

The Presidency / by Hugh Sidey

'Anybody see Patton?'

On April 4, roughly a month before American troops invaded Cambodia, Richard Nixon, with his family, saw the movie *Patton* which is based on the life of General George Patton, the rambunctious commander of the U.S. Third Army in Europe during World War II.

On April 25, just five days before the incursion, he saw *Patton* again. This time Henry Kissinger joined him; the two of them were in the Saturday emptiness of the White House, pondering the Cambodia decision and the speech with which the President would tell the nation what he was doing and why.

Three weeks later *Patton* came up again. In the aftermath of the campus riots and at the depths of the stock market plunge Nixon summoned 45 business and financial leaders to the White House to reassure them about his outlook for both the war and the economy, to reassure them, in short, about his leadership.

The evening had gone well. The President was at ease, talking lucidly and sincerely. The economy was sound, he said, but needed cooling. For a time the slowdown would hurt.



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The troops would come out of Cambodia as promised. They were racing the rainy season and he hoped the monsoons would arrive on schedule as soon as the sanctuaries were cleaned out, preventing the Communists from easy reoccupation and supply. Suddenly a thought struck him. The situation was like *Patton*.

"Anybody see the movie *Patton*?" he asked. Several hands went up, including that of Arthur Burns, the head of the Federal Reserve. Anyone who saw it, Nixon joked, must have learned some four-letter words not even the college kids know (which caused at least one guest to muse that Nixon was clearly out of touch with today's college kids). But the real point of bringing up the movie was that George Patton had accomplished the impossible in rescuing the men trapped by the Battle of the Bulge. "Perhaps," Nixon said, "it was the greatest movement of forces in the whole history of warfare in a short time—one million men about 100 miles in three days." Other generals said it couldn't be done, Nixon explained. One of the best parts of the movie, he continued, was when Patton said they needed good weather so that they could use their air power. The general sent for the chaplain. A prayer was written asking for good weather. Patton prayed bareheaded in the snow. When the weather cleared next day, the general sent for the chaplain and decorated him. Now, said Nixon, "We have every chaplain in Vietnam praying for early rain. You have to have the will and determination to go out and to do what is right for America." His audience burst into applause.

The President's fascination with Patton has been passing through the peculiar national grapevine that deals with men of power. In the process it has grown and been twisted, but it is still worth pondering.

It was noted that when Nixon flew to San Clemente only a few days after talking to the businessmen, the celluloid *Patton*, a special 16-mm film requested by the President, was with him. This time he did not view it, but it may have been on hand for a reason. Presidential Assistant Robert Haldeman has counseled young White House staff members to see the movie for a better understanding of Nixon at this critical time. Secretary of State William Rogers ran into Darryl Zanuck, chairman of 20th Century-Fox and told him that Nixon was a walking ad for the movie. "It comes up in every conversation," said Rogers. The staff had talked about it in the back corridors of the White House. Why would Nixon find Pat-

ton so intriguing? Maybe because Patton had lived through criticism, endured rejection as Nixon had, and in the end was still willing to try what seemed impossible, to take the bold stroke. Patton had faith in God. Patton was a complex man, just as Nixon is. The speculation went beyond the White House to crop up in Hollywood where the movie had been conceived. Actor Peter Ustinov got his timing a little mixed up and said he heard that the night before the Cambodian invasion Nixon saw the film and was much moved, "impressed by the pressures of power and how they make a hero of a man."

In New York Ladislav Farago, the author of the book *Patton* (1963) on which the movie was based, lunched with Dr. Margaret Mead, the anthropologist. Why, Farago wondered, was Nixon so taken with Patton? "The President thrives on opposition," Dr. Mead explained. "It is a form of stimulation for him. His enemies should take heed. Any figure who has had to make decisions in the face of opposition as he has done will seem appealing to him." Dr. Mead noted that the mementoes of the President's career were relics from his fights, his victories. His book speaks of challenges and crises.

Nixon read Farago's biography soon after taking office last year. It apparently helped stimulate in him a broader interest in recent wars. The books of Dwight Eisenhower and Winston Churchill were already on his study shelves. He went through a volume on the reasons for the collapse of France in 1940. He probed Adviser Kissinger's well-stocked mind for further facts about those decades of men's miscalculations. Then came the Patton film.

Nixon is hardly the first President to scour history for examples of military wisdom and daring. John Kennedy was fascinated by General Douglas MacArthur and used to recall his meeting with the old man in the Waldorf Towers. MacArthur warned against a land war in Asia and told Kennedy that the "chickens are coming home to roost" in that part of the world. Lyndon Johnson held up Eisenhower as his military hero, night after night praising Ike's humanity and wisdom in war.

Dr. Mead suggests that there may be real danger in Presidents looking for guidance to heroes who fought wars and battles neither conceived nor structured like anything we face today. Indochina is not World War II. Nixon's White House troops disagree. In sum, they believe that the emergence of Patton as a major figure in the Nixon pantheon is a good sign, meaning that he will continue to hang tough in the crunches.