

together, the attempts by Parliament to appease the Irish masses, and the expected dissolution of the Empire if Home Rule were granted. Tensions escalated as this question went unanswered, for the opposition believed the maintenance of Union was the only answer to the Irish problem. The paramountcy of Union would not be denied, and neither would "the undisputed supremacy of the law" of England.²³ Ireland was bound to Great Britain through ties not easily broken, and those who opposed Home Rule decided those ties must never be broken.

My Lai: The Making of a Massacre.

by William A. Brooks

Research Methods, a required course for history majors at Eastern, demands that, as their final assignment, students support or rebut a paragraph from a standard history text. In so doing, students draw upon the research skills developed throughout the semester. In the following essay, Mr. Brooks accepts the facts presented in Litwack and Jordan's The United States: Becoming a World Power; yet, he questions their analysis.

The administration had good reason to be concerned with the television and press coverage of the war. The daily barrage of pictures and words constantly reminded the American public of the brutality and apparent futility of the conflict. Early in 1970, for example, the full details were revealed of an American attack in March 1968 on My Lai, a Vietnamese hamlet. Led by Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., a company of United States soldiers had massacred at least 175 and perhaps more than 500 Vietnamese, mostly old men, women, youths, and infants. The Army's official inquiry found the troops guilty of "individual and group acts of murder, rape, sodomy, maiming and assault on noncombatants and the mistreatment and killing of detainees."¹

A little over a year has passed since the above paragraph appeared in *The United States: Becoming a World Power*, a standard college history textbook by Leon Litwack and Winthrop Jordan. While a history text may provide facts, it seldom answers the questions how and why something of this nature could happen. While this paper will not dispute the facts presented, it will argue that the term "individual and group acts of murder" ignores the root cause of the massacre.

When Americans hear the words "war atrocities" they often visualize

²³Harington, "The Case Against Home Rule", *Annals*, 257.

¹Leon F. Litwack and Winthrop F. Jordan, *The United States: Becoming a World Power* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1991), 837.

emaciated victims of Nazi concentration or Japanese prisoner-of-war camps at the end of World War II. It was not until late in 1969, however, that most Americans could accept the idea that something equally repulsive could be perpetrated by American soldiers. This is when the story broke of the My Lai Massacre. This paper will discuss not only what happened, but more importantly, why and how it could happen.

The American public first received word of the massacre nearly a year and a half after it occurred when the September 7th edition of the *New York Times* ran this story on page fourteen:

Army Accuses Lieutenant in Vietnamese Deaths in 1968.
Fort Benning, Ga. (AP)

An Army officer has been charged with murder in the deaths of an unspecified number of civilians in Vietnam in 1968, post authorities have disclosed.

Col. Douglas Tucker, information officer, said the charge was brought yesterday against 1st Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., 26 years old, of Miami, who was to have been discharged Saturday after two years in the service.

Col. Tucker declined to give any details of the case other than to say that the incident occurred in March 1968, in Vietnam, and that the charge involved the death of more than one civilian. Lt. Calley was assigned to the 23rd Infantry Division.²

This, of course, was unwelcome news to the new Nixon administration then dealing with the impact of the Tet offensive on public opinion in the United States. On January 30th of the previous year, North Vietnamese troops attacked bases in Da Nang and Hoi An. The following day, the Viet Cong made wide-scale attacks throughout South Vietnam. These attacks marked the beginning of the Tet offensive, named for the lunar New Year's celebration during which they began.³ For the most part, historians agree that the Tet offensive was a tactical failure for the North Vietnamese. Strategically, however, it succeeded in sparking widespread opposition to the war in the United States. While the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese

²Associated Press. "Army Accuses Lieutenant in Vietnam Deaths in 1968," *New York Times*, 7 Sept 1969, Sec. 1, p. 14.

³Michael Klein, ed., *Media and Popular Culture in the United States and Vietnam* (London: Pluto Press, 1990), 38.

may have failed militarily, they did achieve a great psychological victory. U.S. Government policy began to follow public opinion regarding the war. The Johnson administration's rhetoric shifted from the "war effort" to the "peace effort."⁴

This shift was a complete about-face. In explaining this reversal of public opinion and policy, many cite the influence of negative coverage by the media. Former reporters like Peter Braestrup contend that the collective emanations of the major media produced a continuous black cloud of their own. ABC news anchor Howard K. Smith charged that the networks "first showed pictures day after day of Americans getting the hell kicked out of them." President Johnson himself, in a speech before the National Association of Broadcasters on April 1st of 1968 (the day after he announced his decision not to run for reelection), said:

As I sat in my office last evening, waiting to speak, I thought of the many times each week when the television brings the war into the American home. No one can say exactly what effect these vivid scenes have on American opinion. Historians must only guess at the effect that television would have had during earlier conflicts on the future of this nation.⁵

Despite claims by some politicians, media critics, and journalists, there is no evidence to suggest that media coverage "intensified the public's frustration" with the war. Nevertheless, it is argued that negative coverage of the war, and of the Tet period in particular, provided a forum for those opposed to the war and thus affected public opinion and policy.⁶

The media coverage during the early part of the Nixon administration fell into a different category. The President's dual strategy of "Vietnamization" (handing the war over to the Vietnamese) and "Peace with Honor" (negotiating a U.S. withdrawal without losing face) generally elicited favorable news coverage and public opinion. By 1970 however when negotiations failed to produce positive results, the media began to blame the administration's policies:

...coverage returned to the themes of the Tet period, thus when

⁴*Ibid.*, 38-39.

⁵*Ibid.*, 39.

⁶*Ibid.*

the U.S. war effort seemed to escalate and U.S. casualties rose, as at Hamburger Hill in May 1969, and the invasion of Cambodia in April of 1970... media, opposition leaders and even the troops themselves turned against the administration.⁷

The story of the massacre at the hamlet in Quang Nai province continued to remain back page news. Little else was reported of the incident until a news release from Truongan, South Vietnam made the November 17th edition of the *New York Times*:

Vietnamese Say G.I.'s Slew 567 in Town Truongan, S
Vietnam Nov. 16

A group of South Vietnamese villagers reported today that a American infantry unit killed 567 unarmed men, women and children as it swept through their hamlet on March 16, 1968.

The villagers told their story in the presence of American officers at their new settlement, which lies in contested territory less than a mile from their former home....

The officers refused to comment pending the outcome of an army investigation into the charges of murder against 1st Lieutenant William Laws Calley, Jr., 26 years old, of Miami. George Latimer, Calley's lawyer, said in San Antonio that he was "shocked" by the report. "I only know what is in the official records," he said. "My client had nothing to do with the killing of any civilians."⁸

The Army had indeed made an investigation into the reported incident. In April, 1969, an ex-G.I. named Ronald L. Ridenhour, wrote letters to the Pentagon, the White House, twenty-four Congressmen, and other government offices describing the murders at My Lai. Ridenhour had not participated in the attack on the hamlet, but he had discussed the operation with a few of the G.I.s who did. Within four months, many details of the atrocity had been uncovered by Army investigators, and in September, 1969, Lt. William L. Calley, Jr. was charged with the murder of 109 Vietnamese civilians.⁹

⁷Ibid., 60.

⁸Henry Kamm, "Vietnamese Say G.I.'s Slew 567 in Town," *New York Times*, 17 November 1969, sec. 1 p.1.

⁹Seymour Hersh, *Cover-up* (New York: Random House, 1972) 4-5.

A few weeks after the initial newspaper accounts, the Army announced that it had set up a panel to determine what had kept investigators in the spring of 1968 from learning of the atrocity. The panel was called "The Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai incident," unofficially known as the Peers Inquiry, after its director, Lt. General William R. Peers:¹⁰

By mid-March the Peers Panel had gathered enough evidence to recommend that charges be placed against sixteen officers, including Maj. General Samuel W. Koster, who was the commanding general of the American Division at the time of My Lai....

Army officials told newsmen that the Peers Panel had accumulated more than twenty thousand pages of testimony and five hundred documents during its fifteen weeks of operation.¹¹ In the Spring of 1969, Army Colonel William Wilson was assigned to the Office of the Inspector General, under the direction of Major General William Enemark in Washington D.C.. Wilson's duty under the orders of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General William Westmoreland, was to follow up on Ridenhour's letter. Although Ridenhour was not an eyewitness to the incident, after interviewing him, Wilson's investigation would eventually lead him to Hugh C. Thompson Jr.:

Thompson said that he flew his helicopter over the hamlet, where he began seeing wounded and dead Vietnamese civilians everywhere...Thompson landed his helicopter near a drainage ditch filled with corpses. Nearby, he saw several terrified women and children cowering in the bunker. An American lieutenant and some troops were approaching. Thompson returned to [his] helicopter and told his gunner to fire on the Americans if they got any closer. Then he evacuated the Vietnamese.¹²

Wilson would work his way around the country, interviewing members of Thompson's crew and Calley's platoon. On the sixteenth of July, in a motel room in Terre Haute, Indiana, Wilson interrogated a former private present at the operation; Paul D. Meadlo. He stated that Calley had left him

¹⁰Ibid., 6.

¹¹Ibid., 7.

¹²William Wilson, "I Prayed to God That This Was Fiction," *American Heritage*, 1 February 1990, 49.

and a few others with the responsibility of guarding a group of about eighty people who had been taken from their homes and herded together. He repeated Calley's instructions: "You know what to do with them' Calley said and walked off. Ten minutes later he returned and asked 'Haven't you got rid of them yet? I want them dead. Waste them!'" After telling this, Meadlo raised his eyes to the ceiling and began to cry. His compassion for the victims had taken control of him months before and his body shook with sobs as he continued: "We stood about ten to fifteen feet away from them and then he started shooting. Then he told me to start shooting them. I used more than a whole clip--used four or five clips."¹³ Wilson was now convinced that a massacre had indeed taken place at My Lai. Ten weeks after his first interview with Ridenhour, he filed his report which would go to the Joint Chiefs, the President and Lt. General Peers.¹⁴

For the next two years, the nation would be tormented by the issue of American war crimes in Vietnam. As Americans were to discover, Vietnam was radically different from past U.S. wars. This was a guerrilla war. From their bases in the countryside, the Communist Viet Cong practiced hit-and-run tactics, designed to bloody American troops and undermine their morale. The Viet Cong controlled dozens of sympathetic villages and hamlets; the U.S. military believed that the key to victory was to flush out and kill as many of the Viet Cong as possible and to destroy the villages that harbored them. As one general explained: "You've got to dry up the sea that the guerrillas swim in--that's the peasants, and the best way to do that is to blast the hell out of their villages."¹⁵ The success of a unit leader was measured by how many of the enemy was killed under his command, and some of the commanders did not care whether the bodies were enemy or civilian. Award-winning Vietnam war correspondent Neil Sheehan explained:

The military high command treated all Vietnamese life cheaply, the soldiers just followed the high command's example. The soldier's were full of hatred because their comrades were

¹³Ibid., 51, 52.

¹⁴Ibid., 53.

¹⁵Stephen Manning, "The My Lai Massacre," *Scholarship Update*, 6 April 1990, 12.

constantly being killed by guerrillas and the peasants who supported them. They came to see all Vietnamese as vermin to be exterminated.

As Calley would later explain at his trial: "Our colonel kept asking us 'Where's your body count, where's your body count?' I did what every lieutenant had to do; I finally got us a body count."¹⁶

The shooting up of Vietnamese civilians by American forces had been claimed by the South Vietnamese for years. Even the Saigon papers and officials had occasionally protested the wanton shooting of civilians by U.S. forces. These reports tend to be discounted because of their horrendous and unbelievable nature. Serious face-to-face atrocities by U.S. forces is exactly what would have been expected from the basic logic of American military policy, which was to use superior firepower to suppress guerrillas who could not be distinguished from the Vietnamese peasantry. Given this policy, dehumanization of the Vietnamese was probably inevitable, and as frustration mounted, sporadic face-to-face extermination appears to have grown as a matter of course. Among the official U.S. policies conducive to this result were:

- a) the making of "free fire zones" in which anybody can be regarded as enemy by any American with a weapon;
- b) the official policy of large scale destruction of the homes of Vietnamese civilians;
- c) the official sanctioning of heavy air and artillery attacks on populated Vietnamese villages;
- d) official acceptance and encouragement of the "body count" as a measure of performance and progress by military personnel and units;
- e) official unconcern with Vietnamese lives and property, reflected in open destruction, and absence of serious penalties for illegal acts committed against Vietnamese.¹⁷

These are important reasons why direct mass murder as at My Lai could happen.

After the initial shock of the massacre wore off, Americans back home

¹⁶Ibid., 13.

¹⁷Edward S. Herman, *Atrocities in Vietnam: Myths and Realities* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 51-52, 52-53.

wondered how their sons, their fair-haired boys, could perpetrate such an atrocity. Shame set in, and so did doubts and misgivings about the war. On Wednesday, November 26th, 1969, Johnathan Bingham, member of the U.S. House of Representatives from New York, rose and addressed the chamber, summing up the growing sentiment among many Americans:

Mr. Speaker, it is impossible not to feel shame for our country as the revelations of deliberate civilian killings in Vietnam accumulate. And we cannot escape the blame castigating and punishing a few individual soldiers. We all have to share the responsibility for what happened and for the long cover-up.

But what we also have to realize is that this kind of thing is inevitable in war, that the stresses and distortions of war can make monsters of decent human beings.

The only slight gleam of silver lining I can see in the dark cloud of our shame is that perhaps these sickening disclosures will help to bring home to the American people the nature of our involvement in Vietnam and to reinforce the growing desire to end it, even at some cost and at some risk.¹⁶

Representative Bingham's remarks concerning responsibility struck a nerve. Many people felt that trying a small company of soldiers for an apparently isolated incident was missing the point entirely. He was suggesting that the ultimate blame lay with the military higher-ups and government policy toward the war.

The court-martial of Lt. William L. Calley Jr. opened on November 12, 1970. There was a tremendous outpouring of support across the nation for Calley's acquittal. Many felt that although an act of face-to-face mass murder was repulsive, Calley was simply being used as a scapegoat for higher-ups in the military chain of command. Indeed, on more than one occasion Calley's lawyer implied that Calley was simply following orders from his captain [Ernest L. Medina], who in turn followed orders all the way up through General Koster and Westmoreland.¹⁷

In March 1971, exactly three years after the massacre, Calley was

¹⁶Congress. House, Representative Bingham of New York speaking on the Inevitable Shame of War. 91st Cong., 1st sess. Congressional Record (26 November 1969), vol 115, pt 27, 36049.

¹⁷Arthur Everett, Kathryn Johnson and Harry F. Rozenblat, *Calley* (New York: Dell Books, 1971), 259-260.

convicted by an Army court-martial of premeditated murder. The high point of the trial came after the verdict, when, prior to sentencing, Calley asked permission to address the jury that held his fate in their hands. Addressing the foreman, Calley began:

If I've committed a crime, the only crime I have committed is in judgement of my values - apparently I have valued my troops' lives more than I did that of my enemy. When my troops were getting massacred by an enemy I couldn't see, I couldn't feel and I couldn't touch, that nobody in the military ever described as anything other than communism.

They didn't give it a race, they didn't give it an age, they didn't give it a sex. They never let me believe it was just a philosophy in a man's mind. That was my enemy out there and when it came between me and that enemy, I had to value the lives of my troops and I feel that is the only crime I have committed.¹⁸

The My Lai massacre made many people reassess their opinion of the war because it was written not by a war correspondent who was well acquainted with the horrors and injustices of war, but by a reporter back home who was capable of being shocked by it, and because the story broke at a time when the American public was prepared to believe it. A political and emotional climate was created in which more and more Americans believed that the war had long ceased to be justifiable. When My Lai emerged, it provided the basis for an examination of America's motives regarding the nature of the war. For the first time in America's short history, a large proportion of its citizens privately and openly questioned the moral righteousness of its means during wartime.¹⁹

It is easy to blame the Lt. Calleys of the world and to ask how can a civilized human being could do such a thing to innocent men, women, and children. Calley's actions and others' like his are not so savage and spontaneous as they appear on the surface. Incidents similar to those occur through a build-up of fear, frustration, and confusion over long periods of time. They start with the policy makers, who deal with "initiatives" and

¹⁸Ibid., 250-251.

¹⁹Grace Sevy, ed., *The American Experience in Vietnam: A Reader* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 133.

"objectives," but it is with the Pvt. Meadlo on the battlefield that those policies are actually realized. Calley himself sums up this interpretation best:

The General said, "We must deprive the VC of their population resource. I've seen in *The Limits of Intervention*, by the Assistant Secretary of Defense, he said, "Our policy seems to be: destroy the villages, defoliate the jungles, and cover all of Vietnam with asphalt. "As for me, I was just a 2nd Lieutenant. I had to obey orders and to hope those people in Washington were smarter than me. Americans like to think that war is John Wayne. To get a grenade and a VC's throat, to shove the grenade right down it. Americans sit at television sets and say "One hundred bodies. Boy!" And they think "Great!" And they think I'm the ugly one.²²

Lieutenant William Laws Calley, Jr. was convicted by an Army court-martial of premeditated murder and sentenced to life in prison. But after the intervention of President Richard Nixon, his sentence was reduced. He spent only three years under house arrest in an apartment at military base.²³

It has been said that the study of history asks five important questions: who, what, when, where and why. The first four questions are the easiest for the historian to answer. Seymour Hersh and the *New York Times* gave the details. They told what had happened: a massacre. They told who was involved: Lt. Calley and company of American soldiers. They told when it happened: March 16, 1968. They told where it happened: a hamlet in Vietnam. Only the true historian will ask why. It is through Michael Klein, that one gets a feeling of why something of this hideous nature could happen. He cites the Johnson and Nixon administration's policies and the growing disenchantment with the war by the American public. He also cites the media coverage as contributing to that disenchantment. Not necessarily negative coverage, but graphic pictures and descriptions that spilled into American living rooms nearly every night. People on the whole, who had never seen how truly horrible war could be. William Wilson helped answer why, with his interrogation of Private Meadlo and his investigation of the

participants and witnesses to the massacre. Stephen Manning and Edward Herman presented an insight into United States Army policy regarding the waging of war. This goes far into explaining why this may have been inevitable and not necessarily isolated.

Congressman Bingham also helps answer why with his impassioned speech before the House of Representatives questioning the moral righteousness of America's involvement in Vietnam. It is from Calley himself, that this question is most nearly answered when his only defense was that he was only told what to do, but not how to do it. Without ever discovering how and why something has occurred, history is just a collection of records and data, and we would never learn a thing.

²²John Sack, *Lieutenant Calley: His Own Story* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 125.

²³Manning, 13.