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It is difficult to pinpoint a more important turning point in the Vietnam War than the events surrounding the Mai Lai Massacre and what these events represented. Although there were many other atrocities throughout the war, this event more than any other, represented a boiling over point, not for the American public, but for the military; the soldiers themselves. "They were butchering people. The only thing they didn't do is cook and eat 'em. How do you get that far over the edge?" (Appy, pg. 349) The question that helicopter gunner Larry Colburn poses is a complex one. What is not complicated is the fact that wars can be won without the support of the people back home, but they cannot be won without the support and effort of the soldiers doing the fighting. By this point in the war we had lost that. Many outfits were acting like more of a rogue, mercenary army, going even as far as killing their own commanding officers. "...fragging reached unprecedented proportions in the Vietnamization period; more than 200 incidents were reported in 1970 alone." (ALW, pg. 301) Mai Lai was the opposite symptom of the same disease. Here the soldiers involved followed a madman into hell. "They were briefed the night before and I've heard it said that they were going in there to waste everything. They didn't capture any weapons. They didn't kill any draft-age males. I've seen the list of the dead and there were a hundred and twenty some humans under the age of five." (Appy, pg. 348) Our military was operating from a place of ambiguously based rage and more than ever with an overwhelming lack of general purpose. When you lose the public's heart, it makes things difficult; when you lose the soldier's heart, it is the beginning of the end.

Finding the point in the Vietnam War that one could call an "end" is much more difficult. Given that the objectives were so vague and the scoring (body count) so arbitrary, it becomes tricky to decide the winner, much less when this winning occurred. In spite of this it cannot be denied how critical the releasing of the Pentagon papers to the New York Times by Daniel Ellsberg was in ending this war. These papers were "evidence of a quarter century of aggression, broken treaties, deceptions, stolen elections, lies and murder." (Appy, pg. 434) One of the more obvious reasons that this led to the end was that it put in clear black and white print what the truth really was. This re-ignited and added to the resistance movement and gave many antiwar proponents the evidence needed to justify their beliefs. The real damage done by the releasing of these damning papers was in Nixon's reaction to their release, not so much the papers themselves. "If Nixon hadn't issued injunctions against the newspapers it would have sunk like a sub." (Appy, pg. 435) He gave them their power. Another key error in Nixon's responding to this release was in his going after Ellsberg by a group known as "The Plumbers". The Plumbers were a covert White House Special investigations unit that Nixon formed in response to the Pentagon Papers being leaked. Some of it's members were later involved with the Watergate Scandal. This helped ultimately link Nixon directly to the Watergate Scandal, which obviously ended his presidency in disgrace. "And without Watergate I think Nixon might have been able to keep up the bombing of Vietnam indefinitely. I think Watergate shortened the war by at least a couple of years and possibly much longer." (Appy, pg. 436) What is ironic is that the ending of the war didn't ruin a presidency (as LBJ and Nixon feared it would), but the ruining of a presidency ended the war!

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