

**Interview with Meredith Lair  
George Mason University Professor  
Vietnam War Cartoon**

**1. Meet the Cartoon (4:11)**

This is an editorial cartoon by Paul Conrad that ran in *The Los Angeles Times* and was picked up by a lot of other newspapers. And the image itself was in reaction to a particular moment in history when Lieutenant William Calley—who was on trial for war crimes committed in March of 1968—was convicted and sentenced. There was a great deal of public reaction of varying kinds at the time and this cartoon was as much a reaction to the verdict as it was to the reaction to the verdict.

The whole trial was incredibly controversial and really it put the Vietnam War on trial. It put American values on trial. But the immediate public reaction to Calley's sentencing was an outpouring of anger from both the right and the left. Many people who had opposed the war felt that Calley was being scapegoated, that the wrong people had been convicted. And many people on the right who supported the war felt that a war hero was being prosecuted for doing his duty. People sent hundreds of thousands of letters and telegrams to the White House, 99% of them demanding his release.

What Paul Conrad is drawing here is that reaction: the cheering, the yelling, the flag waving. At the top of the ditch represents that swell of sentiment, that Calley was this hero and he was being scapegoated unfairly. You see mostly male figures and they seem to be wearing suits. And there are two signs evident. One says "We're With You, Lt. Calley." The other says, "Well done, Lt. Calley."

The caption is "The My Lai Ditch Claims Another Victim." It references the event of My Lai itself. And the ditch in My Lai was one of the most searing moments of the massacre. Conrad is clearly saying that the United States lost something very dear in that moment. They're on a precipice which I think is really interesting. This crowd is standing on the edge of a chasm, and perhaps the United States is about to pitch forward into it.

The figure at the bottom of the ditch is prostrate, is faceless. And that's the figure that's labeled "U.S. Conscience." And the ditch itself is kind of interesting because it's very deep and it's very dry. Having been to My Lai, I've seen the ditch in person and it doesn't look like this. The ditch that Conrad is drawing is as though the earth has been cut open and damaged.

This was a relatively popular war when it began in the early 1960s and there was a tremendous amount of support for it. That changed over the course of time. People started to question the war. They started to question the cost. That questioning had already begun. But it seemed to solidify what some people in American life knew about the war—that it was a very ugly affair. That being said, there was still a lot of people who very strenuously believed that communism had to be stopped, that it had to be stopped in Vietnam. And that the war ought to continue to that end. Evidence of that is the fact that Richard Nixon was elected in 1968 and then with a landslide again in 1972.

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Americans wanted their victory and I think that that is the crowd that Conrad is drawing. A rather unflattering portrait of the people that he felt led the United States into war and supported the war. They're cheering on and celebrating someone who took part in, of his own admission, the killing of unarmed women and children. And that is the consequence that Conrad is drawing our attention to. He's indicating that the United States has lost its way as nation; that if the American people are willing to rally behind a mass murderer, then something is seriously wrong.

It was a complicated moment and I think that Conrad chose to target the group that seemed to be dealing with it in the most simplistic way. To target the cheerleaders of carnage, to target the people who refused to see the humanity of the victims at My Lai.

## **2. Vietnam History (5:10)**

The Vietnam War has very, very deep roots. You have to begin at least in the 19<sup>th</sup> century just to acknowledge that this was a country that had this long history of resisting foreign invaders. The Vietnamese had thought they had a unified Vietnam under one emperor and then the French show up.

They were seeking colonies. They were seeking markets for their products, cheap labor, cheap raw materials. Seeking bases for their navy. So the French establish a colony in Vietnam. They basically use force to subdue the Vietnamese and to reorder Vietnamese society around French interests. There was always a current of feeling that some day they would rise up and they would seek their independence from France.

World War II comes along and that seems to present an opportunity. The Allies had said World War II is a war for democracy, a war for self-determination. One of the components of the Atlantic Charter that was put together by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill was about easing the burden on colonies around the world and giving home rule to colonized people.

The Vietnamese people read this very enthusiastically and they loved America in the '40s, and saw perhaps that the United States would be part of their liberation from French colonialism. The fly in the ointment in all of this is that the organization that was best poised at the end of World War II to lead the Vietnamese to independence was the Vietminh, which stands for League for Vietnamese Independence. The Vietminh was led by Ho Chi Minh, who was a communist, and the leadership of the Vietminh were communists.

However, the followers of the Vietminh were not necessarily communists. They were just ordinary Vietnamese people who wanted independence for their country from France. Who wanted to be able to farm their own rice and keep the proceeds of their labor and to have fairness in their judicial systems. But the taint of communism was there for the Vietminh. And communism worked in Vietnam in cultural ways because it's a collective society. It made sense to them in ways that democracy did not.

So we have this conflict after World War II and the question is: what's going to happen to Vietnam? What's going to happen to lots of little countries that have been taken over either by 2

Germany, or in the case of Vietnam, by Japan? The Allies decided to give Vietnam not to the Vietnamese people, but back to France. And this was very hard for the Vietnamese people who had supported the United States in the war. Some of them had actually had military contact with American operatives, had been providing aid and information to the United States against the Japanese. They thought, Ho Chi Minh among them, that the United States would support them.

Ho Chi Minh seized control of northern Vietnam in 1945, but not southern Vietnam. So over the course of a couple of years, he tried to negotiate for his country's independence from France. And war broke out in 1946.

This war was known as the Franco-Vietminh War, or the first Vietnam War, and it lasted from 1946 until 1954. And the combatants in that war were France and the Vietminh. Not Vietnam, but the Vietminh. And the understanding is that if the Vietminh win the war, they will establish a communist government.

The United States meanwhile doesn't want communism. Our policy can be summed up at that time as containment. If communism shows up in Korea, we'll fight a war to contain it in Korea. If communism shows up in Vietnam, we'll contain it in Vietnam.

And that policy lasts all the way through from Truman through Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon. Our course is really set in the 1940s when we decide that it is more important for us to help our French ally keep its colony and for us to contain communism than it is for the Vietnamese people to be independent. And so over the course of the '50s, we commit tons and tons of money in a process known as "nation building" to try and keep the southern part of Vietnam communist free. In the 1960s, Kennedy and then Johnson escalate and provide first military advisors and then combat soldiers, over a half a million of them at one time, to try and fight the communist insurgency in South Vietnam.

So when you arrive at My Lai, you know what you have is a divided Vietnam. North Vietnam was under communist control. No one was seriously advocating that we ought to try and make North Vietnam un-communist. But we were trying to maintain an independent, non-communist South Vietnam and we were fighting both the North Vietnamese military and the Viet Cong, the official name was the National Liberation Front, and these were insurgents that were trying to overthrow the government of South Vietnam.

### **3. Vietnam War 93:00)**

A turning point in the Vietnam War took place in January or February of 1968 with the Tet Offensive. Anti-war sentiment in the United States was swelling in late 1967 and to try and keep a lid on opposition sentiment, President Johnson and his administration embarked on a kind of pep talk campaign for the American people. The message to the American people was that we've almost got the communists licked and this war is almost over.

The enemy in fact was laying in wait and so January 31<sup>st</sup>, 1968, the North Vietnamese and their Vietcong allies launched a massive, country-wide assault on both American and South Vietnamese military and government installations. And the hope of the enemy with this

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offensive was that the people would join them and rise up, a mass uprising to evict what they saw as this American invader in their country.

So, the American people, having just been told that the war is almost over, are now treated on the nightly news to images of fighting in the American embassy compound in Saigon, to images of great carnage at the Marine Base at Queshan, at the imperial city of Hue. The fighting was very intense and most of it was wrapped up in a week to the American advantage, but there were mopping up exercises that unfolded over the course of the next several weeks. And so back home, people are thinking, this war is not over. We've been lied to. We've been had. And public opinion started to tank. Johnson's approval ratings overnight dropped.

In Vietnam, this really unnerved American soldiers because they are having a difficult time finding the enemy. And the knowledge that the enemy had been able to orchestrate this offensive without any awareness on the part of the United States was deeply disturbing to soldiers who were trusting that the guys in charge know what they're doing.

The gist of our strategy in Vietnam was attrition—to wear away the strength and will of the enemy to continue fighting. And the logic of that is that at some point, if you kill enough of the enemy and take enough of their weapons, deny them access to the civilian population, then they will give up at some point. The problem with that is that it's a rather open-ended strategy in that your victory is being defined by the enemy and by their will. So if the enemy says, well, hey, you know, this is our country and we're not going to give it up and you can fight us for a thousand years if you want, then you're going to have to wait a thousand years.

There was every evidence that it wasn't going to work, but that was what American soldiers were left with. So it was referred to as “search and destroy.” They were supposed to go into villages and somehow figure out who the enemy is and kill the enemy and protect the civilians.

#### **4. Background (2:11)**

In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, with tensions running high, orders came down in many places in Vietnam, to clear out the Vietcong. And in Quang Ngai Province, a task force was created called Task Force Barker of about 500 combat troops under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Frank Barker. One of the units in this larger taskforce was Charlie Company, and then within Charlie Company, you have this first platoon. The platoon would've been about 40 guys under the command of a lieutenant. In the case of 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon Charlie Company, under the command of Lieutenant William Calley.

And this company, starting in February, was pushed really hard to go out on patrols and try to engage the enemy. They were spending long periods of time away from base camp. They were enduring very harsh conditions in terms of rain and mud and sleeping outside and not eating hot meals. And they were experiencing casualties, but not casualties due to enemy engagement. They were getting picked off by snipers or by booby traps or by injuries. And there's a great sense of frustration that they can't find the enemy. They don't have anybody to blame.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, and perhaps the company as a whole, were not particularly well led. There's 4

evidence from February 1968 of a breakdown in discipline. That some random murders of civilians had taken place. That soldiers had been caught raping civilians and there was no punishment for this. And that raises provocative and disturbing questions about the nature of combat in Vietnam as a whole, but what we see of Charlie Company in the month of February, in the early weeks of March 1968, is a group of soldiers starting to unravel. So when they were charged with this operation to go into My Lai, which the military referred to as “Pinkville,” tensions were very, very high.

### **5. My Lai Orders (1:33)**

The order came down from Lieutenant Barker that they were supposed to go into My Lai and “neutralize” it. That was the word that was used. Barker gave his orders to the company commanders. The company commander of Charlie Company was Captain Ernest Medina and he gave a briefing to his men about what was going to happen on this operation the next morning, so this would’ve been March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1968. And there’s a great deal of debate among the men who were there about what Medina actually said.

Some of them allege that he just gave them their orders and told them to go in and to clean out the village. And some of them allege that he told them that they were going to go in and exact retribution for the casualties that they had incurred and that they were going to go in and leave nothing living in the village. A phrase that many soldiers used to describe the briefing, that “nothing would be left alive.” No man, woman, child, or piece of livestock would be left living in the village.

All of them agreed that the briefing the night before took on kind of a pep rally quality and that the names of the dead and the injured were read. There are debates about whether or not there was alcohol present, but there was definitely a mood of inciting, this idea that they were going to take revenge for what had happened to them in the previous few weeks.

### **6. My Lai (3:30)**

Vietnamese villages are complexes of little hamlets and this village was, to the Vietnamese, known as Song My. My Lai was just one of several hamlets in Song My village. 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon was charged with securing the landing zone which is a very difficult thing to do. It means you’re coming in a helicopter. Your guys are going to jump off and potentially, under enemy fire, have to clear an area that will be safe for other troops to come in.

1<sup>st</sup> Platoon comes in and they’re securing the landing zone, but no one’s shooting at them. In fact, everyone agrees that the first shots fired at My Lai were against an old man who was farming when the helicopters came in. He waved at them and they shot him. The fog of war is often invoked for what came after that. Maybe some soldiers heard shots and interpreted that as enemy fire. But they basically moved the 150 meters from the landing zone into the village and continued firing at any Vietnamese person they saw.

In the ensuing investigation, in the court testimony, there are many moments that are corroborated by a number of individuals. One of them is the old man who waved and was shot down. Another is of a woman who walked out of her house carrying her baby and she was

shot and then the baby was shot. Stories of people being shot and thrown in the wells. Stories of the livestock being shot and thrown in the wells to poison the wells.

The intelligence briefing about what was supposed to happen in My Lai was that somehow the “good” Vietnamese would be at a nearby market and the only Vietnamese left in the village would be “bad” Vietnamese or Vietcong. So it’s really hard to imagine that anyone could’ve taken that distinction seriously. There *was* a market and there were a lot of people who were either at the market or who were doing business in other villages. Or who were just out in the fields working. But there’re obviously just a lot of people going about their daily lives in the village. And so this 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon starts to move through My Lai and some of the soldiers clearly went on some kind of a tirade where they were shooting people at will, torturing them, and raping them.

At one point, a large group of civilians was gathered into the irrigation ditch, about 170 people. Calley told them, told some of his soldiers to “take care of them.” So these guys are standing there watching these villagers and keeping their guns trained on them. And Calley came back after a while and said, “I thought I told you to take care of them” and they said, “we’re watching them, we’re guarding them.” And he said, “no, I meant kill them.” And that was when the slaughter in the ditch took place. The only survivors to come out of the ditch were a couple of people who managed to hide under the bodies of their dead relatives.

There was one instance where a helicopter landed and interceded. There was a helicopter piloted by a man named Hugh Thompson and he had a good view of what was going on underneath him. And he saw American soldiers shooting at women and children and he landed near the ditch and put his ship in between American guns and Vietnamese civilians. He managed to pick up around 20 people and loaded them on his helicopter and carried them to safety.

### **7. Cover-up (1:50)**

Any soldier who was there that day would have had the ability to write a complaint or to let someone in authority know what had happened. Hugh Thompson was the only one who did. He spoke with his chaplain with the understanding that the chaplain would follow this up the chain of command. The chaplain in this case dropped the ball and didn’t pursue it.

Thompson also spoke with Colonel Henderson, Lieutenant Colonel Barker’s superior officer, and nothing official was done about the accusations. In fact, there was a great deal of effort to cover up what had happened.

The official report sent up the chain of command said that 128 enemy combatants had been killed in combat at My Lai and that three weapons had been captured. No Americans were killed at My Lai. One hundred and twenty-eight enemy combatants killed, three weapons captured, is a rather logic-defying outcome for a battle. The rationalization at the time would have been that the Vietcong scavenged their weapons. But if 128 Vietcong are killed and all of them were armed, it’s impossible to imagine that someone was absconding with 125 weapons.

A much more likely explanation for those kinds of numbers is that a massacre had taken place 6

and that a great many people who were unarmed had been killed. Despite the evidence presented to the colonels in charge, there is no official inquiry. Subsequently, the U.S. military bombed My Lai. And then several months later, they sent in giant bulldozers. So literally a year after the massacre, it was as though the village of My Lai had never existed.

### **8. Massacre Uncovered (2:09)**

The person who actually made the effort to tell the story wasn't even there. There was a soldier named Ron Ridenhour who was serving in Vietnam. He was not in Taskforce Barker. He had nothing to do with the incident at My Lai in March 1968.

At some point in the months following the massacre, he was having a drink in a bar in Vietnam with a soldier who was in 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon of Charlie Company. And this guy proceeds to tell the story of the massacre and how this Lieutenant Calley ordered them to mow everybody down. And they killed every man, woman and child in the village and hundreds of people were killed. Ridenhour was really troubled by it and so he started to seek out other men from the company to find out what happened. As a result of his own informal investigation, he starts to hear that the first guy's story is being corroborated down to the finest details.

And so in March of 1969, he writes a letter to his congressman who had just come out against the war. And he also sends copies of the letter to military and government officials, other congressmen, senators, the president, senior officials in the Pentagon. And so in April of 1969, the Army launches a preliminary inquiry.

By now, most of the participants had cycled back to the United States and many of them were no longer even in the military. But this Army investigator had the difficult task of finding and talking to almost every person who was there on the ground that day. He did hundreds of interviews and to his great dismay, found that it was even more horrible than they had originally thought. That preliminary investigation proceeded throughout 1969 and resulted in charges being filed against Calley in September.

Details about what Calley did started to come out in November of '69. The rumors were starting to emerge that a massacre had taken place, that perhaps hundreds of Vietnamese civilians had been killed by American soldiers. And I think people didn't want to believe that it was true.

### **9. Life Magazine (2:48)**

In the midst of that, *Life Magazine* purchased a set of photographs from an Army photographer named Ronald Haeberle. Haeberle had been with the unit that went into My Lai as an official Army combat photographer and he took photographs in black and white for the Army that day, photographs that he then surrendered to the military at the time. But he also had with him a color camera and he took his own set of photographs. And he hung onto those for months until the story broke. He sold the pictures to *Life Magazine*.

And I think it's important to emphasize to young people what *Life Magazine* is. It's big and it came every week. And *Life* was known for setting the agenda, for establishing what the water cooler talk might be. For publishing beautiful and provocative and newsy photographs. So

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anything that makes it into *Life Magazine* is kind of a big deal.

And so you're flipping through your *Life Magazine*, having heard these rumors or read a newspaper article or two about this Calley guy, and suddenly you turn the page and there, in Technicolor, is a pile of bodies. A pile of Vietnamese women and children. There's one photograph in particular that's become iconic of the My Lai massacre and it is of this pile of people in a road. On the top of the pile is a baby, a little, naked baby, with its bottom facing up. It's really hard to understand why the baby needed to be shot.

So the photographs pretty much silenced the naysayers who said this was a rumor. This was definitive proof, vindication for Vietnamese people who knew that this had happened. And it became the biggest story of the day, which is quite an amazing thing given that the war itself was incredibly controversial. Given that atrocities committed by the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese army had recently been unearthed in the city of Hue in Vietnam. It reignited anti-war sentiment. So what ensued then was the release of a lot of detail as the trials were underway and publicized with updates day in and day out. The people who cheered William Calley had seen those photographs and they had seen the interviews with the perpetrators and they had seen interviews with the victims in My Lai. And they had read the testimony in court. They knew what they were cheering.

### **10. Trials (3:12)**

There were actually four trials. There were many issues to decide. One of them was whether or not the direct participants, the individual soldiers who had done most of the shooting and the raping, could be prosecuted. That took months to determine and ultimately none of them were charged. It was determined that they were outside the jurisdiction of any American court. Calley was still in the military but about to be processed out of the military when charges were brought against him, so he was ensnared. And then the officers above him. It became clearer and clearer that a very deliberate effort to cover up the facts of the case had been made.

So you have an army that's divided against itself. On the one hand, you have these dogged investigators going around the country and doing what they can to unearth the truth. And military prosecutors working very hard to try and bring charges against these officers so that some justice will be served. And on the other hand, you have these officers, some very high ranking in the military, protecting their own careers and being protected by people in positions of power.

Eventually, the charges that came down were charges of murder against William Calley. I think he was charged with over a hundred murders because of the incident at the ditch where he ordered his men to kill. And then there actually came a moment where his soldiers refused to continue because there were only children left and Calley took one of their rifles and "finished the job." Calley's superior, Ernest Medina, the captain, was also charged with murder. He was the highest ranking officer on the ground that day who was charged. Above him, Colonel Henderson was charged with dereliction of duty, failure to report a war crime, and with perjury for lying to investigators. Major General Koster was charged also with dereliction of duty and failure to report civilian casualties. Medina was acquitted a few months before Calley's trial even began. Though he was there on the ground, though he walked through the village, he said

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under oath that he never saw anything untoward happen.

Calley's trial drew a tremendous focus and part of it was because of the defense that he used. He did not deny that he had done these things. In fact, he testified rather proudly about his conduct at My Lai. The Army law is the Uniform Code of Military Justice, says that soldiers have to follow orders and if in a combat or a wartime situation, they don't follow orders, that is a treasonable offense. So the defense went something like this: Calley was given these orders and under penalty of being shot or being prosecuted, he had to follow through. But the Uniform Code of Military Justice says that soldiers are not under any obligation to follow unlawful orders. So the question then becomes whether or not Calley and his men understood that the orders to kill unarmed civilians, women and children, were unlawful.

Another question that emerged from it was to what extent was My Lai typical? That question has never really been effectively answered. It's clear that civilians were killed. That most of the time nothing was ever done. But did it ever happen to that degree?

### **11. Lt. Calley (3:24)**

And there was just something so deeply wrong with this image of William Calley ordering his men to fire and then as their fatigue set in, picking off children one by one. That it really seemed to be the face of evil. The trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the architects of the Holocaust, had taken place very recently in Jerusalem and so there was a kind of public and international understanding of individuals committing nefarious acts in the name of some larger purpose. But I think Americans had always comforted themselves that Americans were good and they would never succumb to those impulses. Calley, you know, he was this nice looking, clean-cut American boy, by all accounts, mild-mannered and sweet and kind of simple.

Calley was a non-commissioned officer who had gone through a kind of accelerated training program because it was difficult to find enough NCOs to do the job. So the Army lowered some of its requirements in terms of intelligence, in terms of psychological profile, and accelerated the training. So Calley was what was known as a "shake and bake NCO."

But there's something deeply strange about it. He just seemed very disconnected from the meaning of his event. In the trial, there was an effort by his lawyers to determine whether or not he was insane. He fell within the range of normal, but that, I mean, that's more disturbing. We would like to believe that these men were psychopaths, but, in fact, they all seem to have gone back to life in the United States and lived quiet, unassuming lives. They didn't necessarily come back to happy lives, but they did come back to non-violent lives.

I think people were fascinated with him because he seemed like such a normal person. During his trial, he was kept on house arrest. And he got hundreds if not thousands of letters of support. He couldn't go anywhere, so he would answer all of his fan mail. At some point, he agreed to do an interview with some national publication and the photographer got Calley to agree for the cover photo to sit with Vietnamese children. He's sitting there in his uniform on a stool, smiling, surrounded by Vietnamese children and it is as though the irony of that is absolutely lost on him. Here's William Calley surrounded by Vietnamese children. How could evil could look like

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this?

Calley did not serve a life sentence under hard labor. On April 1<sup>st</sup>, Nixon intervened and ordered Calley be placed under house arrest. In August of 1971, his sentence was reduced to 20 years and then his lawyers continued to wrangle through a lengthy and convoluted appeals process. There was a great swell of opinion that Nixon ought to pardon Calley. The two hundred and some thousand letters that were sent to the White House in the month following Calley's conviction, 99% of them were in support of Calley and said that he ought to be pardoned. Nixon ultimately, beyond ordering Calley not to be incarcerated, didn't intervene, a very Nixon-sympathetic Army secretary did. The military court started to chip away at his sentence. First it was commuted to 10 years. It was commuted further and he was finally released in September of 1974.

## **12. Paul Conrad and the L.A. Times (1:47)**

Paul Conrad was born in the 1920s. He went to art school in Iowa and then from 1950 to 1964, he was the staff cartoonist at the *Denver Post*. He won a Pulitzer Prize for his work in 1963.

In 1964, he was lured away from the *Post* to the *L.A. Times* which at that time was just a regional newspaper. Los Angeles was experiencing a great deal of growth in the 1940s and '50s and the *Los Angeles Times* was growing right along with the city. It still had a reputation as a kind of stodgy, right-leaning conservative newspaper. So a fourth generation of the family that owned the *L.A. Times* took the helm in the early 1960s and wanted to make this a paper of national repute. So there were efforts made to beef up the budgets of the newsroom, to get better reporters, to put a more international perspective into the newspaper. And one of the measures that was taken was to lure Paul Conrad into being the staff editorial cartoonist. He helped them win one of the four Pulitzers that the *L.A. Times* won in the 1960s, and he went on to win another Pulitzer in 1984.

Conrad was known for being very bold. A lot of cartoonists had a more teasing sense of humor. What appealed to me and caught my eye initially was that he was not just targeting some narrow facet of this story, but was literally attacking the American sense of conscience, and the American sense of what is right and what is wrong. Everything that American soldiers are supposed to be fighting and protecting is gone.