

Transcribed from tape.

There are times in the tides of men when the ebb and flow is swift and terrible. The term "watershed" has become something of a cliché in recent times, but some events do trigger decisive change and watershed becomes a rather apt word.

The chronology of this particular critical time of change begins of course with President Nixon's announcement of the invasion of Cambodia. The cascade of events that has followed upon that fateful decision may have signaled a major change of direction for America. The last day of April may well have been the last day of an era. The first days of May just possibly may have provided us with more of glimpse into the future than any similar period in American history. Disheartening and heartening events tumbled one upon the other in such rapid succession in the wake of the President's action that in many cases the political slate was wiped clean and a completely new relationship of forces came into being. It has been written that the Cambodian decision changed the country but it didn't change Richard Nixon. I think that's true, and I think it's the change in the country that is the big news.

The President's action had the effect of unifying and revitalizing the peace movement; it galvanized into instant action an army of young workers for peace candidates in the fall elections and in some of the primaries that still remain. A political science professor active in this movement said the other day, "If Nixon had moved on Cambodia a little sooner we could have saved Ralph Yarborough in Texas." He was referring to the defeat of the veteran Texas liberal in that state's primary by a conservative Democrat. The professor, when reminded that they don't like carpetbaggers in Texas, hastened to say that the army of newly committed young moved to action now will include plenty of Texas accents. The youthful army that came into being when Eugene McCarthy went into New Hampshire in 1968 has been born anew. Its ranks promise to swell a thousandfold. Somebody said the other day that Richard Nixon had turned out to be the finest organizer the peace movement ever had, when he sent American troops into Cambodia. One Washington columnist wrote that the President had wiped out the differences between radical and moderate on the college campuses, he had welded faculty and students together in a united front, he had galvanized valuable new allies.

It was of course Nixon plus other things, most notably the killing of four students at Kent State. Indeed the chronology of the terrible first days of May contains as much foreboding as it does hope. It was the day after the Cambodian announcement, Friday, May first, that President Nixon made his off-the-cuff remarks at the Pentagon in which he called college protesters "bums." It was four days later on Monday, May 4th, that National Guard gunfire echoed across the Kent campus and sent

four students to their deaths. The father of one of them - the father of Allison Krause - was to tell the nation, while sobbing out his grief, that his daughter resented being called a bum. This led another columnist here to write, "That line may be the noose that hangs Richard Nixon in 1972."

That was an anguished week for America. Even as students and others prepared to swarm upon Washington on Saturday, May 9th, in a hastily called rally, another and most ominous development was taking place here in Manhattan. The day, Friday, May 8th. The trouble had in fact been building up on Wednesday and Thursday. Construction workers who had been pelting demonstrators passing a construction site on Wednesday and Thursday sallied off the job on Friday and launched what some have called "the new bullyism." With the tacit acquiescence of the police they demonstrated their self-proclaimed patriotism by using lead pipes and wrenches on students and bystanders. They attacked people who criticized them, people who attempted to dissuade them, people who wore peace buttons. Some evidence has been unearthed to indicate that this foray was less than spontaneous. The publisher of a local fascist paper admitted he used a bullhorn provided by police to help direct the men. Contractors also gave men time off with pay from at least one project to participate in the foray. This brutal thrust from the right hopefully will serve to awaken to reality a lot of practitioners in revolutionary rhetoric. Most particularly it should serve to bring some of those who prattle about the radicalization of the American working class to the realization there is enormous rightist strength in the ranks of U.S. unions.

It is significant, however, that at the very time the construction workers were starting their rampages a group of more progressive unionists here in New York - those long identified with opposition to the war - were sitting down with a group of students, including some brought into activity by Cambodia and Kent, to do something about healing the labor-student breach. All tides do not flow in the same direction at the same time. It is ironic in this context that the same frantic weekend saw the death of Walter Reuther in a plane crash. Reuther, the president of the United Auto Workers, was the highest-ranking figure in American labor to oppose the Cambodian adventure, and he was a potential rallying point for the forces of labor unwilling to follow George Meany's blind endorsement of the Nixon policies.

Reuther's death underscored another aspect of this terrible May. It came one year to the day after he had marched in a Mother's Day demonstration in Charleston, South Carolina, on behalf of striking black hospital workers. In the week following Reuther's death the struggle for black freedom had flared anew in the nation's headlines. Six young black men in Augusta, Georgia, were dead, shot in the back by police. Then it was two black students at Jackson State in Mississippi, shot down in a mindless barrage by highway police. These events emphasized something that was apparent here

in New York. The comment was heard again and again from blacks, during the mourning for the Kent four, that no one had become very excited during a similar killing two years ago of black students at Orangeburg, South Carolina.

In the middle of all this the grand jury in Chicago was saying in effect the Black Panthers were right and the cops were wrong about what happened in a murderous raid there.

It seems to be a time of truth. Perhaps truth does not come too late. This summer new legions of youth will surge into precincts across the nation. The impact upon the November elections could be profound.

Events these days are so fast-moving that it is often difficult in these pre-recorded commentaries to make them entirely timely, but I think the events of the first ten days of May of this year will stand up under the examination of history as a time when some manifestations of rather profound change surfaced in America.

I shall be back in this time slot in two weeks. This is Steve Murdock in New York.