

# The Myth of the Hue Massacre

## Ramparts

Volume 13, No. 8

May-June 1975

*"Look, if you think any American official is going to tell the truth, then you're stupid. Did you hear that?—stupid."*—Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, Saigon, July 1965.

With the Saigon government's abandonment of Hue, and with refugees once more in flight, it was inevitable that the media would revive the memory of the "Hue massacre" of 1968. During March and early April 1975, wire services reported almost daily that "the bodies of more than 3,000 Hue residents were found in mass graves outside the city, executed by their Communist-led captors" (March 25). Don Oberdorfer of the *Washington Post*, in his "farewell" to Hue, recalled that "some 2,800 people were executed in Hue during the Tet offensive. Similar statements were made by the *New York Times*, CBS News and other media.

The "Hue massacre" is now mentioned in a virtually reflex action whenever people refer to Hue—understandably so, given the number of times the story has been repeated since 1968. But this reflex represents a triumph of propaganda over journalistic professionalism. For, like so much else which concerns the history of the Vietnam War, this widely accepted "fact" is a myth, originated by officials of the Saigon and U.S. governments, using phoney documentation and plain lies.

The myth of the Communist massacre at Hue has never been seriously questioned or investigated by the press. Why this has been so, and the process by which the myth has been institutionalized, is as important as the falsity of the myth itself.

### [THE MYTH]

The essential point of the myth<sup>1</sup> is that during their month-long occupation of Hue during the Tet Offensive of 1968, NLF and North

Vietnamese forces deliberately, according to an advance plan and "blacklist," rounded up and murdered thousands of civilians, either because they worked for the government or represented "class enemies." The basic documentation supporting the myth consists of a report issued by the Saigon government in April 1968, a captured document made public by the U.S. Mission in November 1969, and a long analysis published in 1970 by USIS employee Douglas Pike. The Saigon and Pike reports should have aroused suspicions by their source, their tone, and by their role in an extended propaganda campaign. But, even more important, the substance of these documents does not withstand scrutiny.

The primary source of information for the U.S.-Saigon account of what happened in Hue has been the Saigon army's Tenth Political Warfare Battalion. The reliability of this agency in such matters must be judged in the context of its past role in the forgery of documents and implementation of major propaganda campaigns around the theme of alleged Communist massacres. Colonel Nguyen Van Chau, who was head of the Central Psychological Warfare Service of the Saigon army from 1956 to 1962, revealed in 1972 that the famous "bloodbath" in North Vietnam during the land reform program was "100% fabricated" by the Saigon government.<sup>2</sup> According to Colonel Chau, a systematic campaign of vilification by the use of forged documents was carried out during the mid-1950s to justify Diem's refusal to negotiate with Hanoi in preparation for the unheld elections of 1956. This forging of documents was assisted by U.S. and British intelligence agencies, who helped gather authentic documents that permitted a plausible foundation to be laid for the forgeries, which were then distributed to various political groups, writers, and intellectuals for anti-Communist propaganda.

It was this same Saigon government propaganda apparatus which provided

the "evidence" through the Tenth Political Warfare Battalion on the "massacre" in Hue. In a report issued in late April 1968, it claimed that about one thousand executions had been carried out by the Communists in and around Hue, and that nearly half of the victims had been buried alive. Since the story was ignored by the American press, the U.S. embassy put

out the same report the following week, and this time it was headlined in American papers. The story was never questioned, despite the fact that no Western journalist had ever been taken to see the grave sites when the bodies were uncovered. On the contrary, French photographer Marc Riboud was repeatedly denied permission to see one of the sites where the Province Chief claimed 300 civilian government workers had been executed by the Communists. When he was finally taken by helicopter to the alleged site, the pilot refused to land, claiming the area was "insecure."

The captured document, on which many stories were based reporting that the Communists "admitted" killing some 2,900 people in Hue, was released to the press in November 1969. At that time Douglas Pike, a USIS expert on Vietnam, was in Saigon to push the Hue massacre story, at the request of Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. Pike, an expert media manipulator, recognized that American reporters love "documents," so he produced documents. He also knew that virtually none of these journalists knew Vietnamese, so that documents could be translated and shuffled around into conformity with the requirements of a massacre, so he did this. He also knew that few journalists would challenge his veracity and independently assess and develop evidence, despite the long record of official duplicity on Vietnam and the coincidence of this new document with official public relations needs of the moment—Mylai had broken, and organized peace activity in the Fall of 1969 was intense. Pike was

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correct on this point also, and the few indications of skepticism by foreign reporters were not allowed to interfere with the institutionalization of the official version.

Thus, in the Fall of 1969 the press once again headlined the refurbished myth, quoting from the captured document: "We eliminated 1,892 administrative personnel, 39 policemen, 790 tyrants, 6 captains, 2 first lieutenants, 20 second lieutenants and many non-commissioned officers." This sentence and document were accepted as confirmation of the U.S.-Saigon story of Hue, despite the fact that nowhere in the document is it claimed or even suggested that any innocent civilians had been executed. The use of the word "eliminate" was a deceptive mistranslation, suggesting killing, whereas the Vietnamese original ("died") had always been used much more broadly to include killed, wounded, captured, and forced to surrender. Furthermore, the quoted sentence was taken out of context of the document as a whole, which had nothing to do with the punishment of individuals, but was rather a low-level report, describing the military victory of the NLF in a particular district of Hue. But the press was too interested in reaffirming the cruelty of the Viet Cong to pay attention to such fine distinctions.

At about the same time, Douglas Pike gave to selected reporters a list of 15 categories of what he called "enemies of the people," said to be targeted for liquidation. But this phrase appears in none of the documents cited by Pike—it was his own concoction—and even more serious, the documents neither say nor imply that these categories of people were to be punished, let alone liquidated. In fact, the document, which has the title "Fifteen Criteria for Investigation," was simply one local cadre's notion of the kinds of people to be carefully observed.

The claim by Pike that the NLF had blacklists for execution which included "selected non-official and natural leaders of the community, chiefly educators and religionists," is pure fabrication. The testimony of Hue's chief of secret police himself contradicts this. According to the latter, the only names on the list of those to be executed were the officers of the secret police of Hue. In fact, the general strategy of the NLF conveyed in one key captured document provided by the U.S. Mission to one of the au-

thors in 1971, was to try to mobilize and gain support from the masses, organized religious groups, and even ordinary policemen.

Apart from the "captured documents," the support for the alleged massacre comes most notably from the finding of mass graves—but this evidence is as unconvincing as the managed documents. A fundamental difficulty arises from the fact that large numbers of civilians were killed in the U.S.-Saigon recapture of Hue by the massive and indiscriminate use of firepower. David Douglas Duncan, the famous combat photographer, said of the recapture that it was a "total effort to root out and kill every enemy soldier. The mind reels at the carnage, cost and ruthlessness of it all." Robert Shaplen wrote at the time, "Nothing I saw during the Korean War, or in the Vietnam War so far has been as terrible, in terms of destruction and despair, as what I saw in Hue." Of Hue's 17,134 houses, 9,776 were completely destroyed and 3,169 more were officially classified as "seriously damaged." The initial official South Vietnamese estimate of the number of civilians killed in the fighting during the bloody reconquest was 3,776. The NLF claimed to have buried a great many victims of the bombardment in mass graves, along with their own casualties, and a large number of dead civilians were bull-dozed into mass graves by the returning U.S. and Saigon forces.

An important feature of the evidence of the mass graves, as we noted earlier, is that independent journalists were never allowed to be present at their opening. One of the authors spoke with an American marine who was on the scene at one of the early grave openings, who claims that the bodies were not available for inspection, and that he observed old scour marks and tracks indicative of the use of bulldozers at the original burial (which the NLF did not possess). Perhaps the only Western physician to have examined the graves, Dr. Alje Vennema, found that the number of victims in the grave sites he examined were inflated in the U.S.-Saigon count by over seven-fold, totalling only 68 instead of the officially claimed 477; and according to Vennema most of the bodies were clothed in military uniforms and had wounds suggesting that they were victims of the fighting.

The Minister of Health of the Sai-

gon government, Tran Luu Y, after visiting some of the burial sites in April 1969, also expressed the belief that the bodies could well be those of NLF soldiers killed in battle.

In a context of vast numbers of civilians and soldiers killed by savage bombardment and intense fighting—and buried in many hastily dug and covered-over graves—the identification of the sources of the killing of particular victims would be difficult even if carried out by investigators of integrity. When done by propaganda agencies of established willingness to fabricate, carefully avoiding independent verification, and with wildly oscillating numbers of victims, the estimates must be taken with a grain of salt. But this is not done. Don Oberdorfer, in his book on *Tet* and in news reports into April 1975, repeats the assertions of the propaganda agencies that 2,800 "victims of the occupation" were found in mass graves.<sup>3</sup> Fox Butterfield, in the *New York Times* of April 1975, even places all 3,000 bodies in a single grave! Samuel A. Adams, a former analyst with the CIA, writes in the *Wall Street Journal* of March 26, 1975, that "South Vietnamese and Communist estimates of the dead coincide almost exactly. Saigon says it dug up some 2,800 bodies; a Viet Cong police report puts the number at about 3,000." There are no "police reports" that say any such thing; and it apparently never occurs to Adams that the 2,800 figure might have been adjusted to the needs of the mistranslated document.

Len Ackland and Don Oberdorfer have documented cases of individuals who were executed when they tried to hide or otherwise resisted the NLF early in the occupation. But these acts seem to have reflected individual decisions by NLF soldiers and cadres, rather than any policy decision to execute large numbers. According to residents of Hue, interviewed by Len Ackland in 1968, the number of executions early in the occupation was small. In the later phase, when the NLF was being forced out under military pressure, some officials and anti-Communist political leaders, earlier marked for "re-education," were executed, but the numbers still appear to be a very small fraction of the propaganda claims. And there is no evidence in documents, graves, or from individual witness which suggests any large and indiscriminate slaughter of civilians by the NLF at Hue.

By what process does a myth become institutionalized? How does it remain intact for the better part of a decade in a country with a "free press," supposedly interested in the truth, or at least presumably reluctant knowingly to perpetuate falsehood? These are important questions, and the history of the Hue myth adds weight to the view that even in a free society some truths are more equal than others, or, conversely, that falsehoods may be institutionalized if they are congenial to powerful interests and if no important countervailing forces press for the truth.

In the case of Hue, the creation of the myth was facilitated by the confusion of facts in a context of many thousands of civilian deaths, which included a relatively small number attributable to the NLF and North Vietnamese. In this situation, it was easy for experienced official propagandists to construct an edifice of "facts," using documents, statistics and official reports. But equally important was the gullibility and receptivity of American journalists to allegations of evil by the Communists. Their ignorance of the nature and tactics of the NLF, and of the Vietnamese scene in general, is striking; their willingness to believe without question officially produced "documents" that vindicate cold war clichés—in the face of the record of official dishonesty—is awesome.

In some measure this receptivity to official anti-Communist propaganda must be attributed to an unwritten but clear intellectual and moral code among correspondents in Vietnam, which insisted on a "balancing" of their disillusionment with the U.S.-Saigon side with a reaffirmation of the even greater evil of the "enemy." This "balance" has required the suspension of critical processes in considering allegations of evil by the Communists, especially in the face of "documents." (Even the revelations that Watergate and Vietnam tactics were part of a seamless web, as in the Colson-Hunt fabrication of a telegram implicating John F. Kennedy in the Diem assassination, failed to shake the media's official faith in official documents). The Hue massacre evidence has thus been

taken at face value up to this very moment in newspapers like the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. Equally important, perhaps, Frances Fitzgerald in her book *Fire in the Lake*—a work critical of American intervention and sympathetic to the Vietnamese resistance—presents the myth as truth, with a single citation to Douglas Pike as authority! This permitted it to be said that "even" the anti-war forces concede the truth of the Hue massacre. When James Jones, returning from a brief tour of Vietnam, repeated the myth in the *New York Times Magazine*, and was challenged on the point, he referred to Fitzgerald and Oberdorfer as his authentic liberal sources.

The myth has also been established overseas, Michel Tatu, foreign editor of *Le Monde*, for one, having taken it as truth for some years. In his letter proposing Sakharov for the 1973 Nobel Peace Prize, Aleksandr Solzhenitzin also refers to "the bestial mass killing in Hue" as "reliably proved"—and we can be sure he is not referring to the nearly 4,000 civilians mentioned by the Saigon authorities themselves as buried in the rubble created by American firepower!—which suggests that Solzhenitzin was solemnly informed by his Western friends that the Communists "admitted" the killings in authoritative "captured documents."

The myth of Hue is questioned in the U.S. but generally only in journals and books of small circulation and marginal publicity resources, lacking in direct access to 95 per cent of the population. The mass media uniformly accept the myth, transmit it to the general public, and refuse to examine its validity or allow challenges to surface from underground. *The New York Times Magazine*, for example, rejected an article on the subject by one of the authors (Porter) in response to the myth-propagating article by James Jones—not on the grounds of truth or falsehood, it just didn't suit. On Hue we see the *Times* in its Podsnap stance: "I don't want to know about it; I don't choose to discuss it! I don't admit it!" Mr. Podsnap had even acquired a peculiar flourish of his right arm in often clear-

ing the world of its most difficult problems . . . for they affronted him."<sup>4</sup>

But why are the *Times* and the mass media in general content to accept and disseminate a myth? A primary reason is that no important American power group is damaged by this fabrication; thus no "demand" exists that the media feel pressed to supply. There is an obvious analogy with the media's long disinterest in illegal CIA and FBI actions taken against the Socialist Workers Party and the anti-war movement—and their intensive investigative efforts and indignation when Larry O'Brien, Edward Muskie, and other leading citizens were the victims.

A second factor is that important power interests find the Hue massacre myth positively useful. The Government war party, of course, has found the myth of Hue to be invaluable. It has permitted the creation of a fearsome picture of a massive bloodbath if the revolutionaries were to win in South Vietnam, which has in its turn provided an important moral basis for our continued intervention as the "lesser" evil. At the same time, the myth has diverted attention from the real and massive bloodbath in which the U.S. has been participating and sustaining for a decade.<sup>5</sup> No matter how much violence we have perpetrated, with the myth intact the numerous media conduits of government propaganda have always had an automatic checkmate with a solemn reminder of the "Hue Massacre."

Not only the warmakers, but many other leaders and intellectuals want the Communists to be nefarious. It pulls us together, mutes any radical tendencies, and helps sustain the arms budget. And in the country at large, elemental nationalism is a powerful force, which makes their evils consoling, our own painful. Thus there is a positive demand for illustrations of Communist evil—as for instances of welfare abuses—and refutations of false cases would please few people.

It is an interesting coincidence that Mylai, a real and authenticated massacre, occurred at about the same time as the mythical Communist massacre at Hue. The Hue massacre was needed to help convince us that even if we were not quite as kindly toward the

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Vietnamese as in the rhetoric of intervention, they were worse. And it would have disturbed the public's equanimity and sense of patriotic virtue if the media had challenged this convenient offset to the evidence of our own acts. Thus, although untrue, the myth comforted a disturbed public.

But how do the media's revelations of the Mylai massacre square with this analysis? Mylai is an exception, explained by its special characteristics. Even in that case, however, it should be recalled that Mylai occurred in March 1968, the media publicity came more than a year later, and with much of the initiative from non-media people like Ron Ridenhour. It was also a dramatic event, with American participants and sympathetic personalities involved, making it newsworthy. In addition, once the story broke, it was hard to contain, for the Mylai revelations occurred at a time when many important people in the U.S. had had enough of Vietnam, and counterweights to the Nixon drift toward escalation were in demand.

More typical of the treatment of "alleged" atrocities was the mass media's suppression of the sensational revelations of thousands of murders of South Vietnamese civilians by our South Korean mercenaries. The revelations were made in 1972 by two Vietnamese-speaking Quakers, Diane and Michael Jones, who carried out an intensive study of only a portion of the area "pacified" by the South Koreans for half a decade. In the process they uncovered solid evidence of 12 separate massacres of 100 or more civilians and assorted cold-blooded murders running into the thousands. Their well-documented study was shown to Craig Whitney of the *New York Times* and many others. Whitney deigned to mention briefly the Jones study toward the end of an article taking a "balanced" view of the South Korean role, essentially regretful of their imminent departure from "providing a military shield in a poorly defended section of the central coast" (*NYT*, Nov. 9, 1972). That was about it for this story of a real massacre, extending over many years, and part of our program of saving the South Vietnamese from aggression.

Many South Vietnamese were killed at Hue in February through April 1968, the vast majority victims of the fighting, and especially the stupendous use of firepower by the U.S. in recapturing the city. The Communists killed some civilians during their occupation, but there is no evidence that they executed large numbers. In the context of the massive carnage of the Vietnam war generally, and the battle of Hue in particular, the term "massacre" applied to Communist killing of civilians at Hue is simply a deceptive propaganda ploy. The figure of 3,000 repeated in the American press is based on the unverified assertions of Saigon and U.S. propaganda, which rest in turn on the misrepresentation of documentary and site evidence.

The willingness of the mass media to swallow and institutionalize the myth of the Hue massacre reflects its real role in a political and social system adjusted to cold war conflict. In this case bias is not merely a matter of selectivity of issues and choice of truth, it extends to the acceptance and dissemination of official untruth. Despite its experience with official lying and forgeries, it appears once again that in the field of foreign policy the media will challenge the government only under exceptional circumstances—such as when their own rights or those of powerful interest groups are threatened, or when uncontrollable dramatic incidents force themselves into the foreground. Ordinarily the mass media will serve as conduits for government fabrications with only muted and respectful questioning, as in the classic case of Lyndon Johnson's periodic "peace moves," intended to manipulate public opinion by PR gestures, but swallowed in each and every case by the media as of substantive nature. On the Hue massacre, a fabrication that meets official needs, to dehumanize the "enemy," and is subject to no countervailing interest that might cause the mass media to challenge it, has been effectively institutionalized as an "official truth."

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FOOTNOTES

1. For a fuller, documented account of the myth and its genesis, see D. Gareth Porter, "U.S. Political Warfare in Vietnam—The 1968 'Hue Massacre,'" *Indochina Chronicle*, No. 33, June 24, 1974 (reprinted in the *Congressional Record*, February 19, 1975).

2. See D. Gareth Porter, "The Myth of the Bloodbath: North Vietnam's Land Reform Reconsidered," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, September 1973, pp. 2-15.

3. In his analysis of the Hue Massacre, Oberdorfer also relies on the evidence of defectors ("ralliers") long mobilized by the Saigon Political Warfare Department to make political points not otherwise readily supported. Cf. item in Footnote 1.

4. Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*.  
5. On the relative terror attributable to the U.S., Saigon, and the NLF, see Edward S. Herman, *Atrocities in Vietnam: Myths and Realities*, (Pilgrim, 1970), Chapter 2 and 3 on the historic and prospective bloodbath; see *Ibid.*, Chapters 4 and 5, and Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Counter-Revolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Fact and Propaganda* (Warner Modular, 1973).

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