THE MY LAI MASSACRE – VIETNAM 1968 (UPDATED)

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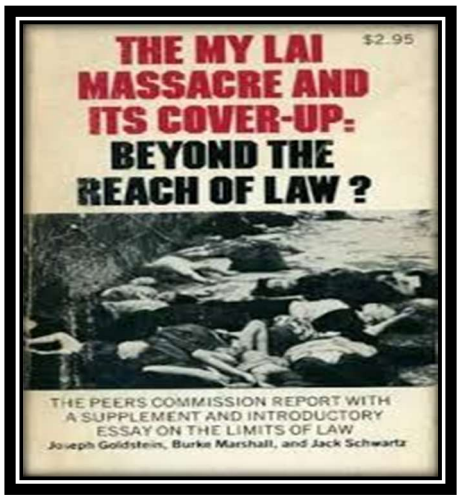


PART ONE

THE PHOTOGRAPHER WHO SHOWED THE WORLD WHAT HAPPENED AT MY LAI, VIETNAM ON MARCH 16, 1968

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY RONALD L. HAEBERLE

To view a video on this subject, ***please copy and paste the below link into your browser.***
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLuBtv1EtcI

CAUTION: GRAPHIC CONTENT COULD BE DISTURBING TO SOME VIEWERS

Ron Haeberle was a combat photographer in Vietnam when he and the Army unit he was riding with Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment — landed near the hamlet of My Lai on the morning of March 16, 1968. Villagers weren't alarmed; American GIs had visited the region near the central Vietnamese coast before, without incident. *But within minutes, an official Army report would later find, the troops opened fire.* In the hours that followed, American forces killed hundreds of old men, women, and children. They raped and tortured. They razed the village. When Haeberle's shocking photographs of their atrocities were published — *more than a year later* — the pictures laid bare an appalling truth*: American "boys" were as capable of unbridled savagery as any soldiers, anywhere.*

I first met Ron Haeberle in 2009 when I was a reporter at the Cleveland Plain Dealer — *the newspaper that, in November 1969, first published his My Lai photos.* That story on the 40th anniversary of that landmark exposé was his first major interview since the story broke four decades earlier. Recently, FOTO asked me to approach Haeberle and ask if he would *revisit the story for the 50th anniversary of the massacre*. He agreed, and he and I returned to one of the darkest chapters in American history, and his role in bringing it to light.

Ron Haeberle was drafted in 1966, after attending Ohio University, where he was a photographer for the school paper. He ended up in Hawaii with the Army's Public Information Office.

By the end of 1967, it was beginning to look as if his “tour” would end there — a disappointing prospect. “As a photographer, I wanted to see what was happening in Vietnam for myself,” he told me. *He requested a transfer and was sent to Vietnam.*

An American soldier stokes the flames of houses that were burned during the massacre in My Lai on March 16, 1968.

(Ronald L. Haeberle—The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images)

At 26 years old, he was older than most members of Charlie Company, where the average age was just 20. Charlie Company had been together for about a year before Haeberle joined it in March 1968, but Haeberle told me that when they landed at My Lai, he had just met the men in his unit that morning. On that day, they were primed for action; Viet Cong troops were reported to be hiding in the hamlet. That information was wrong. But in the end, it didn’t matter. Almost as soon as they landed, he said, “I heard a lot of firing and thought, ‘Hell, we must be in a hot zone.’ But after a couple of minutes, we weren’t taking any fire, so we started walking toward the village. I saw what appeared to be civilians. Then I saw a soldier firing at them. I could not figure out what was going on. I couldn’t comprehend it.”

The corpse of a Vietnamese mother and child killed by American soldiers during My Lai Massacre

In 2009, Haeberle admitted he had destroyed more graphic photos of My Lai.

(Ronald L. Haeberle—The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images)

His photograph of murdered villagers in My Lai appeared — in black and white, not in its original color — on the front page of the Cleveland Plain Dealer on Nov. 20, 1969. (Haeberle took the pictures not with his Army-issued Leica camera, but with his camera, a Nikon; this meant they were not subject to the same oversight.) Most of the victims at My Lai were shot; some were bayoneted. Women and girls

were raped and then killed. *At least one soldier later confessed to cutting out villagers' tongues and scalping others*.

My Lai was hardly the only instance of rape or murder by U.S. troops in Vietnam. But in terms of intensity and scale — and because of Haeberle's photographs — it remains the emblematic massacre of the war.

Today, Ron Haeberle lives about 40 miles from downtown Cleveland, in an attractive house on a quiet cult de sac. His home is simply furnished, clean, and orderly. Original works of art by Vietnamese artists, mostly abstracts, adorn the walls. One is a delicate needlework portrait of a woman, gracefully reaching an arm toward the sky.

The suddenness of the violence at My Lai was especially terrifying. Haeberle told me that he saw an old man with two small children walking toward U.S. troops, their belongings in a basket. "The old man was shouting, 'No V.C.! No V.C.!' to let the soldiers know he wasn't Viet Cong," Haeberle recalled. To his horror, the man and the children were cut down in front of him. *"A soldier shot all three," he said.*

It was more than a year after the massacre before Haeberle approached the Plain Dealer with his photos, but he had begun sharing his My Lai pictures, in slideshow talks to civic groups and even local high schools, after he returned home to northern Ohio in the spring of 1968.
The first slides he showed were innocuous: troops with smiling Vietnamese kids; and medics helping villagers. Then images of dead and mutilated women and children filled the screen. "There was just disbelief," Haeberle said of the reaction. "People said, 'No, no, no. This cannot have happened.'"

At one point in the killing spree, Haeberle recalls, he and Army reporter Jay Roberts came upon a group of villagers huddled in fear after troops assaulted many young women. Haeberle took a photo of a tearful, frantic mother — and as he and Roberts moved on from the scene, rifle fire exploded behind them. "I thought the soldiers were interrogating them," Haeberle told me. "Then I heard the firing. I couldn't turn to look. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw them fall."

The bodies of Vietnamese civilians who were killed by U.S. soldiers rest on a road in My Lai, Vietnam, on March 16, 1968
(Ronald L. Haeberle—The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images)

Haeberle's picture of terror and distress on these faces, young and old, during slaughter, remains one of the 20th century's most powerful photographs. When the Plain Dealer *(and later, LIFE magazine)* published it, along with a half-dozen others, the images graphically undercut much of what the U.S. had been claiming for years about the conduct and aims of the conflict.

Anti-war protesters needed no persuading, but "average" Americans were suddenly asking, what are we doing in Vietnam?

Awful images, not all of them captured on camera, remain with Haeberle to this day: a soldier nonchalantly shooting a young boy; another riding a water buffalo, repeatedly stabbing it with his bayonet.

The massacre and attempt to cover it up was first reported by journalist Seymore Hersh and distributed by a small wire agency, Dispatch News Service, in the second week of November 1969.

(Hersh won the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting for his work.) A week after Hersh's article appeared in dozens of papers around the U.S., the Plain Dealer ran its own story — along with Haeberle's photos to bolster the reports of a massacre.


1st Photos of Viet Mass Slaying

THE PLAIN DEALER

Exclusive

Cameraman Saw GIs Slay 100 Villagers

Two Vietnamese children on a road before they were shot by U.S. soldiers on March 16, 1968.
(Ronald L. Haeberle—The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images)

NOTE

If you are interested in an article that contains much detailed, unknown, surprising, and very interesting information about My Lai and its coverup written by Seymour Hersh, the reporter who broke the "My Lai Story" please copy and paste the below link into your browser. It is entitled "The Scene of The Crime" and is about his journey to My Lai and the secrets of the past. Long, but contains much interesting information not known by many Americans. The link is:

https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/30/the-scene-of-the-crime

An interview with Seymour Hersh *can be viewed by copying and pasting the below link. into your browser.*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJKgwZIqi9M

Haeberle said it was an automatic response to continue taking pictures, even as the brutality escalated. "As a photographer, my role was to capture what was happening during the operation," he told me. "I did feel that what I was shooting was historic, especially the carnage. I kept thinking, 'This is not right.' It was mind-boggling." (Haeberle's reflection, with the camera, can be seen at the top of one picture, as he photographs a corpse in a well. "They told me they threw him down there to poison the water supply," Haeberle said. *(see below)*

Today, trying to make sense of the unfathomable, Haeberle recalls the message imparted to so many soldiers before they arrived in Vietnam. "We were told, *'Life is meaningless to these* people,'" he said, leaving unspoken the rest of that sentiment: *The enemy is not like us. They're not quite human.*

By the late morning of March 16, bodies were scattered everywhere in My Lai. *Elsewhere, soldiers had herded dozens of villagers into a roadside ditch and shot them*. A few children survived by hiding under corpses. Haeberle says that he and Roberts attempted twice to tell Charlie Company Capt. Ernest Medina about what they had seen.

When Medina faced a court martial in 1971, he was acquitted. American helicopter pilot Hugh Thompson, gunner Lawrence Colburn, and crew chief Glenn Andreotta, who arrived during the massacre, were each awarded the Soldier's Medal for heroism on the 30th anniversary of My Lai, in recognition of their attempts to intervene and save villagers' lives, while risking their own.

When this photo ran in LIFE, the caption noted that Haeberle "found the bodies above on a road leading from the village." This image later appeared on the front page of the Plain Dealer.
(Ronald L. Haeberle—The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images)

Of the dozen or so officers and others in Charlie Company who eventually faced court-martial, only Lt. William Calley was convicted. In the spring of 1971, he was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life

in prison. *President Richard Nixon reduced the sentence to house arrest; Calley served three and a half years in his quarters at Fort Benning, Ga*. He is the only person found guilty in military or criminal court for the atrocities at My Lai; in 2009, he apologized. But Haeberle's searing photos, along with stories in the Plain Dealer and other outlets in the fall of 1969, sparked outrage and soul-searching in much of America.

The ditch where Lieutenant Calley ordered the killing of dozens of civilians.

And they have stayed with Haeberle for half a century. He returned to My Lai in 2011, where he met Duc Tran Van, a survivor of the massacre. Duc was 8 years old in March 1968, and as Haeberle spoke with him, through an interpreter, *he realized with a jolt that the woman he had photographed dead behind a rock 43 years earlier was Duc's mother, Nguyen Thin Tau.*

Duc told Haeberle that his mother urged him to run, with his 20-month-old sister, to their grandmother's house. When he heard a helicopter above them, Duc threw himself to the ground to protect his sister, who was already wounded. Haeberle had captured that moment, as well.

Duc and Haeberle have since become friends, and the Army veteran has visited Duc in Germany, where he now lives. "Duc has a small shrine to his family in his home," Haeberle said. "I took the last photo of his mother. *So, I gave him my camera, the Nikon I used at My Lai, for the shrine."* Haeberle has returned to My Lai several times and will be there again on the 50th anniversary of the massacre.

Haeberle is a thoughtful, plainspoken man. He never sought the spotlight, but he gets some solace knowing that his pictures mattered. When I asked him if the publication of his pictures from My Lai changed the course of his own life, his response was characteristically muted. “How can we know that sort of thing?” he asked me. “What can we know when we’re looking to the future? The photos made me more well-known than I might have been. But I just kept moving ahead.”

A group of civilian women and children before being killed by the U.S. Army during the massacre.
(Ronald L. Haeberle—The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images)

PART TWO

THE COURT-MARTIAL OF LT WILLIAM CALLEY – BEHIND-THE-SCENES LEGAL MANEUVERINGS

LT. WILLIAM CALLEY WAS THE ONLY AMERICAN CONVICTED FOR HIS ROLE IN THE MASSACRE OF MORE THAN 500 INNOCENT VIETNAMESE CIVILIANS IN THE VILLAGE OF MY LAI DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

Lt. William Calley, with his civilian and military counsel, heads toward a pretrial hearing at Fort Benning, Georgia, on Jan. 20, 1970. When the trial began on Nov. 17, it was the culmination of a legal process that had started on Sept. 5, 1969. He was personally charged with killing 22 villagers.

In a sense, the court-martial of 1st Lt. William Laws Calley Jr. started in front of my desk at Infantry Hall, the headquarters and academic center of the U.S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. It was late Wednesday morning on Sept. 5, 1969. Col. Earl C. Acuff, a deputy assistant commandant of the school and the man charged with running its day-to-day operations was breathless after his swift descent down the stairs from the office of the school’s commandant, Maj. Gen. Orwin C. Talbott, one floor above.

It wasn't like Acuff to be huffing and out of breath. A master parachutist, he wore the Combat Infantryman Badge with two stars, denoting service as an infantryman in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. During the Korean War, the ROTC graduate from the University of Idaho led the 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment of the 7th Infantry Division at Pork Chop Hill and Old Baldy.

In Vietnam, he commanded the 1st Infantry Division's 3rd Brigade. When Acuff was tasked in 1965 to evaluate the Ranger training program at Benning, he put himself through the course, becoming at age 47 the oldest soldier ever to graduate from the rigorous program and earn the Ranger tab.
I was deputy secretary of the Infantry School. Standing in front of my desk, Acuff came quickly to the point: "Who's the best writer we have at the school?"

I was used to dealing with all sorts of information requests, but this one took me by surprise. *"What kind of writer are you looking for, sir?" I asked. "What kind of project is it?"*

"I don't know all the details," Acuff explained. "It's a war crime of some sort. It's got interest up to the White House and the Pentagon. The way I understand it, there's a first lieutenant assigned to The School Brigade who's due to be released from active duty tomorrow. We need to flag his records today so he can't be discharged, and I need to appoint an Article 32 investigator and have orders cut today."

Under Article 32 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, a pretrial investigation is required before a "general court-martial," the term for a military trial involving the most serious crimes, can be convened. An Article 32 investigation is much like a grand jury investigation in civilian life. Given the severity of the alleged charges—war crimes—and the high level of interest in Washington, Acuff required a mature, skilled writer capable of conducting a thorough pretrial investigation and producing a clear, concise report about whether a court-martial was warranted.
I ran a mental checklist of the dozens of qualified officers serving on the staff and faculty at the Infantry School and analyzed prospective names while Acuff waited. Suddenly I had a name to offer him.

"Dewey Cameron," I said. Lt. Col. Duane "Dewey" Cameron, chairman of the Leadership Department, was the logical nominee. His department not only taught leadership but also supervised instructional programs in military writing. He was a highly regarded officer, a Pennsylvanian commissioned from Ohio University's ROTC program. Cameron wrote the best prose at school. He was a mature, unflappable, experienced officer who could cope with all the investigation's sensitivities.

Acuff repeated the name. "Dewey Cameron. Of course, that's it." He smiled, knowing the right choice had been made. He repeated the name, then turned and ran back up the stairs to inform Talbott about the nominee for investigating officer.

That afternoon, Cameron was appointed to conduct an investigation under the provisions of Article 32 into circumstances involving alleged murders of noncombatants at the village of My Lai 4 in northern South Vietnam's Quang Ngai province on March 16, 1968, by Calley, then a member of the 23rd Infantry Division (America).

Cameron's Article 32 investigation, which took several months, resulted in the court-martial of Calley. The trial began Nov. 17, 1970, and ended with a conviction on March 29, 1971.

The lengthy proceedings captured the public's attention and led to widespread condemnation of the Army and its personnel, further increasing the antipathy for the war in Vietnam. Although Calley was charged personally with the murder of 22 South Vietnamese civilians, as many as 504 may have been killed by members of his platoon.

Retired four-star Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, in an opinion piece published in *The New York Times* on April 2, 1971, called the revelations of the My Lai court-martial "grievous blows."

An organized cover-up had taken place within the America Division, presumably reaching division commander Maj. Gen. Samuel W. Koster, according to the findings of a commission headed by Lt. Gen. William R. Peers.


The Washington Post

FINAL

Calley Convicted of 22 Murders

Building Pay-Price Curb Set

102 Total Reduced By Jury

2 Justices Accuse Court of Bad Faith

Manson Jury Decrees Death In Gas Chamber for All Four

The cover-up began almost immediately. On the day of the massacre, March 16, 1968, reporters at the U.S. military's daily press briefing in Saigon were told: "In an action today, America Division forces killed 128 enemy near Quang Ngai City. Helicopter gunships and artillery missions supported the ground elements throughout the day." With careers on the line for American leaders at division, brigade, task force, and company levels, no mention was made of horrendous civilian casualties. Instead, enemy casualties were claimed.

The Peers Commission report concluded that at least 175 to 200 South Vietnamese men, women, and children had been killed, including perhaps three or four confirmed Viet Cong soldiers, although "there were undoubtedly several unarmed VC (men, women, and children) among them and many more active supporters and sympathizers."

The commission investigated 14 officers directly or indirectly involved with the operation, including Koster and his assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. George H. Young Jr. The commander of the battalion-size task force that included Calley's company, Lt. Col. Frank Barker, was killed in a helicopter crash before the investigation.

By the first week of September 1969, as Calley was preparing for discharge from active duty, it was clear to the Army that he had participated in some manner in the killings at My Lai.
Accordingly, the Department of the Army's chief of staff, Gen. William Westmoreland, previously the top commander in Vietnam, instructed Fort Benning to commence the Article 32 inquiry so that Calley could be retained on active duty if a court-martial was warranted.

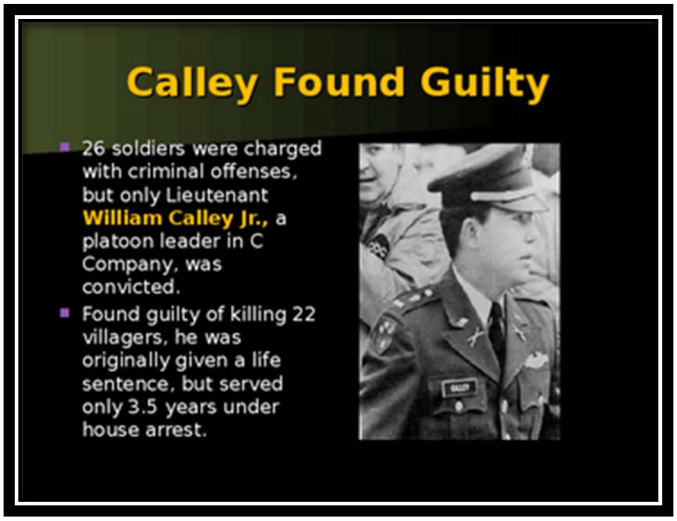
With the appointment of Cameron as the Article 32 investigator on Sept. 5, 1969, Fort Benning's public information office issued a nebulous press release about an investigation of an Army first lieutenant for his actions in Vietnam. The release was largely ignored by the news media.

When investigative reporter Seymour Hersh broke the full story of the massacre on Nov. 12, 1969, and it appeared in 30 newspapers nationwide, the American public was outraged at the atrocity. Time and Life magazines ran detailed reports with photos in late November and early December 1969.

Much of the American public's already waning support for the Vietnam War further eroded.

By then, U.S. troop strength in Vietnam, which had peaked at 543,400 in April 1969, was decreasing under President Richard Nixon's phased withdrawal program. In 1971, the troop count in Vietnam was down to 156,800.

None of those remaining wanted to be the last casualty in an increasingly unpopular war. *The Army was plagued by incidents of fragging, refusal to obey orders, drug abuse, and desertions.* In the continental United States, once-proud units such as the 1st Infantry Division at Fort Riley, Kansas, and the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) at Fort Carson, Colorado, became holding areas for short-timers back from Vietnam, with the consequent breakdown in military discipline.



It was therefore a small wonder that Ridgway could offer in *The New York Times* a litany of woes that revealed the sad state of the American Army in 1971, with the circumstances at My Lai "the most damaging of all."

Two faces of William Calley: (far left) at the Kiwanis Club in Columbus, Georgia, in 2009, where he spoke publicly about My Lai for the first time; (left) at a pretrial hearing at Fort Benning in 1970

SOME NOTABLE COMMENTS REGARDING THE SLAUGHTER

It is reported that when General William Westmoreland received news of the closure his response was, ***"Hell! It's a damn shame when knee-jerks can close down a respectable shooting range. Now what are my boys supposed to practice on? Each other?"***

The Daily Lama had no comment other than to point out that killing babies was a sin in the Void. Gore master Sam Peckinpah bought the movie rights but hesitated when it was revealed there was not enough movie blood available on Earth to fuel the film. *Subsequently, the project lay untouched until rediscovered in the digital age of unlimited blood by Sir Ridley Scott.*

CALLEY @ 74

THE BBC NEWS WROTE: Soldiers went berserk, chasing down horny bitches, both large and small. Families that huddled together for safety in machine-gun nests were given broken-glass-covered American candy. Those who emerged with hands held high were stripped of their Ao Dais. Elsewhere in the village, other stimulating atrocities were in progress. Women were being raped. Vietnamese who had bowed to greet the Americans had their mothers and daughters confiscated.

All the troops were having a ball, except for CO, William Calley, who couldn't find enough battle-hardened babies to obliterate.

By late morning word had gotten back to higher authorities and a "cease-rampage" was *ordered. My Lai was in a state of catastrophic post-orgy. Naked girls, body parts, and discarded condoms were strewn throughout the shattered village.*

But we already used up 16 clips and two RPGs, Sir!"
PFC Mendoza on Calley's order to keep shooting a dead baby.

"The My Lai villagers were armed, so we cut 'em off at the elbow!"
Capt. E. Medina

Pham Thi Trinh, one of the few survivors of the My Lai Massacre, stands in front of the monument honoring victims.

PART THREE

A POLITICAL WAR AND THE LEGACY OF BODY COUNT DIPLOMACY

(CONTAINS SOME DUPLICATE DATA)

On March 16, 1968, Charlie Company was dropped by helicopter into an area of inspiring beauty, My Lai 4 on the South China Sea. *One hundred landed in Army infantry uniforms primed to kill members of the 48th Viet Cong Battalion*. *One problem; there was no Viet Cong in My Lai 4 on that day. But the troops were ready to kill so they went ahead*. Younger, prettier girls were raped, then shot, then thrown in a ditch. Several of the women were pregnant. The bodies piled up, as many as 500. *Only women, children, and old men, all without weapons.*

Then the homes were burned, the animals were killed, sources of water were poisoned, and food destroyed. The fact that there were no Viet Cong soldiers did not matter.

Charlie Company reported to task force headquarters; that *128 Viet Cong killed. This piece of deception made it to Saigon where the report of the My Lai engagement was released* to the *world's press corps as a victory.* The lie lasted and lasted. GIs closed their mouths, not all, but almost all. *Not Ronald Ridenhour*, a helicopter pilot who saw it all and wanted something done. It was uphill for Ridenhour.

He was fought up the line, right up to Major General Samuel W. Koster.

However, after two years the truth surfaced and was made public. *By then General Koster was the Superintendent of West Point.*

***The highest-ranking officer who hid the truth of the My Lai Massacre was by then in charge of the moral upbringing of future West Point graduates*.**

After all this killing of the innocent was anyone punished? Out of the one-hundred killers and rapists, only one, Captain William Calley***. Initially, he was sentenced to a life term of hard labor for the killing of 22 at My Lai.*** What did he serve? About three and half years under house arrest. Why so little**? *President Richard Nixon helped him out.***

The documentation of the United States in Vietnam is overwhelming. *The United States was in the killing business initiated at the request of President Lyndon Johnson.* He set the policy. "Search and Destroy" was his baby as recommended to him by General Westmoreland. Johnson thought if enough enemy soldiers were killed the North Vietnamese would be on their knees and ready to negotiate. *Just kill*

enough and they will give up. Initially, Johnson thought it would take only six months. On the evening news in the 1960s and 1970s, Walter Cronkite reported the body count.

The body count was the number driving this war for the United States.

To the soldiers, it became an insane game in which they had no control. It probably drove them insane. *It did not matter if the dead were women, children, old men, or a cow. Soldiers found ways to pad the kill numbers. The body count was all that mattered. A high body count over time got you the promotion. A low body count and you lost your command. Just report the kills. Make it a big number*.

No need to explain why there were no weapons captured with the bodies. If the heart and mind are too hard to win, then blow the mind away. *It all goes in the body count. If she is Vietnamese and she is dead she is a Viet Cong. Rape her or cut out her tongue. Just count her dead. No other policy could be so ugly and create such disrespect for human life.*

The next question: could the body count theory ever win the Vietnam War? Could all of the killing ever have accomplished the United States' goals in Vietnam? I doubt it.

In 1954 the Vietnamese won a decisive battle against the French at Dien Bien Phu. Ho Chi Minh went to Geneva for peace talks with the French after that victory. The French agreed to leave Vietnam if Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel into North and South Vietnam for two years. *It was agreed that in 1956 free elections would occur and at that point, North and South Vietnam would become one.*

That was Ho's dream, a united Vietnam without foreign interference of any kind.

In 1956 the elections were blocked by the United States because the United States was certain Ho would win and all of Vietnam would become communist with Ho as the president. ***Yes, the United States blocked free and open elections.***

The miscalculations of Johnson and Nixon created terrible costs in suffering. Fifty-eight thousand American soldiers died. Some have estimated that three million Vietnamese died, including two million civilians. That would mean that for each U.S. soldier lost, fifty Vietnamese died. The victims of My Lai were about 0.17 percent of all Vietnamese deaths from our war in Vietnam. Elections. This is uncontested by all reasonable minds.