



12-15-2016

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Recommended Citation

Bradshaw, John (2016) "The Massacre," *Westview*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol32/iss1/3>

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The Massacre

by John Bradshaw

John Holstrom was the son of a Baptist minister—but not one of those fire-and-brimstone Baptist ministers. The Reverend Holstrom was one of the Jesus-loves-and-forgives-you types. When he preached, he taught kindness and compassion, tenderness and understanding. They were good messages for most communities but not for Springhill, Louisiana. Springhill was a small town just outside Bossier City, the little sister city of Shreveport. Springhillers were a grumpy, unforgiving lot. They wanted their Jesus angry and judgmental. It did not take long for the Avenging-Christ crowd to vote the Reverend Holstrom out of their church. The former reverend was forced to get a secular job at the local paper plant. He was a good, kind, hardworking paper maker. He made lots of good paper, but he saved and comforted no souls.

His two sons took the snub badly. The youngest son, Steven, gave up on Christianity altogether and began practicing Transcendental Meditation. Later, when he went to college, he majored in physics and astronomy. The older boy, John, grew up to be a fiery atheist of the worst kind: the kind who knew the Bible inside and out from Genesis all the way to Revelation. Worse still, John was filled with his father's ideals, passions, confidence, tenderness, and mischievousness. The Reverend Holstrom had grown up an FDR acolyte. He believed that FDR deeply cared for the working people of the world, the children of Jesus. John distilled his father's egalitarianism in the fiery rhetoric of Michael Harrington and the unbounded optimism of the Kennedy generation.

What made matters worse still was that both Holstrom boys were very, very smart—not quite geniuses but close enough. They could out-think the rednecks and the pampered golden boys of the Southern aristocracy, the libertarians and even the faithful liberals, who thought much like the Reverend Holstrom.

Their high school years were brutal. Although the Holstrom boys loved their dad very much, they rebelled against his faith. Steven was soft-spoken, and his rebellion was gentle, thoughtful, quiet, and implacable. John, however, was outspoken, forthright, emphatic—even abrasive. In the midst of many family fights about church and God, John said cruel and hurtful things to his white-haired father—things he did not mean and deeply regretted. John's mom, who was the source of his temper, was also the source of his salvation. She saw to it that both father and son reconciled after each fight. She saw what united them and reminded them of their common benevolence. Reconciliation always followed fury. After a time, both father and son mellowed. Disagreements continued in a milder tone, and familial love prevailed.

Then, John went off to college. He was clever enough to go to any school in the state. He chose a school that was close enough to home that he could see his

family frequently, but far enough from home to satisfy his sense of independence. He went to Northeast Louisiana University in Monroe, a hundred miles east, on the other side of the state, just off I-20. Two years later, his brother went to Louisiana Tech, fifty miles east of home, so the two frequently compared notes about school, family, politics, ideas, girls, and life in general.

The first thing John did at college was grow a beard, of course. His beard was full, brown, curly, and it stuck out like a cactus. In truth, he looked a bit like a young George Bernard Shaw. Well, not completely. John was tall and thin with a small, round nose, and his eyes always seemed to smile. When he waved his arms around during one of his excitable moods, he looked like Grover, one of the cuter Muppets from Sesame Street.

While the university was a bit provincial, it was not a complete cultural dead zone. Periodically, the school sponsored a speaker program. The Student Government Association hosted such notables as Gene Roddenberry and Nikki Giovanni. Early in the spring semester of 1975, the SGA invited Wilson Key, the author of the best-selling book about subliminal messages in advertising. John went to see Key give his presentation and, as expected, asked the author lots of tough, skeptical questions during the question/answer period. By this time, the crowd had thinned, so the speaker dodged the questions with a set of fatuous compliments. "You are a brilliant thinker, and your teachers must be proud of you. Keep asking those tough questions, and you'll go far," he said. Of course, John was not fooled. He knew a con-job when he saw one.

The biggest event of the spring semester was the visit by William Calley. Back in 1968, Calley led his platoon in a VC sweep through the village of My Lai. Finding no Viet Cong, Calley took out his frustration in a killing frenzy, ordering his men to kill everyone in the village. Over five hundred civilians were killed. The military tried to cover up the massacre, but eventually the story broke, and Calley was convicted of personally killing twenty-two people, even though military records show that he may have murdered as many as ninety people. President Nixon contemplated a full pardon for Calley, but Nixon was having troubles of his own due to the Watergate scandal. Calley was eventually convicted and sentenced to life in prison but had his sentence commuted to two years. He ended up serving only four months.

After Calley was released, there was a huge national controversy. Reactionaries were quick to defend Calley, while the peace crowd insisted on severe punishment. Calley's supporters, however, were not content to let the matter go. They wanted their man vindicated, so they set up a speaking tour to let him tell his side of the story. The supporters were smart enough to schedule Calley to lecture at those college campuses in the South where he was most likely to get a hero's welcome. They did not risk having their hero speak at progressive schools like Berkeley and Harvard. They wanted to protect their man from armies of hecklers and protesters. Naturally, one of the schools they scheduled was NLU.

Upon first hearing the announcement, John quickly took a stand. He simply had too much of his father's moral spirit to allow his university to celebrate a mass

murderer. He had to do something. He began by doing research into the My Lai Massacre. He read the transcripts of the court marshal so as to be suitably armed for the coming struggle. Then, he started a letter-writing campaign to the various administrative officials involved in the invitation. He first targeted the SGA's speaker committee, noting that the committee's invitation amounted to an endorsement. They ignored his letter. John then sent a letter to the SGA's president, pointing out that the SGA was there to serve the entire student body and that an invitation to Calley was an affront to those students who oppose mass murder. The president of the SGA responded by sending John a form letter thanking him for his interest and asserting that the governing principle is that free speech means that all voices should be heard. Upon receiving the form letter, John wrote back, pointing out that the SGA staunchly rejected anti-war speakers on the grounds that such controversial speakers would disrupt the peace. Surely, it would be much more disruptive to invite Calley, a convicted war criminal, to speak at the school. The SGA responded with their most potent bureaucratic tool—silence.

One of John's friends from Springhill was William Bean, a stout young man with a dashing mustache. Will was a journalism major. His heroes included Jack Anderson and Mike Royko—real newspaper men. In their spirit, Will recommended to John that he start a public campaign. If John wrote a series of letters to the school paper, perhaps he would generate some popular support and pressure the SGA into withdrawing its invitation to Calley. So, John composed a brilliant letter of protest and sent it to the school paper. The paper did not print his letter that Friday.

When John visited the editor's office the following Monday, he was told to go see Dick Carroll, the faculty advisor for the student paper. Dick Carroll was a rotund, red-faced man with thin brown hair who always seemed on the verge of a seizure of some sort. When John came into the room, Carroll pointedly did not invite him to sit down. Instead, he sat behind his immense, cluttered desk and lectured John about the role of a student paper. "It is, young man, first and foremost, the property of the university. The university uses the newspaper to teach undergraduates the professional side of the business. The university also uses the paper as a public relations tool—to bring honor and credit to the school and to attract new students. We will not let our paper be used to scare away parents of prospective students by allowing it to be used as a forum for rabble rousers!"

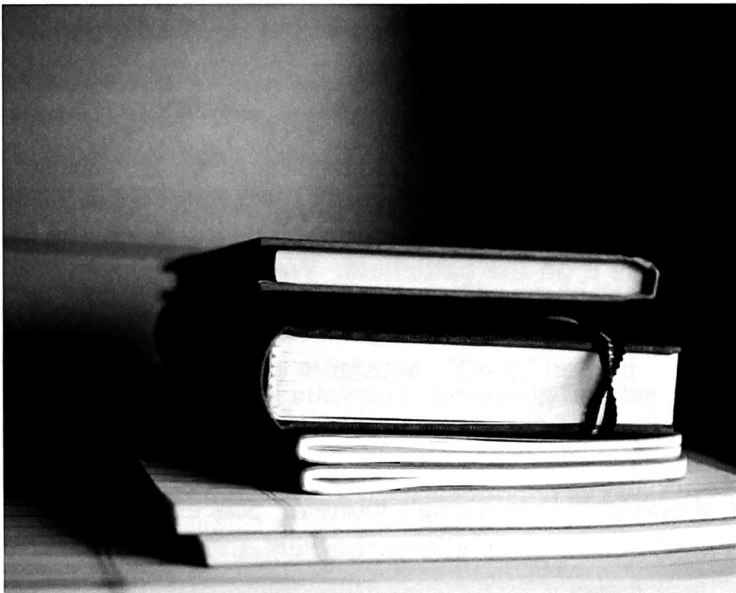
John was crestfallen and sought consolation from one of his other friends, Sarah Kay Danner. Sarah Kay was a pretty girl from one of the wealthier families in Monroe. She was athletic and full of energy. She kept her blonde hair in a Dutch boy cut and shared a large, winning smile with everyone she met. She and Holstrom became friends while sharing an English class. She liked the way he read the assigned poems so feelingly. He, in turn, learned to take solace from her warmth and common sense.

Sarah Kay suggested that John just bide his time until the day of the lecture. Surely, the good people of Monroe and NLU would not allow a mass murderer a public forum without bringing him to task. If need be, John could then bring his grievances to Calley in the question/answer part of the lecture. Sarah Kay, devoutly religious, insisted that God would not let Calley off the hook without at least some kind of spiritual remonstrance. Besides, she reminded John, it would be wrong to assume that Calley did not suffer great guilt and remorse. Perhaps, the speaking tour was his penance, his opportunity to ask the American public for understanding and forgiveness. John snorted, but the look Sarah Kay gave him made him feel ashamed.

Sarah Kay was right. He had an obligation to give Calley a chance at redemption. An atheist who could not forgive was as bad as a Christian who would not.

The day of the big speech rolled around with plenty of fanfare. Fliers flapped loosely on every lamppost; Calley portraits were pinned to every bulletin board. The university put up banners with American flags announcing that Calley would be speaking about patriotism and anti-communism. The *Monroe News Star* and also the *Morning World* were both sending reporters. The speech also merited a bit of coverage from the local TV station, though they were reluctant to spend more than a few seconds of six o'clock air time, just in case some sponsors somewhere might express fear about consumer reaction.

That evening, John and his friends trekked over to Ewing Coliseum. The air was heavy and



humid. The parking lots were full. John and his friends sat in the student section, Section D, thirteen rows up from the basketball court. A large platform had been erected in the middle of the court with plenty of folding chairs for local dignitaries. Among the dignitaries were the local commander from the VFW, the state Republican Chair, the pastor from Monroe's largest Baptist Church (the Eagle's Nest), and the university president, Dwight Delbert. Dwight Delbert was a political appointee whose Ph.D. was in

Business Administration. Delbert possessed all the intellectual depth of a bookkeeper, which is why he got the job in the first place.

The atmosphere was that of a revival meeting. Well over five thousand people turned out for the big event. Everything was electric. The audience was abuzz with excitement. Monroe and NLU seldom hosted such a celebrity. William Calley was one of most famous men to visit this part of the state in years.

The university welcomed Calley with the requisite Southern pomp. The sound system blared the national anthem. The commander of the VFW led the crowd in the pledge. The pastor led everyone in the convocation. The entire coliseum was silent until the end when a thousand voices murmured, "Amen." Then President Delbert got up, creaked and groaned his way to the podium, and wheezed a brief welcoming speech into the microphone. Then, all eyes turned to the right side of the stage. A little man stepped into the spotlight. He stood only five-foot-three, and in his white, tailored suit he looked as dapper and trim as a boutique owner. Everyone in attendance was a bit confused. They had imagined Calley as a huge war hero, a statuesque manly man on the scale of John Wayne or Rock Hudson. No one anticipated that he would be so small and nondescript. But, the little figure had to be him—

he took the podium with sufficient confidence that he surely wasn't a usurper, a counterfeit hero. So the audience, slowly at first, greeted their diminutive hero with a growing wave of applause.

When the applause died down, Calley started his speech. He spent thirty minutes talking about the Vietnam War and the menace of International Communism. He sketched his understanding of the struggle. The war for him was a holy crusade. Critics claimed that the government of Vietnam was corrupt and not worth defending. While he could not address the issue of corruption, he knew that his country needed him in the fight against the communists. "They are not just the enemy of America—they are the enemy of civilization itself," he declared to thunderous applause.

Then, Calley discoursed on the outcome of the war itself. The communists were cunning and knew that, with patience, eventually they would outwait the lazy and weak-willed Americans. They fought a guerilla war for eight years in the treacherous jungles of Southeast Asia, knowing that most of America's wars were fought in forests and open fields. "All they needed was patience, and our own decadence would do us in."

"Those McGovernites and Nixon-haters clamored for retreat. The noisy minority got what they wanted—withdrawal. You saw the outcome. The Reds overran Saigon. It was the first war America ever lost, but we did not lose it on the battlefield. We lost the war because the government listened to the cowards and not to the real Americans, such as you, who supported the fight for freedom."

The audience roared its approval. John sat and glowered. Everyone in the group, including Sarah Kay, looked around at the audience with a bit of astonishment. Sarah Kay especially looked at her neighbors with eyes wide. She knew a bit of Calley's crimes through John, and she had read a few things herself, prodded by her friend's interest. She especially found Seymour Hersh's reports—and the photos in *Life* magazine—shocking and sobering, so for her to see her neighbors cheering this little monster made her ball up her fists. William, on the other hand, watched his friend with a familiar anticipation. John had his fingers steepled, thumbs tapping together, keeping time with some inner moral metronome.

Calley paused and sipped water from a pitcher provided by the SGA president. The SGA president was one of those young men of the Up-And-Coming variety: slender, well-dressed, well-mannered, burning with ambition and arrogance. He saw to it that Calley and the other dignitaries got everything they needed. Everyone knew, William especially, that the young man fully expected that one day, he, too, would be a celebrated dignitary with some young toady seeing to his needs.

Calley then turned his attention to the future. He pointed out that America was at a crossroads. "If we are to save ourselves from the forces of chaos, lawlessness, permissiveness, violence, and drug-induced madness, then we must take bold action. During my time of trials and tribulations, I was tempted to give in to despair. But, I had friends. Richard Nixon supported me in my fight against communism, but he was attacked mercilessly by the press and was driven from office. Others supported me. Governor George Wallace joined me in the fight against the Liberal Establishment. The press savagely attacked the governor, as well, but he fought back—calling a spade a spade. The enemies of America are not all overseas!"

Calley glared around Ewing Coliseum as though he were searching out Viet Cong snipers.

In response, the audience erupted in monstrous applause. Some shouted for the arrest of McGovern and other sympathizers. Again, William watched John intently. He could see John tensing up. Other students murmured their various opinions of the speaker's warnings. But William watched John.

Calley ended his speech with praise for Wallace and suggested that the country would be much better off if Wallace were to win the presidency. "We need a leader with vision and courage," he concluded. Ewing Coliseum rocked its approval. Amens were shouted from the stands. Then, the SGA president took the microphone, thanked the speaker, and pointed to two microphone stands in the walkways among the seats.

"We are opening up the mikes for any of you who wish to ask our distinguished guest a question. Please keep your question brief so as to allow others enough time to ask their questions."

As luck would have it, one of the microphones was being positioned only a few rows down from the gang. A number of people lined up to ask Calley their questions. John just sat in his chair and didn't move. Something big was going on behind his eyes. Sarah Kay asked him what was wrong.

"He never once mentioned My Lai," he whispered.

"So, go ask him," Sarah Kay urged. She could see the conflict in him and pushed him out of his chair. He looked pleadingly at Sarah Kay, then at William. William flashed a tight smile underneath his brushy mustache. "Do it," he said.

John shrugged and got up. He wended his way through the crowd to the microphone stand. Many people were fighting their way to the exits, but many more remained to hear the Great Man speak. John made it to the microphone and was the fourth in line. The other microphone



had a comparable line, and the person in front got to ask the first question.

“Mr. Calley, what did you do before the war?” The question received a smattering of applause. Calley responded that he had worked as an insurance investigator, fighting fraudulent claims. The audience applauded approvingly.

On the other side of the coliseum, John’s side, a shy youth stammered out, “What is your favorite food?” The audience laughed appreciatively. “Pizza!” replied Everyman Calley, and the thinning crowd cheered in agreement.

From his seat, William could see John growing more impatient. Sarah Kay, too, noted that the questions were silly. “When are they going to ask something serious?” she said.

On the other side of the coliseum a woman in her thirties asked, “Are you married?”

“No, ma’am, not yet, but I am engaged to the beautiful and supportive Miss Penny Vick of Columbus, Georgia.” The audience applauded supportively. An older woman near the microphone said, “Isn’t he so romantic?” A good natured laugh swelled through the coliseum.

“What do you do for a living now?” asked a young man, probably an accounting major, on John’s side of the room.

“I’m working to be a certified gemologist so that I can be a jeweler,” Calley replied modestly. Everyone clapped politely.

Two more people asked comparable questions—one about where Calley was from and the other about what he thought about northern Louisiana. He gave fatuous answers that gratified the audience. In the interim, Sarah Kay and William watched John as he got closer and closer to the microphone. They could see his growing anger. John never exploded; his anger was always controlled—tight, focused, intense. They could see his lips pressed together. His face was a gathering storm.

An older gentleman on the other side of the coliseum asked solemnly, “What was your worst experience in Vietnam?”

The audience tensed. It seemed that a dangerous subject had been broached. John looked up from the note cards he had tucked in his shirt pocket.

Calley was quiet for a moment, as though he were composing himself for a lengthy answer. “My best friend Bill Weber was killed by a Viet Cong sniper. I watched him die. I still have nightmares about that moment. And I will never forgive the Vietnamese coward who murdered Bill.” The audience was suitably sympathetic. What was it that made Calley so angry, so enraged at the Vietnamese people? Why had he done the things that he had done? But, nobody wanted to ask that question, at least not in that way. So, when he offered the answer about his best friend’s dying in the jungles of that distant and inhospitable land, it was as though the audience was willing to offer up its absolution.

John Holstrom, however, was not.

When it was his turn, he took the microphone with the determination of a prosecutor. Scarcely looking at his notes, he first asked, “Lt. Calley, how does it feel to be America’s worst mass murderer?” The audience was shocked.

John continued, “What was the strategic purpose served by having the Buddhist monk thrown into the village well and having a grenade dropped on top of him? Why did you ignore Captain

Thompson's orders to stop massacring the civilians?" The audience began to boo. There was a bit of confusion, so the booing was spotty at first. In the current climate, it was entirely unexpected that the Honored Guest would be subject to honest inquiry.

John went on.

"What was your reason for grabbing that infant, as reported in your court-martial, and throwing it into a ditch before shooting it to death? Did you judge the child to be a communist threat? Why did you order the murder of over five hundred innocent women and children?"

By this time, Calley had slunk away from the podium, and SGA ushers had taken away the microphone. The SGA president announced the end of the Q and A session, thanked the audience, and encouraged them to exit in a safe and orderly fashion.

The audience did not exit in a safe and orderly fashion. Many of them were blindingly outraged that the university would allow a student to ruin an otherwise perfectly patriotic evening. They yelled and threw soda cups full of ice at whoever looked remotely like a trouble-maker.

John was escorted away by campus security. The chief campus cop mumbled about charging John with something or other, but all he could legally do was treat the young man roughly, lecture him sternly, and let him go.

When it was all over, John refused to speak about the incident. Sarah Kay put her arm around his shoulders to comfort him, and he accepted her support gratefully. But, he remained silent. He had faced the crowd, told them the truth, and they hated him for it. It was over, and he felt like a spent fury.

But, he suspected that his father would have approved.

