How Nixon Could Have Handled Song My

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 41 years, William H. Stoneman, chief European correspondent of the Chicago Daily News, was one of the great foreign correspondents of an era. He is now visiting professor of journalism at the University of Michigan. He furnished this exclusive analysis of the Song My killings for the Observer Newspapers.

He says one of his more difficult roles was bossing Observer Newspapers Publisher Philip Power when Power was on the Daily News foreign staff in London several years ago.

More seriously, Stoneman, in Italy in 1943, found the bodies of 22 civilians slain by the Germans, and relates: "I was personally responsible for having the bodies buried... and for erecting a monument to their memory, as well as for identifying the German lieutenant and sergeant who were responsible for the mass murder. They were later captured but were repatriated, unpunished, because of a ban on atrocity trials during the period of hostilities."

As you can see, Bill Stoneman knows what he's talking about.

By WILLIAM H. STONEMAN
Exclusive For Observer Newspapers

Millions of American newspaper readers have been horrified by the revelation that a group of American soldiers slaughtered several hundred Vietnamese civilians in the village of Song My, Quang Mgai province, South Vietnam on March 16, 1968.

At this writing the case is "sub judice," and the charges have not been legally proven. But the bare facts of the case appear to have been substantiated by statements made by participants in the affair which have been disseminated without restraint by news media of all kinds.

The Columbia Broadcasting System on Nov. 24 threw caution to the winds by broadcasting an interview with a 22-year-old disabled veteran named Paul Meadlo, of Terre Haute, Ind.

Meadlo, a member of C Company, 1st Battalion, the 20th Infantry at the time of the incident told an interviewer that he had personally killed "10 or 15" men, women and children on orders from 1st Lt. William L. Calley Jr. of Miami, Fl., and Staff Sgt. David Mitchell of St. Francisville, Fla., who was in charge of his squad.

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MEADLO ESTIMATED that 370 villagers were killed during the day. He said the company commander, Capt. Ernest Medina, was "right there" and did nothing to stop the shootings.

Meadlo spoke like an illiterate and admitted that he was deeply disgruntled because the Veterans Administration had reduced his disability allowance. His testimony about Capt. Medina's conduct also conflicted with the testimony of other people who were interviewed by news media. However, the substance of his remarks which were broadcast to the world gave the impression of being substantially true.

Ordinary citizens with no personal experience of war were shocked by the very fact that such an incident had taken place. Most understandably so.

Even a case-hardened newspaperman with personal experience of the London Blitz, the strafing and bombing of refugee columns during the German advance to the English Channel in 1940 and a particularly repulsive atrocity committed by German soldiers in Italy in the autumn of 1943, felt instant repugnance at the savagery and brutality allegedly displayed by members of "C Company."

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BUT THE INSTANT, secondary reaction of any experienced newspaperman with a knowledge of military matters and politics, was bound to be astonishment and disgust at the failure of responsible American military commanders to investigate and punish the perpetrators of such an act, instantly.

The fact that public revelation of this alleged atrocity was left to a free-lance writer, Seymour Hersh, 32, acting on an obviously irregular leak from a free-wheeling source in the Pentagon, who in turn was acting on information from an ex-GI named Ron Ridenhour, who himself had only second-hand knowledge of the massacre, is close to incredible.

Ridenhour, now a student at Claremont Men's College in California, first heard the story from Vietnam veterans when he reached Hawaii on his way to Vietnam. When he reached Vietnam he obtained some of the details from eye witnesses.

But it was not until March 1969, a year after the alleged atrocity, that he sent copies of a 2,000 word report on the matter to 30 important American officials and congressmen.

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THE 23-YEAR-OLD student whose home is in Phoenix, Ariz., presumably acted for conscientious reasons. He risked trouble in doing so because only one of his informants, Sgt. Michael Bernhardt of Hempstead, N.Y., agreed to corroborate his story.

The others continued the conspiracy of silence which had prevented the whole story of "Pinkville"— the GI nickname for Song My – from becoming public knowledge soon after it all happened.

Seymour Hersh who first circulated the story under the aegis of a comparatively unknown agency known as the "Dispatch News Service" had mixed motives.

He has been a long-standing opponent of chemical and bacteriological warfare and worked for Sen. Eugene McCarthy at one time.

He can be presumed to be an opponent of American action in Vietnam. He also was impelled by that highly reputable American institution called the profit motive.

According to Pete Lane of the Detroit Free Press Washington staff, he sold the story which he firmed up by talking with Lt. Calley at Fort Benning, Ga., to 36 different papers for $50 apiece.

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THE POINT IS that neither of these two men should have been required or permitted to "break" the story.

It should have been made known to the world following a speedy and exhaustive study of the alleged massacre by battalion, brigade and Vietnam command authorities with the full knowledge of the Pentagon and the White House.

That should have been done in the spring of 1968, openly and officially, rather than in November 1969, surreptitiously and in defiance of normal legal practice.

Lt. Gen. William R. Peers, chief of reserve components of the Army Staff, has been named to "explore the nature and scope" of the original army investigation into the alleged massacre; in other words, to determine whether the original army investigation conducted by the 11th Infantry Brigade in April 1968 resulted in a "whitewash."

The official verdict following that investigation was, according to a Washington report by Robert M. Smith to the New York Times Nov. 24 that, "no disciplinary action was appropriate and no further action was called for."

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WHATEVER THE FACTS, which remain to be determined by Gen. Peers, members of Congress have been widely quoted as charging that the Army hushed the matter up.

House Republican Leader Gerald Ford of Grand Rapids was quoted by Robert S. Boyd of the Free Press on Nov. 27 as charging that "the Johnson administration covered up the massacre last year," a charge which the White House said it had no evidence to prove.

Having made this highly serious charge, Rep. Ford later said, according to Boyd, that "he did not mean to imply that the Army secretary, chief of staff, vice chief of staff or Gen. William C. Westmoreland, Vietnam commander at the time of the incident, were involved in a coverup."

But, according to Boyd, Ford still affirmed that "responsible Department of the Army authorities in Vietnam knew about the Song My massacre shortly after it occurred, they investigated but took no affirmative action."

Sen. Stephen Young, (D - Ohio), was reported by Boyd as having "declared bluntly, 'The officers over there whitewashed it.' "

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FORD AND YOUNG may have been guilty of making irresponsible statements and the newspapers and networks which repeated their charges may also have been guilty of irresponsibility. But the impression of the average American householder was bound to be that things had been "hushed up." It hardly need be added that the Peers report "has to be good."

Doubts about the facts of the case were pretty well destroyed when an Army photographer named Ronald Haeberle came forward with a set of color slides which he had taken during and after the massacre on March 16, 1968.

Members of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees expressed horror when the films were shown to them behind closed doors, Nov. 26, 1969.

What the public was bound to ask itself was whether these same committee members had not seen copies of Ron Ridenhour's memorandum eight months before.

The public was decidedly within its right in asking why a proper, high level investigation of "re-investigation" of the charges was not undertaken immediately in view of the grave consequences which were bound to result if the charges were true or even half-true.

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ON NOV. 26, 1969 Robert S. Boyd of the Free Press quoted Ronald Ziegler, the White House, spokesman, as saying that "Defense Secretary Melvin Laird first learned of the incident in April 1969, 13 months after it occurred."

"The incident was brought to the White House's attention in August 1969, and early in September the President was informed," Boyd's report added.

Thus, it is established that the President and top members of his administration were well aware that the charges were being widely circulated long before the President's important Vietnam speech in which he made prominent mention of Communist atrocities.

We have not been retained to give the President advice on his public pronouncements. But an off-hand opinion is that he was unwise to the point of foolishness when he failed to mention the "Pinkville" report and to counter its possible effect by assuring the public that action was being taken.

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HERE IS ONE example of what he might have said, with honest candor, in order to disarm the critics when the Pinkville story exploded.

"The Vietnam struggle has been a grim affair, replete with the brutalities always associated with rebellion and guerrilla warfare. We have had the horrible example of Hue, where the Communists murdered hundreds of innocent civilians in cold blood during their occupation of that city in the Tet offensive. Many other less highly publicized outrages have occurred since the 1954 Geneva Conference, including the execution of untold thousands of peasants in North Vietnam in the interests of agricultural collectivization. Some 20,000 servants of the legitimate government in South Vietnam were assassinated by the Vietcong over a period of 13 years in an effort to disorganize local government.

"We ourselves have been unwilling parties to the grim process of making war, all the more terrible when it is a case of civil war in which nobody can tell friend from foe, a war in which the Viet Cong has terrorized whole populations into forced collaboration and even participation in ambushes and assassinations.

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"WE HAVE TRIED to limit the suffering of civilians, witness the partial bombing pause announced at the end of October 1968. The orders against brutality and violence against innocent civilians are firm and clear, whether the act occur in cold blood or the heat of battle.

"When, as must inevitably happen when young men are thrown into the savagery of guerrilla warfare, their normal instincts are blunted by fear, things of that kind have happened and we have acted.

"I have recently ordered reexamination of one alleged incident of this kind in which it is claimed that American soldiers deliberately executed innocent villagers in the village of Song My, otherwise known as 'Pinkville.' I can promise you that if the facts prove to be as claimed the guilty will be punished, together with any officers responsible for concealing the facts."

That's what the White House could have said.

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IN THE MIDST of the outcry which has been raised by the "Pinkville" charges, civilians may be tempted to lose track of the fact that while cold-blooded atrocities of the kind alleged in this case can be and must be prevented, by the proper exercise of military discipline and the display of firm control at all levels of command, no war can be humane.

Savagery is part and parcel of any war and it is difficult to control and to prevent completely in the case of guerrilla warfare.

Communist governments have always made a habit of displaying posters and photographs showing women and children armed with rifles and grenades. Viet Cong amazons have been touring the world for years, boasting of their ferocity in battle.

"Company C" had lost something like half its men in the days preceding the "Pinkville" affair. After a series of firefights in a jungle littered with mines and booby traps, infested with guerrillas disguised as peaceful peasants, shot at from behind by invisible enemies, the men of "Company C" needed iron discipline to keep them in hand.

The lieutenant colonel who should have been responsible for giving them their orders, as to how the village of Song My should be handled, was himself killed in action soon after the incident.

He, at least, will escape court martial.