

# Calley's Honor

How the Southern Culture influenced the public opinion on the court-martial of Lieutenant Calley



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## Introduction

“There is not a day that goes by that I do not feel remorse for what happened that day in My Lai.”

These are the words spoken by former Lieutenant William Calley at a public appearance at the Kiwanis Club of Greater Columbus in August 2009.<sup>1</sup> During his stay Calley was subjected to multiple questions about what happened in My Lai and he was forced to defend his actions. The critical tone of these questions is not something he has had to deal with in the direct years after the conviction for his involvement in what happened in My Lai. This is because the American public saw him as a victim, not as a criminal, and opposed the court that punished him. This is a strange phenomenon, considering the feeling of horror many people get when reading about the My Lai massacre.

In March 1968 Charlie Company was commanded by their Captain, Ernest Medina, to destroy a village called My Lai in South Vietnam, whose inhabitants were considered Viet Cong guerrillas or sympathizers. In reality the village consisted mostly out of women, children and seniors. When the villagers tried to run, Lieutenant William Calley ordered his men to shoot them all, setting the example when some soldiers hesitated. By the time the massacre had ended, the soldiers had murdered, mutilated and raped 504 people, while never being fired on.<sup>2</sup>

It took a while for reports about My Lai to reach the general public. At first, an attempt was made to cover up what happened. Ron Ridenhour, a man who had served with people who were involved in the massacre, decided to take action in April 1969. After hearing his friends speak about it he wrote letters to several politicians informing them of what happened, hereby causing a formal investigation to be set in motion. In early September of 1969 Lieutenant William Calley was charged with six specifications of murder, including the deliberate shooting of 109 civilians. The press did not pick up on this story until Seymour Hersh broke the news in November, causing My Lai to suddenly get a prominent

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<sup>1</sup> <http://dicksworld.wordpress.com/2009/08/19/exclusive-an-emotional-william-calley-says-he-is-sorry/>

<sup>2</sup> C. Cookman, ‘The My Lai Massacre Concretized in a Victim’s Face’ *Journal of American History* 94 (2007), 74.

position in the public debate and to be covered in the media for many years to come.<sup>3</sup>

Not long after that, it was announced that four officers and nine enlisted men were to be court-martialed, of which Lieutenant Calley would eventually be the only one found guilty. He was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labor in March 1971, but his punishment was reduced multiple times. Two important works have been written about him, *The Court-Martial of Lt. Calley* by journalist Richard Hammer in 1971, focusing more on exploring Calley's background, and *The Vietnam War on Trial* by professor of Law Michal Belknap in 2002, giving a detailed recollection of the process.

The amount of attention this court martial process attracted was enormous, mainly because it caused people to question an already unpopular war. While studying the public opinion on the My Lai incident, it is important to take into account the general anti-war feelings that existed during this time. The war was extensively covered by all media and created many controversies, mostly caused by shocking photos or video coverage, unprecedented in any war before this. Much has been written about this close relationship between the Vietnam war and the media, Daniel Hallin and William Hammond being specialists in this area. This involvement of the media caused an open and often intense discussion of the Vietnam War by everyone, which eventually led to a visible antiwar movement and a decline in public support.

In the process of losing faith in the war and its cause, one might expect a growing feeling of sympathy towards the Vietnamese people and resentment towards the soldiers fighting them, something that the My Lai massacre would only empower.

This was interestingly not the case. In a telephone survey of 1090 adults across the United States conducted on April first 1971, they were asked: 'Do you agree or disagree with the decision of the military court which found (Lt. William) Calley guilty (in connection with the My Lai incident) and gave him life sentence?'. Seven percent of the people answered with 'agree', seventy-eight percent said 'disagree' (fifteen percent had no opinion). When asked for the reason of their disapproval, over half of them said 'others share responsibility'. Seventy-seven percent of them were of the opinion that the soldiers at My Lai were only following orders from their higher ups and Lieutenant Calley had been singled out unfairly as

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<sup>3</sup> K. Oliver, 'Atrocity, Authenticity and American Exceptionalism: (Ir)rationalizing the massacre at My Lai' in *Journal of American Studies* 37 (2003), 248.

a scapegoat.<sup>4</sup>

This survey does not differentiate between the different states, even though I believe this is very important. There are studies that show that the southern states were more pro-Vietnam than their northern neighbors. Joseph Fry has extensively studied relations between the southerners and the Vietnam war in his book *Dixie Looks Abroad*.<sup>5</sup> Several works have been written about the reigning discourses in the south, and overall they agree on one point: the south has always had a great affiliation with the military and has always believed in its strength and capability. An important part of this southern discourse analysis is the theory of the culture of honor, developed by Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen in their *Culture of Honor: The psychology of violence in the South*, published in 1996, used by many scholars ever since.

What I would like to research in this essay is whether the differences between the northern and southern stance on the Vietnam war has had any influence on the public opinion of the court-martial of Lieutenant Calley. I will try to nuance the idea of all the American people thinking of Calley as a scapegoat and investigate newspapers from various states in search of different discourses at play and prove that geographical location is an important factor that should not be overlooked.

In the first chapter I will explain more about the public opinion on the Vietnam War and the difference between the northern and the southern states. The second chapter will be a summary of the Calley court-martial and the aftermath. The last chapter will be reserved for a comparative newspaper study, in which I will try to find the answer to my research question.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mylai/SurveyResults.html>

<sup>5</sup> J. A. Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U.S. Foreign Relations, 1789-1973* (Louisiana, 2002).

## Chapter One

As I said in my introduction, I will first discuss the change in public opinion on the Vietnam war and the cultural circumstances in which the coverage on the My Lai massacre emerged. It is difficult to pinpoint the start of the war, since the U.S. military moved into Vietnam gradually. The Vietnam War was a result of American involvement in the First Indochina War. After the French left in 1954, the Americans stayed behind to contain the threat of communism, eventually escalating in a war between North and South Vietnam. The first troops were sent in 1965 and were forced to fight in a guerilla war, until a turning point on January 30<sup>th</sup> 1968. The North Vietnamese orchestrated a full on assault and attacked a hundred South Vietnamese cities and towns, proving that they were stronger and better organized than their American opponent. This was the so called Tet Offensive, which had a huge impact on the public opinion at home.

### *Public Opinion*

There are many difficulties in trying to uncover the general public opinion on the Vietnam war. One way is following the development of the antiwar movement, mostly led by students. Protests started as soon as 1965, reaching its high point on October 21 1967 with the March on the Pentagon, consisting out of 100.000 people. The effectiveness of this movement is debatable, since public opinion polls show that a majority of Americans found the antiwar movement (in particular the hippies) more obnoxious than the war itself.<sup>6</sup> Protests did gain a lot media attention, keeping the debate alive.

A much used, and a more reliable, source in researching public opinions are public opinion polls, which were held throughout the war by numerous polling organizations. A problem here is the wording of the questions, which can lead to different results and makes it dangerous to compare them.<sup>7</sup> The questions often require specification, for instance the 'mistake question'. People who agree with the idea that going into Vietnam was a mistake, are not automatically also of the opinion America should withdraw from the war. Therefore it is difficult to draw large conclusions out of surveys that only hold a few questions. The

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<sup>6</sup> G. C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950 – 1975* (New York, 1996), 206-210.

<sup>7</sup> W. Lurch and P. Sperlich, 'American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam', *The Western Political Quarterly* 32 (1979), 23.

answers to this 'mistake question' do show a growing uneasiness with the war, in August 1965 sixty-one percent did not consider moving into Vietnam a mistake, by May 1971 this was down to twenty-eight percent.<sup>8</sup>

At first very few citizens were aware of America's presence in Vietnam, mainly because the initial involvement came in the form of military advisors and financial support. This situation remained like this for the next nine years, until 1964 when the United States' military involvement escalated. At first the public's faith in the president was strong and they stood by his policies.

However, within three years an increasing amount of people started to believe the American involvement in Vietnam was a mistake, based on the lack of results. This does not mean people wanted the army to draw back, in fact in 1967 most people wanted an escalation of the war, to 'get it over with'. It was this year that the troop concentration in Vietnam was at its highest level.<sup>9</sup> It soon became clear there would not be a quick end to the war as many people had hoped, and from November 1968 on there was a decline in support for the policy of escalation, until eventually in 1970 polls stopped presenting it as an option.<sup>10</sup> This shows 1968 being a turning point in the war, which can mostly be credited to the huge blow the US military had received during the Tet Offensive and many Americans fearing the Vietnamese forces were too strong.

The year 1967 was the low point for the preference for withdrawal, which was six percent, showing the public's support for escalation. After the 1968 election this number started rising to over twenty percent, and never stopped. America's decline in support was also consistent with the rise of the amount of American casualties.

The media coverage of the war followed roughly the same course, from supportive to more critical, which also fueled the public discussion about the war. It is sometimes said that the media coverage caused the failure in Vietnam, but most historians deny this, since the media shift in 1968 came after the public had already grown weary and was therefore not the cause.<sup>11</sup>

It could be said that the increase in negativity of the news had nothing to do with

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<sup>8</sup> Lurch and Sperlich, 'American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam', 23.

<sup>9</sup> W. Lurch and P. Sperlich, 'American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam', 22.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, 25.

<sup>11</sup> W. Hammond, 'The Press in Vietnam as Agent of Defeat: A Critical Examination', *Reviews in American History* 17 (1989), 318.

media becoming more critical but it simply showed the truth, which was the failure of the American policy. However there is evidence for a change in the selection of news. For instance, after 1968 there was an increase in negative coverage of South Vietnam politics, while these policies have been the same since 1966.<sup>12</sup>

During the early years of the war, reporters might have criticized tactics or strategy, but they trusted the president and his military staff and, more importantly, believed every word General Westmoreland said. They often copied official records without taking a critical look.<sup>13</sup> According to Daniel Hallin reporters mostly based themselves on government sources. After the Tet Offensive in 1968 the members of Congress opposed to the war started to speak out more, meaning that the sources themselves changed, which led to a more critical and negative trend. Hallin's studies showed that after 1968, forty-nine percent of all criticism of government policy on television came from public sources.<sup>14</sup>

Many officials claimed the media gave a distorted figure of the war. For instance, General Westmoreland said the reporting journalists had no experience as war correspondents, hereby trying to discredit their pieces. Others believed the press went looking for victories of the enemy and were only interested in atrocities.<sup>15</sup> Still, the press kept their criticizing tone and the American people were subjected to these news stories every day, making it impossible not to have an opinion on the war.

### *Southern Culture*

While there is evidence for the notion of a general decline in support, there are still a lot of factors at play. William Lurch and Peter Sperlich have already researched different opinions based on age, race, sex, religion and social status. They concluded that war opponents were most likely to be older, female, black, democrat and/or non-Christian.<sup>16</sup> Another important factor here, which needs to be studied more extensively, is the geographical location.

Two important terms in this discussion are the 'hawks', being pro-war, and the 'doves', being antiwar. Most people in the south were hawks, but it is important to keep in

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<sup>12</sup> D. C. Hallin, 'The Media, the War in Vietnam and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media', *The Journal of Politics* 46 (1984), 9.

<sup>13</sup> W. Hammond, 'The Press in Vietnam as Agent of Defeat: A Critical Examination', 318.

<sup>14</sup> W. Hammond, 'The Press in Vietnam as Agent of Defeat: A Critical Examination', 319.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, 312.

<sup>16</sup> W. Lurch and P. Sperlich, 'American Public Opinion and the War in Vietnam', 24.



mind that there were also doves, however in much smaller numbers. In fact, perhaps the most famous antiwar senator, William Fulbright, came from the south.<sup>17</sup> When I speak of 'the south', I mean the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, Florida, Oklahoma, West Virginia and Kentucky. Southern hawks fully believed in the containment theory and were prepared to accept military solutions, in part because southern states benefited from military spending. During 1940-1945 the South received forty percent of the War Department budget for building military installations, which are therefore mostly located in these states. Because they benefited from military activity there was much support for escalation of the war. In addition, one out of every three soldiers in Vietnam came from the south, which only represented twenty-two percent of the American population.<sup>18</sup>

Next to these financial benefits, there are also typical southern traditions and ideologies at play which had great influences on public opinion on the Vietnam war. For instance the so called 'culture of honor', closely tied to the 'culture of violence'.

For centuries, the southern states of the US have been more violent than the North. This is a product of cultural values condoning the use of violence, or the so called culture of violence. There have been many explanations for this phenomenon, for instance the south's higher temperature, its poverty or its history of slavery. Another explanation is the culture of honor. The social scientists who have developed this theory are Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen. They wrote *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence In The South*<sup>19</sup>, in which they researched historical economical differences and how these developed into a cultural system. According to them, the culture of honor stems from the pre-Civil war society, which was characterized by an 'institutionalization of dueling' and an 'exaggerated sense of honor'.<sup>20</sup>

The culture of honor is still present these days, men in the south take great offense in the violation of their honor and are expected to respond with violence or else lose status. Honor is nearly synonymous with masculinity and physical strength, which is taught to young

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<sup>17</sup> M. D. Carson, *Beyond the Solid South: Southern Members of Congress and the Vietnam War*, PhD Thesis, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> R.E. Nisbett and D. Cohen, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South* (Oxford, 1996), 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 8.

males from their birth. The historical explanation given is the fact that the South used to be largely based on herding. Anthropologists have discovered herding societies all over the world are more approving of violence, since they have to be willing to use force to defend themselves and their livestock, which was extremely vulnerable to theft.<sup>21</sup>

In the Old South one could not appear to be weak or easily pushed around, since this would make an easy target. Showing toughness and having a reputation of being someone not to be messed with, was therefore very important. While there is no longer a 'herding culture', the culture of honor and the need to keep up your reputation that came out of this still persists. Nisbett and Cohen have proved that male homicide rates in the south are higher than those in the north, but only in homicides that are argument- or conflict related, which can be attributed to the importance of honor. Violence was deemed necessary as a way to defend oneself, but also one's country.

Nisbett and Cohen have shown that culture of honor norms are embodied in the laws and social policies in the south, namely looser gun control laws and more hawkish voting by federal legislators on foreign policy issues. In two experiments they showed that southern institutions such as employers and the media are less likely to disapprove of violence if it was committed as a defense of honor and are more likely to see it as justifiable or sympathetic.<sup>22</sup>

The South has a military-patriotic tradition, which means they see war as a natural consequence of human strife and acceptable means of demonstrating their patriotism and protecting their honor.<sup>23</sup> To them, being called a traitor or a coward would be the worst insult. Much of this attitude could also be found in president Johnson, who was a southerner himself. He was terrified at the prospect of being called a coward, a weakling or a man without a spine, and was determined not to be the "first American President to lose a war".<sup>24</sup>

The south was anticommunist and had never trusted non-whites.<sup>25</sup> These are two very important reasons for the lack of doves, especially during the beginning of the war.

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<sup>21</sup> R.E. Nisbett and D. Cohen, 'Insult, aggression and the southern culture of honor: an "experimental ethnography"', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1996), 946

<sup>22</sup> R.E. Nisbett and D. Cohen, 'Insult, aggression and the southern culture of honor: an "experimental ethnography"', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (1996), 946

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> J. A. Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 265.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, 262.

After president Johnson sent U.S. troops to Vietnam, he wanted to have a limited war to avoid a provocation of the Soviet Union. Many southerners did not have faith in this strategy, and wanted a full on war which proved American supremacy.<sup>26</sup> Because of his southern upbringing, Johnson had great difficulty in understanding other nations and societies, which led him to say: "Foreigners are not like the folks I am used to."<sup>27</sup>

In interviews with southern Vietnam veterans, the previously mentioned themes or honor, duty, patriotism and anticommunism were important. A marine from North Carolina said: "When I went to Vietnam, I believed it was my duty to go over there and fight for my country". This feeling of duty was widespread in the South, hence the amount of volunteers they had. This message was also enveloped in a lot country music.<sup>28</sup>

Southern students were less activist than those from other parts of the country. During 1967-68, thirty-six percent of southern institutions reported protests, compared to forty-nine percent in the Northeast, forty-four percent in the Midwest and forty percent in the West.<sup>29</sup> These protests were very much frowned upon.

This typical southern mentality is especially interesting to investigate within the 'war at home', since it clearly differs from the earlier public opinion I discussed. To them, defending your honor is incredibly important, which makes pulling out of Vietnam an unacceptable solution. The benefits the south receives from warfare are more reasons to support the war.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, 265.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, 270.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, 271.

## Chapter two

In chapter one I have given an overview of the general course of the public opinion and the many factors that are at play. In this chapter I will discuss a more specific part of the Vietnam War, namely the My Lai massacre and its court-martial. As I have shown, public support for the war declined after 1968, the Tet Offensive substantially lowered the level of trust the American people had in the military. One year later the military would make the news in another negative way, with the slaughtering of innocent Vietnamese civilians by US troops in a small village called My Lai. There are few military operations that have been covered this extensively during the Vietnam War, My Lai being present in the news from the moment of it being uncovered in November 1969, till the verdict of the court-martial that followed in March 1971. I will first discuss the uncovering of the massacre and how it was received by the public. After that I will discuss the court-martial of Lieutenant William Calley and how this caused a great and intense debate.

### *My Lai*

In the early morning of March 16 1968, Charlie Company walked into a South Vietnamese village which they believed held Vietcong fighters and opened fire on what turned out to be innocent civilians, killing over five hundred women, children and old men. Charlie Company had landed in Vietnam three months prior and had already lost four men. They were frustrated by the guerilla war the Vietcong were fighting, making it impossible for them to engage in an open battle. Captain Ernest Medina, Charlie Company's commander, gave the orders for the attack on My Lai one day prior, right after a memorial service for a sergeant who had died when he stepped on a landmine. He said the attack would be 'their opportunity to avenge their lost comrades', something Charlie's men desperately wished for. Several of these men later testified that Captain Medina had ordered them to destroy the village and its inhabitants.<sup>30</sup> At 7.24 am bombardments on My Lai started, and between 7.30 and 7.47 Charlie Company was dropped by helicopter northwest of the village. They received no enemy fire and suffered no injuries, except for one soldier who shot himself in the foot to be evacuated, because he could not stand the killing.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Cookman, 'An American Atrocity', 156.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, 157.

It was not until September 1969 that Lieutenant Calley and the My Lai massacre were officially under investigation. This was put in motion by letters sent in the spring of 1969 by Ron Ridenhour, an ex-G.I. who heard much about My Lai from his fellow soldiers. He could have gone to the press, but instead wrote the letters to various people within the US government because he “did not wish to besmirch further the image of America’s servicemen.”<sup>32</sup>

On September 5th the public information office at Fort Benning released a short news statement, which said:

*“1LT William L. Calley, Jr., is being retained on active duty beyond his normal release date because of an investigation being conducted under Article 32 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. 1LT Calley, who was to have been separated from the Army on 6 Sep. 69, is charged with violation of Article 118, murder, for offenses allegedly committed against civilians while serving in Vietnam in March 1968.”<sup>33</sup>*

Only several reporters asked for more information, but they were all told no further details were available. Officers in the Pentagon were prepared for more media attention, but this proved unnecessary. ‘I was amazed that it didn’t get picked-just amazed,’ said one colonel.<sup>34</sup> This was the first chance the news media had to pursue the story, but it went overlooked.

The story finally broke on November 12, when freelance writer Seymour Hersh was finally able to get the press to run his story. He had contacted magazines such as Life, Look and Newsweek, initially without meeting much success. He believed the reasons for this to be self-censorship, the small existing market for American atrocities and the inclination of the American news media to give their troops the benefit of the doubt. Simply, most reporters believed the My Lai story to be enemy propaganda. Finally his story was picked up by the antiwar Dispatch News Service and on November 12 it was published by thirty-six newspapers across the US.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> M. R. Belknap, *The Vietnam War On Trial: The My Lai Massacre and the Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley* (Kansas, 2002), 104.

<sup>33</sup> S. Hersh, *My Lai 4: A Report on the Massacre and Its Aftermath* (Random House, 1970,) 128.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, 130.

<sup>35</sup> W. M. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War* (Kansas, 1998), 189.

Ron Haeberle also played an important part in placing My Lai in public debate. Haeberle was an army photographer assigned to Charlie Company, who had taken photos of the massacre with his personal camera. On November 18 he contacted an old friend who worked for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and tried to get him to publish his photos. Shortly after they both received phone calls from Fort Benning asking them not to publish them, which unintentionally confirmed their legitimacy. They were told the photos would 'inflame public opinion and might seriously jeopardize the rights of Calley and the others.'<sup>36</sup> On November 20, the pictures did get published in both the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *Life*. Some of them show G.I.'s running out of the helicopters, but most of them showed wounded or dead villagers, including some very bloody shots. None of the published photographs show an American soldier and a Vietnamese victim within the same frame.<sup>37</sup>

It was only after Paul Meadlo, one of Charlie Company's men, appeared on CBS on the 24th that the American press finally faces up to what happened and newspapers across the country started to make judgments about the massacre.<sup>38</sup> Finally, on November 25 there was an official Army announcement saying Calley had been ordered to stand trial and face a court-martial.

### *Public Reaction*

After these two weeks of revelations there was no way one could avoid reading about My Lai and Calley's oncoming trial. As William Hammond said, by the end of November 'virtually every newspaper in the United States had taken a position on My Lai.'<sup>39</sup> Harsh judgments were made, for instance *The Philadelphia Inquirer* described My Lai as 'the kind of atrocity generally associated with the worst days of Hitler and Stalin and other cruel despotisms.'<sup>40</sup> Comparisons to Nazi atrocities were not uncommon during this time.

Doves took the My Lai massacre as evidence that the American policy on Vietnam was not working. As a Liberal South Dakota Democrat said: 'What this incident has done is to

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<sup>36</sup> Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 138.

<sup>37</sup> Cookman, 'An American Atrocity', 157.

<sup>38</sup> Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 142.

<sup>39</sup> Belknap, *The Vietnam War On Trial*, 121.

<sup>40</sup> Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 141.

tear the mask off the war (...) I think it's more than Lieutenant Calley involved here. I think a national policy is on trial.'<sup>41</sup>

People who defended what happened were mostly hawks. They believed such things as My Lai were inevitable in warfare, because 'war is hell', and the only the enemy can be blamed. After all, it was the enemy who decided to put their fellow civilians at risk by hiding amongst them.<sup>42</sup> The conservative *National Review* wrote: 'If the Vietcong chooses to build its stronghold under a village, and the villagers, either through choice or coercion, continue to reside in the village, some perhaps to cooperate with the VC, does that mean the stronghold is immune from attack?'<sup>43</sup> Many conservative newspapers opposed the way Doves had tried to explain the massacre. *The Chicago Tribune* wrote on November 29: 'Americans should not be deceived by the contemptible lamentations that we are all guilty and that our troops in Vietnam have been brutalized by the war and are just as inhuman as the Communists.' *The National Observer* said 'It is not the 'system', whatever its shortcomings, or the policy, whatever its failings, that are to blame.'<sup>44</sup> By pressing charges against their own soldiers, America was sabotaging their own war. Some hawks even denied that it had happened, leading to what psychologist Edward Opton wrote about public opinion on My Lai: 'It didn't happen and besides they deserved it.'

At first, denying it had happened was a reaction many people shared. On December 21 the *Minneapolis Tribune* held a statewide poll, which showed that forty-eight percent did not believe the atrocity had occurred.<sup>45</sup> Some believed the story was a antiwar movement tactic, others went as far as saying it was planted by Vietcong sympathizers. Rep. Mendel Rivers, chair of the House Armed Services Committee said: 'You know our boys would never do anything like that', a view many Americans shared with him.<sup>46</sup> By January there was more acceptance, but fifty-five percent of people did not believe Calley was guilty and said he was being used as a scapegoat, something that many people believed until the end of his court-martial.<sup>47</sup>

Hawks criticized the news media for focusing too much on My Lai and too little on

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<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, 157.

<sup>42</sup> Belknap, *The Vietnam War On Trial*, 130.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>44</sup> Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 142.

<sup>45</sup> Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 191.

<sup>46</sup> Cookman, 'An American Atrocity', 160.

<sup>47</sup> Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 191.

atrocities the Vietcong had committed. Overall there was a lot of media criticism, with thousands of people calling their local newspapers and filing complaints. On the day the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* published Haerberle's photos it received over 250 phone calls, eighty-five percent of caller saying the pictures should not have been published, with people calling Plain Dealer 'rotten and anti-American'.<sup>48</sup> A *Time magazine* poll showed over seventy percent of people complaining about news media coverage, saying statements by soldiers from Charlie Company were not be reported before the actual court-martial, since this could interfere with a fair trial.<sup>49</sup> Many people were also disgusted by the profit that Haerberle made out of selling his photos, which was \$50,000.

Much controversy existed around the Calley court-martial, before it had even started. William Calley wasn't the only man charged for the massacre, but his trial was the only one that actually occurred. Many members of Charlie Company had left the army and could no longer be tried by military justice and twenty-four out of twenty-five cases were dismissed.<sup>50</sup> The White House received more than five thousand telegrams, 'running hundred to one in favor of clemency'.<sup>51</sup> There were many people trying to show Calley their support, for instance a group of former servicemen in Atlanta, Georgia, started petitioning to get the army to drop charges and gathered three thousand signatures. Also in Georgia, home state of Fort Benning, an advertisement was put in the paper, accusing the news media to 'tear down America and its armed forces'.<sup>52</sup> By mid-January 1970 Calley was invited to a fundraiser in Jacksonville, Florida, which was organized by six American Legion posts to raise a \$200,000 defense fund. One of the Legion post commanders said: 'We are not saying he is guilty or not guilty. We feel Lieutenant Calley has been condemned and vilified for performance of his duties in combat without benefit of the opportunity to defend himself.'<sup>53</sup> A lot of fellow officers at Fort Benning were outraged by the charges. During this time Calley received about five thousand letters, many of them from people who invited him into their homes and that he could count on their support.<sup>54</sup>

A lot of (hawk) politicians were also openly criticizing the charges against Calley.

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<sup>48</sup> Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 152.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, 153.

<sup>50</sup> Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 161.

<sup>51</sup> Cookman, 'An American Atrocity', 161.

<sup>52</sup> Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 152.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, 154.

<sup>54</sup> Belknap, *The Vietnam War On Trial*, 132.



Former Alabama Governor George Wallace endorsed Calley publicly. In his book *My Lai 4*, Seymour Hersh quotes several republican representatives from Louisiana, South Carolina, Colorado, New Mexico and Maryland who supported Calley.<sup>55</sup>

### *The Calley Court-Martial*

The actual trial did not start until November 17, 1970. The jury consisted out of six carefully chosen army officers, who were all combat veterans. Colonel Reid W. Kennedy was the judge. Calley was being charged with the premeditated murder of 109 'oriental human beings, males and females, whose names are unknown, occupants of the village of My Lai'<sup>56</sup> and his court-martial would become one of the longest trials in American military history.

The courtroom had public seats for fifty-nine people, two thirds of which were given to reporters. The remaining seats were given to members of the public by ballot each morning. People standing at the back had difficulty seeing Calley, mostly just able to see the back of his head. In an army gymnasium close to the courtroom there were over two hundred reporters set up in a specially established press center and they were allowed to set up a tent up near the entrance of the courthouse.<sup>57</sup>

Because the trial had gained such a huge media following, necessary precautions had to be taken. The media circus was managed by seven full-time army informant officers. Judge Kennedy was also very involved with the reporters, was sometimes seen having drinks with some of them, and tried to aid them in their work. During the trial he would note their deadlines and he gave them thirty minute recesses to allow them time to file their stories.<sup>58</sup> Kennedy was also very careful when it came to the press interfering with the jury. For months he had been warning the jury not to read press reports or watch news coverage. He had also warned the press to avoid stories that might influence the outcome of the trial and after Meadlo appeared on CBS, he asked potential witnesses not to give interviews. Many members of Charlie Company ignored his warning and they often appeared in the media.<sup>59</sup> The press was not allowed to speak with Calley, with the exception of John Sack. He would interview Calley in his quarters and eventually publish a book telling his side of the story,

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<sup>55</sup> Hersh, *My Lai 4*, 156.

<sup>56</sup> M. Bilton and K. Sim, *Four Hours In My Lai* (1993), 331.

<sup>57</sup> Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai*, 333.

<sup>58</sup> Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai*, 332.

<sup>59</sup> Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 191.

something for which Calley received \$150,000.<sup>60</sup>

Several members of Charlie Company were called in to testify and they mostly mentioned cruelties carried out by Calley, barely explaining the full extent of what happened. This gave the impression only a couple of men were involved, not an entire company. Even so, these cruelties were not reported widely and therefore the American public never fully understood the horrors in My Lai. While they had seen pictures of brutally murdered women and children, certain details such as the torture, rape and mutilation that came with it remained unknown.<sup>61</sup>

Calley's lawyer mostly used the order by Captain Medina as his defense, saying Calley was only doing what his superior officer told him to do. As Calley said: 'I was ordered to go in there and destroy the enemy. That was my job that day. That was the mission I was given. I did not sit down and think in terms of men, women and children. They were all classified the same, and that was the classification that we dealt with, just as enemy soldiers... I felt then and I still do that I acted as I was directed, and I carried out the orders that I was given and I do not feel wrong in doing so.'<sup>62</sup> During the trial Calley received more than ten thousand letters with only seven of them being unsupportive.

On March 28 1971 the jury returned from seventy-nine hours and fifty-eight minutes of deliberation and announced the verdict. Calley was found guilty of the premeditated murder of twenty-two villagers at My Lai, a lot less than the 109 villagers he was accused of killing. Two days later the jury ordered Calley to hard labor for the rest of his natural life.<sup>63</sup> Hereafter, Calley, who was born in Florida, spoke to the court room for about two minutes: 'Yesterday you stripped me of all my honor. Please, by your actions that you take today, don't strip future soldiers of their honor, I beg of you.'

This verdict angered a lot of Americans. To a lot of them Calley was a hero and his verdict was a great injustice. Both hawks and doves disagreed with the outcome, but for different reasons. Hawks thought it insulted all American troops fighting in Vietnam, court-martialing a soldier for killing while fighting in a war seemed ridiculous to them. In their eyes, Calley was being sent to prison for trying to win the war and doing his duty. Doves were of the opinion Calley was a victim in an overall immoral war and it should be the

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<sup>60</sup> Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai*, 332.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, 334.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, 335.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, 338.

generals and politicians who should be put to trial. To them, My Lai represented the tragedy that was the Vietnam War.<sup>64</sup> So while the hawks disapproved of blaming anyone for what happened, doves advocated for the blame to be shared by the entire nation. Out of those who disapproved of the court-martial, twenty-eight identified themselves as hawks, another twenty-eight percent as doves and twenty-nine percent as middle-of-the-road.<sup>65</sup> After the verdict, the amount of fan mail Calley received reached the height of ten thousand letters a day, forcing him to buy an automatic letter opener.<sup>66</sup>

After the trial radio stations across American's southern states aired a song called 'Battle Hymn of Lt. Calley', recorded by an Alabama vocal group called 'C Company'. Some lyrics include 'once upon a time there was a little boy who wanted to grow up and be a soldier and serve his country in whatever way he could' and 'my name is William Calley I'm a soldier of this land, I'm vowed to do my duty and to gain the upper hand, But they've made me out a villain, they have stamped me with a brand, As we go marching on'. It promoted the typical southern mentality of honor and love for ones country, and sold over 200.000 copies.<sup>67</sup> There were 'Free Calley' stickers everywhere and there was a 'Rally for Calley' held in Columbus.<sup>68</sup> In a telephone survey across America, seventy-nine percent disapproved of the verdict, eighty-one percent found a life sentence too harsh and sixty-nine percent thought Calley had been made a scapegoat.<sup>69</sup> Time magazine wrote that for many Americans the fact that laws existed in combat was simply 'absurd'.<sup>70</sup>

The White House received thousands of letters pleading for a reduction of Calley's sentence and resolutions urging the President to grant Calley clemency were introduced in the states of Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas. Michal Belknap writes in his book: 'Support for Calley was strongest in the south, but his backers included politicians from throughout the country.'<sup>71</sup>

In many of the southern states petitions started, which were sent to the White House. In Florida, a veteran compiled a list of thousand people who wanted Nixon to help

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<sup>64</sup> Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai*, 340.

<sup>65</sup> Belknap, *The Vietnam War On Trial*, 209.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, 194.

<sup>67</sup> Bilton, *Four Hours In My Lai*, 339.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, 340.

<sup>69</sup> Cookman, 'An American Atrocity', 161.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, 259.

<sup>71</sup> Belknap, *The Vietnam War On Trial*, 192.

Calley. From a village in Louisiana, where highschoolers were reportedly “100% behind Lt. Calley”, came a petition signed by 4.500 people, the mayor of a town in Georgia gathered 30.000 signatures and a DJ in South Carolina collected 5.000 letters and a petition which held a few thousand more names.<sup>72</sup> The amount of mail and phone calls directed at representatives from northeast and midwest states was moderate, those received by legislators from Arizona and California was heavier, and southern representatives were overwhelmed with complaints.<sup>73</sup> Studies have shown that Americans applied different standards to foreigners than to their own when it came to war crimes.<sup>74</sup> Taking into consideration the xenophobic culture of the south, this could be an explanation for their higher rates of outrage.

President Nixon decided to use this as a way to gain popularity, since his poll ratings were at an all time low. On April 1, only a day after his sentence was announced, Nixon allowed Calley to be freed from prison and put under house arrest while his appeal was considered, after which Nixon himself would be the final judge. Eighty percent of Americans agreed with this course of action.<sup>75</sup> On August 18 1971, Calley’s life prison sentence was reduced to twenty years, but Nixon wished him to stay under house arrest until his appeal had worked its way up to him. Finally, on May 3 1974 president Nixon decided not to continue pursuing Calley and issued him a Presidential Pardon, releasing him from house arrest, leaving him a free man.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Belknap, *The Vietnam War On Trial*, 195.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, 196.

<sup>74</sup> Ibidem, 209.

<sup>75</sup> Ibidem, 206.

<sup>76</sup> Ibidem, 237.

### Chapter Three

So far I have proved the existence of a certain culture in the southern states of the USA, which contains a high regard for honor, the willingness to use violence to defend said honor, a pro-military history and culture, and nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies. These factors are all explanations for the higher amount of hawks in the south and an overall different stance on the war compared to the northern states. I have shown this to be true not only within the general public opinion on the Vietnam War, but also regarding the Calley court-martial and the resulting verdict. In this chapter I will compare various news reports published in different states between March 30 and April 2 1971, since the amount of publicity on the court-martial was highest in this period (with Calley being convicted on the 30<sup>th</sup> and his sentence being lowered by Nixon on the 1<sup>st</sup>). I will choose news reports from two northern states and two southern ones to prove my theory of the importance of geographical location when it comes to studying the public opinion on the Vietnam War.

Choosing said states is a difficult task, since there are practically no studies or polls on specific states and their overall stance on the war. Some states I have eliminated because there were simply too many discourses at play, such as Georgia (home to Fort Benning). I have eventually chosen states spread across the USA, hereby proving the strength of the southern culture, while also paying attention to the political preference of the chosen governor. In this chapter I will discuss the southern states of Texas, governed by the democratic John Connally, and Florida, governed by the republican Claude R. Kirk Jr. I will compare these to the northern states of California, governed by the democratic Edmund Gerald Brown Sr., and New York, where the republican governor Nelson Rockefeller was chosen.

To find these articles I have used an online newspaper archive<sup>77</sup>, which has accounts from the studied period of eighty-four newspapers in Texas, seven in Florida, six in Minnesota, and forty-three in California. I have studied sixteen articles chosen from these newspapers.

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<sup>77</sup>[http:// www.newspaperarchive.com](http://www.newspaperarchive.com).

The difficulty I came across quite early on was the amount of overlap all articles seemed to have, using examples and quotes from mostly the same people. Nearly all of them mention Governor Wallace of Alabama announcing he was wanted to suspend the draft until Calley was pardoned and they all make note of the House and Senate in Oklahoma adopting resolutions urging Nixon to grant Calley clemency and the several other states that were considering this. Several civilian actions are also present in many of the articles, such as 75-year old Robert Whitaker in St. Louis who flew the American flag upside-down on a flagpole draped in black. He wanted to show that the conviction of Calley is 'killing our flag'.<sup>78</sup> These examples were sometimes exactly alike, making my search for different discourses at play a hard one.

Another phenomenon I noticed was the amount of coverage the protesters of the Calley verdict had in the southern states, which was sizably larger compared to the northern coverage. The description of the actual trial was very similar in all articles: a summary of the charges, the verdict, Calley's stoic reaction to it, his small posture and his pale complexion, the hundred-and-fifty supporters who were waiting outside clapping and saluting him, and the smile that appeared on Calley's face when he noticed them. Only some articles mention the speech Calley gave about being stripped of his honor, voice cracking and eventually breaking down into tears. Only two articles, one in Florida and one in Texas, mention the awards Calley earned for gallantry in Vietnam and the his Purple Heart for combat wounds.<sup>79</sup> It is not a coincidence these were only mentioned in southern states, since possessing a medal for a military achievement is an important status symbol. Usually the outrage the verdict had caused was covered in another section, often on a different page. The differences between northern and southern states did not prevent them from covering all sides of this outrage. For instance, the word 'scapegoat' was printed in bold letters on the cover of the *News Herald* in Florida, a word which is often associated with a more dovish approach.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Avalanche-Journal News Services, 'Calley Verdict Furor Rages', *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, 1 April 1971, 1.

<sup>79</sup> L. Harris, 'Lt. Calley Receives Life Imprisonment; Americans Enraged', *News-Herald*, 1 April, 1971, 1 & Avalanche-Journal News Services, 'Calley Verdict Furor Rages', *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, 1 April 1971, 1.

<sup>80</sup> L. Harris, 'Lt. Calley Receives Life Imprisonment; Americans Enraged', *News-Herald*, 1 April, 1971, 1.

Much of the quotes used in the articles came from veterans or people close to a G.I, among which the outrage was greatest. *News Herald* mentioned veterans turning themselves into their local jails, saying they were just as guilty as Calley. As Carl Savard from Rhode Island said: 'I just couldn't believe a military court could return such a verdict for something done in warfare'. Carl claimed he needed to be punished as well, since he threw a grenade at a woman and her baby during World War II.<sup>81</sup> According to many military men, murder was a part of war, and charging soldiers for it made no sense. As commander of the local VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) post in Panamy City, Milton Davis, said: 'If Calley is guilty then we better start looking for Harry Truman and the crew that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima because if that wasn't premeditated, what is?'<sup>82</sup> Commander of the VFW in Texas, Clifford Teer, promised to mobilize the VFW in support of Calley. 'If the Calley verdict is not reversed, we might as well pull every man out of Vietnam because we will have an armed service of confused men and women.'<sup>83</sup> He also compared Calley to the members of the crew that dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima, saying it is the same situation but judged in a different manner. 'If America is to remain the land of the free and the home of the brave our military must have the full support of the American people or the resultant decline in morale and the will to fight will render us defenseless.'<sup>84</sup> This concern for a dropping morale was a returning theme in hawkish protestor's comments. A petition held in Vero Beach asking president Nixon to help Calley was signed by three thousand people. In this petition it is said Calley was only acting out orders and was trained to find and destroy the enemy, and by imprisoning Calley the morale of the forces will drop.<sup>85</sup>

People who had loved ones in Vietnam shared this same vision. As a mother said in the *Lubbock Avalanche Journal*: 'I have sons and both have registered for the draft. You can imagine how a mother feels who has sons in armed forces who are trained to kill and when they do their job, they are brought home and brought to trial'.<sup>86</sup> The same sentiment was echoed by Raymond Crespin, who was in charge of drafting people in Tucumcari, New

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<sup>81</sup> L. Harris, 'Lt. Calley Receives Life Imprisonment; Americans Enraged', *News-Herald*, 1 April, 1971, 1.

<sup>82</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>83</sup> No author given, 'Local citizens disagree', *Grand Prairie Daily News*, 1 April 1971, 7.

<sup>84</sup> No author given, 'Local citizens disagree', *Grand Prairie Daily News*, 1 April 1971, 7.

<sup>85</sup> The Associated Press, 'Over 3.000 Sign Calley-gram in Vero', *The News Tribune*, 2 April 1971, 8.

<sup>86</sup> *Avalanche-Journal News Services*, 'Calley Verdict Furor Rages', *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, 1 April 1971, 1.

Mexico. After Calley's verdict he resigned, because he did not feel right about sending people over to fight and perhaps be prosecuted like Calley.<sup>87</sup>

Some newspapers interviewed people of their own, often without mentioning their names. A variety of opinions can be seen in these articles, probably intentionally chosen to show diversity. Without factual numbers, unfortunately no large conclusion can be drawn. An example is the *News Herald*, who interviewed people in Bay County, Florida, and reported people saying Calley had been turned into a scapegoat, that he should not have been prosecuted in the first place and some even saying that he should have get a medal.<sup>88</sup> Another example is the *Grand Prairie Daily News* in Texas, who held a poll among its citizens which showed they did not agree with the outcome of Calley's trial. A woman said: 'I feel sure he isn't the only one guilty. I sincerely believe he was carrying out orders by higher-ups.' Another woman said Calley should not go unpunished, but his superiors must be involved as well. A retired couple were puzzled by the notion of punishing 'one of our boys' for doing their duty.<sup>89</sup> The *Oneonta Star*, from the state of New York, surveyed the Cooperstown area. Here we see the same responses we have seen in the previous states: disbelief at soldiers being tried for being soldiers, disgust at the government using Calley as a fall guy and as a way to wash their hands clean and also pride and wanting to award him with a Medal of Honor for killing communists. The last words were spoken by a women who had lost several friends and a brother in the war. What is new in this survey, are responses which approve of the verdict. 'Young people are appalled at the situation, they blame the army for teaching the man to shoot, to kill, but Calley must be punished severely.'<sup>90</sup>

Editorials and letters are also a great source for discovering public opinion. An angry mother, who had lost a son in Vietnam wrote the Texan *San Antonio Express*: 'My blood boils and I am thoroughly disgusted and disillusioned with our so-called "military justice". (...) If Calley is guilty, then everyone from the President of the United States on down is guilty of premeditated murder. Isn't that what war is all about?'<sup>91</sup> An editorial written in the New York *Evening Observer* claims the public protest about Calley's verdict was caused by the

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<sup>87</sup> No author, 'Thousands ask Nixon clemency for Calley', *Press-Telegram*, 1 April 1971, 1.

<sup>88</sup> L. Harris, 'Lt. Calley Receives Life Imprisonment; Americans Enraged', *News-Herald*, 1 April, 1971, 1.

<sup>89</sup> No author given, 'Local citizens disagree', *Grand Prairie Daily News*, 1 April 1971, 7.

<sup>90</sup> I. Mosolescoki, 'Everybody reacts to Calley conviction', *Oneonta Star*, 1 April 1971, 3.

<sup>91</sup> Various writers, 'Letters', *San Antonio Express*, 2 April 1971, 6.



government singling out Calley for prosecution, while there are thousands of others who have killed civilians. 'Not William Calley, but the system which produced him is on trial. Every American is as much a part of that system as he is, which may explain why so many object to this "guilty" verdict.'<sup>92</sup>

On March 31st the *News Herald* published a picture of representative Jimmy Johnson who said Calley had 'guts for taking the dishonor this nation has now put upon him in the name of justice'.<sup>93</sup> A day earlier, on page five of the *Playground Daily News*, a huge headline said: 'Calley pleads for Soldier's Honor', in which his speech about dishonor is extensively covered.<sup>94</sup> Representative Joe Hubenak from Texas was quoted in the *Grand Prairie Daily News* saying Calley should be pardoned 'so that he can live with dignity and honor in the land of the free and the home of the brave.'<sup>95</sup> A resolution condemning the conviction of Calley was introduced into the House of Texas, which asked for a presidential pardon and which said: 'Lt. Calley served our country with dignity while men who have refused to be inducted into the service have not been convicted and are allowed to stay in this country, stirring up trouble, defaming the law.'<sup>96</sup> These are all examples from southern newspapers, displaying themes that I have not found in the northern ones. They all felt that Calley's honor was being affected in a negative way, and wrongly so. By supporting him they are trying to save him from losing face, something he has addressed in his speech.

On April first the Californian *Oakland Tribune's* biggest headline says: 'Should Calley Alone Carry Blame?'<sup>97</sup> In the *Redlands Daily Facts*, also based in California, the headline on Calley says: 'Who's really responsible? Calley decision stirs American conscience'. This article discusses the painful question raised by the Calley verdict about letting him bear the guilt for what happened. Many people feel the President who sent him to Vietnam and the generals who run the war should also be held responsible for such war crimes. University of Kansas student Daniel Evans said: 'There are many high officials, all the way to Johnson and Nixon, who are just as guilty of what was going on. There are other faceless people in the Pentagon

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<sup>92</sup> No author, 'In His Place', *Evening Observer*, 1 April 1971, 6.

<sup>93</sup> The Associated Press, 'Nation Rises Outcry Against Calley Verdict', *News-Herald*, 31 March 1971, 1.

<sup>94</sup> The Associated Press, 'Calley Pleads Soldier's Honor', *Playground Daily News*, 31 March 1971, 2.

<sup>95</sup> No author given, 'Local citizens disagree', *Grand Prairie Daily News*, 1 April 1971, 7.

<sup>96</sup> The Associated Press, 'Protests Echo Across State In Wake of Calley Verdict', *Corsicana Daily Sun*, 1 April 1971, 8.

<sup>97</sup> E. Salzman, 'Should Calley Alone Carry Blame?', *Oakland Tribune*, 1 april 1971, 1.

who are just as guilty.<sup>98</sup> Herb Baas, shop clerk in Cincinnati, says, in what the California based *The Press-Courier* describes as a typical comment: 'I believe it's the wrong person they've convicted. But how do you convict the federal government?'<sup>99</sup>

Articles which discussed the outrage on Calley's verdict often neglected to mention the people who did want to see him punished. The Florida *News Tribune* did devote a small section to people who criticized Nixon's decision to lower Calley's sentence. These were mostly military men from northern states who did not want the president interfering with military justice.<sup>100</sup>

The *Oneonta Star* was the only newspaper taking in the opinions from G.I.'s who are still based in Vietnam, another subject that was often neglected. Some of them see Calley as 'just another victim of a war nobody wanted to fight', which is why the government turned him into a scapegoat. They felt betrayed by their government for letting this trial happen and believed they were only punishing Calley to win popular approval, trying to please people after the media found out about My Lai.<sup>101</sup> This was obviously not the case, since Calley's trial was set in motion before the public learned about My Lai, and punishing Calley was definitely done a way to gain popularity.

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<sup>98</sup> B. F. Middlebrooks, 'Calley decision stirs American conscience', *Redlands Daily Facts*, 1 april 1971, 1.

<sup>99</sup> F.T. Benning, 'Calley Gets Life Term; Lengthy Appeal Seen', *The Press-Courier*, 31 maart 1971, 1.

<sup>100</sup> H. Jensen, 'Praise, Criticism Aimed at Nixon', *The News Tribune*, 2 April 1971, 1.

<sup>101</sup> G. Emerson, 'Calley verdict stirs storm of protest at home and abroad', *Oneonta Star*, 31 March 1971, 2.

## Conclusion

The apology William Calley offered during his stay at the Kiwanis Club in Columbus in 2009 showed him feeling personal guilt over what happened at My Lai in March 1968, something which a large part of the country did not agree with during his court-martial. In fact, strangely enough, supporting Calley is what brought a torn country back together.

What made the Vietnam War so special was the way journalism worked its way into it and how it was the first war to be covered by such an active and critical media. Extensive coverage caused a lively debate sometimes called 'the war at home'. My Lai happened after the general public opinion had already taken a turn towards the negative because of the Tet Offensive in 1968. More people had started thinking going into Vietnam had been a mistake and an overall sense of uneasiness with the war existed. The same course can be seen in the rise of critical media coverage. Of course many other points of view existed within this generalization of public opinion. As had been proven, war opponents (known as doves) were more likely to be older, female, black, democrat and/or non-Christian. I have brought another factor into this theory: geographical location.

Most war activists (or hawks) lived in the southern states of the USA. This pro-war stance can be explained by delving into the southern cultural history, all the way back to the pre-Civil war society. A culture of honor developed itself, intertwining with a culture of violence. Manhood and status became the most important virtues that must be defended by all means. Another part of the southern culture is their military-patriotic tradition, resulting in much of the army's installations being build in the south and warfare hereby leading to financial benefits. Other important aspects are xenophobia, nationalism and anticommunism.

The question I have tried to answer in this essay is how the influences from this southern culture can be seen in the responses to the Calley court-martial. The story on the My Lai massacre and Calley's court-martial found its way to the public on November 12, 1969. Doves and hawks had very different views, but interestingly they both came to the same conclusion: Calley should not be punished for what happened.

The doves laid the blame with the country's policy, My Lai had only shown how wrong the entire war was and Calley was not responsible. Instead his higher officers, the president and all Americans must share the guilt. According to them Calley was being used as a scapegoat. Hawks also said Calley was not responsible because he was following orders from his superiors, which was also Calley's defense during his trial. Nobody should be punished or carry guilt, because killing is a part of war and punishing a soldier for doing his duty outraged many people. By pressing charges against their own men, hawks felt as if America was sabotaging their own war and lowering morale for

soldiers still in Vietnam. This critique fits within the military tradition of the south and the southern tendency to condone violence.

I have discussed many of the actions people took to support Calley during and after the trial, such as petitions, rally's and fundraisers. There was even a pro-Calley song which was played regularly on radio stations across the south. People were ferociously sending letters and calling their local representatives to express their disapproval of the verdict, during which especially the southern representatives were overwhelmed. The outrage that existed in the south could be a result from southerners feeling the government has insulted its military and its honor, explaining why there was a bigger outcry from here.

In my own research I have found certain things of interest. For instance, in the southern newspapers I studied there were larger sections dedicated to the protests against the verdict than in the north. When it was covered, it was shown from all sides, with both hawks and doves being mentioned. It were the veterans and the people with loved ones in Vietnam who were most outraged by the verdict. Veterans claimed that if Calley was guilty, they were all guilty, since there has never been a war without its own My Lai. Some compare the bombers who dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima to Calley, and ask themselves why they are not judged the same. These opinions were most present in southern newspapers, since most veteran institutions were based here. Since the south provided one out of every three soldiers, the chances having a loved one in Vietnam were high, influencing the opinion of many people. It were the younger people and the students who often said the higher officials are just as guilty.

In the newspapers that held their own polls, quotes were published from all extreme ends of the debate. Interestingly enough, it was just the New York based *Oneonta Star* that quoted a man saying Calley should be punished severely. There was very little attention for the small part of the American public who agreed with the verdict, with one southern newspaper mentioning critique on Nixon's decision.

In four of the southern articles, special attention is given to honor and dignity, something Calley himself said he was stripped from. Two southern newspapers mention the medals Calley has received in the war, hereby also protecting his honor. I have not found these themes in any of the northern articles, where headlines such as 'Should Calley Alone Carry Blame?' and 'Who's really responsible?' were popular.

As is clear, geographical location has made an important difference in the aftermath of the Calley court-martial. Since the generally hawkish stand of the south can be traced back to a long existing southern culture, it is important to take this into account while studying public opinion.

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The photo on the cover was taken on April 23 1971, during his trial by Joe Holloway Jr/AP.

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