

# Laying Bare the War: Responses to the My Lai Massacre and the Trial of Lt. William Calley in American Public Opinion

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*This paper investigates the responses to the 1968 My Lai Massacre, and the subsequent trial of the atrocity's chief perpetrator, Lieutenant (Lt.) William Calley. The focus of this inquiry will be centered on the reactions to the massacre and trial within contemporary American public discourse. To this end, the paper relies predominantly on the ways in which the responses to the massacre and trial were represented within the national press. These responses will be shown to highlight the divisions within American society that characterized the final years of the Vietnam War. Utilizing these sources, a substantial segment of this paper's analysis will be dedicated to revealing the ways in which a divided American public responded to the details of the massacre after they became widely known. Finally, this paper will address the Calley trial and argue that it was the unique political and cultural realities of the time that allowed the majority of the American public to serve as apologists for the disgraced Lieutenant – regardless of whether they condemned or defended the conflict in South East Asia.*

## Introduction

The massacre of over 500 men, women, and children that occurred in the sub-hamlet of My Lai in Quang Ngai Province, South Vietnam, on March 16, 1968, represents the greatest atrocity committed by American troops during the Vietnam war, both in scale and notoriety.<sup>1</sup> Not only did the incident trigger investigations, inquiries, and trials by both the US Army and Congress, but it also forced a generation of Americans to reflect on the role that the United States would play in the world. Furthermore, those alive at the time struggled with how they would react to the intense brutality that characterized the event and what

1 Allison, William Thomas. *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), 1; Jones, Howard. *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3.

this cruelty suggested about the moral character of the nation.<sup>2</sup> As historian Howard Jones argues, “My Lai had laid bare the war” for many Americans, and in doing so became an intensely politicized “lightning rod” for both those who supported the war in Southeast Asia and those who opposed it.<sup>3</sup> This paper will be addressing the tragedy at My Lai with a particular focus on reactions in American public discourse. To truly understand the public response, the My Lai fallout must be investigated at every stage, from its initial disclosure to the US public by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh in the fall of 1969, to the aftermath of the trial of Lieutenant (Lt.) William Calley, the massacre’s most notorious perpetrator, in the spring of 1971.<sup>4</sup> The methodology of this investigation relied heavily on how these events were represented in the nation’s newspapers, how the American people responded to them, and what rhetoric was employed as they attempted to reconcile how “America the Good” could be responsible for such depravity.<sup>5</sup> When investigated in this fashion, it becomes clear that the American public responded to the initial revelations of what occurred at My Lai through backlash towards the media, denial that the incident occurred, and outrage towards the war in Vietnam. Furthermore, the reactions to the court-martial of Lt. Calley specifically were characterized by an unexpected consensus between pro-war and anti-war Americans; both of whom argued that Calley was being scapegoated by the Army and the United States government. There were, however, some who dissented against this consensus, foremost among them being the prosecutor of the Calley case – Captain (Cpt.) Aubrey Daniels.

## Background

On the morning of March 16, 1968, Lt. William Calley led 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon of Charlie Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment into the Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai, a sub-hamlet of the larger Son My village.<sup>6</sup> The stated objective on that day was to take action against the 48<sup>th</sup> Viet Cong (VC), which intelligence suggested had a base camp near Song My.<sup>7</sup> Prior to March 16, which was to be the unit’s first experience with

2 Jones. *My Lai*, 3.

3 Ibid; Allison, *My Lai*, 1.

4 Allison, *My Lai*, 84.

5 Young, Marilyn B. *The Vietnam Wars 1945-1990*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 244.

6 Milam, Ron. *Not a Gentleman’s War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). 130. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uvic/detail.action?docID=475198>.

7 Borch, Fred L. “My Lai at Fifty: A History of Literature on the ‘My Lai Incident’ Fifty Years Later.” *Journal of Military History* 82, no. 2 (April

combat, Calley and his men were led to believe that resistance would be substantial, given that Vietnamese guerillas had exercised considerable control in the area for over 20 years.<sup>8</sup> Further contributing to the apprehension of the troops was the trauma of losing a popular sergeant in their company to a booby trap two days previous.<sup>9</sup> Despite what the intelligence had suggested, when Charlie company troops piled out of their helicopter at 0730 hours they were met with no resistance.<sup>10</sup> Little to their knowledge, the 48<sup>th</sup> VC had dispersed over the previous nights.<sup>11</sup> Following the orders of the company's commanding officer, Captain Ernest Medina, Charlie company progressed toward My Lai.<sup>12</sup>

Upon entering the hamlet, the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon continued to be unsuccessful in finding any enemy combatants and instead stumbled upon villagers preparing their morning rice.<sup>13</sup> Despite the lack of resistance, tension among the American troops remained high as they prepared for potential traps or sniper fire from the dense banana trees that surrounded the village.<sup>14</sup> Thus convinced, American troops moved through My Lai with combat intensity, throwing grenades into huts, killing livestock, and shooting down any villagers that fled.<sup>15</sup> As the chaos heightened, Lt. Calley ordered his platoon to gather the remaining villagers into large groups.<sup>16</sup> As this objective was undertaken by the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, Calley's immediate superior, Cpt. Medina demanded to know why progress through the village had been delayed. After hearing that the villagers were delaying progress, and fearing the mission was in jeopardy, Medina reprimanded Calley over a shared radio and, Calley would later testify, ordered him to "waste all those goddamn people!"<sup>17</sup> Humiliated by his commander's anger, Calley committed himself to move out of the village as quickly as possible.<sup>18</sup> He proceeded to order a young Private First Class, Paul Meadlo, who was guarding a large group of unarmed peasants, to execute his prisoners.<sup>19</sup> Meadlo would

later state in an interview with CBS that he and Calley killed "men, women and children" alongside "babies."<sup>20</sup> After he finished firing, Meadlo began to weep openly.<sup>21</sup> After this act of brutality, the violence committed by Charlie company in the village escalated significantly as peasants were rounded into groups, or forced into ditches, where they were summarily executed.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, American cruelty was not only limited to physical violence. As historian William Allison recounts, "by midmorning, members of Charlie Company had killed hundreds of civilians and raped or assaulted countless women and young girls."<sup>23</sup> All this even though no weapons were uncovered in the village.<sup>24</sup>

A sufficient recounting of what occurred on March 16 cannot be truly complete without touching on the most famous act of American humanity on the behalf of the Vietnamese – that of Warrant Officer Hugh Thompson.<sup>25</sup> On the day of the My Lai incident, Thompson and his flight crew had been flying helicopter patrol over the Son My village and became progressively confused and disquieted by increasing numbers of dead Vietnamese peasants they saw strewn along the trails and trenches of the area.<sup>26</sup> This being despite the fact that there was no evidence of any enemy combatants. Thompson and his crew's unease grew into shock and outrage when they witnessed a Captain, later identified as Medina, executing a wounded Vietnamese woman.<sup>27</sup> This bewilderment increased after the recon crew witnessed soldiers, including Calley, shooting into ditches filled with at least 100 Vietnamese.<sup>28</sup> Eventually, Thompson elected to take action by setting his chopper down on the path between a bunker filled with Vietnamese women and children and approaching American soldiers.<sup>29</sup> After instructing his gunner to

2018). 552. <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=31h&AN=128577712&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Allison, *My Lai*, 33.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Borch, *My Lai at Fifty*, 552.

14 Allison, *My Lai*, 35.

15 Ibid., 40.

16 Ibid., 41.

17 Calley testimony, Feb 24, 1971, Calley court-martial transcript, 3984, as cited in Jones, *My Lai*, 67.

18 Jones, *My Lai*, 67.

19 Borch, *My Lai at Fifty*, 553.

20 "Transcript of Interview of Vietnam War Veteran on His Role in Alleged Massacre of Civilians at Songmy" *New York Times*, November 25, 1969.

Retrieved from: <https://nyti.ms/35YafuJ>.

21 Olson, James S., and Randy Roberts. *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 1998). <http://tinyurl.com/y4fqeyto>.

22 Borch, *My Lai at Fifty*, 554.

23 Allison, *My Lai*, 43.

24 Ibid.

25 Jones, *My Lai*, 87.

26 Allison, *My Lai*, 43; Hugh Thompson testimony, April 17, 1970, Hearings of the Armed Services Investigating Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives. 226. Retrieved from: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015039890580;view=1up;seq=234;size=125>

27 Jones, *My Lai*, 88; Thompson testimony, *House Armed Services Hearing*, 226.

28 Allison, *My Lai*, 42; Thompson testimony, *House Armed Services Hearing*, 228.

29 Thompson testimony, *House Armed Services Hearing*, 228.

“cover” him, presumably from the American since there were no Viet Cong, Thompson exited the aircraft and persuaded the Vietnamese to come out of their bunker.<sup>30</sup> According to historian William Allison, the villagers “surely would have been killed had Thompson not been there.”<sup>31</sup> Despite Thompson’s efforts on behalf of this small group, by the end of the day, over 500 Vietnamese civilians lay dead at My Lai.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the degree of violence that occurred at My Lai, the initial army investigations into the incident proved deeply inadequate.<sup>33</sup> After an outraged WO Thompson reported the incident to his superiors, the investigation eventually fell into the hands of Colonel Oran Henderson.<sup>34</sup> Ignoring considerable evidence to the contrary, Henderson erroneously concluded on March 20, 1968 that there was no substance to the claims of mass killings of civilians by American troops.<sup>35</sup>

### My Lai Revealed

The initial response to the events of March 16 by the American public was, quite ironically, positive. Although the operations of Charlie company in Quang Ngai province made no national headlines, those that reported it retold the official army narrative and made no mention of the unreported massacre.<sup>36</sup> In fact, one paper instead spoke of a “running battle” wherein 128 Viet Cong were killed.<sup>37</sup> It is likely that these reports would have remained the only information that the American public ever received about what happened in My Lai, had it not been for the actions of a single American soldier – Specialist (Spec.) Ron Ridenhour.<sup>38</sup> It was Ridenhour who, after hearing rumours from several friends in the army that a “dark and bloody” event had taken place in “Pinkville,” a term for the area around Song My village, began penning a letter to over thirty officials in Washington, DC,

30 Ibid; Carson, Mark D. “F. Edward Hébert and the Congressional Investigation of the My Lai Massacre.” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 37, no. 1 (1996): 66. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4233262>.

31 Allison, *My Lai*, 44.

32 Borch, *My Lai at Fifty*, 551.

33 Allison, *My Lai*, 62.

34 Ibid., 65.

35 Borch, *My Lai at Fifty*, 555.

36 Jones, *My Lai*, 125.

37 *Peers Inquiry*, 3; Exhibits, book 4, Misc. Doc., M-58. 1968. Retrieved from: [https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military\\_Law/pdf/RDAR-Vol-IIIBook4.pdf](https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/RDAR-Vol-IIIBook4.pdf)

38 Cookman, Claude. “An American Atrocity: The My Lai Massacre Concretized in a Victim’s Face.” *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (2007): 154–62, <http://tinyurl.com/y6mylxxv>.

including President Nixon, detailing his concerns.<sup>39</sup> On March 29, 1969, over a year after the incident occurred, Ridenhour sent his letter.<sup>40</sup> The thoroughness of Ridenhour’s report, which included such disturbing anecdotes as the claim that Vietnamese villagers were rounded up and slaughtered “like so many sheep,” motivated immediate inquiries from Congress to the Pentagon and spurred the investigations that would eventually bring the horrors of My Lai into the national spotlight.<sup>41</sup>

The immediate repercussions of Ridenhour’s letter, and indeed the letter itself, were initially unknown to the American public and consisted of an internal investigation by the US Army.<sup>42</sup> It was not until this investigation by the US Army Criminal Investigation Division was underway, and Lt. Calley already implicated and subsequently charged, that the story of what happened at My Lai began to enter the newspapers.<sup>43</sup> Initially, reports were brief and consisted of a back page announcement of court-martials of officers for the murder of non-combatants.<sup>44</sup> The story of what occurred at My Lai reached a national audience through three crucial pieces of journalism. The first was an article by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh which was published on November 13, 1969 and included the first published interview with Calley. The second, was the notorious publishing of army photographer Ron Haeberle’s colour photographs, which he had taken of the dead and wounded Vietnamese in My Lai as the massacre took place, on November 20 in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and on December 5 in *Life*.<sup>45</sup> Lastly, the third event came with the airing of an interview with Pvt. Paul Meadlo by CBS on November 24 in which the visibly traumatized veteran admitted to a national audience that he and his comrades had killed women, children and babies.<sup>46</sup> With these three events, the massacre at My Lai was now firmly implanted in the collective consciousness of the nation, and as more details emerged backlash, denial and outrage would come to characterize the reaction of the public.

39 Ridenhour, Ron. “Ridenhour letter”. March 29, 1969. Retrieved from: [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active\\_learning/explorations/vietnam/ridenhour\\_letter.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/vietnam/ridenhour_letter.cfm); Allison, *My Lai*, 78.

40 Ridenhour, *Letter*.

41 Ridenhour, *Letter*; Allison, *My Lai*, 78; Carson, “Congressional investigation,” 66.

42 Allison, *My Lai*, 78.

43 Allison, *My Lai*, 84.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 85.

46 Ibid., 85; “Interview transcript”, *New York Times*.

## Responses to My Lai

The initial response to the journalism that revealed the My Lai massacre was characterized by substantial backlash. Most prominent were those that suggested that Hersh, Ridenhour, and Haerberle, and by extension *CBS*, and *Life* were “part of the leftist antiwar movement.”<sup>47</sup> Reactions to Haerberle’s photographs were exceptionally intense, as displayed by the cross-section of opinion provided by *Life* magazine. Some readers expressed concern that the piece in *Life*, which contained the gruesome images, might serve to undermine the peace process by igniting increased hatred among the Vietnamese. This fear was exemplified by the comments of a reader from Ogden, Utah who argued that the *Life* My Lai piece had set back the Nixon administration’s peace efforts and would thus “be responsible for many more deaths among our boys.”<sup>48</sup> Many also appealed to the recent comments of Vice President Spiro Agnew, who, in a March 14 speech, had railed against the national media for its perceived liberal bias and “querulous criticism” of the Nixon administration’s policies.<sup>49</sup> Another response criticized *Life* for playing into the hands of the nation’s enemies by falling victim to “a new communist tactic” that relied on reports of “so-called tragedies.”<sup>50</sup> This perspective was demonstrated more explicitly by another reader who simply demanded “whose side are you on?”<sup>51</sup>

Reactions to Paul Meadlo’s CBS interview took on a similar defensive and critical tone. Despite the fact that Meadlo openly admitted to killing dozens of Vietnamese with point-blank automatic rifle fire, many who knew him managed to avoid placing any blame on the young private.<sup>52</sup> As a November 26, 1969 *New York Times* piece on Pvt. Meadlo’s hometown of New Goshen, Indiana concluded “nowhere... was anyone inclined to blame [Meadlo].”<sup>53</sup> Some even demanded to know how the newspapers could justify placing any blame on the young man because, “after all, he had his orders.”<sup>54</sup> The only criticism of Meadlo in the town centred around his decision to go to the press. As a Korean War veteran argued to the *Times*,

47 Jones, *My Lai*, 211.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid; “Transcript of Address by Agnew Criticizing Television on Its Coverage of the News”, *New York Times*. November 14, 1969. Retrieved from: Retrieved From: <https://nyti.ms/2tZvMpA>.

50 “Americans Speak out on Massacre,” *Life*.

51 Ibid.

52 “Interview transcript”, *New York Times*; Jones, *My Lai*, 211.

53 “Meadlo’s Home Town Regards Him as Blameless”, *New York Times*. November 26, 1969. Retrieved from: <https://nyti.ms/2QV3FRi>.

54 Ibid

Meadlo’s only mistake was “talking about this to everyone on television” because “this sort of thing should be kept classified.”<sup>55</sup> Although these interviews represent a small sample size, they still reveal the mechanisms that Americans used to reconcile the events at My Lai.

Those Americans who did not respond to the revelations of what occurred at My Lai with immediate backlash toward the media often coped with them through denial.<sup>56</sup> As Claude Cookman argues, this response to the violence at My Lai was “understandable given the cherished myth of the perfectly balanced American warrior.”<sup>57</sup> American defence of this myth led many to simply conclude that the violence at My Lai was either grossly exaggerated or simply did not occur.<sup>58</sup> This reality was represented by one survey of citizens in Minnesota in which 49 percent of respondents believed that the My Lai story was false.<sup>59</sup> This desire to defend American exceptionalism was clearly active in the minds of many Americans as the details of the massacre emerged and some proved capable of denial even in the face of overwhelming evidence.<sup>60</sup> Denial of what occurred on March 16 was also widespread among American G.I.s who were still serving in Vietnam during the fallout of the incident.<sup>61</sup> As one G.I. argued, even if the massacre did take place, it was possible that those killed at My Lai were not in fact non-combatants because “a lot of VC dress up like villagers.”<sup>62</sup> Other soldiers argued that, although the massacre was troubling, it simply represented a response to the reality of combat in Vietnam. This argument largely revolved around the blurring of the lines between civilian and soldier and the lumping of all Vietnamese into a single racialized category. As one Private dryly commented to the *Times*, “you get your buddy next to you blown away, you ain’t gonna love the Dinks.”<sup>63</sup>

Alongside the criticism and denial that persisted in American public discourse after the massacre was revealed was a massive outcry of moral outrage. This anger was particularly prevalent among the anti-war groups who felt that the brutality displayed at My Lay

55 Ibid.

56 Cookman, *American Atrocity*, 160.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Oliver, Kendrick. “Atrocity, Authenticity and American Exceptionalism: (Ir)Rationalising the Massacre at My Lai.” *Journal of American Studies* 37, no. 2 (2003): 265. [www.jstor.org/stable/27557330](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27557330).

61 “G.I.’s Near Songmy Doubt Any Massacre”, *New York Times*. December 1, 1969. Retrieved from: <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1969/12/01/89386816.html?pageNumber=12>.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

vindicated their position on the war.<sup>64</sup> By late 1969, both the army and the war itself seemed to be on trial in the court of American public opinion.<sup>65</sup> Many believed that the barbarity displayed by American troops demonstrated how the war had corrupted the moral fabric of the nation and led to the “death of American moral authority.”<sup>66</sup> The *Wall Street Journal*, for example, claimed that the nation was plagued “by fears that its national sense of morality has been deteriorating.”<sup>67</sup> The conversion of honourable young men into cold-blooded killers seemed to demonstrate that the war was having a severely deleterious effect on American soldiers. Some blamed the Army specifically, a notable example being Paul Meadlo’s mother who tearfully demanded to know “why did they have to take my son and do that to him?”<sup>68</sup>

Others blamed the horror of war more broadly for demeaning the country’s moral standing. As a Kansas City policeman commented to *Life*, “I don’t know who is to blame... just the war itself.”<sup>69</sup> Also present in these anti-war sentiments was the notion that the war in Vietnam had made My Lai a practical inevitability. A Chicago man quoted in *Life* echoed these sentiments when he stated: “if you give guns to 500,000 men, things like this are going to happen.”<sup>70</sup> These debates surrounding what My Lai meant for the nation’s involvement in Vietnam would not die off, nor be settled, in the months and years following the revelation of the massacre to the American public, but would instead come to be centred around the individual who was most personally associated with the event – Lt. William Calley.

### Responses to Calley’s Trial

The conviction and sentencing to life in prison of Lt. Calley in March 1971 for “murdering no fewer than twenty-two Vietnamese civilians at My Lai” was met with immediate public backlash from an American public that overwhelmingly supported him.<sup>71</sup> In fact, a Gallup poll at the time found that only 11 percent of Americans supported the

verdict, while 79 felt it was unjust.<sup>72</sup> The public support for Calley can be seen as being divided into two broad categories; those on the political right who argued that he had been convicted for doing his duty and was right to follow orders, and those on the left who argued that the conviction of Calley represented gross hypocrisy and claimed that the real problem was the government and military policy that had enabled My Lai in the first place.<sup>73</sup> As William Allison states, “both hardcore hawks and peaceniks viewed Calley as a martyr.”<sup>74</sup>

For those Americans that supported the US involvement in Vietnam, William Calley was elevated to near hero status.<sup>75</sup> During the course of the trial and in its immediate aftermath, Calley acquired an “absurd celebrity” that even earned him a personal visit from Alabama governor George Wallace.<sup>76</sup> This belief from the political right that Calley had become a martyr for an unpopular war was so widespread that James Reston sarcastically suggested in an April 4, 1971 *New York Times* column that “for a while it almost looked as if somebody were going to propose giving Lieutenant Calley the Congressional Medal of Honor.”<sup>77</sup> Specifically, support for Calley was particularly strong in the Deep South where both federal and state politicians found their offices bombarded by letters and telegrams advocating on Calley’s behalf.<sup>78</sup> Importantly, the opinions of Southerners also held increased sway in the White House, given the region’s support for the war and central role in Nixon’s election victory.<sup>79</sup> Many who protested the Calley conviction espoused the familiar rhetorical line that the lieutenant had been convicted for “doing his duty.”<sup>80</sup> The notion that a soldier was obligated to obey orders and could not be held morally culpable for the consequences of his actions was so prevalent that a December 1971 survey conducted by Harvard and reprinted in the *New York Times* found that “two-thirds of those questioned would shoot unarmed civilians if ordered to do so.”<sup>81</sup>

64 Jones, *My Lai*, 211.

65 Ibid.

66 Allison, *My Lai*, 86; “The American as blind giant unable to see what it kills: My Lai”, *New York Times*. June 14, 1970. Retrieved from: <https://nyti.ms/2sxCa7e>.

67 “War and Guilt”, *Wall Street Journal*. March 31, 1971. Retrieved from: <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/docview/133617666?accountid=14846&pq-origsite=summon>.

68 “Meadlo’s Home Town”, *New York Times*.

69 “Americans Speak out on Massacre”, *Life*.

70 Ibid.

71 Allison, *My Lai*, 110, 111.

72 Ibid., 111.

73 Jones, *My Lai*, 272, 292

74 Allison, *My Lai*, 112.

75 Allison, *My Lai*, 111; Beidler, Philip. “Calley’s Ghost.” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 79, no. 1 (2003): 47, <http://tinyurl.com/yf2ftkv>.

76 Ibid., 47.

77 Reston, James. “Calley: Symbol of Vietnam”, *New York Times*. April 4, 1971. Retrieved from: <https://nyti.ms/30oN7Em>.

78 “Mail on Calley, Especially from South, Takes on Emotional Tone”, *New York Times*. April 3, 1971. Retrieved from: <https://nyti.ms/35W0llr>.

79 Jones, *My Lai*, 291.

80 “Mail on Calley”, *New York Times*.

81 “67% in Survey on Calley Say Most People Would Shoot Civilians if Ordered”, *New York Times*. December 28, 1971. Retrieved from: <https://nyti.ms/35SRo49>.

The response from active members of the US Army was characterized by similar indignation. As one soldier posted in Saigon stated to the *Times*, “it is wrong for a man to be tried for murder when we are in this conflict.”<sup>82</sup> Another commented in reference to Calley’s conviction, “he does his job whether it is write [sic] or wrong and he gets hung for it.”<sup>83</sup> Feelings among veterans and active soldiers were so potent that Representative John R. Rarick of Louisiana even reported to the *New York Times* that “I’ve had veterans tell me that if they were in Vietnam now, they would lay down their arms and come home.”<sup>84</sup> Taken together, it is clear that those who supported the war in Vietnam were deeply troubled by the apparent notion that an American soldier could be held responsible for actions taken while serving his country – even if those actions consisted of mass murder.

For those who opposed the American involvement in South-East Asia, the trial and conviction of Lt. Calley were equally outrageous, most blatantly because it seemed to excuse high ranking members of both military and the federal government. This drew particular ire from those who argued that the United States was practicing hypocrisy in refusing to invoke the so-called “Yamashita principle,” which had been applied by the Americans to the Japanese after World War II and held high ranking military officers responsible for crimes committed by their soldiers.<sup>85</sup> This suggested to some Americans, including Fred Graham of the *New York Times*, that the Pentagon had no interest in holding high ranking officers culpable in the My Lai case.<sup>86</sup> It appeared that the nation’s generals were cynically attempting to protect their own, regardless of the moral issues involved.<sup>87</sup>

Other Americans argued that Calley was being used as a scapegoat to avoid having to ask potentially difficult questions about US policy more generally. For example, anti-war Democrat George McGovern argued that the American public should focus on changing American foreign policy instead of punishing low ranking officers like Calley through war crime trials.<sup>88</sup> Related to this argument was the consistent claim that Calley had been made a “scapegoat” by his superiors

to avoid potential criticism of the nature of the conflict itself.<sup>89</sup> As columnist James Reston surmised after Calley’s conviction, the officer’s fate represented a response to “a war without glory or nobility and a symbol for a time of moral confusion.”<sup>90</sup> As Reston also noted, it seemed absurd to many Americans to blame Calley personally without also blaming the architects of the policies that were responsible for putting him in My Lai in the first place.<sup>91</sup> Like Reston, many Americans argued that the far greater crime was the continuation of the war. As one *New York Times* columnist argued in April 1971, “must we not condemn the whole wicked engine of death?”<sup>92</sup> Notable among these voices were the so-called “Winter Soldiers,” Vietnam veterans who petitioned Congress to investigate what they perceived to be a pandemic of war crimes in Vietnam and insisted that Calley had unjustly been made a scapegoat.<sup>93</sup> In response to the outrage from both sides of the aisle, President Nixon ordered that Calley be kept under house arrest, instead of in prison, until his defence team had exhausted all avenues of appeal – at which time the President would review the case personally.<sup>94</sup> The fact that even the President was influenced by the political pressures of the “free Calley bandwagon” demonstrates the prevalence of the view that the lieutenant had been treated unjustly.<sup>95</sup>

One notable voice of dissent against all those who argued the injustice of the Calley conviction came from the man who had prosecuted that case against the disgraced Lieutenant – Cpt. Aubrey M. Daniel.<sup>96</sup> After Nixon stated his intention to review the case, the Army’s prosecutor expressed concern for both the independence of the law and the moral standing of the country.<sup>97</sup> In his letter to the President, Daniel conveyed his dismay and bewilderment at the reaction from the United States public.<sup>98</sup> Specifically, Daniel was shocked that so many Americans were willing to pardon Calley even after being made aware

82 “Saigon G.I.’s Indignant Over Calley Ruling”, *New York Times*. March 31, 1971. Retrieved from: <https://nyti.ms/2soL8Dw>.

83 Ibid.

84 “Many in Nation Perturbed By Conviction of Calley”, *New York Times*. March 31, 1971. Retrieved from: <https://nyti.ms/3aikM7B>.

85 “Impact of Calley Trial”, *New York Times*. March 31, 1971. Retrieved from: <https://nyti.ms/2RlSeB7>.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Jones, *My Lai*, 292.

89 “Saigon G.I.’s Indignant”, *New York Times*.

90 “Calley: Symbol of Vietnam”, *New York Times*.

91 Ibid.

92 “The Cry of America”, *New York Times*, April 5, 1971. Retrieved from: <https://nyti.ms/2FWza7a>.

93 Jones, *My Lai*, 293.

94 Allison, *My Lai*, 113.

95 Ibid., 112.

96 Greenhaw, Wayne. *The Making of a Hero: The Story of Lieut. William Calley Jr.* (Louisville, Kentucky: Touchstone Publishing Co., 1971). 197.

97 Daniel, Aubrey. “Letter Written by Capt. Aubrey M. Daniel to President Nixon”. April, 1970. Retrieved from: <https://famous-trials.com/mylaicourts/1623-daniels-ltr>.

98 Aubrey. “Letter Written by Capt. Aubrey M. Daniel to President Nixon”.

of the depravity of his crimes.<sup>99</sup> Daniel also observed that, despite the outrage, Calley had been given a fair trial and had been convicted beyond a reasonable doubt by a jury of men who were themselves combat veterans and had faced death threats for their decision.<sup>100</sup> The prosecutor also expressed disgust that so many politicians were willing to pander to public opinion while so blatantly ignoring the moral issues involved.<sup>101</sup> For Daniel, the case was simple, “it is unlawful,” he argued to Nixon “for an American soldier to summarily execute unarmed and unresisting men, women, children, and babies.”<sup>102</sup> In the face of the mass outrage that the Calley verdict catalyzed in US public discourse, Daniel argued that perhaps the war itself was to blame for numbing the nation’s moral instinct.<sup>103</sup> If it was the case that so many were willing to elevate Calley to hero status, or defend him as a scapegoat, and demand his release, “then the war in Viet-Nam has brutalized us more than I care to believe, and it must cease,” Daniel determined.<sup>104</sup> In his conclusion, the young Virginian expressed deep regret that, in an effort to appease the public, politicians were willing to “compromise such a fundamental moral principle as the inherent unlawfulness of the murder of innocent persons.”<sup>105</sup> Despite the strong bias that Daniel doubtlessly possessed, his letter to Nixon nonetheless represents a powerful expression of the opinions of those Americans who were bewildered by the sympathy that so many of their compatriots possessed for a man convicted of such a heinous crime.

## Conclusion

When reviewed, it becomes clear that the way that American public opinion responded to the violence that characterized the 1968 My Lai massacre was expressed through several rhetorical motifs that arose from their broader ideologies regarding the justice of the war in Vietnam. Crucially, these arguments were recurrent and demonstrated at every stage of the event’s aftermath, from its initial disclosure to the US public in the fall of 1969, to the conviction of Lt. Calley in the spring of 1971. Specifically, when the gruesome details of what occurred at My Lai were revealed through the journalism of Seymour Hersh, Ron Haerberle’s photographs, and Paul Meadlo’s interview in late 1969, Americans can be clearly seen as responding through either

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

backlash toward the media, denial of the truth of the reports, or outrage at the immorality of the war in Vietnam, depending on their pre-existing political stance. Furthermore, in the months and years after the massacre was revealed to the American public, the focal point of debates around My Lai became increasingly centred on the trial of Lt. Calley. After his conviction in March 1971, responses to Calley among the American people had reached relative consensus and settled on the “scapegoat” narrative. This view was expressed by both war hawks and anti-war activists who saw Calley as either a dutiful soldier or a martyr for an immoral war, respectively. Despite this consensus, there were those who dissented against the nation’s sympathy for Calley, as demonstrated by the letter that Capt. Daniel penned to President Nixon. Taken together, the American people clearly coped with and responded to the trauma of My Lai much in the same way that they coped with the trauma of the war more broadly – some expressed patriotic righteousness, some moral disgust, and others were left with the unshakable feeling that the nation had been led horribly astray.



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