

THE HARRIS SURVEY

66% of Public Support GIs in My Lai Affair

'Shouldn't Be Courtmartialed If They Killed Under Orders'

By Louis Harris

Most Americans feel, by 66 to 15 percent, that soldiers charged as a result of army inquiries into the alleged massacre of civilians at My Lai in Vietnam in 1968 should not be courtmartialed but "should be let off if they prove they did the killings under orders."

Nonetheless, a plurality of the same public, 45 to 37 percent, said they personally would "refuse to shoot old men, women and children," even "where the civilians were suspected of aiding the enemy," and even "if ordered" to do so as a soldier in Vietnam.

Basically, most Americans are saying they might be incapable personally of killing civilians in a war situation, but in the case of My Lai the whole story has yet to emerge and individual soldiers should not be made "scapegoats."

Most people are prepared to write off the alleged behavior of some American troops at My Lai with the view that "war is hell," a guerrilla war especially, and many things happen which might not be condoned in normal civilian life.

Against International Law

Thus, in practice, most Americans seem to go against the international law established at the Nuremberg trials following World War II. In the trials of the Nazi war criminals, the ruling of the special international tribunal was that no individual member of the armed forces of any country could be excused from engaging in a "war crime," simply because he had been ordered to commit the act by his superior officer.

When the cross section was asked directly whether it agreed in principle with the Nuremberg trial ruling, the result was a stand-off: 39 percent in favor of the principle and 39 percent opposed.

Between December 10th and 15th, a cross-section of 1615 was asked:

"Do you think soldiers who killed civilians in My Lai in Vietnam should be court-martialed or let off if they prove they did the killing under orders?"

	TOTAL PUBLIC
Should be courtmartialed	15%
Should be let off	66
Not sure	19

The cross section was then asked to imagine itself in a similar situation:

"Suppose you were a soldier in Vietnam, and you were ordered to shoot old men, women, and children in a village where the civilians were suspected of aiding the enemy. Do you think it is more right to follow orders or more right to refuse to shoot civilians?"

	TOTAL PUBLIC
More right to follow orders	37%
More right to refuse	45
Not sure	18

Those who feel most strongly that it is "more right to refuse" such an order to kill civilians are people under 30, the college educated, women, and those in the higher income brackets.

'Follow Orders' Group

The "follow orders" group includes more of the less well educated, veterans who fought in other wars, and people in the lower-income sectors.

Individuals who voted for George Wallace in 1968 feel decisively, by 57 to 33 percent, that "it is more right to follow orders."

Those who cast their ballots for Hubert Humphrey divide 50-31 percent on the side of "refusing." Nixon voters divide narrowly, by 42-38 percent, on the side of going along with orders given them.

QUESTION—"Under the international law used in the Nuremberg trials after World War II, it was decided that a person was a war criminal who murdered innocent civilians, even if ordered to do so by his superiors. Do you agree or disagree with the Nuremberg trial law?"

	TOTAL PUBLIC
Agree with Nuremberg	39%
Disagree	39
Not sure	22

Although people might have been shocked by the disclosures over the My Lai incident, and the notion of American troops shooting civilians is one which is hard to justify, it is equally evident that most of the public sympathizes with the soldiers involved.