

We, The Undersigned:  
A Basketball Team's Quest to be Heard

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When one thinks about the politics of the 1960s, one of the first things that comes to mind is the conflict in Vietnam. Vietnam was the arguably the most talked about issue in the 1960s and protests on college campuses were spreading across the country like wildfire. The protests continued to mount as America transitioned into the early 1970s and came to a head in May 1970 with the massacre at Kent State University.

While it is clear that protesting the war was prevalent throughout the nation, it is important to examine who exactly was protesting the war. I hypothesize that, over time, opposition to the war will not only increase overall, but will become more prevalent in mainstream America. There were obviously pockets of extremists adamantly opposing the war but how far into mainstream America did anti-war sentiments reach? The answer is displayed in a letter that was sent from the 1970 NCAA champion UCLA basketball team to President Richard M. Nixon in which the 13 members of the team voiced their disapproval of the war. Similarly, evidence from the 1968 and 1972 National Election Studies supports the claim that anti-war sentiments spread deep into mainstream America as the 1960s progressed into the 1970s. This is largely because of the environment that 1960s culture fostered as well as widespread media coverage of the war. The polling data that supports this claim has some irregularities, but overall supports my hypothesis and the evidence of the letter.

The aforementioned letter that the 1970 UCLA men's basketball sent to the President Nixon was indeed eye opening because UCLA basketball in the 1960s was a symbol that represented longstanding tradition; a tradition that most Americans who had any association with the sporting world would be familiar with. The legendary coach John Wooden was seen as an American icon, complete with his words to live by and anecdotes that imparted wisdom on his players that extended far beyond the basketball court. Andy Hill, a guard on the 1970 team was one of the players that spearheaded the movement for the letter and even asked Coach Wooden if the team could have the day off practice to

attend an anti-war rally. Wooden told Hill that he was welcome to miss practice but he wouldn't be welcomed back onto the basketball team (Vallely). Hill talks about the letter in his book *Be Quick—But Don't Hurry!* which was co-written with Coach Wooden:

As President Nixon escalated the war into Laos and Cambodia, and the administration's hostility toward protestors became more overt, it seemed appropriate to use the media to try to make our leadership understand that not all students against the war were hippies and anarchists. What better way to do that than to have the clean-cut national basketball champions write a letter voicing their concerns (Hill 36)?

Hill continues to elaborate on the birth of the letter in the HBO Sports documentary, *The UCLA Dynasty*.

The guys, almost to a man, felt that the war was the wrong thing and we were sort of being held up as all that was right with America. It just seemed obvious to me that this was a wonderful opportunity to make it clear that the people who were against the war weren't necessarily people that you could easily categorize as hippies and commies. Who's more normal than the UCLA basketball team (UCLA)?

Hill's language in these two quotes is almost identical, exchanging "anarchists" for "commies" in the latter passage. Being the leader of the movement to draft the letter, Hill obviously had a clear idea of what he wanted to accomplish. So much so that he would utter almost the exact same quotes almost 40 years later. He closes both questions with a question that has an obvious answer to further define why he started the movement to draft the letter. Hill uses the word "our" in the first passage to make it known that the entire team was behind the letter. This was not necessarily true.

The actual text of the letter is fairly radical and makes certain extreme demands but the team make it very clear that they do not support violent protest in any way. They open the letter by referring to themselves as a collective group of college students rather than well known basketball players. They also use the term "we" nine times throughout the letter to denote that they are united in their beliefs and demands. In an attempt to reform the view of college students, they deny the stereotype of "bums" that had so often been used to classify college students. Only at the end of the letter do they mention

basketball to differentiate themselves from any other students. This is probably because they knew that they would not be heard if they signed the letter as 13 anonymous college students and they had to use the fame and attention that they had garnered by winning the NCAA championship to their advantage.

They claim that President Nixon had:

in the past demonstrated an unwillingness to take into consideration the voice of an ever increasing vocal minority, as exemplified by the statements he made prior to the October 15 moratorium, in which he stated he would be in no way affected by it. He has once again shown his unwillingness to carry out the will of the people by committing U.S. troops to Cambodia (UCLA).

They close the letter by making several demands that include the withdrawal of troops from Cambodia, an investigation of the Kent State killings, and the end of harassment of youth by the Nixon-Agnew administration. The letter was sent care of H.R Haldeman because he was a UCLA graduate and a big fan of UCLA basketball in general, something Hill learned from an alumnus with close ties to the basketball program (Hill 36).

Just as not everyone in America was adamantly opposed to the war, not everyone on the team was as passionate about the letter as Hill was. In an interview I conducted with team captain John Valley, he said the following:

I regret signing the letter because I think as a 21 year old student at UCLA, I had no knowledge of international relations, no real knowledge of what went on in an effort to keep our country free. I mean, it's very easy to embrace the concept that any dispute ought to be able to be resolved between reasonably educated parties. I mean, would I want to be in any war? I don't think there's any human being that would say, in a sane mind, that they wanted to be involved in a war. And I certainly wasn't interested in being involved in a war. But, using the platform of the UCLA basketball team to get involved in a political statement, I thought, was something that I shouldn't have been doing at that time because I wasn't knowledgeable enough about the whole subject matter (Valley).

Valley uses the clarifying phrase "I mean" twice, as though to signify that he is unsure of his exact feelings about the issue. He was sure, however, that he regrets signing the letter because he does not advocate mixing politics and basketball. He mentioned later in the interview that "(he didn't) see

that as a proper thing for anybody to promote the use of teammates to accomplish one's personal goal and I believe that's what was going on at the time."

Vallely continues by saying that he felt that he had "gone beyond the call of (his) duty as a student" by signing the letter. He felt as though he was wronging UCLA because he was given a scholarship to receive an education, yet was using the team as a political platform (Vallely). "Do I want to put my UCLA basketball team, which has honored me with a contract to pay for my education and use it to go and differentiate myself from anybody else on campus?" Again, Vallely is certain that using the basketball team to promote politics was not the right thing to do, in his opinion. Vallely was the last one to sign the letter and suggested that there may have been a rift between Hill and some of the more politically active teammates and other, less politically charged players, like himself. Vallely went on to mention that he never heard any response from political figures or Coach Wooden about the letter, he also mentioned his active support of civil rights and how the campus closure affected his UCLA education.

The two tables presented are derived from The National Election Studies of 1968 and 1972, bracketing the year in which the letter was written. In 1968, the Vietnam-related dependent variable question simply read, "Were we right in getting into Vietnam?" In 1970, the question read, "Do you think we did the right thing in getting into the fighting in Vietnam or should we have stayed out?" The independent variable simply classified respondents by race in both studies, assuming that we consider whites to be representative of mainstream America. I limited responses to the anti-war question to, "yes, did the right thing," "no, should have stayed out," or "don't know," because the other possible answers didn't elicit significant response numbers. I also limited the racial responses to "white" and "black" because they had the most significant responses and I was interested solely in whites being representatives of the mainstream population.

The data derived from the polls generally follow my hypothesis. Whites' who responded to the question, "were right in getting into Vietnam?" with "no, should have stayed out," increased from 52.2% in 1968 to 58.7% in 1972. Negroes' response to the same question increased drastically from 55.2% in 1968 to 74.6% in 1972. Interestingly, whites who responded with, "yes, did the right thing," actually increased from 31.7% in 1968 to 32.1% in 1972. That can probably be explained, however, by the "don't know" response decreasing from 16.1% to 9.2%.

The relationship between my original hypothesis and the data presented in the tables is indeed complimentary. The letter sent from the UCLA 1970 NCAA national championship men's basketball team to the president helps to illustrate this relationship. For a group with as much tradition and heritage as the UCLA basketball team to be so unwaveringly devoted to a controversial political cause like the Vietnam War shows that the issue was moving into the minds of mainstream Americans and that protesting the war as well as other issues was no longer reserved for revolutionaries and radicals.

## Bibliography

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*The UCLA Dynasty*. DVD. Produced by Rick Bernstein and Ross Greenburg. 2007: HBO Home Box Office, 2008.

Vallely, John. Personal interview. 6 March 2010.

## Appendix

### 1970 NCAA basketball national champion UCLA Bruins' letter to the president

President Richard Nixon  
c/o H.R. Haldeman  
Assistant to the President  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
N.W. Washington, D.C.

We, the undersigned, are thirteen U.C.L.A. students who wish to express our grave concern and disapproval over the President's policy of expansion of the immoral, genocidal and imperialistic war the United States is now waging in Southeast Asia. We support the meaningful and peaceful demonstrations held throughout this country. We deplore the tactics of violence of both students and law enforcement agencies that are suppressing the intentions of those who are truly concerned with peace on earth. We further wish to clarify that we are not "bums" as we college students have been so wrongly accused. Rather we are concerned with the well being of America and its democracy which should function as a reflection of the will of the American people. But when massive demonstrations concerning the policies of this country are suppressed or dismissed as unwarranted and unlawful dissent, then there is something seriously wrong. The President has in the past demonstrated an unwillingness to take into consideration the voice of an ever increasing vocal minority, as exemplified by the statements he made prior to the October 15 moratorium, in which he stated he would be in no way affected by it. He has once again shown his unwillingness to carry out the will of the people by committing U.S. troops to Cambodia.

We propose certain measures that we feel are necessary for the alleviation of the social and political pressures that exist today:

The immediate withdrawal of all the combat troops, advisors and arms from Cambodia. The rapid de-escalation of the war in Vietnam with the goal in mind of removing all personnel from Vietnam by January 1, 1971. The public investigation of the killings at Kent State. The end of harassment of youth by the Nixon-Agnew administration, by those in authority at either the federal, state or local level.

Rick Betchley  
Henry Bibby  
Ken Booker  
Jon Chapman  
Sidney Wicks

John Ecker  
Andy Hill  
Steve Patterson  
Curtis Rowe

Terry Schofield  
Doug Schwab  
Bill Seibert  
John Vallely

U.C.L.A. 1970 N.C.A.A. Basketball Champions

Interview with John Vallely, captain and starting point guard of the 1970 NCAA champion UCLA Bruins

*Sam Strong:* Can you start by taking me through the timeline of the letter. You guys won the title on March 21<sup>st</sup>. When did you send the letter? How did it come about and who was the figure head behind it?

*John Vallely:* The date we signed the letter, I do not recall. I thought that the letter was signed during the season. We had one player on our team that was very active in the anti-war efforts and he actually had gone to Coach Wooden during the season and asked if the team could take a day off practice to go down and picket the federal building in a protest. Coach Wooden rejected that. He said that he felt that his team was recruited to play basketball at UCLA and that that was our responsibility. If someone wanted to do something with their free time, they were welcome to do that. Coach Wooden didn't feel that he had been hired at UCLA to be involved in some effort like a big statement. So, he simply told the gentleman, there might have been two of them that went in to see Coach Wooden, that they were welcome to take the day off, but they wouldn't be welcomed back on the basketball team. So, that was their effort and so then they elected as a second step, as I remember it, to go around to the players on the team and ask them to sign onto a letter that they had written objecting to the war effort in Vietnam and so all the players actually signed this letter, except me. And I actually waived on the letter for a long time. Well, long time, days and I finally signed it with my teammates because they had elected that they, as a team, wanted to do that. To this day, I regret that decision.

*SS:* To sign the letter?

*JV:* Yes.

*SS:* Why is that?

*JV:* I regret signing the letter because I think as a 21 year old student at UCLA, I had no knowledge of international relations, no real knowledge of what went on in an effort to keep our country free. I mean, it's very easy to embrace the concept that any dispute ought to be able to be resolved between reasonably educated parties. I mean, would I want to be in any war? I don't think there's any human being that would say, in a sane mind, that they wanted to be involved in a war. And I certainly wasn't interested in being involved in a war. But, using the platform of the UCLA basketball team to get involved in a political statement, I thought, was something that I shouldn't have been doing at that time because I wasn't knowledgeable enough about the whole subject matter. Until you see what goes on in an international political arena, until you see what goes on in with the heads of state, until you see what goes on with a general who's leading the charge to keep this country free, I don't think you're really knowledgeable enough to start making statements like that. But anyway, that's just my personal choice. I don't have any clue what the others have thought about that decision since then. I just know that I regret it.

*SS:* Was everyone as passionate about it as those two players that you mentioned? Who were those two players, if you don't mind?

*JV:* We never had a collective meeting about it. These two players, one of them was quite vocal and the other one was very silent, as I understood it, even when they went to approach Coach Wooden, was very silent about it. And he would have been, because he was a very silent person. And, the balance of the players, I never had a discussion with. It was a letter that this one fellow was passionate about. He

wanted to make a statement and that was his choice. Ultimately, I ended up signing on with the rest of my teammates because it was a team. In afterthought, I think differently about it.

SS: I noticed in the video that Andy Hill seemed to be quite vocal. Was he the one that was leading the charge?

JV: Yes.

SS: What was Coach Wooden's reaction after he learned that the letter was indeed sent?

JV: I never talked to him after it occurred. That would be a question that you would have to ask him about. I ever did discuss it with him.

SS: What was the response to the letter? Did you get anything back from the President? Did you get any response from other students? Was the action of sending the letter well known around campus?

JV: I never heard a single word about it.

SS: Do you have any idea why that is?

JV: I don't.

SS: I noticed that the letter was sent care of H.R Haldeman, who was a UCLA grad and a big UCLA basketball fan. Did you know Haldeman? Did Andy? What went into the decision to send it to him?

JV: I was not involved in the decision to send it to him. That may have been more of Andy Hill's quest.

SS: The campus was obviously alive with protest at that time, with Kent State and everything that came with that. How involved with protests were you and what was your take on those issues?

JV: There was civil unrest on the campus not only for the war but also for racial issues. Our campus was actually closed down for a whole quarter during the two years that I was there. I can't remember whether it was '70 or '69. But the campus was closed because there had been a murder on the campus and apparently, there was a dispute between two black panthers. I'm not sure what the dispute was about but anyway the campus was closed. I was not involved in any effort in regard to the war as far as protesting is concerned. It was on the campus. There was a body of people that were doing that on campuses across the country. The civil unrest and the communities dealing with racial issues were not just on our campus it was in Los Angeles and any other metropolitan area where African-Americans were trying to find their way to civil rights and rightfully so. So, I was more attune to dealing with the issues of understanding our fellow man, far more than I was interested in protesting the war although I had friends that were in the war, lost a couple of friends in the war. But to be honest with you, in my opinion, the war itself was beyond my control and I just wasn't knowledgeable enough for the reasons I mentioned earlier in the conversation. But on the civil front for racial issues, I was very empathetic and learned a lot at UCLA by playing with great players who shared their inner-most thoughts like Kareem and Sidney and some of the others that were my teammates that were great teammates. There was a lot to be learned at UCLA.

SS: Can you talk more about the campus closure and how that affected your scholarship and your overall experience at UCLA?

JV: Campus closure affected all classes because the classes that started in that particular quarter, that was in the third quarter, and the prompts, in some cases, asked each of the students, I think I had two classes where they just asked us to write about our perspective of what was going on on the campus and

turn it in and give yourself a grade. It was that simple. So it was really a strange time. You didn't have to attend classes but they wanted you to give yourself a grade. I wouldn't call that the highest quality part of the educational system.

*JV:* Can you imagine?

*SS:* I would like that very much

*JV:* Everybody would like a free ride but the thing is, there aren't free rides in this life, unfortunately. Sometimes people get off the hook for responsibility, but sooner or later it catches up with them.

*SS:* Being the captain of that 1970 team, did any of the backlash from Andy being vocal or whatever it was, come back on to you through Coach Wooden or the athletic department or anything of that nature?

*JV:* No. Not in the slightest. I never heard a word about it from anybody.

*SS:* There's a quote in the movie about protest not being for hippies and commies but turning to more normal people via the UCLA basketball team. I felt that using the team as a vehicle to protest was very special. Can you touch on what that meant to you and to the team?

*JV:* Protesting the war as an individual is one thing. Being against war as an individual is exactly where I am. I would say, I hate war and I sincerely doubt that anybody who's been involved would embrace the thought that it's a cool thing to be involved in. From the team perspective, I don't see that as a proper thing for anybody to promote the use of teammates to accomplish one's personal goal and I believe that's what was going on at the time.

*SS:* Would you say that there was a divide between your teammates surrounding this issue?

*JV:* I think there might have been a divide about that. I think that probably the majority of them would have been acting like most 21 year olds, not knowledgeable about the true situation and simply people that were against war. I would embrace that, which is why I finally signed it. I'm against war but do I feel it's my place to use the UCLA basketball team, where I've been given a scholarship to receive an education, as a political platform.? Do I want to put my UCLA basketball team, which has honored me with a contract to pay for my education and use it to go and differentiate myself from anybody else on campus? I think that's maybe beyond the call of my duty as a student. I think that as I look back, I was a 21 year old learning all kinds of things but I wasn't equipped to make that sort of statement. I think once you have more knowledge, you might, outside of that arena, go and gather people and get involved in protest or anything else because, I mean, free speech is the whole gig. Free speech is what makes this place wonderful and the idea of silencing any group is frightening to me. For example, what's going on currently with the idea of trying to reduce the availability of any sort of mediums that would present different ideas. If somebody's ideas are more paramount than another because they're popular or they receive commercial support as a result. So that's the marketplace for ideas. But to demand that somebody else listen to somebody who may or may not have subtenant materials is bordering on tyranny. I am against Tyranny.

*SS:* John, was there any other teammates who were reluctant to sign the letter or were you the only dissenting voice?

*JV:* I can't tell you. I just know I was the last one. I wish I could give you more information on that but remember that this was 40 years ago and I'm having trouble remembering. I'm doing my best but I can't recall if anybody else was hesitant. I would suggest to you that I was the most hesitant.

**Table 1**  
**1968**

Respondent's race

	White	Negro	Total
Were we right in getting into Vietnam?			
Yes, did the right thing	32.1% 723	17.6% 45	30.6% 768
No, should have stayed out	58.7% 1,322	74.6% 191	60.3% 1,513
Don't know	9.2% 207	7.8% 20	9.1% 227
Total	100% 2,252	100% 256	100% 2,508

**Table 2**  
**1972**

Respondent's race

	White	Negro	Total
Do you think we did the right thing in getting into the fighting in Vietnam or should we have stayed out?			
Yes, did the right thing	31.7 % 862	23.3% 65	30.9% 927
No, should have stayed out	52.2% 1,422	55.2% 154	52.5% 1,576
Don't know	16.1% 438	21.5% 60	16.6% 498
Total	100% 2,722	100% 279	100% 3,001

# LEGACY: UCLA in the Final Four – A letter they will never forget

After clinching the 1970 NCAA title, Bruins sent a message of protest to then-President Nixon

By [Sam Strong](#)

March 31, 2010 at 12:39 a.m.

On March 21, 1970 the UCLA Bruins continued their dominance in college basketball by beating 7-foot-2-inch Artis Gilmore and the Jacksonville Dolphins en route to their fourth straight NCAA title under the direction of the legendary John Wooden.

While it was a time of prosperity for UCLA basketball, it was a time of great turmoil throughout the nation. College campuses throughout the nation were alive with protest and the United States found itself entrenched in the Vietnam conflict. UCLA's basketball team was not immune to engaging in the political debate.

Although this season's Bruins will watch the Final Four from home, UCLA has a storied past of successful postseason runs including the 1970 team's championship.

Riding the wave of exposure from winning the National Championship, their sixth in seven years, and in an effort to make their voices heard, all 13 members of the 1970 Bruin's basketball team sent a letter of protest to President Richard Nixon in one of the most notable displays of student protest. According to Hill, the letter featured several demands including: "The immediate withdrawal of all the combat troops, advisors and arms from Cambodia" and "the rapid de-escalation of the war in Vietnam with the goal in mind of removing all personnel from Vietnam by January 1, 1971."

The letter was sent care of H.R. "Bob" Haldeman, then Nixon's Chief of Staff, who was a UCLA alumnus and an avid Bruin basketball fan.

Haldeman went on to become a central figure in the Watergate break-in and spent 18 months in prison for conspiracy and obstruction of justice.

Reserve guard Andy Hill said Wooden was frequently at odds with him. Today, Hill and Wooden have a very close relationship, but when it came to political issues, Hill, in his collegiate days, and Wooden would butt heads.

"I remember that the letter was drafted in (former Bruin center) Steve Patterson's pool house," Hill said. "There were a number of words in the letter that there were objections to. I remember literally taking out the dictionary and reading the definitions before people could agree that they could go in the letter."

Not everyone, however, was entirely on board with the letter.

Senior captain John Vallely was the last to sign and wavered on the decision for some time. Vallely said he has second thoughts about the letter today.

Despite their seamless and graceful perfection on the court under the direction of the drill sergeant-esque Wooden, Vallely suggested that there may have been an off-the-court rift between himself and his teammates.

"I think that probably the majority of (the team) would have been acting like most 21-year-olds, not knowledgeable about the true situation and simply people that were against war. I would embrace that, which is why I finally signed it," Vallely said. "I'm against war, but do I feel it's my place to use the UCLA basketball team, where I've been given a scholarship to receive an education, as a political platform? Do I want to put my UCLA basketball team, which has honored me with a contract to pay for my education and use it to go and differentiate myself from anybody else on campus?"

"I think that's maybe beyond the call of my duty as a student."

John Ecker, the sixth man of the 1970 squad, said he was not concerned with Vallely's lack of support for the letter, adding he was pleased when stars Sidney Wicks and Curtis Rowe showed no hesitation to sign on.

"The idea that the team could be united with that kind of political statement was something that we found to be very positive and if it had been a real big problem, I can't imagine us really doing it," Ecker said.

“We’re talking about a dimension of protest that never existed before. It wasn’t tough getting the rest of the UCLA players behind it, they were all against (the war).”

Hill, meanwhile, said that he would sign the letter again in a heartbeat. “People died and the war was a bad war,” Hill said. “I didn’t do enough. There’s no question in my mind that I didn’t do enough.”

Hill went on to say that being politically active and signing the letter enhanced his experience at UCLA.

“It made me feel like I was still a student and not just an athlete, which I think was sort of the idea of being a student-athlete at UCLA is to not go through school just as an athlete but to truly experience the entire spectrum of college life,” Hill added.

But the team’s requests were not limited to the Vietnam War. The letter also demanded a “public investigation of the killings at Kent State,” referring to the May 4, 1970 demonstration at Kent State where National Guard troops opened fire on a student protest, killing four students. UCLA students’ continued protest of the killings as well as the murders of two black panthers at Campbell Hall caused the campus to be shut down for several days in May.

Ecker said he and a number of other players approached Wooden about wearing black wristbands in protest and solidarity.

“Coach Wooden was never anyone who wanted to see us involved in political statements, so that was something that he was against. ... He wasn’t too happy about us getting involved in something like that and making that kind of a political statement, but on the other hand, he didn’t punish anybody for it” Ecker said, adding that Wooden was open to political discussions within the team but did not want them to reach the public.

“I remember he wasn’t pleased, but it wasn’t the first time (Wooden) wasn’t pleased with me. ... There was a very strong feeling that challenging authority was an important thing to do at that point in time so the fact that he didn’t much like it was not a surprise to me,” Hill said. “The way we

looked at it was, you couldn't really afford to sit back and say 'I don't want to get involved' because too many people were getting killed."

Ultimately, the team never got a response from Haldeman or the president. And despite the ripple in their unity caused by the disagreements over the letter, Wooden's Bruins went on to win three more national titles in a row.

<http://www.dailybruin.com/articles/2010/3/31/legacy-ucla-final-four-letter-they-will-never-forg/>