

Nixon at War

Episode Five - The Beginning of the End

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

Key

Bold = Narrator, Kurt Andersen

GBH = GBH Open Vault Collection

Intvw = Original interview

OH = Oral History

RNL = Richard Nixon Library

WHT = White House Tape

(Trailer)

[Newsreel \(GBH\) February 8 1971](#)

One of the biggest offensives of the Vietnam War is now underway, this time from Vietnam into neighboring neutralist Laos.

It's February 1971. Deep into the seventh year of the U.S. war, with more than 300,000 U.S. troops still in the fight.

[Newsreel \(GBH\) February 17 1971](#)

The Americans are still very much here. Almost all of the air support is American, and without it, the South Vietnamese would be fighting an entirely different kind of war in Laos.

General Al Haig, the deputy national security adviser and diehard hawk, is just back from Vietnam telling his bosses “we are within an eyelash of victory.” And that has encouraged President Nixon to okay another expansion of the war.

[Newsreel \(GBH\) February 8 1971](#)

The push began at dawn with armored personnel carriers from the 11th Armored Cavalry brigade, spearheading the attack.

But this new offensive is different - for the first time in a big operation, the South Vietnamese army is on its own. No Americans officially on the ground.

[Newsreel \(GBH\) February 17 1971](#)

And high-ranking American officers in Saigon fully expect President Nixon to point to this fact soon, as proof that Vietnamization is working.

After Nixon widened the war last year into a different neutral country, Cambodia, Congress cut off funds for any future boots on the ground outside South Vietnam. Such as Laos.

So this would be the test of the crux of Nixon's whole Vietnam policy -- can our South Vietnamese allies actually fight the war on their own?

[Newsreel \(GBH\) February 8 1971](#)

Twenty thousand Vietnamese are in this drive. There are some two divisions of North Vietnamese troops in southern Laos and they've known about this invasion for days.

But the Americans in charge would rather not have the American public know much about it. They're attempting a news blackout.

[Newsreel \(GBH\) February 8 1971](#)

Also on hand at the border were a dozen Vietnamese military policemen. Their job is to keep correspondents from accompanying the assault force.

Seems like a bad omen that the U.S. and its ally have different names for the Laos incursion – to the Americans it's "Operation Dewey Canyon II" but to the South Vietnamese it's "Operation Lam Son 719."

[Hoang Duc Nha \(GBH OH\)](#)

Lam Son was the name of the king who beat the Chinese...

Hoang Duc Nha, a top aide and cousin of President Thieu's.

[Hoang Duc Nha \(GBH OH\)](#)

...and we use that to code-name the operation into Laos, the purpose of which is to...number one, demonstrate that the army of Vietnam could stage an operation outside of its own territory and secondly, disrupt the supplies on the Ho Chi Minh trail.

- the north-south web of back roads and trails and rivers through Laos and Cambodia -

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

...which was being used by the North Vietnamese to supply practically all of the operations in South Vietnam.

Admiral Thomas Moorer, chairman of the joint chiefs:

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

The American role was primarily in the form of air support and logistic support.

"Air support" meaning swarms of Air Force, Army, Navy and Marine aircraft bombing and strafing communist Vietnamese soldiers inside Laos.

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

It was, in fact, the first major operation outside of Vietnam, South Vietnam, that was conducted under their command.

Maybe it would work...

[Newsreel \(GBH\) February 17 1971](#)

South Vietnamese soldiers are doing things today that the Americans always had to do for them before.

A CBS News report a week into the operation.

[Newsreel \(GBH\) February 17 1971](#)

And high-ranking American officers in Saigon fully expect President Nixon to point to this fact soon, as proof that Vietnamization is working.

But unlike Cambodia last year, where the North Vietnamese made a strategic retreat ahead of the U.S. invaders, this time they stand and fight and wham the South Vietnamese.

[Hoang Duc Nha \(GBH OH\)](#)

The whole thing was conceived wrong from the start.

Again, the president's cousin Hoang Duc Nha.

[Hoang Duc Nha \(GBH OH\)](#)

When you had to teach the troops to understand a little bit of English to call for air cover, you know, from the US air force so, that had leak out, and as a result, the Communists had about two divisions waiting. After that, completely demoralized - and did not give us the success we had anticipated.

And while no U.S. infantry entered Laos, anti-aircraft fire there brought down U.S. airmen who then had to be search-and-rescued. So inevitably there were American boots on the ground.

Seymour Hersh (intvw)

We had we had so many people shot down in places they shouldn't be.

Seymour Hersh, who'd reported on the war from the start.

Seymour Hersh (intvw)

There were a lot of American guys that were in units that would go into Cambodia, into Laos. They would be flown in and dropped off looking for guys we knew were shot down and they had a beacon, and maybe after a couple of days they would, they were on the run, and the beacon would burn out.

This big test of the South Vietnamese taking over from the Americans is not going well at all.

I'm Kurt Andersen, and this is "Nixon At War." Episode 5: "The Beginning of the End.

As the press reports the South Vietnamese failure, a month into this "limited incursion" into Laos, Nixon tells Kissinger that "our worst enemy is the press." Two days later, talking to his chief of staff, he's already rationalizing the failure in Laos, planning the fibs and the spin.

[RNL WHT464-012 3.9.71](#)

Richard Nixon: However Laos comes out, we have got to claim that it was a success, we've been in four weeks now. Four weeks is a helluva long time. So they get the hell kicked out of them and have to get out — claim a victory. Armies always do that.

The next day, Kissinger returns with bad news:

[RNL WHT465-008 3.10.71](#)

Kissinger: I think the South Vietnamese want to get out of Laos within the next few weeks. My view is that politically—diplomatically, the North Vietnamese will make this into a big victory if they leave this quickly. If they could hang in there another three or four weeks...

– "they" being the South Vietnamese army –

[RNL WHT465-008 3.10.71](#)

Kissinger: I just want you to be aware of the fact. Abrams is going up to talk to them.

– Creighton Abrams, the general running the war –

Nixon is making sure his secretaries of defense and state would be kept out of the loop. Which concerning the war was now standard procedure – the Secretary of State had been deadset against this expansion into Laos, and the Secretary of Defense was a bit iffy.

[RNL WHT465-008 3.10.71](#)

Kissinger: If they could stay . . . say, another month, and then start slowly to withdraw, I think the strategic gain for us next year is worth some casualties this year.

Worth some South Vietnamese casualties.

[RNL WHT465-008 3.10.71](#)

Kissinger: But we can't insist on it. We can't —

Nixon : No, no, we can't insist on it, because if we insist and they take a bang, they'll squeal.

Kissinger: That's right. Absolutely.

“If they take a bang, they’ll squeal.”

But part of Nixon’s and Kissinger’s cynicism is just realism: this big test of the fundamental U.S. policy, “Vietnamization,” is failing.

[RNL WHT465-008 3.10.71](#)

Kissinger: I must tell you honestly, now that I’ve seen the operation, this South Vietnamese army is not as good as we all thought last year. They’re moving like crazy, but they’re always moving in areas where there are no North Vietnamese.

Nixon: Nevertheless, if the South Vietnamese do withdraw, we’ve just got to make the best of it.

K: Oh, yeah.

“Make the best of it.” At this point it’s mainly about what the American public can be persuaded is true, the reviews of the war in the press.

[RNL WHT465-008 3.10.71](#)

Nixon: Fortunately, we have gotten a couple of good stories. We’ve had about three day’s ride. And now they can say “We’ve accomplished our objective and we’re moving out.

The press seems to be falling for the spin – but how about the South Vietnamese, the actual war...?

[RNL WHT465-008 3.10.71](#)

Nixon: I have become completely fatalistic about the goddamn thing. I don’t think they’re up to a real bang. And if they’re not up to it, I’d rather have them get out, and then we’re going to get the hell out and hope and pray that nothing happens before 1972.

“Get the hell out and pray that nothing happens before 1972.”

Meaning, of course, Election Day 1972.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

We were going to lose the war.

Nixon biographer Evan Thomas.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

But if we lost the war too quickly, the Republicans would be blamed for it and it would be an election issue and they would say, you lost Vietnam, whereas if we lost the war after the election, we wouldn’t get blamed for it. Now, that’s a very cynical bargain because prolonging the war could cost thousands of American lives just for the purpose of reelecting Richard Nixon.

Kissinger had told Nixon that our allies wanted to pull back their forces within “a few weeks” — but now just one week later they started abandoning their positions in Laos and high-tailing it home.

On March 19th, as the full failure of the six-week operation is being reported, Vice-President Agnew gives another of his speeches slagging the press, for its coverage of the war — and is asked afterward about Laos specifically.

[Spiro Agnew press conference March 19 1971](#)

Reporter: Mr. Vice-President, if it did turn out, in that Laos incursion to be actually a retreat, and a disorderly withdrawal, would the Administration level with the American people and say so?

Agnew: I think so, I don't see any reason why we shouldn't.

More than a third of the South Vietnamese soldiers in the Laos incursion were wounded or killed – some accidentally by American airmen in a half dozen friendly fire incidents. Of the U.S. helicopter fleet – no boots on the ground! – 108 were shot down and destroyed, another 600 damaged. And more than 200 Americans were killed.

But spin doctor Kissinger has a PR plan for the president.

[RNL WHT471-002 3.9.71](#)

Kissinger: I think you can give a very thoughtful speech. It doesn't have to be long — in which you say, “We believe Laos has been a success for the following reasons...” And you can give them some figures: Just a few figures. They won't check them.

“They” being the press.

[RNL WHT471-002 3.9.71](#)

Kissinger: I think we can make a most impressive case. And then at the end of that presentation, you can say, after the most careful study, we have decided to withdraw 100,000 troops by December 1st.”

Great minds thinking alike!

[RNL WHT471-002 3.9.71](#)

Kissinger: A small withdrawal that triggers a big public debate is actually less useful, even from a diplomatic point of view, than if we get ahead of the power curve with the announcement. Then, I think, early in May, we ought to approach the North Vietnamese for another meeting. Our problem is that if we get out after all the suffering we've gone through— We can't have it knocked over—to put it brutally—before the election.

Nixon: That's right.

“Knock the place over,” their euphemism for what they understand to be the South Vietnam regime's more or less inevitable fall. Nixon now simply wants to

delay that, maintain good optics – not be seen as “bugging out.”

But Congress, with Democratic majorities in both houses, is losing patience. Every week another hundred Americans are still dying in Vietnam, and another 400 wounded. In a war that everyone in Washington in the spring of 1971 accepts that the U.S. is not going to win.

On the failed Laos operation, Kissinger had advised Nixon to give a speech, not too long, declare victory.

[Richard Nixon Address on SE Asia April 7 1971](#)

Good evening, my fellow Americans.

And voilà, two weeks later...

[Richard Nixon Address on SE Asia April 7 1971](#)

There has been a great deal of understandable speculation — just as there was after Cambodia — whether or not it was a success or a failure, a victory or a defeat. What is important is not the instant analysis of the moment, but what happens in the future.

As Kissinger had also instructed, “give them some figures, they won’t check them”...

[Richard Nixon Address on SE Asia April 7 1971](#)

Now on this chart on my right, you can see how our plan has succeeded. In June of 1969 I announced a withdrawal of 25,000 men; in September...

Then, also as discussed, make it look like the policy hadn’t just failed its big test, that everything is going according to plan...

[Richard Nixon Address on SE Asia April 7 1971](#)

I can report that Vietnamization has succeeded. Because of the success of the Cambodian operation, because of the achievements of the South Vietnamese operation in Laos, I am announcing an increase in the rate of American withdrawals. The American involvement in Vietnam is coming to an end.

That is, by the end of his third year as president, just in time for the 1972 election campaign...

[Richard Nixon Address on SE Asia April 7 1971](#)

100,000 more American troops will be brought home from South Vietnam. This will bring the total number of American troops withdrawn from South Vietnam to 365,000. Now that’s over two-thirds of the number who were there when I came into office. Let me turn now to a proposal which at first glance has a great deal of popular appeal.

As always with options he prefers not to choose, he tosses out the red herring of their “popular appeal”...in this case, because he knows his slow-motion withdrawal is losing popularity fast. A new Gallup Poll shows that half of Americans now disapprove of how he’s handling the war, more than ever before.

[Richard Nixon Address on SE Asia April 7 1971](#)

If our goal is a total withdrawal of all our forces, why don't I announce a date now for ending our involvement? The issue very simply is this: Shall we leave Vietnam in a way that by our own actions consciously turns the country over to the Communists?

Again, there isn't much doubt now about that end — we leave, the communists finally win Vietnam's civil war. The main question is when.

Then Nixon finishes on a completely and uncharacteristically sentimental note.

[Richard Nixon Address on SE Asia April 7 1971](#)

I think the hardest thing that a President has to do is to present posthumously the Nation's highest honor, the Medal of Honor, to mothers or fathers or widows of men who have lost their lives. We had an award ceremony in the East Room of the White House just a few weeks ago. And at that ceremony I remember one of the recipients. Her husband was a Marine sergeant, Sergeant Karl Taylor. // I shook hands with their two children, Karl, Jr.—he was 8 years old, and Kevin, who was 4. As I was about to move to the next recipient, Kevin suddenly stood at attention and saluted.

In fact, Sergeant Taylor had died in 1968, before Nixon became president...20,000 American deaths ago, more than a third of all those killed in the war.

But thanks to the president's patriotic finale, even the tougher news guys on TV give the speech an instant A.

Upstairs in the Lincoln Sitting Room, where just the day before he'd had the Secret Service install a bug on that phone, Nixon settles in to do something he loves.

As Sy Hersh says:

Seymour Hersh (intvw)

He was constantly, you know, giving a speech and spending the next four hours calling up people to one, two o'clock in the morning to be praised. I mean, he was that needy, it was sort of shocking.

And so begins a long night of phone calls.

First up, Haldeman.

[RNL WHT001-08 April 7 1971](#)

HRH: That was great.

RN: I don't know.

RN: Now I must say that I put an awful lot of emotion into it. And I don't know whether it got through

HRH: it sure did. And it did very clearly. And the decision to do the thing at the end was exactly right I think for the one thing completely threw the commentators off.

RN: Oh did it?

HRH: And the staff people, of course, all think it's great...

RN: To take all of that and compress it into that and to say it without being maudlin. And yet to have some emotion, you know, it was done with style.

HRH: It sure was.

Seymour Hersh (intvw)

He needed to be loved. It was very hard to tell Nixon something he didn't want to hear. He needed to be loved. They were courtiers, too. You had to be. Nixon was Nixon.

But as Sy Hersh says, none of them were better than Kissinger.

Seymour Hersh (intvw)

The flattery! I thought to myself, "oh, my God, it can't be that easy!" There was a *genius*, a sort of shamelessness

[RNL WHT001-010 April 7 1971](#)

Henry Kissinger: Mr. President?

Richard Nixon: Yah, Henry.

The first of five conversations that night with Henry Kissinger.

[RNL WHT001-010 April 7 1971](#)

Kissinger: This was the best speech you've delivered since you've been in office.

Nixon: Well, I don't know.

Nixon again with the preliminary *aw shucks*.

[RNL WHT001-010 April 7 1971](#)

Nixon: I thought November 3rd was better, but we'll never have a moment like that again.

His speech five months ago about the antiwar bums versus the "Silent Majority."

[RNL WHT001-010 April 7 1971](#)

Kissinger: Well, the November 3rd speech was not well delivered, Mr. President. It was a powerful speech.

Nixon: Yeah, yeah —

Kissinger: this one was really movingly delivered. And I don't know whether you saw the commentary —

Nixon: Of course I don't even look at the commentary. I don't care what the bastards say—

Kissinger: Well, but this is so amazing. First of all, no one was fly-specking it. Everyone is saying “a strong man sticking to his guns, carrying out his policies and not being driven off,” Dan Rather, very positive, Marvin Kalb, very positive.

Nixon is now finished with the false humility.

[RNL WHT001-010 April 7 1971](#)

Nixon: I'll tell you one thing: This little speech was a work of art. I know a little something about speechwriting, and by the time we got it done and that little conclusion, it was no act, because no actor could do it. No actor in Hollywood could have done that, that well. I thought that was done well, didn't you think?

Kissinger: First of all, no actor could have *written* it. You couldn't have done it unless you had meant it.

Nixon: Yeah. But did that come across? I mean it was--

Kissinger: Mr. President, I had after all heard it before. I had a lump in my throat when I heard it.

Nixon: Well, you know, it brought a lump in mine, strangely enough.

Kissinger: It was dignified, strong. It was not ingratiating. If anything can do it, I don't know what the results will be —

Nixon: Oh well, when I met with... those leaders were a miserable lot, weren't they?.

Right before tonight's speech Nixon, with Kissinger, had briefed the leaders of the House and Senate and assured them he did indeed have a fixed deadline in mind – a secret plan! – for getting out of Vietnam once and for all.

[RNL WHT001-010 April 7 1971](#)

Nixon: I said After you left, I stuck it to em, on that point — I said, if the Congress wants to take over, that's fine. But then they take responsibility for this going down the drain.// By God, I'm not gonna let them get off this hook.

Kissinger: It is a disgrace. Mr. President, you are saving this country.

Nixon: Well, let me say, incidentally, screw the cabinet. And the rest of them. As far as I'm concerned, I've made the speech now and the rest of them if they like it, fine. But no more sucking around. I'm sick of the whole bunch-

Kissinger: It was a speech that we can all be proud to have had the privilege to be associated with.

Nixon: Well, it's a goddamn good little speech, actually.

Kissinger: It was also magnificently delivered.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

Kissinger, I think he's the greatest of many things.

Evan Thomas.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

He was certainly the greatest ass kisser in history.

Next up, Rosemary Woods, Nixon's secretary for the last 20 years, whose been registering some of his cronies' congratulations tonight.

[RNL WHT001-012 April 7 1971](#)

Rose Mary Woods: It was tremendous, from everybody's point of view. The whole thing, the sincerity, when you put the papers down and just talked, I would doubt that you had a dry eye in the audience.

Richard Nixon: I didn't -- felt a little wet myself.

Woods: Yeah.

"I felt a little wet myself," Rosemary.

[RNL WHT001-012 April 7 1971](#)

Woods: Jack Mulcahy called.

A multimillion-dollar Nixon donor.

[RNL WHT001-012 April 7 1971](#)

Nixon: Did he?

Woods: He said that it was the first time he'd ever listen to any president and had tears in his eyes.

Nixon: Did he? Even old Jack? Good.

Woods: Yeah, Leonard Firestone called.

Nixon: Oh did he? Len?

Woods: Yes.

Another big donor.

[RNL WHT001-012 April 7 1971](#)

Woods: And he said that he was with a whole group of people. And they all were so thrilled. The record, the leadership, the delivery, the poise...

Then comes his old friend, the Protestant pope, "America's pastor."

[RNL WHT001-014 April 7 1971](#)

Billy Graham: Mr. President?

Nixon: Who's this, Billy?

Graham: This is Billy Graham. I want to tell you that that's by far the best anybody's done on Vietnam. You had me in tears.

Nixon: Well, I was in tears myself, you know,

Graham: I thought it was just tremendous. I think you've given some of people like me, you've given me something to hold on to. And I've got a editorial in the New York Times on Friday.

Nixon: Good.

Graham: And I'm putting all the blame of this whole thing on *Kennedy*.

Nixon: That's right, he started the damn thing! He sent the first 16,000 combat people there himself!

Graham: Well, I'm saying that the first time I ever heard about involvement was playing golf with him. He said "We cannot allow Laos and South Vietnam to fall to the communists." [*Nixon laughs*] I said when President Johnson took over we had 16,000 troops there.

RN: That's right!

But even with all the flattery, as the night goes on Nixon is eventually pulled down into the dark side.

He talks again to Haldeman, complaining about the cabinet members who haven't phoned to flatter him yet.

[RNL WHT001-035 April 7 1971](#)

Nixon: We've heard from only three cabinet officers, which I expected. And that's that. I said, I guess we heard from Mitchell. Who else, Rogers?

Hungry for still more praise, he calls Kissinger again but Nixon's insecurity and paranoia are getting the best of him. He's keeping track of which aides still haven't called in to praise the speech.

[RNL WHT001-037 April 7 1971](#)

Nixon: You know, haven't heard from MacGregor or from Rumsfeld or Finch, or any of the other fellows, I mean, they're all covering, I suppose, waiting til they see —

Kissinger: I think MacGregor called Haldeman and said he was disappointed at the withdrawal

Clark MacGregor is the White House liaison with Congress.

Nixon immediately calls Haldeman back to drill down on this minor character's apparent disloyalty. And then spirals into an epic rant.

[RNL WHT001-039 April 7 1971](#)

Nixon: Henry just told me that McGregor was disappointed in the speech because I didn't announce more withdrawals. Now if he's going to be that kind of a guy, we better shuck him off god damn fast, if he can't see this. Is that what he told you?

Haldeman tries defending his colleague.

[RNL WHT001-039 April 7 1971](#)

Haldeman: What he told me was that he was very enthusiastic on presentation and that he had hoped that we could that we would withdraw, you know, a larger amount, but he said that all along.

Nixon: Yeah. But he really has shown he doesn't have much guts. We haven't heard from Rumsfeld, we haven't heard from Finch. And this is all you've heard from

McGregor. So we've now found out who's who, haven't we? Right? They don't want to fight when it's tough? Screw 'em, because we're in a hell of a fight. Believe me.

Haldeman: You're darn right. Hell of a fight.

Nixon: And if they can't go with this — this was, if I may say so, this is the best you can do with what we've got. I really think it was — I mean, we, I mean, I put a lot of, as I told you earlier, a lot into myself into that. And if they can't get it — I think the folks got it. But I don't know, You had to say something that was sort of related to people, and it did relate a little to people, I think. If it didn't, the hell with them, the country can't be saved.

“The country can't be saved.” By midnight he's practically King Lear, declaiming, raging, naked on the heath.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

Andersen: The title of your book is *Being Nixon*.

I was talking with Evan Thomas.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

Andersen: while he was president, what was it like to be him?

Thomas: Nixon was somebody who wanted to be happy, who wanted to be upbeat — when he came home at night, his daughter remembered that he would turn on all the lights and he'd turn a Broadway show tune on the record player, and he wanted nothing but cheerful conversation. He wanted to be upbeat because he knew that deep down he was gloomy and depressed. He was always fighting his own demons. He lost.

[RNL WHT001-053 April 8 1971](#)

Nixon: Hello, Henry?

Kissinger: Mr. President?

Nixon: You out to dinner someplace?

24 hours after that first round of praise, like an addict he needs some more...

[RNL WHT001-053 April 8 1971](#)

Kissinger: I had dinner with the board of directors of the RAND Corporation.

They'd both dined with big businessmen who all thought the speech the night before had killed.

[RNL WHT001-053 April 8 1971](#)

Kissinger: No, it shows the tremendous power of the presidency if it is used with courage and wisdom.

Nixon: Yeah, and sometimes it, particularly with the medium of television, where you can go directly to the people, not through the press, just whack it right out there. It'll give this press a little pause. Oh, they'll hack away now about the time and do we have a date in mind and all that sort of thing. And some way or other you've got to get Laird in,

Secretary of Defense Laird...being a bit too independent.

[RNL WHT001-053 April 8 1971](#)

Kissinger: I scheduled a lunch with him next week. I'll get him quieted down by other methods. I'm just gonna tell him he'll get himself into such unbelievable trouble.

Nixon: He should also pipe down on the Calley thing.

“The Calley thing.” A week earlier a military jury had found 27-year-old Army Lieutenant William Calley guilty of murdering 22 of the 504 civilians killed at My Lai in South Vietnam. The jury of fellow officers sentenced Calley to life in Leavenworth Federal Prison.

Secretary Laird was opposed to leniency. But much of Nixon’s Silent Majority, and even liberals like Senator William Fulbright, thought Calley was being scapegoated. So Nixon immediately had him moved from jail to mere house arrest while he appealed his sentence.

And the president in his speech had made some political hay by downplaying war crimes, like Lieutenant Calley’s.

[Richard Nixon Address on SE Asia April 7 1971](#)

I feel it is my duty to speak up for the two and a half million fine young Americans who have served in Vietnam. The atrocity charges in individual cases should not and cannot be allowed to reflect on their courage and their self-sacrifice.

Billy Graham’s op-ed in the Times that week, on Good Friday, was all about Calley - “Let him that is without sin cast the first stone,” the Reverend Graham wrote, “We have all had our My Lais in one way or another.”

[RNL WHT001-053 April 8 1971](#)

Nixon: We’re not defending Calley, we’re gonna let it run its course. Let it drag on a while.

Nixon on the phone with Kissinger, about that week’s reactions to the verdict and sentence.

[RNL WHT001-053 April 8 1971](#)

Nixon: It was really such an amazing sort of public furor, surprised us all, surprised the press. It’s probably a good thing that the country had that little spasm.

Kissinger: That’s right.

Nixon: Give them a chance to pop off steam, and we gained a little initiative as a result of it, don’t you think?

Kissinger: Oh, yes, and no matter what they say now, no one can construe that outburst as a dove outburst, even if it took the form perhaps of wanting to get out of the war. It was the frustration of the people who are not permitted to *win* the war.

Nixon: That's right. Exactly.

Kissinger: What they wanted was a feeling of revulsion against the *deed* -- in fact, the deed itself didn't bother anybody.

"The deed" - the massacre of hundreds among them 173 children, including 56 infants.

[RNL WHT001-053 April 8 1971](#)

Nixon: No, they — as a matter of fact the people said, "Sure he was guilty — but, by God, why not?" [*both laugh*]

Kissinger: Exactly.

I'm KA, and we'll be right back, with Nixon at War, from PRX.

The U.S. had been on their way out of Vietnam since Nixon came in. But when did the North Vietnamese really decide that victory was theirs?

I asked the Columbia historian Hang Nguyen.

Hang Nguyen (intvw)

Kurt Andersen: Did they have a pretty good sense of the timeline of how much longer this was going to take to win?

Nguyen: That's such a good question – I mean, I think if you were to ask Lê Duẩn that question –

– the top guy in Hanoi –

Hang Nguyen (intvw)

and then here I'll try to channel him, he would date it from when troops on the ground could deliver a decisive victory. And it did happen in 1971. The Americans and the South Vietnamese rushed into this Laotian operation, and North Vietnamese troops were able to take out the cream of the crop, the backbone of the South Vietnamese forces.

And indeed, four days after Nixon's speech about how great Laos had gone, reality failed to cooperate:

A front page Times story reports the Ho Chi Minh Trail wide open again, full of communist supply trucks and soldiers.

And now, a week after that, another front-page story in the Sunday paper — Creighton Abrams, the Vietnam commanding general, says unfortunately there might have to be another South Vietnamese invasion of Laos, again with backup from American forces.

Nixon is annoyed — not by the possible military do-over but by the candor.

[RNL WHT001-145 April 18 1971](#)

Nixon: The orders have got to go out there that I want Abrams to pipe down. It doesn't make any difference what he does, I don't care if he goes in and bombs the hell out 'em. But don't say it. Some goddamn newspaper guy wanted to get a story to the effect that we were going back into Laos-cuz the news guys out there dying because Laos is over, and I think poor old Abrams, he just he just feels so compelled to be so goddamn honest all the time. Why doesn't he just shut up?

Kissinger: That's right.

Nixon: Jesus Christ, do what I say, don't comment on that sort of stuff.

Kissinger: Exactly.

Nixon: Dodge it. it doesn't make any difference what the actual stories say, it's what hits in that minute that people see on television. And everybody that was beginning to calm down over Laos, they get all stirred up about it again.

Nixon no longer has many illusions: his war is now a delaying action keep just enough U.S. forces there just long enough that he won't get blamed for the bad finish. General Abrams sending forces back into Laos or not isn't gonna change the outcome.

[RNL WHT001-145 April 18 1971](#)

Nixon: Don't get the impression that, by Abrams saying a silly thing like this that that's gonna hold down the North Vietnamese. It isn't. I mean, he had his shot, and he's not gonna get any more.

After Walter Cronkite went on CBS prime-time back in 1968 and declared the war unwinnable, people started saying “when you've lost Cronkite you've lost middle America.” But American public opinion about Vietnam actually shifted pretty gradually. In fact, on Vietnam, it's only now, in 1971, that you'd really lost middle America, when you lost Congressman Jack Flynt.

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

I began to see and feel an attitude among my constituents in the Sixth Georgia District that there was an increasing amount of dissatisfaction, number one, with the conduct of the war, the way it was being fought, and then with the war in Asia itself.

Flynt represented a district outside Atlanta for two decades. Like almost all Southern congressmen back then, he was a conservative Democrat. As an officer in World War II he'd won a Bronze Star.

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

In April of 1971 I made one of the hardest decisions that I'd ever been called on to make in my entire life.

The House was voting on a bill to re-authorize the draft. The day before, Lieutenant Calley had received his sentence at Fort Benning, next door to Flynt's district. The congressman decided he was done with the Vietnam War.

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

It was on the day that I spoke in the House of Representatives and uh, announced my rejection of the war policy of our country as it applied in Southeast Asia 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, and that we had made our decision and we were going to do what we could to wind it down and bring it to a close. All of us supported the position of our government, of our country, as long as we possibly could. But when it reached the point that we felt we could no longer in good conscience support it I think that many people throughout the United States who had previously supported the war as strongly as I had, began to feel the same way that the war was a mistake and really had been a mistake from the, from the very beginning.

But...some obscure Georgia Congressman — who cares?

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

On the day that I made that speech neither one of the Atlanta newspapers gave it any coverage whatsoever. On the other hand, the New York Times and other national newspapers throughout the country gave it front-page coverage.

Even conservatives, even Southerners, even medal-winning veterans, wanted out of Vietnam absolutely ASAP. As Nixon knew. A couple of weeks after his big speech, his high totally gone, his cynicism is extreme: he tells Kissinger their Vietnam mission is now all about domestic politics and getting good press.

[RNL WHT484-013 April 21 1971](#)

Nixon: The war has eroded America's confidence up to this point. The people are sick of it. The action in Laos, itself, dropped us ten points in the polls. You know that?

Kissinger: No question.

Nixon: Just the action! And then, the coverage of the action continued to drop us. You see my point? From now on, we have to ruthlessly play for the best news that we can.

[Fulbright \(Vietnam War\) Hearings April 22 1971](#)

(gavel pounds mtg to order)

But the very next day his bad-news week gets even worse.

[Fulbright \(Vietnam War\) Hearings April 22 1971](#)

Fulbright: Will the committee come to order. The committee is continuing this morning, its hearings on proposals relating to the ending of the war in Southeast Asia.

Senator Fulbright of Arkansas was a classic old-fashioned Senator, creator of the Fulbright Scholarship program for international study, the powerful chairman of

the Foreign Relations Committee, and almost from the start a Vietnam War skeptic. In April '71, he's holding a whole week of hearings about the war.

So far the testimony had come mostly from other Senators. But they were really the opening acts.

[Fulbright \(Vietnam War\) Hearings April 22 1971](#)

Fulbright: This morning the committee will hear testimony from Mr. John Kerry.

Former Lieutenant Kerry had volunteered for the Navy out of Yale, during his four months in Vietnam got wounded three times and won a Silver Star and Bronze Star and came home an anti-war activist.

[Fulbright \(Vietnam War\) Hearings April 22 1971](#)

Fulbright: As you know, there has grown up in this town a feeling that it's extremely difficult to get accurate information about the war, and I don't know a better source than you and your associates.

He isn't well-known and until now, his new group, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, has not been getting much press.

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

We had this press conference. We told everybody about it and this was an important antiwar statement and nobody came.

This is from an interview for the WGBH Vietnam series, a few years later but before he returned to D.C. as Senator Kerry.

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

I remember calling ABC, I think it was, and I got mad and I said what in the hell is the matter with you people. I said, I'll bet if we chained ourselves to the White House gates you'd have been there. And, they said, "yah, we probably would've." And, at that point it was clear to me that the only way to do it was to bring masses of veterans to Washington and camp on the Mall and do something that was gonna make them take notice, and it did.

And so in 1971 he and a thousand of his brothers are in Washington all week long. Camping on the Mall, marching on the White House and lobbying Congress.

In a play on the name of the Laotian operation just finished, they're calling their protests "Dewey Canyon Three"—"a limited incursion into the District of Columbia."

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

The purpose of Dewey Canyon was quite literally to get the United States of America to understand that there were thousands of veterans in this war who had a story to tell,

about why the war itself was wrong, and why we were not going to be successful and why we have to recognize that, and we just felt that story had to be told, and the only way to tell it was to take it to Washington in that form.

And so on this cool spring morning on Capitol Hill, Senator Fulbright pitches a slow one, right over the plate...

[Fulbright \(Vietnam War\) Hearings April 22 1971](#)

Fulbright: You have a perspective that those in the government, who make our nation's policy, do not always have, and I'm sure that your testimony today will be helpful to the committee in its consideration of the proposals before it. As you know, there has grown up in this town a feeling that it is extremely difficult to get accurate information about the war, and I don't know a better source than you and your associates.

...and 27-year-old John Forbes Kerry knocks it out of the park.

[Fulbright \(Vietnam War\) Hearings April 22 1971](#)

Kerry: The country doesn't know it yet, but it's created a monster – a monster in the form of millions of men who have been taught to deal and to trade in violence, and who have been given the chance to die for the biggest nothing in history. Men who have returned with a sense of anger and a sense of betrayal which no-one has yet grasped.

Then he goes after President Nixon directly.

[Fulbright \(Vietnam War\) Hearings April 22 1971](#)

Each day to facilitate the process by which the United States washes her hands of Vietnam, someone has to give up his life so that the United States doesn't have to admit something that the entire world already knows, so that we can't say that we have made a mistake. Someone has to die so that President Nixon won't be, and these are his words, "the first President to lose a war." And we are asking Americans to think about that because how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam? How do ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?

For Nixon and company, these veterans are a problematic new kind of protester—not the spoiled, soft-headed college-kid “bums” they'd been using as political foils. Instead, all over the evening news are haunted-looking men, many missing limbs, tossing military discharge papers and medals and ribbons over a temporary fence around the Capitol.

[Newsreel Vietnam Vets Throw Medals April 23 1971](#)

Vet: NEW GUY FROM NEW YORK [crowd cheers]

That week the Nixon Administration is routed in the war the president cares most about, the propaganda war, and by Friday he was enraged once again.

[Nixon and Kissinger Phone Call April 23 1971](#)

Nixon: It's highly unconscionable reporting. Highly unconscionable. Deep down, they know goddam well, our policy is to win the war. And winning the war simply means, letting South Vietnam survive.

Kissinger: Well, they want to destroy you and they want us to lose in Vietnam.

These press guys want us to lose.

[H.R.Haldeman Audio Diary \(RNL\) April 23 1971](#)

Friday, April 23rd.

Haldeman in his diary that night.

[H.R.Haldeman Audio Diary \(RNL\) April 23 1971](#)

We got into quite a discussion of the media problem; they're really killing us because they run the veterans' demonstration every night in great detail, and we have no way to fight back. It's a tough one, and we've been trying to figure out some ways of getting back at it. In the meantime we're getting pretty well chopped up. Our quick poll shows a drop in Presidential approval of about 3 points and a switch back to disapproval on Vietnam. It's a hard one to figure because since we last polled, we've had really no bad war news except the veterans' demonstration, and still we go down. The only conclusion can be that the veterans' deal, and the coverage of it, is the cause

The veterans were the spectacular act one of that spring's protests. Just afterward, for another week, comes a quarter million demonstrators of the more usual kinds.

["The Whole World is Watching"](#)

Narrator: On April 24, the National Peace Action Coalition, supported by welfare rights groups, labor unions and others, held a massive demonstration in Washington, D.C.

Remember that film the D.C. police made about the 1969 Moratorium protests? During the 1971 protests they made another one.

["The Whole World is Watching"](#)

Narrator: Though larger than most, this was an organized demonstration with parade permits, marshals and responsible leadership. There were few laws broken, few arrests. Most who came in the name of peace returned to their homes, jobs or school.

Not helpful to Nixon in terms of press and us-versus-them political impact.

["The Whole World is Watching"](#).

Narrator: But some who came to break the peace stayed on. For them, the April 24 rally was only a prelude to Mayday - an opportunity to advance their own well-defined aim - to shut down the federal government,

**But this more militant final phase of the protests, with its “Mayday Blockade”?
That suited Nixon.**

[“The Whole World is Watching”](#)

Nixon: We're going to see to it that the thousands of government workers who have a right to go to work peacefully are not interfered with by those militants.

The president is actually in the police documentary.

[“The Whole World is Watching”](#)

Nixon: Those few militants, who in the name of demonstrating for peace abroad, presume that they have the right to break the peace at home.

Narrator: Here a new tactic was adopted: massive civil disobedience and confrontation. Instead of peaceably assembling paralyze the judicial system, challenge law enforcement, and embarrass the Establishment.

Narrator: Money and draft cards were burned. The National Anthem and the American flag were made a mockery.

In the middle of it all, on the one-year anniversary of the Kent State killings, Nixon tells his chief of staff, “Take a hard line” on the protesters, “I know what the country feels, don’t worry about due process.”

Yessir, Mr. President: Thousands of D.C. police, backed by thousands of soldiers, herded up 12,000 protesters — more Americans than had ever been arrested at one time in one place.

That very night on TV, the new sitcom “All In the Family” was on...

[All In the Family clip](#)

If you people think you’re gonna get somewhere with *your* type of protest, I’m tellin’ ya, you’re *dreamin’!*

...with its conservative, hippie-hating, hardhat *anti*-hero Archie Bunker, the comedy avatar of Nixon’s Silent Majority.

Not unlike a lot of the constituents of Jack Flynt, the congressman who just a month earlier had come out as a dove.

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

The people of our district have always been a highly patriotic people. And rightly or wrongly they viewed the anti-war protesters as being unpatriotic. They were never in support of the open anti-American feeling that many, that we felt that many of the anti-war protesters exhibited.

Nixon won that week’s battle in the propaganda war.

But longer term, in the looming 1972 election he didn't look at all like a shoo-in. Polls had him running even with the leading Democratic contenders.

And the war in Vietnam? Same old stalemate. Nixon felt frustrated. The North Vietnamese knew they just had to hold tight. In Paris, the official peace talks dragged on...along with the secret talks conducted by Kissinger, the next round just 48 hours away.

[RNL WHT507-004 May 29 1971](#)

Nixon: At this point we're dealing with a bunch of goddamn bandits. At this stage in the negotiations, Henry, they need some shock treatment.

Instead, at that next meeting in Paris, Kissinger would make a shockingly good offer to the "bandits" -- for the first time, a fixed date for total U.S. withdrawal, and in return the North only had to agree not to send any more soldiers into South Vietnam.

On the phone now with Nixon, Kissinger keeps him focused on their mission in Vietnam – delaying the loss of the war for at least 17 more months.

[RNL WHT507-004 May 29 1971](#)

Kissinger: The only problem is to prevent the collapse in '72.

Nixon: I know...

Kissinger: I'm being perfectly cynical about this, Mr. President. If we can, in October '72, go around the country saying, "We ended the war and the Democrats wanted to turn it over to the Communists" — then we are in great shape. If it's got to go to the Communists, it'd be better to have it happen in the first six months of the new term than have it go on and on and on. I'm being very cold-blooded about it.

"I'm being perfectly cynical, I'm being very cold-blooded."

[RNL WHT507-004 May 29 1971](#)

Kissinger: But on the other hand, if Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam go down the drain in September '72, then they'll you spoiled so many lives, just to wind up where you could've been in the first year.

And they'd have a point. In fact, just a week later, the senior U.S. Senator from Massachusetts dares to state the plain unvarnished truth. It was as if Teddy Kennedy had overheard Nixon and Kissinger's conversation. "At last," he says in a speech, "the ultimate and cynical reality of our policy is beginning to dawn..."

[Newsreel \(GBH\) Ted Kennedy June 7 1971](#)

The only possible excuse for continuing the discredited policy of Vietnamization, the war, now and in the months ahead seems to be the President's intention to play his last great card for peace at a time closer to November, 1972 — when the chances will be greater that the action will benefit the coming presidential election campaign. How many

more American soldiers must die? How many innocent Vietnamese civilians must be killed, so that the final end of the war may be announced in 1972 instead of 1971?

The mainstream response to Kennedy's remarks was either ignore or criticize them. The critic who really clutched his pearls was a fellow Democrat - Hubert Humphrey, freshly re-elected to the Senate.

"It is beyond the bounds of fairness," Humphrey said in the Senate, "to charge that any President would extend the war and cause death and injury to young Americans to get closer to an election date."

[RNL WHT005-002 June 10 1971](#)

Hubert Humphrey: Hello!

Which delighted the president.

[RNL WHT005-002 June 10 1971](#)

Nixon: I hope you didn't get into too much trouble by rising to my defense on the Senate floor, and I'm most grateful.

Humphrey: Well, I didn't. It didn't bother me one bit.

Nixon: I just want you to know, Hubert, the point that we all agree on is that when you were in office, and the same was true of Lyndon Johnson, nobody wanted to keep the damn war goin' Everybody was for peace.

Yeah, yeah, yeah -- back in the fall of 1968, he reminds Humphrey, "nobody wanted to keep the damn war going."

[RNL WHT005-002 June 10 1971](#)

Nixon: Now, we may disagree as to how and when and all that, but I did appreciate it very much.

Humphrey: Well, I very much appreciate that. And let me say I did exactly what I would have expected that you or someone like you to have done under the same circumstances, and which you did do. And I believe there are rules of fair play, and I have too much respect for the office and the man that occupies it to permit things like that to go unchecked.

Nixon: Well, I appreciate it because there's no political mileage in anybody in keeping this going.

Humphrey: Of course not.

Just as he was saying when he ran for president the last time. Such chutzpah. So Nixon.

I'm Kurt Andersen, and from PRX this has been Nixon At War.

Our next episode: "Off the rails."

Tom Johnson (intvw)

This was treason. You can shape it any way you'd like to shape it, but this was treason. And it was directed by the candidate - Richard Nixon - who became president of the United States.

Thanks very much 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. And the producer and researcher is Caitlin Rathe. Our original music is by Mason Daring with additional music by Tim Dickinson. Our mix engineer is Robin Wise.

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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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