

Nixon at War
Episode Four - Searchlight on the Lawn
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Where possible, we have included links to the archival audio or transcripts.

Key

Bold = Narrator, Kurt Andersen

ADST = Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training

GBH = GBH Open Vault Collection

Intvw = Original interview

OH = Oral History

RNL = Richard Nixon Library

(Trailer)

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Announcer: From Lai Khe, Hue, and Danang in Vietnam, Chrysler presents,

January 1970. NBC prime time.

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

the Bob Hope Christmas Special.

Amazingly, almost two-thirds of the Americans watching TV that Thursday night were watching this...

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Bob Hope: Here's South Vietnamese vice-president Marshall Ky who came backstage to thank the cast for coming to Nam.

... as it turned out, more than had ever watched a TV show.

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

General: I'd now like to give you the one and only Bob Hope. Bob? (*applause, music*)

Bob Hope, now in his sixties, had been doing these TV Christmas shows for troops in Southeast Asia every year since the U.S. war started, in 1964. That first year, only 23,000 Americans were deployed in Vietnam and 216 died. Now there were half a million soldiers and Marines and airmen and sailors there, 200,000 more in the region, and many weeks 216 and more were killed.

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Hope: Boy what a crowd. I got to drop a note to the president about this. They told him you were all home.

President Nixon, elected a year before to get America out, had started reducing U.S. forces, but so far by only about 10%.

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Hope: And for your information, you fellas up for rotation, they just had a new draft lottery, and if you hurry home, you may win it. (*laughs, smattering of boos*)

A few weeks earlier, Vietnam draft lottery numbers had been drawn for the first time, live on television. If you were 19 year-old boy and got a low number – as half did – and weren't attending college, you got drafted. This new lottery was Nixon's idea, meant to make the draft seem more fair and maybe make those who lucked out feel less inclined to protest the war.

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Hope: I didn't expect to be here this year, the Paris Peace Talks were going so well. (*applause*) If you're wondering about what's going on with the Paris Peace Talks, here's the latest up to the second flash on what they're doing over there: (*silence*)

Hope's long pause, silence, was the punchline. Negotiations with the North Vietnamese had been underway for going on two years. And were stalled. Which for this audience is an existential issue.

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Hope: We flew in through the air corridor. At least it's plainly marked: you just stay between the tracer bullets...

Nixon's war policy is known as "Vietnamization" – handing off the fighting to our allies... slowly.

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Hope: I envy you guys. Now that the South Vietnamese have taken over, you can just sit around all day and do nothing, huh?

The TV show has Bob Hope flying from base to base doing his act...

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Hope: "This is our fifth triumphant year in Lai Khe. You can tell: the lizards salute back.

Unlike his previous Vietnam tours, this one had been launched with a White House state dinner a week earlier, hosted by Hope's old buddy Richard Nixon.

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Hope: It's just a kick to think that a group of gypsies like this can stop at the White House and pick up a free meal...

At Lai Khe, Hope told the 10,000 troops he had a personal message from the president – “no worries, fellas, you’re all coming home soon.”

But in that audience, a critical mass weren’t buying it. At all. They started booing and throwing things at the stage. MPs had to restore order.

Of course, none of that appeared in the NBC holiday special which finished as a full-on infomercial for Nixon’s handling of the war.

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Hope: Everyone agrees that this most unpopular of wars has lasted too long, but now for the first time we can see the light at the end of the tunnel....The president’s troop withdrawal plan is working. We are getting out of Vietnam. But we can’t just run out. With a little more patience and unity here at home, and with God’s help, this war will end within the next year. And we’ll have the satisfaction of knowing that we’ve preserved the freedom of not only South Vietnam but also of Southeast Asia.

And finally this visit to a U.S. military hospital...

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Hope: These are Vietnamese children suffering from all the ailments that come with a disaster, some with wounds inflicted by a ruthless war.

...being attended to on-screen by American soldiers.

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Hope: That’s what they’re practically all like, and don’t let that image get tarnished by the occasional combat-disturbed casualty who may freak out and create the horrible headline.

The most horrible headlines had appeared just two months earlier: about the organized murder by U.S. soldiers in a South Vietnamese village of 500 civilians, including children – the My Lai massacre and its coverup by the Army for a year and a half.

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Hope: A lot of you asked about morale over there. Well, these kids were concerned about the morale back home....They deserve our backing to a man. It’s the least we can do. Good night.

Support for the president’s war policies had declined during 1969 to under 50% – until the Silent Majority speech apparently turned things around. Now, in a Gallup Poll right after that Bob Hope show, two-thirds of Americans were again with Nixon on Vietnam. Only a quarter said they disapproved. Anti-war outrage seemed to be waning.

But as it turned out, not for long.

I'm KA, and this is "Nixon At War."

Episode 4 – "Searchlight on the Lawn"

[Nixon State of The Union January 22 1970](#)

...My colleagues in the Congress, our distinguished guests and my fellow Americans.

Exactly a week after his comedian pal asked Americans watching his TV special for "a little more patience and unity on Vietnam," President Nixon was making the Vietnam case for himself in prime-time, his first State of the Union.

[Nixon State of The Union January 22 1970](#)

The major immediate goal of our foreign policy is to bring an end to the war in Vietnam in a way that our generation will be remembered for the fact that we had the courage and character to win the kind of a just peace that the next generation was able to keep. *(applause)*

In other words...

[Bob Hope Tour](#)

Hope: "We are getting out of Vietnam, but we can't run out."

Nixon understood that a true military victory by the U.S. or South Vietnam wasn't in the cards. But like Johnson before him he couldn't stand the prospect of being the president who officially lost it to the communists. America didn't lose wars.

[Nixon State of The Union January 22 1970](#)

The prospects for peace are far greater today than they were a year ago. A major part of the credit goes to the members of this Congress who despite their differences on the conduct of the war, have overwhelmingly indicated their support of a just peace.

The House had just passed a meaningless resolution endorsing his quote "efforts to negotiate a just peace in Vietnam."

[Nixon State of The Union January 22 1970](#)

By this action, you have completely demolished the enemy's hopes that they can gain in Washington the victory our fighting men have denied them in Vietnam. *(applause)*

Mmmm... not really.

Formerly hawkish Democratic Senators as well as Republicans were starting to join the antiwar coalition in Congress, sponsoring bills to rein in the war, and hold the president to his promise to get out by the end of 1970.

Again, the big truth about this war - the U.S. simply never reckoned with the Vietnamese communists' willingness to sacrifice so much in their quarter-century war for independence, so much more than we were.

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

And as a consequence, they were going to stick it out and they figured they could stick it out longer than we could, because we had less at stake. I'd say that was the fundamental misjudgement.

Paul Warnke, who'd just left his job as Assistant Secretary of Defense.

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

So, we put ourselves in a position in which we thought that if we could inflict enough punishment, that this would diminish the amount of support that was coming down from North Vietnam. Now that turned out to be incorrect.

Four or five or six times as many North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were being killed as Americans and South Vietnamese. In some years half the communist fighting force was wiped out but then replaced, and continuing to fight on.

In their long chess game, North Vietnam was unwilling to offer a draw to the United States or South Vietnam.

Hang Nguyen (intvw)

The leadership of North Vietnam did not trust negotiations with the United States.

Hang Nguyen, Columbia University historian of the Vietnam War.

Hang Nguyen (intvw)

They drew the lesson from the French-Indochina War that premature negotiations - and that would be defined as talking about peace or negotiating from a position of weakness - and that would always fail to achieve Hanoi's goals, as they did in 1945 and 1954, which basically left the southern half of the country in shackles.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

Kissinger knew that South Vietnam was doomed and he was quite cynical that we just gotta keep Thieu propped up long enough to get past Election Day.

Nixon biographer Evan Thomas.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

With Nixon, it's more complicated. Nixon really did believe that at the end of the day, American military power could wrest some kind of peace - what might give the South Vietnamese government a fighting chance to hang in there. This was a naive belief, and I think Kissinger thought it was naive. But late at night Nixon could get himself wound up believing in American power.

In other words the president was unprepared to resign from the game.

But of course, it wasn't chess. The pawns were many thousands of human beings dying each month after month. More and more of them in Cambodia. The U.S. bombing campaign there against the communists' "sanctuaries" had dropped 200 million pounds of explosives.

Meanwhile in Washington, Nixon was feeling more put-upon than ever. The press increasingly skeptical of the war, public approval of his Vietnam policies dropping again.

And then in mid-March 1970, after a full year of the American bombing, push came to shove in the capitals of both the United States and Cambodia.

In Washington, Kissinger told the president bluntly that U.S. military power almost certainly wouldn't weaken the communists' resolve. Nixon "hit the roof," demanding he get a new "hard option" for using more military power in the war that day.

[Mort Halperin \(GBH OV\)](#)

The escalation of the war was, I think, a necessary part of the policy.

Kissinger's recently-pushed-out deputy Mort Halperin.

[Mort Halperin \(GBH OV\)](#)

The escalation signals, in effect, had to be sent to Hanoi. I think, the Administration was determined to make it clear to Hanoi that it would ultimately destroy the north if it had to and that it would signal that by various escalatory measures, including the bombing of Cambodia, and then the invasion of Cambodia.

At that same moment in Phnom Penh, Cambodian citizens fed up with the spillover of the war into their country, ransacked the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong embassies.

Newsreel March 11, 1970

More than 20,000 young Cambodians, mostly students, marched in the streets of Phnom Penh, telling Hanoi to get their troops out of the country and shouting, "dirty Vietcong go home."

In response, their head of state Prince Sihanouk doubled down on his "extreme neutrality"....objected to the protests and to the "imperialist capitalists" and to the Vietnamese Communists hanging out in Cambodia...and he threatened to resign. Instead he was immediately removed in a coup, replaced by the America-friendly prime minister.

[Andrew Antippas \(ADST OH\)](#)

As it turned out, when all of this started to happen in March, 1970, there was only eight people in the embassy in Phnom Penh.

Andrew Antippas was the State Department's Cambodia expert in Saigon.

[Andrew Antippas \(ADST OH\)](#)

And suddenly, the whole world attention focused on Cambodia. And the White House was as surprised, and particularly the State Department, as anyone at the overthrow of Sihanouk. What happened was that things just got out of hand.

Disorder cascaded. Ethnic Vietnamese civilians were massacred. The new man in charge, Lon Nol, wasn't much of a leader. In the chaos, the local Khmer Rouge communist guerrillas and North Vietnamese forces launched new offensives against the Cambodian government.

That chaos in Cambodia made the leadership in Washington start thinking about launching their own offensive there.

The Pentagon decided an invasion would only succeed if American troops did the invading. Joint Chiefs chairman Admiral Thomas Moorer:

[Thomas H. Moorer \(GBH OH\)](#)

We gave serious consideration to permitting the South Vietnamese only to go into Cambodia. But it was quite clear that at that point in their training the South Vietnamese did not have the capability.

But for all the tactical and strategic calculation and analysis, the decision-making wasn't entirely rational. For Nixon, who'd served as a Navy lieutenant in the Pacific, there was a large emotional aspect.

[Patton \(film clip\)](#)

Ten-hut. I want you to remember that no bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country.

The first scene of *Patton*, a movie that had just come out – George C. Scott playing General Patton addressing troops during World War II 30 years earlier. Nixon screened it at the White House in early April.

[Patton \(film clip\)](#)

Men, all this stuff you've heard about America not wanting to fight, wanting to stay out of the war, is a lotta horse dung. Americans, traditionally, love to fight. All real Americans love the sting of battle.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

He did get entranced with the idea of Patton.

Biographer Evan Thomas

Evan Thomas (intvw)

The idea of the tough warrior making the tough decisions, when everybody else around him is weak and he just fell in love with Patton and it revved him up to make the tough call as he saw it on invading Cambodia.

Then two days after that came a patriotic cruise aboard the *Sequoia*, the hundred-foot-long presidential yacht.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

He loved that yacht because it was presidential and they piped him aboard. Nixon had this tradition, touching in a way, of taking the presidential yacht down the Potomac to George Washington's home to Mt. Vernon and strike the colors and to to fire a sunset gun.

This last Saturday in April he brought along his family and attorney general Mitchell and Henry Kissinger.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

They had a lot of cocktails and to play the national anthem on the loudspeaker. And Nixon would have a couple of pops and say, play it louder. And he loved it. He just loved the whole ritual of it.

And then back upriver to the White House for another screening of *Patton*.

[*Patton \(film clip\)*](#)

Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser. That's why Americans have never lost and will never lose a war.

As the weekend ended, Nixon ordered an expansion of the ground war into Cambodia, tens of thousands of American boots on new ground.

[*Andrew Antippas \(ADST OH\)*](#)

Very few people in MACV knew about it in advance.

MAC-V, the U.S. military headquarters in South Vietnam.

[*Andrew Antippas \(ADST OH\)*](#)

It really was only set up in the last three or four days of April 1970

Andy Antippas, the U.S. Cambodia expert, was en route to his new post in Phnom Penh.

[*Andrew Antippas \(ADST OH\)*](#)

Even the Secretary of State Bill Rogers didn't know that we were planning this because on April 25, he was testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Fulbright, that the United States had no intention of intervening in Cambodia. It made him look kind of a little silly after we marched in.

Nixon and Kissinger were so extremely secretive about this operation because that's who they were. Evan Thomas:

Evan Thomas (intvw)

Partly they just like secrets and they didn't they didn't want to have congressional hearings. They didn't want to have articles in the New York Times. They liked -- doing things secretly.

[Richard Nixon -Cambodia Incursion Speech April 30 1970](#)

Good evening, my fellow Americans.

On all three TV networks in prime time, Nixon announced his invasion.

More than 30,000 U.S. soldiers and Marines, along with 40,000 South Vietnamese troops, swept into neutral Cambodia.

[Richard Nixon -Cambodia Incursion Speech April 30 1970](#)

This is not an invasion of Cambodia.

Right – an “*incursion*,” a word I remember learning that week.

Mike Rives was running our new embassy in Phnom Penh:

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

I first heard of the incursion into Cambodia by US troops on the radio and the president's speech being broadcast at that time.

[Richard Nixon -Cambodia Incursion Speech April 30 1970](#)

Attacks are being launched this week to clean out major enemy sanctuaries on the Cambodian-Vietnam border. That means cleaning out major North Vietnamese and Vietcong-occupied territories. These sanctuaries which serve as basis for attacks.....

Not search and destroy, not surround and pound, not rack up body counts, merely “clean out” the “sanctuaries.”

[Richard Nixon -Cambodia Incursion Speech April 30 1970](#)

We take this action not for the purpose of expanding the war into Cambodia, but for the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam, and winning the just peace we all desire.

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

The Embassy did not have its own communications and therefore we were dependent on the local telegraph in the post, which closed from midnight to six in the morning. The message had come in and at the time of the broadcast we were in the process of deciphering it. As soon as it was deciphered I of course took the message to General Lon Nol.

Cambodia's leader since the coup, six weeks earlier.

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

General Lon Nol himself took it quite calmly, although obviously he was surprised, also sort of stunned by the whole thing.

President Nixon depicted the big juicy main target of the whole campaign as the Vietnamese communists' jungle Pentagon.

[Richard Nixon -Cambodia Incursion Speech April 30 1970](#)

Tonight, American and South Vietnamese units will attack the headquarters for the entire Communist military operation in South Vietnam.

As if it were some bamboo equivalent of our massive new MAC-V military headquarters near Saigon. The U.S. military even had a Pentagon-esque acronym for it, COS-vin. Not just a headquarters but a key control center.

[Richard Nixon -Cambodia Incursion Speech April 30 1970](#)

This key control center has been occupied by the North Vietnamese and Vietcong for five years in blatant violation of Cambodia's neutrality.

General Douglas Kinnard led the planning for the attack.

[Douglas Kinnard \(GBH OH\)](#)

The operation was due to begin at seven o'clock and Nixon's speech came on about that time and here was President with his map making a big issue of the fact we were going to capture COSVN.

...the U.S. force gets the green light.

[William Corson \(GHB OH\)](#)

We were going to go in, as Mr. Nixon said, to eliminate the COSVN.

William Corson, a Marine Corps counterinsurgency and intelligence colonel in Southeast Asia.

[William Corson \(GHB OH\)](#)

Here was this big headquarters. And we got there and wonder of wonders, no one was there.

Nixon had kept the incursion secret from the Cambodian leader and his own Secretary of State and military staff in South Vietnam, but not from the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, who had already retreated deep into the Cambodian jungle, out of harm's way. And rigged up a new harm's way for the arriving Americans.

[William Corson \(GHB OH\)](#)

This is what caused a tremendous number of casualties, the passive defense, the booby traps, and the mine fields. The enemy, the physical enemy was gone, but he left you a reminder.

That was really a microcosm of the whole war: massive U.S. military power rendered ineffective by nimble, committed native fighters. And like with so much about the American war, the 1970 Cambodia campaign was driven at least as much by hubris and pridefulness as coherent military strategy. In other words:

[Patton \(film clip\)](#)

...the very thought of losing is hateful to Americans.

General Patton was in Nixon's head. The bottom line in the president's TV speech was his refusal to admit we couldn't win, and anger at feeling humiliated.

[Richard Nixon -Cambodia Incursion Speech April 30 1970](#)

We will not be humiliated. We will not be defeated.

And finally, just in case anyone had missed it:

[Richard Nixon -Cambodia Incursion Speech April 30 1970](#)

I know that a peace of humiliation for the United States would lead to a bigger war or surrender later. I would rather be a one-term president and do what I believe was right than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power and to see this nation accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history.

At the end of his Cambodia speech, the president blamed the American unraveling not on the war but – hello, Silent Majority – on reaction against the war.

[Richard Nixon -Cambodia Incursion Speech April 30 1970](#)

We live in an age of anarchy, both abroad and at home. If, when the chips are down, the world's most powerful nation - the United States of America - acts like a pitiful, helpless giant, the forces of totalitarianism and anarchy will threaten free nations and free institutions-throughout the world.

For the war skeptics in Congress, this abrupt, spectacular expansion of the war on the ground was several bridges too far. Two senior Southern Democratic Senators instantly sounded alarms. Foreign Relations chairman William Fulbright:

[Cambodia: Congress Reacts \(GBH\)](#)

I think it raises a very grave question about his authority to move into a neutral country – a country that we have insisted was neutral, up until now.

And Senator Albert Gore, whose son Al was an Army private headed for Vietnam, used the same phrase:

[Cambodia: Congress Reacts \(GBH\)](#)

This is a very grave situation. And an impending constitutional crisis...It is our country that is about to be torn asunder because of an invasion of a small country that has committed no crime against the United States.

Assistant Secretary Marshall Green was at State Department headquarters:

Marshall Green (ADST OH)

Rogers and I were alone up in this little escape room on the seventh floor next to his regular office. At around 10 o'clock that night, as Nixon was winding up his television address, he started out the way we'd expected to but then he became terribly maudlin and all worked up. And Rogers got angrier and angrier. When he was finished. I remember him, he snapped off the television set and said, the kids are going to retch.

“The kids” did. And the radical New Left was already running wild.

In the last couple of months the left-wing Weather Underground group had bombed police headquarters in Berkeley...

Newsreel

When it detonated, dozens of inch-long construction staples, and glass, flew through the building like shrapnel.

...and were planning to bomb an Army base in New Jersey when they accidentally blew themselves up instead, in a Greenwich Village townhouse.

Nixon's chief speechwriter Ray Price.

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

There were times when the way he reacted to a situation or the way he presented it certainly had the effect of exacerbating tensions, and I think probably the classic case on that is when he announced the move into Cambodia. It was a time of high tension, high emotion. The announcement itself was a dramatic one and the speech in which he made it, it had an inflammatory effect, and it sent the country into a spasm of hysteria.

Nixon's speech had been written by the in-house right-winger, young Pat Buchanan.

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

I don't know how he happened to be assigned it. It had belligerent rhetoric in it, and that was Pat's style, and this was at a very tense and delicate time in the U.S. when we

were dealing with massive riots with anti-war demonstrations and so forth. Pat was never asked to write another speech after his Cambodia speech in April of 1970.

The next morning, May Day, Nixon went to the Pentagon to get briefed on his limited non-invasion, then chatted with some civilian employees. And spontaneously doubled down on the anti-antiwar rhetoric. As Buchanan recalled:

[Pat Buchanan, CSPAN](#)

A woman said, "I want to thank you, Mr. President for what you are doing, to help my husband stay alive over there." And Nixon said, "they are great young people over there. On the other hand, there are these bums blowing up campuses." And the term "bums" was taken by the press for Nixon to mean all the demonstrators and all the people who had opposed the war.

That Friday, protests started on campuses all over the country.

In Ohio over that weekend there was a big campus protest an hour south of Cleveland.

John Farrell (intvw)

What really was a working class, middle class, non-elitist school, Kent State.

Nixon's biographer Farrell.

John Farrell (intvw)

A right-wing Republican governor sends the National Guard in.

After the ROTC building there was burned to the ground, a thousand soldiers took over the campus. On Monday, another antiwar demonstration, this one involving 3,000 students.

[Protest Audio \(Kent State\)](#)

National guard: Leave this area immediately.

Police and the National Guard instructed them to end their protest. They didn't, tear gas was fired, and some students threw rocks. A half hour into the confrontation, most of the Guardsmen were headed away from the protesters.

[Protest Audio \(Kent State\)](#)

Protester: Tear gas first started down the commons, then the Guard moved up on both sides of Taylor Hall...

But two dozen of them turned and fired their M-1 rifles.

NBC news

"The guardsmen opened fire on the students."

...some fired again, wounding nine students and killing four, all of those killed 100 yards away, posing no threat.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

I was at lunch at the Federal Club in Washington, D.C., waiter came over, said that, "You've got a call from your office. You have to take it right away."

Egil Krogh, known as Bud, was a 30-year-old White House aide.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

When I took the call they said, "This has happened at Kent State." I went immediately back to the White House to learn what had happened. And it was just awful. I mean, it was just a terrible blow. Because we had managed to be able to handle all major demonstrations in Washington, D.C., without harming anybody, and some of us were - of course a lot of the people that came to demonstrate were people we went to school with. These are our friends. I mean, some of us were just sick at heart at that, because giving live ammunition to the National Guard, a decision had been made, and it was just one of those things that was a deeply tragic affair, which would not have happened but for the Cambodia decision. That was a very sad week, very tragic week.

And then Nixon made it worse.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

I was not privy to the development of the President's statement, as I read it later, I was disappointed in it because it laid a lot of it off on the demonstrators

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

I was in my office then.

Speechwriter Ray Price hadn't learned the lesson four days earlier of Buchanan's inflammatory Nixon speech.

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

I got a call from Ron Ziegler, the press secretary, saying that four kids had been killed there, and they needed to do a little statement. I drafted a quick, short one, thinking that it was - made sense, it turned out to be a mistake. I forget now exactly what it was, but it wasn't as compassionate, I guess, as I - because I think it had something in it about - I'd have to dig it out, that, uh -

He basically had the president say the Kent State protesters were asking for it.

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

You know when you riot, you run a risk. And these were rioting kids who were actually throwing stones at National Guardsmen with guns in their hands.

As Nixon said that week:

[Richard Nixon on Kent State May 9 1970](#)

When you do have a situation of a crowd throwing rocks, and the National Guard is called in, that there is always the chance that it will escalate into the kind of a tragedy that happened in Kent State.

The Kent State killings and the president's public reactions amped up the outrage and fervor exponentially.

Thirty ROTC buildings were burned or bombed, governors deployed the National Guard to 20 campuses and hundreds were shut down. Maybe half of America's college students protested.

Nixon had been elected to get out of Vietnam and restore order in the U.S. Now this.

A majority of Americans still approved of how he was handling Vietnam. But the disagreements were really no longer just about foreign policy. Instead, the war had ignited a new cultural conflict that Nixon helped whip up, and defines our politics to this day.

Scorsese: Street Scenes documentary

"One two three four we don't want your fuckin war"

Four days after Kent State, in Manhattan, on Wall Street, a thousand people, mostly college students, gathered to protest the war and memorialize the four dead in Ohio.

Suddenly an organized mob of hundreds of construction workers swarmed into the crowd chanting "All the way, U.S.A." and "Love it or leave it".

Scorsese: Street Scenes documentary

You rotten commie. You're a commie. Get out of here.

By the way, that documentary you're hearing? Directed by Martin Scorsese, shot by Oliver Stone.

Scorsese: Street Scenes documentary

"You Commie!"

In lower Manhattan that day, scores of kids were beaten, in what was immediately called the Hard Hat Riot. It got huge national attention, and the hardhats kept at it, tens of thousands marching for days through Manhattan for Nixon, for the war, for old-fashioned white working-class America.

That same Friday of the hardhat riot, tens of thousands of anti-Nixon anti-war protesters descended on Washington.

[Pat Buchanan, CSPAN](#)

Peter Jennings: They stream through every street of Washington heading south, bumper to bumper busses served as silent sentries to guard the immediate area near the White House. The demonstrators kept coming through the morning. The intent was serious. The mood was peaceful and the day was hot.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

We felt that there would probably be over a hundred thousand people descending on the city.

The president's young aide Bud Krogh.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

The FBI, Secret Service and others were tracking movements of people coming in. This was just an eruption of people.

Q: Tell us about the decision to put busses around the White House?

Krogh: Remember a meeting in the Justice Department, and I think I said, "Well, you know in the old westerns, John Wayne just used to circle the wagons, and that was enough to be able to protect people inside the wagon train." And I remember saying in the meeting, "Look, what's the worst that they could do? We can put a cordon of people there and when they try to come over, we can squirt them with some tear gas, and they'll slide back down to the other side."

Richard Nixon White House Press Conference, May 8 1970

Live from the nation's capital, President Richard Nixon's news conference.

Just a week after he'd gone on TV to announce his widening of the war in order to end the war, Nixon was back, live from the East Room of the White House.

[Richard Nixon White House Press Conference, May 8 1970](#)

John Scali: Mr. President, How do you answer the criticism... that the justification that you give for going into the Cambodian sanctuaries is hauntingly similar to the reasons that President Lyndon Johnson gave, as he moved step by step up the ladder of escalation -- he wanted peace, too.

Nixon: Mr. Scali, President Johnson did want peace. And if I may use the vernacular he's taken a bad rap from those who said he did want war. The difference is that he did move step by step. This action is a decisive move. And this action also puts the enemy on warning that if it escalates, while we are trying to de-escalate, that we will move decisively and not step by step.

Given everything, it was a pretty impressive performance. The president seemed calm. However:

[Dwight Chapin \(RNL OH\)](#)

The best politician of all is Nixon.

His young aide Dwight Chapin.

[Dwight Chapin \(RNL OH\)](#)

If it's abstract, China, Russia and the world today brilliant strategist. But, boy, when you get in tight and close and you're fighting him and you're fighting his people, and you're coming at him and it's "them/we," he starts falling apart and he does not make good decisions. It's very tricky.

Pat Buchanan, a product of his very Roman Catholic upbringing, had an apostle's take.

[Pat Buchanan, CSPAN](#)

There were hundreds and hundreds of campuses that simply shut down and this was early May and Nixon was tremendously shaken by this, that was the worst period, I call it the Gethsemane of the Nixon Presidency before Watergate. He was really down and really broken.

Geth-SEM-uh-nee: Nixon as the anguishing Christ before his crucifixion? But the president apparently was having some existential feelings. Late on this bad Friday, with his wife away at Camp David, he embarked on a stranger-than-fiction pilgrimage around Washington, D.C and chronicled it right afterward for posterity on vinyl with his Dictaphone.

I'm Kurt Andersen. From PRX, this is Nixon at War.

[Richard Nixon Dictabelt \(076 Seg 4\) May 13 1970](#)

This is a memorandum covering my recollections of a visit to the Lincoln Memorial. As you recall, the press conference was at 10 o'clock Friday night. I then went to bed and slept soundly until shortly after four o'clock.

Unreliable narrator alert: in fact, after the press conference, until 4 a.m. Nixon has almost 50 phone conversations through the White House switchboard.

[Richard Nixon Dictabelt \(076 Seg 4\) May 13 1970](#)

When I woke up, I got up and went into the Lincoln Sitting Room and was listening to a Rachmaninoff album Manolo apparently heard, and came down to the Lincoln sitting room...

Manolo Sanchez, Spanish-born, age 40, Nixon's private valet for years, lived with his wife on the 3rd floor of the White House. At 4:22 a.m., according to the official White House diary, Nixon phones Manolo.

[Richard Nixon Dictabelt \(076 Seg 4\) May 13 1970](#)

As I looked out at the window and saw the small knots of students begin to gather, I asked him if he had ever been to the Lincoln Memorial at night. He said he had not. I said, "get your clothes on and we'll go down to the Lincoln Memorial." Well, I got dressed and at approximately 4:35, we left the White House and drove to the Lincoln Memorial. I have never seen the Secret Service quite so petrified with apprehension.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

He had a little bit too much to drink, as usual, and listened to Rachmaninoff and and he never slept...

His biographer Evan Thomas.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

and he was truly troubled by, by these student protests. And he wanted to go talk to them. He thought he could reason with them face to face, person to person.

Bud Krogh is downstairs in the White House.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

4:30 in the morning, I was in the Secret Service command post, and over the loud speaker came the words, "Searchlight is on the lawn." And "Searchlight" being the President's Secret Service code name so I rushed across West Executive Drive, took the stairs two at a time, went out in the Rose Garden just in time to see the taillights of the President's limousine go out the southwest gate. Ran back, got in another car and found out where the President was going and followed him up to the Lincoln Memorial.

A mile and a half from the White House, at the end of the National Mall near the Potomac. And like so much of Washington that night, filled with antiwar protesters sleeping, hanging out.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

Couldn't have gotten there more than two or three minutes after he got there, went up the stairs to see what was going on, and found him in discussion with, at the start, 10 to 15 young people, students who had come in from all over the East Coast. It was woefully understaffed. I think only four Secret Service agents. We got up there while it was still dark, and he spent about 45 minutes, maybe longer, talking to these students.

[Richard Nixon Dictabelt \(076 Seg 4\) May 13 1970](#)

I walked over to a group of them, and walked up to them, and shook hands. They were not unfriendly. As a matter of fact, they seemed somewhat overawed, and of course quite surprised.

As one of the protesters said afterward, “it was so freaky.”

[Richard Nixon Dictabelt \(079 Seg 1\) May 13 1970](#)

As I tried to explain, my goals in Vietnam were the same as theirs - to stop the killing and end the war, to bring peace. Our goal was not to get into Cambodia by what were doing, but to get out of Vietnam. They did not respond. I hoped that their hatred of the war, which I could well understand, would not turn into a bitter hatred of our whole system, our country, and everything that it stood for. I said, “I know you, that probably most of you think I'm an S.O.B., but I want you to know that I understand just how you feel.”

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

It was totally unplanned, unscripted. It was not just a drop-by. This was a major effort to communicate with these young people. And the crowd grew, it got bigger as they began to realize this is not Rich Little; this is Richard Nixon. This is the real guy. His manner was intense, trying to reach out to them. He talked about how when, before World War II, he had been a pacifist.

Pacifism inherited from his Quaker mother. When he was their age in 1938, he explains to these random protesters at the Lincoln Memorial at 5 in the morning.

[Richard Nixon Dictabelt \(079 Seg 1\) May 13 1970](#)

I recalled how excited I was when Chamberlain came home from Munich, and made his famous statement about "Peace in Our Time."

Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain.

[Richard Nixon Dictabelt \(079 Seg 1\) May 13 1970](#)

I had heard it on the radio. As a result, I thought that at that time that Chamberlain was the greatest man alive. And when I read Churchill's all-out criticism of Chamberlain, I thought Churchill was a madman. In retrospect, I now realize I was wrong.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

It was an amazing effort to try to find a way to communicate with them.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

He was ridiculed for this, but if you actually look at what he said, it's touching. He's trying to persuade these students that, sure, protesting is fine, but they need to see the world as it is, and it's a tough place. and these stoned out kids are looking at him - what the hell are you talking about? But it was a sincere effort to say, “look, I was young once.”

John Farrell (intvw)

Several of them had been up all night smoking dope in their cars or taking acid.

Nixon biographer John Farrell

John Farrell (intvw)

He was really square in the pejorative term of his time. And, you know, "You all need to get out there and travel the world and open your eyes to different cultures." And they were like, "Hey, man, you know, we came here to end the war."

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

He talked about a lot of things that I think that those, the young people around him, felt was off the point, was not really related to why they were there.

Such as, no joke, the really bitchin' beaches in SoCal.

[Richard Nixon Dictabelt \(079 Seg 1\) May 13 1970](#)

I said that right below where I live in California, there was the greatest surfing beach in the world.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

It's getting light now, and you could look out on the Mall, and the reflecting pool, and see people all over the place, and I figured, we've got to go.

[Richard Nixon Dictabelt \(080 Seg 2\) May 13 1970](#)

This group of students, who'd driven all this distance to Washington, this was the only time they'd ever talk to a president of the United States. Perhaps the major contribution I could make to them was to try to lift them a bit out of the miserable intellectual wasteland in which they now wander aimlessly around. Paragraph.

Now, at dawn, the president's Lincoln Continental limo heads east from the Lincoln Memorial, toward the rising sun.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

He got in his car, and I thought we're now safely in route back to the White House, and we go up Constitution Avenue at speed, and we go right by 17th, which we would have turned off to go into the White House, and go up to Capitol Hill. We went in, and we walk through, to the House chamber.

Where, 20 years earlier, Nixon had been a two-term congressman.

John Farrell (intvw)

Nixon sits in his old seat in the House Representatives. He's got his valet with him.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

And the president went and sat down and said, "Manolo, go up and give a speech." So Manolo went up to the speaker's platform in the House and said a few things, I forget what he said, and then the President started to applaud then we went out of the chamber and he noticed a woman - an African-American woman, an older woman - is swabbing the floor. He went over to say hello to her and she had her Bible with her, and the President, "Do you read the Bible?" And she said, "I read it every day." He held her

hand and he said, "My mother was a saint." He said, "You be a saint, too." It was, for me, a beautiful moment.

John Farrell (intvw)

And now you see that the thing was really driving him that morning was this terrible conflict that he had that rather than being a peacemaker, which is what his mom always wanted, he was actually in danger of being a warmonger and losing it all.

Haldeman, the White House chief of staff, remarked in his diary at the time – "the weirdest day so far."

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

Later I did read Haldeman's diary for that day, and he said he felt that the President was in as extreme a condition as he had seen him in his Presidency, and they needed to find some way to get him some rest after that.

[Richard Nixon Dictabelt \(080 Seg 2\) May 13 1970](#)

Memo to Haldeman with regard to this memorandum: After you read it, I think you will share my complete frustration with regard to the coverage of my activities. I can well understand why John Erlichman got the idea from the news reports that I was tired, and all I talked about was nonsensical things. Even when I'm tired, I do not talk about nonsensical things. End of memorandum.

And then Saturday.

CBS Evening News

Walter Cronkite: Good evening. President Nixon heard today the voice of the campus and a massive appeal for peace now. Thousands strong and mostly young, protesters against the Indochina war rallied in Washington Ellipse within sight and sound of the White House.

"Greetings, fellow bums," 32-year-old Jane Fonda tells them, a callback to Nixon's Kent State remark a week ago.

That day in Washington a bomb blows out the glass of a National Guard building and police tear gas demonstrators all over town.

But when the day is done, Nixon and company are actually relieved at how things went.

CBS Evening News

Walter Cronkite: As the sun set behind the Washington Monument, it was clear that both sides, the demonstrators and the Nixon Administration, had finally agreed to call a truce, if not a peace.

“Truce”? Cease-fire maybe. And inside the Administration, in the elite White House national security team, people were defecting.

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

I had just really become very, very against what we were doing in Vietnam.

William Watts ran the National Security Council day to day, one of Kissinger’s “bleeding hearts.”

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

And that big march that they had around the White House. I left to go out and join with these protesters out there, sitting out there with those kids all smoking pot, and goddam, Chapin, Nixon’s appointment secretary, comes through taking pictures. He looks down at me and says, “What are *you* doing here?” I said, “I’m with them.” “*What?*” And then these kids say, “Who are *you*?” I said, “I’m Kissinger’s deputy,” and they are all cheering that I am out there with them.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

There was a lot of tension.

His White House colleague Bud Krogh.

[Egil Krogh \(RNL OH\)](#)

This was now our war. And I knew that, really, the game had changed with that Cambodia invasion. It was going to be something for which we are going to be held responsible.

When Watts went in to resign, he reminded his boss-that when he took the job he’d written him a letter explaining his moral compass:

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

My loyalties, number one, is to my country and the American people and I’m leaving.” And Kissinger said “Bill, your views represent the cowardice of the Eastern Establishment.” I just came up out of my chair swinging, I was so goddamn mad, and took a real roundhouse swing at him, and missed him. He ran behind his desk and said, “I’m only kidding.” So, that was the end of my government career.

Nixon was now feeling like classic Nixon: misunderstood, unappreciated, alone against the world, betrayed even by his own Washington partisans. In the spring of 1970, Republicans co-sponsored a Senate bill to force him to withdraw completely from Vietnam within a year.

That didn’t pass. But in response to the Cambodia invasion, the Senate by a large margin in June did pass a bill to end all funding for any future expansion of the ground war beyond Vietnam.

Although now, concerning Cambodia, that was moot.

[Richard Nixon Address to the Nation June 3 1970](#)

I can now state that this has been the most successful operation of this long and very difficult war.

In June, the president declared victory.

[Richard Nixon Address to the Nation June 3 1970](#)

The success of these operations to date has guaranteed that the June 30 deadline I set for withdrawal of all American forces from Cambodia will be met, and American and allied casualties have been far lower than we expected.

[Andrew Antippas \(ADST OH\)](#)

I think that the incursion was a much tougher campaign than people recall.

Andy Antippas, whose first three months at the embassy in Phnom Penh coincided with the incursion.

[Andrew Antippas \(ADST OH\)](#)

I mean, some people think that it was just a "walk through." In point of fact the North Vietnamese fought very hard, and we took very heavy casualties.

Five percent of the Americans deployed in the operation were wounded and one percent were killed. And 18,000 North and South Vietnamese died.

[ABC News Standup July 27 1970 \(GBH\)](#)

They're hot, they're dirty, but they're happy to be back in South Vietnam. Whether they were victorious in Cambodia remains an open question. This is Frank Mariano, ABC News, back in Vietnam.

As the U.S. troops left Cambodia, Nixon retreated to his very modest cinderblock "Florida White House" on Key Biscayne, near Miami. And spent the weekend there watching the new *Battle of Britain* movie and, for a third time,

Patton theme
(Trumpets)

Patton.

Cambodia was "The most successful operation of this long and difficult war," Nixon had said. Sy Hersh's Pentagon sources told him otherwise.

Seymour Hersh (intvw)

The Cambodia thing was a rocket for the guys in the inside. Everything that they

thought that would happen every thought, every bit of intelligence they had was wrong. And so at that point, anybody on the inside, any American boy that was sent to die, should have been on the soul of everybody sending him, including the colonel who sent him or the lieutenant colonel and the captain of the company – it was over, we we didn't have a chance Cambodia just told everybody it's over.

But Nixon didn't get that memo. Five months after the incursion, the end of 1970, he's still itching to bomb Cambodia harder, raging to Kissinger one night: "Really go in, everything that can fly, go in there and crack the hell out of them."

It seems to me that Nixon and Kissinger's expansion of the war into Cambodia for four long years is the single most inexcusable thing they did in Southeast Asia. Collateral damage on a profound scale.

John Farrell (intvw)

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...

Nixon biographer John Farrell

John Farrell (intvw)

Again, it's just this heedlessness about the human life at stake that I think is shocking.

That is, Nixon's and Kissinger's heedlessness –

John Farrell (intvw)

And what effect that might have on Cambodian politics, driving the Cambodians back further into their country, giving the Khmer Rouge and the North Vietnamese more of an avenue to bring communist revolution into Cambodia, and that really created this chaos.

That is, four years of heedless nonstop U.S. bombing destabilized a previously neutral, peaceful country, accelerated its civil war, radicalized its citizens, and inadvertently helped the most extreme guerillas, led by a madman named Pol Pot.

Hang Nguyen (intvw)

What that did was basically ensure that a more violent faction of the Cambodian Communist Party would emerge victorious.

Historian Hang Nguyen.

Hang Nguyen (intvw)

In other words, this is really the rise of the Khmer Rouge. You can't separate the post-1968 war - Nixon's war - all of the ripple effects it would have in Cambodia and Laos. And Nixon only helped Pol Pot's campaign.

The Khmer Rouge won, and in four years running Cambodia, oversaw the extermination of a million and a half or more Cambodians, a quarter of the population.

[Henry Kissinger \(GBH OH\)](#)

With respect to the charges that have been made that the Administration's policy contributed to the devastation of Cambodia, I think this is a act of considerable hypocrisy.

Henry Kissinger, shortly after that genocide ended, on the [WGBH series Vietnam: A Television History](#).

[Henry Kissinger \(GBH OH\)](#)

I think Cambodia is a great tragedy. Whether Nixon and his associates like myself were right in ordering the incursions into Cambodia can be discussed forever, but this is unprecedented in modern history that a government takes over that then begins to exterminate its own people.

But then he makes the case that antiwar Americans were also responsible for what happened in Cambodia by being too antiwar – that the liberals had handcuffed them, prevented Nixon from waging more war there to stop the Khmer Rouge from winning.

[Henry Kissinger \(GBH OH\)](#)

I think both sides of this debate ought to search their souls and stop these bitter, vicious, personal attacks on something on which reasonable people could differ, but in which, finally, millions of people were killed because a murderous gang was permitted to take over, largely as a result of our own divisions.

I'm Kurt Andersen. From PRX, this has been the fourth episode of "Nixon at War."

[Henry Kissinger \(GBH OH\)](#)

KISSINGER: No, I have to stop now. It's 12:30 and I have guests coming at one. I've gotta make phone calls...

Our next episode: "Beginning of the End."

[John Flynt \(GBH OH\)](#)

For the first time, a large group of Southern conservatives who had previously been classed as hawks decided that this war was no longer for us.

Thanks very much for listening. I'm the writer and a co-producer of this series. 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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For more on the series, visit our website, nixonatwar.org. And if you like what you've heard, please give us a rating and review wherever you get your podcasts.

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