

## ‘Collateral Murder’ and the My Lai Massacre

Comparing the reaction to the evidence of two war crimes reveals how much the United States has changed in the past 50 years, writes Joe Lauria.

By [Joe Lauria](#)

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*To gauge the transformation in the response by the U.S. military, the mainstream media and the public to a U.S. war crime, one need only compare the reactions to two of the most heinous American crimes: the 1968 My Lai massacre in Vietnam and the gunning down of innocent Iraqis on a Baghdad street in 2007.*

The latter was captured on a cockpit video from attacking Apache helicopters and revealed in a video released by *WikiLeaks* ten years ago [today](#). *Wikileaks* obtained the video from a conscientious U.S. Army intelligence analyst, Chelsea Manning.

The My Lai incident was revealed to the public in Nov. 1969 through the reporting of investigative journalist Seymour Hersh. An army veteran whistleblower, Ronald Ridenhour, had first written in early 1969 to the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department and members of Congress revealing credible details about the massacre. It led to a military investigation.

The probe found that U.S. Army soldiers had killed 504 unarmed people on March 16, 1968 in the village of My Lai, including men, women and children. Some women were gang-raped by the soldiers. The military investigation led to charges against 26 soldiers. Just one, Lieutenant [William Calley Jr.](#), a C Company platoon leader, was convicted. He was found guilty of the premeditated murder of 109 villagers. (Given a life sentence, he ultimately served only three and a half years under house arrest.)

But Calley’s conviction was largely covered up by the military. *The New York Times* ran only a short Associated Press story on Sept. 7, 1969, with few details. Hersh, however, heard something about the incident from a military source in Washington and started poking around. Eventually he got to see Calley in his cell in Georgia and was even allowed to look through classified notes on his case. Hersh had his story. He pitched it to *Look* and *Life* Magazines, but was turned down. Eventually the freelancer published his story at the obscure [Dispatch News Service](#).

# Lieutenant Accused Of Murdering 109 Civilians

By SEYMOUR M. HERSH

Copyright 1969, Dispatch News Service

FORT BENNING, Ga., Nov. 13 — Lt. William L. Calley Jr., 26 years old, is a mild-mannered, boyish-looking Vietnam combat veteran with the nickname "Rusty." The Army is completing an investigation of charges that he deliberately murdered at least 109 Vietnamese civilians in a search-and-destroy mission in March 1968 in a Viet Cong stronghold known as "Pinkville."

Calley has formally been charged with six specifications of mass murder. Each specification cites a number of dead, adding up to the 109 total, and charges that Calley did "with premeditation murder . . . Oriental human beings, whose names and sex are unknown, by shooting them with a rifle."

The Army calls it murder. Calley, his counsel and others associated with the incident describe it as a case of carrying out orders.

"Pinkville" has become a widely known code word among the military in a case that many officers and some Congressmen believe will become far more controversial than the recent murder charges against eight Green Berets.

#### Year's Investigation

Army investigation team spent nearly one year studying the incident before filing charges against Calley, a platoon leader of the Eleventh Brigade of the Americal Division at the time of the killings.

Calley was formally charged on or about Sept. 6, 1968, in the multiple deaths, just a few days before he was due to be released from active service.

Calley has since hired a prominent civilian attorney, former Judge George W. Latimer of the U.S. Court of Military Appeals, and is now awaiting a military determination of whether the evidence justifies a general court-martial. Pentagon officials describe the present stage of the case as the equivalent of a civilian grand jury

proceeding.

Calley, meanwhile, is being detained at Fort Benning, where his movements are sharply restricted. Even his exact location on the base is a secret; neither the provost marshal, nor the Army's Criminal Investigation Division knows where he is being held.

The Army has refused to comment on the case, "in order not to prejudice the continuing investigation and rights of the accused." Similarly, Calley —

## 350-Pound Campus Queen

BELLINGHAM, Wash., Nov. 13 (UPI) — A 350-pound pig named Grenalda has been elected homecoming queen at Western Washington State College.

Grenalda was sponsored by the college rugby club.

although agreeing to an interview — refused to discuss in detail what happened on March 16, 1968.

However, many other officers and civilian officials, some angered by Calley's action and others angry that charges of murder were filed in the case, talked freely in interviews at Fort Benning and Washington.

#### Factors Agreed On

These factors are not in dispute:

The Pinkville area, about six miles northeast of Quang Ngai, had been a Viet Cong fortress since the Vietnam war began. In early February 1968, a company of the Eleventh Brigade, as part of Task Force Barker, pushed through the area and was severely shot up.

Calley's platoon suffered casualties. After the Communist Tet offensive in February 1968, a larger assault was mounted, again with high casualties and little success. A third attack was quickly mounted and it was successful.

The Army claimed 128 Viet

Cong were killed. Many civilians also were killed in the operation. The area was a free fire zone from which all non-Viet Cong residents had been urged, by leaflet, to flee. Such zones are common throughout Vietnam.

One man who took part in the mission with Calley said that in the earlier two attacks "we were really shot up."

"Every time we got hit it was from the rear," he said. "So the third time in there the order came down to go in and make sure no one was behind."

"We were told to just clear the area. It was a typical combat assault formation. We came in hot, with a cover of artillery in front of us, came down the line and destroyed the village."

"There are always some civilian casualties in a combat operation. He isn't guilty of murder."

The order to clear the area was relayed from the battalion

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Hersh's Dispatch News Service story picked up by the St. Louis Post Dispatch, Nov. 14, 1969.

There was a public outcry after Hersh's revelation. It was picked up by newspapers across the nation, including on the front pages of *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*. It fueled anti-war sentiment and hatred of President Richard Nixon. Two days following Hersh's story about 250,000 anti-war protestors gathered at the Washington Monument. "It surpassed in size the civil rights March on Washington in 1964 and was easily the largest — and was perhaps the youngest — antiwar crowd ever assembled in the United States," the *Post* reported.

Forty years after the My Lai incident, Apache helicopter gunships patrolling the skies of Baghdad on July 12, 2007 opened fire on a group of civilians on a street below, killing a number of people, including two Reuters journalists, and the driver of a van who had come to pick up the wounded.

During the My Lai incident one brave American serviceman, Hugh Thompson, landed his helicopter between cowering civilians and advancing GIs and told the Americans his gunship [would fire on them](#) if they didn't stop. In Baghdad, one U.S. soldier, Ethan McCord, [saved](#) the lives of two Iraqi children over the orders of his superiors.

Where the Similarities End

Some similarities between the two incidents are uncanny. But the outcomes were wholly different. Both were stories of a U.S. military massacre of innocent civilians, just two instances of many such massacres across Vietnam and Iraq. Both began with a whistleblower, Ridenhour on My Lai and Manning on Baghdad. Both stories were turned down by major media, and later accepted by obscure publications (which then made *WikiLeaks* well-known). (Manning was first turned down by the *Times* and *The Washington Post*).

But that's where the similarities end. The My Lai story led to a military investigation and a conviction of a U.S. soldier for mass murder. It caused a global outcry when all the facts

became known. It contributed to the growing anti-war movement in the U.S. And it catapulted Hersh into prominence. As a result of his story, the freelancer was hired by *The New York Times*.

The Baghdad massacre led to no military investigation or charges against any soldier involved, despite video evidence that was stronger than what came out of My Lai. (The Army photographer who took the photo up top admitted to [destroying](#) pictures of the murders being committed.) The whistleblower was not jailed, as Manning was, but was listened to, and it led to an investigation. The 'Collateral Murder' video caused a stir, but hardly a global outcry, and it did not contribute to a U.S. anti-war movement. While *WikiLeaks* was catapulted into prominence, its publisher did not win a Pulitzer Prize, as Hersh did, but instead is languishing in a London prison on remand pending an extradition request by the United States to stand trial for espionage.

It bears repeating: At least one American soldier was imprisoned in My Lai. Hersh and the whistleblower did not go to jail. Not one U.S. soldier has gone to jail for the Baghdad massacre and the whistleblower and the journalist who revealed the crime were both imprisoned.

Manning's 35-year sentence was commuted in 2017. She was again imprisoned for more than 250 days for refusing to testify to a grand jury against Assange, before she was released last month. Assange remains in a maximum security prison for doing the same job Hersh did.

These fundamentally different outcomes to a strikingly similar situation shows how far American society has sunk into the mire of authoritarianism and obedience.

### Ellsberg and Assange

There is another Vietnam-era story that contrasts sharply with *WikiLeaks*, demonstrating how much the U.S. has changed for the worse in half a century. During the 1973 trial of whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg for leaking the Pentagon Papers it became known that the government had broken into Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office and bugged his phone to dig up dirt on him. The judge in the case was also offered the FBI directorship if Ellsberg were convicted.

When this serious prosecutorial misconduct became known, Ellsberg's case was immediately [thrown out](#) and he was a free man. Fast forward nearly 50 years to Assange's case. It is now publicly known that a Spanish company, UC Global, was contracted by the Ecuadorian government to conduct 24/7 video surveillance of Assange in the London embassy and that this audio and video—including of privileged conversations between Assange and his lawyers—was sold to the Central Intelligence Agency.

In other words, the prosecuting government eavesdropped on the defense preparations. This is even more egregious misconduct than in Ellsberg's case, though it has not led to the extradition request on espionage charges being immediately tossed out.

At a rally for Assange in London in February I [asked](#) Yanis Varoufakis, the former Greek finance minister, why this was so. "The difference is that Dan was tried in a normal court," he said. "Julian will never be given this opportunity. Julian is going to disappear into a system where not even his lawyers will know what the charges are. Habeas Corpus does not

exist for him. Things are getting worse. Far worse.”

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*Featured image: Photo by United States Army photographer Ronald L. Haeberle on March 16, 1968 in the aftermath of the My Lai massacre. (Wikipedia)*

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