

**Nixon at War**  
**Episode Seven - Tangled Web**  
**Release Date - July 26, 2021**

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

Key

*Bold* = Narrator, Kurt Andersen

*Intvw* = Original interview

*OH* = Oral History

*RNL* = Richard Nixon Library

*WHT* = White House Tape

*(Trailer)*

**From PRX, this is Nixon at War**

**In 1971, the War in Vietnam was still going on. But to Nixon and Kissinger, it was now a chronic...annoyance that they were managing, finally off-loading.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

They saw Vietnam as an irrelevant backwater...

**Nixon biographer John Farrell.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

...not terribly important to any United States strategic interest, except for the fact that we had to get out of there with a modicum of respect, with some flags flying, with some prestige intact, so that we could continue to be a superpower elsewhere around the globe.

**I think what drove Nixon mad that summer was this: that receding backwater war had suddenly been whipped into an 11th hour front-page problem by the liberal elite....and just as he was gonna grab the brass ring –**

[Richard Nixon Inaugural 1969](#)

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

**And it really was about to be bestowed on him! All that spring, Mr. Anti-communist leader of the free world had been working to create a normal relationship with big, scary, nuclear-missile-armed communist China. Working secretly – and in this case, justifiably so!**

**Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai had finally said OK...and in July, a week after Kissinger secretly met with Zhou:**

[Nixon Announcement July 15 1971](#)

I have requested this television time tonight to announce a major development in our efforts to build a lasting peace in the world. I sent Dr. Kissinger, my Assistant for National Security Affairs, to Peking. The meeting between the leaders of China and the United States is to seek the normalization of relations between the two countries. It is in this spirit that I will undertake what I deeply hope will become a journey for peace, peace not just for our generation but for future generations on this earth we share together.

**A bona fide historic breakthrough. And U.S. military forces were continuing to leave Southeast Asia right on track. And so by the fall, with his re-election campaign about to start, Nixon had pulled ahead of the presumed Democratic front-runners in the polls.**

**But his domestic special-ops cold war that grew out of the Vietnam War, against his American opponents? Kept escalating.**

**Late that summer, Nixon's aide Bud Krogh gave the green light to the Plumbers' first completed burglary – Friday of Labor Day weekend, his gang broke into the office of Dan Ellsberg's psychoanalyst.**

**I'm KA, and from PRX, this is the final installment of Nixon at War. Episode seven: The Tangled Web.**

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

Here's what I now understand happened.

**Dan Ellsberg.**

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

Nixon, pursuing a policy which involved the possibility of continuing to escalate the war, possibly even using nuclear weapons -- a policy that would be quite obstructed and undermined if the public understood the ambitiousness of his aims -- had to shut me up, and keep me from revealing documents that I might still have, or he assumed I probably did have, that would reveal his planning going back to '69.

I had to be influenced, coerced, into not putting out any more documents that will deal with Nixon. So, basically, the first step they took there was to try to get information from my former psychoanalyst's office, Dr. Lewis Fielding in Beverly Hills, that I would not want out. To threaten me with being put out if I didn't cooperate by shutting up. A psychoanalyst's office seemed to be a logical place to do that. They didn't find information there that they could blackmail me with, but it was a good try.

**Nixon told David Frost he didn't know about that burglary beforehand. But if they had asked his permission?**

*Richard Nixon - Robert Frost 1977 interview*

"I would've said, 'Go right ahead.'" Call it paranoia, but paranoia for peace isn't that bad. Basically, what Ellsberg really boils down to — I mean, the discrediting and all the rest, what it boils down to: I didn't want to discredit the man as an *individual*, I couldn't care less about the punk. I wanted to discredit that kind of activity which was despicable and damaging to the national interest.

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

Nixon was not terribly reckless to believe that he could commit crimes like this, and keep them quiet. Presidents did this kind of thing all the time, and nearly all of them they kept quiet. So he wasn't unusually reckless in doing this. He had bad luck. But he was vulnerable. There was a possibility, and he took that risk to preserve a Vietnam policy that he thought would work, foolishly, but not impossibly. He was wrong,

**Plotting and executing burglaries, abusing government power, paranoia run amok....but publicly, as 1971 turned to 1972, everything looked swell for Nixon. Especially his week in China at the center of the world's attention, meeting for hours with the leaders, his historic photo-op with Chairman Mao.**

*Newsreel*

East meets West, as a handshake bridges sixteen thousand miles, and twenty-two years of hostility. *[band music up]* At the summit, face to face, two leaders who direct the destiny of one out of three persons on the earth. The gate to friendly contact, has finally been opened.

**In 1972, I turned 18, registered for the draft and – thanks to the new 26th amendment – registered to vote and volunteered in the campaign of the Democrats' peacenik nominee George McGovern.**

**Which made it kind of funny when I got a letter from President Nixon naming me a 1972 presidential scholar – one of 120 graduating high school seniors invited to the White House in June to receive a medal with his signature.**

[Spiro Agnew Speech to the Presidential Scholars June 13 1972](#)

You are coming to maturity during a period marked by change and controversy both at home and abroad.

**At the Rose Garden ceremony, I wore my McGovern button. Alas, Nixon stayed inside, meeting (I know now) with Kissinger and Haldeman and Colson. Instead, we got vice-president Agnew.**

[Spiro Agnew Speech to the Presidential Scholars June 13 1972](#)

And I can assure you that your views will be listened to with interest.

**For the rest of the world, there was a more memorable White-House-related event that week.**

[Newsreel Watergate Break-In](#)

News anchor: We have a mystery story out of Washington - five people have been arrested and charged with breaking into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in the middle of the night.

Reporter: Located in the Watergate office building. The burglars (*fade out*) forced a stairwell door and taped a latch open....

**They were there to bug the phones. Among the Watergate burglars were the same guys who'd broken into Ellsberg's psychoanalyst's office the year before.**

**But the world didn't know that yet. And through the remainder of the election year the White House coverup worked...as Woodward and Bernstein slowly reported bit by bit. Watergate would not become Nixon's existential problem for many months.**

**And at the end of October 1972...**

[Henry Kissinger Press Conference October 26 1971](#)

We believe peace is at hand.

**A sudden, breathless Kissinger press White House conference...**

**TV news special reports, huge front page banner headlines...a big successful "October Surprise." And about peace in Vietnam. Like in that last presidential election.**

[Henry Kissinger Press Conference October 26 1971](#)

We believe that an agreement is within sight. And having come this far we cannot fail, and we will not fail.

**Eleven days later:**

[Richard Nixon Victory Speech November 8 1972](#)

Nixon: ...we've accomplished what was thought to be the impossible--we've not only won a majority of the votes of America, we've won a majority of the votes of *young* Americans! (*cheers, applause*)

Crowd: "Four more years! Four more years! Four more years!..."

**He'd squeaked by in 1968, but now...**

**...re-elected in a massive landslide, winning 49 of 50 states.**

[Richard Nixon Victory Speech November 8 1972](#)

Nixon: I notice that some of the commentators are referring to that fact that it may be the greatest victory in American political history. Let me — [*broken off by cheering*] But this will be a great victory depending upon what we *do* with it

**I'd started college that fall. It felt as if they'd ended the revolution without me. Seymour Hersh had just become a star reporter at the New York Times, thanks to his Pulitzer Prize reporting on Vietnam.**

*Seymour Hersh (intvw)*

Andersen: My sense was that the protest movement was deflating. To the degree Vietnamization and Nixon's policy worked, it worked to make young people like me think "I'm good." I mean, was it your sense as a journalist that as a story, the Vietnam War was sort of receding?

Hersh: Not for me — but it *was*. I joined the Times to do Vietnam, and I was sent there to make whoopee on the war. And within four or five months, they demanded I leave. And I was put into Watergate. They said, 'Forget Vietnam right now,' you know, 'you've got to do this.' And I was really shocked.

**Americans were really eager, even desperate to move on from Vietnam.**

*Seymour Hersh (intvw)*

Hersh: I realized then that — there was a sense that we'd lost the war.

**Just before the election, announcing peace, Kissinger had said –**

[Henry Kissinger Press Conference October 26 1971](#)

It is inevitable that in a war of such complexity, there should be occasional difficulties in reaching a final solution.

**And so there were.**

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

Nixon: I reluctantly concluded that the only way to break the logjam was to bomb military targets in Hanoi with B-52s. There was a huge public outcry.

**The Christmas Bombings, B-52s day after day for two weeks, the most massive campaign of its kind since World War II. In which the U.S. killed another 2,400 Vietnamese civilians.**

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

Nixon: I received very few messages of support.

**That whole January of 1973 is like some pre-finale montage:**

**Daniel Ellsberg's federal espionage trial begins in L.A.**

**Back in Washington,**

**A second inaugural –**

[Richard Nixon's Second Inaugural Address January 20 1973](#)

When we met here four years ago, America was bleak in spirit, depressed by the prospect of seeming endless war abroad, and of destructive conflict at home. As we meet here today, we stand on the threshold of a new era of peace in the world.

**Two days later, Lyndon Johnson dies in Texas. His confidante down there, Walt Rostow, still has the X File about Richard Nixon and Vietnam that LBJ had given him.**

**And then, the very next day in Paris:**

[Richard Nixon Address to the Nation on the Vietnam War January 23 1973](#)

Good evening. I have asked for this radio and television time tonight for the purpose of announcing that we today have concluded an agreement to end the war and bring peace with honor in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. In the settlement that has now been agreed to, all the conditions that I laid down then have been met. Within sixty days from this Saturday, all Americans held prisoner-of-war, throughout Indochina, will be released. During this same sixty day period, all American forces will be withdrawn from South Vietnam. The people of South Vietnam have been guaranteed the right to determine their own future without outside interference.

**In January Nixon's Gallup approval hits its absolute peak, 68% — and on the separate question about Vietnam, 75% of Americans approve of how the president has done.**

**But the week right after the peace treaty is signed? The first Watergate burglars are convicted...followed a week later by the formation of the Senate Watergate Committee.**

**In Early March, in the final calm before the full Watergate storm, Nixon sits down one afternoon in the Oval Office for a long, discursive chat with one of Washington's old-school power-brokers, Tommy Corcoran...an adviser to presidents since he'd worked for FDR, who'd nicknamed him "The Cork" in the 1930s.**

[RNL WHT870-002 March 6 1973](#)

Nixon: How are you? Let's sit over here. You know this room, for many years...

Thomas Corcoran: I know this room.

**First the president brings up Corcoran's recently deceased pal LBJ.**

[RNL WHT870-002 March 6 1973](#)

Nixon: I was so glad at the end of his life, that before he died, he knew that the war had been ended in an honorable way.

**In other words: by extending the war in order to get myself re-elected, I've also done Johnson a big favor.**

**But finally Tommy the Cork gets to his very specific mission:**

**His "protege" Anna Chennault. He had been a friend of her late husband the general, and was now what the newspapers called her "constant companion."**

[RNL WHT870-002 March 6 1973](#)

Corcoran: Mr. President, I happen to know what was going on in '68, when Anna kept her mouth shut.

**I know what you were doing in sixty-eight. And despite the pressure, your loyal friend did not snitch.**

**And now would like an appointment, as a roving ambassador to Asia.**

*Ken Hughes (intvw)*

Anna Chennault was a very loyal soldier for Richard Nixon.

**Nixon historian Ken Hughes.**

*Ken Hughes (intvw)*

And she wanted and expected to have some sort of political reward in the Nixon administration for the services that she had done. But the Nixon White House realized that she was a hot potato for them, that the possibility that her activities would come to light and become a big political issue was ever-present.

**She never got that presidential appointment as her quid pro quo.**

**And a few years later she talked to a Washington Post reporter about what she'd done for Nixon: "If people like this ask me to do something again, I'm going to make them put it in writing."**

**Not long after LBJ died, Walt Rostow handed over his X file about the "activities of Mrs. Chennault before the election," to the new LBJ Presidential Library. On it he wrote "Top Secret" and attached a letter -- "it is my recommendation that this file remain sealed for 50 years." Over the years some of the material has been released. But the rest remains sealed in Austin. The 50 years are up in 2023.**

**I asked LBJ's man Tom Johnson what secrets may remain.**

*Tom Johnson (intvw)*

Andersen: Do you know what's in that thing?

Johnson: I do not. I do not.

**I'm KA. Nixon at War will continue.**

**For the rest of 1973, the Nixon downfall proceeds...**

**Dan Ellsberg's trial is stopped by the judge, all charges against him dismissed.**

**...the president's ex-speechwriter William Safire, now a New York Times columnist, learns that he was bugged in the White House by, quote, "Nixon or some lizard-lidded paranoid acting in his name"...**

**....the president finally makes Kissinger Secretary of State -- after which Kissinger, not Nixon, wins the Nobel Peace Prize for ending the Vietnam War....**

**..by the end of the the year, Watergate has pushed the president's approval down toward 25%.**

**Then 1974, the end.**

[\*Richard Nixon's Final Remarks to White House Staff August 9 1974\*](#)

Dan Rather: (*applause*) This lengthy standing ovation from members of the White House staff.

**He has resigned, the only president ever to do so.**

[\*Richard Nixon's Final Remarks to White House Staff August 9 1974\*](#)

Nixon: ...never get discouraged, never be petty, always remember — others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win unless you hate them, and then you destroy yourself.

**And nine months after that, another end.**

[\*Newsreel Saigon April 30 1975\*](#)

Narrator: Saigon, April the 30th, 8 o'clock, the last American helicopter on the roof of the American embassy prepares to lift off the last of the evacuees fleeing before the advancing communist armies. (*helicopter flying sounds*)

**By the way, that iconic final helicopter out of Saigon? Operated by the CIA's airline Air America...a company founded by Anna Chennault and her husband...and then acquired by the CIA with Tommy "the Cork" Corcoran as broker.**

[\*Henry Kissinger Press Conference on the Fall of Saigon April 29 1975\*](#)



Now to give you details of the events of the past few days and answer your questions, Secretary of State Kissinger.

Reporter: Looking back on the war now, would you say that the war was in vain, and what do you feel it accomplished?

Kissinger: I think it will be a long time, before Americans will be able to talk or write about the war with some dispassion. It is clear that the war did not achieve the objectives of those who started the original involvement. What lessons we should draw from it I think we should reserve for another occasion.

**When I was growing up, my mom quoted one line to me dozens of times: “*Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.*” It’s from a Sir Walter Scott poem about the court of Henry the 8th. I thought of it a lot as we made this series.**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

There's a direct line from Nixon's feeling of futility and misery about Vietnam to the Watergate break-in.

**His biographer Evan Thomas.**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

Basically Nixon's insanity about secrecy and his paranoia about his enemies first leads him to want to do illegal acts to protect himself on Vietnam, which directly leads to illegal acts to get himself reelected in 1972.

*Liz Holtzman (intvw)*

The abuses of power that he engaged in were linked to his support for that war and opposition to the opponents of the war — I mean, go to the enemies list. Most of the people on the enemies list were people who opposed the war

**Elizabeth Holtzman is really the anti-Nixon. The same day he was re-elected, she became the youngest woman ever elected to Congress...as an anti-Vietnam war candidate from Brooklyn. And promptly got on the House judiciary committee, investigating Watergate, drafting impeachment articles.**

*Liz Holtzman (intvw)*

Andersen: Did you see connections at the time between the Vietnam War and Nixon's conduct of it and the various Watergate crimes?

Holtzman: No, I can't say I saw it at the time -- all of the machinations, all of the criminality, that came out to me and was exposed to me as we were doing our work on the impeachment effort. Actually, you can trace the Watergate break in // to the Vietnam War itself and the bombing of Cambodia. A New York Times reporter broke a story that the U.S. was bombing in Cambodia. That infuriated Nixon and he wanted to figure out how that reporter got the information. And that's when his surveillance program started, the illegal surveillance program. So that surveillance program, which was designed to stop leaks about the Vietnam War, were the key to and Nixon's illegal

surveillance, which is what the Watergate break-in was about, illegal surveillance of the Democratic Party in order to win the election, his reelection effort. So, you know, it's a straight line. It's just a straight line.

**And actually, except for the “illegal” part, the president himself more or less agreed.**

*Richard Nixon, In the Arena (audiobook)*

My administration did have a carefully limited and totally legal policy of conducting wiretapping for reasons of national security. I do not at all regret having that policy. We were at war in Vietnam.

**Way before I started reading and thinking about Richard Nixon for this series I had a big counter-intuitive realization about him that I first spelled out a decade ago in a New York Times column. If not for his obsessive resentments and secrecy and paranoia, Nixon would now be considered one of the great presidents.**

**I know, and if pigs had wings. But seriously. I posed this idea to Evan Thomas.**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

If it hadn't been for Watergate – which is a pretty big *if* – Nixon would have been a very successful president. He opened up China. He got an arms control treaty with the Soviet Union. Now, Vietnam was a bloody mess and that would have always worked against him. But it was a hard problem, going to be a hard problem for any president. He created the Environmental Protection Agency, he passed other early environmental laws. He actually even was good, even though he was known as a race-baiter, he desegregated Southern schools by being very pragmatic about about how he went about it.

**In fact, I think domestically the most expansively liberal president between LBJ and...Joe Biden.**

**Because also: the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, tripling the budget for civil rights enforcement, expanding food stamps, creating OSHA and Amtrak, increasing federal arts spending by 500%.**

**At that liberal moment he let the liberals have their way on those things because he really only cared about global affairs, remaking the world.**

**And Richard Nixon did successfully remake it.**

**But not by means of the war he continued to wage. America's two other epic conflicts abroad, World Wars 1 and 2, transformed the planet.**

**The Vietnam War? As a world-historical event, Nixon and Kissinger were right...it was kinda...minor-league. And thus aggravated them:**

[RNL WHT713-001 April 19 1972](#)

Nixon: We're not going to let this country be defeated by this little shit-ass country.

**The communists won, and long-term, communism didn't spread beyond their little shit-ass country. Which has actually done quite well for itself. Geopolitically? The War in Vietnam really only changed...Vietnam.**

**But the war had a huge impact on America, on Americans, our culture and psychology and politics, in so many ways, then and now.**

**A feeling of division that Richard Nixon exploited and exacerbated in order to get elected and re-elected. As have his political descendants ever since.**

**The lies and hubris and misguidedness of the Vietnam War profoundly undermined Americans' trust in government. Which Nixon made worse by keeping the war going for years.**

*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.

**John Farrell.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

Again, it's just this heedlessness about the human life at stake that I think is shocking and makes it worse than just eavesdropping on your political opponents. The fate of the people of Southeast Asia just didn't really matter. The extra 25,000 Americans who died and the hundreds of thousands who were wounded in that time didn't matter as much as American prestige. Vietnam, his handling of Vietnam was much more dastardly and painful and underhanded as a whole than anything that happened with Watergate, which really Watergate was dirty political tricks carried to the next level.

**No question, more dastardly – his high crimes in America were bad, the additional death and destruction in Southeast Asia worse.**

**But here's what's also true: Nixon's collateral, domestic Vietnam War...a president encouraging Americans to consider fellow citizens their enemies... and his gangsterism that grew out of the war, up to and including Watergate -- together, combined, amounted to a horrible synergistic one-two punch to America's gut.**

**Radically deepening our cynicism about government and each other and undermining American solidarity for two generations.**

**And counting.**

**I'm Kurt Andersen and from PRX, this has been "Nixon At War." Thanks for listening. I'm the writer of this series. The series producer is Emma Weatherill. And the producer and researcher is Caitlin Rathe. The executive producer is Steve Atlas. Our mix engineer is Robin Wise. Our original music is by Mason Daring with additional music by Tim Dickinson.**

**For more on the series, visit our website, [nixonatwar.org](http://nixonatwar.org). And if you like what you've heard, please give us a rating and review wherever you get your podcasts. It helps others find us as well.**

**For archival material in the series, our great thanks to the Richard Nixon Library in Yorba Linda, California; the Lyndon B. Johnson Library in Austin, Texas; the Miller Center for Public Affairs at the University of Virginia; Open Vault, WGBH Archives; the Air Force Historical Research Agency; NixonTapes.org; ADST, the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training; and Rotunda, the digital imprint of the University of Virginia Press for use of the Presidential Recordings.**

**Finally, special thanks to Lucy Andersen, Chris Appy, Heather Ashe, Karen Cariani, Julia Chen, Wilford Frost, Frank Gannon, Jocelyn Gonzalez, Mike Greco, Derek John, Susan Johnson, Monica Johnson, Frederik Logevall, Timothy Naftali, Luke Nichter, Ryan Pettigrew, Russell Riley, Marc Selverstone, Greg Smith, and Melinda Ward.**

**And to our experts John Farrell, Daniel Hemel, Seymour Hersh, Elizabeth Holtzman, Ken Hughes, Tom Johnson, Hang Nguyen, and Evan Thomas.**

**Nixon at War has been made possible by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, democracy demands wisdom.**