

**The My Lai Massacre & the Comfort of Language:
Musings During the Night Bush Defeated Kerry – November
2004**

The My Lai Massacre has assumed the role, over the years, of one of the 3 or 4 most significant *leit motifs* that incessantly punctuate the cultural perceptions of the American public when it tries to “remember” the Viet Nam War. The concept of “My Lai,” for better or worse, continues to help define what Americans think they “*really know*” about that war - and about themselves. Put simply, the historical event once identified as the My Lai Massacre has become a precise shorthand representing all sorts of atrocity, big and small – but with the unique characteristic of being tied to the previously “untainted” record of the American military in war. It’s the phrase “My Lai” that matters now - the word “massacre” has become somehow superfluous. One sees unceasingly in contemporary journalism, fiction, film, historical essays, intellectual discourse, and in the popular media the tendency to employ the simple name “My Lai” as a code for all manner of perceptions about the American military, its once-ruined reputation, and even the country’s generalized moral dysfunction in and after the Viet Nam War. Regardless of the suspect accuracy of all these thousands of cultural and literary references coursing just under the surface of America’s vast popular culture, My Lai has come to “*mean*” a lurid selection of received public “knowledge” about how that particular war was waged, how it destroyed American resolve, how Americans came to fight

that cruel joke of a war in the beginning, just what kind of nation fielded such troops in the first place, and so on, and on, and on, and still on.

My Lai, as much as anything else, has evolved into a figure of speech. It is a trope mutated. But listen carefully, my friend, My Lai often may be a figure of speech – but My Lai will always remain an atrocity. Beware the comfort of language.

The two tiny syllables possess a deceptive gravity - and these two slight sounds bear equally grave consequences whether they are whispered behind a palm or shouted in rage. *My Lai*, despite its quick lovely cadence, has been coerced into reducing immense complexities of individual and national character into convenient catchwords. “*My Lai*” has evolved into the sign of a profound mythos of American capability. “*My Lai*” has become one of the modern American legends that now, for better or worse, accurate or wildly inaccurate, define the dark side of American power. In spite of the documented murders of 500 elderly men, unarmed women, and defenseless children, “*My Lai*” continues its irrevocable transformation into legend.

As all true legends do, the actual My Lai Massacre originates from incontrovertible fact. Nevertheless, these kernels of fact have blossomed into myriad cultural interpretations and national self-perceptions that body forth the hopes, fears, and imaginations of the American public. “*My Lai*” has become the violent psychopathic relative hidden away in the national attic; “*My Lai*” is the ugliest but obligatory chapter in the epic narrative of the American Everyman GI doing his level best, but getting a bad rap; “*My Lai*” is a modern recasting of the preposterous Custer Legend where this time the American is the BAD GUY; “*My Lai*” is a political metaphor; and “*My Lai*” cavorts in countless other disguises that get appropriated to “define” or “explain” American national character under stress – each masquerade dependent on whom is calling the dance. The very notion of the likelihood of another “*My Lai*” recurs again and again within American films,

novels, and art, to the point that “*My Lai*” has transmogrified into a sort of national Urban Legend.

Always, when one wants to sense what a culture thinks it “knows” about itself and its history, one must examine that culture’s literary and artistic production. Though often unconsciously so, this is how one culture dresses itself up against the scrutiny of other cultures. When a culture is profoundly affected by a certain traumatic event, evidence of the nature of that psychological influence will be clearly present at every level of the media, popular film, drama, fiction, present again in its poetry and music, and reflected in its everyday graphic art.

One will find literally hundreds of examples of the My Lai Massacre being recycled as metaphor, or being creatively recast as the lethal potential of an adolescent giant set loose among the lesser nations of the modern world. Conservatively, there are a dozen feature films that deal with My Lai (or its ghosts) as major plot elements or themes. At least that many more use the idea of My Lai more obliquely to deal with the root concept of atrocity and America’s ambiguous relationship to it. Additionally, one would find fully a score of documentaries dealing with it in one way or another. Scholars, librarians, and journalists have documented 50 or more novels that use the My Lai Massacre – or its distillate – as a major theme in their conclusions or plot devices. The short stories and poems that reflect the original event (or its evil essence) are virtually countless. Some version of this now nearly mythical event - this atrocity - appears on paperback covers, record albums, in board games, software, and T-shirts. My Lai is commemorated in the symphony even while its images throb in the lyrics of rock and its visual images reverberate in Reggae.

What such a spectacular integration of an historical event actually means to its parent society is yet to be seen. This happens to be how myth is birthed. This is the power of mythology. Mythology, properly speaking, has nothing to do with factual accuracy but everything to do with truth. The My Lai Massacre is changing in its

public representation and interpretation almost year-by-year. 1998 promised to be a watershed year for its latest transformations via the public media.

If one wishes to watch this latest transformation of a nation's concept of itself, then one must gaze fixedly at that corner of the nation's cultural soul that best captures its visceral meaning. Pay attention. Watch how My Lai is remembered and imagined - NOT how it is documented. Assuring oneself of the grim facts of the incontrovertible My Lai Massacre takes but an hour or so. Assessing the impact of that brief aberration on its parent culture will take 60 years, or 600. That is as it ought to be. Pay attention to how America remembers itself.

The 30th anniversary memorialization that occurred over that year was simply one more version of the original event. The memorials being planned right now in Viet Nam are merely the next wave of revisioning. Monuments themselves are densely tangible myths. They will be, if the current variety of representations is any indication, richly diverse in their politics and lushly imaginative in their aesthetics. It is odd indeed to anticipate the assessment of atrocity through the lens of aesthetic "beauty." The memorials to My Lai this year will be the performance art of remembered guilt, a guilty pleasure. A nation's memory is far more subservient to its imagination than ever it is to its imperfect commitment to "facts." If one wants to understand America's obsession with the Viet Nam War one must follow the trail cut by the imagination. Memory, after all, is imagined as much as it is recollected. The My Lai Massacre lurks along that very trail – squatting in silence, shimmering in and out of focus like some odd industrial notion of history. Anyone possessing a smug notion of exactly where My Lai is concealed in the American psyche is about to be ambushed. Again.

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