



**The Vietnam War on Trial: The My Lai Massacre
and the Court-Martial of Lieutenant Calley
(Landmark Law Cases and American Society)
(Landmark Law Cases & American Society)**

Michal R. Belknap

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The military trial of William Calley for his role in the slaughter of five hundred or more Vietnamese civilians at My Lai shocked a nation already sharply divided over a controversial war. In this superb retelling of the My Lai story through the prism of the law, Michal Belknap provides new perspectives and keen insights into core issues about the war that still divide Americans today.

One of the most highly publicized trials of its day, the Calley case emerged at a time when protests against the war were growing larger, louder, and more intense. Well aware of this, the Nixon administration sought to downplay the My Lai incident, which military officers in Vietnam had tried to cover up in order to protect their own careers and reputations. It might never have come to light had it not been for the efforts of Vietnam veteran Ron Ridenhour and journalist Seymour Hersh. Their investigations revealed the full extent of the My Lai tragedy, further inflamed the antiwar movement, and brought to trial Lieutenant William Calley.

Unfolding the Calley case step by step, Belknap shows how our system of military justice actually works. His dramatic reenactment takes readers through every stage of the trial, from pre-trial investigations to actual courtroom exchanges among prosecutors, defenders, witnesses, and judges. In the process, he reveals how a court-martial conducted within the public eye transformed a purely legal proceeding into a political debate about the conduct of the war. Calley's trial clearly demonstrated both how deeply the Vietnam War had divided our nation and how difficult it was for any court to deliver justice under such intense media coverage.

Scrupulously fair to all parties involved, Belknap portrays Calley as both criminal and victim-guilty of the crimes of which he stood accused, but also an unintended scapegoat of the American military machine. His court-martial, for hawks and doves alike, epitomized all that was wrong with our involvement in Vietnam.

By reopening the Calley case, Belknap helps a new generation of readers better understand why the Vietnam War was so controversial and damaging to national unity. His book, however, also provides insights that apply well beyond events of a particular war, suggesting that the grim lessons of My Lai will continue to shadow the conduct of America's present and future wars.

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