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Charging a Cover-up of a Whitewash of a Massacre

Reviewed by
Ron Ridenhour

Books

In 1969 the reviewer wrote a letter to the Secretary of Defense and other highly placed persons that led to the revelations of the My Lai massacre and all that followed. He is now a student at Arizona State University and writes for *New Times*, an underground newspaper.

It came as a bitter shock to most Americans when the nation's young began filling the streets in protest against the Vietnam war, leveling charges against our own government and military that had traditionally been reserved for only our vilest adversaries. They were charges few Americans could accept.

But in November, 1969, Seymour M. Hersh, an enterprising free-lance journalist who specializes in covering the military, rocked the nation and the world with a series of articles exposed what became known as the My Lai massacre. The series won Hersh the Pulitzer Prize and later became a probing thorough book. Although most people refused to believe it, it began to look as if the worst charges made by the anti-war groups were true.

Now Hersh is back with a second book based on My Lai. It is potentially more explosive than the story of the massacre itself, raising serious questions that cut to the core of the military as an institution and laying open to question the integrity of our top military and civilian leaders as well as the American brand of justice.

"Cover-up" is based on 28,000 pages of testimony and documents gathered by the Army's investigation of the My Lai affair by a much ballyhooed blue-ribbon panel named after its chief, Lt. Gen. William R. Peers, plus Hersh's own extensive investigations. The purpose of the Peers inquiry was to discover what happened at My Lai, why it happened, and how it could have gone so long undiscovered. The

COVER-UP. By Seymour M. Hersh.

(Random House, 305 pp., \$6.95)

Army was reacting, according to Hersh, to charges of a whitewash. The public was promised full access to the Peers discoveries after the military trials, barring the usual "national security" catch-all provision. The trials are now over except for Calley's appeal, but the Pentagon still refuses to release the report.

The reason, Hersh says, is that the investigation of the whitewash is itself a cover-up.

- Hersh shows the Peers group collecting detailed evidence of a second massacre on the same morning by another company from Task Force Baker, Charlie Company's parent unit, but Gen. Peers denied any knowledge of it at a press conference announcing the investigation's results.

- He shows Lt. Calley sentenced to life imprisonment (later reduced to 20 years) while his two commanding generals are let off the hook by a fellow general in a deal that smacks of the "old boy" syndrome—even though each accuses the other of ultimate responsibility and both their testimonies are full of holes and hedging.

- He shows wholesale destruction and alteration of records by privates through generals.

- He shows the CIA's shadowy hand in operation and the part a CIA agent played in planning the My Lai operation.

- He shows a loose, unofficial but fiercely loyal alliance of field grade officers willing to break all the rules

to protect their fellow officers—even those they've never met.

Beyond these revelations, however, lies the deeper question of command responsibility, not only for My Lai but for all the undiscovered—publicly at least—massacres and atrocities of the war. Implicit in the handling of the My Lai affair by the administration and the Pentagon is the assumption that the massacre was an atypical incident, a kind of horrible aberration caused by a freakish and complicated combination of factors that could never be repeated.

"Cover-up" indicates that the atrocity syndrome was widespread throughout the Americal Division, at least, and that the military policies then in effect, policies designed in the highest military echelons made them inevitable. In the chapters Hersh devotes to the subject, one is struck by the identical line that issues from a variety of witnesses from numerous echelons: "Kill, kill, kill". If they are to be believed, the official emphasis was on body count and little else. There is hardly any conclusion left to draw except that as far as

the brass was concerned, what really mattered was not who was killed, but how many.

In Hersh's final analysis it becomes clear that not only was My Lai inevitable, but so was its cover-up and the cover-up's cover-up. Perhaps the most disturbing issue he raises is that what made it all so inevitable is integral to the United States Army today. And that raises some questions.

Hersh threads the story of My Lai and its sister massacre at My Khe, their investigation and the double cover-up, into a broad tapestry tightly stitched together with the most damning evidence of all—the testimony of the men who participated at every level and every stage of the whole sordid affair.

Years from now, when scholars attempt to understand the Vietnam phenomenon, "Cover-Up" is the one book to which they will all turn. And they will ask themselves, I suppose, why the vital questions raised by Hersh about an institution as powerful in and important to America as its army were allowed to go unanswered—as they surely will in a nation that has had the war up to here.