

From My Lai to Mesopotamia: When Atrocities become an “Accepted Technique”

By [Felicity Arbuthnot](#)

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In his introduction to Robert Jungk’s wake up call, ‘Children of the Ashes’, on the survivors of Hiroshima, the late, great James Cameron writes of what the American military psychiatrist, Robert Jay Lifton called ‘the immersion into death’. Lifton went on to ‘describe how his feelings about Hiroshima were multiplied later by the appalling US atrocity in My Lai, Vietnam.’

Another kind of horror, writes Cameron, is that such atrocities have become ‘an accepted technique ...’ There you have it. The deviant, unhinged, criminal sadism, from My Lai to Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan, Abu Ghraib and the litany of inhuman, near unimaginable atrocities in America and Britain’s invasions, are not ‘isolated incidents’, the deranged acts of the occasional ‘bad apple’. The whole barrel needs decontaminating for the salvation of the odd good apple.

This month’s Nation made it clear (again) how short the forty year road is from My Lai to Iraq. What was as shocking as the horrific acts perpetrated by U.S., servicemen (and women) described, was that it was impossible to find anyone who was surprised. Revolted, appalled, deeply shamed, but not surprised. Fairly or not, the perception of America’s armed forces (with Britain not excluded either) is largely that of purveyors of lawless depravity.

The acts described by soldiers included shooting a two year old because of random firing after an explosive device went off, shooting a family dog, shooting a family in a car, where the bodies ‘literally sat in the car for the next three days while we drove by them’. Specialist John Middleton explained a prevalent concept that ‘if they don’t speak English and have a darker skin, they’re not as human as us, so we can do what we want’. Goodness, to think that there are those who believed the western troops were the foreigners in a far away place. ‘A dead Iraqi is just another dead Iraqi – you know, so what?’, said Specialist Jeff Englehart, admitting that ‘guilt ... takes root’, on returning home. No doubt, unlike the families of the dead Iraqis, he and his ilk will be sympathized with and treated for post traumatic stress disorder.

What of the: ‘..fourteen year old kid with an AK47 (who) decided he’s going to start shooting at this convoy?’ He would have been just nine or ten at the time of ‘shock and awe’ – and utter pant wetting terror. He would have spent between birth and nine or ten under an embargo which denied children even childhood, with ongoing illegal U.S., and U.K., bombings. *‘Every person got out and opened fire on this kid. Using the biggest weapons we could find, we ripped him to bits.’*

House raids, said Sgt John Burns, involved ‘.. *catching them in their sleep*’, *ripping the man*

of the house out of bed 'in front of his wife, tearing 'the room to shreds ... you'll throw all the clothes on the floor ... dump the sofa cushions and basically leave his house looking like a hurricane just hit it.' Hearts and minds, eh? One squad leader's mentality was described as to regard every Iraqi as a potential terrorist and ' ... kill them over here so we don't have to kill them back in Colorado.' One has to wonder what threat the ten year old with his three donkeys, all run over by the military, posed to Colorado. And where the seriously psychologically challenged soldier who posed with a spoon reaching to 'scoop out some ... brain', from a dead Iraqi in a body bag, was recruited? Brain matter, transported in jar, to 'fridge, it has long been reported, is the new 'trophy'. In Vietnam it was ears, heads, testicles.

Paul Rieckhoff, Executive Director of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, is incensed at the Nation's revelations. Iraqis are tragically 'caught in conflict's crossfire', bad decisions are sometimes made in 'the fog of war'. It was the reporting that was 'sensationalist and unethical', he wrote in a letter to The Independent. 'Readers, veterans and the Iraqi people deserve better.' Readers deserve the truth, the veterans told the stories - and the Iraqi people indeed deserve much better : to see many, many of the illegally invading army in the dock, tried with crimes against humanity.

Rieckhoff's letter rang a My Lai bell. Here again from Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim's meticulously researched 'Four Hours in My Lai.

' Lt. William Calley was the only serviceman to be charged for part in the massacre of 16th March 1968. He had thrown a defenseless old man down a well and shot him and: 'seeing a baby crawling away from a ditch filled with the dead and dying villagers, threw it back in the pit and shot it.' Sentenced to life imprisonment, President Nixon ordered he should be released from jail pending appeal. The Rieckhoff of the day, Judge Robert Elliot, releasing Calley on parole explained : 'War is war, it is not unusual for innocent civilians ... to be killed.' Massacred? Forget it. The Judge helpfully explained that: ' when Joshua took the city of Jericho in biblical times, no charges had been brought against him for the slaughter of the civilian population.'

' I think there is a good deal of evidence that we thought all along we were a redeemer nation', wrote the distinguished theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, of Vietnam in general and My Lai in particular : ' There was a lot of illusion in our national history. Now it is about to be shattered.' The mirror images could not be starker. The killings in My Lai: '.. took place part maniacally, part methodically ... they were accompanied by rape, sodomy, mutilations and unimaginable random cruelties .. it was a Nazi kind of thing ..', Bilton and Sim say they were told again and again and: 'Festering sores disfiguring the face of American society (erupted) in all their horror.'

To the army, My Lai was, of course, an aberration: ' .. wholly unrepresentative of the manner in which our forces conduct military operations.' Seventy percent of villages in one province alone, Quang Ngai, had been destroyed by aerial bombardment or artillery, a full two years before My Lai. 'We are here to kill dinks ... that's our job', commented one soldier. As in Iraq, there to kill 'Hajis', 'Sand niggers', 'Camel jockeys'. And as Vietnam's decimation, to kill from Al Qaem to Fallujah, to northern Tel Afar, to Baquba, Baghdad and across the nation. To rape, degrade, thief, defile. These are not 'isolated incidents', but numerous documented and first hand reports.

Can it get worse? Oh yes. As Elana Schor and Roxana Tiron report: ' At the Pentagon's

request, Senate Defense authorizers, tucked deep within the Defense Bill, a repeal of the Department's restriction on granting security clearances to ex-convicts, drug addicts and the mentally incompetent.' (see: [Global Research, July 2007](#)).

There are brave U.S., Iraq and Afghanistan veterans crossing the U.S., going to bases, risking imprisonment, attempting to persuade their colleagues to longer participate in these invasions. Two days ago when the vast US Kitty Hawk docked in Australia, colleagues there distributed fact filled leaflets as sailors disembarked. Two uniformed personnel hid many amongst a pile of pizzas they had come to collect and asked that copies of two searing films on Vietnam and Iraq be slipped in their pockets to show back on the ship. Good apples, but back in occupied lands, numerous bad ones, commit atrocities with impunity and having lost 'imagination ... laugh among the dying, unconcerned'.(Wilfred Owen : Insensibility).

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