

Afghanistan's My Lai

Patrick Martin
13 March 2012

The action of the unidentified US staff sergeant in Panjwai district in Kandahar province, slaughtering at least 18 innocent civilians, including nine children, is a demonstration of both the brutality and the deepening crisis of American imperialism's war of aggression in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The atrocity recalls, in both its horror and its potential political impact, the My Lai massacre during the Vietnam War, an even greater act of mass murder that brought home to much of the American population, and particularly to young people, the barbarism of the war in southeast Asia.

The My Lai massacre was first brought to public attention in articles written by Seymour Hersh, then an investigative journalist for the *New York Times*, which described the killing of hundreds of Vietnamese villagers by a platoon of US soldiers under the command of Second Lieutenant William Calley.

There are obvious differences in detail between the events of March 12, 2012 and those of March 16, 1968, 44 years ago almost to the day. Sunday's massacre appears to be the work of a lone gunman who, according to press reports, had suffered mental problems in the course of four combat deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. At My Lai, some 26 soldiers participated in the killing of 504 civilians. They were following orders by the US high command, which tasked them to destroy the village, burning every home, and identified the entire population as sympathizers of the National Liberation Front, the Vietnamese nationalist insurgents.

The stench of Vietnam, the greatest-ever defeat of American imperialism, now hangs over the whole US-NATO intervention in Afghanistan. The puppet regime

in Kabul, like its predecessor in South Vietnam, is the creation of a vast influx of American troops and American dollars, without any significant support in the local population. The leading personnel of the regime are drawn from the most rapacious and unprincipled social types, worried more about fattening their offshore bank accounts than prevailing in a war that they regard as hopeless and for which they are prepared to risk nothing.

In just the past week, there have been reports in the US press of widespread looting of billions in American aid by Afghan cronies of President Hamid Karzai, linked to the failure of the Kabul Bank, and of intervention by Karzai's top aides to block an investigation of the thieving. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that US officials are now investigating charges that the Afghan Air Force, created by the Pentagon, has been used to ferry narcotics and illegal weapons around the country—Afghanistan is the source of 90 percent of the world's opium. Anyone familiar with the history of the Vietnam War will recognize the process of corruption and decay that is the prelude to collapse.

As was the case in Vietnam, fratricide has become a leading cause of death for the occupation forces in Afghanistan. In Vietnam, it was reluctant American conscripts "fragging" particularly brutal or reckless officers with grenades while they slept. In Afghanistan, US-trained Afghan policemen and soldiers have killed dozens of their US and NATO "allies" in a series of what the military describes as "green on blue" attacks. Last week, an Afghan policeman allowed Taliban insurgents to enter a checkpoint and kill nine of his fellow policemen as they slept, then escaped with them.

The parallel between Panjwai and My Lai is a stark refutation of the incessant claims by the administration

and the corporate-controlled media that American imperialism is engaged in military interventions around the world for “humanitarian” reasons. First under George W. Bush, then under Barack Obama, US bombs and missiles have rained down on the people of Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Libya, and now potentially on Syria and Iran.

The truth is that, like Vietnam, the explosion of American militarism over the past decade has an absolutely criminal character. The US ruling elite is no less brutal and ruthless than in the 1960s. If its methods have become more technologically sophisticated—smart bombs and drone-guided missiles instead of B-52s and napalm—the fundamental imperialist contempt and arrogance toward the people being targeted is the same, inevitably finding expression in the type of savagery meted out on Sunday morning.

In Afghanistan, in particular, Obama has played the main role in the escalation of violence, tripling the US troop presence and extending the war into every corner of that country, as well as across the border into Pakistan. He installed General Stanley McChrystal, who headed the assassination campaign against insurgents in Iraq, to lead a similar effort in Afghanistan, then fired him when he expressed reluctance to use airpower indiscriminately against civilians.

Under McChrystal’s successor, Gen. David Petraeus, US special operations forces greatly increased the night raids that have devastated many Afghan villages. This has been accompanied by mounting outrages, a few of them well-publicized, like the urination on corpses, taking fingers and other body parts of murdered Afghans as “trophies,” and the burning of Korans at Bagram Air Base.

The Panjwai massacre also exposes the reactionary role of the pseudo-left groups that helped channel mass sentiment against the war in Iraq behind the Democratic Party and the Obama election campaign. Many of these organizations originated in the protest movements of the 1960s sparked by the Vietnam War, but they have crossed over into the camp of American imperialism and abandoned any semblance of opposition to its

crimes. Last year they served as cheerleaders for the US-NATO bombing of Libya; today they clamor for outside intervention against the Syrian regime of Assad; tomorrow they are prepared to endorse a US-Israeli war against Iran.

The Socialist Equality Party fights to mobilize the working class, in the United States and internationally, against American militarism and aggression. The first principle of the SEP campaign in the 2012 elections is internationalism: uniting the working class of the entire world in a common struggle against the capitalist system. We demand the immediate withdrawal of all US and NATO troops from Afghanistan, monetary reparations for the Afghan people, and holding accountable the war criminals responsible for this war.

Patrick Martin



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact