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Skeleton in Our Closet Refuses to Stay Put

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I spent yesterday afternoon reading Richard M. Nixon's deposition in a wiretap suit brought by Morton Halperin, thinking it would be fun, thinking I would come across those wonderful Nixonian phrases like "perfectly clear." I did, but it was not fun.

Not that Mr. Nixon has changed any. He is still a class act—still the innocent and injured party, still hostile to the opposition lawyers, still whining about being deprived of his presidential papers, still petty in his apologies. He insisted, for instance, that the record be corrected so that Halperin would be called doctor instead of mister. Mr. Nixon said Henry Kissinger cared about that sort of thing.

But on page 22 of the deposition, things suddenly turned sour. Mr. Nixon was talking about the leak that told the American people that our planes were secretly bombing Cambodia in 1970. He said the leak was "directly responsible for the death of thousands of Americans because it required discontinuance of a policy that saved American lives."

The sentence stopped me cold. Here was Vietnam all over again, the kicking skeleton in Washington's closet that refuses to stay put. This is as it should be. This town conceived the war, planned it and executed it. The killing occurred elsewhere.

I have been thinking of Vietnam lately. I thought about it when I attended a recent book and author luncheon here and watched Jack Valenti, a former White House aide, and Eartha Kitt, the singer, go at each other about something that happened years ago. The issue, still, was the war. I thought about it when a friend of mine debated whether to accept an invitation to honor someone who had been steadfastly for the war. He wound up not going.

I thought about it again yesterday when I came across Mr. Nixon's sentence about the Cambodian bombing. I did not think of Cambodia, where I have never been, but of Washington, where I was during the war. I recalled the peace marches and the prowar marches, the encampments on the Mall, the human interest stories about soldiers killed in battle, the visits

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to hospitals like Walter Reed where some of the injured eventually were taken.

Mostly I thought about Allison Krause. She was killed by the Ohio National Guard at an antiwar demonstration at Kent State University in 1970. She was a local girl, a graduate of John F. Kennedy High School in Wheaton. After the slaying, I went up there to do a story about her and found the school divided like the rest of the nation. The antiwar kids had lowered the flag to half-staff; the prowar kids took it down and burned it in a trash can.

That is what I wrote at the time. I also wrote about Allison Krause, trying to find out about her by interviewing her teachers. I expected them to say that they barely remembered her, that she was nice and no trouble to anyone. This is the way you talk about the dead. But they did not say that. They were male teachers and they remembered her well. She was nice all right, and pretty and bright. But there was something more. She was beautiful in a way you could not see in the yearbook picture. They called her a woman—a rare and beautiful woman. They came close to crying.

I have never been able to forget this girl I never met. I remembered her during the Kent State trials or whenever her father appeared on television or in print. He had become an activist. I remembered her yesterday when I read Nixon's deposition. I thought about Nixon blaming the leak for the deaths of thousands and not on his decision to continue the war, to invade Cambodia, something he called an "occurrence" in his deposition. Allison Krause died protesting that "occurrence."

Reading the deposition was no fun.