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my lai



The speaker represented a turning point that was representative of a group of people, i.e. Americans. My Lai eventually brought a turning point in American attitudes almost as significant as the Tet Offensive. Millions who had believed the war was a result of misguided policy or a tragic mistake began to consider the possibility that it was fundamentally unjust and immoral.

Perhaps some background on My Lai will shed light on how the "turning point" was arrived at.

On March 16, 1968, U.S. infantrymen from the Charlie company killed some five hundred Vietnamese civilians in My Lai-4, a subhamlet of Son My village in Quang Ngai Province. It was a leisurely slaughter that lasted several hours, so long that many of the GIs took breaks to eat and smoke cigarettes. It was reported that during the slaughter, the GIs never received a single round of hostile fire. However, American commanders summarized the event as firefight in which 128 "Viet Cong" had been killed in action. American press, which relied heavily on US military accounts of the war reported that 128 enemy soldiers had been killed in day-long fighting. Many Americans believed the media had an antiwar bias and eagerly looked for stories that might cast U.S. policy in a negative light. Yet, the mainstream media played no role in the initial uncovering of the My Lai massacre. The story may have not surfaced were it not for the persistence of Ron Ridenhour, a Vietnam veteran. He heard the details of the massacre from five eyewitnesses.

when?

When the story made it to the press and exploded into national and global consciousness, many Americans reacted with a kind of desperate denial. Some insisted the story was a hoax, others struggled to justify the massacre. For the first time, the massacre was a topic of discussion in small-town coffee shops, executive offices, and mass-circulation magazines. **To me this represents another turning point in the Vietnam conflict, that our morality and judgment and decision making had come into question.....** "No American atrocity in Vietnam of such a dimension had ever come to light".....(Appy pp 344).

My Lai was not an isolated event but a logical outgrowth of a military strategy that sent American soldiers on search and destroy missions to locate an enemy largely indistinguishable from the civilians and measured success by the number of dead bodies produced. During this period, and as attention shifted from My Lai to broader scrutiny of the war, Americans learned of “free-fire-zones” in South Vietnam. This is where anything that moved was deemed a legitimate target of American ground fire and bombing. These zones were routinely and randomly shelled with harassment and interdiction fire **The author saw the exposure and scrutiny of these events as a turning point in the war.**

Part 2

COLLAPSE

The spring of 1973 was a welcome time for a majority of Americans. These period saw the welcome home of the last US servicemen and POWs. The national mood however, was not celebratory. Most Americans wanted to forget the whole ordeal. College campuses grew quiet, and Vietnam fell off the headlines in national media.

The war, surprisingly, was not over. Hanoi was determined to achieve its ultimate goal of national unification. Communist leaders were increasingly concerned about provoking a US reentry to the war if they flagrantly violated the Paris peace accords. The Communist strategy shifted to consolidation of regions they controlled and the modernizing of the Ho Chi Minh trail. The Soviet and Chinese regimes funded these projects. While U.S. military personnel were officially withdrawn from Vietnam, Nixon left behind 9000 civilians. Nixon also ordered the reconnaissance flights to be resumed over North Vietnam. The bombing of Cambodia, began in 1969, continued long after the signing of the Paris accords.

In the summer of 1973, congress voted to end all U.S. military activities anywhere in Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos. In November of 1973, congress overturned a president’s veto and passed the war powers act, a measure that limited the time a president could deploy U.S. troops abroad without congressional approval. With broad public support, Congress also forced the White House to reduce annual U.S. aid to South Vietnam from 3.2 billion to 700 million. *In my view, the events in this paragraph symbolized an ending to the war.* There is one more event which was symbolic of the end of the war, more on that at the end of my story.

August 1974 saw the resignation of Nixon and the North Vietnamese began to accelerate plans for a final offensive. They attained control of several provinces including the DMZ which saw

the collapse of ARVN forces. In mid- November, North Vietnamese tanks broke through the gates of the presidential palace. The communist victory did not bring the "bloodbath" that American and some South Vietnamese officials had long feared. *The fall of Saigon, was another event that signified the end of the war.....*" In the United States the fall of Saigon brought back the nearly forgotten war roaring back into the news and American consciousness with graphic scenes of defeat".....(Appy page 496).

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