

81% Think There Were More My Lais

By Louis Harris

A plurality of the American people, 36 percent against 35 percent, disagreed with the verdict and would have declared Lt. William Calley not guilty of murdering civilians at My Lai. The special Harris Survey was taken after the case had closed, but before the court gave its decision.

A substantial 29 percent of the public could not make up its mind whether Lt. Calley should have been declared guilty or innocent.

The dilemma of many Americans over the My Lai case stems from the conviction on the part of 81 percent that they are "sure there were other incidents like My Lai involving U.S. troops that have been hidden." Therefore, the public agreed by 69 to 16 percent with the statement that "Lt. Calley and the others indicted have been singled out as scapegoats."

Recognition that Calley probably shot civilians was implicit in the judgment by 69 to 23 percent that the lieutenant was "not justified" in killing old men, women, and children at My Lai.

A lopsided margin of 76 to 6 percent felt that "soldiers at My Lai were only following orders from higher ups."

Most Americans clearly are convinced Calley was caught in a web of military orders and practices.

A cross section of 1618 people across the nation was asked:

"If you were a soldier in Vietnam and ordered by superior officers to shoot old men, women, and children suspected of aiding the enemy, would you follow the orders and shoot them or would you be more right to refuse to shoot them?"

THE HARRIS SURVEY

By Age	Follow Orders Right to Refuse			Not Sure
	43 %	41 %	16 %	
Under 30	34	53	13	
30-49	45	38	17	
50 and over	50	32	18	

The 43-41 percent division over what people would do if they were ordered to shoot civilians marks a change from results to an identical question asked in 1969 after the first disclosures of the My Lai incident. Back then, by 45 to 37 percent, a plurality of the people said they would have refused to follow such an order.

The key point is that the public saw the focal point of the trial hinge around whether the guilt was Calley's for following orders or with those who gave the orders in the first place. Three quarters of the people were inclined to feel the primary blame was not Calley's or the men with him on the day of the shooting, but rather those who sent them on such a mission in the first place.

Nonetheless, substantial numbers of Americans also hold to the view that shooting of civilians who are suspected of helping an enemy is justified.

Question: "Do you feel it justified or not justified for one human to take the life of another under these circumstances?"

	Justified		Not Justified		Not Sure
	86 %	9 %	17 %	4 %	
If a soldier shoots an enemy in war	86 %	9 %	17 %	4 %	5 %
If a person kills another in self-defense	79 %	17 %	14 %	9 %	
If a policeman shoots a criminal in the course of duty	77 %	14 %	14 %	9 %	
Executing a person who murders another in cold blood	57 %	35 %	35 %	8 %	
Shooting civilians who are believed to be helping an enemy in war	42 %	40 %	40 %	18 %	

A double standard is immediately evident from these results. A big majority of 86 percent feels killing another soldier in war is justified, but no more than 57 percent are willing to endorse capital punishment, executing someone convicted of killing another person.

The cross section was asked these six statements about the Calley case:

	Agree		Disagree		Not Sure
	81 %	6 %	13 %	18 %	
I'm sure there were many other incidents like My Lai involving U.S. troops that have been hidden	81 %	6 %	13 %	18 %	
Soldiers at My Lai were only following orders from their higher ups	76 %	6 %	18 %	15 %	
Lt. Calley and others have been singled out unfairly as scapegoats	69 %	16 %	15 %	15 %	
The press and TV should never have reported statements by soldiers about My Lai, because they only hurt our cause in Vietnam	60 %	30 %	30 %	10 %	
With incidents such as this, it is difficult to argue we fight wars in a more moral way than the communists	54 %	30 %	30 %	16 %	
It all proves our involvement in the war has been morally wrong all along	42 %	44 %	44 %	14 %	