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Exposing Evil: My Lai, the Media, and American Atrocities in Asia, 1941-1975

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**EXPOSING EVIL: MY LAI, THE MEDIA,
AND AMERICAN ATROCITIES
IN ASIA, 1941-1975**

by

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ABSTRACT

In both the Pacific War against Japan from 1941 to 1945 and the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, United States combat troops—emboldened by a combat culture of dehumanization through racism and a military that enacted policies of attrition—committed atrocities against Asian soldiers and civilians. This trend continued into the Vietnam War unabated beginning in 1965. Incidents of atrocities committed by American troops overseas were not publicly discussed until the My Lai Massacre of 1968 was revealed to the American people in 1969. Once the massacre became a national news story published in outlets all over the country, American citizens were forced to confront the reality of what some US combat troops had done in Asian wars for decades.

This thesis argues that the media coverage of the My Lai Massacre broke a culture of silence, a phenomenon previously observed in military circles, that existed in American society concerning atrocities committed by GIs in American wars in Asia during the mid-twentieth century. Myths of American righteousness abroad and the morally good GI were challenged by liberal doves who reconciled the reality of My Lai with their national identity and called for a collective acceptance of responsibility by Americans. In contrast, a large contingent of war hawks, unwilling to let the overarching myth of American exceptionalism fade, defended and incorporated American war atrocities into those ideas. War atrocities and the myth of American exceptionalism

persist in the wake of My Lai, but the culture of silence has diminished as Americans continue to reconcile atrocities with their wars.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the Vietnam War in 1968, the United States Army, reeling from the Tet Offensive, struggled to dismantle National Liberation Front (NLF) operations in South Vietnam. A particular hotspot of Communist activity was a region in the northeastern Quang Ngai Province known by the South Vietnamese as Son My Village. Colloquially referred to by GIs as “Pinkville,” Son My was composed of a collection of subhamlets that included My Lai 4, My Khe 4, Binh Tay, Binh Dong, and others. As part of a sequence of search-and-destroy operations in Quang Ngai conducted by the newly formed Task Force Baker under the moniker “Operation Muscatine,” Son My was assaulted by US combat troops from Company B and Company C on March 16. They expected to wipe out the remnants of the NLF’s 48th Local Force Battalion while the civilians were away at market. After initial artillery shelling and helicopter gunfire softened the village, over 100 GIs from Task Force Baker began a ground sweep of Son My. As far as the press and task-force headquarters were concerned, the day’s operation concluded with 128 NLF dead and three weapons found “in a bloody day-long battle” with no American deaths.¹ It was a definitive success. In reality, however, 504 unarmed civilians—almost all women, children, and the elderly—were murdered by US soldiers in

¹ Quoted in Seth Robson, “Clemency is Last Hope for a More Normal Life,” *Stars and Stripes*, May 12, 2009, <https://www.stripes.com/news/clemency-is-last-hope-for-a-more-normal-life-1.91416>; Seymour M. Hersh, “The Massacre at My Lai: A Mass Killing and its Coverup,” *New Yorker*, Jan. 15, 1972, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1972/01/22/coverup>.

Son My that day. Much of the killing occurred at the My Lai 4 subhamlet and the trail leading up to it under orders from Second Lieutenant William Laws Calley, Jr., who headed 1st Platoon, Company C, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Brigade, 23rd (Americal) Infantry Division.²

Some officers and hundreds of other GIs in Task Force Baker learned the truth of what happened within weeks, but few outside the Army knew what transpired until ex-GI Ronald Ridenhour sent letters in late March, 1969, to the State Department, the White House, the Pentagon, and twenty-four congressmen in both the House and the Senate that described the “dark and bloody” murders.³ Ridenhour was not a part of Task Force Baker, but he heard of the incident from witnesses as part of a reconnaissance unit in Vietnam shortly after it occurred. The Army conducted its own internal investigations into the matter and eventually charged William Calley, Jr., with the murder of 109 unarmed South Vietnamese civilians on September 5, 1969. It was only in November 1969 that the media and American public at large learned of the massacre at Son My, now commonly known in the US as the “My Lai Massacre.” Investigative reporter Seymour Hersh broke the story on November 13 with the publication of his article “Lieutenant Accused of Murdering 109 Civilians” in the *Boston Globe*, *Miami Herald*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, and other outlets. The events of the My Lai Massacre finally achieved national attention on November 20 with the publication of both Hersh’s second article, “Hamlet Attack Called ‘Point-Blank Murder,’” and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*’s

² Hersh, “The Massacre at My Lai”; Howard Jones, *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-3, 27-29. Jones notes that official figures are contested, but 504 is accepted by most as an accurate count of the victims at My Lai. William Thomas Allison, *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press: 2012), 52.

³ Quoted in Seymour M. Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and its Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1970), 103, 106.

publication of eight photographs taken by Ronald Haeberle, an Army photographer present at My Lai 4, that depicted graphic images of the victims before and after their murder.⁴

In the same month, Lieutenant General William Peers was assigned by the Army to direct a panel that would determine what happened at My Lai and why initial inquiries into the incident in 1968 failed to bring attention and consequences onto the perpetrators. The Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident, or simply “The Peers Inquiry,” conducted dozens of interviews of perpetrators and officers involved with the affair. In its final report on March 17, 1970, to Army Chief of Staff William Westmoreland and Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor, the Peers Inquiry concluded, “Within the Americal Division, at every command level from company to division, actions were taken or omitted which together effectively concealed the Son My incident,” and some of those actions “constituted deliberate suppression or withholding of information.”⁵

The indifference with which the My Lai Massacre was treated for over a year, its suppression by both members involved and officers in the Army, and its revelation to the public by media outlets is part of a larger story of relations between American combat troops, American civilians, and the US government concerning atrocities in Asian wars during the twentieth century. The United States fought the Japanese in World War II from 1941-1945 and the North Koreans and troops from the People’s Republic of China

⁴ Jones, *My Lai*, 205-214; Hersh, “The Massacre at My Lai.”

⁵ Peers Inquiry, Volume I, The Report of the Investigation, 2-9, Report of the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident, 1970, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/Peers_inquiry.html; Michal R. Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley* (Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 2002), 78-79; Hersh, “The Massacre at My Lai.”

in the Korean War from 1950-1953. In both wars, American soldiers committed atrocities against soldiers and civilians alike. It was not until the My Lai Massacre of 1968 during the Vietnam War, however, that an instance of US soldiers violating the laws of warfare and cultural mores garnered substantial media coverage and sparked a national conversation. Americans at home confronted the reality that some of their own troops flagrantly murdered unarmed civilians—women, children, and the elderly—by the scores.

If My Lai was not the first instance of an atrocity committed in the Vietnam War, or the Korean War, or the Pacific War, why was My Lai the first to garner national attention? What does the media scrutiny of My Lai in tandem with public engagement imply about the relationship between the US military and the American people before, during, and after? Through the public coverage of the My Lai Massacre, myth and reality converged in American society as a culture of silence surrounding American war atrocities in Asia broke. Conceptions of American righteousness and the morally good GI eroded in the minds of antiwar doves and liberal Americans who let go of the myth of American exceptionalism. These doves reconciled the reality of the My Lai Massacre with their national identity and called on their peers to accept collective guilt and responsibility. War hawks and pro-military advocates, however, reinforced the myth of American exceptionalism in the wake of My Lai by defending the massacre and incorporating the occurrence of atrocities into the image of the good GI and American righteousness. While attempts at collective reckoning failed and the myth of American exceptionalism remains, the culture of silence surrounding American atrocities dissipated due, in part, to the media's coverage of My Lai. Atrocities, when discovered, now

become national topics of conversation in mainstream news media, and Americans continue to confront reality and the myths they hold on to.

CHAPTER 2

FROM THE PACIFIC TO MY LAI

Given the proper context, the My Lai Massacre was wholly predictable. The history of racially-tinged acts of violence by US troops against Asians abroad can be traced back to the Philippine-American War in the beginning of the twentieth century.⁶ Since this study only focuses on the actions of US soldiers over a thirty-four year period that encompasses the Pacific War of World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, there is still room, then, for a study that effectively incorporates the Philippine-American War into the discussion of US atrocities against Asians in the twentieth century and the media coverage of My Lai. Regardless, the historical record confirms that atrocities committed by GIs against Asians were not a phenomenon that began with My Lai; they were a pattern of action that culminated in the event. Furthermore, a culture of silence existed among US troops, citizens, and the news media. This silence maintained an image of morally good GIs that developed through the Pacific War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War before My Lai.

Though atrocity is often used in the monographs and academic articles referenced in this thesis, the term is rarely defined by its users. Alan Kramer notes in the

⁶ For instances of atrocities committed by US soldiers during the Philippine-American War of 1899-1902 and evidence of their racial nature, see Paul A. Kramer, "Race-Making and Colonial Violence in the U.S. Empire: The Philippine-American War as Race War," *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 2 (2006): 169-210, <https://ezproxy.latech.edu:2080/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.24915090&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

International Encyclopedia of the First World War that an atrocity is, “an act of violence condemned by contemporaries as a breach of morality or the laws of war” and is “culturally constructed.”⁷ Therefore, the condemnation of an instance of violence that is perceived as unusually immoral indicates its status as an atrocity. An atrocity does not need to be scrutinized through laws of warfare to exist, only when it is to be punished by law. It is important to understand this distinction. Atrocities by American troops occurred throughout the Pacific War, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, whether labeled by actors, victims, witnesses, other contemporaries, or scrutinized through the lens of the Hague Convention of 1907 or the Geneva Convention of 1949.⁸ These atrocities include corpse looting, rape, torture, and the shooting of both unarmed civilians and disarmed combatants.⁹

Regardless, the word “atrocity” is a messy term burdened with a seemingly endless amount of lingual, cultural, and contextual baggage. For instance, using Alan Kramer’s definition, questions arise: if an act of violence *would be* rationally condemned by contemporaries as a breach of morality if the act were known about, can it still be defined as an atrocity? This thesis assumes so. If one society does not condemn a violent

⁷ Alan Kramer, “Atrocity,” in *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson (Freie Universität Berlin, 2017), doi: 10.15463/ie1418.10770/1.1.

⁸ See Hague Convention of 1907: Laws of War: Laws and Customs of War on Land, Hague IV (October 18, 1907), Annex to the Convention: Regulations Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, in *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy*, Yale Law School, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hague04.asp#art4; See Jones, *My Lai*, 16.

⁹ Eugene B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981; reprint, New York: Presidio Press, 2007) Kindle, 65, 119-22, 145-47, 151-52, 289-90. Corpse looting was a common occurrence that Sledge recognizes was “dehumanizing,” “savage,” and a product of hatred; Richard Tregaskis, *Guadalcanal Diary* (1943; reprint, New York: Modern Library, 2000), 126-29; Craig M. Cameron, *American Samurai: Myth, Imagination, and the Conduct of Battle in the First Marine Division, 1941-1951* (1994; reprint, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 126; Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2010) 167-69, 196-99; Jones, *My Lai*, 4. Jones references the work of the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group.

act broadly, but another society does (a perpetrator-victim scenario), does the act constitute an atrocity? This thesis contends it does for the sake of using words and defining them, but perhaps there is an argument against such a liberal use of the term. Accounting for scale, this thesis utilizes “atrocity” to describe a wide range of acts that encompass the torture of prisoners and the firebombing of Tokyo. While this thesis defines these acts under the same umbrella term of “atrocities,” this does not imply that they carry the same weight in terms of impact, victims, or reception by contemporaries. They are, however, both considered atrocities here. Furthermore, a violent act’s descriptive definition does not preclude it from being in atrocity as this thesis utilizes the term. For instance, a massacre and an instance of corpse-looting are both atrocities even though they can be described without referring to them as such. Finally, this thesis’ use of the messy term of “atrocity” does not preclude other scholars from defining it differently if they see fit. In this thesis, the term “atrocity” carries the context established in these last two paragraphs forward and liberally applies the term.

Historians John Dower and Craig Cameron show that atrocities committed by US troops in the Pacific War were connected to racist sentiments prevalent in the West toward Asians at the time. Racism during the twentieth century toward Asians was a common feature of Western culture rooted in a history of colonialism and the Yellow Peril.¹⁰ Dower pioneered the argument in his 1986 monograph, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, that the United States was not only culpable of its own

¹⁰ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 8-10; Cameron, *American Samurai*, 89-90, 92; Craig M. Cameron, “Race and Identity: The Culture of Combat in the Pacific War,” *International History Review* 27, no. 3 (2005): 550-51, 554-58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40109606>. In this article, Cameron expands on his view that Western relegation of Asian territories to colonial status under a guise of Western cultural (and racial) superiority before and through the interwar period partially instigated the Pacific War.

crimes in the Pacific War, but that the motivation for those atrocities and the viciousness of fighting in combat were motivated by “race hatred” that was transferred to other Asian adversaries during the Cold War.¹¹

Cameron proposes in his 1994 monograph, *American Samurai: Myth, Imagination, and the Conduct of Battle in the First Marine Division, 1941-1951*, that racism was a feature of combat culture among US Marines in the Pacific and Korea. Racist myths that presumed Asian cultural and racial inferiority to Western whites were reinforced in boot camp, developed among Marines on Guadalcanal and Peleliu under strenuous jungle warfare, and manifested fully on Okinawa and later the Korean War with a devastating number of civilian deaths.¹² Myths of race that permeated American society, in this case, were the impetus for combat troops to dehumanize Asians. Dehumanization made atrocities easier to commit and more regular, according to Cameron.¹³

Two Pacific War memoirs referenced by Dower and Cameron in their research more clearly portray how racial animus and combat culture manifested among US soldiers fighting the Japanese. Eugene Sledge’s 1981 memoir, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*, details his firsthand experience as a US Marine in Company K, 3d Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division during the battles of Peleliu and Okinawa in 1944 and 1945, respectively, and exemplifies the race hatred described by Dower and Cameron on both sides in the Pacific War. In describing his “brutish” and

¹¹ Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 3-73, 77-190, 293-317.

¹² Cameron, *American Samurai*, 7-8, 51-52, 89-94, 170-72, 187-90, 230-36. Cameron notes that there were 80,000 to 160,000 Okinawan civilian casualties in the Marine invasion of the island, a result only achieved because Marines had “created the necessary attitudes and conditions to wage an exterminationist campaign.”

¹³ Cameron, *American Samurai*, 7-8, 51-52, 89-94, 170-72, 187-90, 230-36.

“inglorious” experiences, Sledge acknowledges a racial animus existed that generated heinous violence.¹⁴ Corpse looting was a common occurrence that Sledge recognizes was “dehumanizing,” “savage,” and a product of hatred that existed between the Marines and Japanese, though combat stress may have contributed.¹⁵ Racist language was commonplace as Sledge recalls different Marines referring to the Japanese as “slant-eyed bastards” or “slant-eyed yellow bastards,” not to mention the derogatory colloquial “Jap.”¹⁶ Sledge witnessed atrocities on both sides, including: the removal of a gold tooth from a paralyzed yet living Japanese soldier by a Marine with a Ka-Bar; three mutilated American corpses—two of which had their heads, hands and genitalia severed, the latter shoved into their mouths; the removal of a dead Japanese soldier’s hand by a Marine to keep as a souvenir; and the murder of an injured Okinawan civilian by another Marine.¹⁷

The situation differed little on Guadalcanal while the sentiments remained the same. In Richard Tregaskis 1943 memoir, *Guadalcanal Diary*, Marines sometimes sang songs about killing “Japs” or “Nips.”¹⁸ As one Marine walked down a trail towards his comrades with an unarmed Japanese prisoner, he was greeted with shouts of “Kill the bastard!”¹⁹ In another instance, a group of Marines delighted in shooting Japanese troops who were trying to escape to the shore of the Tenaru River among heaps of their dead comrades.²⁰ These descriptions are used by Dower and Cameron to reinforce their claims

¹⁴ Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 36-37, 317-18. Note that Dower and Cameron utilize this memoir in their monographs *War Without Mercy* and *American Samurai*, respectively.

¹⁵ Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 65, 119-22.

¹⁶ Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 109-10, 137-38, 302-03.

¹⁷ Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 119-21, 145-47, 151-52, 289-90.

¹⁸ Tregaskis, *Guadalcanal Diary*, 4, 72. Note that Dower and Cameron utilize this memoir in their monographs *War Without Mercy* and *American Samurai*, respectively.

¹⁹ Tregaskis, *Guadalcanal Diary*, 107.

²⁰ Tregaskis, *Guadalcanal Diary*, 127-28.

that racism was a mechanism of dehumanization and othering used by American GIs in the Pacific War to justify atrocities.

Overarching military policies that were racialized and attrition-focused failed to abate atrocities committed by ground troops. In both *American Samurai* and his 2005 essay, “Race and Identity: The Culture of Combat in the Pacific War,” Cameron insists the failure to distinguish between civilians and noncombatants in the indiscriminate incendiary bombings of the Japanese Home Islands indicate a lower value placed on Asian lives relative to whites by US officials.²¹ Thomas Searle, referencing the incendiary bombing of Japanese cities during the Pacific War, notes that “the intention to kill large numbers of Japanese civilians was explicitly included in planning documents read and approved at every level from the individual airmen to the Joint Chiefs of Staff” in his 2002 article, “‘It Made a Lot of Sense to Kill Skilled Workers’: The Firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945.”²² This “race-tinged revenge” for Pearl Harbor, as Williamson Murray and Allan Millet describe the incendiary bombings of Japan in their 2000 monograph, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War*, compound with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as ample evidence of the disregard for Japanese civilians’ lives among policymakers.²³

Just as a racialized combat culture contributed to atrocities committed by American troops in the Pacific War, Bruce Cumings and Sahr Conway-Lanz show that this trend extends to the Korean War. Cumings argues in *The Korean War: A History*,

²¹ Cameron, *American Samurai*, 4; Cameron, “Race and Identity,” 550-51, 554-58, 561-62.

²² Thomas R. Searle, “‘It Made a Lot of Sense to Kill Skilled Workers’: The Firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945,” *The Journal of Military History* 66, no. 1 (2002): 103-05, 108-09, 117-19, 121, 133, doi:10.2307/2677346.

²³ Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2000), viii, 168, 506-07.

published in 2010, that US policy and combat culture during the Korean War was racist and conducive to an environment of civilian massacre, the largest example being Nogun-ri.²⁴ Instances of the slitting of civilians' throats and rape of Korean women by GIs were undergirded by a pervasive racial language that American troops used to dehumanize Korean "gook[s]".²⁵ As for US military policy, the air war conducted against the North Koreans during the Korean War, similar to the Pacific War with its use of incendiaries and targeting of urban centers, is labeled a "genocide" by Cumings who utilizes the United Nation's Genocide Convention's definition.²⁶ Conway-Lanz shows in his 2006 monograph, *Collateral Damage: Americans, Noncombatant Immunity, and Atrocity after World War II*, that civilian deaths like those at Nogun-ri occurred under a policy that allowed for the shooting of Korean refugees.²⁷ Atrocities committed by GIs in the Korean War reflected on American society "where Koreans were 'people of color' subjected to apartheid-like restrictions."²⁸

In the Vietnam War, GIs commonly perceived the Vietnamese as inferior. Kyle Longley argues in *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam*, published in 2008, that dehumanization of the Vietnamese, indoctrination, and improper training at boot camp prepared soldiers "to kill when ordered" without the capacity to distinguish

²⁴ Cumings, *The Korean War*, 14-15, 149-61, 167-70, 196-99; See Cameron, *American Samurai*, 234-35; The story of the massacre of hundreds of North Korean civilians by American GIs in the opening weeks of the Korean War in 1950 at the Nogun-ri village broke in 1999. One perpetrator that fired into scores of huddled civilians under a bridge said, "We just annihilated them." Associated Press, "G.I.'s Tell of a U.S. Massacre in Korean War," *The New York Times*, Sept. 30, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/30/world/gi-s-tell-of-a-us-massacre-in-korean-war.html>; See Richard Pyle, "Ex-GIs Say U.S. Troops in Korean War had Orders to Shoot Civilians," *Star-Banner*, Nov. 22, 2000, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1356&dat=20001122&id=LwJQAAAAIBAJ&sjid=XggEAAAAIBAJ&pg=6810,3364381>.

²⁵ Cumings, *The Korean War*, 14-15, 169-70, 197.

²⁶ Cumings, *The Korean War*, 149-61

²⁷ See Sahr Conway-Lanz, *Collateral Damage: Americans, Noncombatant Immunity, and Atrocity after World War II* (Routledge, 2006).

²⁸ Cumings, *The Korean War*, 15.

between combatants and civilians.²⁹ Indeed, Longley notes that officers in basic training would shout at their trainees to “Kill, kill, kill the gooks!”³⁰ This mantra reflects the mindset of some GIs toward Vietnamese during the My Lai Massacre. Private First Class Dennis Bunning, referring to the slaughtered Vietnamese, recalled to the Peers commission that perpetrators “didn’t even consider them human.”³¹

The racist parallels of combat against the Vietnamese and Japanese by American troops is invoked by one anonymous GI in Vietnam who proclaims in Michael Herr’s 1977 memoir, *Dispatches*, that it was “just like goin’ in against the Japs.”³² The consequences of racial dehumanization manifested fully when Vietnamese civilians, referred to as “Dinks” in this instance, tried to escape gunfire by entering a helicopter with GIs only to be shot at by the troops.³³ One Marine prior to this instance was upset that he was prohibited from firing through villages to avoid civilian crossfire.³⁴ The racialized combat culture among US troops during the Pacific War and the Korean War remained in Vietnam, as did its tendency to produce atrocities.

Military policy in Vietnam also contributed to an environment where atrocities regularly occurred, though not on the scale of My Lai. Thomas Thayer and Gregory Daddis establish in *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (1985) and *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (2011), respectively, that US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV)’s improper use of attrition metrics for its counterinsurgency campaign—that is, measuring

²⁹ Kyle Longley, *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2008), 41-47, 62-64.

³⁰ Longley, *Grunts*, 63.

³¹ Quoted in Jones, *My Lai*, 77.

³² Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1991) Kindle, 23.

³³ Herr, *Dispatches*, 29.

³⁴ Herr, *Dispatches*, 27-28.

success by the number of NLF soldiers killed—was responsible for the over one million civilian casualties during the conflict.³⁵ For his 2003 monograph, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*, Christian Appy interviewed 350 people to tell the story of the war from the perspective of individuals who participated, one of whom corroborates MACV’s culpability in civilian casualties.³⁶ As a whole, these studies show that the three policies of the “free fire zone,” “search and destroy” missions, and MACV’s idea of measuring “progress” in the war through body counts resulted in a combat culture where civilian deaths were excused, unpunished, and statistically beneficial for squads who would report civilian deaths as enemy dead, just as Task Force Baker did at My Lai.³⁷

The works of scholars and the memoirs of veterans reveal that combat culture and policy regularly combined to produce atrocities over three decades of warfare in Asia. The My Lai Massacre, however, remains the most consequential of these atrocities in terms of its scale and relevance as a national scandal during the divisive Vietnam War. The facts and timeline of the massacre and its aftermath are well-documented at this point. Historians in the past two decades are more concerned with My Lai’s significance and proper interpretation. In *The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the Court Martial of Lieutenant Calley* (2002), Michal Belknap examines Lt. Calley’s publicized court martial as a site of political debate between hawks and doves. Belknap

³⁵ Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam* (1985; reprint, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2016), 125-33, 257; Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) Kindle, 5-6, 8-10

³⁶ Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Penguin, 2003), xv-xvi, 349-52.

³⁷ Michael Bernhardt, quoted in Appy, *Patriots*, 350; Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 5-6, 8-10; See also Jones, *My Lai*, 24-25.

shows that the Vietnam war effort and faith in the federal government were undermined in the eyes of hawks who viewed Calley as a patriot abandoned by the Army and doves who viewed Calley as a scapegoat for higher-ups more responsible.³⁸ Unlike Belknap, this thesis examines the responses of hawks and doves to the immediate revelations of My Lai in news outlets rather than focusing on the trial of Lt. Calley.

The media coverage of My Lai and what it shows about how Americans viewed themselves is the topic of Kendrick Oliver's 2003 article, "Atrocity, Authenticity, and American Exceptionalism: (Ir)rationalising the Massacre at My Lai." Oliver argues that the national discussion surrounding the My Lai Massacre brought up shame and questions of national identity that were (ir)rationalized by Americans who categorized the incident in one of three ways: a one-off event, an event indicative of American culture, or an event indicative of the nature of man in warfare.³⁹ Specifically, the tragedy brought up concerns and questions over the traditional notion of American exceptionalism and the righteousness of the United States' cause in Vietnam.⁴⁰ Rather than Oliver's three categorizations, this thesis categorizes reactions to the massacre under two umbrellas: hawks who incorporated the massacre into existing myths of American exceptionalism and the good GI, and antiwar doves who let those myths fade and called for collective responsibility for the massacre. However, this thesis aligns with Oliver's conclusion that the massacre's effect on the national character is questionable given the still-present myth of American exceptionalism and its continued espousal by public officials.⁴¹

³⁸ Michal R. Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley* (Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 2002), 3-5, 256.

³⁹ Kendrick Oliver, "Atrocity, Authenticity and American Exceptionalism: (Ir)rationalising the Massacre at My Lai," *Journal of American Studies* 37, no. 2 (2003): 251-52, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27557330>.

⁴⁰ Oliver, "Atrocity, Authenticity, and American Exceptionalism," 252-54.

⁴¹ Oliver, "Atrocity, Authenticity, and American Exceptionalism," 266-67.

Claude Cookman also analyzes the media coverage of the My Lai Massacre in his 2007 article, “An American Atrocity: The My Lai Massacre Concretized in a Victim’s Face,” but his study is relegated to the public reaction of photographs taken of victims, particularly combat photographer Ron Haeberle’s photograph of seven victims moments before their brutal murder.⁴² Cookman shows that public comments on the photographs included dismissal, disbelief, and comparisons to war crimes perpetrated by the Nazis—reactions that this thesis also finds in Chapter 3.⁴³ Like Oliver, Cookman recognizes that public rejection and disbelief of the photographs were founded in mythical notions of American exceptionalism.⁴⁴ Cookman concludes with a call to action for the reader, “Contemplating the picture and accepting our responsibility as citizens in whose name the Vietnam War was waged can be an act of contrition.”⁴⁵ This thesis agrees with Cookman that collective responsibility by Americans for atrocities in their wars is necessary for effective mitigation and change in institutions, a point discussed more in-depth in the next two chapters. Indeed, William Allison notes in his 2012 monograph, *My Lai: An American Atrocity in the Vietnam War*, that an “unwillingness to take responsibility” for the My Lai Massacre “continues to haunt the American conscience.”⁴⁶

Currently, Howard Jones’ 2017 monograph, *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness*, stands as the most comprehensive and encompassing scholarly work pertaining to the My Lai Massacre. Memory is brought up once again as a “crucial” part of engagement with the My Lai Massacre, along with the point that the massacre

⁴² Claude Cookman, “An American Atrocity: The My Lai Massacre Concretized in a Victim’s Face,” *The Journal of American History* 94, no. 1 (2007): 154-55, doi:10.2307/25094784.

⁴³ Cookman, “An American Atrocity,” 155-60.

⁴⁴ Cookman, “An American Atrocity,” 161-62.

⁴⁵ Cookman, “An American Atrocity,” 162.

⁴⁶ Allison, *My Lai*, 132.

dispels the myth of American exceptionalism whether it persists in society today or not.⁴⁷ Jones contends past scholarship by giving multiple examples in which the Army has acted to change its rules, regulations, and culture to mitigate atrocities since My Lai.⁴⁸ Still, he argues these actions failed to prevent American atrocities in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and accountability remains lacking.⁴⁹ Jones argues My Lai was also a “turning point” because “it tarnished the image many Americans had of their soldiers, and that soldiers had of themselves.”⁵⁰ The image Jones is referencing is the same that Cookman insists is a “cherished myth” of the good GI (what Cookman calls “the perfectly balanced American “warrior”), one that is “fierce in battle but chivalrous toward noncombatants.”⁵¹ But where did this image come from?

The myth of the good GI developed in American society and was reinforced in news media coverage of American wars before My Lai. In his 2004 article, “Kilroy is Back: Images of American Soldiers in Korea, 1950-1953,” Andrew Huebner argues that the image of the “tough, dependable, patriotic GI” was propagated by journalists, officials, and filmmakers during World War II and was remobilized for the Korean War.⁵² Cameron notes that elitism was incorporated into this image of Marines who were advertised during World War I as “First to Fight” by recruiters.⁵³ The idea of American fighting-men as exceptionally strong, brave, adventurous saviors appealed to traditional

⁴⁷ Jones, *My Lai*, 339, 350-51.

⁴⁸ Jones, *My Lai*, 346-49.

⁴⁹ Jones, *My Lai*, 348, 350-51.

⁵⁰ Jones, *My Lai*, 339, 351.

⁵¹ Cookman, “An American Atrocity,” 160.

⁵² Andrew J. Huebner, “Kilroy is Back: Images of American Soldiers in Korea, 1950-1953,” *American Studies* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 103-04, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40643620>.

⁵³ Cameron, *American Samurai*, 25.

masculine values and the gender roles of men, along with notions of American righteousness in warfare.⁵⁴

As Robert Self shows in *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (2012), the common embodiment and representation of an American male in this period was white, middle-class, heterosexual, and patriotic.⁵⁵ Military service, masculine values, and the good GI image became inseparable in the minds of Americans during the twentieth century until, by 1965, “soldiering” was one of three pillars of masculinity for American men—the others being breadwinning and heterosexuality.⁵⁶ John Wayne movies like *Sands of Iwo Jima* and other Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s informed young men that service and combat was essential to being a man; therefore, being a GI became a “rite of passage into manhood” that was reinforced by the government through Cold War conscription.⁵⁷

The federal government and media tapped into masculine values to appeal to men and mobilize a war effort for World War II and the Cold War that followed. Nevertheless, atrocities were committed by GIs and continued to be committed by GIs in Asian conflicts. How did the positive image of the good GI develop before My Lai, and why were the GI and his actions perceived as “good” by the public? The answer lies in how the news media covered these wars. Huebner argues in *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (2008) that World War II was where most Americans first encountered images of soldiers in war, though

⁵⁴ Cameron, *American Samurai*, 64-65.

⁵⁵ Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 4.

⁵⁶ Self, *All in the Family*, 8.

⁵⁷ Longley, *Grunts*, 14, 24-28.

images were encountered to a lesser degree after the First World War.⁵⁸ The news media, according to Huebner, wanted readers and viewers to sympathize and identify with soldiers.⁵⁹ Although the GI of World War II was portrayed as “tough, manly, and confident,” more graphic images appeared in the news after 1943 in order to garner public sympathy for the war.⁶⁰

The image of the good GI evolved during the Korean War. Unlike in World War II coverage, GIs were shown crying and emotional in the Korean War. These sentiments of vulnerability were incorporated into a new masculinity wherein combat troops bore the weight of suffering for all Americans under strenuous conditions and a sometimes apathetic government.⁶¹ In his 2005 article, “Rethinking American Press Coverage of the Vietnam War, 1965-68,” Huebner contends that World War II imagery of “skill, toughness, commitment, and compassion” was used to depict the GI in Vietnam before coverage transitioned to depict him as a sympathetic victim of policy, environment, and combat as he was portrayed in Korea.⁶²

Government censorship of the media also contributed to how the GI was portrayed to the public and why American atrocities failed to become the subject of national conversation until the press coverage of My Lai. The Office of War Information generated much of the propaganda surrounding the myth of the good GI during World War II, but George Roder, Jr., argues in his 1993 book, *The Censored War: American*

⁵⁸ Andrew J. Huebner, *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), Kindle, 7.

⁵⁹ Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 11.

⁶⁰ Huebner, “Kilroy is Back,” 104.

⁶¹ Huebner, “Kilroy is Back,” 125.

⁶² Andrew J. Huebner, “Rethinking American Press Coverage of the Vietnam War, 1965-68,” *Journalism History* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 152, <https://search.proquest.com/openview/45d40318e5e4980e019687919fed3d5/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=6565>.

Visual Experience During World War Two, that withholding information was a strategy used by the US government to mobilize the home front and maintain a narrative of righteous legitimacy.⁶³ Censorship continued into the Korean War, and Huebner notes in *The Warrior Image* that the Public Information Office issued press releases to “compete with images of the exhausted American GI.”⁶⁴ Steven Casey argues in *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion, 1950-1953* (2008) that the limited-war strategy of Korea kept the atrocities in the conflict away from press coverage, an observation that leaders used as a template for Vietnam.⁶⁵ The government censorship was a success. Though there was some contemporary evidence available to the public that prisoners of war (POWs) were mistreated by US troops in Korea, Huebner suggests “the notion that American GIs could be war criminals was by no means part of the prevailing image in the 1950s.”⁶⁶

Unlike World War II and the Korean War, there was no official censorship of the media during the Vietnam War.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the government pressured the media to be on its side. After a CBS correspondent questioned the burning of the village of Cam Ne by US troops in an August 1965 report, President Lyndon Johnson questioned CBS president Frank Stanton on a telephone call, “Are you trying to fuck me?”⁶⁸ Regardless, government pressure was not needed to achieve compliance. Huebner shows in “Rethinking American Press Coverage” that before the Tet Offensive, “even those

⁶³ Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 19; George H. Roder, Jr., *The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War Two* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), 2-5.

⁶⁴ Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 104.

⁶⁵ Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion, 1950-1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 366.

⁶⁶ Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 110.

⁶⁷ Huebner, “Rethinking American Press Coverage,” 152.

⁶⁸ Lyndon Johnson, quoted in Huebner, “Rethinking American Press Coverage,” 154.

journalists who questioned American methods in Vietnam rarely challenged the American presence there...The media, like the public, generally supported Cold War anticommunism....”⁶⁹ In the first few years of the Vietnam War, Americans were presented with honorable, virtuous, and sympathetic GIs that embodied traditional masculine values.⁷⁰ As Daniel Hallin explains in *The “Uncensored War”: The Media and Vietnam* (1986), the media had become a more progressive, professionalized, and free institution that sometimes countered government interests since the Korean War, but it nevertheless remained limited to traditional ideologies and connections to the government.⁷¹

Still, a part of this story of atrocities committed by GIs in Asian wars, the image of the good GI, American citizens, the press, and the institution of the military is missing. The press did not cover American atrocities in any substantial way due to censorship before the Vietnam War and a general belief in American righteousness through 1968.⁷² The military instituted an attrition-based policy while maintaining an image of righteousness that it could not compromise without hindering war efforts and political favor. Yet atrocities were committed by GIs in these Asian wars, and they were known about by perpetrators and those close to them. So why were they not being publicly discussed? Why had servicemen and military officials not come forward to the press, and why were atrocities being ignored?

⁶⁹ Huebner, “Rethinking American Press Coverage,” 152.

⁷⁰ Huebner, “Rethinking American Press Coverage,” 154; Huebner, *The Warrior Image*, 180.

⁷¹ Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War”: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3-12, 211-15.

⁷² See William M. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

In *Patriots*, Appy failed to obtain interviews from some veterans because “there are things some people will not share.”⁷³ One veterans’ wife attempted to convince him to share a story with Appy that was haunting him, but he refused.⁷⁴ Another ex-pilot who was shot down and surrounded by enemy troops before being rescued said he would not tell Appy what happened before the helicopter arrived because, “If I tell you, I won’t sleep.”⁷⁵ At the end of the book, Appy interviews Toshio Whelchel, a Japanese American who discovered later in life that his half-brother had served in Vietnam and lied to his family, saying he had been stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, at the time. When Whelchel asked his half-brother about his time in Vietnam, he apparently replied, “No. I can’t talk to you about it. I don’t want to talk about it.”⁷⁶

Appy was confronted with the culture of silence, a pattern of behavior and thinking that characterized the identifiable group of combat veterans relating to their wartime experiences, particularly atrocities. Ron Eyerman, in his 2019 monograph on cultural sociology, *Memory, Trauma, and Identity*, explicitly notes that a “culture of silence and group solidarity” existed in the military and stymied discussion of atrocities like My Lai.⁷⁷ Veterans, for reasons including shame or loyalty to comrades, often refused to share or talk about their experiences when they returned home. In *War Without Fronts: The USA in Vietnam* (2009), without explicitly naming a culture of silence, Bernd Greiner describes the common sentiment among GIs in Vietnam who failed to break the silence surrounding the My Lai Massacre, “If we say something, nothing will happen

⁷³ Appy, *Patriots*, xxvi.

⁷⁴ Appy, *Patriots*, xxvi.

⁷⁵ Appy, *Patriots*, xxvi.

⁷⁶ Appy, *Patriots*, 529.

⁷⁷ Ron Eyerman, *Memory, Trauma, and Identity* (New Haven: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 191.

anyway, because atrocities like those in My Lai go on all the time....”⁷⁸ As a result of the culture of silence and press censorship, the myth of the good GI who did not commit atrocities and the myth of American righteousness were maintained through World War II, the Korean War, and the beginning of the Vietnam War. The media coverage of the My Lai Massacre was an instance where the culture of silence broke, and these atrocities were finally put at the forefront of national conversation. An examination of this coverage modifies Eyerman’s observation by revealing that the culture of silence was not only prevalent among GIs; it was reinforced by war hawks and relatives of perpetrators of atrocities in the civilian sector who attempted to suppress discussion of the My Lai Massacre before and after its revelation.

⁷⁸ Bernd Greiner, *War Without Fronts: The USA in Vietnam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 242.

CHAPTER 3

MYTH AND REALITY

Many forces converged in the instance of the My Lai Massacre. A history of a racist combat culture and military policies of attrition that resulted in numerous atrocities committed by American GIs in three separate Asian wars culminated in a devastating massacre of Vietnamese civilians that Americans, informed by the media, were forced to confront. From this confrontation, a culture of silence broke, and a discussion of different realities emerged. What were American troops actually doing thousands of miles from the homeland? Were atrocities already an accepted but unspoken characteristic of American wars? What did it mean for American society and the military that a minor media outlet, not the government, revealed the story of this atrocity to the public? Along with these questions, the image of the good GI and American righteousness abroad—concepts embedded in notions of American exceptionalism—were challenged and defended as Americans struggled to determine who was responsible for the massacre and who they were as a people.⁷⁹

Before discussing the media coverage of My Lai, however, it is necessary to understand that the coverage and reactions did not occur in a vacuum; they were influenced and shaped by forces and events pervading the turbulent 1960s that include “the anti-war movement, counterculture,” and “the rage of antiauthority among American

⁷⁹ Oliver, “Atrocity, Authenticity and American Exceptionalism,” 253-54.

youth,” argues William Allison.⁸⁰ The civil rights movement and black power movement were in full effect, women in the feminist movement were fighting for sexual freedom and gender equality, and the specter of communism and nuclear annihilation still lingered on American minds. Television was making in-ways. Distrust of the government grew as Americans questioned the point of the Vietnam War, the draft, and the reason for thousands of young American men dying overseas. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., came out against the war in 1967. In 1968, Americans experienced the Tet Offensive, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the assassination of prominent anti-war advocate and Democratic senator Robert F. Kennedy, the moon landing, the riots and protests at the chaotic Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and the election of President Richard Nixon.⁸¹

By the time revelations of the My Lai Massacre reached the public in November 1969, Americans were at the end of a tumultuous decade and starkly divided. The Vietnam War was the focal point of this division. Conservative hawks advocated a pro-military stance and continuation of the war in Vietnam while anti-war doves staunchly opposed continued military intervention in Vietnam. The latter group displayed their dissatisfaction with the war and the federal government by burning draft cards and protesting. Just two days after Seymour Hersh published his first article that broke the story of My Lai, the Vietnam Moratorium Committee staged the largest anti-war demonstration in US history (roughly 500,000 people) in Washington, D.C.⁸² Earlier that

⁸⁰ Allison, *My Lai*, 3.

⁸¹ For a more comprehensive examination of the 1960s and the shifts in American society during this decade, see David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994); For a deeper examination of the evolution of gender and sex in the late 1960s, see Self, *All in the Family*.

⁸² Jon Wiener, “Nixon and the 1969 Vietnam Moratorium,” *Nation*, January 12, 2010, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/nixon-and-1969-vietnam-moratorium/>.

year, Americans were confronted with the story of Green Beret Colonel Robert Rheault and six of his officers who were charged with the murder of an alleged Vietnamese spy. Their charges were soon dropped by Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor because CIA operatives would not cooperate for testimony. During this lesser scandal, hawks and doves interpreted the event to fit their narratives. For hawks, the charges were evidence of an unsupportive and apathetic Army. For Doves, it was evidence of the illegitimacy of the United States in Vietnam.⁸³

In examining responses to My Lai revelations, then, it is important to understand that opinions were formulated and ideas about the information were interpreted within the context of the 1960s and through the writers' already-held beliefs about Vietnam and the military. Hawks were already prone to supporting the combat troops involved, dismissing the massacre as an aberration, and supporting the war effort. In contrast, Doves were more likely to interpret the massacre as evidence of American righteous illegitimacy in an anti-war framework. The newspaper executives and editors understood the climate in which they operated, and their business certainly benefitted from outrage and division. With this in mind, a proper examination of the source material can begin.

Shock and disbelief characterize the reactions of many American civilians and officials after they heard of the My Lai Massacre in November 1969. "I find myself just sick," Albert Baller wrote to the editor in the *Boston Globe*.⁸⁴ The *Chicago Tribune* noted in late November that Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor stated, "It is difficult to

⁸³ See Paul Vitello, "Robert Rheault, Green Beret Ensnared in Vietnam Murder Case, Dies at 87," *New York Times*, November 1, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/02/us/robert-rheault-green-beret-ensnared-in-vietnam-murder-case-dies-at-87.html#:~:text=When%20the%20Army%20charged%20the,over%20the%20war%20in%20Vietnam.>

⁸⁴ Albert H. Baller, letter to the editor, *Boston Globe*, Nov. 29, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/435204890>.

convey the feelings of shock and dismay which I and other civilian and military leaders of the army have experienced.”⁸⁵ The *Minneapolis Tribune* conducted a statewide poll in December 1969 and discovered that almost half of the 600 people interviewed refused to believe that GIs committed mass murder at My Lai.⁸⁶ Roughly forty percent were “horrified” after first hearing of the incident before deciding that it was a false report.⁸⁷

The fact that the news of the murder of hundreds of unarmed civilians by American GIs was unexpected and the refusal by some to believe its veracity suggest that many Americans viewed their military servicemen as incapable of performing these actions. As one anonymous Philadelphian stated, “I can’t believe our boys’ hearts are that rotten.”⁸⁸ This could be dismissed as a one-off idiomatic saying if not for the fact that many individuals literally did not believe the massacre happened. Aside from the poll in the *Minneapolis Tribune* already mentioned, the statement of a Los Angeles salesman who talked to the *Wall Street Journal* in late November reads, “I don’t believe it actually happened. The story was planted by Vietcong sympathizers....”⁸⁹ Indeed, while many in the antiwar movement were pushing back against traditional depictions of GIs, servicemen were still the ideal representatives of American morality and the bedrock of American exceptionalism. Civilians who questioned the troops’ morality were forced to question their own ideals, and some were unwilling to judge themselves. Russell Baker, a prominent journalist writing for the *New York Times*, declared that “nations, like people,

⁸⁵ Quoted in Russel Freeburg, “Can’t Accept Such Action: White House Warning Given to Military,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 27, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/377219501>.

⁸⁶ Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 153.

⁸⁷ Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 153.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 152.

⁸⁹ “Doves Recoil but Hawks Tend to See ‘Massacre’ as Just Part of War,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 1, 1969, quoted in Scott Laderman, “The Masssacre that Was Dismissed as Fake News,” History News Network, March 15, 2018, <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/168518#sdendnote3anc>.

live by their illusions. Strip a man of all his illusions, and you destroy him.”⁹⁰ The illusion of American righteousness—an adjunct to the notion of American exceptionalism as expressed by Kendrick Oliver—was reconciled in the media coverage of the My Lai Massacre.⁹¹

For many, beliefs of American righteousness in the Vietnam War and exceptionalism fell away when they learned of the massacre at My Lai. President Lyndon Johnson began the war evoking the United States’ role as an arbiter of goodness and democracy that would help keep “the people and governments of all Southeast Asia...free from terror, subversion, and assassination.”⁹² Editors for the *Los Angeles Times* writing in late November 1969 echoed the sentiment that the United States was in the Vietnam War for “moral reasons,” insisting that Americans were “opposing a system that uses terror, brutality and indiscriminate killing as instruments of policy.”⁹³ The hypocrisy with which the combat troops acted in the instance of the My Lai Massacre as arbiters of the values expressed by the US government—and American citizens as an extension—was “a staggering blow not simply to a particular cause but to the national conscience.”⁹⁴ The virtuous reasons for entering the Vietnam War expressed by Johnson were corrupted by the actions of US soldiers at My Lai. Furthermore, their actions reflected on the values of the nation. Carl Rowan, the former head of the United States Information Agency, lamented in the *Spokane Chronicle* that revelations of the massacre

⁹⁰ Russell Baker, “Observer: Mr. President, Save That Illusion,” *New York Times*, Nov. 30, 1969, <https://www.nytimes.com/1969/11/30/archives/observer-mr-president-save-that-illusion.html?searchResultPosition=10>.

⁹¹ Oliver, “Atrocity, Authenticity, and American Exceptionalism,” 253-54.

⁹² Quoted in Carl T. Rowan, “My Lai Hamlet Massacre Has Far-Reaching Effects,” *Spokane Chronicle*, Nov. 28, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/564882734/?terms=my%2Blai>.

⁹³ “The ‘Massacre’ at My Lai,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 25, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/385763227/?terms=my%2Blai%2Bmassacre>.

⁹⁴ “The ‘Massacre’ at My Lai.”

“stripped away whatever cloak of morality remained around our Vietnamese commitment.”⁹⁵ The faith that Americans who were already unsure of their stance on the Vietnam War had in their moral righteousness as individuals and in collective pursuits of warfare waned. Vietnam was already a divisive topic in 1968, and the My Lai Massacre media coverage furthered anti-war sentiments by undermining the argument for morality in America’s interests.

Antiwar proponents expressed the United States’ moral failing by comparing the My Lai Massacre to war crimes committed by the Nazis in World War II. Senator Stephen M. Young, a Democrat from Ohio, was shown combat photographer Ron Haerberle’s color slides of the My Lai victims (taken with his own camera, not the Army’s) with other congressmen. Senator Young declared the massacre “an act of brutality that cannot have been exceeded in Hitler’s time.”⁹⁶ Average citizens, not just political officials, made this comparison. Hebert Glucksman from Lexington wrote to the editor of the *Boston Globe* that “the shame that the massacre of Lidice [the massacre of hundreds of civilians at a small Bohemian village by Nazis under orders from Adolf Hitler in 1942] brought to the German nation is now our shame, and who would have ever thought such a shame could come to America?”⁹⁷ Another letter to the editor from Ronald Mallis asks, “Does Song My [one contemporary name for the My Lai Massacre] (or Hue) help us understand Hitler’s ‘Final Solution’?”⁹⁸ Finally, John Scully, Jr., notes that “for twenty years we have reproached Germany with the question: ‘How could you

⁹⁵ Rowan, “My Lai Hamlet Massacre.”

⁹⁶ Quoted in Freeburg, “Can’t Accept Such Action.”

⁹⁷ Herbert Glucksman, letter to the editor, *Boston Globe*, Nov. 29, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/435204890>.

⁹⁸ Ronald Mallis, letter to the editor, *Boston Globe*, Nov. 29, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/435204890>.

have let it happen?” before he draws the somber conclusion, “Now we must ask ourselves how Song My could have happened in Vietnam.”⁹⁹ In the consciousness of these American minds, the My Lai Massacre was definitive proof of a moral failure. They were ashamed of the evil enacted in their name on helpless victims, and in this shame their shared conviction of moral superiority collapsed. The atrocities committed by the Nazis represented the greatest evil humans could commit. Now, through the media coverage of My Lai, Americans confronted the reality that just because they were American, people in their society were not exempt from instigating atrocities.

As the preconceptions of American moral righteousness dissipated for some, the questions arose for Glucksman and others, “Can we erase this blot from our national honor? We can punish the guilty. But who is guilty?”¹⁰⁰ Some individuals accepted their responsibility for partaking in a society that generated citizens who committed atrocities. Representative Allard Lowenstein, a Democrat from New York and famous political activist, intimated at an Association for Student Governments meeting that Americans had a collective guilt for the My Lai Massacre: “We’re there to prevent a massacre. The only way to prevent massacres is to stop committing them.”¹⁰¹ Lowenstein’s thoughts on My Lai carried more weight than many average citizens and journalists due to his ability to influence policy and political thought. Rowan of the *Spokane Chronicle* asserted that “no sensitive American can absorb the ghoulish account of this massacre in My Lai hamlet without feeling a measure of personal guilt.”¹⁰² Rather than implicating Lt. Calley

⁹⁹ John P. Scully, Jr., letter to the editor, *Boston Globe*, Nov. 29, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/435204890>.

¹⁰⁰ Glucksman, letter to the editor.

¹⁰¹ “National ‘Guilt’ Seen in My Lai,” *Boston Globe*, Nov. 28, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/435203699/>.

¹⁰² Rowan, “My Lai Hamlet Massacre.”

as responsible for the massacre, one writer suggested that “the United States government is perhaps more responsible,” a government elected by its citizens.¹⁰³ In a letter to the editor in the *Boston Globe*, Davis Luft from Cambridge expressed “moral outrage” at both “the government which gives our soldiers such tasks—and for ourselves, the citizens who permit it.”¹⁰⁴ Luft accepted his responsibility for directing soldiers’ actions in Vietnam because of his role as a civilian in producing the democratic government that controls them. If incidents like the My Lai Massacre were to be avoided in the future, the whole of society had to take responsibility and guilt for the incident. Only then could they act collectively towards prevention.

But acceptance of collective responsibility was not achieved by Americans broadly. A wider reckoning was stymied by counternarratives that upheld American righteousness and a refusal to sacrifice the image of the good GI following revelations of the My Lai Massacre. While antiwar doves—encompassing both average citizens and politician—compared the tragedy to atrocities committed by the Nazis, relinquished the idea of infallible American actions, and decided that accepting collective responsibility was the best course for reconciliation, hawks and proponents of American exceptionalism justified the massacre as morally righteous. When Baker spoke of nations and illusions, he also mentioned that “the illusion of our fundamental decency as a people may run even deeper among Americans than among most Westerners.”¹⁰⁵ More conservative, hawkish, pro-military, and pro-Nixon Americans, often with ties to the military, refused

¹⁰³ “No Time for Scapegoats,” *Boston Globe*, Nov. 29, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/435204890>.

¹⁰⁴ Davis S. Luft, letter to the editor, *Boston Globe*, Nov. 29, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/435204890>.

¹⁰⁵ Baker, “Observer.”

to let go of the myth of the good GI. American righteousness was too entangled with their identity, and they were unwilling to alter their paradigm. This segment of American society where illusions of the good GI penetrated deepest, therefore, did not accept public consternation toward its beloved icon. In his 1977 memoir, *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo describes the mythical icon of the good GI by invoking religious imagery. GIs were “knights” in Vietnam on a “crusade” of democracy, goodness, and righteousness against a global Communist evil.¹⁰⁶ Following this point, Caputo explains, “There was nothing we could not do because we were Americans, and for the same reason, whatever we did was right.”¹⁰⁷ At the time of the My Lai Massacre, conservative, pro-war Americans still believed this.

Caputo’s depiction of the good GI represents the ideas held by those who rationalized the My Lai Massacre within its framework of an inability to do wrong. One Bostonian describing the incident proclaimed, “It was good,” before sarcastically remarking, “What do they give soldiers bullets for—to put in their pockets?”¹⁰⁸ Shooting unarmed civilians, then, was acceptable within the framework that war required shooting people generally. A woman in Cleveland professed, “It sounds terrible to say we ought to kill kids, but many of our boys being killed over there are just kids too.”¹⁰⁹ In this instance, the woman expressed a belief among hawks that the shootings of children were justified because young enlisted Americans were also dying in the Vietnam War.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (1977; reprint, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2017), Kindle, 69-70.

¹⁰⁷ Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, 69-70.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 151.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 151.

¹¹⁰ Another woman from Florida in *Life* magazine stated, “My child... is much more precious to me (and should be to every fellow American) than the life of an enemy, no matter what their age or condition. Quoted in Cookman, “An American Atrocity,” 160.

Civilians were not the only ones who defended the myth of the good GI. One troop claimed that the GIs at My Lai were not the perpetrators of unwarranted violence, but victims who were “hit hard before the action.”¹¹¹ Another insisted, “There’s gotta be something missing,” indicating a refusal to believe the GIs at My Lai committed the massacre on a whim.¹¹² Politicians also weighed in. Senator Ernest Hollings, a Democrat from South Carolina, conflated the My Lai Massacre with an accident and implied that accidental civilian deaths were an acceptable part of military operations when he asked the Senate, “Are we going to take every helicopter pilot and B52 pilot who makes a mistake and call him a murderer?”¹¹³ Indeed, White House Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler was mistaken when he insisted that the My Lai Massacre was “abhorrent to the conscience of all the American people.”¹¹⁴ It was abhorrent to doves and proponents of the antiwar movement, but hawks found ways to incorporate the massacre into their cherished myths of American exceptionalism and the good GI.

To hawkish defenders of the good GI image, moral culpability rested with officers and officials rather than combat troops. Paul David Meadlo, one of the perpetrators of the My Lai Massacre ordered to fire on civilians by Lt. Calley, told the story of how he shot civilians at My Lai on CBS in an interview with Mike Wallace on November 24, 1969.¹¹⁵

When J. Anthony Lukas visited Meadlo’s hometown of New Goshen, Indiana, and

¹¹¹ Quoted in Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 152. Hersh references a *New York Times* survey of GIs in Quang Ngai following revelations of the massacre.

¹¹² Quoted in Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 152. Hersh references a *New York Times* survey of GIs in Quang Ngai following revelations of the massacre.

¹¹³ Quoted in Associated Press, “Laird Vows to Enforce Laws of War in Vietnam,” *Arizona Republic*, Nov. 26, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/116828759>.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Freeburg, “Can’t Accept Such Action.”

¹¹⁵ For a transcript of the interview, see “Transcript of Interview of Vietnam War Veteran on His Role in Alleged Massacre of Civilians at Songmy,” *New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1969, <https://www.nytimes.com/1969/11/25/archives/transcript-of-interview-of-vietnam-war-veteran-on-his-role-in.html>.

questioned residents about who he was and how he was perceived, Robert Hale, a pool hall owner, responded, “How can you newspaper people blame Paul David? He was under orders. He had to do what his officer told him.”¹¹⁶ Another resident, Dee Henry, affirmed Hale’s disgust at the insinuation that Meadlo was responsible, “Anybody who’s had any affiliation with the service knows you do what you’re ordered to do—no questions asked.”¹¹⁷

Even perpetrators of the massacre defended their actions or put the blame on their superiors. In an interview on the *Huntley-Brinkley Report*, Private First Class Vernardo Simpson, a perpetrator of the My Lai killings, insisted that he was “reluctant, but I was following a direct order” when he murdered a man, woman, and child “about 2 years old.”¹¹⁸ For soldiers and conservative citizens who maintained the good GI myth, then, following orders was a part of being a good, competent GI. The onus of morality was placed elsewhere, on individuals like Lt. Calley, and did not indicate a broader moral failure of the American GI or American society. To “put the blame on the American people” was “one of the most sickening of knee-jerk reactions” according to the conservative, pro-war *Chicago Tribune*, “The charge that American troops generally have been ‘brutalized’ by the war is a contemptible lie.”¹¹⁹ Believing in the good GI was a method of avoiding the self-reflection liberal doves saw as a necessary step toward moving past the massacre.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in J. Anthony Lukas, “Meadlo’s Home Town Regards Him as Blameless,” *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 1969, <https://www.nytimes.com/1969/11/26/archives/meadlos-home-town-regards-him-as-blameless.html?searchResultPosition=30>.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Lukas, “Meadlo’s Home Town.”

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Associated Press, “Killed 10 Viet Civilians on Orders: Ex-GI Left Nothing Standing, He Says on TV,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 27, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/377219527>.

¹¹⁹ “The Besmirchers of America,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 29, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/377235642/?terms=my%2Blai%2Bmassacre>.

Institutions in American society also officially conformed to myths of the good GI and American righteousness to reinforce the “confidence and integrity” of the military that, as one reporter put it at the time, “has been so buffeted in recent months.”¹²⁰ Nixon’s Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler, attempting to protect Nixon after revelations of the My Lai Massacre, urged citizens that “this incident should not be allowed to reflect on the some million and a quarter young Americans who have now returned to the United States after having served in Vietnam with great courage and distinction.”¹²¹ “The United States government does not condone atrocities in any way, at any time, under any conditions,” read a joint statement from the US embassy and US military command in Saigon.¹²² One senior officer in the Army mirrored the official joint statement in his own, “The Army as an institution doesn’t put up with this kind of wanton killing.”¹²³ He continues, “If it did, we’d have dozens of instances of this happening all over Vietnam over the past four years. It hasn’t happened.”¹²⁴ The government and the military protected their image as righteous institutions and defended the image of the good GI by arguing that My Lai was an aberration.

But My Lai was only an aberration in the number of civilians killed, not in its occurrence as an atrocity. Many GIs testified to committing or seeing the “systematic use of electrical torture, beatings, and in some cases, murder of men, women and children, by their military units in Vietnam.”¹²⁵ According to Howard Jones, the Vietnam War Crimes

¹²⁰ Fred S. Hoffman, “Army Fears Slaying Cases Damage Its Image,” *Courier-Journal*, Nov. 23, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/107086141/?terms=my%2Blai>.

¹²¹ Quoted in “No Time for Scapegoats.”

¹²² Quoted in Reuters, “U.S. Denies ‘Atrocities’ Sanctioned,” *Boston Globe*, Nov. 19, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/435445835/?terms=my%2Blai%2Bmassacre>.

¹²³ Quoted in Hoffman, “Army Fears Slaying Cases.”

¹²⁴ Quoted in Hoffman, “Army Fears Slaying Cases.”

¹²⁵ U.S. Government Responsibility for My Lai, from Alexander L. Peaslee, Halifax, July 17, 1972, Document 07 in “Department of State’s Dissent Channel Revealed,” March 15, 2018, National

Working Group—a once-classified archive assembled by a Pentagon task force in the early 1970s after revelations of the My Lai Massacre—show there were over 300 allegations of murder and assault during the Vietnam War.¹²⁶ The Pentagon’s documentation of these incidences indicate some shift in attention toward the problem of atrocities in the military. But incidents unveiled by the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group not only happened in Vietnam. They also occurred in the Pacific War and the Korean War.¹²⁷ The Army as an institution, then, did tolerate routine atrocities, and it had for some time. Vernardo Simpson even implicated MACV’s search-and-destroy policy as a direct cause of the My Lai Massacre: “We had orders to search and destroy everything... We searched the huts... If there was anything in there, well, we was to destroy it and everything.”¹²⁸ Still, a mother eating at a restaurant with her son learned of the My Lai Massacre and proclaimed to the *Miami Herald*, “That’s a terrible thing and he knows nothing [about it].”¹²⁹ Yet there she was, sending her son to fight in Vietnam where acts like My Lai occurred. Did Americans really not understand what their soldiers were doing—and had been doing—overseas for thirty years? The public response to the My Lai Massacre indicates that some did not. What about those within the military? What about veterans, or their civilian friends and families?

Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington, DC, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4389155-Document-07-U-S-Government-Responsibility-for-My-Lai>.

¹²⁶ See Jones, *My Lai*, 4; See also Nick Turse and Deborah Nelson, “Civilian Killings Went Unpunished,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 2006, <https://www.latimes.com/news/la-na-vietnam6aug06-story.html>.

¹²⁷ See Sledge, *With the Old Breed*; See Tregaskis, *Guadalcanal Diary*; See Associated Press, “G.I.’s Tell of a U.S. Massacre.”

¹²⁸ Vernardo Simpson, quoted in Associated Press, “Killed 10 Viet Civilians.” Also see Appy, *Patriots*.

¹²⁹ Quoted in Clarence Jones, “‘Most GIs Don’t Give a Damn for the Viets,’” *Miami Herald*, Nov. 28, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/622973103/?terms=my%2Blai%2Bmassacre>.

The media coverage of My Lai reveals that in military circles especially, atrocities were well known. One sergeant on base at Fort Benning, Georgia, questioned by a reporter for the *Miami Herald* in late November 1969 about Lt. Calley's involvement in the massacre stated, "This happens all the time over there, but just not this many people at one time...most soldiers over there don't give a damn for the Vietnamese."¹³⁰ Dennis Stout, a former Army paratroop sergeant, said to the *Arizona Republic* in December 1969 that the prosecution of Lt. Calley was the Army's way of hiding that "this goes on and is not prohibited."¹³¹ On atrocities, Stout insisted, "They could stop it," but they refuse to.¹³² A draftee at Fort Benning also interviewed by the *Miami Herald* in November 1969 summed up the generalized understanding among GIs, "Look, war is war...If people are going to try to pretend that there is such a thing as a clean war or a pretty war, that's ridiculous."¹³³ Under this pretense, atrocities were excused by those in the military who knew they existed. Even if there was a general knowledge that acts described by the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group were wrong in peacetime, they were accepted as what happened in war, not something to be actively prevented during war. Therefore, atrocities did not reflect on the good GI image in military circles.

While many combat troops were familiar with atrocities occurring in Vietnam before My Lai, the American public broadly was ignorant of specific atrocities US troops committed in Asia as evidenced by initial shock to revelations of the My Lai Massacre. But that ignorance was not the product of accident. Partially, it resulted from both

¹³⁰ Quoted in Jones, "Most GIs Don't Give."

¹³¹ Quoted in Associated Press, "Student Tells of Atrocity: Says Deaths Common, Unchecked," *Arizona Republic*, Dec. 13, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/8672274/?terms=my%2Blai%2Bmassacre%2Bpublic%2Bopinon>.

¹³² Associated Press, "Student Tells of Atrocity."

¹³³ Jones, "Most GIs Don't Give."

voluntary and involuntary media censorship in the Pacific War and Korean War that laxed during the Vietnam War.¹³⁴ Another cause of ignorance, however, was a culture of silence in American society that relegated discussion of American atrocities to smaller, normally military circles. It took the media, ensconced in a heated and divisive debate about a morally-questionable war, even before the My Lai Massacre, to break the culture of silence that existed in the United States around these atrocities.

The culture of silence among GIs, reinforced by civilians who insisted GIs not talk about any atrocities they committed, is evident in the negative reactions to GIs discussing the My Lai Massacre publicly. Ronald Ridenhour noted that, before he talked openly about the massacre, his family and friends urged him to keep the stories of My Lai to himself.¹³⁵ The reasons Ridenhour says he did stay silent for over a year are the same reasons why his family and friends recommend he not publicize them. Initially, he had no desire to “besmirch the image of the American service man.”¹³⁶ Ridenhour could not reconcile the event with the myths of American righteousness and the good GI he assumed he was. Instead, he let those myths fade, “It was a reflection on me, on every American, on the ideals that we supposedly represent. It completely castrated the whole picture of America.”¹³⁷ When Paul Meadlo revealed his part in the My Lai Massacre to

¹³⁴ See Associated Press, “Censorship Put On News of U.S. Troop Shifts,” *Chicago Tribune*, Jul. 14, 1950, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/370713716/?terms=atrocitiy>. The article notes, “In World War II, American newspapers observed voluntary censorship which ended when Japan surrendered. War subjects in the field were subject to military censorship.”; See Associated Press, “Military Court Refuses to Ban News, Photos of Viet Slayings,” *Arizona Republic*, Dec. 3, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/8623641>. The Court of U.S. Military Appeals in Washington did not intervene to halt discussions of the My Lai Massacre, a point that evidences laxing censorship.

¹³⁵ Associated Press, “Public Reaction Favorable to Ridenhour’s Disclosure,” *Arizona Republic*, Nov. 27, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/116829334/?terms=my%2Blai%2Bmassacre>.

¹³⁶ Quoted in Associated Press, “My Duty to Report Atrocitiy, Ex-GI Says,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 27, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/377219527>.

¹³⁷ Quoted in Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 105.

Mike Wallace on CBS, people from his hometown were not concerned with his role in the killings. Rather, they were concerned that he broke a culture of silence by publicizing it. Dee Henry, a resident of Meadlo's hometown and associate, declared, "The only thing I blame Paul David for was talking about this to everybody on television."¹³⁸ Henry continues, "Things like that happen in war. They always have...But only just recently have people started telling the press about it. It's bad enough to have to kill people without telling everybody about it."¹³⁹ Those who knew Meadlo and those close to Ridenhour pressured them to stay silent about the massacre or were upset that they talked at all. Both examples show that the culture of silence among GIs was reinforced by civilian associates who suppressed discussion and disapproved of GIs speaking of their experiences publicly.

Consternation for breaking the culture of silence did not just come from those who knew the perpetrators before My Lai. Coverage of the My Lai Massacre in mainstream news outlets forced a national conversation around the event, and defenders of American righteousness and the good GI lambasted the media for breaking the story and, in the process, the culture of silence. "I don't know of anybody in the Army that feels like this [the revelation and discussion of My Lai] is a good thing for the Army or the country," one GI returning from Vietnam claimed. Reconciliation was not "good" to him or those he described because their image—and the image of the institution they served—was tarnished in the process.¹⁴⁰ Journalist Seymour Hersh discovered that over eighty percent of 250 telephone calls received by the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* the day it

¹³⁸ Quoted in Lukas, "Meadlo's Home Town."

¹³⁹ Quoted in Lukas, "Meadlo's Home Town."

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Jones, "'Most GIs Don't Give.'"

revealed Ron Haeberle's photographs of My Lai victims were upset that the paper published them.¹⁴¹ One caller judged, "Your paper is rotten and anti-American," while another asked, "How can I explain these pictures to my children?"¹⁴² Furthermore, Hersh reports that all but two of 110 phone calls Mike Wallace received following his interview of Paul Meadlo on November 24, 1969 were "abusive."¹⁴³ Senator Peter Dominick, a Republican from Colorado, said of Wallace's interview, "When we find ordinarily responsible networks and newspapers...participating in this, there just is no justification for it. What kind of country have we got when this sort of garbage can be spread around?"¹⁴⁴

Why were some Americans upset that their media was finally reporting on atrocities committed by GIs overseas against civilians, and why were they not thankful to the media for bringing My Lai to their attention? Answers can be inferred from the woman's question of how she would explain the photographs to her children. She would have to explain that Americans are not always righteous in their actions. They commit atrocities like any other country's people. American troops, she would need to say, are not perfect and do not always do good things. In fact, they have often committed evil deeds like the one in My Lai. In these ways, America and Americans are not so exceptional. She and Americans like her, however, believed in myths that defied these truths and rejected reality.

¹⁴¹ Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 152.

¹⁴² Quoted in Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 152.

¹⁴³ Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 152.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Associated Press, "Laird Vows to Enforce."

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

In the United States, news coverage of the My Lai Massacre contributed to an ongoing discussion on morality in war. The reality of atrocities committed by GIs overseas collided with long-held myths of American moral righteousness and the image of the good GI. The media was the vehicle for this collision, and its coverage of My Lai broke a culture of silence around atrocities. For some Americans—particularly liberal doves and those unsure of the war effort in Vietnam before My Lai—reconciliation was achieved, their perceptions of a country and a military with infallible morals faded, and they implored the rest of society to accept collective responsibility for the horrors committed in America’s name. Their conservative, hawkish, pro-military opponents, however, incorporated the My Lai Massacre into the belief that America was righteous in its actions abroad, excusing GIs for their actions in far-off lands. As of the year 2020, the evils of atrocities from twentieth-century American-Asian wars have been regularly rediscovered while new atrocities have been uncovered in twenty-first century wars in the Middle East. Two examples include the CIA “enhanced interrogation” (torture) of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and the torture of Iraqi detainees by Army soldiers during the Iraq War.¹⁴⁵ But their existence fails to undermine persistent notions of American

¹⁴⁵ See Matt Apuzzo et al., “How U.S. Torture Left a Legacy of Damaged Minds,” *New York Times*, Oct. 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/09/world/cia-torture-guantanamo-bay.html>; See

exceptionalism in American society, a conclusion that aligns with observations made by Kendrick Oliver.¹⁴⁶

The myths persisted after My Lai's initial revelation to the public because the military was forced, under media scrutiny, to prosecute Lt. Calley and twenty-five others for the incident. Lt. Calley's prosecution was evidence to the *Miami Herald* that the Army was "living up to its best traditions in the most difficult of circumstances."¹⁴⁷ Whether the atrocities occurred or not became irrelevant. Actions were being taken by the Army—and as an extension, by the American people—to right the wrong. "Every American has the right to be proud of its conduct in the dismal affair known as My Lai," the *Miami Herald* concluded in March 1970.¹⁴⁸ Atrocities, if noticed and punished in even a symbolic way (that is, not everyone who participated was punished at all or to the fullest extent of the law), now fit neatly into the myth of American exceptionalism.

But the punishment dealt by the military for My Lai did not fit the crime of the murder of over 500 unarmed South Vietnamese civilians. Only Lt. Calley was convicted, and only of the murder of twenty-two villagers. He was given a life sentence, but President Nixon removed him from prison and placed him on house arrest at Fort Benning on April 1, 1970, three days after his conviction. Secretary of the Army Howard H. Callaway commuted Calley's sentence to ten years in 1974, and Calley was paroled the same year. To summarize the totality of the punishment for those responsible for the

Rebecca Leung, "Abuse of Iraqi POWs by GIs Probed," CBS News, Apr. 27, 2004, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/abuse-of-iraqi-pows-by-gis-probed/>.

¹⁴⁶ See Oliver, "Atrocity, Authenticity, and American Exceptionalism."

¹⁴⁷ "Army Moves Honorably in My Lai Tragedy," *Miami Herald*, Mar. 19, 1970, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/623098780/?terms=my%2Blai%2Bmassacre%2Bletters%2Bto%2Bthe%2Beditor>.

¹⁴⁸ "Army Moves Honorably."

My Lai Massacre: Lt. Calley served less than four years, most of that under house arrest.¹⁴⁹

By comparison, Lieutenant General Yamashita, Japanese commander of the Philippines during World War II, was convicted at the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal in 1946 and hung for “condoning atrocities” even though, according to the *Miami Herald* reporting in December 1945 after Yamashita was found guilty, he “never once was accused of personally having harmed anyone nor of having witnessed any” atrocities.¹⁵⁰ It was assumed that he should have known atrocities happened under those whom he commanded, and this was enough to be held accountable. The Army failed to punish the actions of combat troops, as well as officers like Lt. Calley, who committed atrocities. By extension, the American people failed to hold their troops, their military institutions, and the federal government accountable. Americans held themselves to a different standard, one where American exceptionalism allowed for understanding and acceptance of atrocities.

The past informs more recent conflicts, showing that the contradictions of American exceptionalism and wartime atrocities remain unresolved. In 2004, during the Iraq War, CBS News published photographs showing that US soldiers committed atrocities by abusing Iraqi prisoners in the prison known as Abu Ghraib.¹⁵¹ After the incident was made public, the then deputy director of coalition operations in Iraq, Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, told the American public at the time that the perpetrators constituted “a small minority of the military, and No. 2, they need to

¹⁴⁹ See Jones, *My Lai*, 338.

¹⁵⁰ Associated Press, “Yamashita Convicted; Must Hang: Found Guilty of Condoning Atrocities,” *Miami Herald*, Dec. 7, 1945, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/617143104/?terms=atrocit%2Bopinion>.

¹⁵¹ Leung, “Abuse of Iraqi POWs.”

understand that is not the Army. The Army is a values-based organization. We live by our values...these acts that you see in these pictures may reflect the actions of individuals, but by God, it doesn't reflect my army."¹⁵² Collective societal reckoning remains elusive after My Lai. War atrocities continue without recognition that the institution of the Army is responsible for the continuation of these atrocities. American society, in tandem, fails to hold the Army accountable. The Army still portrays itself as a symbol of the inherently moral values that permeate American society. Kimmitt made this statement because he understands that many Americans still subscribe to the myth of exceptionalism. If Americans do not collectively accept responsibility for atrocities committed by US soldiers overseas, reinterpret their role in regulating the actions of combat troops, and reshape the military as an institution for enacting foreign policy through violence abroad, atrocities overseas will continue as a product of the institution. Regardless of precise answers on how to dramatically curb instances of atrocities in warfare, the status quo is insufficient.

What has changed, then, as a consequence of the media coverage and public reaction to the My Lai Massacre? Conversations about American atrocities overseas and how they implicate American citizens and national identity are being had on a national level—on television networks like CBS News and mainstream newspapers like the *New York Times*—rather than among segmented groups of veterans and their close associates. The media, in reporting on the My Lai Massacre, broke a trend—a culture of silence. When discovered, war crimes like the one at Abu Ghraib in 2004 become major headlines and topics of discussion in American society. This discussion allows for enemy

¹⁵² Rebecca Leung, "Abuses at Abu Ghraib," CBS News, May 5, 2004, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/abuse-at-abu-ghraib/>.

combatants to be humanized and the violence and consequences of warfare to be considered as the Vietnam War was for Ronald Mallis of Boston who wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Boston Globe* after reading about the My Lai Massacre,

The massacre of civilians at Song My particularizes a war in which “atrocious” had just been another word, in which events, people, the language itself, all had been nothing more than their electronic images. We had forgotten, in the flood of body-counts, what it means for people to murder other people. But now suddenly we are made aware of definitions and ramifications....¹⁵³

Attempts at collective reckoning and the eradication of myths about American righteousness and the good GI have been made thanks to the media providing a platform, but those attempts have not yet been successful. If the discussion of atrocities in American society continues to affect hearts and minds like Mallis’, however, those myths may one day be overturned.

¹⁵³ Ronald Mallis, letter to the editor, *Boston Globe*, Nov. 29, 1969, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/435204890>.

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