

**JUNE 5**

# From Watergate to Downing Street

**Y**ou wouldn't know it from the media focus on Deep Throat last week, but the lies that Richard Nixon told about the Watergate break-in were part of his standard duplicity for the Vietnam War. It wasn't just that the Nixon administration engaged in secret illegal actions against a wide range of peace advocates – including antiwar candidate George McGovern, the Democratic presidential nominee in 1972. Deception was always central to Nixon's war policy. Thirty-three years after Watergate, echoes of his fervent lies for war can be heard from George W. Bush.

From the outset, President Nixon falsely claimed to be seeking an end to the war. "I know that peace does not come through wishing for it – that there is no substitute for days and even years of patient and prolonged diplomacy," he declared in his first inaugural address. The great independent journalist I.F. Stone commented days later, "It's easier to make war when you talk peace."

A year into his first term, Nixon told the nation: "I pledged in my campaign for the presidency to end the war in a way that we could win the peace. I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge. The more support I can have from the American people, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed."

In 1971, Nixon "was increasing deceptively labeled 'protective reaction strikes' against the North to a level that amounted to the resumption of [President] Johnson's bombing," Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg recalls. "Starting the day after Christmas 1971 [six months after the Pentagon Papers came out], he launched a thousand U.S. bombers during five days of bombing against North Vietnam, in the heaviest raids since 1968."

Ellsberg adds: "Most Americans in truth had wanted out of the war long before the [Pentagon] papers were published; a majority had even come to regard it as immoral.... In the face of that majority sentiment, the president had kept the war going by reducing ground troops, while he increased the bombing, and by recurrently convincing the public that he was on the verge of a settlement. He did that again in the next few months, unveiling in January 1972 the secret talks and a deceptively 'gener-

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ous' offer that he knew was unacceptable to Hanoi."

In public, Nixon spoke with gravity about the war and his yearning for peace. In private, tape recordings tell us, top-level discussions were something else.

For instance, on May 4, 1972, while conferring with Henry Kissinger, Al Haig, and John Connally, the president said: "I'll see that the United States does not lose. I'm putting it quite bluntly. I'll be quite precise. South Vietnam may lose. But the United States cannot lose. Which means, basically, I have made the decision. Whatever happens to South Vietnam, we are going to cream North Vietnam.... For once, we've got to use the maximum power of this country ... against this shit-ass little country: to win the war. We can't use the word 'win.' But others can."

The president continued to assure the public that he was among the war-makers perennially in pursuit of peace. In his second inaugural address, Nixon repeated his mantra for a "lasting peace." Moments after being sworn in again, he resumed spinning for the history books and more immediately for public opinion. "Because of America's bold initiatives," he said, "1972 will be long remembered as the year of the greatest progress since the end of World War II toward a lasting peace in the world."

What Nixon didn't mention was that he had recently inflicted a huge new wave of murderous violence against Vietnamese people. Ellsberg, in his superb memoir "Secrets," describes the late December 1972 bombing spree this way: "President Nixon sent B-52s over Hanoi for the first time ever. In the next 11 days and nights – with Christmas off – American planes dropped on North Vietnam 20,000 tons of bombs," amounting to "the explosive equivalent of the Nagasaki A-bomb."

But on January 20, 1973, just weeks after the massive Christmastime bombing of North Vietnam, Nixon spoke with notable shamelessness, laying claim to the mantle of peacemaker: "Let us be proud that by our bold, new initiatives, and by our steadfastness for peace with honor, we have made a breakthrough toward creating in the world what the world has not known before – a structure of peace that can last, not merely for our time, but for generations to come."

Three decades later, on the first day of May 2003, under a "Mission Accomplished" banner, President George W. Bush used the dramatic backdrop of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln near San Diego to proclaim the end of major hostilities in Iraq. But the occupation set off an escalating pattern of large-scale killing.

Last month, on May 1, exactly two years after Bush's top-gun appearance, the Times of London revealed the "Downing Street memo" – instantly a huge story in the British press, but slow to gain any traction in major U.S. media outlets. Across the United States in early June, front pages filled up with stories about Deep Throat and the

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bygone Watergate era, but editors at major newspapers still couldn't spare prominent space for scrutiny of the Downing Street memo – smoking-gun minutes from a top-level meeting of British officials convened by Prime Minister Tony Blair on July 23, 2002.

The memo makes clear that President Bush was lying when he publicly kept claiming that he hadn't decided yet whether to order an invasion of Iraq. Bush's actual policy was to launch the war, no matter what. In addition, the memo said, at the top of the administration in Washington "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy."

Like Richard Nixon, the current president insists that he wants peace. And, in a twisted sense, he does. As the Prussian general Karl von Clausewitz remarked two centuries ago: "A conqueror is always a lover of peace."

On his own terms, of course.

*This article is adapted from Norman Solomon's new book*

*"War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death".*

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