

Reflections on the death of Lt. William Calley Jr.: Imperialist atrocities, from My Lai to Gaza

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The death of former Army lieutenant William Calley Jr. at the age of 80, only reported this month although it took place in April, provides an occasion for reviewing one of the most notorious crimes of American imperialism during the Vietnam War, the My Lai massacre.

This is not a matter of ancient history, as there are many people today who can still recall, as this writer does, when he first heard the name of Calley and the village he will forever be linked to: My Lai, in US Army parlance, Songmy, as it was called by those who lived there.

Nor is it simply a matter of a single US atrocity in Vietnam in 1968, in which American troops machine-gunned, stabbed and killed with hand grenades some 504 Vietnamese civilians, nearly all of them women, children and elderly men incapable of fighting back. Such events are the hallmark of every imperialist and colonial war.

Today in Gaza, virtually every week brings a new My Lai, although usually by remotely launched missiles, bombs dropped from warplanes, or tank rounds fired into crowds of Palestinian civilians. Israeli soldiers use advanced American-supplied weapons which allow them to kill with impunity from a distance. They don't have to dirty their hands by pushing screaming victims into a ditch and then opening fire with machine guns or throwing hand grenades.

It was the psychological toll of such actions that cracked the cover-up of My Lai by the US military high command. Individual soldiers in Calley's platoon balked at the mass murder, some refusing outright to open fire, others bitterly regretting their own role in "following orders," and telling other soldiers, and eventually the press.

A few courageous soldiers, Hugh Thompson, Jr. and Ron Ridenhour, and one principled journalist, Seymour Hersh, played the main role in bringing My Lai to the notice of the American and world public.

On March 16, 1968, Calley, then a second lieutenant, led his First Platoon of Charlie Company, a unit of the Americal Division, into the hamlet of My Lai. He had been told by the high command, and relayed the "intelligence" to his troops, that most of the women and other noncombatants would be away from the village at a local market, leaving behind primarily Vietnamese resistance fighters, so-called "Vietcong," who were to be killed without mercy.

The platoon found no resistance fighters, but the killing without mercy began anyway. They herded families into drainage ditches or bomb shelters, then slaughtered them with hand grenades or machine gun fire. Soldiers gang-raped many of the women and girls, before killing them. By the end of the bloodbath, there were 504 dead Vietnamese, and not a single US casualty.

The eyewitness testimony still sickens, like the remembrances of Holocaust survivors. The *Bulletin*, then the newspaper of the American Trotskyist movement, cited some of it at the time of Calley's 1970 trial on 109 counts of murder:

There was a little boy walking towards us in a daze. He'd been shot in the arm and leg. He wasn't crying or making any noise. The GI fired three shots into the child. The first knocked him back, the second lifted him into the air. The third shot put him down and the body fluids came out. The GI ... simply walked away.—Ronald L. Haeberle, ex-army sergeant photographer

Just outside the village there was this big pile of bodies. This really tiny kid—he only had a shirt on, nothing else—he came over to the pile and held the hand of one of the dead. One of the GIs behind me dropped into a kneeling position, 30 meters from this kid, and killed him with a single shot.—Jay Roberts, Specialist 5

We walked over to the people and he [Calley] started pushing them off and started shooting off into the ravine. There were about 80 civilians there and we just started using automatics on them, men, women and children and babies.—Ex-private Paul Meadlo

There were many more such witnesses, although for more than a year the massacre remained a secret held within the Army command.

Herbert Carter, a soldier from Houston, Texas, later said, "We went through the village. We didn't see any VC [Viet Cong]. People came out of their hootches [huts] and the guys shot them down and then burned the hootches, or burned the hootches and then shot the people when they came out. ... It went on like this all day. Some of the guys seemed to be having a lot of fun doing it."

"The whole thing was so deliberate. It was point-blank murder and I was standing there watching it," Sgt. Michael Bernhardt of New York would recall. "It was just like any other Vietnamese village—old Papa-san, women and kids. As a matter of fact, I don't remember seeing one military-age male in the entire place, dead or alive. The only prisoner I saw was about 50."

Michael Terry, of Orem, Utah, said, "They just marched through shooting everybody. Seems like no one said anything. ... They just started pulling people out and shooting them." He described the killing of a group of 20 Vietnamese: "They had them in a group standing over a ditch—just like a Nazi-type thing. ... One officer ordered a kid to machine-gun everybody down, but the kid just couldn't do it. He threw the machine gun down and the officer picked it up. ... A lot of guys feel that they aren't human beings; we just treated them like animals."

Varnado Simpson, interviewed for the book *Four Hours in My Lai*, admitted, "I cut their throats, cut off their hands, cut out their tongue, their hair, scalped them. I did it. A lot of people were doing it, and I just followed. I lost all sense of direction." He later committed suicide.

The Army initially reported a major military success at My Lai, in which 128 enemy fighters had been killed. The US commander in

Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, declared that US troops had dealt a “heavy blow” to the Viet Cong. Similar lies and boasts frequently accompany such atrocities.

But there was a complaint filed by Hugh Thompson, a helicopter pilot who personally rescued 16 Vietnamese children at My Lai (he set his helicopter down at the village, had his two gunners level their weapons at the rampaging soldiers, and filled the aircraft to capacity before flying away).

Ronald Ridenhour, a helicopter gunner who was not on the scene, learned of the massacre through the grapevine and started to investigate it on his own. He waited until leaving the military, but in 1969 sent messages exposing the My Lai events to the military high command and dozens of members of Congress. The Army began a formal investigation of Lt. Calley on charges of murder, expecting questions to be raised in Congress, but none were. The Associated Press (AP) reported the opening of the investigation in a four-paragraph article in September 1969.

The true dimensions of the My Lai horror only became public two months later. Ridenhour’s allegations reached Seymour Hersh, then a 32-year-old freelance reporter who had quit AP to work as press secretary for Senator Eugene McCarthy’s presidential campaign, which had challenged incumbent Lyndon Johnson over the Vietnam War. Hersh followed up persistently, eventually locating Calley and interviewing him about the events of March 16, 1968.

Hersh’s articles on the massacre committed by US soldiers were distributed by the Dispatch News Service, an alternative press agency specializing in critical coverage of the Vietnam War. (Founded in 1968, it went out of business in 1973, three years after Hersh was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for international reporting for his exposure of My Lai). Only after the revelations were picked up by the international press did the American corporate media follow suit.

The My Lai reporting produced widespread revulsion, fueling the antiwar movement in the United States, staggering the Pentagon and causing lasting damage to its ability to wage war on behalf of American imperialism. As the *Bulletin* headline of the time read (using the Vietnamese name for the location of the massacre), “SONGMY IS VIETNAM.”

That article, published December 8, 1969, provided a Marxist analysis of an event that was being widely publicized in the corporate media, but was at the same time being dismissed as the criminal action of a group of soldiers and low-ranking officers, not reflecting US government policy. The *Bulletin* explained:

The Vietnam war is a war of an imperialist power, the United States, against the people of Vietnam, the ordinary working people and peasants. On one side stands the United States Army and a small group of corrupt profiteers, militarists, capitalists of the Saigon government. On the other side stands the National Liberation Front and North Vietnam which receives the support of the mass of the people, and which could not last for a day without that support.

Under conditions of imperialist war the ordinary civilians ARE the enemy. It is not possible to fight such a war without atrocities. There is no way to clean up the imperialist filth of this war. There is no way to limit the blame for Songmy to a single lieutenant ... The blame lies with the rulers of America. There is no way to limit the exposure of this war to Songmy alone. Songmy is the very heart of the Vietnam War. It shows above all else the CLASS character of this war.

Trial, conviction, but no punishment

As the Army investigation proceeded, charges were dropped against every officer initially implicated, except the two most directly involved: Calley, who was on the scene engaged in the mass shootings, and his direct superior Captain Ernesto Medina, who according to witnesses at the trial, gave Calley orders to destroy anything “walking, crawling or growling,” in the village. Charges were also dropped against seven of the eleven enlisted men initially implicated. Of the remaining four enlisted men, all were acquitted, as was Captain Medina. Calley was thus the only person convicted for a mass murder that took the lives of 504 people.

In a statement to the court, recalled in the *New York Times* report of his death, Calley said, “My troops were getting massacred and mauled by an enemy I couldn’t see, I couldn’t feel and I couldn’t touch—that nobody in the military system ever described them as anything other than Communism ... They didn’t give it a race, they didn’t give it a sex, they didn’t give it an age. They never let me believe it was just a philosophy in a man’s mind. That was my enemy out there.”

Anti-communism was combined with the same justification for criminal violence offered by the Nazis: “I was just following orders.” That pretext served four of Calley’s co-defendants, the rank-and-file soldiers acquitted of their actions at My Lai because they were following Calley’s orders. But Calley’s effort to use the same justification was rejected by the court, since this would have required admitting that My Lai, rather than being an aberration, was carried out in accordance with US military orders in Vietnam.

The verdict of the court martial in March 1971—after the longest trial in US military history—was to find Calley guilty of the murders of 22 people. He was sentenced to life in prison, but after only three days President Richard Nixon intervened, placing him on house arrest pending appeal. The base commander cut his sentence to 20 years. Army Secretary Howard Callaway further reduced the sentence in 1974 to 10 years, and Calley was eventually released after only three years of house arrest, during which he lived on the base where he had been serving, Fort Benning, near Columbus, Georgia. [1]

Prominent pro-war politicians, Democrats and Republicans alike, denounced the prosecution, conviction and sentencing of Calley. Governor George Wallace of Alabama called for a presidential pardon. Jimmy Carter, the future president, then governor of Georgia, called the verdict “a blow to troop morale.” He urged Georgians to “honor the flag as Rusty had done,” using Calley’s nickname, given because of his reddish hair.

After Calley’s release from house arrest, he led a quiet and uneventful life. He married, worked at his father-in-law’s jewelry store, fathered a son, eventually divorced, moved to Atlanta, and later to Florida. Little has been reported of his final decades, until he died at the age of 80, on April 28, 2024, at a hospice in Gainesville, Florida.

According to the *Washington Post*, which first reported Calley’s death, the newspaper obtained “a copy of his death certificate from the Florida Department of Health in Alachua County. The *Post* was alerted to the death, which was not previously reported, by Zachary Woodward, a recent Harvard Law School graduate who said he noticed Mr. Calley’s death while looking through public records.”

The *Post* obituary noted: “Curiously, his death certificate matched known details about his life—including information on his birth, career, name and nickname—but featured one notable omission. On a line asking if he had ever served ‘in U.S. armed forces,’ the answer given was ‘no.’” Even in death, apparently, the government sought to distance itself from the mass killer they had created.

My Lai was exceptional, not in its brutality, but in its notoriety. The US military killed an estimated one to two million civilians during the years

1965 to 1973, when large numbers of American troops were engaged in ground combat in Vietnam. There are hundreds of similar large-scale massacres noted in US military records, according to researchers. My Lai stood out because a combat photographer was there and took the shocking photos, because eyewitnesses blew the whistle on the event, and ultimately forced a public inquiry and trial.

Calley's own lawyer, former military judge George Latimer, told the court, "This boy is a product of the system... He was taken out of his own home, given automatic weapons, taught to kill. They ordered him to kill. And then the same Government tries him for killing and selects the judge, the court and the prosecutor."

Myrtle Meadlo, mother of Paul Meadlo, one of the soldiers most active in the massacre, by his own account, told Seymour Hersh, "This has made him awful nervous ... He seems like he just can't get over it." She concluded, "I sent them a good boy and they made him a murderer."

The day after the massacre, Paul Meadlo stepped on a land mine while on patrol and his right foot was blown off. As he boarded a helicopter for medical evacuation, Meadlo reportedly shouted at his lieutenant, "Why did you do it? This is God's punishment to me, Calley, but you'll get yours! God will punish you, Calley!"

There is one other circumstance of the My Lai events that deserves consideration. March 1968 was a month of extraordinary crisis, both in Vietnam, and in the affairs of world capitalism more generally. The Tet Offensive, launched on January 29, 1968, had shattered the Johnson administration's claims of steady progress and inevitable victory in the war. National Liberation Front troops seized the US embassy in Saigon, raised their flag over the citadel in Hue, and attacked dozens of other cities and US bases. Quang Ngai province, where My Lai was located, was the scene of bitter fighting in the month leading up to the massacre.

While they suffered huge losses and were eventually driven out of the cities over the next month, the Vietnamese forces had dealt a mortal blow strategically and politically.

In the course of March, Johnson's political position and the economic position of the United States both crumbled. On March 12, McCarthy took 42 percent of the vote in the New Hampshire primary, a strong rebuff to an incumbent president. Four days later, Senator Robert F. Kennedy announced he would also challenge Johnson for the nomination.

Johnson had replaced Robert McNamara as secretary of defense with Clark Clifford, a longtime Democratic Party power broker in Washington. Clifford removed Westmoreland as Vietnam commander on March 22, 1968, six days after My Lai (which no one in Washington was aware of at that point). On March 25, Clifford convened a group of former top national security officials (dubbed the "wise men") to review US policy in Vietnam. The next day, this group met with President Johnson. Five days later, on March 31, Johnson himself announced he would no longer be a candidate for reelection.

Equally significant was the impact of the Tet Offensive on the deepening crisis of the dollar, as the US balance of payments deficit continued to worsen. The selling of dollars for gold reached panic proportions in early March, and the British pound, a weaker currency, faced collapse, forcing the British government to close all banks and stock exchanges on March 15. On March 16-17, an emergency meeting of world bankers established a two-tier system in which maintained a stable gold price of \$35 for their own dealings with each other, while allowing a free market price for gold in all other dealings. This was the final stage in a crisis that culminated with Nixon's ending dollar-gold convertibility entirely on August 15, 1971.

Thus, on the same day that American soldiers were machine-gunning Vietnamese civilians at My Lai, the rulers of world capitalism were taking equally drastic measures in the financial realm to preserve their class domination. There is more than symbolism here. Mass murder and financial extremity are two sides of the same coin, the global crisis of

world capitalism.

The news of Calley's death sparked a one-day flurry of articles in the corporate press, but then a resumption of the silence on the crimes of the Vietnam War which has persisted over more than a half century. Each new war of American imperialism—Panama, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iraq again, Libya, Syria, Yemen and now Ukraine—is launched amid a barrage of publicity hailing the democratic and humanitarian motives of the United States. There is never a reference to the revelations of war crimes in Vietnam, directed from the very top of the military-intelligence apparatus.

Nor, of course, was there any effort to take the measure of the crisis of American capitalism which has only taken on a deeper and more malignant character in the 56 years that have passed since My Lai. One of the actions taken by Donald Trump during the final year of his administration was to issue pardons to a number of American soldiers convicted of war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan which matched the brutality, if not the casualty total, of William Calley's actions. Trump praised them as heroes.

And today, the Biden-Harris administration gives full-throated backing to an Israeli military that has carried out numerous massacres on the scale of My Lai, most of them with American-supplied bombs and missiles fired remotely, although some mass killings have been perpetrated face to face. Indeed, based on the estimated death toll in Gaza of 186,000 by July 5 published by the British medical journal *The Lancet*, Israeli troops have been killing an average of 680 Palestinians—more than the My Lai death toll of 504—every day.

[1] *Fort Benning, named after a Confederate general, was renamed Fort Moore in 2023, as part of the effort to separate the US military from the heritage of pro-slavery rebellion that ignited the American Civil War (1861-1865). But the base was renamed after another American general best known for a war that was arguably just as odious as the Confederate revolt: Hal Moore, who commanded US troops in Vietnam during the 1965 battle of Ia Drang.*

This was the first large-scale engagement between Vietnamese and American soldiers, and the first to involve helicopter-borne assault by American troops and the use of B-52 bombers as tactical air support (essentially saturation bombing around the besieged American force). Ia Drang was effectively two battles, as Moore's 1st Battalion, 7th Air Cavalry Regiment, though besieged, held off its attackers effectively and later claimed a 10:1 kill ratio thanks to the artillery and air support. The 2nd Battalion, however, was virtually overrun, with the Vietnamese soldiers closing in so tightly that bombing them would have wiped out the Americans as well. The unit suffered more than 50 percent casualties before evacuation.

Ia Drang is recounted in the book We Were Soldiers Once ... And Young, by Moore and Joseph Galloway, which was made into a movie with Mel Gibson portraying Moore in a heroic light. But as Galloway himself later commented, Ia Drang was "the battle that convinced Ho Chi Minh he could win," because the Vietnamese stood toe-to-toe with the most powerful imperialist military in the world, and forced them to withdraw.



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