

Lesson 6—Law and Society

Lieutenant Calley and My Lai

Objectives

- To examine some aspects of American combat involvement in the war in Vietnam
- To discuss the American commitment to the prosecution of war crimes

Notes to the Teacher

The principles of rules governing the waging of war and the treatment of prisoners were established as early as the American Civil War with the publication of the Lieber Code, and advanced significantly during the post-World War II era with the Nuremberg and Tokyo war crimes trials.

Although the action at My Lai occurred on the morning of March 16, 1968, it was not revealed to the American public until early 1970, a time in which the domestic opposition to the war had intensified. The dreadful story of what happened started on the morning of March 16, 1968, when American artillery shells began to explode among the scattered grass shacks and small buildings that made up the tiny South Vietnamese village of My Lai. After the bombardment ended, United States Army helicopters appeared in the sky and landed quickly in a nearby field. A company of American soldiers led by Lieutenant William Calley scrambled out and raced out from under the whirling helicopter blades. The soldiers had expected to face fierce armed resistance from the Vietcong, but instead they found nothing but silence. No one shot at them, and no Vietcong could be seen anywhere. The soldiers moved quickly toward the village of My Lai. Many stories would be told about what happened in My Lai on that terrible morning, and each story was different from the next. One fact, however, stood out among all the conflicting accounts, a fact disputed by no one. In spite of no armed resistance, almost all of the four hundred civilians of My Lai—mostly old men, women, and children—were dead by noon of that day. Nearly all the buildings, houses, and grass shacks in the village had been burned to the ground, and most of the animals had been slaughtered.

The general court-martial at which Lieutenant Calley would stand trial for murder was

set to begin on November 17, 1970. The court-martial board was composed of six officers who ranged in rank from colonel to captain. The judge was Colonel Reid Kennedy, a career army lawyer. Lieutenant Calley's chief defense attorney was George Latimer, an experienced civilian lawyer and a specialist in military law. Captain Aubrey Daniel—a young, inexperienced attorney—led the prosecution. Lieutenant Calley's court-martial ended on March 16, 1971, three years to the day after he had led his troops into My Lai. It was the longest court-martial in American history.

