

Pivot Point: Mi Lai

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Warfare is, and has always been, an integral part of human history. In the earliest records, we find that the warriors and the people all learned a very relevant lesson.

No tribe or nation can survive without the consent of the people. Sometimes, even most of the time, the consent is coerced. In fact, "That's the way it is and there's nothing we can do about it," may well be the oldest phrase in any one of a thousand languages.

This knowledge led to the development of the wartime strategy of demoralization. One warring faction would take any step necessary to break the will of the citizen to fight the war, and thus the government fighting the war would find a way to end it.

Some of these tactics, especially in the early stages of our civilization were quite gruesome. Early Europeans were known to put heads of vanquished warriors on pikes to warn others of their impending doom. In North America, the Indigenous tribes were well known for skinning opponents alive. Massacres were common as well. The native tribes did it to other native tribes and, when Europeans arrived, they did it to them at times. The Europeans returned the favor with gusto. In Central America, hearts were cut out of living captives. Early tribes in the Americas and in Africa would routinely kill all the boys in a vanquished village, thus removing the next generation of warriors. There are even references to this tactic in the Bible. The flight to Egypt and Moses' boat ride in the river are examples. This practice was also common in Vietnam. If a village was known to house Viet Cong sympathizers, the South Vietnamese army would kill the men and burn the village to the ground.

During World War II, the Germans used the tactic, sending buzz bombs over London on a nightly basis, hoping to demoralize the citizenry and break the support for France. The United States conducted similar operations. There were few military targets in Dresden, but it was bombed flat and burned with incendiary bombs.

Later, new munitions were developed with the same intent. Carpet bombing, bomblets, fleshets, and Fuel Air Explosives had one mission: demoralization. The most extreme examples of the tactic are the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The outcome was as predicted and most Americans accepted it as a part of winning.

The incident at Mi Lai changed that. The profile that the media gave to the massacre was so high and strong that the tactic backfired. Instead of resulting in a lack of support

for the war by the North Vietnamese citizen, it destroyed the support for the war by the American citizen.

The United States population had pivoted, forcing the United States military to find more humane ways of winning. New technology was being developed that allowed for pin-point bombing and new intelligence technology was developed to more accurately identify potential targets as military or non-military, thus avoiding many civilian casualties. At the forefront of these technologies was the computer, satellite photography, and electronic signal interception.

What we are witnessing today in Israel and Gaza is simply the most recent incidence of the strategy. The outrage in the United States by supporters of both factions, is little more than a reflection of the fact that, while the United States has pivoted away from the strategy, the rest of the world has not. Hamas used it in the attack on Israel. Israel is using it to respond.

To reiterate that famous phrase, *That's the way it is and there's nothing we can do about it.*

It will happen again.

Author's Note:

During the review process, I received the comment that it seemed as though I was "Normalizing" the atrocities. The fact is that I'm not normalizing these actions. They are already normal for the rest of the world and have been for millenia. My paper simply acknowledges their normalcy. We Americans no longer find that acceptable. Our outrage towards both parties in the conflict is a move towards making these tactics abnormal.

If we accept these atrocities as having once been globally normal, we can also accept the fact that we can continue to become more civilized.