Coming to Terms with the Past: My Lai

Kendrick Oliver revisits the scene of an infamous massacre that became a watershed in public perceptions of the Vietnam war, and asks what it means to America, almost forty years on.

On the morning of March 16th, 1968, the men of Charlie Company, 11th Light Infantry Brigade, Americal Division, US Army, entered the hamlet of Tu Cung, in the village of Son My, on the coast of central Vietnam. The company was assigned to a temporary battalion-sized unit named Task Force Barker, and it was led by Captain Ernest Medina. In charge of the company’s 1st Platoon was Lieutenant William Calley. Inside Tu Cung the company encountered no enemy forces, no opposing fire of any kind. Its only casualty was self-inflicted. Nevertheless, by early afternoon, well over 300 residents of the hamlet lay dead. Those killed were predominantly women, old men or small children. A number of the women had been raped before being killed. Other victims had been tortured and mutilated, then killed. Much of the killing, though not all, had occurred in the sub-hamlet of Xom Lang, known to the Americans as My Lai (4). Much of the killing, though not all, had been conducted by 1st Platoon. That same morning, a mile or so away, another Task Force Barker unit, Bravo Company, killed close to a hundred civilians in the sub-hamlet of My Hoi, Co Luy hamlet, known to the Americans as My Khe (4).

Initially covered-up by the local divisional command, the events in Son My only came to the attention of the army authorities in April 1969, after a young GI who had served in the 11th Brigade wrote a letter to the President, the Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and several congressmen and senators describing what he had been told about the killings by some of the soldiers involved. Eight months later, in November, knowledge of the massacre finally entered the public domain when the investigative reporter Seymour Hersh revealed that William Calley had been charged with the murder of 109 Vietnamese civilians.

From that moment on, through to the conclusion of Calley’s court martial in spring 1971, what became known as the My Lai massacre (the killings in My Khe (4) were largely ignored) remained a prominent item in American national discourse. According to a survey commissioned by the Nixon White House, the level of public awareness of the ‘guilty’ verdict handed down in the Calley trial was 96 per cent: ‘the highest we’ve gotten on any subject in any of our polls,’ commented Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman. The case even produced its own hit single, ‘The Battle Hymn of Lieutenant Calley’ by Terry Nelson and ‘C’ Company, which reached number 37 on the Billboard chart. Commentators, meanwhile, were rarely inclined to understate the massacre’s historical significance. As evidence about the crimes committed in My Lai (4) began to emerge in the wake of Hersh’s revelations, a New York Times editorial declared that the atrocities ‘may turn out to have been one of this nation’s most ignoble hours’. In April 1971, Time magazine asserted that ‘the crisis of confidence caused by the Calley affair is a graver phenomenon than the horror following the assassination of President Kennedy. Historically, it is far more crucial.’ In these renderings, the My Lai massacre was a pivotal event, not just in the history of the Vietnam War but also in that of the American nation as a whole.

Nearly forty years on, however, the status of the massacre as historical pivot is unclear, not so much because it is explicitly contested, but because its memory is muted. The media has revisited the story of the massacre on most of its major anniversaries, or when fresh revelations of atrocities in past or current conflicts have stimulated a search for analogies or precedents. Public interest in the case has been reawakened on occasion by more extensive treatments, as in 1989 when the British television documentary Four Hours in My Lai was broadcast on the
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influx of Western (particularly American) tourists, Son My remained somewhat isolated from the principal circuits of visitor traffic. Well into the 1990s, foreigners who wished to visit the massacre memorial required a permit from the local police.

Yet the displacement of the My Lai massacre and other American combat atrocities from the national memory of the Vietnam experience was not entirely a post-war development. Even as the massacre dominated public discourse within the United States, from the initial revelations in November 1969 to the aftermath of Calley’s court-martial in spring 1971, the sufferings of the victims became neutralized as a source of national anxiety and remorse. Combat photographs of the villagers moments before they were killed, or lying dead thereafter on the ground, were frequently published in the media, but the victims were rarely, if ever, identified. No survivors were called to testify at any of the massacre courts-martial. Even the few survivor accounts that did appear in the American media had a rather incidental quality: a face appearing on a screen, personal horrors briskly summarized, the camera moves on, never to return. What the images of the massacre, the judicial proceedings and the coverage in the press tended to record was only the termination of lives in Son My, not the social and emotional investments that produced and nurtured them, nor the social value of the individuals themselves, nor their potential to produce more—the wasting of all of which marked the true dimensions of the My Lai crime.

Americans, indeed, were far more interested in the character and fate of the perpetrators than those of their victims. As many media commentators noted, there seemed to be nothing in the background of the soldiers involved that explained how they had come to engage so willingly in slaughter. ‘They were Everyman,’ commented Time, ‘decent in their daily lives, who at home in Ohio or Vermont would regard it as unthinkable to maliciously strike a child, much less kill one.’ The soldiers of Charlie Company, particularly William Calley, were frequently represented in the media as members of a recognizable national community, in army uniform or at home, in the company of family and friends, surrounded by the goods and chattels of an ordinary American life. These images perhaps precipitated the thought: if these men could unload their weapons upon Vietnamese women and children, how many Americans could say for certain that, in the same situation, they would not have acted the same way? Many Americans, indeed, seemed both to identify with the crime itself and to sympathize with the soldiers who had committed it. Respondents to one opinion poll were asked what they would have done if, as a soldier in Vietnam, they had been ordered by a superior officer to shoot all the inhabitants of a village suspected of aiding the enemy, including old men, women and children. Fifty-one per cent affirmed that they would have obeyed. Of the 96 per cent who claimed awareness of the verdict in Calley’s trial, the vast majority registered their belief that his conviction had been unjust, that something or someone else was to blame, such as the pressures of war or the senior officers who had supervised the assault upon Son My.

Indeed, to examine the manner in which Americans received and responded to the revelations about the My Lai massacre, and to the prosecution of the soldiers most immediately responsible, is to be left largely unsurprised that the public memory of the incident has since taken the form and course that it has. It has been difficult for Americans to come to terms with the Vietnam War, but not perhaps difficult enough; the effort has succeeded to the extent that it has because of a failure to come properly to terms with events like My Lai. The US Army revised its training schedules in the wake of the massacre revelations, but for everybody else there were few congenial purposes to which knowledge of the atrocity could be turned. More than three decades on, it is unlikely that any new accounting will occur. More Americans are presently able to travel to the site of the massacre, speak to its survivors, make an effort to imagine the terror, pain and grief that the soldiers of their country had visited upon Son My, and come finally to feel some of the moral weight of their own recent history. Yet their numbers will always be small compared with the size of the cavities to be repaired in their nation’s memory of the war. Vietnam, moreover, is changing, and with it Son My. It is now the ‘buying mood’ of the American tourist that the authorities in Hanoi most wish to cultivate and preserve, not a sense of shame nor a commitment to the clearance of still outstanding national moral accounts. To the north, an hour’s drive away from Son My, an international airport is under construction; on the beach near My Khe (4), the site of the Bravo Company massacre, a new luxury hotel is being built; there are plans for a golf course. Tourists may visit the massacre memorial in the morning, play the back nine in the afternoon: in that experience, there would be scope for an education, but there possibly would also be something obscene.