

US History

The Vietnam War

Learning Target:

I can analyze how American credibility in Vietnam was severely damaged by the My Lai Massacre.

9. The My Lai Massacre

Location-

- March 16, 1968
- Village of My Lai in South Vietnam

Background-

- Well known location of Vietcong activity
- Charlie Company had suffered numerous casualties due to the Vietcong
- Soldiers were eager to find the Vietcong and kill the enemy
- Charlie Company was under the command of Lt. William Calley

The Mission-

- Charlie Company was ordered on a "search and destroy" mission
- Objective of the mission was to locate and kill Vietcong soldiers

The Massacre-

- The mission turned into the killing of over 300 unarmed civilians
- Victims included women, children, and many elderly
- Reports surfaced of numerous atrocities including:
 - old men being bayoneted, at least one girl raped
 - praying women and children being shot in the back of the head
 - Calley had villagers rounded up in a ditch and killed with machine guns

The Investigation-

- Military investigation resulted in Calley being charged with murder in Sept. 1969
- Public did not find out about My Lai until Nov. 1969
- Calley claimed he was ordered by Captain Ernest Medina to kill everyone in My Lai
- Medina admitted to covering up the massacre but not ordering it - he was not convicted

Soldiers Conduct-

- As details of My Lai surfaced questions were raised concerning the conduct of US soldiers
- Military reports said that soldiers were being replaced with draftees who were not qualified or prepared to lead
- Many military leaders claimed if more educated middle class soldiers were in the army a man of Calley's stature (unemployed college dropout) would not have been giving orders

Conclusions-

- The publicity surrounding the My Lai massacre proved to be an important turning point in American public opinion. It illustrated the deterioration that was taking place in the behavior of the US troops and undermined the moral argument about the need to save Vietnam from the "evils of communism". Vietnam was not only being destroyed in order to "save it" but it was becoming clear that those responsible for defeating communism were being severely damaged by their experiences.