

## *PBS: American Experience - "My Lai"*

**Directions:** Read through these questions prior to viewing the film in order to know what to look for. Once the film is finished, thoroughly answer the following discussion questions, using evidence from the film if necessary. You may answer on a separate sheet of paper if you choose.

1. How do you explain what happened at My Lai? How would you rank or weigh the various causal factors? What were the circumstances that created a situation in which, according to Widmer, "Finally, you just throw the rule book away"?
2. What should the rules of warfare be with respect to treatment of civilians? Who should be considered a civilian (or a non-combatant)? Should there be special rules governing the treatment of women or children?
3. What is the defense of superior orders"? When should the defense be available? What should be done in the case of ambiguous orders or when oral commands contradict written directives? Must the belief that a superior order is lawful be reasonable? What should a soldier do when he is given an order that he thinks is unlawful?
4. Was Calley simply following orders? What had he been told? What did he reasonably infer? Did he believe that his superiors were aware of his orders?
5. When Medina said that he gave no order to kill the residents of My Lai, was he being completely truthful? Was Medina aware of what was happening at My Lai when there was still time to do something about it? Should sins of omission be treated the same as sins of commission?
6. Which was worse—the massacre or the cover-up?
7. What relevance was it that atrocities had been committed against U.S. servicemen in the area in the days immediately preceding the My Lai operation?
8. Was Calley evil, or was he a more-or-less “normal person in abnormal circumstances”?
9. Were there any heroes at My Lai? What makes a hero able to act heroically? How can we make more people likely to act heroically?
10. Was justice done in the court martial of Calley? In the court martial of Captain Medina? Should others have been charged with crimes?
11. What do you make of Fred Widmer's statement at the end of the film "As far as living with the same of My Lai, I have no shame. I did what I supposed to be doing. The shame rests with the politicians and the military. Not with me . . . . It's a national shame."