

The My Lai Massacre Revisited

41 years ago

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Forty-one years ago, on March 16, 1968, a company of US Army combat soldiers from the Americal Division swept into the South Vietnamese hamlet of My Lai, rounded up the 500+ unarmed residents, all women, children and old men, and executed them in cold blood, Nazi-style. No weapons were found in the village, and the whole operation took only 4 hours.

Although there was a serious attempt to cover-up this operation (which involved a young up-and-coming US Army Major named Colin Powell), those who orchestrated this “business-as-usual” war zone event did not deny the details of the slaughter when the case came to trial several years later. But the story did eventually filter back to the Western news media, thanks to a couple of courageous soldier eye-witnesses whose consciences were still intact. An Army court-martial trial eventually convened against a handful of the soldiers, including Lt. William Calley and Company C commanding officer, Ernest Medina.

According to many of the soldiers in Company C, Medina ordered the killing of “every living thing in My Lai,” all of them innocent noncombatants – men, women, children, babies and even farm animals. Lt. Calley was charged with the murder of 109 civilians. In his defense statement he stated that he had been taught to hate all Vietnamese, even children, who, he had been told, “were very good at planting mines.”

That a massacre had occurred was confirmed by all of Medina’s soldiers and it was recorded by Army photographers, but the Army still tried to cover it up. The cases were tried in military courts with juries of Army officers, which eventually dropped the charges against all of the defendants (except Calley) or acquitted them. Medina and the others who were among the killing soldiers that day went free, and only Calley was convicted of the murders of “at least 20 civilians.” Nobody was convicted of the murders of the other 400+ villagers. Calley was sentenced to life imprisonment for his crime, but, under pressure from patriotic pro-war Americans, President Nixon pardoned him within weeks of the verdict.

The trial stimulated a lot of interest because it occurred during the rising outcry of millions of Americans against the war, acknowledged widely as an “overwhelming atrocity.” Many thoughtful Americans, including many military conscripts and veterans, were sick of the killing. However, 79% of those that were polled strenuously objected to Calley’s conviction, some veteran’s groups even voicing the opinion that instead of condemnation, he should have received medals of honor for killing “Commie Gooks.”

Just like the Jewish Holocaust of World War II, the realities of My Lai deserve to be revisited again and again so that it will happen “never again.” The Vietnam War, (as is the current quagmire in Iraq) was an excruciating time for conscientious Americans because of the numerous moral issues surrounding the mass slaughter in a war that uselessly killed 58,000

American soldiers, caused the spiritual deaths of millions of others, killed 3 million Vietnamese (mostly innocent civilians) and psychologically, physically and spiritually traumatized countless others on both sides of the conflict.

Of course the Vietnam War was a thousand times worse for the innocent people of that doomed land than it was for the soldiers. The Vietnamese people were victims of an army of heavily-armed, ruthless, adolescent males from a foreign land who were taught that the "little yellow people" were pitiful sub-humans and deserved to be killed - with some GIs preferring to inflict torture first. "Kill-or-be-killed" is a reality that is standard operating procedure for military combat units of every nation of every era and of every ideology.

Vietnam veterans tell me that there were scores, maybe hundreds, of "My Lai-type massacres". Not surprisingly, the Pentagon refuses to acknowledge that truth. Execution-style killings of "potential" Viet Cong sympathizers (i.e., anybody that wasn't an American at the time) were common. Many combat units "took no prisoners" (a euphemism for murdering captives, rather than having to follow the nuisance Geneva Conventions which requires humane, but time-consuming treatment for prisoners of war). The only unusual thing about My Lai was that it was found out, and the Pentagon's routine attempt at a cover-up failed.

Very few soldiers or their commanding officers have ever been punished for the many war crimes that occurred during that war because those in charge thought that killing (or torturing) of innocent civilians during war-time is simply the norm, usually labeled "collateral damage." After all, as US Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld infamously proclaimed, "stuff happens" during wars

The torture and shooting was enjoyable for some - for awhile (witness Abu Graib and Guantanamo Bay realities). And wars are profitable for many - and still are (witness Halliburton, Blackwater, et al. today).

Those who plan wars and/or participate in them, yet also profess to be Christians, are explicitly rejecting the ethical teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6 and 7) and Matthew 25:31-46. Those Christians are either ignorant of or simply reject what Jesus repeatedly said about the issue of homicidal violence (in so many words, he says: "Violence is forbidden for those who wish to follow me"). And what is most hypocritical of all is the fact that pro-war or neutral Christians, by their actions, are rejecting Jesus' Golden Rule command: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

The rejection of the Way of Jesus also includes the rejection of his clear teachings on how his followers are to treat the neighbor, the stranger, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the captive, the enemy and all others in need of mercy and understanding. In order to participate in the legal homicide that takes place in all wars, the followers of Jesus have to reject gospel ethics and adopt the un-Christ-like, non-gospel Just War Theory of Augustine (which first appeared 3 centuries after Jesus' death). There seems to be no ethical way for the follower of the nonviolent Jesus to participate in or support the mass slaughter of war. The Christian has to choose between two irreconcilable realities: the Way of the God of Love or the way of the god of war.

The whole issue of the justification of war, with its inherent atrocities, never seems to be thoroughly examined in an atmosphere of openness and historical honesty. Full

understanding of the realities of war and its spiritual, psychological and economic consequences for the victims – or for the victimizers, for that matter – is rarely attempted, even for people of faith. If we who are non-soldiers ever truly experienced the horrors of combat, the effort to abolish war would suddenly be a top priority (perhaps even for the current crop of unelected “Chicken Hawk” warmongers in the Bush and Obama Administrations).

If we actually knew the gruesome realities of war (or even understood the immorality of spending trillions of dollars on war preparation while hundreds of millions of people are homeless and starving) we would refuse to cooperate with the things that make for war. But that wouldn't be good for the various war profiteers and their shareholders who profit from war. So those “merchants of death” must hide the gruesome truths and try instead to make war look like something glorious, benign, character-building or patriotic, with, for example, sloganeering like “Be All That You Can Be.” Or they might try to convince the soon-to-be-childless mothers of doomed, dead or dying soldiers that their child had died honorably fighting for God and Country instead of for domination of the Middle East's oil reserves.

Let's face it. The US military's standing army system has been gradually bankrupting America at \$500+ billion annually year after year after year – even in times of so-called “peace.” The warmongering legacy of the Pentagon is still with us, particularly among those who wanted to “nuke the gooks” in Vietnam. Un-elected policy-makers of their ilk are still in charge of US war-planning and war-making today, no matter who is president, and they have been solidifying their power to flush more and more money down the Pentagon toilet with the huge profits made off the deaths, screams, blood, guts and permanent disabilities of those hood-winked soldiers who were told that they were “saving the world for democracy” when in fact they were making the world safe for exploitive capitalism with obscene profits for the few. And even the politicians who are paid lapdogs for the corporate war profiteers don't want the gravy train to be derailed.

Things haven't changed much even from the World War II mentality that conveniently and guiltlessly overlooked the monstrous evil that was perpetrated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August 1945, war crimes so heinous that the psychological consequences, immune deficiency disorders and cancers from that nuclear holocaust are still being experienced in unimaginable suffering 6 decades later.

Things haven't really changed much when one witnesses the political mentality that ignores the 500,000 deaths of innocent Iraqi civilians in the aftermath of the first Gulf War or the 600,000 plus civilian deaths in the current fiasco in Iraq.

It is apparent that our military and political leaders haven't learned anything about the real costs of war since WWII, Korea, Viet Nam, not to mention what has happened to every army that ever tried to conquer Afghanistan. And sadly, it appears that the churches haven't learned much either. The person sitting next to you in the comfortable church pew is, like most unaware or apathetic Americans, blissfully unaware of the hellish realities of the war-zone, so he is likely to be blindly patriotic and therefore indifferent to the plight of “the other” who suffers so much in war. He may think, contrary to Jesus' clear teachings, that some people are “less than” us white Americans, and, therefore, if necessary, can be justifiably killed for “Volk, Fuhrer und Vaterland.”

As long as most American citizens continue to glorify war and militarism and denigrate its peacemakers; and as long as the American public endorses the current spirit of nationalism

and ruthless global capitalism; and as long as the American church leadership remains prudently silent (and therefore consenting to the homicidal violence of war) we will not be able to effect a change away from the influence of conscienceless war-mongers. The prophets, the peacemakers and the conscientious objectors to war and killing are never valued in militarized nations, especially in times of war; indeed, they are virtually always marginalized, demeaned, imprisoned and sometimes even executed as traitors. And one of the reasons is that there are no profits to be made in peacemaking, whereas there are trillions to be made in the biggest business going: the preparation for, and execution of, war and the “inconvenient” but inevitable collateral damage to the creation and its innocent creatures. The current “Blow it Up Then Build it Up” reality makes money first for the killing machine and then also for the Halliburtons of the world.

As long as we continue to be led by unapologetic and merciless war-makers (and their various partners in crime – the wealthy corporate elite); and as long as there are under-employed young men and women who don’t know they are being lied to at the military recruiting stations; and as long as the nuclear giants (but ethical infants) in Washington, DC continue to be corrupted by the big money bribes and bonuses for their short-term profiteering, there is no chance America will ever obtain a meaningful peace.

And as long as America’s Christian religious leaders and their followers continue to be silent about what Jesus surely would have had them vociferously resist, namely the mass slaughter that is modern war, suffering humanity will be condemned to future wars, poverty, pestilence and starvation.

And unless America stops their military’s carnage, fully repents of its crimes against humanity and offers compensation and pays for the damage done, its turn as a recipient of retaliatory violence, like that suffered by all previous collapsed and collapsing empires, will surely come, and it will come from those, foreign and domestic victims that our nation has treated so shamefully over the past half-century.

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