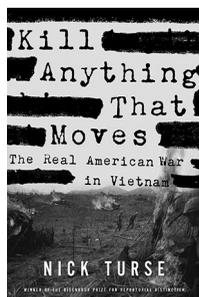


## NEW PERSPECTIVES ON VIETNAM

**Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam**  
By Nick Turse

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New York: Metropolitan Books, 2013

370 pages

\$30.00

Investigative journalist Nick Turse offers a disturbing account of American atrocities in the Vietnam War in a commendable attempt to bring attention to the death and destruction wrought upon South Vietnamese civilians. His purpose is to expose “the scale of civilian suffering” in Vietnam, while claiming that American “command policies”—free-fire zones, body counts, search-and-destroy missions, and the use of excessively destructive conventional technology—established a deadly but accepted standard of “overkill” at the operational level. At the tactical level, this “overkill” created a caustic atmosphere among US forces, one that encouraged American troops to commit atrocities—rape, mutilation, murder, mass killings—with callous impunity. This is a very grim and chilling read indeed.

Turse bases his findings on his examination of the US Army’s Vietnam War Crimes Working Group collection in the National Archives. Collected by a then-secret group in the wake of the My Lai investigations, these records detail approximately 800 alleged and investigated incidents and cover-ups of atrocities committed by American military personnel. They range in scale from barbarous individual acts to the body-count mayhem orchestrated by the “Butcher of the Delta,” Major General Julian Ewell, who with his 9th Division conducted a multi-month mass killing spree called Operation Speedy Express in the Mekong Delta during 1968. Turse takes the reader through example after example of soldiers raping young girls in rural villages, intentionally running down children with deuce-and-a-half trucks, and shooting unarmed civilians, among other incidents. He supplements this material with extensive interviews of veterans and Vietnamese victims; these may be Turse’s greatest contribution and are a credit to his journalistic skills.

A harsh critic might suggest Turse cherry-picked his evidence; a more generous reviewer would criticize his data sample as too narrow. Absent is context beyond what fits Turse’s agenda. He ignores the very compelling stories of servicemembers who honorably performed their difficult duties, despite the dark character of the war in which they fought. He overlooks civic-action programs, the broader pacification strategy, and other nonmilitary efforts that, flawed as they were, worked alongside military operations in what was obviously a failed and tragically costly effort to stabilize South Vietnam. Missing is a balanced examination of the impact of atrocity allegations on the antiwar movement and the frustrating difficulty of prosecuting atrocities under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. To bring attention to civilian suffering would also warrant examination of Viet Cong atrocities committed against Vietnamese noncombatants—this, too, is absent.

The author also ignores the commonality of civilian suffering in all war. For example, did not the way in which American forces fought

World War II contribute to atrocities in Europe and the Pacific? Rape committed by American forces in France, for example, occurred just as it did in Vietnam (see J. Roberts Lilly, *Taken By Force: Rape and American GIs in Europe during World War II*, from Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Turse quotes at length from Michael Herr's seminal book *Dispatches* (Knopf, 1977), citing the macabre photographs taken by GIs in Vietnam—posing with severed heads, showing off necklaces of severed ears, and dragging corpses unceremoniously behind various vehicles. Such acts, vile as they are, are not unique to Vietnam. Has not YouTube alone provided numerous examples of the same from Iraq? Afghanistan? This is a missed opportunity. The same argument the author applies to Vietnam could easily apply elsewhere, but viewing Vietnam, or any conflict, through this one lens dramatically skews the broader picture.

This is not to excuse or condone atrocities with Sherman's epithet "war is hell." But, war is hell, and atrocities occur despite diligent preventive efforts. Turse is certainly correct in that the way a war is fought can affect the occurrence of atrocities. History is replete with examples. While the author should be applauded for taking on such a grim and challenging subject, for exhaustive though narrow research, and for bringing attention to the immense suffering of the Vietnamese people during this awful war, he offers little that has not been previously discussed, suggested, or argued. No serious historian of the Vietnam War disputes that the way American forces fought the war contributed to an atmosphere of atrocity. None doubt that command at all levels may have swept allegations under the rug or that incidents went unreported. Few historians argue that My Lai, while an aberration in scale, was an aberration in practice. Historians focus on My Lai because it is symptomatic of the wider issues that Turse attempts to address. To claim they do so at the expense of the broader suffering of combatants and noncombatants, however, is off the mark.

The author states the "indiscriminate killing of South Vietnamese noncombatants . . . was neither accidental nor unforeseeable." This implies that American political leaders and military commanders wantonly pursued a war of mass indiscriminate killing. Turse does not convince that this was indeed the case. That needless deaths and wounding of hundreds of thousands of civilians, however, was the consequence of the way the United States fought the war has long been the consensus among historians.

The book's singular value lies in its brutal content. Turse does remind us of the extreme character and tragedy of atrocity. In the end, however, he offers an uneven view of a controversial war.