Mankato State College President James Nickerson served from 1966 to 1973 and has been remembered for keeping student protests against the Vietnam War safe. His book, "Out of Chaos" will come out Saturday.

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**Leading a New Kind of Demonstration**

**Former MSU president James Nickerson has an upcoming book release**

Garret Felder

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Some people are just born to lead. Be it a councilmen of local politics, a business manager of a multi-million dollar soap corporation, or the captain of the local amateur baseball team, some individuals just have a knack for getting people to follow their words or ideas through any endeavors or conflicts.

After leading Mankato State College students and channeling their ignored voices into peaceful demonstrations from 1970-1972, former university president James Nickerson is one of those individuals who hasn't stopped using his leadership skills. Instead of leading protests, this time it was heading the documentation of the most heated time period in Minnesota State's history - the Vietnam War.

"There was a group of five or six of us - graduates and former staff members [of MSC] - and we would get together and visit and we would get concerned with what's happening in terms of life in wartime," Nickerson said. "It looks so much like [about 30 years ago] in Vietnam and it is what we're seeing in Iraq. So we said, let's take a look at this, and we started to dig and we found there were no written records it. So we thought, what could we do?"

With the help of dozens of MSC graduates, faculty, administrators and Mankato citizens, Nickerson organized "Out of Chaos," a book comprised of personal accounts (including his own) about Mankato's restlessness during the Vietnam War.

"What surprised me was that they weren't reluctant at all," Nickerson said about the sources of the nearly 18-month project. "Even after [about 30 years] they were pleased to get the chance to say what they thought about the experience."

During Nickerson's time as university president, from 1966-73, MSC and Mankato were going through a whirlwind of change, he said. The college was making the move from downtown to the present campus location. Student population at the small rural college had shot from 8,000 to 12,000 during...
Nickerson’s time and student housing quality and quantity were not satisfying the increased numbers, he said. People were fighting for women’s rights, civil rights and the generation’s new way of life. At the same time, college campuses across the nation were demanding a change of course in the Vietnam War from President Richard Nixon.

MSC was no exception, as the small school became a hotbed for anti-war protest, Nickerson said. Although he was close to calling in the National Guard like other colleges had during this period, Nickerson said, he knew suppression and punishment would present unwanted results for both the college and town.

Among the numerous stories in this compilation about silent marches, sit-ins, negotiated occupations of the Old Main Building (administration), political rallies and all-night vigils outside the Mankato Post Office, one event sticks the most in his mind - the one that led to a clash between students and police on the Highway 169 and the Mankato-North Mankato bridges.

According to a May 10, 1972 article in the Mankato State Daily Reporter, 3,000 students marched from the upper campus downtown and blocked both the Main Street and Belgrade Avenue bridges, causing traffic to congest for three miles. As police warned Nickerson they would use force to clear out the bridge if his students did not disperse, Nickerson pleaded with the students over a loudspeaker, but to no avail. Tear gas was shot into the crowds and started a teargas throwing rumble between students and police.

"For me, I must admit this was one of the most lonely and isolated moments of my life," Nickerson said. "With friends who wouldn't or couldn't talk to me or who were not ready to assume their usual responsibility of leadership, I reluctantly gave up and returned to the cluster of officers, knowing what I was sure would happen as force was applied to remove the crowd."

Although he may not have been able to prevent this clash between his students and law enforcement, Nickerson has been praised for his leadership and how he influenced the students to demonstrate in a civil way.

"I think the one thing that a university president needs to do is underscore the civil liberties and freedom of speech opportunities whenever they occur," current MSU President Richard Davenport said. "I think in that situation that was so rarified, in regards to the emotion and tension of the time, that the president had to listen to the students and hear what they had to say."

MSU Facilities Service Director David Cowan agrees that Nickerson's tactics were the very strategies that kept MSC from being remembered in the same breathe as Kent State and Jackson State during the Vietnam era because there were no deaths and minimal injuries during the Mankato demonstrations.

"Nickerson's leadership style incorporated community leaders, law enforcement, faculty and staff, and, of course, he reached out to demonstrators," said Cowan, a 1970 MSC graduate who became an administrative assistant of the college. "No one could say he was not open to dialogue. Cracking down and cracking heads is an approach, which would have enflamed protesters. Nickerson walked a tightrope each day and knew when to take action and when the best action was no response."

In reference to the demonstrations of the Nickerson era, Davenport said MSU has a very liberal policy toward student protest and demonstration because of Nickerson's presidency. The only restrictions on demonstrators, he said, are that students cannot interfere with classes and the business of the university and cannot harm any faculty, staff or students.

Yet in comparison to that time, Davenport said campus protest about the Iraq War has not reached the levels of Nickerson's reign because of the different reasons the country went to war.

"[The Iraqi War] was a reaction to 9/11 and that escalated to where it is today," Davenport said. "We
were reacting to terrorism here and it wasn't terrorism in Vietnam. We were working to fight communism and promote democracy. So the motivation was different."

Mark Halverson of Mankato agrees the Vietnam era was a different time, but a vital one to be a college student.

"It was a time of revolution and evolution," said Halverson, a 1973 graduate who was also a student senator involved in the Kent State-Jackson State Memorial project. "Students were treated like they had no rights at all. But Nickerson sympathized with the cause and was supportive of student rights," Halverson said.

Adding to the new book, Nickerson also helped in a proposal to the Mankato City Council for a commemorative plaque for this turbulent time period in Mankato's history. Somewhere along the way, he said, the original draft was distorted in city hall, became a plaque commemorating the peaceful protests of the 1970s and was to be placed near the Veterans Memorial Bridge. Instantly, the "revised" proposal received criticism from veterans.

"The plaque proposal specifically was to put it on the Veterans Memorial Bridge and the bridge is already dedicated to veterans and how can you have two purposes for one dedication?" said Ivy Miller, a member of the American Legion in North Mankato and the Mankato Women of Today

A couple weeks ago, the city council dropped the plan from discussion because of the complaints. But to Nickerson, the plan failed because of the city hall changes to the plan.

"By the time the proposal went through a few hands and made it to the city council table the issue was garbled," Nickerson said about his proposal. "The issue was, as they read it, to be a memorial to demonstration against the war."

The release of "Out of Chaos" is set for Saturday. Nickerson will have a book signing that day from 10-11:30 a.m. at Old Main Village, 301 South Fifth Street in Mankato. At the signing there will also be a brief program and a chance for attendants to buy a copy of the new book. For more information, call 507-389-3235.

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