

**Nixon at War**  
**Episode Three - Sideshow**  
**Release Date - June 28, 2021**

Where possible, we have included links to the archival audio or transcripts.

Key

*Bold* = Narrator, Kurt Andersen

*ADST* = Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training

*AFHRA* = Air Force Historical Research Agency

*GBH* = GBH Open Vault Collection

*LBJL* = Lyndon B. Johnson Library

*Intvw* = Original interview

*MC* = Miller Center

*OH* = Oral History

*Patriots* = Interview by Christian Appy for his book *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides*

*RNL* = Richard Nixon Library

*WHT* = White House Tape

(Trailer)

*CNN*

Woodruff: Whatever is happening, we are going to be bringing it to you.

Greenfield: And folks, in the year 2004, please could you make up your minds a little more conclusively (laughter), because we can't take another election like this one...

**In the fall of 2000, two weeks after the excruciatingly close presidential election, we still didn't know who was the next president, George W. Bush or Al Gore, and wouldn't know for weeks more. And the lame duck current president was out of the picture on the other side of the world. Entering Hanoi, the capital of the reunited communist Vietnam, his limousine passes by just one low-key government banner welcoming President William Jefferson Clinton and spouse. Given the history, the long war America waged in Vietnam until just 25 years earlier, killing millions of Vietnamese, the welcome from ordinary citizens was extremely warm.**

[Clinton speech at Vietnam National University Hanoi](#)

Thank you very much, and good afternoon.

**President Clinton, former Vietnam War protester and draft dodger gives a speech broadcast on Vietnamese TV to a crowd of thousands, college students but also middle aged veterans of the war.**

[Clinton speech at Vietnam National University Hanoi](#)

I can think of no more fitting place to begin my visit at this hopeful moment in our common history than here at Hanoi National University. I am honored to be the first American president to see Hanoi. I do so conscious that the histories of our two nations are deeply intertwined in ways that are both a source of pain for generations that came before and the source of promise for generations yet to come.

**The next day at a village outside Hanoi, where the remains of a U.S. pilot shot down in 1967 were being recovered, he spoke again.**

[Clinton speech at Vietnam National University Hanoi](#)

The United States is doing what we can to help the people of Vietnam find answers about *their* missing as well. I brought with me over 350,000 pages of documents that I hope will provide some of those answers to the people of Vietnam.

**From the trove of documents Clinton declassified also came a fuller accounting, at long last, of the war America waged next door, in Cambodia.**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

The scale of the bombing was massive. We're using B-52s, a lot of firepower,

**Nixon biographer Evan Thomas:**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

And we dropped more bombs on Cambodia than we dropped on Germany in 1942.

**Compared with the bombing of our actual enemy, North Vietnam, we dropped 15 times the explosives per person on Cambodia — a neutral country. But in 2000, those revelations about that bombing back in the late 1960s and early 70s didn't get much attention.**

**TV news made Vietnam America's first "living room war." And by the late '60s the intense press coverage was more skeptical of U.S. military conduct than in any previous war. American reporters in Vietnam weren't giving the government a free pass.**

*(music)*

**So how come it took another 30 years for the world — those who even cared at that point -- to get a full account of the damage inflicted by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger on Cambodia?**

**I'm KA. We'll be right back, with Nixon at War.**

### Episode 3: Sideshow

#### [Richard Nixon Inaugural](#)

My fellow Americans, and my fellow citizens of the world community:

**Having almost won a decade earlier, and coming so close to losing again, finally Richard Nixon was president.**

#### [Richard Nixon Inaugural](#)

The greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker. This honor now beckons America. This is our summons to greatness.

**As a candidate, Nixon had managed a neat trick. He won running on “Law & Order,” his tough rhetoric appealing to voters upset by all the cascading social change in the 1960s...**

**...including the antiwar protests of the baby boomers,**

*Protest audio*

One two three four...

**At the Democratic Convention, they protested the war waged by two Democratic presidents. And now Nixon had been elected running against the same disastrous war — as a responsible peace candidate.**

#### [1968 Nixon campaign ad](#)

I pledge to you: We shall have an honorable end to the war in VN.

**"Honorable" was the hitch. He never defined exactly what “peace with honor” meant.**

**During that winter of 1969 the peace talks in Paris were deadlocked, a stalemate. Richard Nixon only cared a lot about foreign policy. And in foreign policy only about the Big Game.**

*Marc Selverstone (intvw)*

Nixon is trying to figure out how to get out of Vietnam, because for him, that's small potatoes —

**Cold War historian Marc Selverstone of UVA's (University of Virginia) Miller Center.**

*Marc Selverstone (intvw)*

— what he really wants to focus on is superpower relations, relations with the Soviets, particularly regarding arms control, and then trying to bring China into the family of nations

**“Red China,” as Nixon and most Americans still called it.**

*Marc Selverstone (intvw)*

And that's something that he thought he couldn't do necessarily with Vietnam hanging over him.

[Richard Nixon Inaugural](#)

Let all nations know that during this administration, our lines of communication will be open.

**Vietnam? Minor-league to Nixon.**

**As it was to the Harvard professor who'd spied on the Paris peace talks for his campaign...and overnight became the consequential teammate of his presidency.**

[Nixon introduces Henry Kissinger](#)

Ladies and Gentlemen. I'm honored by the confidence that the president-elect has expressed in me, I enthusiastically accept this assignment and I shall serve the president-elect with all my energy and dedication.

**Henry Kissinger, 44 and hugely ambitious, wasn't well-known outside the foreign policy world. But he'd just published an influential article explaining why America couldn't expect to win the Vietnam War militarily.**

**His politics were...flexible. During 1968, a young member of the Paris peace talks delegation, Daniel Davidson, asked Professor Kissinger about the upcoming election.**

*Daniel Davidson (Patriots)*

I called Henry up, he said, "Dan, I haven't even decided who I'm voting for. Three days a week I'm for Humphrey. Three days a week, I'm for Nixon and one day a week, I'm not voting." Henry expected to get jobs, no matter who won.

[Nixon introduces Henry Kissinger](#)

Dr. Kissinger will bring to this responsibility a fresh approach and I trust under his direction he will establish a new organization, bring new men, and develop new ideas and new policies for the critical problems America has in the field of foreign policy around the world.

[Winston Lord \(ADST OH\)](#)

Nixon deserves great credit for choosing Kissinger.

**Winston Lord, age 31, a senior member of Kissinger's elite young White House team.**

[Winston Lord \(ADST OH\)](#)

Here was Nixon from California, conservative, anti-communist Republican. Distrustful and disdainful of the elite, the establishment, the northeast Ivy League, and frankly with a heavy dose of anti-Semitism. And who does he pick as his National Security Advisor but Henry Kissinger, a Jewish immigrant from Harvard who had worked as a closest advisor to Nelson Rockefeller, Nixon's strongest opponent. So it was an amazing choice and a brilliant one.

*Morton Halperin (RNL OH)*

Because he became so powerful, people forget how shaky he was at the beginning.

**Morton Halperin was a 30-year-old national security hot-shot who'd worked for the Johnson Administration...and taught at Harvard with Kissinger.**

*Morton Halperin (RNL OH)*

First of all he was Jewish, and you couldn't, as we now know from the tapes, you couldn't hang around Nixon for ten minutes without realizing that Jews were not his favorite people. Kissinger had no relationship with him. He barely knew Nixon. So it was not a given that Kissinger would emerge as the dominant foreign policy figure of the administration. And he spent this first period of time making that happen.

[Winston Lord \(ADST OH\)](#)

He also asked Halperin to start devising system so that he, Kissinger, on behalf of the President, could control American foreign policy out of the White House. That's why he chose Kissinger. That's why he chose Bill Rogers...

**His old friend and Eisenhower Administration colleague.**

[Winston Lord \(ADST OH\)](#)

...to be Secretary of State.

[William Watts \(ADST OH\)](#)

Bill Rogers, who is one of life's loveliest people, I just think he was not a strong Secretary of State.

**William Watts, the NSC's (National Security Council) administrator at the time.**

[William Watts \(ADST OH\)](#)

And the biggest problem of all was this extraordinary relationship that developed between Nixon and Kissinger. And Nixon I mean, he had such contempt for the State Department, just total. He'd say, "keep those bastards out of this, we'll do it."

*Winston Lord (ADST OH)*

Even though he had spent his life in academia he immediately had an instinct for the jugular and bureaucratic infighting, a good sense of how to deal with the bureaucracy, as well as later on with the press and the Congress. Then you had underneath them this brilliant staff.

**A “brilliant staff” — says Kissinger’s top deputy.**

*Winston Lord (ADST OH)*

Then you had Kissinger willing to work really hard as well as being brilliant and tough, and frankly Rogers not working that hard. There was consultation with Rogers, but he was somewhat naive bureaucratically, and both the pace of events and Kissinger's skill, he didn't realize how much power he was giving away. So within a day or two the system was set up that was going to put Kissinger in charge.

**This was a big change. Before that, the State Department basically ran foreign policy and the Defense Department basically ran military policy...and the president’s NSC, the National Security Council, lightly oversaw them. But Nixon’s NSC would be turbo-charged.**

**Mort Halperin drafted the first big National Security Council memo about Vietnam. But he and the rest of his team weren’t thinking boldly enough for the new tough guy in the Oval Office.**

*Morton Halperin (RNL OH)*

The first draft of the memo we did for Nixon did not have an escalation scenario in it, because none of us thought that was politically feasible or militarily sensible. And Kissinger sent it up to the president, and Nixon sent it back and said, (*chuckling*) where's the escalation scenario? And we said, "Oh." And so we added an escalation scenario.

**In a different interview, Halperin explained why he didn’t want to put, as they saying now goes, “all the options on the table.”**

*Morton Halperin (RNL OH)*

My response to that was to be quite nervous about it, because I thought it was a mistake, a fundamental mistake, and that it would recreate the illusion that we could somehow win this war. And I tried then and occasionally afterwards to persuade Kissinger that that was not a viable option.

**But concerning Vietnam, Kissinger’s boss had a previous U.S. war in East Asia in mind.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

He was very much influenced by serving as Dwight Eisenhower's vice president.

## **Nixon biographer John Farrell.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

And Eisenhower very famously was elected to end the war in Korea and did so quite swiftly by sending word to Moscow at a time when the United States had great superiority in nuclear arms especially, and saying that you're going to make your client stop

### **– the Soviets' client North Korea –**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

because otherwise we're going to start using all of our our weapons at our disposal, including our nuclear arsenal. So Nixon's plan was that he would end the war by going to Hanoi through Moscow and indicate to Moscow that he was unstable and quite possibly would do extremely aggressive things if he didn't get his way.

### **The possibility of using nuclear weapons in Vietnam had been part of U.S. military planning for years. During the Tet offensive in 1968, LBJ's aide Tom Johnson remembers the long North Vietnamese siege of a big Marine Corps base –**

*Tom Johnson (intvw)*

The plan to perhaps deploy tactical nuclear weapons in '68 to keep Khe Sanh from being overturned scared the daylights out of me. I mean, God, I was just thinking, please, we can't. We can't. We can't do that. He had each each member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff sign a letter that they had what it took to keep Khe Sanh from falling — a formal letter.

### **Now President Nixon very consciously tried playing nuclear chicken.**

### **His biographer Evan Thomas**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

He and Kissinger decide that the way to do that is to make the North Vietnamese believe that Nixon is essentially a madman, was known as the Madman Theory, that he was just going to make those North Vietnamese think that he was just crazy, do anything up to nuclear weapons.

### **And maybe not always just a bluff - Halperin recalls a meeting he had with Kissinger at the time:**

*Morton Halperin (RNL OH)*

Kissinger had at the President's direction given Dobrynin a threat,

### **– the Soviet ambassador to Washington –**

*Morton Halperin (RNL OH)*

...which said, "Please convey to the North Vietnamese, that if they don't move quickly to a settlement that is satisfactory to us, then had made a threat that we would use nuclear weapons." Didn't use the word but it was unambiguous. And the Russians basically came back and said, "you talk to them, you deliver the message, we're not delivering that message."

**So Nixon was in a tough spot. Stopping the bombing the previous fall is what had gotten peace talks moving...and he'd gotten elected promising to wind down the war, bring our people home. Now he was about to wind it up again.**

**Halperin worried...**

*Morton Halperin (GBH OH)*

...that there would be a public reaction to this evidence of escalation of the war, that it would undercut the strategy which was to pretend to the American people we were withdrawing while secretly signaling to Hanoi that we were escalating, and the fear was that this would generate public discussion which would force this policy out in the open before the Administration wanted it out in the open.

**Talk about "tricky." On the one hand, make sure Americans think you're finally ending this horrible war.**

**But on the other hand, make the enemy think Nixon was prepared to do whatever it took, even going nuclear.**

**Meanwhile, Kissinger started playing good cop early in 1969—flying to Paris for his own regular secret meetings with North Vietnam's chief negotiator. And Kissinger also came up with a new, lateral bad-cop idea for showing the enemy they meant business: the U.S. could resume massive bombing, but next door. Secretly. In Cambodia.**

**Why Cambodia?**

*Thomas H. Moorer (GBH OH)*

The North Vietnamese had created what we called sanctuaries.

**Nixon's Joint Chiefs chairman Admiral Thomas Moorer:**

*Thomas H. Moorer (GBH OH)*

...which were nothing more than rest camps and supply bases from which they were organizing forays into South Vietnam, and they would immediately retire back into this sanctuary, and, of course, could not be followed. As we began to concern ourselves about the United States casualties, which the North



Vietnamese were able to inflict by virtue of making use of these sanctuaries, well of course, we began to take a look at what kind of operation we could mount in order to stop it.

**Yes, Cambodia was officially neutral. But...on the maps used by both the U.S. and North Vietnamese militaries, those Cambodian border areas were already labeled “War Zone C.”**

**On the WGBH series *Vietnam: A Television History* in the 1980s, Kissinger justified their expansion of the war into Cambodia.**

[Henry Kissinger GBH OH](#)

The so-called secret bombing of [Cambodia](#) started in March 1969 following a North Vietnamese offensive that began three weeks after Nixon came into office, and before he had had any opportunity to formulate a policy and after he had sent messages to the North Vietnamese that he was looking for an honorable, negotiated solution.

**In other words, the president took it personally, regarded those attacks as sucker punches meant to humiliate him.**

**But beyond the war-fighting reasons, a massive new bombing campaign in virgin Cambodia would send a “message” to the other side -- this Administration wasn’t a bunch of war-weary pushovers.**

**And although the U.S. had no official diplomatic relations, Nixon had reason to believe Cambodia’s head of state, Prince Sihanouk, would be...cooperative.**

[James Lowenstein \(ADST OH\)](#)

Sihanouk kept saying, "Look, I know that you are bombing Cambodia."

**James Lowenstein, a career State Department official,.**

[James Lowenstein \(ADST OH\)](#)

“It is perfectly okay with me. You go ahead and bomb the North Vietnamese and Cambodia all you like. Just don't say anything about it, I won't say anything about it. For God's sake just shut up.

**For Nixon and Kissinger a new Cambodian bombing campaign seemed like the crafty little zig-zag move of a knight – forgive the extended chess game metaphor – one step straight, one step diagonally...but nothing too dramatic or attention-getting.**

**Because secrecy – not from our enemies, but from the American people – was paramount.**

[Newsreel](#)

Heathrow. The presidential Boeing jet eased into position. On board, one of the most powerful men in the world, making a goodwill visit. President Nixon, new man in the White House, was welcomed...

**After just a month in office he went to Europe to consult with the NATO allies.**

[Newsreel](#)

Leader met leader: There was so much to talk about and so little time in which to say it...

**But the urgent work on that trip was all in-house, nailing down the secret Cambodia bombing campaign. On the flight over, Nixon gave his final go-ahead to Kissinger – who promptly called his deputy in D.C., who in turn phoned the Air Force colonel at the Pentagon who'd actually overseen the operational planning.**

*Colonel Ray Sitton (AFHRA OH)*

This voice said, "I'll meet you at the command center as soon as you can get there, and we'll arrive in Brussels about eight o'clock tomorrow morning, and we'll get together with the president and do the briefing." And I said, are you sure you know to whom you're speaking, and his voice said "This is Colonel Ray Sitton, right? This is Al Haig over at the White House."

**Deputy National Security Advisor Al Haig.**

**In Europe the next day, flying around on Air Force One, the president delegates the Cambodia mission briefing to Kissinger alone.**

*Colonel Ray Sitton (AFHRA OH)*

We were told that this is so sensitive that it must be done with the absolute minimum number of people being exposed to it. At one point Dr. Kissinger even suggested that why don't we do it using sky spot radar. Even the crews won't know where they're dropping. And we hastened to explain to him that that's slightly impossible. Even if you could keep them from knowing. And you cannot, they would conjecture that night at the bar about what was it we were doing. And some of them would come pretty close to guessing what it was. And the guy buying the drinks for them would be somebody out of The New York Times staff.

**Back in Washington, the president told only those few who needed to know he was about to widen the war. Secretary of State Rogers objected to the whole idea. Defense Secretary Mel Laird, had no issue with the war part.**

[Melvin Laird \(GBH OH\)](#)

I didn't have any reservations about bombing Cambodia. I didn't want it kept secret. Because I felt I could get the support of the Congress and the American people to protect American troops in South Vietnam as we withdrew and I felt it could not be kept secret. I had 16,000 military people that would have to be involved and I told the National Security Council, the president, the presidential advisor for national security, and the secretary of state that their proposal to keep it secret just would not work.

**But they tried. Even as the bombing began on St. Patrick's day, 1969, Kissinger's director of policy Halperin was clueless.**

*Morton Halperin (RNL OH)*

Interviewer: When do you start hearing stirrings of interest in bombing Cambodia?

Halperin: The day after we started bombing. I was in Kissinger's office, and Haig burst in and said, we had many secondary explosions. And then they looked at each other and realized that I was in the room, and Kissinger said, "we will trust you" and told me that we were bombing Cambodia.

*Seymour Hersh (intvw)*

It's just...it's amazing.

*Seymour Hersh (intvw)*

Kissinger was personally involved in instructing the Strategic Air Command to lie about where they were dropping bombs. and he was picking targets, Henry, picking targets too -

**Hersh isn't exaggerating about Kissinger's involvement. The man who was a few months ago just a political science professor, and still on leave from Harvard, was Colonel Sitton's day-to-day commander for the secret bombing of Cambodia.**

*Colonel Ray Sitton (AFHRA OH)*

It was so hush hush that I would carry the paperwork, the proposed sortie, over to the White House west basement. Dr. Kissinger would look at it, approve it or amend it, whatever he felt like doing. He merely told us to strike here in this area, or strike here in that area. Not at all unusual for me to get a call from Al Haig on a commercial telephone, said "You got another one of those things that we can look at?" "Yeah." And I'd dash to the White House and we'd decide to go or not go. And later he'd called and say, "You know, that last one you brought? Execute it tomorrow."

**As intended, America's ability to annihilate at will, from six miles in the sky, day after day after day, was demonstrated to the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong - and, sorry, collateral damage - the Cambodians.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

The nonstop bombing of Laos and Cambodia and the Ho Chi Minh Trail,

### **Nixon biographer Farrell:**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

especially when it was being done by high altitude B 52s where you had very little control over where in the grid the bombs were gonna land // You see this cascading set of effects set in motion by the fact that he expanded the war across that border into a neutral, innocent country // the callousness of Nixon and Kissinger in talking about the people of Southeast Asia is really chilling. // and they talk about, you know, all bodies look alike, we're going to have some overflow on that bombing and we're going to lose some civilians. But, you know, that happens in war. Don't worry about neutral Cambodia. What possibly could happen?

### **And remarkably, that bombing campaign did stay secret...and not just from the public.**

*Marshall Green (ADST OH)*

Nobody was informed about this thing.

### **Career diplomat Marshall Green, was serving in Asia when it began.**

*Marshall Green (ADST OH)*

My predecessor, Bill Bundy, who was the assistant secretary then, didn't know about it.

Interviewer: Good god. // Who was our ambassador at that time? //

Green: We didn't have an ambassador. We had a chargé d'affaires. His name was Mike Rives.

Interviewer: Did he know that?

Green: No, oh no. Good heavens, no.

[Mike Rives \(GBH OH\)](#)

I didn't know anything about the bombing when I went to Cambodia,

### **This is Mike Rives, who just months before had arrived in Pnom Penh, 40 miles from the South Vietnamese border.**

[Mike Rives \(GBH OH\)](#)

In fact I didn't know anything about it until after it broke in the newspapers. For some reason I was never briefed on what was going on. I was aware of bombing, because in my house on the banks of the Bassac River, at night I not only could hear the bombing but the whole house shook from the load of the bombs when

they were dropped, I assumed, in Vietnam. But I suppose eventually, I mean, most of them were being dropped in Cambodia.

**Two months into the bombing campaign, as Colonel Sitton predicted, the story broke, in the New York Times.**

**But the scoop was oddly underplayed: buried on page 9, and not even the lede, in a story focused on communist troops in Cambodia. And the front-page follow-up Times story the next morning had this upbeat pro-U.S. spin: "RAIDS IN CAMBODIA BY U.S. UNPROTESTED."**

*Morton Halperin (RNL OH)*

It was a two day sensation in the New York Times, and then it went away.

*Morton Halperin (RNL OH)*

Everybody believed that we were getting out of Vietnam, that like Kissinger, that escalation was not a realistic alternative. So they just didn't believe the story and it just disappeared.

**Because it didn't happen *in* Vietnam, didn't involve U.S. ground forces...and didn't fit with the Nixon narrative. So despite the new facts, that narrative held.**

**But?**

*Morton Halperin (RNL OH)*

Nixon was furious about it.

**Hold on: furious? You'd think his reaction would be "Fantastic, nobody really cares about the bombing!" But no. It was the leaks to the Times that freaked them out.**

*Morton Halperin (GBH OH)*

The White House was in Florida at the time that the New York Times published the story, and there was great concern about it, because there had been a decision that this had to be kept secret and it was known only to a very small number of people. And their concern about it was, it was taken as further evidence that there were leaks and leakers in high positions and, therefore, that these people had to be found out. And we know, of course, that it led to the beginning of a wiretap program of people on the NSC staff and the State Department and in the Defense Department.

**In fact, the White House -- that is, Nixon and Kissinger personally -- ordered the wiretaps hours after the second Times story appeared. To me, this really seems like the moment, five months in, that Nixon as president starts down the slippery slope.**

**According to Sy Hersh, Kissinger spoke four times that day with J. Edgar Hoover, telling him they intended to quote, “destroy whoever did this if we can find him, no matter where he is.” But that the FBI should be careful, quote, “so no stories get out.”**

**And, mostly, that worked.**

[William Watts \(ADST OH\)](#)

I knew about the taps because I read some of them. **I wasn't supposed to see them.**

**Kissinger's NSC administrator William Watts.**

[William Watts \(ADST OH\)](#)

They were handled by a completely separate channel. A specific courier came over from the FBI to deliver these personally to Kissinger. I was in one Saturday and happened to be on duty and the guy came in and gave it to me, and I opened it up and boom, it was a tap on Halperin. I sealed it back up; I didn't want to see any of this shit again ever.

[Morton Halperin \(RNL OH\)](#)

And I now know that Nixon called Hoover, and Hoover said // it's Halperin. You know, my press contacts tell me it's Halperin, because he's against the war.// We were in Key Biscayne and we went for a walk on the beach, and Kissinger told me that people didn't trust me, and that he was going to have to give me less access to classified material for a while, in order to prove my innocence, which of course was not possible to do. They wiretapped me for 21 months. They never got a single leak of classified information.

**Nixon and Kissinger never discovered the sources of that first reporting on their secret war in Cambodia. But those early wiretaps normalized the practice of surveillance to serve their obsession with knowing everything and keeping secrets from everyone...and Nixon's suspicion that anyone might be his enemy.**

**However, during those new-president honeymoon months, the Gallup Poll found his overall approval high, above 50%, mostly above 60%. And most Americans still took him at his word – that he was all about ending this war, and that the end was in sight.**

**I'm Kurt Andersen - we'll be right back with Nixon at War...**

**In June of 1969, Nixon and his national security advisor flew to Midway Island, the U.S. naval base a few hours past Hawaii, to meet with our ally, South Vietnam's President Thieu. They reassured Thieu they were not**

about to sell him out, give away the store to his communist enemies in the peace talks...despite what the press was suggesting, just trying to “drive a wedge” between them.

However...a turning point in the war had undeniably come.

[Richard Nixon returning from Midway](#)

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, members of the cabinet.

**Two days later, back at the White House.**

*RN*

..the forces of South Vietnam have now been trained and equipped to the point that they are able to take over a substantial portion of combat activities presently being born by Americans.

**The 543,000 Americans deployed in Vietnam would be the peak number -- from now on, the war would be “Vietnamized.”**

*RN*

After five years, in which more and more Americans have been sent to Vietnam, we finally have reached the point where we can begin to bring Americans home from Vietnam. (*applause*)

**Beginning immediately... and, the president promised, with all the soldiers and Marines and airmen possibly home in just 18 months – by the end of 1970.**

**We were getting out, the only question now, how fast or slow... and how many Americans would die in addition to the 37,000 already killed.**

*RN*

There is fighting still to be born until we reach the point that we can have peace.

**In fact? It would be another four years before the last U.S. combat forces left Vietnam.**

**Nixon’s public commitment to “Vietnamization” in 1969 played well politically. But Sy Hersh says Kissinger, who didn’t need to worry about midterm elections, wasn’t a fan.**

*Seymour Hersh (intvw)*

Henry didn't like - he didn't like the policy of pulling out troops because he thought it was bad bargaining, it was unilateral. But he didn't fight it because Nixon wanted to get -- there were 25,000 they *announced* they were going to pull

out, and they began to do so, which meant also that was the end of any serious negotiation, the North knew that the game was over.

**“The game,” the previous open-ended U.S. commitment to keep fighting in Vietnam, “was over.”**

**That same June, Life magazine -- influential, iconic, populist, massive weekly circulation -- ran a cover story that I think shaped public opinion about the war, public feeling, as much as any single media moment. They called it “The Faces of The American Dead in Vietnam” -- one week of casualties, photos of each of the 217 young Americans who’d all been alive just a month before, page after page, like a yearbook, dozens of them teenagers.**

**I was 14, my brother was 19, and I remember my mom standing in our kitchen, leafing through that issue, sobbing.**

*(music pause)*

**At his inauguration, Nixon had said...**

[\*Richard Nixon Inaugural\*](#)

The greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker.

**Now, five months later on the White House lawn, he wraps up with a kind of callback to that.**

[\*Richard Nixon Inaugural\*](#)

By our action in withdrawing 25,000 American combat forces from Vietnam, we have opened wide the door to peace. And now we invite the leaders of North Vietnam to walk with us through that door.

**Only 25,000 of the 543,000. But it was a start. His biographer Farrell on the two Richard Nixons:**

*John Farrell (invtw)*

He was a messed-up guy. He had a really horrible side from his dad, who was something of a brute. And he had this gentle side that came from his mom, who was a Quaker, a progressive Republican and there was a strong urge in him always to go to her, figuratively, go to her grave site and say, “See, mother, see what I've done -- I've brought I've brought you peace.”

**That peacemaker self-image was more at odds than ever with the nightmare reality on the ground in South Vietnam and now Cambodia. “Search and destroy” had become the new infantry term of art in the**



**Vietnam counterinsurgency. Early in the Nixon Administration, Sy Hersh discovered, it was superseded.**

*Seymour Hersh (intvw)*

Hersh: The losses were getting so bad by '69 they changed it to something called "surround and pound." What they do is declare an area a free fire zone, and they just would drop everything in it, not even try and go in with troops to look for them, just kill everybody in it. And they call it "surround and pound." I mean, and they didn't publicize that

KA: No wonder.

Hersh: Well, you know, what can I tell you

**But imagine you're the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong in 1969. You've been fighting against foreign occupiers, and your fellow Vietnamese in league with the foreign occupiers, since World War II, sacrificing and dying non-stop-for more than a quarter century.**

[\*Paul Warnke \(GBH OH\)\*](#)

Well I think a fundamental misjudgment in Vietnam was that we didn't realize that victory was more important to the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong than it was to us.

**Paul Warnke was assistant secretary of defense under Johnson and briefly under Nixon.**

[\*Paul Warnke \(GBH OH\)\*](#)

The North Vietnamese, the Vietnamese in general had the feeling that they were right. It was their country. That we were wrong. That we were interfering in what was basically a nationalist movement

**The Americans had been involved in a big way for only four years and were already calling it quits. So if you're the Vietnamese communists fighting your long war for your country, why give in now? , instead of persevering and winning? Yes, the new U.S. bombing campaign in Cambodia required more sacrifice, but it was nothing like a decisive blow.**

[\*Paul Warnke \(GBH OH\)\*](#)

Stepping up the bombing just increased the amount that the North Vietnamese had to put into the top of the funnel, but they could get out at the bottom of the funnel the pitifully little that was necessary in order for them to continue to support the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam, and that therefore, no intensity of bombing was going to prevent the re-supply and the reinforcement of the forces within South Vietnam.

**By the summer of '69, Woodstock summer, Nixon was trying anything, everything. Kissinger began his parallel track in Paris of secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese.**

**Nixon also tried nice – a polite secret letter direct to North Vietnam's founding leader Ho Chi Minh, urging an “early resolution to this tragic war.” The reply he got was also polite – and unbudging: No, please leave our country now.**

[News Clip](#)

“Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, Ho Chi Minh is gonna win... Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh is gonna win...*”

**In America, the light at the end of the tunnel was not getting brighter.**

**During 1969, for the first time, Gallup found that a growing majority of Americans thought that getting into the war in the first place had been a mistake. Although a big majority also approved of the new president's slow-motion withdrawal.**

**Except young people more and more just wanted out, now.**

[Newsreel](#)

(singing) "c'mon people now, get together..."

**On October 15th, 1969, the antiwar movement suddenly achieved spectacular undeniable scale, and not just on campuses - two million Americans attended Vietnam protests and “teach-ins.” It was called The Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam.**

**As a high school sophomore in Omaha, I organized draft counseling sessions.**

**Sam Brown, who'd grown up a decade before me right across the Missouri River in Council Bluffs, Iowa, was one of the Moratorium's two national organizers.**

[Sam Brown \(GBH OH\)](#)

The choice of the word moratorium rather than strike was designed very consciously.

**Sam Brown was one of the moratorium's two national organizers.**

[Sam Brown \(GBH OH\)](#)

That meant you had to have language that was moderate and not strident and off-putting to middle America, that you had to have people, events, which moderate people could participate in and be assured that they weren't gonna get

dragged into something that they didn't want to be a part of. So, Strike is a tough, hard, angry word. Moratorium is a sort of nice "let's put things aside for a day and reason together" word.

**It worked. The Moratorium made the cover of Time magazine, a media zenith of which there's really no equal today.**

[Sam Brown \(GBH OH\)](#)

It broadened the base of the anti-war movement. It brought in people who hadn't been involved in it before. It allowed events in Topeka, Des Moines, Council Bluffs, and Cleveland and a whole wide range of hundreds of other places where no anti-war activity had ever taken place before.

*John Farrell (intvw)*

What shocked the Nixon White House...

**Nixon's biographer Farrell:**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

was that the people who participated in the moratorium were to a large extent, middle class American parents and middle class American squeaky clean youth, not the hippie bums.

**But that didn't stop the White House from deriding them. Vice-President Agnew Nixon's vicious alter ego, promptly gave a speech in the South that made a big national splash, savaging hippies and antiwar students and the liberal elite...**

[Spiro Agnew speech 10.19.69](#)

A spirit of national masochism prevails encouraged by an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals. (*applause*)

**Agnew was channeling Nixon, who was frustrated, angry. A year after the war had ended a presidency and gotten him elected, now he couldn't get the Vietnamese communists to budge. And Americans' opposition was growing more widespread than ever.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

And you begin to get memos going to Nixon from people like staffers like Daniel Patrick Moynihan -

**- a Harvard professor and presidential aide -**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

- saying, "you've got to make peace now, because if you don't, it's going to become Nixon's war, just like it was Johnson's war and that brought an end to that presidency." This was at the moment where Nixon had to make the decision

whether he was going to make it Nixon's war or not. And it was still some uncertainty there as to which way he would go.

**Then there was another guy out of Harvard, an ex-Marine lieutenant and A-list defense intellectual.**

*Seymore Hersh (intvw)*

He was the boy genius, you know,

**Seymour Hersh.**

*Seymore Hersh (intvw)*

...on strategic arms and control. He was deeply involved in the initial nuclear planning targeting. He was a hawk and he was a good hawk.

**Daniel Ellsberg. He'd worked for two years in South Vietnam for the Johnson Administration. Ellsberg had been part of a team under LBJ that assembled a massive secret history of the war...research that in 1969 led to Ellsberg's epiphany, when he became an antiwar activist.**

[\*Daniel Ellsberg \(RNL OH\)\*](#)

The fact that we had begun the war in support of a French imperial re-conquest of a colony that had declared its independence, that meant, from American values, and American anti-imperialist ideals, it had no legitimacy from the beginning. To me, that meant, in '69, when I read these documents, that it was unjustified homicide, which I saw as murder. Not just an error, not just a bad, incompetent policy, it was mass murder, to be killing people who wanted to be independent.

**So Ellsberg decided if he could get some of that damning history publicized in Congressional hearings, it would give the new president cover to “extricate,” pull out now.**

[\*Daniel Ellsberg \(RNL OH\)\*](#)

My feeling was, by the time he makes it his war, you can't help him get out. He won't get out because it'll be his war. What I'd hoped was that if they came out before I hoped he had committed himself publicly to this strategy it would help him, blame the Democrats for failure in the war, and for incompetence and incoherence and whatnot, and say, "I very much regret going this direction, but the war is hopeless, thanks to my predecessors."

**But his scheme was politically naive, and he couldn't get antiwar Democrats in Congress to bite.**

[\*Daniel Ellsberg \(RNL OH\)\*](#)

Each one said, we can't do that as Democrats. They meant, in effect, "Let Nixon

make it his war. Then perhaps we'll help him get out." When my hearings didn't take place in '69, I sort of gave up.

**Ellsberg gave up...gave up playing by the rules. And eventually, two years later, would manage to get his secret history publicized — as the Pentagon Papers.**

[1969 DC Police Film - Some to Demonstrate, Some to Destroy](#)

Nov 13, 1969. In the next 48 hrs, a quarter of a million people will converge on Washington. Some will come to demonstrate. Some to destroy.

**This is a film chronicling the big protest in Washington, produced by the D.C. police department.**

[1969 DC Police Film - Some to Demonstrate, Some to Destroy](#)

Friday 8 pm. Interior Department authorities granted an 11th hour permit to a coalition of radical groups for a rally in Dupont Circle park, the center of Washington's hippie community. Intelligence had warned of trouble.

[Charles Colson \(RNL OH\)](#)

I got there the week after a lot of the protests and demonstrations that surrounded the White House, a quarter of a million people.

**Charles Colson arrived at the White House to serve as one of Nixon's toughest henchmen.**

[Charles Colson \(RNL OH\)](#)

I also hadn't seen Nixon since the campaign except at public events, and I hadn't sat down with him. He seemed frustrated and he seemed tired and beleaguered, and you could tell what that first year had done to him. You could also tell what the opposition was doing to him, and that's what every President discovers is that you go in, and it's a great, glamorous moment, "Hail to the Chief" is played, and music you love to hear, and then all of a sudden you discover all of the problems you gotta deal with, the bureaucracy that is intractable, the White House staff that doesn't do what you tell them to do, and the press. So I saw this in Nixon, I saw the toll it had taken on him.

**Since summer Nixon's Gallup Poll approval had been on a steady decline. So the president announced he would give a major, major speech devoted to the war.**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

He disappeared to the mountaintop. He went to Camp David for a couple of weeks.

**Biographer Evan Thomas.**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

Nixon wrote a lot of his own speeches and he wrote this one.

**The newspapers were filled with fevered speculation, what might he say? What did Wall Street expect? What did the military think?**

[Ray Price \(RNL OH\)](#)

He spent several days really working hard on that, it was entirely his own.

**Ray Price, Nixon's chief speechwriter.**

[Ray Price \(RNL OH\)](#)

He came back and did it, and it was probably the most effective speech of his Presidency.

**He returned to a theme and tone that got him elected — *Us versus Them culturally*, American versus American. Which for Nixon was visceral, authentic.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

He basically came from a backwater of Southern California.

**Biographer Jack Farrell:**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

His dad ran a filling station and then a grocery store and he went to little Whittier College while he was up against people who went to Harvard. And he developed this fine sense of what I call the politics of grievance. it's, you know, "I'm a victim. You're a victim. Those elites are, you know, putting it to you. They don't care about you. I'm the only one that can get you out of this because I, Richard Nixon, am one of you.

**But this speech would be different -- now he'd try politically exploiting that Middle American resentment as president...to justify a foreign war.**

[Richard Nixon, Nov 3 1969: Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam](#)

Good evening, my fellow Americans.

**In prime time on all three networks.**

[Richard Nixon, Nov 3 1969: Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam](#)

I believe that one of the reasons for the deep division about Vietnam is that many Americans have lost confidence in what their Government has told them about our policy. The American people cannot and should not be asked to support a

policy which involves the overriding issues of war and peace unless they know the truth about that policy.

**Says the guy who rarely told the full truth about anything, especially concerning Vietnam.**

**But...then Nixon actually gets candid, in classic Nixonian straw-man fashion, about his options.**

[Richard Nixon, Nov 3 1969: Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam](#)

There were some who urged that I end the war at once by ordering the immediate withdrawal of all American forces. From a political standpoint this would have been a popular and easy course to follow. After all, we became involved in the war while my predecessor was in office. I could blame the defeat which would be the result of my action on him and come out as the Peacemaker. Some put it to me quite bluntly: This was the only way to avoid allowing Johnson's war to become Nixon's war.

**Instead, he'd chosen option two. Lengthen the unwinnable war and demagogue the opposition at home.**

[Richard Nixon, Nov 3 1969: Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam](#)

In San Francisco a few weeks ago, I saw demonstrators carrying signs reading: "Lose in Vietnam, bring the boys home."

**"In San Francisco" — a trope of the political right is born.**

[Richard Nixon, Nov 3 1969: Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam](#)

Any American has a right to reach that conclusion and to advocate that point of view. But as President of the United States, I would be untrue to my oath of office if I allowed the policy of this Nation to be dictated by the minority who hold that point of view and who try to impose it on the Nation by mounting demonstrations in the street.

**It actually was still a minority who wanted to get out of Vietnam immediately...except among those who'd started being called the Woodstock Generation.**

[Richard Nixon, Nov 3 1969: Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam](#)

And now I would like to address a word, if I may, to the young people of this nation who are particularly concerned, and I understand why they are concerned, about this war. I respect your idealism. I want peace as much as you do.

**But he wasn't actually addressing them at all. Rather:**

[Richard Nixon, Nov 3 1969: Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam](#)

And so tonight--to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans--I ask for your support.

**And so a phrase was coined - “the Silent Majority.” The non-protesters, the non-hippies, the non-liberal-elite.**

[Ray Price \(RNL OH\)](#)

Interviewer: In looking at the drafts of Nixon's "Silent Majority" speech, I notice that at one point he talks about the silent center, and he changed that to majority.

**Speechwriter Ray Price.**

[Ray Price \(RNL OH\)](#)

Price: I wasn't a part of that change, but knowing him, I think it makes sense. That is, in fact, the rioters who believed they were a majority, were not. They were a minority; they were a radical, violent minority.

**“The rioters” — around 300 shouting vandals, would-be revolutionaries who’d organized their “Days of Rage” in Chicago three weeks earlier - who Nixon was now making stand-ins for the millions peacefully protesting the war, and the tens of millions more who wanted out now.**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

Nixon was good at two things: one was pretty high-minded foreign policy.

**Evan Thomas.**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

But he was good at something else, even better at something else — and that was scaring people - about hippies, communists, black people, the unwashed university professors, just the *other*, the enemy. And all the people who, in his view, wanted to make America weak.

**And he did that masterfully, in the Silent Majority speech.**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

And it was a brilliant political speech because it had this whole idea of a silent majority that most Americans weren't quitters and they wanted to stick with a war and that those those peaceniks out there at the anti-war demonstrations, they were weak and appeasers and helping the communists. But real Americans, which is to say most Americans, supported sticking with the war and sticking it to North Vietnam.

[Richard Nixon, Nov 3 1969: Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam](#)

Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. Because let us



understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that.

[Pat Buchanan, CSPAN](#)

It was a smashing triumph.

**Pat Buchanan, Nixon's young right-wing aide.**

[Pat Buchanan, CSPAN](#)

—and 70 percent of the country backed him and stood with him. That I think was the real making of the President, not 1968 so much but the real making of the President. At the end of that year, Richard Nixon was at 68 percent approval and 19 percent disapproval, [*laughs*] astonishing. Here was a fellow who seven years before was the biggest loser in American politics

**And the positive response from “the silent majority” in turn made Nixon more hardline on Vietnam.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

So Nixon makes the decision at that moment that he's not going to sue for peace.

**John Farrell.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

He's going to stick it out in Vietnam and the way he's going to carry the argument back home is to divide Americans. He would purposely create, exacerbate the division in American society over the war and capitalize on it, and so he makes this speech fully realizing, fully cognizant that, that from this point on it's going to be us versus them.

**Sam Brown, who'd spent a year working 24/7 setting up the Moratorium protests, felt like his incredible success weeks earlier had been undone in 32 minutes.**

[Sam Brown \(GBH OH\)](#)

There had been a careful building of a moderate image, and suddenly Richard Nixon claimed that he was the only moderate left in the country. And that anyone who disagreed with him was not simply mistaken, or misled, or something else, but was un-American, didn't belong in America, was destructive, probably supporting the Soviet Union, I mean, wild kind of talk coming from the president of the United States. And unfortunately, that's a powerful bully pulpit. And a lot of people listen to those words. And so over the months ahead, December and on, it became increasingly clear that the momentum which had been, which had been building really was pretty much destroyed.

**In December, Time magazine announced its Person of the Year - "Middle Americans," a result of the Silent Majority speech. 20 years later, in his final memoir, he was still bragging.**

*Richard Nixon, [In the Arena](#) (audiobook)*

The goal of my November 3rd speech was to make a case for continued American sacrifice in Vietnam directly to the people who were being asked to make those sacrifices. It was successful. The silent majority spoke.

**Doubling down on Us versus Them had worked for Nixon. Politically. Temporarily.**

**He even declared later that it actually "changed the course of history". He said, "The enemy could no longer count on dissent in America, to give them the victory they could not win on the battlefield."**

**Not really. Although in another way I think Nixon's speech did change the course of American history enduringly. By politicizing this new division and mutual contempt among Americans - between the cosmopolitan college-educated New Class, and the white working class.**

*[William Safire \(RNL OH\)](#)*

The silent majority uh, is an old phrase meaning dead people.

**Nixon's (and Agnew's) speechwriter William Safire.**

*[William Safire \(RNL OH\)](#)*

To join the silent majority means to die and go on. Become part of the cemetery. But that was not the meaning we had in mind at all. But it shows that a phrase can be around, can be around, can be perking along, and suddenly when a President uses it at a propitious moment, it's striking a match in a gas filled room.

**And of course, after that initial explosion, fifty years on, the fire is still burning in our politics.**

**I'm KA, and this has been the third episode of "Nixon At War."  
Next episode: "Searchlight on the Lawn."**

*(Tease Episode four)*

**Thanks for listening. I'm the writer and a co-producer of this series.**

**The executive producer is Steve Atlas.**

**The series producer is Emma Weatherill.**

**Our mix engineer is Robin Wise**

**And the producer and researcher is Caitlin Rathe.**

**Our original music is by Mason Daring with additional music by Tim Dickinson.**

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