

A CONVERSATION WITH LAWRENCE ROBERTS

What led you to explore this largely forgotten story of dissent?

I started work on this book five years ago because I believed one of the great mass movements in U.S. history, the opposition to the Vietnam War, deserved another look. Now we're suffering through another terribly divisive era. It seemed important to learn how we survived the 1960s and early 1970s, when institutions were shaken to the core, when millions of people took to the streets to oppose a government policy they abhorred. How did leaders react? How did it all end?

Why focus in particular on the spring of 1971 in Washington, D.C.?

In that one season, many of the people and forces rocking the country converged on the nation's capital. On one side you had hippies and Yippies, longtime pacifists, embittered Vietnam veterans, leaders of the fights for women's rights and for civil rights, and self-styled revolutionaries. On the other side were President Richard Nixon and his men, a new kind of Republican Party cadre determined to hold onto power and the status quo. Over ten weeks, they collided like tectonic plates. The aftershocks were extraordinary.

How did that clash play out?

The mass civil disobedience known as Mayday was the finale to a whole string of protests between March and May. It began with a spectacular bombing of the U.S. Capitol by the radical Weather Underground. Weeks later came the first major antiwar action by people who'd fought as soldiers in Vietnam, followed by the biggest mass march of any kind, up to that point, in Washington's history.

Which characters stand out in your story?

There's Richard Nixon, of course, whose surprising interactions with the antiwar movement haven't been as widely reported as the rest of his presidential activities. The Washington police chief, Jerry Wilson, is a man of integrity squeezed between a paranoid White House and increasingly militant demonstrators. There is Barbara Bowman, a brave and brilliant lawyer who leads a small army of public defenders into battle against a repressive government. Among the antiwar ranks are David Dellinger, something of an American Gandhi, and Rennie Davis, who organizes peaceful protests while his brother plots with underground revolutionaries. This also happens to be the moment when John Kerry bursts onto the national scene, and when Jane Fonda makes a previously unknown move to help Kerry's group, Vietnam Veterans Against the War.



Much has been written on Nixon's corruption. What did you find that was new?

The Vietnam protests got to Nixon in a very visceral way. They triggered his rage. He secretly directed the government's attempts to undermine dissent. Thus the spring of 1971 turns out to be an unexplored prologue to the Watergate scandal that ended his presidency.

How did you go about researching *Mayday 1971*?

I interviewed scores of participants and searched more than a dozen archives around the country—not only records held at libraries and universities but also those sitting untouched for decades in dusty boxes in basements and garages. I listened to many hours of the Nixon tapes. And I discovered to my surprise that many of the president's conversations about Mayday had been transcribed by federal technicians more than forty years ago, and then promptly forgotten. They'd been sitting pretty much unnoticed inside binders at the National Archives.

Were there any big mysteries?

Who dynamited the U.S. Capitol in 1971, and who helped? The Weather Underground claimed responsibility, but the FBI couldn't identify the actual bombers. So agents used the explosion as an excuse to ramp up their clandestine campaign against the New Left. They pursued people they thought might be accomplices and went a bit crazy setting wiretaps. When the courts declared such wiretaps illegal, the case quickly fell apart. No one was ever charged. The bombing remains officially unsolved. Yet over the years, published reports have pointed to two women who at the time were Weather members, Bernardine Dohrn and Kathy Boudin. And, as the book shows, a handful of suspects chased by the FBI—among them some of the Yippies—may have known more than they let on.

Any other puzzles you set out to solve?

Who exactly ordered police to make what turned out to be the biggest mass arrest in U.S. history? No one owned up to it at the time, but I was able to finally document the role of the White House. Also, I tracked down what really happened to all the Mayday arrest records, which a federal judge ordered to be destroyed.

Why should people read *Mayday 1971* today?

This is a story that took place not too long ago, when a government gone rogue confronted masses of citizens demanding change. It shows both the power and the limitations of street protests—the fallout from Mayday 1971 actually changed some of the rules for protesting, and some readers might like to know more about that. The book chronicles the collateral damage to the Constitution when leaders go to extremes. And ultimately, it's an encouraging lesson about the resilience of our democracy.