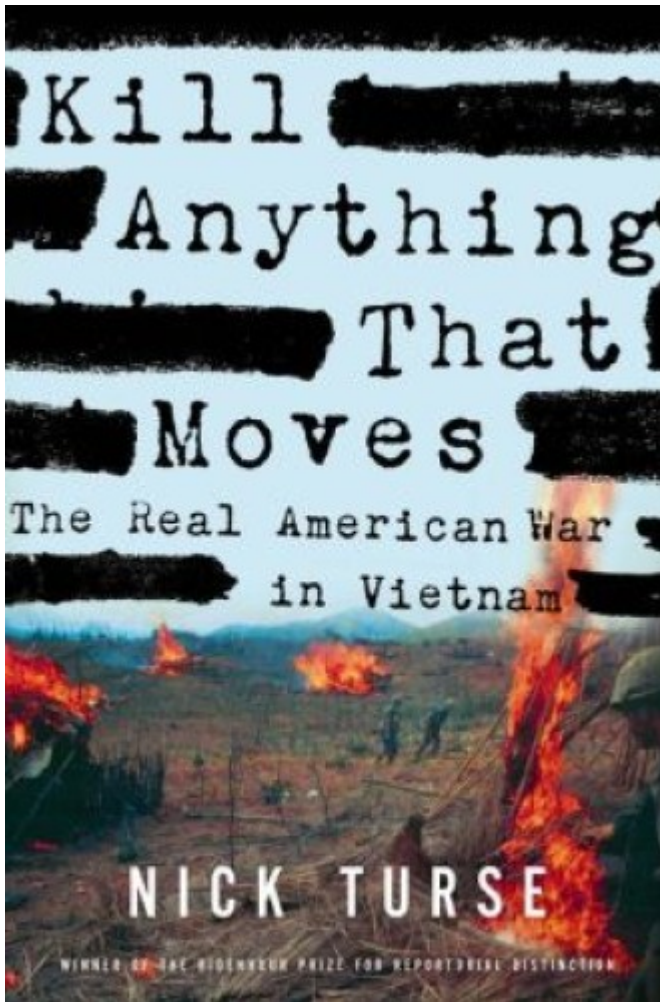


Kill Anything that Moves, by Nick Turse

reviewed by [Robert Westbrook](#) in the [October 16, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Kill Anything That Moves

By Nick Turse
Metropolitan

The My Lai massacre of March 1968—the murder of 500 South Vietnamese men, women and children by U.S. Army soldiers led by Lieutenant William Calley—is the only American war crime of the Vietnam War to survive the conflict in popular

memory and in a great deal of historical scholarship. But this singularity is misleading.

As most Americans saw it, something went terribly wrong at My Lai. The massacre of innocent civilians was not the American way of war, and Americans recoiled in horror. Few contemplated a more horrible prospect: that My Lai was not aberrant but symptomatic of American military practice in the Vietnamese countryside—that My Lai was, in a nutshell, the American way of war.

Such is the prospect that Nick Turse would have us face, and skeptics will be hard pressed to dispute the evidence he has amassed for it.

Turse began his research with the serendipitous discovery of the files of a secret Pentagon task force, the Vietnam War Crimes Working Group. He discovered that the archives of this ad hoc agency, set up after My Lai to control further scandal, contained around 300 allegations of atrocities substantiated by military authorities themselves. Even though many court-martial records are missing or were destroyed, Turse was, on the basis of this official military source alone, able to conclude that “atrocities were committed by members of every infantry, cavalry, and airborne division, and every separate brigade that deployed without the rest of its division—that is, every major army unit in Vietnam.”

Building out from this discovery, Turse dug into other archives, interviewed veterans, tracked down contemporaneous press accounts and made a trip to Vietnam in search of Vietnamese eyewitnesses. This latter research expedition proved far more revealing than he had anticipated: “I thought I was looking for a needle in a haystack; what I found was a haystack of needles.”

Turse places this disturbing qualitative material within the frame of similarly appalling statistical evidence of the destruction of civilian lives. Numbers of civilian casualties are, he admits, difficult to estimate. And they must largely be estimated because the one major statistic that a statistics-obsessed American command in Vietnam deliberately failed to collect was that of noncombatant casualties. Historians of the war sympathetic to its cause have put the number at 1.1 million, while its sharpest critics put the estimate at 7.2 million. Turse argues that the best evidence indicates that 2 million civilians were killed and millions more wounded (out of a total South Vietnamese population of just 19 million people).

A tragedy, one might say—a telling reminder of the horrifying, unintended consequences of modern warfare. But no. Turse's central claim is that this slaughter "was neither accidental nor unforeseeable." The American war in Vietnam was a war on the Vietnamese people. The millions of civilians killed there by American troops were not "collateral damage" but the intended targets of U.S. firepower. Indeed, one might even say that enemy combatants were the collateral targets there. The de facto American policy was one of kill anything that moves, and sort out the dead later.

At the heart of Turse's explanation for this policy was the overriding importance of "body count" to American strategy. Although he does not quite say it this way, one can regard U.S. military doctrine in Vietnam as a grisly example of rational choice theory in action—one forged by technocratic minds such as that of Robert McNamara, who worshiped at the church of game theory. Simply put, American strategy was to kill or wound enough enemy troops so as to exceed the capacity of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese to replace them. Once this tipping point (the "crossover point") had been reached, the argument went, the enemy would rationally perceive the futility of its cause and give up.

Consequently, body count, the number of enemy dead and wounded-beyond-repair, was the crucial metric for policy makers, and this measure of success was conveyed to military commanders and grunts on the ground. Incentives were keyed to it: those who delivered impressive body counts were rewarded with promotions, furloughs and other goodies; those who did not were not.

As Turse says, "The war managers, of course, gave little thought to what this strategy—basing the entire American military effort on such an indicator as Vietnamese corpses—might mean for Vietnamese civilians." But the consequences of this "incentivizing of death" were predictable. The "rational" if not the just choice for an American soldier was to eschew the difficult and sometimes dangerous task of distinguishing combatants and noncombatants before pulling the trigger—in favor of killing Vietnamese people indiscriminately and then judging as many of them to be combatants posthumously as one could plausibly claim. And since all concerned were under pressure to deliver elevated body counts, few in the chain of command demanded much plausibility. For example, war managers turned a blind eye to operations that generated strikingly disparate accounts of enemy killed and weapons recovered.

An obsession with body count also created incentives for overkill. The constraint of protecting noncombatants often requires restraint and precision. Freed from this constraint, troops have every incentive to respond to threats with disproportionate firepower:

A sound from the tree line? Hose it down with machine gun fire. A sniper shot from the ville? Hit the hamlet with napalm. A hunch that an area might have enemy fighters in it? Plaster it with artillery fire. A Saigon-appointed Vietnamese official identifies a village as an enemy stronghold? Bomb it back to the Stone Age.

Of course, the intentional murder of civilians was not official American policy. Troops were perfunctorily provided formal lectures of an hour or so on the principle of noncombatant immunity from attack. But the informal and operative principle in the field was quite otherwise. As psychiatrist Robert Lifton said, all the evidence points to “a striking contrast between the formal instructions (given rarely if at all) to kill only military adversaries, and the informal message (loud and clear) to kill just about everyone.” The purpose of lectures on just warfare was not to promote just warfare but to provide cover for those directing a war that violated many of its tenets.

One of the signal features of Turse’s account is that it directs our attention not only to incidents similar in kind if not in scope to My Lai but also to the terror that Americans rained on Vietnamese civilians from the air by way of helicopters, bombers and artillery. Much of the violence perpetrated against noncombatants in Vietnam was violence at a distance—a safe distance—for the perpetrators if not their victims. Unchallenged by any antiaircraft defenses in the South, the air campaign there considerably outstripped the more familiar bombing in the North. Vietnam, General Maxwell Taylor remarked, was an important “laboratory” for the development and refinement of destructive technologies: napalm, white phosphorus, cluster bombs, attack helicopters, chemical defoliants and more. As one general put it, the prevailing ethos was “Waste ammunition like a millionaire and lives like a miser”—by which, of course, he meant American lives.

Turse brings home the significance of such relatively detached killing in his most eye-opening case study, the story of Operation Speedy Express, which was headed by the “Butcher of the Delta,” General Julian Ewell, leader of the Ninth Infantry Division in the Mekong Delta and the master of industrial-strength slaughter in Vietnam. No one preached the gospel of the body count with greater evangelical

fervor than he did, and those under his command produced a staggering death toll, most of it by way of helicopter gunships, bombers and artillery fire. At the time of Operation Speedy Express (December 1968 to May 1969), the average “kill ratio” of enemies killed to Americans killed in the war as a whole was 8 to 1. Ewell oversaw a kill ratio that eventually reached an astonishing 134 to 1. Even so, the number of enemy forces in the region did not decline; most of those killed were civilians who paid the price of Ewell’s pursuit of an additional star.

If American military and political leaders failed to win the war in Vietnam, they were quite successful in suppressing full knowledge of its cost to Vietnamese civilians. The only aberrant thing about My Lai was the “unprecedented and unparalleled investigation and exposure” of its horrors. The Vietnam War Crimes Working Group served not to expose war crimes but to keep the lid on exposure of war crimes. For 40 years it served this purpose well, neglecting only to destroy its files.

The Ninth Infantry Division was the first to leave Vietnam, reflecting perhaps a certain unease at the Pentagon about the mountain of civilian corpses the division had zealously amassed. But despite reports of the disproportionate havoc that Ewell wreaked in the Delta, he was not brought up on charges or even carefully investigated. General William Westmoreland himself ensured that no such investigation was launched. Instead, Ewell won the promotion he so fiercely desired and found his way to the highest echelons of the military bureaucracy. He was commissioned to coauthor, with his equally ambitious and bloodthirsty subordinate Ira Hunt, an account of his methods in the Delta for the instruction of future commanders. Such methods, they said, had succeeded in “‘unbrutalizing’ the war”—a reminder that truth and plain-speaking must also be numbered among the casualties of the Vietnam War.

I conclude with a few words from Thomas Jefferson, which Turse’s searing book brought to mind. They were uttered in a different context but are nonetheless relevant here: “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever.”