

Retropolis

Protesters shut down D.C. traffic before. It helped end the Vietnam War — and reshaped American activism.

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By [Hannah Natanson](#)

Thousands of protesters took to the streets of downtown Washington with a single goal: Bring traffic to a total, grinding halt in the nation’s capital.

Demonstrators — hailing from a wide variety of social justice causes — armed themselves with anything they could find: trash, tree limbs, bottles, bricks, tires. They used the materials to form barricades across heavily trafficked sites in the District, stared into the faces of waiting police officers and prepared for a day of conflict.

But this wasn’t the [September 2019 Shut Down D.C. protest that interrupted the Washington commute](#) to draw attention to climate change. This was May 1971, the *original* D.C. traffic blockade launched to protest the Vietnam War — what longtime organizer and historian L.A. Kauffman calls “the most influential protest you’ve never heard of.”

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“It contributed to helping end the Vietnam War and pioneered a new model of organizing that would shape movement after movement in the decades to come,” Kauffman said in a phone interview with The Washington Post. “May Day 71 was a crucial turning point in our history.”

Government records show that officials of President Richard Nixon’s administration were so spooked by the massive action that it hastened their withdrawal from Vietnam, Kauffman said. And in the years following May Day, activists across the country adopted the demonstration’s guiding principles, Kauffman said: that movements should be decentralized; should revolve around small, autonomous groups; and should involve participants hailing from all kinds of ideologies.

The protest also featured another notable American landmark: Thanks to what Kauffman calls a “massive overreaction” from the Nixon administration, more than 7,000 protesters were arrested in a day. It was the largest mass arrest in U.S. history, according to Kauffman.

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In a text, 2019 Shut Down D.C. organizer Liz Butler confirmed that May Day 1971 served as inspiration for her coalition's modern version. Thai Jones, a professor at the University of Columbia who studies radical social movements, told The Post it makes historical sense that climate activists today would adopt the tactics of anti-Vietnam War protesters in the 1960s and 1970s.

People resort to massive, disruptive activities like a traffic blockade only when they've reached "an extreme level of frustration," Jones said.

"If you talk to people from the '60s, they will say climate change is today's Vietnam," Jones said. "This parallel works on many, many levels. One of them is the sense, at this point, of just extreme dismay that every conceivable and plausible form of activism has failed to move the needle."

A similarly pervasive sense of despair inspired the May Day 1971 protests, according to Kauffman.

A year before, the Nixon administration had directed the military to invade Cambodia, spurring outrage across the country and prompting students at more than 100 colleges and universities to conduct walkouts, Kauffman said. By the end of May 1970, Kauffman estimates, more than half of the United States' student population had probably taken part in antiwar demonstrations.

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But Washington didn't seem to be paying attention. The United States was still deeply entangled in the Vietnam War — fought between 1955 and 1975 in a bid to eradicate communism from that country, costing hundreds of thousands of lives — and seemed likely to get more involved.

“An air of futility hung over the established antiwar movement. ... It seemed that everything had been tried, and nothing had worked,” Kauffman wrote of the period in her book, “[Direct Action: Protest and the Reinvention of American Radicalism](#).” Kauffman quoted one 1960s-era protester who, tired of the endless, apparently useless demonstrations, wondered, “Should I take pictures ... or would photographs from past identical rallies suffice?”

May Day came at the right moment — a shot of adrenaline that pumped fresh life into a rapidly flagging movement, according to Kauffman. It was something new and bold. No one had ever successfully shut down the streets of a major U.S. city before. (Although the [Congress of Racial Equality](#) unsuccessfully tried it at the 1964 World's Fair in New York City, an event that served as a model for May Day protesters, Kauffman said.)

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The May Day Tribe — as the traffic disrupters called themselves — was largely the brainchild of Rennie Davis, a “New Left” organizer who rose to prominence after being arrested by the FBI for protesting outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Kauffman said. The movement attracted a variety of young people from across the country, who found out about it through speeches or mailed pamphlets. It wasn’t all hippies, but the tribe definitely “had a long-haired freaky flavor,” Kauffman wrote in her book.

The central idea — and May Day Tribe slogan — was simple: “If the government won’t stop the war, we’ll stop the government.” Movement pamphlets promised something new and effective. “The overall discipline will be nonviolent, the tactic disruptive, the spirit joyous and creative,” reads one, quoted by Kauffman in her book. Other leaflets showed repeated images of Gandhi standing with one fist raised, according to Kauffman.

Another novel feature was the lack of a central command. Davis may have started the group, but the protest operated without a main leader. Instead, it split into small cadres of 5 to 15 people called “affinity groups,” Kauffman said.

This strategy had several advantages: Individual groups could more flexibly respond to difficult situations, and it would be difficult for federal officials to identify and blame any single top organizer.

Plus, “it’s easier to avoid infiltration and disruption by the authorities when you organize in a

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Protesters began arriving in Washington in late April and set up camp in West Potomac Park.

As they waited for the big event, campers partied around bonfires, some using marijuana and harder drugs, such as acid. As people continued to pour in — at one point, the camp reached 45,000, according to Kauffman — organizers put on at least one rock concert.

Things soon got out of hand. Claims of sexual harassment spiked, Kauffman wrote. At one point, Nixon sent troops to shut down the encampment, scaring at least half of the protesters into heading home, according to Kauffman.

Still, a sizable number — roughly 25,000 — stayed behind and began pouring onto D.C. streets on the morning of May 3. The May Day Tribe had identified 21 vital traffic circles and bridges across the capital, Kauffman wrote, and bands of protesters headed to their designated sites. Along the way, they grabbed whatever materials they could find to serve as makeshift barricades. Supplies included lumber, nails and parked cars, according to the New York Times.

Police were waiting.

The Nixon administration had obtained a copy of the May Day Tribe's tactical plan, according to Kauffman, and had made its own preparations. Nixon deployed a massive amount of manpower: police officers and 1,500 National Guardsmen, the New York Times

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reported.

Federal troops arranged themselves on the Key Bridge, helicopters appeared near the Washington Monument, and a Marine battalion — its large guns pointing toward the street — encircled Dupont Circle, Kauffman reported in her book.

“There’s nothing like it that has happened before or since, it was essentially a military operation,” Kauffman said. “Then it became a sweep operation, where anybody and everybody who looked like they might have any relationship to the protest was just swept up off the streets.”

As thousands of arrests piled up, officials soon ran out of space in the city jail. They began transporting protesters to a practice field near RFK Stadium, where conditions were abysmal: muddy, cold and without food or blankets, according to Kauffman. (The vast majority, charged with disorderly conduct, were let go before their cases could come to trial, [according to WETA](#).)

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Ultimately the protesters failed to stop traffic for long, Kauffman wrote. Federal employees still made their way to work. Some dealt with blockades, while others arose before dawn to reach the office. Three members of Congress actually paddled to work across the Potomac, according to Kauffman.

Immediate reviews of the day were far from favorable.

“It was universally panned as the worst planned, worst executed, most slovenly, strident and obnoxious peace action ever committed,” columnist Mary McGrory wrote of May Day 1971 in the Boston Globe. Even Davis said at a later news conference that the traffic blockade had failed, according to Kauffman.

As time went on, historians largely forgot the protest. Kauffman said that may be because “it raised the specter of a revolution in the United States — a really profound breakdown in society — that people just didn’t want to dwell on.” Jones said he is unsure why it disappeared from Americans’ collective memory.

Relegated to the historical dustbin, for whatever reason, the blockade nonetheless in some way “influenced most American protest movements since,” Kauffman wrote in her book — culminating most obviously in the 2019 climate shutdown.

Jones said it is impossible to guess whether this year’s climate blockade will achieve the same long-term success as its predecessor. It may spur the Trump administration to take action on climate change — or it may do nothing beyond frustrate D.C. commuters for a morning.

“The way history works, you just can never really predict what will be the crucial point of pressure,” Jones said. “You never know the tipping point until later.”

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