

## MY LAI: THE STRUGGLE OVER OUTRAGE

*by Truda Gray and Brian Martin*

The 1968 My Lai massacre, during the Vietnam War, and its aftermath can be conceptualized as a struggle over outrage. Examination of the events reveals that the perpetrators and their commanders took various actions that inhibited outrage over the unprovoked killing of civilians. These actions can be classified into five methods: covering up evidence; devaluing the victims; reinterpreting the episode as a military victory; setting up superficial investigations that gave the appearance of justice; and intimidating those who might speak out. These are the same five methods regularly used by perpetrators to inhibit outrage about other types of injustices. This case gives guidance on the sorts of techniques needed to raise concern about human rights violations during wartime.

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On March 16, 1968, U.S. soldiers in Charlie Company, part of Task Force Barker, entered a village named My Lai 4, in Quang Ngai Province in central Vietnam. Encountering no resistance, many of the soldiers in the company nevertheless went on an orgy of violence against defenseless villagers, killing hundreds—perhaps as many as 500—mostly women, children, and old men. Soldiers killed some villagers individually, others by herding them into ditches and shooting them. In addition, the soldiers raped many women, burned buildings, poisoned wells, and killed livestock.

Upon publication of the news in late 1969, many people in the United States and beyond were shocked. For some, My Lai became a symbol of an unjust war; for others, though, it was simply an unfortunate episode, with the soldiers warranting congratulations for pursuing the enemy.

The story of My Lai and its ramifications has been told many times. Our main aim in this article is to offer a new perspective, namely, to conceptualize the events as a struggle over outrage, with a focus on the tactics used in the struggle. The perpetrators and their allies took a range of steps to reduce the likelihood of awareness of and concern about the events, whereas some of those who were most disturbed by

the massacre took action to foster awareness and concern. In other words, awareness of and concern about the massacre did not happen automatically or predictably; instead, they were the result of a lengthy struggle—indeed, one that continues even today. Furthermore, the techniques used in this struggle are the same ones used in other struggles over injustice. Our case study—My Lai—is historical, but our analysis draws more on sociology and political science.

Psychologists, philosophers, and social scientists have studied justice and injustice at length, with in-depth investigations into preconditions, rationales, and consequences, but seldom with attention to the tactics used by perpetrators and their opponents. To approach this topic, a useful starting point is nonviolence researcher Gene Sharp's concept of political jiu-jitsu, in which violent attacks on peaceful protesters can be counterproductive for the attacker by generating more support for the protesters among the group attacked, the attacking group, and third parties.<sup>1</sup> Sharp referred to numerous historical cases of political jiu-jitsu, such as the 1960 Sharpeville massacre that damaged South Africa's reputation as a democratic state and the attacks on U.S. civil rights protesters in the 1950s and 1960s.

Generalizing from Sharp, it is plausible to propose that anything perceived as unfair, excessive, or violating a social norm—such as censorship, unfair dismissal, police beatings, torture, and war—can potentially be counterproductive for the perpetrator. However, in practice most such actions are *not* counterproductive. For example, most police beatings do not have significant repercussions for the police. This suggests that perpetrators have ways to prevent the outrage that might otherwise occur.

Social historian Barrington Moore, Jr., in his book *Injustice*, examined the ways people in different societies respond to certain events or situations as unjust.<sup>2</sup> He observed that victims of attack felt angry when a moral code had been violated, for example, when a person hits another without justification. A feeling of social injustice can be created by certain violations of an implicit and variable social contract, including when rulers do not provide security, when rulers take advantage of their position, and—most relevant to political jiu-jitsu—when rulers exercise excessive cruelty. According to Moore, “every culture seems to have *some* definition of arbitrary cruelty on the part of those in authority.”<sup>3</sup> Moore thought it plausible that some situations generate a sense of social injustice in every society, and, in cases where no outrage is observed, there are “social and psychological mechanisms” present to inhibit it.

What could these mechanisms be? Investigation into a range of cases suggests that it is useful to classify the techniques used by perpetrators to prevent or reduce adverse reactions to their actions into five main methods:

- covering up the action;
- devaluing the target;
- reinterpreting the events;
- using official channels to give the appearance of justice; and
- intimidating and bribing participants and witnesses.

This framework identifies the sorts of methods regularly, indeed predictably, used by perpetrators to minimize shock and anger over their actions. When these methods fail, a perpetrator's actions may be said to backfire, with things ending up worse for the perpetrator than if nothing had been done. We call this the backfire model.<sup>4</sup>

For example, when police severely beat a nonresisting citizen, many people would see this as "arbitrary cruelty on the part of those in authority," to use Moore's words. Nevertheless, most police beatings do not backfire. Any or all of the five methods above of inhibiting outrage may be brought into play. Most police beatings are covered up; often no one except the victim is a witness. Police often denigrate the people they beat, perhaps labeling the victims as criminals. Police will say that they were merely doing their duty (as, in many but not all cases, they are). If someone puts in a formal complaint, it quite often leads nowhere. Finally, the victim of a beating may be threatened with arrest.<sup>5</sup>

There is a counter for each of these methods of inhibition; for example, cover-up can be challenged by exposure. The most famous case of a police beating that backfired occurred during the arrest of Rodney King by Los Angeles police in 1991. The events happened to be recorded on video by observer George Holliday and, when played on television, the images cut through the police cover-up and discredited the police interpretation that the arrest had been carried out properly. A detailed look at this case reveals all five methods of inhibiting outrage, though due to the video they were insufficient to prevent massive outrage.<sup>6</sup>

We use this same approach to analyze the struggle over outrage over the My Lai massacre. The massacre clearly backfired on the U.S. military and government; it discredited the war in the eyes of many U.S. civilians and troops, and many members of the public in other countries. Furthermore, the National Liberation Front (NLF) in Vietnam reported

the events widely in leaflets and broadcasts.<sup>7</sup> However, our attention is not on the existence or extent of backfire but on the techniques used to inhibit or increase outrage. Based on other studies of backfire dynamics, we expect to find that the perpetrators and their supporters used all the five standard methods of inhibiting outrage. In the next five sections, we present examples of each of the methods, along with evidence about the ways that challengers countered these methods. In the final two sections, we spell out historiographical and practical implications of this approach.

Our aim is not to write a history of My Lai but rather to show how My Lai and the disputes around it can be understood as a struggle over outrage; in particular, we are concerned with the tactics deployed in this struggle. We draw on the many detailed accounts of the massacre, the cover-up, and the official inquiries. We do not explore related matters, such as the U.S. military's Phoenix Program and Pacification Program (the context of the massacre), U.S. military propaganda, other atrocities such as massive killing from bombing, or debates about the rationale for the war, and the role of the media. These and other important issues deserve attention and could potentially be included in the framework we use.

#### COVER-UP AND EXPOSURE

Cover-up is the process of hiding information so that people remain unaware and cannot become disturbed. In the case of My Lai, there were multiple audiences that can be divided into three groups: the target group, the attacker group, and third parties.<sup>8</sup>

##### *The Target Group*

This group consists of the Vietnamese population, beside those aligned with the U.S.-supported side. After the massacre, the perpetrators certainly did not announce to the Vietnamese public that they had intentionally killed hundreds of civilians. However, there were some surviving Vietnamese witnesses of the assault, and many Vietnamese witnesses of its consequences, including returning villagers and visiting observers. The NLF soon became aware of the massacre and referred to it in leaflets and broadcasts.<sup>9</sup> In writings on My Lai, there is little attention given to the impact of the massacre in Vietnam, but it is reported to have increased recruitment to the NLF in the same way other assaults on the Vietnamese population did.<sup>10</sup>

*The Attacker Group*

This group includes U.S. troops, U.S. military commanders and civilian leaders, and other allied troops and commanders, from South Vietnam and other countries. In this group, there were systematic attempts to prevent information spreading, especially up the chain of command. The official press release written by Sergeant Jay Roberts of Charlie Company described a battle in which 128 Viet Cong died.<sup>11</sup> Roberts and photographer Ronald Haeberle decided they would not reveal what they had seen.

Charlie Company soldiers, when approached officially, denied that they had been involved in anything untoward.<sup>12</sup> However, not all kept quiet. Some of the soldiers in Charlie Company had refused to participate in the killings; some of those who did were sickened by what they had done and witnessed. The result was that stories soon circulated through the U.S. army and beyond.

Going further than any other soldier was Hugh Thompson, a helicopter pilot who witnessed what was happening on the ground in My Lai. Believing that civilians were being killed, he landed and confronted a U.S. officer. Later, Thompson again landed his helicopter to protect some Vietnamese fleeing U.S. soldiers and arranged for their rescue, going so far as to order his crew to prepare to use their rifles to defend the operation. Thompson and his two crew members were the only U.S. heroes to emerge from the events on March 16.<sup>13</sup> Thompson, angry at what he had witnessed, made reports to his commanders. But these reports and subsequent in-house investigations led nowhere, and served as de facto cover-ups, as discussed later in the section on official channels.

Overall, cover-up was largely successful within the ranks of U.S. and allied military forces,<sup>14</sup> with information being restricted to stories circulated among the troops, largely privately. Apparently, no word reached top commanders until the story broke more than a year later, reflecting a cover-up process within middle ranks. The Peers inquiry, one of the military's later investigations into the massacre and cover-up, concluded that:

Within the America Division, at every command level from company to division, actions were taken or omitted which together effectively concealed from higher headquarters the events which transpired in TF Barker's operation of 16-19 March 1968. Some of these acts and omissions were by design, others perhaps by

negligence, and still others were the result of policies and procedures.... One matter which casts further suspicion on the America Division is the almost total absence of files and records of documents relating to the Son My incident and its subsequent investigation. With few exceptions the files have been purged of these documents and records of their removal or destruction have not been maintained.<sup>15</sup>

The Peers inquiry thus documented extensive cover-up.

### *Third Parties*

The key third parties were the U.S. public, populations in other countries, and the governments of countries not involved in the war. The U.S. public was especially important, encompassing those involved in the antiwar movement, those supporting the war, and those undecided.

The cover-up within the U.S. military was nearly enough to prevent the My Lai story reaching any wider audiences. A few soldiers wrote or spoke to their families about what had happened, but few tried to put the whole story together. The standout exception was Ron Ridenhour. Not involved at My Lai himself, Ridenhour served in Vietnam alongside some members of Charlie Company and heard their candid accounts. Ridenhour decided to collect more information. After leaving the army, he pondered what to do. If he had followed the advice of most of his friends, the story would have remained buried.<sup>16</sup> Instead, he spent weeks writing and refining a letter about the massacre, which he sent to 30 military and political leaders on March 29, 1969, just over a year after the events.<sup>17</sup> Carefully composed and filled with alarming information, the letter had sufficient credibility to ignite a flurry of activity to check the story, in particular a military investigation.

The military's belated efforts to find out the truth about My Lai were internal, and did not alert the public to the seriousness of what had happened. Months later, Ridenhour, having had no feedback about the investigation, contacted a literary agent to promote the story, but major newspapers and television networks were not interested. Ridenhour himself approached the *Arizona Star*, but it also was not interested.

The person who broke the story was Seymour Hersh, a young investigative journalist. Hearing a little about My Lai and the military investigations from various sources, Hersh dug deeper and soon had

researched a major story. However, the mainstream media also were initially not interested. The magazines *Life* and *Look* declined Hersh's story, so he turned to a newly formed independent news agency, Dispatch News Service, whose general manager personally contacted 50 editors of newspapers around the country, many of which published Hersh's story on November 13, 1969.

Nevertheless, more was needed to produce a truly major impact. One of the soldiers at My Lai, Ronald Haeberle, had taken black-and-white photos of the scene and the assault with his army camera; with his own camera, he had taken color photos of the massacre. After My Lai entered the news, Haeberle revealed to a reporter that he had photos, and before long, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* published his photographs, subsequently seen across the world. Hersh contacted another soldier who had been at My Lai, Paul Meadlo, and convinced him to tell his story on CBS television. Interviewed by Mike Wallace, Meadlo admitted his role in the executions. The interview had an enormous impact.

Although the My Lai story was kept from the U.S. public for over eighteen months, eventually the cover-up failed in a cascading series of exposures. To recapitulate: Ridenhour played the crucial role; without his letter, the story might never have been revealed. It was his letter that prompted the main military investigations. Hersh used tips and leads to gain enough information to break the story, despite the initial reluctance of most major media to run it. Once the media covered the story, Haeberle was encouraged to release his photos and Meadlo to tell his personal story, resulting in widespread exposure.

#### DEVALUATION AND VALIDATION

If the target of an attack is perceived as, or worthless, degraded, evil, then many people will be less upset than if the target is of high status. An assault on an innocent child is treated as more reprehensible than an assault on a serial killer. Therefore, devaluing the target can be an effective way of reducing outrage from an attack. The contrary process can be called validation.

The key processes in devaluation of the My Lai victims were racism and stereotyping. Racism was apparent in the language used by U.S. soldiers, who frequently referred to the Vietnamese as "gooks," "dinks," and "slopes."<sup>18</sup> In this regard, reflecting on numerous interviews with soldiers during his inquiry, General Peers commented,

The most disturbing factor we encountered was the low regard in which some of the men held the Vietnamese, especially rural or farming people. This attitude appeared to have been particularly strong in Charlie Company, some of whose men viewed the Vietnamese with contempt, considering them subhuman, on the level of dogs.<sup>19</sup>

Negative stereotyping is a phenomenon widely applied to enemies in war.<sup>20</sup> In the United States, Daniel Haller writes, “television coverage of Vietnam dehumanized the enemy, drained him of all recognizable emotions and motives and thus banished him not only from the political sphere, but from human society itself.”<sup>21</sup>

The combination of these two processes could result in profoundly negative views about the Vietnamese, including civilians who were considered the enemy. A soldier, William Bezanson, who had flown above My Lai, told in an interview how he coped with what he had seen and done:

The first night we got back and were sitting in the bunker smoking dope. One of my buddies started shaking—it really freaked him out. He kept saying something like “What are we turning into?” It was truly the first time I ever thought about that—I can remember. But it didn’t really matter that much; they were just gooks. The next day we were out flying again and killing again ...<sup>22</sup>

A psychiatric report on William Calley, a key leader in the massacre, said that he felt his victims “were animals with whom one could not speak or reason.”<sup>23</sup> He did not distinguish between enemy soldiers and civilians:

At last it had dawned on me, *These people, they’re all the VC ...* Everyone there was VC. The old men, the women, the children—the *babies* were all VC or would be VC in about three years. And inside of VC women, I guess there were a thousand little VC now.<sup>24</sup>

Although the Vietnamese were the primary targets of devaluation, attempts were also made to discredit those who exposed the massacre, in the familiar process of “shooting the messenger.” President Richard Nixon asked his aides to undertake a secret investigation of Ridenhour in order to find dirt that could damage his credibility.<sup>25</sup> One of the



investigations of the massacre, by a Congressional subcommittee chaired by H. Edward Hébert, “seemed more interested in discrediting those who had exposed the war crimes committed at My Lai than in ensuring that those responsible for them were punished.”<sup>26</sup> The subcommittee criticized photographer Ronald Haeberle for not reporting the massacre and questioned him about how much money he had made from his photos. The subcommittee grilled helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson about ordering his crew to be prepared to shoot U.S. soldiers. Peers later commented that he could not understand the subcommittee’s treatment of Thompson, which seemed to him “to be more of an inquisition than an investigation”<sup>27</sup> and gave no recognition for Thompson’s heroism.

Racism and stereotyping no doubt reduced many people’s concern over the My Lai massacre, but there were many others who felt revulsion and anger. On the other hand, attempts to discredit those who exposed the massacre were largely unsuccessful: individuals such as Ridenhour and Thompson were more easily recognized as conscientious, humane soldiers than as self-seeking traitors.

#### INTERPRETATION STRUGGLES

In the abstract, many people would interpret the killing of hundreds of defenseless civilians as a massacre, and might blame those participating or those setting policies that allow or encourage such actions. Perpetrators, and others who do not like this interpretation in particular instances, commonly present alternative interpretations, for example, that the events are not what they seemed, or that someone else is responsible. This process of reinterpretation includes genuine alternative beliefs—a worldview or ideology—as well as lying and spin-doctoring.

There is little evidence of reinterpretation among the Vietnamese population: the NLF interpreted the My Lai events as a massacre. It was within the U.S. military and wider audiences that reinterpretation played a big role.

When news about the high number of civilians killed at My Lai reached Brigadier General George H. Young, the assistant division commander, he instructed Colonel Oran Henderson to investigate. Henderson interviewed the men in Charlie Company, uncritically accepting their denials of any killing and dismissing the statements of those such as Thompson who reported otherwise. Henderson’s report said that 20 civilians had been killed through bombardment and crossfire and that

no one had been intentionally shot. He said that NLF claims about a massacre were propaganda only.<sup>28</sup>

Henderson's report could be considered to be either cover-up or reinterpretation. The boundary between these two methods is somewhat arbitrary. We choose to draw the line this way: cover-up is when nothing is revealed about anything untoward happening, whereas reinterpretation begins when some civilian deaths are admitted but explained away as different from, less than, or differently attributable than a natural interpretation based on full knowledge of the facts. With this boundary, the soldiers in Charlie Company were covering up when they denied anything had occurred and Henderson, whatever he knew, was reinterpreting the events when he wrote his report.

Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker—in charge of the task force of which Charlie Company was a part on March 16—also wrote a report about that day in My Lai, like Henderson describing a battle in which 128 enemy were killed, elaborating the story with such fictitious details as small-arms fire received from the enemy. Barker only mentioned civilian casualties in passing, as due to crossfire.<sup>29</sup> Barker's report was approved up the chain of command, with General William Westmoreland issuing a routine congratulatory message. The South Vietnamese government said, like Henderson, that enemy claims about a massacre were propaganda.<sup>30</sup>

A different set of reinterpretations came into play after the My Lai story became public. Many of those in the United States who supported the war preferred to downplay My Lai. General William Peers, who headed the fourth and largest military inquiry into the massacre and its cover-up, was approached just before a press conference marking the conclusion of the inquiry. Army representatives from the Office of Information tried to get him to change the language in his statement by removing the word "massacre." Eventually and reluctantly, Peers agreed to a formulation with the expression "a tragedy of major proportions."<sup>31</sup> The military preferred the word "incident" to "massacre" and much of the media followed this cue.

Only some members of the public were critical of what U.S. soldiers had done at My Lai. Many explained or justified the actions by saying that this was just something that often happened in war. Many accepted the excuse made by soldiers that they were only following orders or doing their duty. Some blamed the Vietnamese, or even denied that the massacre had occurred.<sup>32</sup> President Nixon stated that My Lai was an "isolated incident."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Army Secretary Resor told a Senate Armed Services Committee investigation that "... what apparently

occurred at My Lai is wholly unrepresentative of the manner in which our forces conduct military operations in Vietnam.”<sup>34</sup>

However, these reinterpretations—following orders, blaming the Vietnamese, My Lai as an isolated incident—only persuaded some. Others were swayed by the successive media revelations, including admissions by military leaders that massive killing of civilians had taken place. Evidence of a separate massacre by a different company, with 90 victims, on the same day as the killings at My Lai, and reports of other such occurrences, undermined the isolated-incident reinterpretation, though these received relatively little attention.<sup>35</sup> Kevin Buckley of *Newsweek* linked My Lai to the overall policy of the pacification program: “An examination of that whole operation would have revealed the incident at My Lai to be a particularly gruesome application of a wider policy which had the same effect in many places at many times.”<sup>36</sup>

The “isolated incident” reinterpretation goes hand in hand with the “bad apple” explanation, which attributes problems to deviant individuals, likened to rotten apples, rather than to the system that produced the problem, likened to the barrel. That Lieutenant William Calley was the only person eventually found guilty of any crime in relation to My Lai conveniently meshed with the bad apple explanation.

A number of high-ranking Pentagon officials put forward the theory that the four main army men involved in command positions in relation to My Lai were all “misfits.” All the men, it was said, were “mustangs” or men who had enlisted earlier in the army, but had, for one reason or another, gone through Officer Candidate School some time later, following unconventional career paths. They were not graduates of prestigious military academies. Had they been, it was argued, it was less likely that what happened at My Lai would have occurred, or that it would never have been covered up.<sup>37</sup> It was said that the men concerned were not conventional military men and consequently, they did not behave conventionally. However, the Peers inquiry led to charges being made against senior officers as high-ranking as Major General Samuel W. Koster.

In summary, various different reinterpretations were used in relation to My Lai, depending on the concurrent level of cover-up. When little was known about the events, civilian deaths were attributed to bombing or crossfire. Later, when the story had been exposed, struggles over language occurred, with labels ranging from “massacre” to “incident.” Among those who accepted that something terrible had happened, blame could be put on individuals, on commanders, or on policy-makers:

shifting the blame continues to be a key part of interpretation struggles. Finally, there were many who accepted, rationalized, or fully justified the killings as being a normal part of war in which soldiers were doing their duty. Challenging all these interpretations was the human rights position that killing nonresisting civilians is wrong.

#### OFFICIAL CHANNELS

The category of “official channels” includes grievance procedures, formal inquiries, court proceedings, pronouncements by authorities and experts, and other processes or actions that offer a formal and authoritative resolution of social problems. Because many people believe that official channels provide justice, referring matters to such channels has a great potential to reduce public concern. This is advantageous to perpetrators when official channels give only an appearance of dispensing justice, with little or no substance. Of course, in some cases official channels do indeed provide justice, but often they do not, especially when the perpetrators have much more power than their victims. Consequently, it is frequently observed that official investigations are established only when public pressure becomes too great—namely, cover-up, devaluation, and reinterpretation have proved inadequate to dampen outrage—and that token, in-house, or secret investigations are used unless the outcry is so great that a public, independent investigation is needed to reduce the pressure on leaders.

After the My Lai massacre, there were many different investigations and inquiries, each directly stimulated by increasing awareness of what had happened. There were two main target audiences: U.S. troops and commanders, and the U.S. public.

Helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson was furious about what he had observed at My Lai and made reports to his immediate commander, Major Fred Watke, and to a higher commander, Colonel Oran Henderson. Thompson, according to biographer Trent Angers, “felt he had done his duty as a soldier. The ball was in the court of his superiors, and he assumed they would take the necessary steps to investigate the massacre and to see to it that the guilty parties were punished.”<sup>38</sup> Watke took the matter higher up the chain of command. Adding to concern among Thompson’s superiors was information from the assault that 128 enemies had been killed with only three weapons captured, a statistic suggesting civilian deaths. Two days after the massacre, Brigadier General George H. Young met with several other officers and made the decision to have Henderson investigate the allegations. This was a prescription for a whitewash,

because Henderson would be investigating soldiers under his own command: an adverse finding would reflect on his own performance.<sup>39</sup>

Henderson's investigation was superficial and his report was indeed a whitewash. As mentioned earlier, it falsely concluded that about twenty civilians had been killed when caught in the crossfire between the enemy sides during a battle at My Lai.

Ridenhour's powerful letter sent in March 1969 to numerous top U.S. political and military figures triggered further official investigations. A month later, Westmoreland ordered an inquiry. The Office of the Inspector General set up an inquiry led by Colonel William Wilson, which, after numerous interviews, confirmed the claims made by Ridenhour. Next, the Army's Criminal Investigation Division (CID) investigated responsibility for the massacre and made recommendations for prosecution. The Inspector General and CID investigations appear to have been conducted by officers committed to finding the truth and reporting it fairly. However, these investigations were secret and took many months.<sup>40</sup>

Eventually, Ridenhour sought to take the story public and, separately, Hersh began his own investigations, with the story breaking in November 1969. The public shock and questioning that followed the revelations produced a "crisis atmosphere" at the Pentagon.<sup>41</sup> In response, the army set up a new body to investigate the previous investigations, to determine what they had said and why they had failed to discover or reveal the details of the atrocity. This body, chaired by Lieutenant General William R. Peers, officially titled the Department of the Army Review of the Preliminary Investigations into the My Lai Incident, became known as the Peers Panel.

In response to pressure for an independent inquiry into the massacre and due to the increasing workload, the Army recruited two prominent civilian New York lawyers to work with the panel. The appointment of these lawyers was, it was reported by Seymour Hersh, calculated to have the effect of deflecting public criticism of the apparent lack of independence of the inquiry.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, in Congress, Armed Services Committee Chairman Rivers had his subcommittee, chaired by F. Edward Hébert, investigate the massacre. However, these hearings also were closed. The subcommittee's report was withheld from public release for eight months and then only published in a heavily censored form.<sup>43</sup>

The Peers inquiry was wide-ranging, interviewing hundreds of witnesses and collecting enough evidence to recommend that charges be brought against fifteen officers, going as high as Major General Samuel

W. Koster, then superintendent of West Point and at the time of My Lai commanding general of the America Division in Vietnam.

The process of charging, prosecuting, and convicting soldiers was filled with complications and obstacles, most of which served to prevent or reduce penalties. The Supreme Court had ruled earlier that U.S. soldiers could not be charged in civilian courts for crimes committed out of the country. This meant that Charlie Company veterans who had left the Army escaped prosecution. The Hébert subcommittee did not help the prosecutions; in fact, it refused to release testimony that could have been used in trials, which were also hindered by the constitutional right not to testify, frequent “lack of recall,” and “lost” records.<sup>44</sup> Obedience to orders was treated as an adequate defense, so most trials resulted in verdicts of not guilty.<sup>45</sup>

Out of all the processes, only one person was convicted: Lieutenant William Calley. At the conclusion of a lengthy court-martial, a military jury in March 1971 found him guilty of killing 22 civilians. Calley was sentenced to life imprisonment. However, many supporters of the war thought Calley was a hero who was being scapegoated. There was a vociferous campaign on his behalf which no doubt influenced President Nixon, who, after Calley had been in prison for a few days, where his girlfriend could visit him. In the following years, Calley had his sentence reduced twice until he was released in November 1974, having spent only a short time behind bars.

The complexity of the investigations and court cases and the complications of numerous separate trials all served to reduce public outrage. The result was that most of those who were guilty escaped anything more than token punishments, but by the time this happened public attention had turned elsewhere. Months after the trials, when he was effectively beyond reach, Captain Ernest Medina, the officer in charge on the ground at My Lai, admitted that he had suppressed evidence and lied to the Peers Panel and the Army Inspector-General's Office.<sup>46</sup>

Of the official channels involved in the My Lai story, several are widely regarded as having been honest and effective: the Inspector General investigation, the CID investigation, and the Peers inquiry. However, these were internal deliberations and details were not revealed to the public at the time. Each investigation was a result of revelations about the massacre to significant audiences. Also, several official processes served more to cover up or excuse the massacre, in particular Henderson's investigation immediately after the massacre, the Hébert subcommittee inquiry, and the trials. It is also worth noting ways in

which official channels could have been used, but were not. Some Justice Department lawyers favored a mass trial, but the Army opposed this: it would have put the military as a whole in the dock.<sup>47</sup> The Army successfully pushed for individual prosecutions, which minimized damage to the Army's reputation. Another powerful option would have been a presidential commission, but Nixon resisted pressure to set one up. As Bilton and Sim conclude, "By leaving the prosecutions and judicial decisions in the hands of soldiers, the Nixon administration virtually ensured that there would be no justice."<sup>48</sup>

### INTIMIDATION, BRIBERY, AND RESISTANCE

Intimidation and bribery serve less to inhibit outrage than to prevent its expression. For this general method in relation to My Lai, the three main groups were, again, the Vietnamese people, members of the U.S. military, and U.S. and wider publics.

The waging of war can serve as intimidation on a massive scale, especially when harsh measures—such as assassination and torture—are used and civilians are targeted. The My Lai massacre was a particularly acute form of this. Some local Vietnamese village figures, when questioned by CID investigators, denied that anything inappropriate had occurred, presumably because of pressure by South Vietnamese government officials.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, this form of pressure failed overall because many eyewitnesses were willing to speak out and the NLF was undeterred from publicizing the events.

Intimidation probably had the greatest impact on the soldiers directly involved at My Lai. The internal pressure not to go against the system was associated with an elaborate framework of punishment and reward. Punishment came for going against superiors, challenging orders, snitching on buddies, refusing duty, going absent without leave, etc. Captain Medina warned Michael Bernhardt, who refused to participate in the killings, not to write to Congress about it. Bernhardt was afraid of being killed by someone in Charlie Company<sup>50</sup>; he was also assigned to dangerous duties in the field and denied medical treatment.<sup>51</sup> Photographer Haeberle was also afraid. Charlie Company as a whole was sent on dangerous patrols, which they interpreted as punishment or even the hope that they might be killed.<sup>52</sup>

Hugh Thompson, the helicopter pilot who intervened between Vietnamese civilians and U.S. troops pursuing them, was subsequently assigned to highly hazardous duty. Later, when Thompson testified about

the massacre to inquiries and at trials of soldiers charged with offenses, he sometimes was the one who came under attack, with some of his questioners—especially in the Congressional subcommittee inquiry—focusing more on Thompson’s threat to fire on U.S. troops than on the atrocities he was trying to prevent. Thompson feared that he might be charged over this, and at one point considered fleeing to Canada.<sup>53</sup> However, he maintained his courage and continued to testify. As a result of giving testimony, Thompson was ostracized and abused by other troops, so at new postings he avoided telling anyone about his role.<sup>54</sup>

The promise of rewards played a larger role with officers. Promotion was generally dependent on action in the field and a key measure of success was the “body count.” Further rewards, in the form of bonuses, rest and recreation vacations, and family visits, were given for the highest body counts.<sup>55</sup> Many engagements were reworded in reports to include an enemy body count when there was none. As these rewards were dependent on the number of bodies, distinguishing between civilians and enemy soldiers was not a high priority either before or after the engagement. Journalist David Halberstam said that “dishonest and bad policy” came from the top and “people in the field who said it wasn’t working were told to salute and report that it was working or otherwise their careers wouldn’t go.”<sup>56</sup> Anything negative on a commander’s file was damaging for promotion purposes, so it is not surprising that most of those in the line of command at My Lai were reluctant to speak out.<sup>57</sup> There is commonly a close connection between intimidation, bribery, and cover-up, and My Lai is a perfect example.

Although intimidation and bribery played an important role in delaying exposure of the massacre, ultimately they were unsuccessful. Ron Ridenhour, who was instrumental in bringing the story to U.S. officials, was not part of Charlie Company and thus less subject to reprisals or criticism for participating in the killings or cover-up. Inside the army, there were many who did all they could to bring the truth to light—such as the investigators for the Inspector General, the CID, and the Peers inquiry—despite any damage it might do to their reputations or careers. In particular, there were courageous journalists, editors, and publishers who initially broke the story, making it safe for others to follow.

#### HISTORIOGRAPHICAL COMMENTS

In examining My Lai as a struggle over outrage, our approach has drawn far more heavily from sociology and political science than history,



though of course these fields overlap. Even so, the backfire model has a number of implications for studying wars. Here we spell out five such implications.

First, in most wars there are likely to be atrocities not given sufficient emphasis in historical accounts. Given that cover-up is a predictable technique used by perpetrators in a wide variety of arenas—not just war—and given that wars involve considerable secrecy for operational and propaganda purposes, the scope for cover-up is enormous. Atrocities receive insufficient attention in two main ways. The first is through cover-up so thorough that historians have little or no way of extracting information. Given the difficulty of bringing My Lai to public attention, it is plausible that other equivalent atrocities occurred that remain undocumented.<sup>58</sup> Second, some atrocities are normalized: they are treated as routine activities, as business as usual, and not categorized as atrocities. High-altitude bombing in Vietnam is an example: it killed far more civilians than on-the-ground killings such as at My Lai, but rarely is it given equivalent attention, because of the normalization of bombing through its use in World War II. Earlier, after World War I, the bombing of civilians had been considered an atrocity; outrage followed the fascist bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. The backfire model draws attention to the active processes used by perpetrators to minimize outrage: cover-up of the evidence or normalization of behavior can change the ways the public, including historians, respond to events.

A second implication of the backfire model arises from attention to interpretation struggles: one-sided perspectives are likely to go unremarked. There are vast numbers of histories of the Vietnam War by U.S. and other Western authors, but no well-known (in the English-speaking West, at least) history by a Vietnamese historian. There are several possible explanations for this, but our point here is that the Western histories almost never comment on the absence of histories from a Vietnamese perspective. Similarly, the Western studies of My Lai give extensive attention to its consequences for the U.S. military, government, and population, but very little attention to its consequences for the Vietnamese. The dominant historical perspective—the Vietnam war seen from U.S. eyes—could be said to benefit from historiographical analogs of the five methods of inhibition, such as cover-up of contrary perspectives, devaluation of accounts from the “other side,” and reinterpretation of events from U.S. perspectives. This is not to say that Western accounts of My Lai necessarily support the U.S. military

or government; that is demonstrably not the case. Rather, in terms of writing history, the orientation is to U.S.-centered concerns.

A third implication of the backfire model is that historians are part of an ongoing struggle over the meaning of events. That is a truism for historians. The backfire model, though, puts this struggle into the context of five main arenas, namely the five methods of inhibiting and amplifying outrage over injustice. Historiography is mainly situated within interpretation struggles, though it has relevance to the other four arenas of struggle. The backfire model draws attention to the role of history as a tool of struggle, in a sense as a tactic. In the case of My Lai and the Vietnam war, the struggle over meaning is relevant for policy—for example, in debates over the “Vietnam syndrome”—for cultural understandings shaped by historical accounts, as well as for history itself. With the backfire model, historians can gain a better sense of their place in ongoing struggles over injustice. They can conceptualize their work as tools in these struggles. In a sense, they are “captives of controversy”<sup>59</sup>: tools in historical and political controversies whether they want to be or not.

A fourth implication is that official channels, such as the various inquiries into My Lai, should be conceptualized as tactics as well as events. The backfire model looks at actions surrounding a perceived injustice as tactics or tools, including court proceedings, statements by expert bodies, and even elections. Normally these are studied in themselves, as events of significance, as outcomes, or as parts of webs of influence and causation. The other types of tactics covered in the backfire model, namely cover-up, devaluation, reinterpretation, and intimidation, are more readily seen as tactics, though they are not always studied that way. Seeing official channels, as tactics, used (often unconsciously) by perpetrator groups to reduce outrage over injustice, is uncommon in historiography. The backfire model highlights this perspective.

The points raised here are not new to historiography. For example, many historians are attentive to one-sided perspectives and the influence of censorship on knowledge. The value of the backfire model in this context is to provide a lens—struggles over injustice as involving five arenas of tactics—which highlights a number of insights into historiography.

## CONCLUSIONS

If an action is perceived as unjust and information about it is communicated to a receptive audience, it can cause public outrage and backfire on the perpetrators. This process is even more pronounced when the injustice

is clear cut, such as police killings of peaceful protesters. Although war is filled with horrible occurrences, the chance of provoking outrage is greatly reduced by the very conception of war, namely a struggle between armed opponents. In other words, because the opponent is using violence, using violence against the opponent seems far more justifiable than it might otherwise.

Nevertheless, some actions in war are sufficiently outrageous that they can backfire. The My Lai massacre is a prime example: unprovoked close-range killing of hundreds of civilians, including babies. The policy of bombardment and clearing of entire areas of the Vietnamese countryside was a far greater atrocity in terms of lives lost,<sup>60</sup> but this did not have the symbolic potency of shooting women and children up close and in a ditch.

We have outlined five methods commonly used to inhibit outrage from injustice: cover-up of the action; devaluation of the target; reinterpretation of the events; use of official channels that give the appearance of justice; and intimidation and bribery. Each of these methods played an important role in relation to the My Lai massacre. Because the massacre became the most infamous atrocity in the Vietnam War, there is extensive documentation about the events revealing that all five methods of inhibition were brought into play. Many injustices during the war received little attention, for example, because of successful cover-up, so there was no need for other methods such as official channels.

The My Lai massacre also reveals techniques for enabling expression of concern and public anger over atrocities in wartime, such as the efforts of Ron Ridenhour and Seymour Hersh to reveal what happened. From the specifics of My Lai, we propose the following recommendations for raising concern about wartime atrocities to counter these methods of inhibition used by the perpetrators.<sup>61</sup>

- Expose the action to receptive audiences. Good documentation, with credible sources, is vital. Photographs or videos provide powerful support.
- Validate and humanize the targets. Providing details about them as individuals can engender empathy and reduce impersonality. Personal contact, interviews, photos, and documentaries can contribute to this.
- Clearly interpret the events as wrong, for example, as a violation of human rights, as illegal, or as disproportionate to anything done by the targets. Challenge contrary views.

- Treat official channels with caution. Inquiries that are internal or closed hold the greatest potential for creating a facade of justice. Instead of hoping for justice from inquiries, courts, or other official procedures, it is more reliable to promote greater exposure of the events to ever-wider audiences.
- Support targets, witnesses, and supporters to resist intimidation and bribery. When possible, expose attempts to intimidate or bribe.

This analysis can be applied to *actual* atrocities such as torture and genocide. Another application is to *potential* atrocities such as the use of nuclear weapons, which are qualitatively different from other weapons in terms of technology and, due to the efforts of anti-nuclear campaigners, are highly stigmatized. A nuclear strike could well backfire against the perpetrator, which may be a key reason why nuclear weapons have not been used in war since 1945.

In thinking through tactics to expose and challenge atrocities, it can be useful to think about what happens when atrocities are committed against one's own side. There is ample exposure of the action on the home front, the victims—fellow citizens—are automatically considered worthy, the attack is interpreted as wrong, no official investigations are needed, and intimidation and bribery by the opponent have little scope. This would be how many Vietnamese perceived My Lai.

We close with a vignette from the My Lai saga that illustrates the backfire framework at a micro level. Helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson intervened against the killing at My Lai, immediately reported the massacre, and later testified against the perpetrators. However, the Army did not want to recognize Thompson's role: he received a medal that falsely referred to his being in a crossfire at My Lai, which served as a whitewash of the massacre. For his stand, many vilified Thompson.

Twenty years later, a documentary made about the events triggered greater awareness of Thompson's actions. One particular supporter, David Egan, relentlessly pushed the Army to give Thompson a medal for heroism. Eventually the Department of Defense approved the medal, but more than a year passed without any move to award it: some Pentagon insiders did not want to touch the emotional story. Egan then mounted a public campaign, and media coverage eventually forced the military's hand. Initially the Pentagon wanted a private ceremony, but Thompson insisted on a public one. In 1998, on the 30th anniversary of the massacre, Thompson and his former crewmember Larry Colburn returned to My Lai and met some of the Vietnamese villagers that they

had saved, accompanied by Mike Wallace of CBS News. In a mini-backfire, the Army's reluctance to award the medal ended up generating far greater attention to Thompson's heroism and to the events at My Lai.<sup>62</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973), 657–703; Gene Sharp, *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential* (Boston, MA: Porter Sargent, 2005), 405–413.

2. Barrington Moore, Jr., *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

3. *Ibid.*, 26 (emphasis in the original). Another way to look at this is to say that people adopt an “injustice Frame”—a frame is a way of looking at the world—when they believe that authorities, or the authority system, are linked to injustice. See William A. Gamson, Bruce Fireman, and Steven Rytina, *Encounters with Unjust Authority* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1982), 14; William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 31–58.

4. Sue Curry Jansen and Brian Martin, “Making Censorship Backfire,” *Counterpoise* 7 (July 2003): 5–15; Sue Curry Jansen and Brian Martin, “Exposing and Opposing Censorship: Backfire Dynamics in Freedom-of-Speech Struggles,” *Pacific Journalism Review* 10 (April 2004): 29–45; Brian Martin, “Iraq Attack Backfire,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 39 (April 17–23, 2004): 1577–1583; Brian Martin, *Justice Ignited: The Dynamics of Backfire* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); Brian Martin and Truda Gray, “How to Make Defamation Threats and Actions Backfire,” *Australian Journalism Review* 27 (July 2005): 157–166; Brian Martin and Iain Murray, “The Parkin Backfire,” *Social Alternatives* 24 (Third Quarter 2005): 46–49; Brian Martin and Steve Wright, “Countershock: Mobilizing Resistance to Electroshock Weapons,” *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 19 (July–September 2003): 205–22.

5. Charles J. Ogletree, Jr., Mary Prosser, Abbe Smith, and William Talley, Jr.; Criminal Justice Institute at Harvard Law School for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Beyond the Rodney King Story: An Investigation of Police Misconduct in Minority Communities* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1995).

6. Brian Martin, “The Beating of Rodney King: The Dynamics of Backfire,” *Critical Criminology* 13 (2005): 307–326.

7. We refer to the NLF rather than to the Viet Cong, a term considered abusive by many Vietnamese.

8. This is modeled on Sharp's three audiences for political jiu-jitsu, but with slightly different terms.

9. Documents are reproduced in James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *My Lai: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 133–138; W. R. Peers, *The My Lai Inquiry* (New York: Norton, 1979), 280–286.

10. Noam Chomsky, “After Pinkville,” Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal on Vietnam, 1971. <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/1971----02.htm>, accessed June 8, 2006, reported a comment by US soldiers to this effect from *New York Times*, September 24, 1969.

11. Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 182–183; Jay A. Roberts, “Press Release, March 1968,” in Olson and Roberts, *My Lai*, 27.

12. Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 172–174. What is described as the “bond of brotherhood” and the “code of silence,” similar to that in the police force, is commonly said to prevail amongst the career soldiers: Ron Ridenhour in *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*, ed. David L. Anderson (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 71.

13. Trent Angers, *The Forgotten Hero of My Lai: The Hugh Thompson Story* (Lafayette, LA: Acadian House, 1999).

14. The response within the U.S.-allied South Vietnamese forces is recounted in Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 186–188.

15. Joseph Goldstein, Burke Marshall, and Jack Schwartz, *The My Lai Massacre and Its Cover-Up: Beyond the Reach of the Law? The Peers Commission Report with a Supplement and Introductory Essay on the Limits of Law* (New York: Free Press, 1976), 299, 313; see also Peers, *My Lai Inquiry*, 199–209.

16. Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 218.

17. Ronald Ridenhour, “Letter to Military and Political Leaders,” in Olson and Roberts, *My Lai*, 147–151.

18. Michal R. Belknap, *The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 48.

19. Peers, *My Lai Inquiry*, 230.

20. Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1986).

21. Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War”: The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 158. Hallin also notes that for U.S. television, racism of U.S. soldiers was “apparently too sensitive to touch” (135).

22. Seymour Hersh, *Cover-Up: The Army's Secret Investigation of the Massacre at My Lai 4* (New York: Random House, 1972), 175–176.

23. Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 21.

24. John Sack, *Lieutenant Calley: His Own Story* (New York: Viking, 1971), 79, 84 (emphasis in the original).

25. Belknap, *Vietnam War on Trial*, 137; Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 321.

26. Belknap, *Vietnam War on Trial*, 140.

27. Peers, *My Lai Inquiry*, 242.

28. Belknap, *Vietnam War on Trial*, 93–95; Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 177–179. Henderson's report of April 24, 1968, is reproduced in Olson and Roberts, *My Lai*, 127–128; Peers, *My Lai Inquiry*, 272–273.

29. Barker's Combat Action Report of 28 March 1968 is reproduced in Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 191–195; Olson and Roberts, *My Lai*, 28–32; Peers, *My Lai Inquiry*, 268–271.

30. Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 270–272; Tran Ngoc Tan, "Report to Quang Ngai Province Chief, March 28, 1968," in Olson and Roberts, *My Lai*, 140–141.

31. Belknap, *Vietnam War on Trial*, 127; Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 306–309; Peers, *My Lai Inquiry*, 216–217.

32. 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 (1972): 177–212; Edward M. Opton, Jr., "It Never Happened and Besides They Deserved It," in Nevitt Sanford and Craig Comstock, eds., *Sanctions for Evil: Sources of Social Destructiveness* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1972), 49–70. We thank an anonymous referee for suggesting these sources.

33. Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 231; see also Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 12–13.

34. Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 231.

35. Peers, *My Lai Inquiry*, 184–198, describes the My Khe-4 atrocity, concluding with the comment that, "Taken as a whole, the information of the operation was more deeply suppressed than even that of Charlie Company. It was an almost total coverup" (198).

36. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Vintage Books, 1972), 197.

37. Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 254–255.

38. Angers, *Forgotten Hero of My Lai*, 135.

39. Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 178–179.

40. Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 221–246.

41. Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 229.

42. Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 232, reports that his source told him that "at one stage of the game, Bob Jordan [the Army general counsel] and Resor became aware of the credibility problem." The appointment of the two civilian lawyers "blunted the demand, from liberals and conservatives alike, that an outside panel be established to investigate the cover-up."

43. Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 233.
44. Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 235, 206–207, 210, 255.
45. Peers, *My Lai Inquiry*, 221–228, lists the disposition of all charges made.
46. Hersh, *Cover-Up*, 155.
47. Belknap, *Vietnam War on Trial*, 144.
48. Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 323.
49. Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 275.
50. Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 179–180.
51. Angers, *Forgotten Hero of My Lai*, 144.
52. Bilton and Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai*, 183, 201.
53. Angers, *Forgotten Hero of My Lai*, 164–166, 170.
54. Angers, *Forgotten Hero of My Lai*, 177–178.
55. Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, *The Indochina Story: A Fully Documented Account* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 129–130.
56. David Halberstam, in *Facing My Lai: Moving Beyond the Massacre*, ed. David L. Anderson (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 70–71.
57. Belknap, *Vietnam War on Trial*, 88–89.
58. After writing this, news has appeared about a previously secret Pentagon archive showing that “confirmed atrocities by U.S. forces in Vietnam were more extensive than was previously known,” including hundreds of cases of murder and torture. See Nick Turse and Deborah Nelson, “Civilian Killings Went Unpunished,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 August 2006.
59. Pam Scott, Evelleen Richards, and Brian Martin, “Captives of Controversy: The Myth of the Neutral Social Researcher in Contemporary Scientific Controversies,” *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 15 (Fall 1990): 474–494.
60. Opton, “It Never Happened and Besides They Deserved It”; Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 690.
61. See also Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001) for insightful analysis of challenging denial about atrocities.
62. Angers, *Forgotten Hero of My Lai*.