

Seeds of Watergate

Based on David Cortright, *Protest and Policy in the Iraq, Nuclear Freeze and Vietnam Peace Movements* (Cambridge University Press Elements, 2025), pp. 45-46.

Although promising to end the war, President Nixon escalated the conflict in late April 1970 by increasing the bombing and sending U.S. troops into Cambodia. The result was an angry explosion of antiwar protest, as students went on strike and many thousands of people poured into the streets in communities all over the country.

On May 4 at Kent State University Ohio National Guard troops fired into a crowd of unarmed protestors and killed four students, sparking an even larger convulsion of unrest. The national student strike that had started on May 1 spread rapidly, with walkouts recorded at 883 campuses.¹

At some universities, including Kent State, ROTC buildings were attacked and burned. National Guard units were mobilized in 16 states. More than a hundred thousand people gathered a few days later in Washington and even greater numbers demonstrated in San Francisco.

In response to the public outcry, the Senate passed the Cooper-Church amendment cutting off funds for further ground operations in Cambodia after June. The Nixon administration lobbied against the measure but could not prevent its approval, as Congress finally began to use its power of the purse to curtail military operations—a process that would continue and finally bring a definitive end to the war a few years later.²

The massive protests of November 1969 and May 1970 turned Washington into a "besieged city," said National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. To get some sleep he had to move from his apartment which was "ringed by protesters" into the basement bomb shelter of the White House, joining exhausted colleagues who were "unhappy, nearly panicked."³ Nixon's top aide H.R. Haldeman was among them. He later wrote that Nixon was under "unbearable pressures," which caused him "to order wiretaps and activate the plumbers [a secret break-in and dirty tricks squad] in response to antiwar moves." Kent State "marked a turning point for Nixon," wrote Halderman, "a beginning of his downward slide toward Watergate."⁴

In 1971, mass peace demonstrations were even larger, and they now included an influential new voice, those who had served in the war. Vietnam veterans became a powerful constituency for the antiwar movement. In April of that year, eight hundred

combat veterans and members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War encamped on the Mall to Washington DC for several days of action. They held protests at the Pentagon and other government agencies, marched to Arlington Cemetery to memorialize those killed in the war and lobbied members of Congress, where then Navy Lieutenant John Kerry testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asking “how do you ask a man to be the last man to die in Vietnam?”

The culmination of the VVAW program was a ceremony on April 23 in which hundreds of combat veterans, some in wheelchairs or on crutches, many wearing military fatigues, individually tossed their war medals and ribbons onto the steps of the US Capitol Building to denounce the war and declare their anger and distress at being decorated for serving in an unjust war.

The dramatic actions of the Vietnam veterans received front-page press coverage in national newspapers and were a lead story on network news broadcasts. The White House was panic-stricken. Haldeman complained that media coverage of the veterans was “killing us” and that the White House was “getting pretty well chopped up” by the press. Attorney General John Mitchell described VVAW as the most dangerous group in America.

The VVAW actions were a decisive moment for the peace movement, a time when the American people turned more definitely against the war.⁵ The veterans gave a brilliant political performance dramatizing the public demand for peace and convincing growing numbers of people to support immediate withdrawal. They drove Nixon crazy.

The web of criminality that ended Nixon’s presidency was rooted in his paranoia about and attempts to discredit the peace movement. The White House took extreme measures to hide the truth about the war and counter antiwar narratives. Illegal wiretapping began in 1969 in response to leaks of information about the ‘secret’ bombing of Cambodia. The plumbers were activated in 1971 to discredit Daniel Ellsberg for releasing the Pentagon Papers. They burglarized the office of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist in Los Angeles in search of incriminating information, a preview of their break-in at Democratic Party offices in the Watergate a year later.

The alleged purpose of the Watergate burglary, according to convicted conspirator James McCord, was to find information on links between the Democratic Party and VVAW based on false claims that VVAW was planning terrorist acts at the forthcoming Republican Party convention.⁶ The administration’s campaign against peace advocates and antiwar veterans contributed to the president’s undoing. This was another indirect but significant effect of the mounting opposition to the war, an example of the peace movement helping to shape history in unexpected ways.

¹ Based on calculations of the National Information Center at Brandeis University, archived at the Mapping American Social Movements center at the University of Washington, https://depts.washington.edu/moves/antiwar_may1970.shtml#strike; Steve Early, “Fifty Years Ago This Spring, Millions of Students Struck to End the War in Vietnam,” Jacobin, April 24, 2020, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/04/kent-state-shooting-vietnam-war-protest-student-organizing>

² Julian E. Zelizer, “How Congress Got us out of Vietnam,” *The American Prospect*, February 19, 2007, <https://prospect.org/features/congress-got-us-vietnam/>

³ Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America’s Involvement in and Extraction from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 168-170.

⁴ H.R. Haldeman, *The Ends of Power* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 107, 121.

⁵ Andrew E. Hunt, *The Turning: A history of Vietnam veterans against the war* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

⁶ S. O’Sullivan, “A Watergate Burglar’s account of his crimes—and what it tells us about the Mueller probe,” *The Washington Post*, May 9, 2019.