

Richard Nixon's Darkest Secret

Exclusive: In just-released Watergate grand jury testimony from 1975, ex-President Richard Nixon complained that his 1968 campaign was bugged by the Johnson administration. But there was little curiosity then or now as to why that surveillance was justified, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Thirty-six years ago, as former President Richard M. Nixon dodged grand jury questions about his illegal wiretapping of political enemies, he briefly referenced a dark secret about his 1968 campaign's sabotaging of Vietnam War peace talks, actions which President Lyndon Johnson at the time privately labeled "treason."

Without providing that historical context, Nixon complained that he and his 1968 campaign had been victims of surveillance and wiretapping, too, as he tried to persuade Watergate prosecutors and the grand jury that bugging opponents was just part of hardball politics.

"In 1968, for example, we learned that not only was Vice President [-ial nominee Spiro] Agnew's plane under surveillance, and he himself was under surveillance by the FBI, but that the FBI was at one point directed to bug my plane," Nixon said, according to secret grand jury transcripts released by the National Archives on Thursday.

During that testimony on June 23, 1975, the prosecutors failed to follow up on his reference to the 1968 bugging, such as why it would be ordered. And after the transcripts were released this week, the major U.S. news media also missed the comment's significance.

The evidence of Nixon's sabotage of the 1968 Vietnam peace talks is now overwhelming including diplomatic cable traffic and contemporaneous audiotapes of Johnson discussing the Republican promises to South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu of a better deal if he boycotted negotiations in Paris.

But the American press corps has never given this shocking scandal much attention. So, when the newly released transcripts revealed Nixon veering off topic into his complaint that the FBI had been involved in bugging his 1968 campaign, the strange diversion was noted by the New York Times near the end of its article but not explained.

Yet, in citing the 1968 case during that 1975 testimony, Nixon was reviving a complaint he had raised in a White House meeting on July 1, 1972, just two weeks

after his “plumbers” had been arrested bugging the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate building in Washington.

According to Nixon’s White House tapes, his aide Charles Colson touched off Nixon’s musings by noting that a newspaper column claimed that the Democrats had bugged the telephones of Anna Chennault, a right-wing Chinese-American activist who in 1968 had served as Nixon’s intermediary to Thieu.

“Oh,” Nixon responded, “in ’68, they bugged our phones too.”

Colson: “And that this was ordered by Johnson.”

Nixon: “That’s right”

Colson: “And done through the FBI. My God, if we ever did anything like that you’d have the ”

Nixon: “Yes. For example, why didn’t we bug [the Democrats’ 1972 presidential nominee George] McGovern, because after all he’s affecting the peace negotiations?”

Colson: “Sure.”

Nixon: “That would be exactly the same thing.”

A Dangerous Game

Nixon wanted to use his 1968 bugging complaint to create a backfire against the Watergate investigation, even though possible disclosure of the fact that Nixon’s campaign had blocked a peace settlement to the bloody Vietnam War would presumably have carried considerable political risk for him.

On Jan. 8, 1973, Nixon urged Haldeman to plant a story about the 1968 bugging in the *Washington Star*. “You don’t really have to have hard evidence, Bob,” Nixon told Haldeman. “You’re not trying to take this to court. All you have to do is to have it out, just put it out as authority, and the press will write the Goddamn story, and the Star will run it now.”

Haldeman, however, insisted on checking the facts. In *The Haldeman Diaries*, published in 1994, Haldeman included an entry dated Jan. 12, 1973, which contains his book’s only deletion for national security reasons.

“I talked to [former Attorney General John] Mitchell on the phone,” Haldeman wrote, “and he said [FBI official Cartha] DeLoach had told him he was up to date on the thing. A *Star* reporter was making an inquiry in the last week or so, and LBJ got very hot and called Deke [DeLoach’s nickname], and said to him that if

the Nixon people are going to play with this, that he would release [deleted material – national security], saying that our side was asking that certain things be done.

“DeLoach took this as a direct threat from Johnson,” Haldeman wrote. “As he [DeLoach] recalls it, bugging was requested on the [Nixon campaign] planes, but was turned down, and all they did was check the phone calls, and put a tap on the Dragon Lady [Anna Chennault].”

In other words, Nixon’s threat to raise the 1968 bugging was countered by Johnson, who threatened to reveal that Nixon’s campaign had sabotaged a peace settlement to the Vietnam War when a half million U.S. soldiers were in the combat zone.

However, the two retaliatory disclosures never occurred. On Jan. 22, 1973, ten days after Haldeman’s diary entry, Johnson died of a heart attack. Haldeman also apparently thought better of publicizing Nixon’s 1968 bugging complaint. [For more details, see Robert Parry’s *Secrecy & Privilege*.]

Turning a Blind Eye

Over the past several decades, the Nixon’s sabotage story has spilled out in bits and pieces, but the shocking story never was played up by the major U.S. news media, perhaps because it risked devastating public faith in the political system.

The news media’s pattern of looking the other way continued in December 2008 when the National Archives released audiotapes of President Johnson’s official phone conversations from 1968. Though the conversations revealed Johnson talking about Nixon’s Vietnam machinations, the American press corps again ignored this sordid story.

Beginning in late October 1968, as Nixon was running neck-and-neck with Democratic nominee Hubert Humphrey and the Paris peace talks appeared on the verge of achieving a settlement of the Vietnam conflict, Johnson can be heard on the tapes complaining about the Republican gambit to sabotage negotiations.

Johnson’s frustration builds as he learns more from intercepts about the back-channel contacts between Nixon’s operatives and South Vietnamese officials who had tentatively agreed to take part in the Paris meetings. The apparent Republican goal was to sink Johnson’s peace deal and thus deny Humphrey a last-minute bump that could have cost Nixon the election.

On Nov. 2, 1968 just three days before the election Thieu recanted on meeting with the Viet Cong in Paris, pushing the peace talks toward collapse. On the

same day, an angry Johnson telephoned Senate Republican leader Everett Dirksen to lay out the evidence of sabotage and get Dirksen to intervene with Nixon.

"The agent [Chennault] says she's just talked to the boss in New Mexico and that he said that you must hold out, just hold on until after the election," Johnson said in an apparent reference to a Nixon campaign plane that carried some of his top aides, including Agnew, to New Mexico. "We know what Thieu is saying to them out there. We're pretty well informed at both ends."

Johnson then made a thinly veiled threat about going public with the information. "I don't want to get this in the campaign," Johnson said, adding: "They oughtn't be doing this. This is treason."

Dirksen responded, "I know."

Johnson continued: "I think it would shock America if a principal candidate was playing with a source like this on a matter of this importance. I don't want to do that [go public]. They ought to know that we know what they're doing. I know who they're talking to. I know what they're saying."

The President also stressed the stakes involved, noting that the movement toward negotiations in Paris had contributed to a lull in the violence.

"We've had 24 hours of relative peace," Johnson said. "If Nixon keeps the South Vietnamese away from the [peace] conference, well, that's going to be his responsibility. Up to this point, that's why they're not there. I had them signed onboard until this happened."

Dirksen: "I better get in touch with him, I think."

"They're contacting a foreign power in the middle of a war," Johnson said. "It's a damn bad mistake. And I don't want to say so. You just tell them that their people are messing around in this thing, and if they don't want it on the front pages, they better quit it."

Nixon's Denial

The next day, Nixon spoke directly to Johnson and professed his innocence.

"I didn't say with your knowledge," Johnson responded. "I hope it wasn't."

"Huh, no," Nixon responded. "My God, I would never do anything to encourage Saigon not to come to the table. Good God, we want them over to Paris, we got to get them to Paris or you can't have a peace."

Nixon also insisted that he would do whatever President Johnson and Secretary of

State Dean Rusk wanted.

"I'm not trying to interfere with your conduct of it. I'll only do what you and Rusk want me to do. We've got to get this goddamn war off the plate," Nixon said, recognizing how tantalizingly close Johnson was to a peace deal.

"The war apparently now is about where it could be brought to an end," Nixon said. "The quicker the better. To hell with the political credit, believe me."

However, the South Vietnamese boycott continued, and Johnson concluded that Nixon was playing a double game. Johnson also became aware that Christian Science Monitor reporter Saville Davis had gotten wind of the story. The President was tempted to confirm it.

Before doing so, however, Johnson consulted with Rusk and Defense Secretary Clark Clifford on Nov. 4, 1968. Both these pillars of the Washington Establishment advised against going public out of fear that the scandalous information might reflect badly on the U.S. government.

"Some elements of the story are so shocking in their nature that I'm wondering whether it would be good for the country to disclose the story and then possibly have a certain individual [Nixon] elected," Clifford said in a conference call. "It could cast his whole administration under such doubt that I think it would be inimical to our country's interests."

Instead of helping Davis confirm his information, Clifford and Rusk argued that the Johnson administration should make no comment, advice that Johnson accepted. He maintained his public silence on what Nixon was doing.

The next day, with Johnson unable to cite any clear progress toward ending the war, Nixon narrowly prevailed over Humphrey by about 500,000 votes or less than one percent of the ballots cast.

Johnson's Pleadings

In the aftermath of the election, Johnson continued to privately confront Nixon with the evidence of Republican treachery, trying to get him to pressure the South Vietnamese leaders to reverse themselves and join the Paris peace talks.

On Nov. 8, Johnson recounted the evidence to Nixon and described the Republican motivation to disrupt the talks, speaking of himself in the third person.

"Johnson was going to have a bombing pause to try to elect Humphrey. They [the South Vietnamese] ought to hold out because Nixon will not sell you out like the Democrats sold out China," Johnson said.

"I think they've been talking to [Vice President-elect Spiro] Agnew," Johnson continued. "They've been quoting you [Nixon] indirectly, that the thing they ought to do is to just not show up at any [peace] conference and wait until you come into office.

"Now they've started that [boycott] and that's bad. They're killing Americans every day. I have that [story of the sabotage] documented. There's not any question but that's happening. That's the story, Dick, and it's a sordid story. I don't want to say that to the country, because that's not good."

Faced with Johnson's implied threat, Nixon promised to tell the South Vietnamese officials to reverse themselves and join the peace talks. However, the deal was done. There was no turning back because Thieu could then expose the secret arrangement with Nixon's people. Nixon had to understand that it was more likely that Johnson would stay silent than that Thieu would.

Nixon bet right. Johnson failed to achieve the peace breakthrough he had hoped for before leaving office, but remained silent about Nixon's treachery as he went into retirement.

The U.S. participation in the Vietnam War continued for more than four years at a horrendous cost to both the United States and the people of Vietnam. Nixon kept searching for violent new ways to get Thieu the better deal that had been promised, including the invasion of Cambodia and heavier bombing of targets in North Vietnam.

Before the conflict was finally brought to an end, a million more Vietnamese were estimated to have died along with an additional 20,763 U.S. dead and 111,230 wounded. The war also divided the United States, turning parents against their own children.

As the Democrats stayed mum, Nixon apparently concluded that they were more concerned about the information of his Vietnam War "treason" coming out than he was. So, after the "plumbers" got arrested in June 1972, he viewed the 1968 events as something of a blackmail card to play against Johnson to get help squelching the Watergate investigation.

Nixon discussed the 1968 bugging in his Oval Office meetings with his subordinates and even ordered Haldeman to leak at least that part of the story to the press although one might reasonably expect that the press would finally start focusing on why the bugging was justified.

Given the horrors of the Vietnam War from 1969 to 1972, Nixon presumably would have more to lose by a full disclosure of his "treason" than the Democrats would by disclosure of their eavesdropping to find out about it. But Nixon seems to

have been confident that the Washington Establishment would always steer away from that precipice.

So, during his 1975 grand jury testimony, Nixon returned to his bugging complaint, telling prosecutors: "There are differing versions as to whether they did or did not do it. [FBI Director J. Edgar] Hoover once told me that they did. But others have indicated that this was not carried out.

"I raised the problem of the bugging here because I knew that it was a common practice by the other side and they were experts at it, even my plane possibly, at least ordered to be bugged this time by a government agency, not by a campaign committee in 1968."

Nixon's confidence in surfacing his bugging complaint without expecting that its full context would be exposed may have extended far beyond his death on April 22, 1994. In the just-released grand jury transcripts, there is a curious remark by the former president who suggests that the full story behind the tit-for-tat bugging is so shocking that it must never be made public.

Nixon said "only if there is an absolute guarantee that there will not be disclosure of what I say, I will reveal for the first time information with respect to why wiretaps were proposed, information which, if it is made public, will be terribly damaging to the United States." Whatever that secret might be, it does not appear in the released transcripts.

However, Nixon's brief reference to the 1968 bugging reminds us of this chilling reality that for some politicians, acquisition of power in the United States is so alluring and so valuable that it trumps not only the democratic process, but the lives of American soldiers overseas.

[For more on related topics, see Robert Parry's *Lost History, Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a three-book set for the discount price of only \$29. For details, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.
