EPISODE 4: "Vietnam: Napalm and Tear Gas" TRANSCRIPT [FINAL] w/ Citations

KACIE LUCCHINI BUTCHER: Hey, it's Kacie. If you're just starting with this episode, go back and listen to Episode 1… things will make more sense.

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STUART LEVITAN: In 1963, there were 350 people at the first anti-war protest on campus. About 350 people on the steps of the Memorial Union.

But Six years later, there are 15,000 people in the Fieldhouse and then marching up State Street. So you go from 350 people in 1963 to 15,000 people six years later. That's a hell of a story.[1]

KLB: Dang, that does sound like a hell of a story… but, umm, who is that and what is he talking about?

ALLIE MORRIS: Wow, somebody wasn't paying attention back in Episode 3. That's Madison historian Stu Levitan. And what he's talking about is **[getting more frantic and breathless]** the growth of a multifaceted student protest movement at UW-Madison against the Vietnam War that went from a relatively niche cause among a group of dedicated activists to the mass mobilization of thousands of students, faculty, and staff — a course of events that sent the campus into chaos, resulted in spasms of violence perpetrated by both the state and student protesters themselves, and cemented UW's place at the center of 1960s antiwar activism.

KLB: Wow! Is that… um… so, that's what we're gonna talk about on today's episode?

AM: Yeah, you know it is!

[THEME MUSIC]

AM: From the Rebecca M. Blank Center for Campus History, this is *Reorientation*, a podcast exploring the history of UW-Madison you won't hear on your campus welcome tour. I'm Allie Morris.

KLB: And I'm Kacie Lutcchini Butcher.

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[1] To learn more about the 1960s in Madison, see Stu Levitan's book, "Madison in the Sixties," (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2018).

This season, we're looking at the history of campus protest at UW-Madison. How did UW become a 'protest school'? And what does that even mean? For Episode 4, we're telling a story that really helps answer some of that.

AM: You mean the story of how…

SL: In 1963, there were 350 people at the first anti-war protest on campus.

KLB: Okay, alright. Let's speed this up…

[FAST FORWARD]

SL: Six years later, there are 15,000 people in the Fieldhouse and then marching up State Street. So you go from 350 people in 1963 to 15,000 people six years later.

[RETURN TO NORMAL SPEED]

That's a hell of a story.

KLB & AM: That's a hell of a story! **[LAUGHS]**

[MUSIC]

KLB: So before we dive into anti-war protests at UW, it'd probably help to have a basic understanding of the Vietnam War. Cause it's one of those things that's omnipresent in the American cultural imagination but also, like, super complicated…

AM: I mean if only we had an eminent author and historian to lay it out for us in a really succinct way. Maybe somebody with like a Pulitzer Prize or two…

DAVID MARANISS: I'm David Maraniss, and I am an author and journalist…

AM: Oh yeah, he'll do.

DM: The Vietnam War was the longest running war in American history. Starting with the advisors coming into Vietnam in 1962, the first troops in '65, and not leaving until 1974. You can look at it on three levels. In one sense, it was a civil war between the North and South in Vietnam. It was an ideological war between communism and capitalism, and it was a proxy war between the United States and the Soviet Union and

China. And the proxy war, the American involvement in that was based on one idea that proved to be a fallacy, which was the domino theory, that if Vietnam fell to the communists, the rest of Southeast Asia would fall as well. And because of that fallacy, Americans lost more than 57,000 lives and millions of Vietnamese.

KLB: Man, he's really good at that. With synopsis skills like that, I bet he woulda ate down at a campus teach-in.

AM: Funny that you mention that. Did you know that UW-Madison was one of the very first campuses in the country to hold a teach-in on the war?[2]

KLB: [LYING] Uhhmm.. no.

AM: Well it's true! This happens in the spring of 1965, so still early days of the protest movement. It's organized by a sociology professor named William Sewell – just remember that name for later –

And it went really well.

SL: They have this teach-in. It's all day. It's... There are 23 faculty, there's like 1,000 students there. They're sitting there all day!

AM: That's historian Stu Levitan again.

SL: They're sitting there all day talk- you know, listening to the history of colonialism, the history of uh, explanations about imperialism and, okay, what can we do? But it's j- it's just, It's a classic thing to happen on a campus. Let's, let's sit in a lecture for 10 hours and talk about the war.

KLB: There's something important to point out here though. The teach-in is seen as a success. But in the grand scheme of things in 1965, this is still pretty niche. A lot of the students who show up to sit in a lecture hall for *10 hours* are gonna be the ones who are already woke to the idea that this war is bad.

Both Stu and David Maraniss made this point.

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[2] PBS, "Timeline: Vietnam War and Protests," *American Experience: Two Days in October*, entry for April 1, 1965, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/two-days-in-october-vietnam-battlefields-and-home-front/.

DM: There's some misimpressions about the perceptions of the war and there being a strong anti-war movement from the beginning. That first couple of years, there were teach-ins at Wisconsin trying to inform students about what this war was about. But even then, in 1967 when the first major protest happened at Wisconsin, a majority of students, more students belonged Young Republicans than to the Students for Democratic Society.

SL: This is not an anti-war campus. There are anti-war activists who are pushing and leading the campus and creating the movement, but they do not represent the dominant attitude among students until we get to '68, '69, the war becomes so overwhelming that, "Oh my God, maybe these kids are right."

[MUSIC]

AM: So how did we get from teach-ins and a few dedicated people opposing the war, to these massive protests with civil disobedience and violence? Like Stu just said, part of it was that the war kept getting worse. More Americans were dying. And more images of horrific destruction were on people's TVs. But there are a couple specific things that really changed the antiwar movement at UW: the draft and the DOW Chemical Company.

KLB: Let's start with the draft. Basically this thing called the Selective Service program meant that all males 18 and up had their names on a list. And the US government could call your name to go fight and possibly die in Vietnam. *But*, there were ways to get your name *off* the list. One of the big ones was getting a deferment by going to college.

AM: Education is important!

KLB: But there were issues with the deferment system. One thing was fairness. At this point it was mostly white, middle class or wealthy kids who could go to college. They could avoid the war, while poorer people and people of color were much more likely to get shipped off.[3]

AM: Another issue was that the government kinda reneged. By 1966, they needed more men in Vietnam. So the draft board decided that students with "poor academic performance" could lose their deferments. They got universities to basically narc on the

[3] Bailey, Martha J, and Eric Chyn. "The Demographic Effects of Dodging the Vietnam Draft." AEA papers and proceedings. *American Economic Association* vol. 110 (2020): 220-225.

students with bad grades and administer a standardized test to weed out “marginal” students.[4]

KLB: Why does it always come back to standardized testing in this country?

AM: And this got a lot of students worked up, which is understandable. All of a sudden falling behind in your classes or bombing this test could actually mean life or death. This led UW students to stage their first sit-in to protest the draft.

KLB: For six days in May 1966, students peacefully occupied the campus Administration Building. They literally *sat in* the lobby and hallways and staircases. First it was dozens, then hundreds and eventually close to 10,000 people were *sitting in* on nearby Bascom Hill.

The protesters’ demand was that the university stop giving out students’ grades and test scores to the draft board. After a week of this protest, the president said he’d call a special faculty meeting to vote on it. Eventually they passed a watered-down version of the demand. So not a total win for the students. But remember, just a year before this, that *big* teach-in was like one-tenth as many people. So what changed? What got all these kids involved?

DM: Every protest movement is a combination of idealism and self-interest, and the more self-interest there is, the more intense the idealism and the more activism.

AM: That’s author David Maraniss again.

DM: So in that era, so many thousands and thousands and millions of young people were affected by the war in Vietnam in a way that future wars were not because of the draft. And so that every young man, every girlfriend, every mother and father and sibling was dealing with the question, "What will I do? How will I get involved?" And that made millions of people turn against the war in Vietnam.

AM: So for this protest, *there’s* the self interest part: not wanting to lose deferments and get drafted. But Stu Levitan says there was already a lot of idealism too. Many of the sit-in protesters opposed the draft system all together.

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[4] Laura E. Hatt, “LBJ Wants Your GPA: The Vietnam Exam,” *The Harvard Crimson*, May 23, 2016, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2016/5/23/lbj-wants-your-gpa/; Thomas J. Frusciano, "Student Deferment and the Selective Service College Qualification Test, 1951-1967,” *Research Memorandum* (1980).

SL: To the point of the white middle class having the college deferments, that is what makes the draft protest of 1966 so outstanding. It was the white middle class students who were trying to get rid of the student deferment in order to expose their, their parents and the parents of their, of their classmates to the same horrors of the war that the poor and the Black students' parents were, uh, uh, exposed to, on the theory that if we bring the pain of the war to the parents of the middle class, that will create the political dynamic that will then make the members of Congress pay attention.

AM: But beyond individual motivations, the 1966 draft protest also marked a turning point for the antiwar movement on campus. It wasn't just a small group of diehards anymore…

SL: We get to the draft protest of 1966, which is the first time that you get, you get the, the freaks on Mifflin Street, you get the geeks in the Wisconsin Student Association, and the Greeks on, on Langdon Street all agreeing.

KLB: It's almost like a Kumbaya moment here. Everyone coming together for a cause. Even university leaders were like, "this is fine." The President, Robben Flemming, praised the students for their **[POMPOUS VOICE]** "disciplined behavior." He said: "The right to protest, which is essential in a democratic society, can be handled in a responsible manner at Wisconsin." And he specifically told police not to intervene as long as everyone stayed chill. Sounds pretty good, right? Well, all of that was about to change…

[MUSIC]

KLB: Around the same time that some UW students were protesting the draft, others were thinking about a career at the Dow Chemical Company. The manufacturer had started hosting events on campus to recruit promising soon-to-be graduates.

AM: But this wasn't any old chemical company. Dow was the same company that made Napalm. This horrible compound was like jellied gasoline… or liquid fire. It stuck to anything it touched – including human skin. And the US military was using Napalm in Vietnam. Photos and TV footage coming out of the warzone showed people at home just how horrific Dow's product was. So students started protesting these recruiting events on campus.[5]

KLB: In October 1966, a group picketed against dow on the Engineering campus. Then, again, in February 1967, students blockaded offices in Bascom Hall to demand that

[5] University of Wisconsin–Madison, "October 1967: A Turning Point," https://1967.wisc.edu/index.html

Dow be removed from campus. But, the university kept hosting Dow and allowing them to recruit. So by October of 1967, students organized another round of protests. [6]

AM: Students knew that on the morning of October 18, Dow was going to be conducting interviews in Ingraham Hall. So about 200 protesters sat in the hallway to physically stop students from getting to their job interviews.[7]

KLB: Over the next two hours, 150 to 200 more students showed up to help block the halls. By noon, the UW president decided to call in the city police to disperse the crowd. And just a quick aside: Remember William Sewell, the professor who organized the first teach-in? This is him. He's the president now. And even though he's against the war, he's still like, 'I can't let you kids do this.'

AM: Oof. Look what a title and a paycheck will make a man do…

KLB: Anyways, back to the story: The Madison Police showed up but the crowds just kept growing. And then things escalated… When students **[POMPOUS VOICE]** *failed to disperse,* cops started hitting them with riot sticks and dragging them out of the building.

DM: The, Madison poli - first of all, the Madison Police had not been on the campus before that. And those city cops hated the students. You know, I interviewed many of them, and they would talk... one guy, McCarthy said that, he wished that a, an atomic bomb had been dropped on Bascom Hill. You know? I mean, it was that, that l- I mean, it was an exaggeration, but it was that level of antipathy. And so they were ready to beat heads. Most of the cops came out of the working class. Some of them had been in Vietnam, or Korea before that. Many of them had brothers who were in Vietnam. And they thought the students were spoiled and from a different world, and there was no love lost between them. So they were ready to bash heads.

AM: But the cops couldn't break up the crowd, even when they used force. Students stayed right outside the building and continued to protest. Some of them started throwing rocks, sticks, shoes, and even bricks at the police.

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[6]PBS, "Protests and Backlash," *American Experience: Two Days in October*. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/two-days-in-october-student-antiwar-protests-and-backlash/.

[7]PBS, "Timeline: Vietnam War and Protests," *American Experience: Two Days in October*. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/two-days-in-october-vietnam-battlefields-and-home-front/. Entries: 1966 and February 1967.

DM: There were a lot of different factions within th- those few hundred protesters, from a few who really wanted to stir it up and maybe provoke the police, and most of them not, but wanting to have an act of civil disobedience, perhaps be arrested. Everyone who went in that building was willing to be arrested. They weren't expecting to have their heads beaten by the police.

AM: The police ended up doing more than beating heads … They responded by using tear gas. And this was a monumental move here. This was the first time tear gas was *ever* used on a U.S. campus. It created chaos. Dow would go down as the first truly violent antiwar protest in American history. And it solidified UW's central role in antiwar activism.[8]

KLB: It also, sort of ironically, radicalized students who were more neutral before that day. So it really did the opposite of what the police and the university president intended. By 9pm that night, there were more than 3,000 students on Library Mall. They demanded that the administration permanently bar city police from campus and not punish the leaders of the Dow sit-in. Thousands of students were absent from their classes the next morning. [9]

AM: Eventually the administration did take steps to change police policy for large crowds. And they suspended Dow's recruitment on campus. But they ended up suspending 13 student protesters, and 10 students were charged with disorderly conduct. [10]

[MUSIC]

KLB: If we're mapping out the antiwar movement at UW-Madison…

AM: And you know we are.

KLB: The Dow protest is a really important turning point. Before Dow, a lot of the anti-war organizing on campus was still based around education: the teach-ins, the pickets, the peaceful sit-ins. After Dow, the movement doesn't just get bigger. It gets

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[8] University of Wisconsin–Madison. "Timeline." October 1967: A Turning Point. https://1967.wisc.edu/timeline/. Entries: October 18, 1967.
[9] PBS. "Timeline: Vietnam War and Protests."American Experience: Two Days in October. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/two-days-in-october-vietnam-battlefields-and-home-front/. Entry: October 18, 1967.
[10] University of Wisconsin–Madison. "Timeline." October 1967: A Turning Point. https://1967.wisc.edu/timeline/.

more intense. Which all makes sense, right? Students had just watched police beat and gas their classmates *on campus*.

DM: There were so many people who had no feelings about the war or were just going to class that day, and saw what was going on and were changed forever. It was a, it was a pivotal moment in the lives of thousands of students.

AM: I mean, of course students would look at everything that happened and say okay… something is really wrong here. And what are we gonna do about it?

SL: Those tensions ratchet because there's a vicious circle, a vicious cycle of protest, repression, more protest, more repression, more protest, more repression, because the empire always strikes back.

AM: Things definitely ratchet…

SL: You never de-ratchet. **[LAUGHS]** You, you only ratchet up. You never ratchet down. Um, s- so, and, and at every step of the way, it provokes more and more repression, which then just engenders a higher level of obstruction. And as the protests didn't seem to be having any impact, they naturally got more intense. Okay, picketing didn't work. Let's try sitting in. Eh, sitting in didn't work. Let's try heckling. Ah, that didn't work. Well, I guess we got to start busting some windows. Oh, damn, that didn't work. Okay, let's, let's burn something. Oh, damn, that didn't work. I guess we gotta blow up a building.

KLB: That's foreshadowing by the way.

AM: By 1970, one of the biggest symbols of UW's connection to the war was inside Sterling Hall. The U.S. Army was funding a mathematical research center on campus that antiwar activists believed supported the war effort. To protesters, it wasn't just an academic center. It was proof that the university was helping produce research for the military, including work that could be used in operations connected to Vietnam.

KLB: At 3:42 in the morning on August 24, a bomb exploded outside of Sterling Hall. It was the work of four antiwar radicals: Karl and Dwight Armstrong, David Fine, and Leo Burt. They parked a stolen university van outside of Sterling Hall and filled it with a homemade explosive. A warning call was made to Madison police before the explosion, but there wasn't enough time to clear the building. [11]

[11] Schmitt, Preston, and Doug Erickson. "The Blast That Changed Everything." On Wisconsin (May 28, 2020). https://onwisconsin.uwalumni.com/the-blast-that-changed-everything/.

AM: The blast damaged 26 buildings. It shattered windows, destroyed equipment, and wiped out years of research. But the most important part of the story is not the building. It is Robert Fassnacht.

Fassnacht was a 33-year-old postdoc researcher in physics. He was married and had three young children. He was working late in his basement lab that night, trying to finish an experiment before going on a family vacation. Fassnacht didn't have anything to do with the Army Research Center. And the bomb mostly missed the target anyway.[12]

KLB: On the most basic level, the Sterling Hall Bombing was a tragedy. A man lost his life. His family lost a husband and a father. But it's also maybe the last important turning point in the story of anti-Vietnam organizing at UW. As horrified as people were, the bombing didn't *end* the protest movement. But it changed it.[13]

SL: What Sterling Hall did was it destroyed the moral high ground that the protest movement had been on, and it cast a pall over that entire year. So people were just totally-- I mean, like, "What did we do?" "What have we become?"

AM: The US kept fighting in Vietnam for another four years. UW students kept protesting the war. There were still big marches and sit-ins. Even some more clashes with cops. But the intensity that had rocked campus in the years leading up to Sterling Hall cooled.

Part of it was that loss of the 'moral high ground' that Stu mentioned. Fassnacht's death gave critics a chance to call out the hypocrisy of a peace movement resorting to violence.

But there were other factors too. The fighting was slowing down and fewer Americans were dying. And by 1973 the draft had ended. To put it bluntly there was less stuff to protest.

KLB: So did years of antiwar protests at UW and other colleges work? Did they end the war sooner? That's a debate that we could never hope to answer in podcast form.

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[12] Erickson, Doug. "When Bomb Tore through Sterling Hall 50 Years Ago, He Was Inside: 'I Still Have Flashbacks.'" *UW–Madison News* (August 18, 2020). https://news.wisc.edu/when-bomb-tore-through-sterling-hall-he-was-inside-i-still-have-flashbacks/.
[13] Schmitt, Preston, and Doug Erickson. "The Blast That Changed Everything." *On Wisconsin* (May 28, 2020). https://onwisconsin.uwalumni.com/the-blast-that-changed-everything/.

What we can say is that a protest movement that started out with clear demands that the university could control—whether or not to provide test scores, whether or not to host Dow—switched to a movement located on campus but with demands far outside of the scope of campus administrators.

UW leaders couldn't stop the war in Vietnam. And bombing Sterling Hall didn't make President Nixon sign a peace treaty.

SL: You have to localize the protest so that the decision-makers are affected. You have to understand that creating chaos in the street Will, will, create a general sense of, "Oh, this nation's going, it, some- something's terribly wrong."

But we created chaos in the streets starting in 1966, '67. The war didn't end until, uh, you know, '73, '74, '75. I mean, that's—rule number one of a successful protest is you can only target the people who have the power to make the decision to do what you want.

KLB: This doesn't mean that the anti-war protests on campus didn't have any impact or weren't important. The antiwar protests of the 1960s served a clear educational purpose. By the end of the 1970s many more students knew about the war in Vietnam, and cared. And the protests fundamentally shaped the way UW students organized on countless other issues in the decades to come.

More on that in the next episode of *Reorientation…*

[MUSIC]

LAUREN MUNDA: You can find a full teaching guide for this episode on our website at campus history dot wisc dot E-D-U. That includes links to some of David Maraniss' work on Vietnam and oral histories about the Sterling Hall Bombing.

Reorientation is written by Kacie Lucchini Butcher, Allie Morris, Lauren Munda, and John K. Wilson. He also produced and edited this episode.

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