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# Atrocity, Authenticity and American Exceptionalism: (Ir)rationalising the Massacre at My Lai

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On the morning of 16 March 1968, the men of Charlie Company, 11th Light Infantry Brigade, Americal Division, US Army, entered the village of Son My, on the coast of Central Vietnam.[1] The company was led by Captain Ernest Medina. In charge of the company's 1st Platoon was Lieutenant William Calley. The company encountered no enemy forces, no opposing fire of any kind. Its only casualty was self-inflicted. Nevertheless, by early afternoon, over 400 villagers lay dead. Those killed were – almost exclusively – either women, old men or small children. For many of the women, rape had preceded death. Other victims had been tortured and mutilated, then killed. Much of the killing, though not all, had occurred in the collection of hamlets known by the Americans as My Lai 4 and had been conducted by 1st Platoon.

Through the 11th Brigade up to divisional headquarters, senior military officers were aware that a large number of civilians had been killed at My Lai. Contrary to Army regulations, however, the divisional command allowed the 11th Brigade to investigate itself. In the subsequent report, to the extent that civilian casualties were acknowledged, they were asserted to have been small-scale and accidental, primarily the result of long-range artillery fire.

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[1] See the following works for comprehensive accounts of the massacre at My Lai: Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours at My Lai* (London: Penguin, 1992); Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall and Jack Schwartz, *The My Lai Massacre and Its Cover-up: Beyond the Reach of Law? The Peers Commission Report with a Supplement and Introductory Essay on the Limits of Law* (New York: The Free Press, 1976); Richard Hammer, *One Morning in the War: The Tragedy at Son My* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc, 1970); Seymour Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath* (New York: Random House, 1970).

Rumours and allegations of deliberate mass killings were dismissed as enemy propaganda.

For a year thereafter, the official record remained silent on the subject of My Lai. In April 1969, however, Ronald Ridenhour, a young GI who had served in the 11th Brigade, wrote a letter to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defense, the President and several Congressmen and Senators describing what had happened at My Lai and requesting an investigation. Ridenhour himself had not been present at the massacre, but his account was compiled from detailed conversations with soldiers who had witnessed and, in some cases, participated in the killing. Quietly, the Army's Office of the Inspector General began to investigate the allegations. In early September, William Calley was charged with six specifications of murder, including the deliberate shooting of 109 Vietnamese civilians.

Although brief details of the charges against Calley were released to the press, it was only in November, following the appearance of a news story by Seymour Hersh, that the massacre at My Lai began to attract serious media and public attention. In the same month it was announced that Calley would be court-martialled. Eventually four officers and nine enlisted men were charged with major crimes relating to the massacre. Many of these charges, however, were subsequently dismissed. Of the handful of cases that went to court-martial all but that of Calley resulted in acquittal. Convicted of murdering twenty-two villagers at My Lai, Calley was sentenced in March 1971 to life imprisonment with hard labour. That sentence was commuted swiftly to twenty, then ten years. In November 1974, Calley became eligible for parole and left military custody. In 1976, he married and took over the management of his father-in-law's jewellery store in Columbus, Georgia.

From the initial media revelations in November 1969 to the immediate aftermath of Calley's court-martial in the spring of 1971 the killings at My Lai were one of the most prominent items of American national discourse. As the reporting of witness and participant accounts resolved the doubts of most observers about whether the massacre had actually occurred, an array of different actors – politicians, veterans, intellectuals and ordinary Americans – joined with the military establishment and the news media to debate where responsibility lay. The questions raised by the massacre were addressed and readdressed in the pages of national papers of record and current affairs magazines, in the solemn commentaries of television news anchormen, in book-length journalistic accounts, in the reflections of social psychologists and moral philosophers, in the filmic sub-genre of "Vietnam westerns," in poetry and even in popular song.

A spasm of popular indignation greeted Calley's conviction in March 1971, encouraging President Nixon to release the lieutenant from the stockade pending an appeal. Thereafter, the political significance of the massacre seemed to decline to the point that a number of recent commentators have attested to its near-complete absence from contemporary public memories of the war.[2] Perhaps they overstate the case. The sort of pathologies which characterised the massacre at My Lai have never entirely disappeared from cultural representations of the Vietnam experience. Scenes in which American soldiers brutalise Vietnamese civilians have been a feature of many of the most significant films about the conflict, including *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Casualties of War* (1989). In *Platoon*, indeed, a massacre on the scale of My Lai is averted only at the final moment. To read the published oral history testimonies and memoir accounts of American veterans, meanwhile, is to engage with a world in which civilians were routinely killed, tortured and mutilated for no reason of military logic; the rape of women and the desecration of bodies were mundane, everyday occurrences; atrocity was a banal and unremarkable fact of life in the field.[3] In the last decade, the massacre at My Lai has been a central drama in novels by Tim O'Brien and Norris Church Mailer.[4] In March 1998, as the thirtieth anniversary of My Lai approached, all four major television news shows reported on a medal ceremony honouring three former servicemen who had intervened during the killings to rescue inhabitants of the hamlet, and the CBS programme "Sixty Minutes" accompanied two of the men on a journey back to the site of the massacre to meet its

[2] Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, for example, note: "My Lai is now almost completely forgotten, erased almost entirely from the national consciousness. What was once an image of incandescent horror has become at most a vague recollection of something unpleasant that happened during the Vietnam War." Bilton and Sim, 4. Christian Appy comments that the My Lai massacre "has virtually disappeared from public debate or memory. Throughout the 1980s very few students even recognized the name." Christian G. Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 277. In the view of David Anderson, "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." David L. Anderson, "What Really Happened?," in Anderson, ed., *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 12.

[3] See, e.g., Mark Baker, *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There* (London: Abacus, 1982), 131–53; Myra McPherson, *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation* (London: Sceptre, 1988), 567–603; and Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), 290–320.

[4] Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods* (New York: Penguin, 1995); Norris Church Mailer, *Windchill Summer* (New York: Fourth Estate, 2000).

survivors.[5] In 1999, Susan Faludi's *Stiffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man*, a dissection of the condition of contemporary American masculinity, devoted a chapter to the thesis that the massacre resulted from the failure of senior military officers in Vietnam to provide ethical leadership to the men under their command, to fulfil the role of surrogate fathers.[6] That same year, the atrocities at My Lai once again emerged as a referent in public discourse after the *Associated Press* revealed that during the Korean War members of the US Army's 7th Cavalry regiment had killed hundreds of civilian refugees near the village of No Gun Ri.[7] The massacre also flickered briefly across the national consciousness in the spring of 2001, when former US Senator Bob Kerrey admitted involvement in the killing of at least thirteen unarmed women and children during a raid on Thang Phong, a Vietnamese hamlet, in February 1969.[8] These disparate, diverse, often incidental instances of remembrance, of course, hardly suggest that the crimes committed at My Lai have a secure and permanent place in the nation's historical consciousness; moreover, the stories of which they form a part are almost exclusively stories about America and Americans, rarely dwelling for very long upon the toll of lives, limbs, health, families, communities, resources and history experienced by the massacre's actual victims. Nevertheless, though its hold on national memory may be fragile, intermittent and partial, the massacre at My Lai has not been entirely forgotten.[9]

[5] ABC News, 6 Mar. 1998, Vanderbilt Television News Archive, hereafter abbreviated to VTNA; CBS News, 6 Mar. 1998, VTNA; NBC News, 6 Mar. 1998, VTNA; CNN, 6 Mar. 1998, VTNA. See also Trent Angers, *The Forgotten Hero of My Lai: The Hugh Thompson Story* (Lafayette: Acadian House, 1999).

[6] Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man* (London: Vintage, 2000), 291–358.

[7] See, for example, *Washington Post*, 30 Sept. 1999: "The reported death toll would make No Gun Ri one of two known cases of large-scale killings of noncombatants by U.S. ground troops in this century's major wars, military law experts note. The other was Vietnam's My Lai massacre, in 1968, in which more than 500 Vietnamese may have died." See also Charles J. Hanley, Sang-Hue Choe and Martha Mendoza, *The Bridge at No Gun Ri: A Hidden Nightmare from the Korean War* (New York: Henry Holt, 2001), 224–26.

[8] In the article that first fully reported the Kerrey story, Gregory Vistica mentioned My Lai and one other major Vietnam atrocity – the massacre at Son Thang in February 1970 in which 16 women and children were slain. Gregory L. Vistica, "One Awful Night in Thanh Phong," *New York Times Magazine*, 25 Apr. 2001.

[9] Robert J. McMahon has recently argued that, whilst the rhetoric of American political leaders in the post-Vietnam era has consistently evaded questions of US responsibility for the sufferings of the Vietnamese people, broader societal memories, as revealed in public opinion polls and popular culture, have proven more resistant to the notion of moral closure, continuing to reflect an understanding that the nation's conduct of the war was not easily reconciled with what its people believe that it should stand for. Robert J. McMahon, "Contested Memory: The Vietnam War and American Society, 1975–2001," *Diplomatic History*, 26: 2 (spring 2002), 159–84.

The purpose of this article is to explore one of the principal ways in which the events in My Lai came to be accommodated within the American national consciousness. In the view of many commentators at the time, the massacre had caused a serious rupture in the narratives that Americans liked to tell about themselves. As evidence accumulated in November 1969, a *New York Times* editorial declared that the atrocities "may turn out to have been one of this nation's most ignoble hours."[10] Concluding an ABC television news broadcast towards the end of that month, anchorman Frank Reynolds sombrely informed his audience that, as a consequence of the allegations, "our spirit as a people is scarred." The massacre, he believed, offered "the most compelling argument yet advanced for America to end its involvement in Vietnam, not alone because of what the war is doing to the Vietnamese or to our reputation abroad, but because of what it is doing to us."[11] After Calley had been convicted, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr asserted: "This is a moment of truth when we realize that we are not a virtuous nation."[12] *Time* magazine commented: "the crisis of confidence caused by the Calley affair is a graver phenomenon than the horror following the assassination of President Kennedy. Historically, it is far more crucial."[13]

However, though most participants in the debate precipitated by the massacre revelations agreed that My Lai raised awkward questions about American national identity, the conclusions that they reached often diverged markedly, primarily because no consensus could be forged concerning the *locus* of culpability. In the opinion of some, the massacre revealed little about the United States as a whole; they argued robustly that the killings were an aberration, the only meaningful explanation for which lay in the specific criminality of Charlie Company, with the actions of Ernest Medina, William Calley and the men they led into My Lai that day. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in the wake of the revelations, Secretary of the Army Stanley Resor asserted that the massacre was "wholly unrepresentative of the manner in which our forces conduct military operations in Vietnam."[14] Calley's conviction, indeed, was assured by the failure of his defence to weave the events of 16 March 1968 into a wider canvas and to erase the impression left upon the court by a succession of prosecution witnesses who testified to the lieutenant's personal enthusiasm for the grim task of slaughter.[15] As Pentagon officials advised the White House in the

[10] *New York Times*, 22 Nov. 1969.
[11] ABC News, 28 Nov. 1969, VTNA.
[12] *New York Times*, 4 Apr. 1971.
[13] *Time*, 12 Apr. 1971.
[14] *New York Times*, 27 Nov. 1969.
[15] For an account of the trial, see Richard Hammer, *The Court-Martial of Lt. Calley* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Inc., 1971).

wake of the verdict: "Calley is not a scapegoat, nor a poor lieutenant singled out to bear the entire burden of a difficult war. His act stands alone in infamy among known atrocities by U.S. Forces in the war."[16] Others, however, judged that the massacre could not be explained without reference to the broader culture of American war-making in Vietnam; if the soldiers of Charlie Company had butchered civilians at will, they asserted, it was only because they had considered their conduct consistent with the attitudes and practices of their GI peers, with the policies of the military command, and with the conscience of the political nation at home. Responding to the verdict against Calley, Ohio Governor John J. Gilligan stated: "The guilt assigned by the court must be shared – by his superiors, by members of Congress, by the Administration and, in truth, by all of us who have tolerated the continuation of this awful war."[17]

A number of those contributing to the debate, however, drew the circle of responsibility more broadly still, as broadly, perhaps, as it could be drawn: in their view, atrocity, like war, was an eternal recurrence in human affairs, an expression of the unchanging primal essence of man. This was an interpretation which reflected the changed moral co-ordinates of a war that was now accumulating human waste at levels which even the most optimistic estimates of military outcome struggled to legitimise; emerging critiques of America's past which traced a long narrative of national violence back from Vietnam through the treatment of African Americans, the suppression of insurgents in the Philippines, the Indian wars of the nineteenth century and beyond; the comparability of My Lai with atrocities committed in other conflicts by other countries; ambient cultural and counter-cultural ideas about the coexistence of good and evil within the human soul and the primitive impulses which persisted beneath the civilised facade of modern man; and pop-psychological propositions which cast the experience of war and atrocity for individuals and nations alike as an existential rite of passage into the condition of self-knowledge and maturity. In addition, by abstracting the causes of massacre to the plane of human nature, this third interpretation offered both the perpetrators of the killings and those who had granted them licence, from the military command in Vietnam to the quiescent masses at home, a release from conscience.

It was, however, not cost-free. Those who chose to attribute the atrocities at My Lai to the inevitable order of things might certainly have lifted from

[16] Untitled document, 3 Apr. 1971, enclosed with Haig to Ehrlichman, "My Lai," 7 Apr. 1971, "Calley–April–May 1971" folder, box 14, John W. Dean III Subject Files, Staff Members and Office Files, White House Special Files, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Archives.

[17] *New York Times*, 4 Apr. 1971.

themselves and others a sense of culpability and guilt, but they were obliged as a result not only to subscribe to an essentialist and irredeemably bleak view of human character, but also to discard as delusory the long and widely held belief in American exceptionalism. As Deborah Madsen notes, the concept of exceptionalism has been at the centre of debates about American identity since even before the nation itself was founded.[18] According to Perry Miller, the seeds of exceptionalist doctrine were sown by the Puritan migrants of the seventeenth century, who sought to establish in New England a working model for the full religious reformation that had still to be achieved at home. In Miller's view this notion of a special spiritual destiny for the Puritan community became somewhat secularised as the prospect of a return to Europe receded; Enlightenment science contracted the spheres in which the workings of God's grace were accorded primary explanatory power; and the increasing material prosperity of New England indicated to its people that they basked in the approval of the Lord and that there was no longer quite the same need for self-abasement before the knowledge of their own sin, despite the jeremiads of preachers who continued to insist that they should.[19] Sacvan Bercovitch, however, asserts that Miller proposed a false opposition between the spiritual lamentations of the Puritan churches and the secular processes through which wider society became American, for the jeremiad and its avowal of the gap between the collective moral ideal and contemporary moral practice flourished as a rhetorical model well beyond the colonial period. For Bercovitch, indeed, the historic distinctiveness of the American nation was expressed in and affirmed by the jeremiad; in contrast to the European form which invoked the distance between the injunctions of God and the conduct of man as evidence of the latter's essential depravity, the American jeremiad was intended to induce reform within its audience and to propel the nation on towards the fulfilment of its special destiny. At the same time as it diagnosed delinquency, therefore, the jeremiad professed optimism and faith. For Americans, the act of gazing upon themselves and

[18] Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 1–2.

[19] Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953); Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), esp. 463–91; Perry Miller, "Errand into the Wilderness," in Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 1–15. For an analysis that skilfully maps the complexities of Miller's relationship with national myth, and the tensions that existed between his dissection of Puritan exceptionalism and mainstream American historiography in the era of the early Cold War, see Nicholas Guyatt, "'An Instrument of National Policy': Perry Miller and the Cold War," *Journal of American Studies*, 36: 1 (April 2002), 107–49.

registering their sinfulness was a necessary stage in their communal passage towards reformation and redemption, when the profane countenance of man would dissolve, giving way to the divine.[20]

As both Loren Baritz and Trevor McCrisken have demonstrated, the conviction that the United States represents a virtuous alternative to an old world resigned to its own amorality has been a consistent feature of American thinking on foreign affairs since the birth of the republic, even as the national policy posture shifted markedly from one of aloofness in the early 1800s to one of global intervention by the high-tide of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, the conversion of national economic power into international predominance also refracted back to further confirm the validity of assumptions about the uniquely righteous character of American civilisation: that the United States had come to stand at the commanding heights of the international system was evidence of the blessings bestowed upon a worthy people by an approving God. As a consequence of the war in Vietnam, however, these two components of exceptionalist doctrine were exposed to unprecedented critical scrutiny.[21] The experience of military defeat by an ostensibly weaker foe disrupted the narrative of accumulating national power. Atrocities such as the massacre at My Lai did not simply cast into doubt the ability of Americans to live up to the ethical standards that they had ascribed to themselves. At various locations within the national culture, these events inspired the (ir)rationalisation of atrocity as an expression of some essential dark force lingering within the human soul – a discourse with profound implications for exceptionalist thought, for it offered a version of history that was at least as transcendent as that of exceptionalism itself. The assertion that within all men vibrated impure and primitive hearts had the potential to dissolve faith not only in the peculiar benevolence of American actions abroad, but also in the progressive moral development of American civilisation as a whole. This is therefore an intriguing historical episode, when the violence of America's armed forces slipped outside the reach of state rationalisations, prompting a critical reappraisal of historic

[20] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), esp. 3–30; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (London: Yale University Press, 1975), 14–15.

[21] Loren Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led Us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1985); Trevor McCrisken, "American Exceptionalism and U.S. Foreign Policy: The Influence of Traditional Beliefs in American Foreign Policy, 1974 to the Present," (D.Phil. thesis, American Studies; University of Sussex, 1999).

formulations of national identity and conventional assumptions about the impact of modernity upon the ethics of human behaviour.

The massacre at My Lai might have been more easily categorised as an exceptional, aberrant event and, accordingly, less easily attributed to ahistorical human impulses had the conflict in which it occurred not itself become ever more irreconcilable with the calculus of a just war. The Tet offensive of 1968, in which Vietcong guerrillas and North Vietnamese regulars launched assaults on cities and towns throughout South Vietnam, entering the US embassy compound in Saigon and briefly capturing the ancient imperial capital of Hué, had suggested the deludedness of earlier official assurances that the American limited war strategy was successfully eroding the enemy's military strength. One result was the disruption of the discursive framework which had denoted a correlation between the United States' progress towards victory in Vietnam and advances in the welfare of the Vietnamese people. In the wake of Tet, a significant minority of Americans were prepared to support a dramatic escalation of the US military effort in order to win the war, apparently without much thought for the human consequences of such a policy. In March 1968, 27 per cent of those polled agreed that the United States should use atomic weapons to achieve a military victory.[22] A year later, 32 per cent of respondents favoured the option: "escalate war, go all out."[23] Roughly the same proportion of Americans, however, seem to have taken the view that a military victory could not be achieved and that it was therefore futile to continue fighting the war.[24]

At the level of government, meanwhile, the accession of Richard Nixon to the presidency had precipitated the eclipse of liberal internationalism by the "realist" school of foreign policy theorists, manifest most obviously in the appointment of Henry Kissinger as national security adviser. The essential priority of the realists was the preservation of American power and credibility within the international system. Whilst the pursuit of this objective precluded too hasty an abandonment of the United States' allies in Southeast Asia, it also relegated the impact of American war-fighting upon the peoples of the region from the bitter satire it had been in the Johnson era, when the President had placed their well-being at the centre of his public policy justifications, to a near-total irrelevance. Indeed, as Jeffrey Kimball has noted,

[22] John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1973), 129.

[23] George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935–1971: Volume Three 1959–1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), 2189.

[24] In March 1969, 26 per cent of respondents agreed that the United States should "pull out (let the South Vietnamese take over)." Ibid., 2189.

whenever Nixon and Kissinger departed from realist principles, they lapsed not in the direction of what they regarded as sentimental moralism, but instead towards the satisfactions of excessive force, in an attempt to coerce the enemy into concessions, win the peace and thereby sustain America's reputation as a credible power in the world.[25] At a time when the United States was actually expanding and intensifying rather than de-escalating many aspects of the war, including pacification programmes and bombing operations, the disjunction between the objectives for which it was fighting, increasingly defined by the abstractions of great power politics, and the interests of those inhabiting the ground zero of its campaigns was more acute than it ever had been before.[26]

The scale of Vietnamese suffering, moreover, was being communicated to the home front more forcefully in late 1969 than had been the case in previous years, when media institutions had for the most part chosen to remain silent over the darkest aspects of the national war effort. As *Time* magazine noted in December, the revelations about My Lai had "started a flood of other horror stories. Dozens of journalists, soldiers and visitors to Viet Nam have begun to recall other incidents of U.S. brutality. Individual acts of senseless – sometimes gleeful – killing of civilians apparently happened often enough to be deeply disturbing."[27] In the wake of the Calley court-martial verdict, 81 per cent of respondents to a Harris poll believed that "there were other incidents like My Lai involving U.S. troops that have been hidden," whilst 50 per cent of those questioned by Gallup took the view that "the incident for which Lt. Calley was tried" was a "common" occurrence during the war.[28] For many Americans it had become difficult to make any clear distinction between the massacre at My Lai and the ethical content of the wider conflict, to avoid drawing the conclusion which William Calley himself had drawn from his experience in Vietnam: "Killing people in war's something new? Now what in the hell *else* is war than killing people?"[29]

For William Calley, then, his culling of a village represented nothing worse than an over-enthusiastic improvisation around the ethical latitudes which all

[25] Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 63–86.

[26] For discussions of military policies in Southeast Asia during the early years of the Nixon administration, see Richard Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995); Kimball, 91–176; and Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999).

[27] *Time*, 5 Dec. 1969.

[28] Louis Harris to Larry Higby, "Harris Survey," 5 Apr. 1971, "Calley" folder, box 16, John D. Ehrlichman Alphabetical Subject File, Staff Members and Office Files, White House Special Files, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Archives; Gallup, 2296.

[29] John Sack, *Lieutenant Calley: His Own Story* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 23.

soldiers observed in times of conflict. The proposition that the pathologies exposed at My Lai were not Calley's alone, but rather expressed moral ambivalences intrinsic to the broader profession of arms, received endorsement from a number of commentators. The massacre revelations prompted some to re-evaluate the military history of the United States and the pattern of its interactions with people of other races, and to establish that the nation's past was punctuated with acts of persecution and violence. A few years previously, as the psychologist Edward M. Opton, Jr., noted in 1971:

> even those of us who were aware of the four-hundred-year atrocity of the treatment of the black minority in the United States, of the genocide of the native Americans, of the Northern and Southern Andersonvilles of the Civil War, of the two hundred thousand Filipinos slain when the United States decided to replace Spain as the colonial owner of the Philippines – even those who knew this history thought of it as thankfully remote and not as continuous with the present policy of the government.[30]

In the wake of My Lai, however, such complacency appeared unsustainable. The *New York Times* reminded readers of two earlier massacres committed by US armed forces: the Miniconjou Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890, and 600 Moros near Jolo in the Philippines in 1906.[31] In his reflections on the killings, Noam Chomsky asked: "Is it an exaggeration to suggest that our history of extermination and racism is reaching its climax in Vietnam today?"[32]

It was not just liberal and left critiques, however, which asserted that the record of the US military was more familiar with atrocity than collective memory liked to allow. Taking the view, it seems, that Calley's conviction represented a wilful denial of the harsh realities of combat, a succession of Second World War veterans publicly declared that they, too, had been guilty of war crimes according to the definition of the court. Raymond Hufft, a retired major general, told reporters that he had once ordered his men to take no prisoners: "We shot everything that moved … If the Germans had won, I would have been on trial at Nuremberg instead of them." In Coventry, Rhode Island, Carl E. Savard announced that he had killed a mother with a baby in her arms, as well as a 10-year-old boy who had shot his radio man, and requested to be placed in jail. "If he [Calley] can be tried for those

[30] Edward M. Opton, Jr., "It Never Happened and Besides They Deserved It," in Nevitt Sanford, Craig Comstock, et al., *Sanctions for Evil* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc, 1971), 49–50.

[31] *New York Times*, 28 Nov. 1969.

[32] Noam Chomsky, "After Pinkville," in Peter Limqueco and Peter Weiss, *Prevent the Crime of Silence: Reports from the Sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal Founded by Bertrand Russell* (London: Allen Lane, 1971), 45–46.

crimes," he said, "I would like to be tried for crimes I committed in World War II."[33]

The massacre at My Lai, therefore, cast into ambiguity not just the ethical reputation of the American military in Vietnam, but that of the nation's martial tradition as a whole. In doing so, moreover, it functioned to undermine the perception that the armed services of the United States, uniquely amongst the national agents of war in the modern era, had been a force for good in the world, an instrument of liberation and the advance of social progress. As Russell Baker reflected in the *New York Times*, the massacre had struck a blow

> against one of our fondest illusions, the American fighting man as G.I. Joe. How we loved that great guy – slogging through Europe with a wisecrack on his lips, a wink in his eye, and a chocolate bar in his hand for the orphaned *Paisano* kids left behind by the Nazis. Now we are challenged to see him as a guy whose answer to a pleading mother hugging her child is a burst of automatic rifle fire.[34]

The conduct of the United States military no longer seemed so distinct from that of other national armed forces, even those of regimes which commonly had been considered beyond the ethical pale. Indeed, one GI present at the time of the My Lai killings had described them as "just like a Nazi-type thing."[35] General Telford Taylor, a specialist in the laws of war, published a volume examining the applicability of the judgments made in the American-sponsored war crimes trials following the Second World War to US actions in Vietnam, asserting that "now the wheel has spun full circle, and the fingers of accusation are pointed not at others for whom we have felt scorn and contempt, but at ourselves."[36] Reporting from London on foreign responses to the massacre, Anthony Lewis noted that Europeans made comparisons to the German slaughter of Czech villagers at Lidice in 1942, and to the multiple outrages committed against indigenous populations by the colonial armies of Britain and France.[37] *Time* examined the coverage of My Lai in foreign newspapers and informed its readers: "In the end, if any reaction to the massacre of My Lai was shared by honest men, it was that the world expects the worst from warriors – even American warriors."[38]

[33] *New York Times*, 1 Apr. 1971.

[34] *New York Times*, 30 Nov. 1969.

[35] Quoted in Robert Jay Lifton, "Existential Evil," in Sanford et al., *Sanctions for Evil*, 43.

[36] Telford Taylor, *Nuremberg and Vietnam: An American Tragedy* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 12.

[37] *New York Times*, 22 Nov. 1969; *New York Times*, 29 Nov. 1969. The *Nation* went further still, asserting that, if the descriptions of Charlie Company's conduct in My Lai were true, "the Americans involved behaved with an on-the-spot savagery that exceeded even that of the Germans at Lidice in World War II." *Nation*, 8 Dec. 1969.

[38] *Time*, 12 Dec. 1969.

Characterising a number of the contributions to the public debate that followed the massacre disclosures, then, was a perception that the bloody deeds perpetrated in My Lai had ethical analogues not just in many other aspects of the US military effort in Vietnam, but also in earlier national campaigns and in the history of warfare in general. For these commentators the story of a single village put to the sword contained universal lessons about the true nature of war. Their views found echoes in the broader popular response to the affair. In January 1970 *Time* magazine reported the findings of a Harris poll in which 65 per cent of those questioned asserted that "incidents such as this are bound to happen in war."[39] There is indeed little evidence to indicate that the massacre revelations had a dramatic impact upon levels of public opposition to the war, which were determined primarily by the attrition of American lives, not those of the Vietnamese, and by disillusionment with the progress of the military effort rather than with its morality.[40] After William Calley had been convicted, *Time* observed that for many Americans the notion that laws existed in conditions of combat was simply "absurd."[41] This was a sentiment reflected in popular responses to the trial, as well as in the subsequent judicial resolution of the case. A national survey conducted in late May and June 1971 – two months after the conclusion of Calley's court-martial and the initial wave of intense public disaffection with its outcome – still discovered majority opposition not just to the verdict and the sentence, but also to the fact that a trial had taken place at all.[42] Releasing Calley on parole in 1974, Judge Robert Elliott stated: "war is war and it's not unusual for innocent civilians such as the My Lai victims to be killed. It has been so throughout recorded history."[43]

According to such judgments, then, the cause of atrocities like those at My Lai lay in the inevitable strains imposed upon soldiers by the conditions of war. The sociology of armed conflict was responsible, not the individuals who had done the actual killing, nor the military tacticians who had generated an institutional culture of indifference to non-combatant fatalities, nor the

[39] *Time*, 12 Jan. 1970. Similarly, 52 per cent of Minnesota residents responding to a poll conducted by the *Minneapolis Tribune* asserted that, if the reports were true, the principal cause of the massacre was "the fact that war tends to make people brutal." *Minneapolis Tribune*, 21 Dec. 1969.

[40] Mueller, 52–63; Howard Schuman, "Two Sources of Antiwar Sentiment in America," *American Journal of Sociology*, 78: 3 (Nov. 1972), 513–36.

[41] *Time*, 12 Apr. 1971.

[42] Herbert C. Kelman and Lee H. Lawrence, "Assignment of Responsibility in the Case of Lt. Calley: Preliminary Report on a National Survey," *Journal of Social Issues*, 28: 1 (1972), 177–212.

[43] *Calley* v. *Callaway*, 382 F. Supp. 650 (1974), in Goldstein et al., *The My Lai Massacre and Its Cover-up*, 553.

multitudes at home who had not challenged that indifference. Even this level of analytical abstraction, however, was not sufficient for some participants in the massacre controversy, for whom atrocity and war alike were best understood as products of the more fundamental ethical ambivalences existing within the character of man. In Europe, reported Anthony Lewis, My Lai was regarded "as a reminder that there is a dark side to all human beings, to all societies."[44] *Time* magazine observed that good and evil were "intertwined and inseparable" components of human existence; whilst acknowledging that wrongdoing was "not to be shrugged off with easy references to human nature," it concluded that "to ignore the persistent dark element in man can be as misleading, and intolerant, as to see only the dark."[45] These meditations often took a geneological turn, alluding to the survival of the savage beneath the rational, urbane façade of modern man. Writing in the *New York Times*, Tom Wicker proposed that the massacre had proved "nothing specific about Vietnam; it only shows once again what man is capable of once he lets loose the beast within himself."[46] The argument concerning the true nature of "the human animal," Eric Sevareid told viewers of CBS News in late November 1969, "has been going on for several thousand years. It's far from settled."[47] Later, in the wake of Calley's conviction, Sevareid assessed the mood in the nation's capital and reported that many people there were "thinking some long thoughts about the fragile construction of civilization and what endless war gradually does to the mirror-image of a people who always thought that they had at the least a general goodness."[48] The editors of *Sanctions for Evil*, a volume of essays which sought to excavate the socio-psychological origins of events like My Lai, endeavoured scrupulously to deploy the term "evil" as a signifier only of outcome, not cause; their analysis, however, was not altogether free of essentialist assumptions, as when they asserted that soldiers responsible for raping and then killing a young Vietnamese girl had "found the means for direct release of their most primitive impulses."[49] On the inside cover of the volume, meanwhile, was depicted a darkened head with no discernible features of its own, bearing a naive, benign mask of the human face.

In their challenge to the polarities of good and evil, civilisation and savagery, these articulations reflected a range of long-established cultural assumptions, as well as contemporary intellectual developments. Much of Christian theology – not least in its concept of original sin – asserted the

[44] *New York Times*, 29 Nov. 1969.
[45] *Time*, 5 Dec. 1969.
[46] *New York Times*, 2 Dec. 1969.
[47] CBS News, 28 Nov. 1969, VTNA.
[48] CBS News, 9 Apr. 1971, VTNA.
[49] Sanford and Comstock, "Sanctions for Evil," in Sanford et al., *Sanctions for Evil*, 7.

coexistence of good and evil within man.[50] In the references to the persistence of primal energies, there were traces of Frederick Jackson Turner's iconic frontiersman, operating at "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" – a figure, as John Hellmann has noted, which had been recently revived for the era of modern warfare in the form of John F. Kennedy's Green Berets.[51] There were congruities also with the insights of structuralist anthropology. In 1966, Claude Levi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* had been published in English. The author sought to challenge the proposition of Jean-Paul Sartre that there were fundamental differences between the processes of reasoning characterising "historical" and "pre-historical" societies. For Levi-Strauss, the "savage mind" – defined as "mind in its untamed state as distinct from mind cultivated or domesticated for the purpose of yielding a return" – was actually conjoined in the modern consciousness with rational, scientific thought.[52] Perhaps most influential, however, were the neo- and post-Freudian manifestoes of the sixties counter-culture which asserted the need to acknowledge and emancipate the natural instinct-life of the human species, long suppressed by the role demands of modern technocratic capitalism.[53] Not all did so without critical reservations, because the survival of ethics in an uninhibited society could not be entirely guaranteed. As Theodore Roszak observed: "No sooner does one speak of liberating the non-intellective powers of the personality than, for many, a prospect of the starkest character arises: a vision of rampant, antinomian mania, which in the name of permissiveness threatens to plunge us into a dark and savage age."[54] Nevertheless, the pathologies that resulted from repression were considered more destructive than those that might accompany the condition of liberation. Consciousness of one's own irrational urges was healthier than denial. Thus, writing in *Sanctions for Evil*, Robert Bellah argued that the young cultural dissenters of the day possessed a better understanding of the darkness that lay within and "a deeper sense of what it means to be human" than

[50] In its ruminations upon the massacre, indeed, *Time* magazine cited Martin Luther: "man is *simul justus ac peccator* – saint and sinner at once." *Time*, 5 Dec. 1969.

[51] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1931), 3; John Hellmann, *American Myth and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 41–53.

[52] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1966), 219, 245–69.

[53] See, for example, Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (London: Sphere Books, 1969); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 1991); Charles A. Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971); Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter-Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970).

[54] Roszak, 73.

many of their elders, for whom evil had always been projected outwards onto others.[55]

To identify atrocity as an authentic expression of what it is to be human is to engage with the proposition that something of value can accrue from the act – a form of existential knowledge, in particular. The inclination to believe that the experience of war and the abandonment of ethical restraint provided access to essential truths about the nature of man was evident in many contributions to American cultural discourse in the late 1960s and 1970s, and especially so in texts relating to the conflict in Vietnam. In 1972, in a collection of lectures, Lionel Trilling contended that works of literature which evinced the quality of "sincerity" were now considered anachronistic and quaint; over the course of the twentieth century, "authenticity" had become the identifying mark of literary merit. To Trilling, "authenticity" suggested "a more strenuous moral experience than 'sincerity' does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man's place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life."[56] If one literary work exemplified this concern with authenticity, it was Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, particularly in its characterisation of Mr Kurtz. The megalomanic agent of European colonialism who directs the base-level pathology of that enterprise towards new and almost inexpressible extremes, Kurtz nevertheless attains the status of hero, for – as Trilling comments – he had "sinned for all mankind. By his regression to savagery Kurtz had reached as far beneath the constructs of civilization as it was possible to go, to the irreducible truth of man, the inner-most core of his nature, his heart of darkness."[57]

Kurtz, of course, was later to receive American citizenship and a commission in the Green Berets, as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) transposed Conrad's story onto the tableau of Vietnam, and re-evoked the existential truths apparently offered by the experience of ethical transgression. Coppola has often been criticised for the lack of moral centre in his film, but he was hardly original in his choice of theme.[58] In 1973 the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, describing himself now as a "psycho-historian," proposed that there had long existed in human culture a myth of the "warrior–hero," according to which each soldier would follow "the heroic life-trajectory of the call of adventure, the crossing of the threshold

[55] Robert Bellah, "Evil and the American Ethos," in Sanford et al., *Sanctions for Evil*, 190.
[56] Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 9.
[57] Ibid., 108.
[58] For one such critique, see Peter Marin, "Coming to Terms with Vietnam: Settling our Moral Debts," *Harper's*, Dec. 1980, 41–56.

into another realm of action and experience, the road of trials, and eventually the return to his people to whom he can convey a new dimension of wisdom and of 'freedom to live.'"[59] For the modern American fighting man, however, the conflict in Vietnam supplied no such satisfactions, due to the uncertain allegiance of those he was supposed to be protecting, the elusiveness of his enemy, the reliance of his peers upon technology-intensive forms of war-fighting, the ultimate failure of the enterprise and, not least, his knowledge of the atrocities committed in its name. Nevertheless, in Lifton's view the veterans of Vietnam retained some of the mystique of the "warrior–hero," perceiving themselves certainly to be "a victimized group unrecognized and rejected by existing society," yet also as "a special elite who alone can lay claim to a unique experience of considerable value in its very extremity and evil."[60]

That the vicissitudes of the Vietnam War could yield to the men who fought it, especially those most intimate with the mortal waste that it caused, a kind of unique personal insight into the human soul had been an emergent theme in national discourse in the months preceding the revelations about the massacre at My Lai, not least because all the other cultural logics through which military service could be ascribed value – participation in a successful endeavour, the preservation of democracy and freedom – by then were exhausted. It was evident especially in visual representations of the US soldier. In June 1969, *Life* magazine published photographs of all but 25 of the 242 Americans who had died in the war during the week 28 May to 3 June, noting: "More than we must know *how many*, we must know *who*."[61] Most of the images depicted young men posing happily in civilian clothes or earnestly in full military dress. Printed on the cover of the issue, however, was a picture of William C. Gearing, Jr., apparently taken in Vietnam, in which the troubled, reflective face of the subject suggested a story of loss more complex than that of a single human life. To the editors his face may have expressed something of the impact of war upon the innocence of youth; it was the same face, perhaps, that Michael Herr reported having seen "at least

[59] Robert Jay Lifton, *Home From the War: Vietnam Veterans: Neither Victims nor Executioners* (London: Wildwood House, 1974), 26.

[60] Ibid., 68. In 1984 William Broyles, a veteran of the Vietnam conflict, attached a similar kind of value to his experience of war: "War may be the only way in which most men touch the mythic domains in our soul. It is, for men, at some terrible level the closest thing to what childbirth is for women: the initiation into the power of life and death. It is like lifting off the corner of the universe and looking at what's underneath. To see war is to see into the dark heart of things, that no-man's-land between life and death, or even beyond." William Broyles, "Why Men Love War," in Walter Capps, ed., *The Vietnam Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 74–75.

[61] *Life*, 27 Jun. 1969.

a thousand times" during the conflict – "of boys whose whole lives seemed to have backed up on them, they'd be a few feet away but they'd be looking back at you over a distance you knew you'd never really cross."[62]

With greater resonance for the cultural conceptualisation of atrocity, however, was another photo-story in *Life*, published just before the allegations of massacre at My Lai were disclosed to the American public. The journal reported on the case of Robert Rheault, a colonel in the Green Berets, who had been accused of shooting in cold blood a Vietnamese man thought to have been an enemy double agent.[63] The charges against Rheault had recently been dropped, but he still resided, *Life* asserted, "in a moral twilight somewhere between guilt and exoneration." His career was over, a victim of the disparity between the ethical standards of the civilian world and "the aberrant, equivocal principles of war as it is waged in the shadows." Rheault had met a similar fate, the article suggested, to "les soldat perdus" – the "lost soldiers" – who had returned to France in the 1950s following the wars in Indochina and Algeria, "too early hardened and too early disaffected." Rheault was pictured on the cover of the issue inhaling a cigarette, his weathered skin and cool narrow gaze communicating a difficult, hard-boiled kind of glamour: a poster-boy for authenticity.

Thankfully, however, most of those who commented on the massacre at My Lai stopped short of according a special existential status to its perpetrators, of ascribing to them any profound new understanding of the human condition. Following his conviction, many Americans were certainly prepared to describe William Calley as a hero, but this sentiment derived, it seems, from either a belief in his innocence or an attribution of his deeds to the honest naivety of a young patriot, not from a fascination with his passage into extremity. Over the course of his court martial, meanwhile, the mainstream media had received too comprehensive an education in the damning details of Calley's conduct in My Lai to afford any space to a romanticised reappraisal.[64] Moreover, Calley's own physical attributes offered little scope for the successful visual signification of authenticity; boyish when news of the massacre broke, he had become rather plump and prone to hair-line recession by the time the case came to court. Only very rarely did photographs of Calley exhibit a comparable iconic grammar to that used in the image of Rheault, as in *Life* in March 1971, when the lieutenant was shown sitting on his couch, cigarette in hand, gazing into the middle distance.[65]

[62] Michael Herr, *Despatches* (London: Picador, 1979), 21. [63] *Life*, 14 Nov. 1969.
[64] See Joseph Kraft, "Lt. Calley No Media Hero," *Washington Post*, 4 Apr. 1971.
[65] *Life*, 5 Mar. 1971.

In the view of a number of commentators, however, the model of massacre as catharsis, as a rite of passage into self-knowledge and maturity, did have resonance for the American nation as a whole. In the *New York Times*, Anthony Lewis asserted: "To recognize the bad in ourselves with the good, to see ourselves honestly, would be healthy for the United States in the end. Only children and stunted adults live in fairy tales. Growing up is good for countries as well as individuals."[66] *Time* magazine agreed: "only the nation that has faced up to its own failings and acknowledged its capacities for evil and ill-doing has any real claim to greatness."[67] On occasion, however, the massacre was assigned a meaning which moved beyond simply the potential it presented for collective enlightenment. As Jonathan Schell observed in the *New Yorker*, the My Lai revelations tempted some "toward a touch of actual pride … as if we had gone through an initiation ceremony into adulthood as a nation, or as if committing great crimes were part of being a great nation, like having a huge gross national product, or going to the moon."[68] In the pages of *Time* in mid-December 1969, an advertisement appeared with no obvious commercial purpose and no acknowledged sponsor besides the name of the advertising agency.[69] Exhibiting a handwritten text on the right side of the spread, and a pair of eyes pictured at the top, cast partly in shadow, the layout of the advertisement implicated the reader in its production. The text incorporated a series of statements of experience and responsibility, in which the pronoun "I" stood for every American. These statements juxtaposed achievements with failure and transgressions: thus, "I have died in Vietnam. But I have walked the face of the moon." Similarly: "I have beat down my enemies with clubs. But I have built courtrooms to keep them free"; "I have watched children starve from my golden towers. But I have fed half of the earth." Expressing a more complex collective self-image than that prevailing in the years before the Vietnam War threw narratives of national success and moral leadership into doubt, this advertisement nevertheless seemed to propose that a country's journey into greatness was inevitably marked by the contemporaneous performance of ethical extremes, that there was an essential duality between acts of generosity, intelligence and technical innovation and ones of violence, despoliation and neglect. "I am ashamed," the text concluded, "But I am proud. I am an American."

The massacre at My Lai, then, presented a challenge to the ethical dimension of American exceptionalism, not just because the killing of innocents

[66] *New York Times*, 29 Nov. 1969.
[67] *Time*, 5 Dec. 1969.
[68] Jonathan Schell, "Notes and Comments: Talk of the Town," *New Yorker*, 20 Dec. 1969, 28.
[69] *Time*, 19 Dec. 1969.

was difficult to reconcile with the identity of a virtuous republic, but also because it provoked some to search for an alternative source of national gratification; the commission of atrocities, perhaps, was a burden that great nations had to bear as they exercised power across a world stage. Sacvan Bercovitch's model of the American jeremiad no longer held fully. Although acts of negligence and delinquency continued to prompt expressions of regret, there was less assurance that they would induce a collective effort of ethical regeneration; the dialectical dynamic between the real and the ideal seemed to have stalled. Violence and corruption were elementary facts of human existence from which there was no hope of escape. America might continue to do good, but only as a by-product of the otherwise amoral pursuit of the satisfactions of national power.

This was not, of course, conclusive. Elsewhere in the culture calls for national self-reflection and a commitment to reform did not go unmade. In the wake of the massacre revelations, a distinguished group of lawyers and law professors proposed an impartial commission to investigate whether US military operations in Vietnam were consistent with the laws of war. They asserted that "the reputation, but even more the conscience, of all law-respecting Americans" would be damaged if the country failed "to show itself unafraid to examine all the evidence, to review the context within which the alleged acts occurred, and, if required, to make reparations and institute the changes in policy and procedure necessary to restore our good standing as a moral leader among nations."[70] Others, however, denied that the massacre had proven anything very distressing about the national moral condition. Howard K. Smith of ABC News, for example, found in the court-martial proceedings against Calley evidence that human civilisation continued to advance:

> The fact is that in our slow rise from the jungle, we've got to establish a rule of law. In the case of war, it's a hard long bit-by-bit process, but we're making a little headway. We've made rules against poison gas stick; we have written and we want to make stick the Nuremberg rules against mistreating helpless civilians.[71]

In the years that have passed since the My Lai revelations and the trial of William Calley dominated public discussion in the United States, the relationship between the atrocities committed by Americans in Vietnam and long-standing formulations of national character has evaded a final resolution. As Trevor McCrisken has demonstrated, the doctrine of American

[70] Goldberg et al. to Nixon, 5 Dec. 1969, "[cf] ND18–4 War Crimes – Trials [1969–70]" folder, box 43, Confidential Files, White House Special Files, Nixon Presidential Materials Project, National Archives.

[71] ABC News, 5 Apr. 1971, VTNA.

exceptionalism survived the experience of moral and military failure in Southeast Asia and remained a rhetorical resource for the country's policy-makers in the post-Vietnam era. Both Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter paid occasional homage in their speeches to the old exceptionalist themes of the national jeremiad: the mistakes made and wrongs committed in the recent past provided a sobering lesson that would guide America back to the path of righteousness.[72] In general, however, the restoration of faith in the nation's providential destiny has proceeded not through rituals of public atonement, but instead through displacement and erasure. According to Robert McMahon, this was exemplified by the "radical historical revisionism" first evident in the later rhetoric of President Carter and subsequently established as mainstream political orthodoxy during the Reagan administration, when the national commitment to Vietnam was reinterpreted as a "noble cause," when the discursive emphasis upon the sacrifices of US veterans elided all mention of Vietnamese suffering, when the more reprehensible aspects of the American military campaign were effectively relocated to the dimmer recesses of official public memory.[73]

At the same time, however, the explication of atrocity in terms of the inevitable toll taken by war upon the ethics of those who fight it remains a trope of cultural commentaries on Vietnam, even if its implications for the ideological return to exceptionalism have rarely been acknowledged. "Out there," wrote Philip Caputo in his best-selling memoir, *A Rumor of War*, "lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state."[74] A similar process of moral degeneration is described by army veteran Peter Hollenbeck in his poem "Anorexia":

Something seared us beyond the fire
That grew and twisted above the hootch's grey
remains,
Hotter and brighter, it cut through the mists
Of reasons and arithmetic, piercing the common
daylight;
There were times when all we could do was watch
The unfolding atrocity, observe, under the stern
masters,
The civilized restraints disintegrate.[75]

[72] McCrisken, 115–16, 124–25.
[73] McMahon, "Contested Memory," 166–71.
[74] Caputo, xx.
[75] Peter Hollenbeck, "Anorexia," in W. D. Ehrhart, ed., *Carrying the Darkness: The Poetry of the Vietnam War* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1989), 136–37.

"It is hard for most of us to imagine the horrors of war," asserted the Board of Trustees of the New School in a declaration of 'unqualified support' for their president, former Senator Bob Kerrey, following the exposure of his involvement in the killings at Thang Phong. "War is hell. Traumatic events take place and their terrible effects may last a lifetime."[76]

Whether they read like existential wisdom or thoughtless cliché, such formulations cannot suffice. The response to atrocity expressed in the national jeremiad may have no greater merit, for in cases where specific individuals and institutions can be identified as culpable, it offers too diffuse a lament and too routine a path to redemption.[77] To confect a public memory of conflict that almost entirely denies its pathologies, meanwhile, not only disconnects the community from the complex, instructive realities of its past, but does so on an issue where ignorance and complacency can carry their own mortal costs. Yet to naturalise atrocities as a timeless fact of life in war, or as the fathoming of man's dark, essential depths, may be worse still, for forgetting at least registers a wrong in the effort to erase it. These articulations amount to evasions of serious historical and judicial inquiry at a time when such inquiries are most practical and most necessary. Furthermore, their romanticisations of extremity and, through the discourse of authenticity, their attribution of cultural value to the experience of grave moral transgression, may ultimately admit a dangerous kind of licence.

[76] Quoted in Christopher Hitchins, "Leave No Child Behind?," *Nation*, 28 May 2001, 9, 24.

[77] In December 1969, the *Nation* observed that the public "pseudo-moral discussion" that had followed the My Lai revelations "would be a good thing if it resulted in a lasting change of heart, but it is as ephemeral as the frontier evangelism from which it is derived and which went hand-in-hand with the slaughter of Indians." *Nation*, 15 Dec. 1969.