

PEOPLE'S ARMY JAMBOREE



ANTHONY RUSSO

Thirty five years ago, in late August 1970, an antiwar protest against the American Legion at its annual convention which was held that year in Portland, Oregon, both galvanized and polarized the city and state. Dory Hylton, professor of history at Lewis & Clark College, interviewed participants, witnesses and bystanders in the 1990s, following an historical monograph she wrote on the May 1970 anti-Vietnam War student strike at Portland State University. She discovered her earlier interviews into the PSU strike overlapped into the People's Army Jamboree, which to interviewees was the rest of the story.

BY DORY HYLTON

On the Road to Watergate, Richard Nixon passed through Portland, Oregon in the summer of 1970. To put it more accurately, because Richard Nixon was unable to pass through Portland, Oregon, he began his journey down the Road to Watergate.

I believe this is true because I have read some documents that trace the chronology of Nixon administration policy developments vis a vis the antiwar movement. And I have listened to the stories of nearly 200 people who recall the spring and summer of 1970 on the streets and behind closed doors in and around the city of Portland. Their recollections begin in the South Park Blocks of Portland State University.

On Monday, the 4th of May 1970, student antiwar activists at PSU met to discuss plans to answer the call for a nationwide student strike. The call had been issued to express and crystallize the outrage many young people felt with the unexpected announcement that the United States had invaded Cambodia and resumed bombing North Vietnam. While the newly-forming PSU Strike Committee was assembled, news came that four Kent State University students had been fatally shot and nine others wounded by Ohio National Guardsmen. On Tuesday, antiwar activists sounded the call to shut the university down. By Wednesday the campus community, split between strikers and antistrikers was in turmoil.

A dramatic procession of events gripped the campus community. At the cross streets in the city-owned South Park Blocks that were the geographical core of the PSU campus, spontaneous collectives sprang up where students had constructed barricades to block vehicular traffic, originally for the purpose of holding rallies and demonstrations, then manned 24 hours a day. In the center of the Park Blocks, a large first aid tent was erected like a field hospital in a war zone. The Park Blocks resonated with the sights and sounds of factional fighting, rallies, marches, dances, speeches, music, and eventually, a violent police action that galvanized the campus community as a unit once again.

When riot police wielding 42-inch batons inflicted injury on 31 young people, many who witnessed the violence found themselves not only sickened, but changed. They speak now of a loss of innocence, of the war coming home to Portland, of the chilling realization that the Nixon administration with its 'college kids are draft dodgers and bums' rhetoric had set the tone for the country. It was okay to kill the little bastards.¹

At the end of spring term, strike organizers looked for their next salvo against the Vietnam War. They decided to organize a series of demonstrations to coincide with the National Convention of the American Legion to be held in Portland from August 28 to September 3. They would call their collective act, in a spirit of somber mirth, The People's Army Jamboree.

At the same time, four students who had opposed the strike went to Washington, D.C. to meet with the Oregon contingent and youth coordinators of the Nixon administration. Their goal was to plead for dialogue between the administration and the nation's youth. One of the young men was driven to the

Pentagon one morning, where he was escorted through the labyrinth to a small room where he waited for — what? What was he doing here? The door opened and a uniformed man strode in, planted his foot on a chair, bent over the youth and demanded, "Tell me what you know about the People's Army Jamboree!"

Back home again, that young man, who had served in Vietnam, was called to Fort Lewis to train Oregon National Guardsmen in riot control. During the PSU strike, he had also become acquainted, and even friendly, with strike organizers, the same group who were now organizing the People's Army Jamboree. One evening when he reported for duty, an officer confronted him with having been seen at PAJ headquarters. Although on that particular occasion he had not been there, he now discovered that PAJ headquarters was under surveillance by the military.

Surveillance of civilian groups by the military belonged to the Huston Plan, which had been briefly implemented by Richard Nixon in June of 1970, then scuttled as illegal after a red-faced FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover refused to become involved with interagency intelligence gathering. Officially the Huston Plan was nixed, but here in Portland was evidence of part of the plan in effect.²

Early in July, Governor Tom McCall was informed by the FBI that 50,000 antiwar protesters were planning to descend upon Portland to disrupt the National American Legion Convention. They would call themselves the aforementioned People's Army Jamboree and would be hell-bent on destruction, and other atrocities were in store.

To make a long part of this story short, Governor McCall signed on to a plan brought to him by his assistant Ed Westerdahl. Westerdahl had been approached by The Family, a group of hippies who suggested a Woodstock-type rock festival to draw protesters away from the city, thus averting expected violence. The festival became known as Vortex 1.³

The voices.... Start talking to folks at any bus stop in town, at any casual get together, anywhere where people gather to talk. *Sure, I remember the summer of 1970. Was that the year? Where was I? I went to a rock concert down over at McIver Park. Yeah, that was it, Vortex. It was the first time I ever smoked a joint. I went with some friends. It was great. We watched naked women taking mud baths. Heck, we took mud baths. I think there were some rock bands. We stayed a week. Yes, the American Legion Convention was going on in Portland. Governor McCall put on this pot party to keep hippies and protesters out of town. It worked. Geez it was brilliant. I might have joined the protesters for a march or two, but I went to Vortex instead. Maybe I should have joined the protesters. Heck, sex, drugs, rock and roll — what can I say?*

Okay, Dick, it's you and me, mused an earnest war protester, who mustered troops of local antiwarriors to fill the ranks of the People's Army Jamboree. We knew the estimates of protesters coming to Portland were exaggerated. In fact, we had no idea how many people might show up to demonstrate against the American Legion. We had manufactured the numbers ourselves, and the local papers picked it up. The Legion expected 25,000, so we doubled the number. FBI reports were compiled largely from media stories, so the numbers of expected protesters reaching 50,000 took on a life of their own.

Not in our town, chorused People for Portland, who mustered their troops of ordinary citizens to train as buffers between potential combatants along the parade routes. Some of the PPF were long-standing peace activists who were familiar with street demonstrations, having themselves marched over the years through the streets of the city. Our idea was to head them off at the pass, troublemakers, that is. We knew the local kids were all right, and we could spot outsiders who were bent on stirring up trouble. We'd just walk up to them, look them in the eye, and escort them out of the parade. One little old lady saw the police getting ready to go after some kids who were jeering the American Legionnaires. She shook her finger at the police and told them to go away, that it was they who would cause trouble.

EDITOR'S NOTES

1. The police assault upon the PSU strikers on May 11, 1970 is chronicled in the May/June 2005 *Times Eagle*: 'Bloody Monday'.
2. Much of the discredited Huston Plan later found its way into the 2001 USA Patriot Act.
3. For a very good account of what has become known as the "Governor's Rock Festival," read Matt Love's book, *The Far Out Story of Vortex 1* (Nestucca Spit Press, 2004).
4. Terry Schunk was Portland Mayor and Des Connell Multnomah County District Attorney.

Why don't you just shoot them? insisted a citizen who'd had it up to here with young people making rude and loud noises in opposition to the Vietnam War. She had spoken in answer to Governor McCall's announcement that the state would sponsor Vortex as a diversionary tactic to attract potential People's Army Jamboree participants.

Meanwhile, back at the American Legion Convention, Nixon was scheduled to be the keynote speaker. This was his audience. He loved these guys. No boos, jeers, hard questions from them. No profanity, no communication gap. They planned a 'Victory in Vietnam' parade through the streets of Portland. These were his folks. He was looking forward to the trip.

The PAJ planned a 'Victory for the Vietnamese People' parade. Juxtaposition was a common protest by 1970. Juxtapose images of killing with images of living. Stage a Festival of Life in counterpoint to the nightly bodycount, those images of dead and dying American and Vietnamese troops that were a staple of the nightly television news. Since there were more of them than us, the bodycount was supposed to let us know we were winning the war.

It was funny, really. We didn't know how many people would show up for the People's Army Jamboree. We were just a handful of college kids and Vietnam veterans against the war. We ran an article in the L.A. Free Press, and underground newspapers across the country picked up the item. Said the place that summer was Portland, Oregon. The American Legion Convention. Rumors flew that 50,000 protesters were coming, the protesters were coming!

The FBI, CIA, the Pentagon, Justice Department, John Dean, all got into it. Twice a week the White House had in-person briefings with Ed Westerdahl, U.S. Attorney Sid Lezak, others. To their credit, they figured out the core agitators in Portland were a loosely organized group of local activists who coalesced around their commitment to end the war, and their commitment to nonviolent forms of protest. They agreed there wouldn't be any problem with PAJ organizers. But they were worried about the hordes of hippies, politicians and agitators who might be headed this way.

Portland was abuzz with separate encampments: The People's Army Jamboree, the American Legionnaires, city and state police, the National Guard, the FBI, CIA, Secret Service, the Mayor's men, the Multnomah County District Attorney's men⁴, the Governor's men, the President's men, feminists, People for Portland, The Family (whose brainchild was Vortex 1), Vietnam veterans for and against the war, huddled, frightened citizens, bemused citizens, outraged citizens, inside and outside agitators (mostly police plants) poised for action, some looking to party, some searching for community.

That was the scene in Portland during the late summer of 1970. But a funny thing happened on the way to the confrontation. The separate, disparate encampments began to communicate with one another. A steering committee was formed to coordinate the actions of government agencies. People for Portland, PAJ and Vortex organizers. Whatever their differences regarding the issues of the Vietnam War, the folks who comprised the troops agreed on one thing: Nonviolence was the only violence they wanted to experience on their streets. This was their community. While the right to dissent would be supported, only nonviolent forms of dissent would be allowed. The government and citizen troops adopted rules of mediation in the confrontation situation about to occur between the American Legion and the People's Army Jamboree.

Elaborate plans were made for arrests of great numbers of protesters. Jails were emptied to make room for them. Combat troops stood ready to enter the city if needed. National Guard troops drove their vehicles in circles around the city to create the impression of great numbers. The National Guard carried no live ammunition on orders of Ed Westerdahl, who armed his state police and was confident their judgment in the possible use of arms would be rational and mature. No Kent State would visit Oregon under his watch.

For all the elaborate preparation, for all the careful attention to open lines of communication among all groups involved, in the end, perhaps 1200 people marched with the People's Army Jamboree through the streets of Portland. The American Legionnaires held their parades without incident save some taunting from the sidelines.

In the end, Nixon didn't come to Portland. At the last minute he was replaced by Vice President Spiro Agnew. In the space of 65 minutes, Agnew arrived in a helicopter, intoned a speech, reboarded his helicopter, and left the city. In and out, just like that. *We won. We kept Nixon out of Portland, made him change his plans. Little us, in little old Portland. Our voices were heard. We made Life magazine and the national news.*

When it was all over, the city of Portland had suffered one broken window. Journalist Terry Drinkwater was reportedly hit over the head by a flagpole wielded by a drunk Legionnaire. Everyone declared victory and went home.

Stay tuned for the sequel to this story: *Richard Nixon reincarnates the Huston Plan on his way to Watergate.* Nixon wanted to go wherever he wanted to go, and the People's Army Jamboree stood as a roadblock to the man who was President.

Dory Hylton is also a jazz singer and has been accompanied by such noted pianists as Jessica Williams and David Horowitz, who is a professor of history at Portland State.

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