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## COVER-UP

by Seymour M. Hersh

Random House, 305 pp., \$6.95

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*Reviewed by Arthur Prager*

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■ My Lai 4 is a part of American history now, like Yorktown or Appomattox or the shores of Tripoli. The names of Calley and Medina and the rest have become folk legend. The stench that polluted the reputation of the Americal Division has spread as far as West Point, with its sadly eroded honor system, its commandant deposed and forced to divest himself of an unmerited general's star and Distinguished Service Medal. Take your medicine, the cadet honor code says. Don't hide behind others. If you have erred, own up. Report yourself. *No excuse, Sir!* Until graduation day, that is. After that, it's every man for himself.

A harsh indictment? Perhaps, but Seymour Hersh provides plenty of evidence to substantiate it. He shows us the amazing picture of two generals accusing each other of being responsible for the most heinous episode in 200 years of United States military involvement, and a third general clouding the issue by conveniently losing all the pertinent documents in between expeditions of "gook hunting" (taking potshots at unarmed Vietnamese civilians from the safety of a helicopter).

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Mr. Hersh won his Pulitzer Prize for reporting the My Lai massacre in 1969. In this sequel he gives a day-by-day, event-by-event analysis of the massive and largely successful attempt by the Army to shield the officers and men involved. *Cover-Up* is a book that no one who has ever held a position of military authority or taken any pride in our country's armed forces will be able to read without a shudder of revulsion. An American atrocity? Senior officers who are venal, cowardly, untruthful, and careless of the lives of the men under their command? Combat commanders who allow their troops to rape, torture, and kill indiscriminately? Ridiculous. Anyway, our boys just don't act that way. (And if they do, for God's sake keep it out of the papers.)

My Lai 4 happened shortly after a group of jumpy, combat-fatigued GIs saw one of their buddies blown up by a mine. Something snapped and they launched into a veritable Old Testament orgy of revenge, carrying fire and sword into a Vietnamese hamlet, destroying virtually everything that lived. Public outrage triggered an investigation, but few of the men involved in this war crime were brought to trial. An officer who murdered more than a hundred people was given a life sentence, which was quickly reduced to

twenty years. The rest, due to "insufficient evidence," were let off with relatively light administrative punishments.

The March 16, 1968, massacre at My Lai received wide press coverage, but what about My Khe 4, in which a hundred civilians were butchered on the same day? Has anyone but Mr. Hersh ever heard of it? A small notice appeared on page 24 of the *Washington Post*, but no newsman found it important enough to follow up. Hersh interviewed a number of participants.

"We were out there . . . having a good time [recalled one]. It was sort of like being in a shooting gallery." He told of a machine gunner who, with a blaze of bullets, methodically tore one woman in half at the waist. And he told of a tiny infant, barely of crawling age, who became the object of a marksmanship contest. A rifleman had taken careful aim at the infant with a .45-calibre pistol. . . . He missed. "We all laughed. Then he got up three or four feet closer and missed again. We laughed. Then he got right up on top of him and plugged him."

Mrs. Nguyen Dhi Bay, a My Khe survivor, told Army Criminal Investigation Division personnel that she had hidden in a bunker, where she was discovered by GIs. Two of the soldiers raped her. One of them tied a heavy

OVER

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rope around her neck and sent her into huts and bunkers as a human mine detector.

The importance of the My Khe incident is that although three prestigious groups—the investigating panel headed by Lieutenant General Peers, the Department of the Army, and high Pentagon officials—had complete, detailed evidence of what had occurred, none of the My Khe killers was prosecuted. Indeed, all three of these groups did everything possible to prevent the American public from finding out about the slaughter that took place at My Khe.

Evidence presented to the Peers panel revealed that cover-ups (such as those resulting from My Lai and My Khe, false reports, altered or “misplaced” documents, and doctored body counts representing civilian and even animal dead as Vietcong were by no means unusual. Rather, they were matters of routine, means commonly employed to dramatize lackluster “combat” engagements or to win medals or promotions for favored or ambitious officers.

By the end of 1969 all but two of the reports and documents dealing with My Lai 4 and its aftermath—all of which should have been on file at brigade and division headquarters—had magically vanished. The sole recommendation made by the final Peers report after a 250-page review of the atrocities at My Lai 4 and My Khe 4 was that “consideration [should] be given to the modification of applicable policies, directives, and training standards in order to correct the apparent deficiencies noted . . . above.” The deficiencies to be corrected were lack of a procedure for reporting war crimes when superior officers were involved in them, insufficient training in the provisions of the Geneva Convention, and a permissive attitude toward “mistreatment” of Vietnamese.

Fortunately, eyewitnesses don't disappear as easily as pieces of paper, and Mr. Hersh has done a masterful job of investigative reporting, raking back into the light a number of facts the American public would rather forget.

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Arthur Prager, a former regular Air Force officer and U.S. Embassy attaché in the Far East, is the author of *Rascals at Large*.

#### LITERARY I. Q. ANSWERS

A9, Anderson, *Winterset*; B8, Gorki, *Lower Depths*; C 11, Hugo, *Hunchback of Notre Dame*; D7, Shelley, *Frankenstein*; E 12, Shakespeare, *Tempest*; F 1, Dickens, *Oliver Twist*; G6, Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*; H3, Hemingway, *Sun Also Rises*; I 4, Barrie, *Peter Pan*; J2, Rice, *Street Scene*; K5, Giraudoux, *Tiger at the Gates*; L 10, Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*.

#### DEATH AND THE MINES: Rebellion and Murder in the United Mine Workers

by Brit Hume

Grossman, 280 pp., \$7.95

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*Reviewed by Thomas Goldwasser*

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■ Brit Hume begins his brilliant account of the perils of mining (and of how little the United Mine Workers has done to protect its dues-paying members from those perils) by focusing on the disaster that struck the Consolidation Coal Company's Number 9 mine in Farmington, West Virginia, on November 20, 1968: as a result of a series of underground explosions seventy-eight men died.

One of the miners to come out alive at Farmington was twenty-six-year-old Jerry Davis. A West Virginian who had started to work in the mines at nineteen, Davis had witnessed a flagrant violation of safety regulations months before the blasts ripped through Number 9. He had seen a foreman lighting a match in a working area, where, Hume writes, “the danger of gas accumulation is greatest.” Davis reported the incident to his local's safety committee; Hume describes how the miner was rewarded for his vigilance:

When a hearing was held, the foreman denied the violation. Davis was called a liar and a troublemaker. Nothing came of the complaint, but Davis soon found that it was not forgotten. He was taken off his regular job and assigned to what miners call the “labor gang.” This involves unskilled work and is usually reserved for inexperienced men. Davis's job was to stand alone in remote passageways to monitor conveyor belts carrying coal to central loading points. Most mines operate on the “buddy” system, where every man has a companion worker who looks out for him. But Davis worked alone . . . and this bothered him more than the drudgery of the job itself. . . . Finally, after more than a year, he was given work as a roof bolter . . . in the far southwest corner of the mine, miles from any other working area. The spot was extremely gassy and the roof leaked so much it was like working in the rain.

The night before the Farmington disaster occurred, “excessive accumulations of flammable gas” had shut down work in Number 9 for several hours. On November 20 at five A.M. a deafening blast was heard above ground and debris erupted from the Number 9 shaft. Three hours later a second explosion shook the mine. A third blast, at ten that night, “sent flames hundreds of feet into the night sky.” That afternoon, West Virginia's Governor, Hulett Smith, appeared on the scene and reminded the kin of men dead or trapped