FACE MY LAI
MOVING BEYOND THE MASSACRE

MODERN WAR STUDIES
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INTRODUCTION

What Really Happened?

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In November 1969 the American public first learned from brief newspaper reports that U.S. army lieutenant William L. Calley had been charged with multiple murders of Vietnamese civilians at a place called My Lai. At that time, there were about five hundred thousand U.S. troops in Vietnam. American combat units had been there for almost five years, and over forty thousand Americans had been killed in action. The Vietnam War had been the principal issue in the 1968 election that brought Richard Nixon to the White House with a promise to find an honorable way to end the war. The public was tired of and disillusioned with the conflict, and news that U.S. soldiers might be murderers seemed additional evidence of the liability that the war had become. After a military court-martial found Calley guilty in April 1971 of the murder of “at least 22” Vietnamese noncombatants, a Harris Poll revealed that an incredible 91 percent of its respondents had followed the trial closely. Among those polled, 36 percent disagreed with the verdict, 35 percent agreed, and 29 percent were undecided.1
The crime in which Calley participated was one of the most horrendous atrocities in the history of U.S. warfare. The initial charges against Calley accused him of personally killing or ordering to be killed 109 civilians on March 16, 1968, but the total killed that day far exceeded that gruesome number. One of the men later described the scene:

I just killed. I wasn’t the only one that did it; a lot of people in the company did it, hung ’em, all types of ways, any type of way you could kill someone that’s what they did. That day in My Lai I was personally responsible for killing about twenty-five people. Personally, I don’t think beforehand anyone thought that we would kill so many people. I mean we’re talking about four to five hundred people. We almost wiped out the whole village, a whole community. I can’t forget the magnitude of the number of people that we killed and how they were killed, killed in lots of ways.

Do you realize what it was like killing five hundred people in a matter of four or five hours? It’s just like the gas chambers—what Hitler did. You line up fifty people, women, old men, children, and just mow ’em down. And that’s the way it was—from twenty-five to fifty to one hundred. Just killed. We just rounded ’em up, me and a couple of guys, just put the M-16 on automatic, and just mowed ’em down.2

Although the words My Lai and massacre will forever be linked in the historical record, the enormity of the evil of that day is scarcely remembered. For many Americans, it is one of a host of unpleasant and uncomfortable images and associations from the Vietnam War that they seek to forget. As the divided public reaction to the Calley verdict also revealed, the explanation of what happened was elusive and has continued to confound those who seek to understand and to ease the psychic pain of the evil and horror of Vietnam. Who was responsible and who was to blame? Time has a way of healing, according to the old adage. Time also erases or blurs memories. Forgetting and healing are not necessarily synonymous.

Some facts about My Lai are generally accepted. On March 16, 1968, troops of Charlie Company, First Battalion, Twentieth Infantry Brigade, Americal Division combat air assaulted a village in South Vietnam’s Quang Ngai Province. Known to Americans as My Lai 4, Vietnamese called it Thuan Yen. It was part of a hamlet called Tu Cung, which was part of a larger village called Son My.3 In GI slang it was “Pinkville,” a name derived from shading on military maps that indicated a densely populated area.

Charlie Company was part of Task Force (TF) Barker, a temporarily assembled strike unit of three infantry companies and an artillery battery commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker. TF Barker’s mission was to locate and destroy Vietcong main-force combat units in an area that had long been a political and military stronghold for the enemy. Captain Ernest L. Medina commanded Charlie Company and Second Lieutenant William L. “Rusty” Calley commanded the company’s First Platoon.

Shortly before 8:00 A.M., helicopters landed the company outside My Lai. Expecting Vietcong resistance, the first and second platoons entered the village with weapons firing. By noon every living thing in My Lai that the troops could find—men, women, children, and livestock—was dead. The
total of Vietnamese civilians killed numbered 504, according to North and South Vietnamese sources. The casualties of Charlie Company were one self-inflicted gunshot wound in the foot. The company’s report to the division commander, Major General Samuel W. Koster, listed 128 enemy killed in action (KIA) and three weapons captured. Two days later, the division’s newsletter proclaimed: “TF Barker Crushes Enemy Stronghold.”

What really happened at My Lai? Was it an armed Vietcong village if only three weapons were found? Was it an enemy stronghold if the U.S. troops suffered no casualties from hostile fire? Did anyone from the village fire at all? What orders did Colonel Barker give his officers, and what orders did Captain Medina give his troops? Why did many, but not all, of the men of Charlie Company persist for over three hours in brutalizing and executing all the unarmed, unresisting villagers? The victims included babies in their mothers’ arms, young women (some of whom were raped before they were murdered), and elders too feeble to rise from their beds. Why did not someone in command stop the slaughter? Why was there no immediate military investigation of the obvious inconsistencies in the operation? Why did it take a year and a half before the horrible facts of the events at My Lai became public, and then only through the prodding of a conscience-stricken GI, Ron Ridenhour, who was not even present at My Lai? Why was Lieutenant Calley the only person there that day ever to receive any judicial punishment?

There has been no general agreement on the answers to these questions. The U.S. Army eventually investigated the massacre and gathered volumes of testimony and other evidence that detailed the gruesome facts of that March 16. Several criminal prosecutions ensued, but in the courts of law guilty verdicts proved difficult to obtain. Similarly, in the judgment of history, much of the truth about My Lai remains ambiguous. One of the most contentious questions has been whether My Lai was an aberration or an operation. Was the cold-blooded brutality unique or at least an extreme deviation from the admittedly harsh tactics of a counterinsurgency war? Or was it routine or at least close to normal for a war that was conducted with lethal modern weapons among an inscrutable and racially distinct population? Was the atrocity produced by a breakdown of leadership and discipline in one unit, or was it an inevitable and all-too-familiar product of a war that was a bureaucratic abstraction of body counts, attrition strategy, and global deterrence? Does the moral burden fall on a few individuals, on the military and civilian chain of command, or on the entire American way of war? How one answers these questions about the past determines how
one lives with the traumatic memories in the present and guards against such disasters in the future.

In examining the My Lai massacre, three explanations emerge. Although they tend to point the finger of blame in three directions, they are complementary and, in combination, help reveal who or what was responsible. One explanation is that a mental breakdown by some individual members of Charlie Company produced this atrocity. The culprit is emotion, ranging from fear, rage, and vengeance on one extreme to no human feeling at all on the other. This interpretation cites mounting psychological pressures on the men. On February 12 a bullet from an unseen sniper had killed Specialist Four Bill Weber. His death was the company's first in Vietnam. Over the next month there were more deaths and terrible wounds from land mines and booby traps, but no face-to-face encounters with enemy troops. The men became increasingly brutal in their treatment of Vietnamese civilians they encountered on their patrols, and the officers tolerated this behavior. On March 15 the company held an emotional memorial service for Sergeant George Cox, a popular squad leader who had been blown apart by a booby trap the previous day. Immediately after the service, Medina briefed the men on the next morning's operation at My Lai. The service and briefing merged into a kind of ritualistic preparation for bloody vengeance. Regardless of what were Medina's specific orders before going into My Lai, the troops were primed to kill, and kill they did. For some the villagers were the unseen enemy that had been killing and maiming their friends for weeks, and for others the victims were scarcely human at all. The soldiers' behavior was so shocking that attention can be misdirected toward them and shifted away from what others were doing.

Poor leadership is a second explanation for the atrocity, and it puts the burden primarily on the company, battalion, and division officers. Medina, Barker, Colonel Oran K. Henderson (the new brigade commander supervising his first combat operation), and Koster are the chief culprits here. Calley himself fits both the first and second explanation, because his rank gave him command responsibility while his inexperience made him susceptible to breakdown. Either from actual orders or from the informal climate in the division, many of the men believed they had license to kill. Ridenhour suspects that the higher officers may purposefully have planned an operation to brutalize the village and others. A similar, somewhat smaller, and never fully prosecuted incident occurred with Bravo Company of TF Barker at the nearby village of My Khe. In this counterterrorism scenario, a brutal attack on a village in a Vietcong-controlled area would be a demonstration to the local people, something like a criminal gang burning out a small business to convince others in the neighborhood to pay protection money. It is likely that Henderson and Koster were in "Charlie-Charlie" (command and control) helicopters over My Lai, and it is certain that Medina and Barker were close by. Did these officers make no move to stop the ground action because it was going according to plan? Even if not planned, Colonel William Echardt, who supervised the My Lai prosecutions, notes that Medina quickly knew the men were on a rampage and did nothing to stop it. Medina and those above him may have kept a discreet distance to create plausible deniability later.

A third explanation is that the massacre flowed from what could be called the American way of war in Vietnam. The United States used high technology and vast material resources to inflict maximum suffering and damage on the enemy while minimizing pain and loss to U.S. forces. Military historian Russell Weigley has noted that "war creates a momentum of its own; the use of violence cannot be so nicely controlled and restrained as strategists ... would have it." The culprit is body count or kill ratio—that is, counting the number of enemy KIA or comparing enemy KIA to American KIA. In a war where the enemy often wore civilian clothes, the bodies were often counted using the "mere gook rule" that "if it's dead and it's Vietnamese, it's VC." Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's Pentagon devised this war by the numbers, and General William C. Westmoreland, the commander of all forces in Vietnam, tried to implement it through an attrition strategy sometimes labeled "search and destroy." The destruction was accomplished not just by soldiers' firing into villages with M-16s and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), but also by artillery, napalm bombs, and B-52 carpet bombing in so-called "free-fire zones." All of this violence was the product of a global strategy to deter the ambitions of America's powerful enemies. How many Vietnamese civilians had to die to prove a point to Moscow and Beijing? What point was being proved? There was no relationship between means and ends.

This same pattern of three causes, which might be characterized as individual, group, and general, is evident in other notorious incidents in American history. For example, in the village of Salem, Massachusetts Bay Colony, in 1692, twenty men and women were executed after being charged with witchcraft. The explanations offered have included the following. (1) Individual: The accusers were mentally ill, and their hysteria spread to others in
the community and resulted in irrational behavior. (2) Group: Local magistrates and church leaders used the charges as a pretext to intimidate others in the community who threatened their authority. (3) General: Colonial New Englanders were deeply religious and believed in the reality of witches. Some thirty other people were hanged for witchcraft in other places in New England; Salem’s experience was not isolated but represented a particular time and region.

Another example is McCarthyism in the 1950s, in which unsubstantiated allegations of communist sympathies ruined reputations and careers of countless citizens. The explanations include: (1) Individual: Senator Joseph McCarthy himself was psychotic, and his charges triggered irrational fears and hysteria in others. (2) Group: McCarthy’s ranting would have gained no credence or audience if cynical politicians had not calculatingly exploited his antics for their own purposes. (3) General: The cold war, Soviet possession of the atomic bomb, and communist success in China were realities that would have generated fear of communism even if there were no McCarthy or those who would manipulate his rhetoric.

In the case of My Lai—as with the Salem witch trials and McCarthyism—the final explanation is a collage of the three factors. Some members of Charlie Company lost their individual moral and rational bearings and committed murder. Private Paul Meadlo, who followed Calley’s order to shoot women and small children gathered in an irrigation ditch, later testified:

A: I held my M-16 on them.
Q: Why?
A: Because they might attack.
Q: They were children and babies?
A: Yes.
Q: And they might attack? Children and babies?
A: They might’ve had a fully loaded grenade on them. The mothers might have thrown them at us.
Q: Babies?
A: Yes.
Q: Were the babies in their mothers’ arms?
A: I guess so.
Q: And the babies moved to attack?
A: I expected at any moment they were about to make a counterbalance.

It is difficult to make any sense of such behavior. As Vietnam infantryman and novelist Tim O’Brien has written about GIs in village warfare in Vietnam: “They did not know even the simplest things. . . . They did not know how to feel when they saw villages burning. . . . They did not know good from evil.”

Many American combat veterans, however, deeply resented the image of themselves as “baby killers.” “I never heard of renegade squads or anything like that,” a veteran of the combat-hardened Twenty-fifth Infantry Division later recalled. In his view, “My Lai was bizarre, an unusual aberration. Things like it were strictly for the movies. The average soldier fought hard and well.” Historian Eric Bergerud, who interviewed many of the men of the Twenty-fifth Division, concluded: “My Lai was and is an albatross on the shoulder of every Vietnam veteran. . . . It is almost incomprehensible that so many Americans accepted the idea that the insane actions of one perverse junior officer . . . were representative of the entire U.S. Army.”

The men immersed in the My Lai mayhem, including Calley, may have been factually disoriented, but that explanation cannot be used for Medina and his superiors up through the division commander. Regardless of whether Barker and Medina explicitly ordered the men to kill everyone, as some troops later testified, Medina clearly conveyed to the unit that the hostile inhabitants of this village were part of the unseen enemy behind the booby traps and land mines and were to be shown no mercy. In addition, as James William Gibson has described as standard operating procedure in this “techno-war,” the “war-managers” — that is, Colonel Henderson, General Koster, and their staffs — would have hovered over the area in their helicopters following and perhaps even directing the action below. The brass had created TF Barker for this purpose, that is, to bloody the elusive Vietcong. They may well have presumed, without knowing or caring about the precise details, that the killing they knew was happening was following the plan. The announced and bogus body count of 123 enemy killed may, in fact, have derived from some earlier planning estimate.

The reporting of the body count points directly to the third cause — the way the war was conducted. While Calley was being tried, the army was already rewriting training manuals to improve teaching the law of warfare. The military was going to have a lot of retraining to do, however, from the top down. With the My Lai case already uncovered, the lieutenant general who commanded II Field Force (the Saigon area) was still compiling death statistics to determine promotions and decorations, and his forces in
the field knew it. Grunts throughout Vietnam may not have been well versed in the Geneva Conventions, but many of them understood the “mere gook rule.”

These three considerations are important in trying to obtain some closure as to how this atrocity could have happened, but of equal or even greater long-term significance is the aftermath, including the cover-up, uncovering, trials, and finally the response of the military and the public. The dark secret of March 16 was held within the Americal Division for a year. A complaint by Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson, Jr., had been forwarded up the brigade chain of command almost immediately. A helicopter pilot, Thompson was not part of Charlie Company but was in the aviation unit assigned to cover the ground assault on My Lai. Realizing what the ground forces were doing, he landed and rescued the few civilians he could. The actions of Thompson and his crew were a singular and powerful expression of compassion and moral courage amid a scene of human depravity. His formal report of brutal and unprovoked murder of civilians was not investigated or acted upon by brigade or division headquarters. Did the senior officers in charge simply not believe the brush young pilot? Had they become insensitive to violence against civilians? Were they knowingly hiding their own culpability and failure of leadership?

The uncovering began more than a year after the event, when Ron Ridenhour, a recently discharged GI, wrote a letter. He sent copies to the army and several members of Congress. It asked for a public investigation of “something very black indeed,” namely, the possible killing of every man, woman, and child in the village of My Lai. Without this letter, the crimes at My Lai might never have been investigated. Ridenhour had not been in Charlie Company or at My Lai, but he knew several men who were. He had heard them describe that day in chilling detail. His sense of justice and patriotism compelled him to track down other witnesses, to search for more grim facts, and ultimately to speak out. In his letter he quoted Winston Churchill: “A country without a conscience is a country without a soul, and a country without a soul is a country that cannot survive.”

Numerous investigations ensued. The Department of the Army Inspector General and the Criminal Investigation Division of the Army determined, largely through interviews with members of Charlie Company and other witnesses such as Thompson and his crew, that the laws of land warfare had been violated. General Westmoreland, who was then Army Chief of Staff, created a special investigation panel headed by Lieutenant General William R. Peers. With the army’s image already damaged by the long and increasingly controversial war in Vietnam, Westmoreland was as concerned about the apparent cover-up by senior officers as he was about the brutality in the village. Peers returned a stunning report that graphically described the carnage and called for the indictment of twenty-eight officers. At the top of Peers’s hit list was General Koster, who had moved on to become commandant of West Point, one of the army’s most honored assignments.

Naming suspects and getting convictions proved to be very different propositions. Because many months had passed since the crimes, many of those involved were out of the service, and the Nixon administration’s Justice Department resisted bringing civilians before military courts-martial. Evidence had been destroyed, and key witnesses either could not or would not remember important details. In addition, military law allowed commanders to review the merits of charges brought against members of their command. As a result of these factors, Koster and several other senior officers escaped the court-martial process entirely. Lieutenant General Jonathan Seaman harshly censured Koster for failing to investigate Thompson’s complaint and for ignoring other evidence of wrongdoing. In a nonjudicial action, the former Americal commander was demoted to brigadier general and stripped of his Distinguished Service Medal; he soon retired, his once promising career finished. Although Seaman may have been correct that there was not enough evidence to proceed to open trial, the public-relations impact of his decision was enormous. Since Koster’s censure was administered privately, the dropping of the formal charges made it appear that one general was simply protecting another and letting others take the blame and punishment for My Lai.

From the time that Ridenhour wrote his letter, he had feared the military would not pursue the cases. He began trying to get his story to the press but could find no real interest. After the arrest of Calley in September 1969, an investigative reporter in Washington, Seymour Hersh, began to look into the Calley case, not knowing about Ridenhour or the broader investigation. Slowly the story began to come out. Hersh began publishing a series of reports, and he found Ridenhour, who was a fountain of information. On November 20 the Cleveland Plain Dealer published photographs of the massacre taken by Ron Haeberle, a combat photographer who had been present. Shortly afterward, Paul Meadlo appeared on the CBS Evening News. The press and public had to acknowledge that something horrible had happened at My Lai.
The story became front-page news, but the initial reaction was disquieting. Many Americans simply refused to believe that the allegations could be true, and others accused the accusers of trying to tear down the armed forces. Thirteen members of Charlie Company, including Captain Medina, were eventually charged with murder. All were acquitted or had their charges dropped except for Calley. Colonel Barker had died in Vietnam in a June 1968 helicopter crash. Twelve officers were accused in the cover-up, but only Colonel Henderson stood trial. He was acquitted after several witnesses declared under oath that they could not recall the events about which they were being questioned.

Calley, then, was the only person convicted of My Lai related crimes. A military court of six officers found him guilty of premeditated murder and sentenced him to life imprisonment at hard labor. Responding to public criticism of the verdict and especially the complaint that this one junior officer was being singled out, Nixon as commander-in-chief moved Calley from the stockade at Fort Benning to house arrest and said he would review the case. Privately, Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor and, publicly, Captain Aubrey Daniel, who had prosecuted Calley, took strong issue with the president’s action. They argued that the president’s interference denigrated the military justice system and that it placed the U.S. government in the position of condoning a crime that, in Resor’s words, stood “alone in infamy.”

After various appeals and reviews, Calley served only four and a half months in the military prison at Fort Leavenworth.

Like Resor and Daniel, many military professionals understood that there was no defense or excuse for the cold-blooded mass murder at My Lai. The U.S. military role in Vietnam ended in 1973, and career officers throughout the Army began to take a hard look at the institution to which they remained loyal. Many of them saw a host of mistakes made in management and organization of the military, and they set out to reform the system and restore its fallen honor. In military staff and command schools and colleges, My Lai and the law of war became important subjects of study.

Answers to disturbing questions about My Lai remained difficult to fashion because the event itself was so painful to recall. For many years Americans sought to repress the entire Vietnam War experience in both their own minds and the nation’s collective memory. Vietnam, after all, represented defeat and failure. Immediately after the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese forces in April 1975, President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger urged the public to put Vietnam behind them and not to dwell on it or think about it. Many Vietnam veterans, tormented by nightmarish recollections of the fear, rage, and horror that they had been through, wished to God that they could forget. As Sigmund Freud observed long ago, however, even the most painful memories have a way of reappearing. With the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1982, the public amnesia and the private agonies of many veterans began to be healed. Indeed, the late 1980s and early 1990s were a time of growing curiosity about the war as revealed in major motion pictures, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and hundreds of college courses on the subject.

Yet even as a healthy light of reexamination began to shine on the war and as many veterans began to feel that the country did care about what they had been through, dark shadows remained. A sense of alienation and exploitation continued to haunt some veterans. An unprecedented number of men and women who had served in Vietnam both in combat and in support suffered severe and ongoing psychological damage. The Veterans Administration (VA) physicians resisted until 1983 recognizing a diagnosis that specifically related these patients’ symptoms to the war. The sufferers experienced anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks, psychic numbing (the inability to feel strong emotions), aggression, and guilt from either having killed or having survived when their buddies died. Their behavior included drug and alcohol abuse, broken marriages, sudden outbursts of violence, and reclusiveness. Together these symptoms were given a variety of names, such as battle fatigue or delayed stress, but finally in 1980, the American Psychiatric Association settled on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The VA eventually conceded that at least five hundred thousand of the three million who served in Vietnam suffered from PTSD. Professionals who counseled these patients estimated in 1990 that the number was more than eight hundred thousand.

While these veterans struggled individually, the nation struggled collectively with what some conservatives labeled as the “Vietnam syndrome.” Former President Nixon, President Ronald Reagan, and others worried that public disgust and disenchantment over Vietnam would undermine the nation’s will to defend its international interests with military force. Reacting to the characterization of Vietnam as a “limited war,” other citizens urged the use of greater U.S. firepower in any future conflict. Sensitive to these concerns, President George Bush repeatedly chanted, almost as if it were an exorcism, that his order to invade Iraq in 1991 was not another Vietnam. The U.S. military performed well in the Persian Gulf War, and the
success of Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm showed that lessons had been learned from Vietnam about keeping a clear balance between objectives and costs. After the swift U.S. victory over Iraq, Bush exclaimed, “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”

Two decades after Hanoi gained de facto control over all of Vietnam, however, the United States remained in denial. It continued to reject diplomatic recognition of the Vietnamese government. It was not until July 11, 1995, that President Bill Clinton announced the extension of full diplomatic recognition to Vietnam by the United States. The issue of accounting for American prisoners of war and missing in action complicated the recognition issue, but the persistent inability of the United States to admit defeat and move on had dramatized how deeply the war had damaged America’s self-image.

In the 1950s American culture simply assumed the moral and material superiority of the United States over other nations. The United States had led a great victory over totalitarianism and militarism in World War II, and for the generation of Americans who waged that struggle, right and might had merged. Historians of that generation such as Louis Hartz and Daniel Boorstin wrote that, from its inception, American culture had been uniquely enlightened. Abraham Lincoln had once declared that American democracy was mankind’s “last, best hope,” and few Americans in the flush of peace and prosperity after World War II would have disputed that proposition.

The children of the 1950s, who composed the postwar “baby boom,” did not read Hartz or Boorstin and knew few of Lincoln’s speeches, but they breathed the purified air of America’s noble self-image. The boys played army or cowboys and Indians. They pretended they were their fathers killing Nazis or Japs. They imitated the heroic exploits portrayed in popular westerns and war movies. In the childhood games, as in the movies, the American GIs or the cowboys (the white Americans) always prevailed over the forces of evil and savagery. For African-American children, their approach was different. Some of their great-grandfathers may have fought Indians, but their fathers had, for the most part, not been allowed to fight the Germans or Japanese. These children wanted the opportunity to prove themselves in combat. The thought that Americans themselves (apart from some stereotyped villains) could be evil simply did not exist for most Americans.

In the 1960s the young men who had fought in World War II had reached positions of national leadership, and the children of the 1950s formed a vast pool of potential military manpower. These leaders and the children of their generation, although usually not their own children, fought a war in Southeast Asia. The Vietnam War, which in fact sprawled beyond the borders of Vietnam, began for the leaders and soldiers as a continuation of the nation’s presumed role as champion of good and opponent of evil. Before that conflict ended, however, it had delivered some smashing blows to the collective and individual identity of Americans. War is hell, and American soldiers in World War II and Korea, at places such as Omaha Beach, Tarawa, and Chosin Reservoir, knew firsthand what it meant to kill or be killed. But the mayhem of these other wars had some purpose. The enemy usually consisted of uniformed soldiers, and at the end of the battle it was usually obvious who had won or lost. In Vietnam the progress and the results were seldom clear, and often there was no clear-cut way to tell civilian friend from military enemy.

In August 1967, well before My Lai but also well into the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, journalist Jonathan Schell had a conversation with four GIs at Duc Pho, not far from My Lai. “When we got here, we landed on a different planet,” one explained. Trying to give his observation historical context, he added: “In Germany and Japan, I guess there was a thread of contact, but even when a Vietnamese guy speaks perfect English I don’t know what the hell he’s talking about.” “No one has any feelings for the Vietnamese,” another explained; “They’re not people. Therefore, it doesn’t matter what you do to them.” Schell asked the second GI what he was going to tell people when he returned to the United States. The man responded: “Maybe when I go home I’ll just crawl back inside myself, and not say a word. Things are so violent nobody would believe it. And I don’t want to die of frustration trying to convince them.” Schell had heard this remark—“they wouldn’t believe it back home”—many times in Quang Ngai Province. He had pressed a soldier at Chu Lai: “What kind of things, then?” The GI refused to elaborate: “You wouldn’t believe it, so I’m not going to tell you. No one’s ever going to find out about some things, and after this war is over, and we’ve all gone home, no one is ever going to know.”

Today, we live in an age of historical relativism. Women, minorities, and other ordinary individuals are giving voice to their own histories and expressing open skepticism about the old history that valued consensus and seemed to limit itself to the study of generals, politicians, and intellectually gifted or powerful males. In the cacophony of diverse voices, truth is difficult to discern and cynicism abounds. Can we ever know the truth of the past with certainty? Such reflection can be discouraging and even defeating, if we
allow it. On the other hand, realization that the past has many manifestations can be liberating. As a recent essay on the nature of history argues, "since no one can be certain that his or her explanations are definitively right, everyone must listen to other voices."16

Psychologists and historians know that neither memory nor history is characterized by total recall. Everything about the past cannot be retrieved and brought into the present. What is retrieved may be only an approximation or a distortion of the actual past. There are some things that society or individuals do not want to recall. Memory struggles against forgetting on several fronts. From bits and pieces, a past is reconstructed in the present to offer a guide for the future. The process does not stop with listening. "We cannot meet dogmatism with dogmatism," historian Dan Carter has admonished us, "or simply shrug our shoulders and say there are 'many kinds of truth.'"17 We must carefully collect evidence, analyze it, and construct logical arguments. If American political and military leaders and U.S. citizens are going to face the darkness and heal the wounds of Vietnam—both collectively and individually—they are going to have to confront the war in all of its reality. The massacre at My Lai is part of that reality, indeed, one of the most daunting parts of that reality.

NOTES

11. Gibson, Perfect War, 179-82.