



Photo by Ron Haerberle, *Life Magazine*, 1968

Hearts and Minds

By a single crime know a nation.
Virgil, *The Aenid*

AS THEY WERE PREPARING for market day just after sunrise on March 16, 1968, several hundred men, women and children were rounded up by U.S. Army troops in the remote Vietnamese village of My Lai and herded into nearby rice paddies and irrigation ditches.

The unarmed villagers dutifully obeyed, expecting to be routinely searched for weapons and released. Instead—pausing only to gang-rape at least twenty of the women and girls—the soldiers began a five hour killing spree, murdering the praying and pleading villagers at close range, using bayonets, machine guns, and in at least one instance, a grenade launcher.

Then they broke for lunch.

After assuming the presidency in 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson confessed privately that he knew the Vietnam War—which he called his ‘bitch mistress’—was unwinnable, but he “wasn't going to be the first American president to lose a war.” By early 1968, however, U.S. and South Vietnamese troops were confronting the North’s devastating Tet Offensive, and with U.S. casualties soaring, LBJ faced a rising tide of protest at home.

Dismissing the millions of demonstrators, LBJ remarked, “If you've got 'em by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow,” but after popular news anchor Walter Cronkite claimed the war was lost, he told his advisors, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost middle America,” and announced that he wouldn’t run for reelection.

Later that year, Richard Nixon was elected, promising American voters that he had a bold new plan to ‘wind down’ the war.

‘Tricky Dick’—as he was already known—began withdrawing troops but initiated a massive bombing campaign, a policy critics derided as ‘widening down’ the war.

Due to Nixon’s deception, direct U.S. involvement in Vietnam would drag on for another six long and ultimately futile years.

The massacre at My Lai finally ended when an enraged U.S. Army helicopter pilot intervened, ordering his gunner to fire on American troops if they resumed the killing. (The pilot subsequently evacuated the wounded, saving about twenty survivors.)

When the bloodbath was over, 504 villagers—aged from infancy to 82—lay dead, many of the bodies badly mutilated. The soldiers encountered no enemy fire and found few if any military-aged men and little weaponry—only three old rifles.

After a high-level military cover-up and one dedicated journalist’s painstaking investigative reporting, the story finally broke publicly in late 1969, and a highly-publicized trial followed.

Of the 26 soldiers charged, only the platoon leader, an Army lieutenant, was convicted. Found guilty of initiating the slaughter and personally killing at least 22 villagers—including a two-year old child who was running away—he was given a life sentence, but served only 3-1/2 years under house arrest before being granted a tacit presidential pardon. Crucial to his release was the American public’s perception of him as a patriotic soldier, martyred simply for following the orders of his superiors. (The judge in the trial stopped opening his mail due to constant death threats.)

The lieutenant’s superior—the captain who planned, ordered, and supervised the operation—was court martialled but later acquitted. After his trial, he took a job with a company owned by his defense lawyer.

Both men defended themselves by claiming that the villagers could have been aiding and abetting the enemy. In fact, all the troops had received instruction in how to treat civilians and how to distinguish them from enemy soldiers, including one training course reassuringly titled ‘Vietnam, Our Host.’ Several soldiers refused direct orders to kill civilians, with one even shooting himself in the foot in order to escape participation.

Following his release, the lieutenant capitalized on his notoriety by giving paid talks defending his actions at My Lai, until students heckled him off the college lecture circuit. One charitable My Lai survivor—an old man who lost four family members in the massacre—invited him to meet in reconciliation, but was unable to pay the \$25,000 fee the ex-soldier demanded. (In 2009, 41 years after the massacre, the lieutenant made his first public apology.)

The My Lai massacre was by no means an isolated incident. Numerous veterans of the war in Vietnam testified to having witnessed routine torture and murder of civilians by American troops. “There were *hundreds* of My Lais,” one stated matter-of-factly. “You got your card punched by the numbers of bodies counted.”

In the U.S. today, the Vietnam War is regarded as a failure of foreign policy and the beginning of a long decline in America’s prestige abroad. But for Vietnam and South-east Asia, it was a humanitarian disaster.

The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C. is a moving tribute to U.S. soldiers killed or missing in action in Vietnam, its two 246-foot long black granite walls a stark reminder of the war’s tragic cost in American lives.

If the memorial included the names of the war’s estimated 2,450,000 Asian victims—along with its 58,318 Americans—the walls would be almost *four miles* long. ■