

MY LAI: A REFLECTION

Peter J. Riga

I think there are certain situations and events in human life that are so horrendous and evil that a sensitive human being is left speechless and pain-filled to the point of numbness. Such were the actions at Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Dachau, Dresden, Bataan, Sharpeville; now we may add another name in the long list of human brutality of the twentieth century—My Lai.

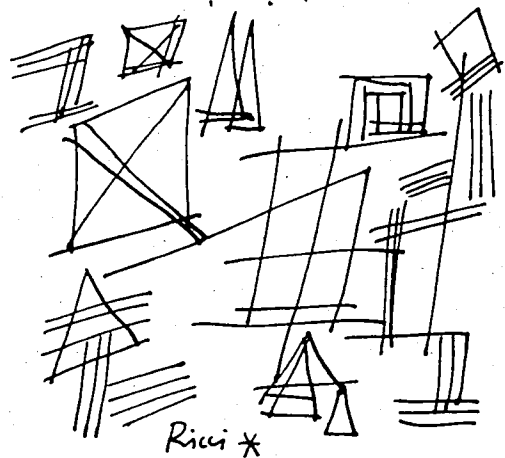
It is easy to condemn the particular men who perpetrated this crime against God and man, just as it was easy for the Germans after World War II to stand apart from what their government had done, to insist that it was not *they* who released the gas jets; so too Americans today are horrified and condemn some few men as scapegoats since it is clear that it was not they who gave such orders or who pulled the triggers of the M-16's and the 50-calibers. In both cases, this facile rationale is an escape by a whole people from the responsibility for crimes committed in an atmosphere which, by their tacit or vocal consent, made it more likely that such crimes could be committed. We are quick to condemn the sixty or seventy men and officers of one of the three platoons of the 11th Infantry Brigade company who allegedly committed the atrocity on March 16 1968, but we are angered by the suggestion that those who have supported this war also share some guilt as well.

It is with this form of moral reasoning, therefore, that both the Germans and American people excuse themselves and transfer total guilt on particular men. Yet, is it not true to say that the moral law has inscribed within it its own law of talion, so that those who disobey it must pay the price of this violence of disobedience in their own lives? How can we hope to escape responsibility for these atrocities—which have been going on in Vietnam for a long time—when we support a war whose price of “victory” means the death and injury of literally millions of poor people in a small country? What can victory mean here?

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What can morality and ethics mean to people who support such aims as this for the purpose of “stopping communism”? What possible moral ends could conceivably be served by dropping more tons of bombs on a small, rural, poor country than we dropped during the whole of World War II? What possible moral ends can be served by killing a ratio of civilians (it's that kind of war) three and four times the number of military casualties?

Does not such a war morally corrupt us all, directly and indirectly, with the result that when we see and realize a concrete episode of cruelty and brutality such as My Lai, we sense this moral disgust and corruption in our very being? For what is the ethical and moral difference between taking an M-16 and blowing the insides out of a four-year-old boy and dropping a bomb or shooting an artillery shell into civilians in a village which has been declared a “free strike zone”? There is none. But the nauseating picture of the dead women, children and old people who are the victims of the shelling does not ordinarily appear in the pages of the *New York Times* or *Time* magazine.



That this form of war has been going on for years in Vietnam is beyond a shadow of moral doubt. One has only to talk to a number of ex-G.I.'s to realize this. The “Pinkville” incident was known among American soldiers for many months before it came to light—that it finally did was due to a conscience stricken ex-G.I., himself a veteran of Vietnam. If one wishes further evidence, he has only to read the books *Air War Vietnam* and *In the Name of America*, both of which narrate similar atrocities taken mostly from American journalistic sources, not from the Communist propaganda machine.

We have been doing these things for years in Vietnam and we have not wanted to see or have not been permitted to see all of what we have encouraged and abetted in our names, with our money, through our own men. Now the mask of innocence has been torn away and we can contemplate our moral nakedness, now exposed to all the world but, more importantly, to ourselves. As a people we cannot escape the responsibility of this war, and the pictures of the dead women, children and old people of My Lai will not allow us to recede back into the ignorant innocence of past years.

Our putative messianic stance of bringing freedom and liberation to Vietnam is now seen for what it is: ignominious death and destruction for those who oppose us. For when the messianic fervor of violence is released in the new anti-Communist crusades we cannot hope to escape the butchery and slaughter that became an inevitable mark of other former crusades of past history. *Deus Vult*, cried Pope Innocent I in the eleventh century: God wills it! God, however, is not mocked and the moral law is not flaunted with impunity; who will pay for My Lai? Someone must pay as someone must be responsible.

Perhaps the morally sickest people of this society are those who simply point to the atrocities of the Viet Cong (and these have been many) and say that ours are not as big or as frequent or as bad. As if one atrocity can ever be morally greater than others! Since our cause is right, then these atrocities of My Lai, it is claimed, must be seen as mere accidents in the great crusade to keep people "free." This is a moral escape from the very basic notion that, given the means so far actually employed in Vietnam by the U.S. Government, "accidents" such as these are the almost inevitable concomitant. The My Lais are the mute witnesses against ourselves.

It is not without irony that this society calls out stridently for "law and order" in the cities and in the universities and responds so inadequately to the law of the moral order concerning bigotry, racial prejudice and unconcern for the poor both domestically and internationally. The moral law needs not a vengeful God to implement it since it has within it its own law of talion, which necessarily returns in the measure that we abuse it. Americans cannot call for law and order in Newark or Harlem or Watts or West Oakland or Hunter's Point and disregard it in Ben Suc ("We had to destroy it in order to save it," in the words of an American captain) and in My Lai. Ethics cannot be determined by geography, and breaking domestic law in Detroit can be consistently and non-

hypocritically condemned only when the moral law is observed in Ben Suc and in My Lai. Morality cannot be determined by whether it is happening "to us" or "to them" or because, in the phrase of another American general, "Orientals hold life to be cheap."

Massacres have occurred from the beginning of recorded human history, but from the same recorded past there have been those few voices which spoke out courageously against the violence and cruelty of men. So was it with the ancient prophet *Amos* in the eighth century B.C. in these stinging words against his own people:

Thus says the Lord:

For three transgressions . . . and for four, I will not revoke punishment:

because they have threshed Gilead
with threshing sledges of iron.

So I will send a fire upon the house of Hazael

. . . says the Lord God Almighty

Thus says the Lord:

For three transgressions . . . and for four, I will not revoke punishment:

because they have ripped up women
with child in Gilead,

that they might enlarge their border.

So I will kindle a fire in the wall of Rabbah,

and it shall devour her strongholds

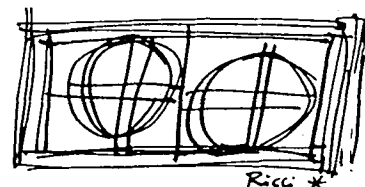
. . . says the Lord God Almighty.

(*Amos* 1:3-5, 13-15)

One simply has to translate Gilead to My Lai and the situation is the same, and so is the threat.

That voice of protest, stilled in *Amos*, must be continued against *all* violence and all war. If we are silent now, we are as guilty as all the rest. In the words of *Isaiah*:

For the Lord spoke thus to me with his strong hand upon me and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying: "Do not call treason all that this people calls treason, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of Hosts, Him you shall regard as Holy; let him be your fear, let him be your dread." (8:11-13)



Rici *