

# LBJ's 'X' File on Nixon's 'Treason'

**Special Report:** In the dusty files of Lyndon Johnson's presidential library in Austin, Texas, once secret documents and audiotapes tell a dark and tragic story of how Richard Nixon's team secured the White House in 1968 by sabotaging peace talks that might have ended the Vietnam War four years earlier, Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry

On May 14, 1973, Walt W. Rostow, who had been national security adviser during some of the darkest days of the Vietnam War, typed a three-page "memorandum for the record" summarizing a secret file that his former boss, President Lyndon Johnson, had amassed on what may have been Richard Nixon's dirtiest trick, the sabotaging of Vietnam peace talks to win the 1968 election.

Rostow reflected, too, on what effect LBJ's public silence may have had on the then-unfolding Watergate scandal. As Rostow composed his memo in spring 1973, President Nixon's Watergate cover-up was unraveling. Just two weeks earlier, Nixon had fired White House counsel John Dean and accepted the resignations of two top aides, H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman.

Three days after Rostow wrote the memo, the Senate Watergate hearings opened as the U.S. government lurched toward a constitutional crisis. Yet, as he typed, Rostow had a unique perspective on the worsening scandal. He understood the subterranean background to Nixon's political espionage operations.

Those secret activities surfaced with the arrest of the Watergate burglars in June 1972, but they had begun much earlier. In his memo for the record, Rostow expressed regret that he and other top Johnson aides had chosen for what they had deemed "the good of the country" to keep quiet about Nixon's Vietnam peace-talk sabotage, which Johnson had privately labeled "treason."

"I am inclined to believe the Republican operation in 1968 relates in two ways to the Watergate affair of 1972," Rostow wrote. He noted, first, that Nixon's operatives may have judged that their "enterprise with the South Vietnamese" in frustrating Johnson's last-ditch peace initiative had secured Nixon his narrow margin of victory over Democratic Vice President Hubert Humphrey in 1968.

"Second, they got away with it," Rostow wrote. "Despite considerable press commentary after the election, the matter was never investigated fully. Thus, as the same men faced the election in 1972, there was nothing in their previous experience with an operation of doubtful propriety (or, even, legality) to warn

them off, and there were memories of how close an election could get and the possible utility of pressing to the limit and beyond.” [To read Rostow’s memo, [click here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).]

Rostow also was aware that as the Watergate scandal deepened in late 1972 and early 1973 Nixon’s men had curiously approached the retired President Johnson with veiled threats about going public with their knowledge that Johnson had ordered wiretaps to spy on their Vietnam peace sabotage in 1968. Apparently, Nixon thought he could bully Johnson into helping shut down the Watergate probe.

Instead, the threat had infuriated Johnson, who was still pained by his failure to end the Vietnam War before he left office on Jan. 20, 1969, a tragic lost opportunity that he blamed on Nixon’s treachery and deceit. Just a couple of weeks after Nixon’s strange overture about the 1968 bugging and two days after Nixon was sworn in for a second term, Johnson died of a heart attack on Jan. 22, 1973.

### **‘The X Envelope’**

So, in spring 1973, Rostow found himself in a curious position. As Johnson’s presidency ended in 1969 and at Johnson’s instruction Rostow had taken with him the White House file chronicling Nixon’s Vietnam gambit, consisting of scores of “secret” and “top secret” documents. Rostow had labeled the file “The ‘X’ Envelope.”

Also, by May 1973, Rostow had been out of government for more than four years and had no legal standing to possess this classified material. Johnson, who had ordered the file removed from the White House, had died. And, now, a major political crisis was unfolding about which Rostow felt he possessed an important missing link for understanding the history and the context. So what to do?

Rostow apparently struggled with this question for the next month as the Watergate scandal continued to expand. On June 25, 1973, John Dean delivered his blockbuster Senate testimony, claiming that Nixon got involved in the cover-up within days of the June 1972 burglary at the Democratic National Committee. Dean also asserted that Watergate was just part of a years-long program of political espionage directed by Nixon’s White House.

The very next day, as headlines of Dean’s testimony filled the nation’s newspapers, Rostow reached his conclusion about what to do with “The ‘X’ Envelope.” In longhand, he wrote a “Top Secret” note which read, “To be opened by the Director, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, not earlier than fifty (50) years from this date June 26, 1973.”

In other words, Rostow intended this missing link of American history to stay

missing for another half century. In a typed cover letter to LBJ Library director Harry Middleton, Rostow wrote: "Sealed in the attached envelope is a file President Johnson asked me to hold personally because of its sensitive nature. In case of his death, the material was to be consigned to the LBJ Library under conditions I judged to be appropriate.

"The file concerns the activities of Mrs. [Anna] Chennault and others before and immediately after the election of 1968. At the time President Johnson decided to handle the matter strictly as a question of national security; and in retrospect, he felt that decision was correct.

"After fifty years the Director of the LBJ Library (or whomever may inherit his responsibilities, should the administrative structure of the National Archives change) may, alone, open this file. If he believes the material it contains should not be opened for research [at that time], I would wish him empowered to re-close the file for another fifty years when the procedure outlined above should be repeated."

### **Opening the File**

Ultimately, however, the LBJ Library didn't wait that long. After a little more than two decades, on July 22, 1994, the envelope was opened and the archivists began the process of declassifying the contents. (Some documents, including what appears to be the oldest document in the file, an Aug. 3, 1968, "top secret" memo from White House national security aide Bromley Smith to Johnson, remain partially or wholly classified even today.)

Still, the dozens of declassified documents revealed a dramatic story of hardball politics played at the highest levels of government and with the highest of stakes, not only the outcome of the pivotal 1968 presidential election but the fate of a half million U.S. soldiers then sitting in the Vietnam war zone.

Relying on national security wiretaps of the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington and surveillance of right-wing China Lobby activist Anna Chennault, Johnson concluded that Nixon's Republican presidential campaign was colluding with South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu to derail the Paris peace talks and thus deny a last-minute boost to Democratic presidential nominee, Vice President Hubert Humphrey.

At the time, Johnson thought a breakthrough was near, one that could have ended a war which had already claimed the lives of more than 30,000 American troops and countless Vietnamese. Nixon, like Humphrey, was receiving briefings on the progress as the negotiations gained momentum in October 1968.

The Johnson administration was encouraged when North Vietnam agreed on a framework for peace talks. However, America's South Vietnamese allies began to balk over details about how the negotiations would be conducted, objecting to any equal status for the South Vietnamese Viet Cong insurgents.

"Top Secret" reports from the National Security Agency informed President Johnson that South Vietnam's President Thieu was closely monitoring the political developments in the United States with an eye toward helping Nixon win the Nov. 5 election.

For instance, an Oct. 23, 1968, report presumably based on NSA's electronic eavesdropping quotes Thieu as saying that the Johnson administration might halt the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam as part of a peace maneuver that would help Humphrey's campaign but that South Vietnam might not go along. Thieu also appreciated the other side of the coin, that Johnson's failure would help Nixon.

"The situation which would occur as the result of a bombing halt, without the agreement of the [South] Vietnamese government would be to the advantage of candidate Nixon," the NSA report on Thieu's thinking read. "Accordingly, he [Thieu] said that the possibility of President Johnson enforcing a bombing halt without [South] Vietnam's agreement appears to be weak." [Click [here](#) and [here](#).]

By Oct. 28, 1968, according to [another NSA report](#), Thieu said "it appears that Mr. Nixon will be elected as the next president" and that any settlement with the Viet Cong should be put off until "the new president" was in place.

### **Nixon's Go-Between**

The next day, Oct. 29, national security adviser Walt Rostow received the first indication that Nixon might actually be coordinating with Thieu to sabotage the peace talks. Rostow's brother, Eugene, who was Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, [wrote a memo](#) about a tip from a source in New York who had spoken with "a member of the banking community" who was "very close to Nixon."

The source said Wall Street bankers at a working lunch to assess likely market trends and to decide where to invest had been given inside information about the prospects for Vietnam peace and were told that Nixon was obstructing that outcome.

"The conversation was in the context of a professional discussion about the future of the financial markets in the near term," Eugene Rostow wrote. "The speaker said he thought the prospects for a bombing halt or a cease-fire were dim, because Nixon was playing the problem to block.

"They would incite Saigon to be difficult, and Hanoi to wait. Part of his

strategy was an expectation that an offensive would break out soon, that we would have to spend a great deal more (and incur more casualties) a fact which would adversely affect the stock market and the bond market. NVN [North Vietnamese] offensive action was a definite element in their thinking about the future.”

In other words, Nixon’s friends on Wall Street were placing their financial bets based on the inside dope that Johnson’s peace initiative was doomed to fail. (In another document, Walt Rostow identified his brother’s source as Alexander Sachs, who was then on the board of Lehman Brothers.)

A separate memo from Eugene Rostow said the speaker had added that Nixon “was trying to frustrate the President, by inciting Saigon to step up its demands, and by letting Hanoi know that when he [Nixon] took office ‘he could accept anything and blame it on his predecessor.’” So, according to the source, Nixon was trying to convince both the South and North Vietnamese that they would get a better deal if they stalled Johnson.

In his later memo to the file, Walt Rostow recounted that he learned this news shortly before attending a morning meeting at which President Johnson was informed by U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Ellsworth Bunker about “Thieu’s sudden intransigence.” Walt Rostow said “the diplomatic information previously received plus the information from New York took on new and serious significance.”

That same day, Johnson “instructed Bromley Smith, Executive Secretary of the National Security Council, to get in touch with the Deputy Director of the FBI, Deke DeLoach, and arrange that contacts by Americans with the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington be monitored,” Rostow wrote.

The White House soon learned that Anna Chennault, the fiercely anticommunist Chinese-born widow of Lt. Gen. Claire Chennault and a member of Nixon’s campaign team, was holding curious meetings with South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States Bui Diem. On Oct. 30, an FBI intercept overheard Bui Diem telling Mrs. Chennault that something “is cooking” and asking her to come by the embassy.

### **Johnson Complains**

On Oct. 31, at 4:09 p.m., Johnson his voice thick from a cold began working the phones, trying to counteract Nixon’s chicanery. The Democratic president called Republican Senate Leader Everett Dirksen and broached a concern about Nixon’s interference with the peace talks. Johnson said he considered Nixon’s behavior a betrayal because he had kept Nixon abreast of the peace progress, according to

an audio recording of the conversation released by the LBJ Library in late 2008.

"I played it clean," Johnson said. "I told Nixon every bit as much, if not more, as Humphrey knows. I've given Humphrey not one thing."

Johnson added, "I really think it's a little dirty pool for Dick's people to be messing with the South Vietnamese ambassador and carrying messages around to both of them [North and South Vietnam]. And I don't think people would approve of it if it were known."

Dirksen: "Yeah."

Referring to his political trouble with Democrats as well as Republicans, Johnson continued, "While they criticized my conduct of the war, they have never told the enemy that he'd get a better deal, but these last few days, Dick is just gotten a little shaky and he's pissing on the fire a little."

Johnson then told Dirksen, "We have a transcript where one of his partners says he's going to frustrate the President by telling the South Vietnamese that, 'just wait a few more days,' he can make a better peace for them, and by telling Hanoi that he didn't run this war and didn't get them into it, that he can be a lot more considerate of them than I can because I'm pretty inflexible. I've called them sons of bitches."

Dirksen responded by expressing the Republican concern that Johnson might spring a breakthrough on the peace talks right before the election. "The fellas on our side get antsy-pantsy about it," the Illinois Republican said. "They wonder what the impact would be if a cease-fire or a halt to the bombing will be proclaimed at any given hour, what its impact would be on the results next Tuesday," Election Day.

Johnson denied he would play politics with the war and recalled Nixon's pledges to support his handling of the war. Johnson said, "With Nixon saying 'I want the war stopped, that I'm supporting Johnson, that I want him to get peace if he can, that I'm not going to pull the rug out [from under] him,' I don't know how it could be helped unless he goes to parting under the covers and gets his hand under somebody's dress."

Knowing Dirksen would report back to Nixon, Johnson also cited a few details to give his complaint more credibility. "He better keep Mrs. Chennault and all this crowd tied up for a few days," Johnson said.

### **Bombing Halt**

That night, Johnson announced a bombing halt of North Vietnam, a key step toward

advancing the peace process. The next morning at 11:38, he discussed the state of play with Sen. Richard Russell, D-Georgia, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Johnson again mentioned Nixon's secret maneuverings though expressing hope that his warning to Dirksen had worked.

Nixon has "had these people engaged in this stuff," said Johnson, amid loud honking to clear his sinuses. "Folks messing around with both sides. Hanoi thought they could benefit by waiting and South Vietnam's now beginning to think they could benefit by waiting, by what people are doing. So he [Nixon] knows that I know what he's doing. And this morning they're kind of closing up some of their agents, not so active. I noticed that one of the embassies refused to answer their call."

However, on Nov. 2, Johnson learned that his protests had not shut down the operation. The FBI intercepted the most incriminating evidence yet of Nixon's interference when Anna Chennault contacted Ambassador Bui Diem to convey "a message from her boss (not further identified)," according to an FBI cable.

According to the intercept, Chennault said "her boss wanted her to give [the message] personally to the ambassador. She said the message was that the ambassador is to 'hold on, we are going to win' and that her boss also said, 'hold on, he understands all of it.' She repeated that this is the only message 'he said please tell your boss to hold on.' She advised that her boss had just called from New Mexico."

In quickly relaying the message to Johnson at his ranch in Texas, Rostow noted that the reference to New Mexico "may indicate [Republican vice presidential nominee Spiro] Agnew is acting," since he had taken a campaign swing through the state.

That same day, Thieu recanted on his tentative agreement to meet with the Viet Cong in Paris, pushing the incipient peace talks toward failure. That night, at 9:18, an angry Johnson from his ranch in Texas telephoned Dirksen again, to provide more details about Nixon's activities and to urge Dirksen to intervene more forcefully.

"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. "We know what Thieu is saying to them out there. We're pretty well informed at both ends."

Johnson then renewed his thinly veiled threat to go public. "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."

### **A Worried Nixon**

After hearing from Dirksen, Nixon grew concerned that Johnson might just go public with his evidence of the conspiracy. Nixon discussed his worries with Sen. George Smathers, a conservative Democrat from Florida, who, in turn, called Johnson on the morning of Nov. 3, just two days before the election.

Smathers recounted that "Nixon said he understands the President is ready to blast him for allegedly collaborating with [Texas Sen. John] Tower and [Anna] Chennault to slow the peace talks," according to [a White House summary](#) of the Smathers call to Johnson. "Nixon says there is not any truth at all in this allegation. Nixon says there has been no contact at all. Nixon told Smathers he hoped the President would not make such a charge."

At 1:54 p.m., trying to head off that possibility, Nixon spoke directly to Johnson, according to [an audiotape](#) released by the LBJ Library.

"Mr. President, this is Dick Nixon."

Johnson: "Yes, Dick."

Nixon: "I just wanted you to know that I got a report from Everett Dirksen with regard to your call. I just went on 'Meet the Press' and I said that I had given you my personal assurance that I would do everything possible to cooperate both before the election and, if elected, after the election and if you felt that

anything would be useful that I could do, that I would do it, that I felt Saigon should come to the conference table.

"I feel very, very strongly about this. Any rumblings around about somebody trying to sabotage the Saigon government's attitude, there's absolutely no credibility as far as I'm concerned."

Armed with the FBI reports and other intelligence, Johnson responded, "I'm very happy to hear that, Dick, because that is taking place. Here's the history of it. I didn't want to call you but I wanted you to know what happened."

Johnson recounted some of the chronology leading up to Oct. 28 when it appeared that South Vietnam was onboard for the peace talks. He added: "Then the traffic goes out that Nixon will do better by you. Now that goes to Thieu. I didn't say with your knowledge. 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, including going to Paris himself if that would help. "I'm not trying to interfere with your conduct of it; I'll only do what you and Rusk want me to do," Nixon said, recognizing how tantalizingly close Johnson was to a peace deal.

"We've got to get this goddamn war off the plate," Nixon continued. "The war apparently now is about where it could be brought to an end. The quicker the better. To hell with the political credit, believe me."

Johnson, however, sounded less than convinced. "You just see that your people don't tell the South Vietnamese that they're going to get a better deal out of the United States government than a conference," the President said.

Still professing his innocence, Nixon told Johnson, "The main thing that we want to have is a good, strong personal understanding. After all, I trust you on this and I've told everybody that."

"You just see that your people that are talking to these folks make clear your position," Johnson said.

Nixon protested that some of his Democratic rivals were citing the bombing halt as good news for Humphrey's campaign. "Some of Humphrey's people have been gleeful," Nixon said. "They said the bombing pause is going to help them and our people say it hurts."

"I'll tell you what I say," Johnson cut in. "I say it doesn't affect the election one way or the other. I don't think it will change one vote."

Trying to end the conversation on a pleasant note, Nixon inserted, "Anyway, we'll have fun."

According to some reports, Nixon himself was gleeful after the conversation ended, believing he had tamped down Johnson's suspicions. However, privately, Johnson didn't believe Nixon's protestations of innocence.

### **What to Do?**

In a 2:18 p.m. phone conversation with Secretary of State Rusk about the messages from the Nixon camp to the South Vietnamese leadership, Johnson said, "I don't think they say these things without his knowledge."

Rusk: "Well, certainly not without Agnew's knowledge, some cutouts somewhere."

Johnson: "Well, what do we do now? Just say nothing?"

Rusk: "I would think we ought to hunker down and say nothing at this point."

However, on Nov. 4, the White House received another report from the FBI that Anna Chennault had visited the South Vietnamese embassy. Johnson also got word that the Christian Science Monitor was onto the story of Nixon undermining the peace talks.

The FBI bugging of the South Vietnamese embassy picked up a conversation involving journalist Sville Davis of the Monitor's Washington bureau, seeking a comment from Ambassador Bui Diem about "a story received from a [Monitor] correspondent in Saigon." Rostow relayed the FBI report to Johnson who was still at his Texas ranch.

The "eyes only" cable reported: "Davis said that the dispatch from Saigon contains the elements of a major scandal which also involves the Vietnamese ambassador and which will affect presidential candidate Richard Nixon if the Monitor publishes it. Time is of the essence inasmuch as Davis has a deadline to meet if he publishes it. He speculated that should the story be published, it will create a great deal of excitement."

Davis also approached the White House for comment about the draft article, which had arrived from correspondent Beverly Deepe. Her draft began: "Purported political encouragement from the Richard Nixon camp was a significant factor in the last-minute decision of President Thieu's refusal to send a delegation to the Paris peace talks at least until the American Presidential election is over."

The Monitor's inquiry gave President Johnson one more opportunity to bring to light the Nixon campaign's gambit before Election Day, albeit only on the day before and possibly not until the morning of the election when the Monitor could publish the story.

So, Johnson consulted with Rusk, Rostow and Defense Secretary Clark Clifford in a Nov. 4 conference call. Those three pillars of the Washington Establishment were unanimous in advising Johnson against going public, mostly 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. "It could cast his whole administration under such doubt that I think it would be inimical to our country's interests."

Johnson concurred with the judgment, and an administration spokesman told Davis, "Obviously I'm not going to get into this kind of thing in any way, shape or form," according to another "eyes only" cable that Rostow sent Johnson. The cable added:

"Saville Davis volunteered that his newspaper would certainly not print the story in the form in which it was filed; but they might print a story which said Thieu, on his own, decided to hold out until after the election. Incidentally, the story as filed is stated to be based on Vietnamese sources, and not U.S., in Saigon."

Rostow's cable also summed up the consensus from him, Rusk and Clifford: "The information sources [an apparent reference to the FBI wiretaps] must be protected and not introduced into domestic politics; even with these sources, the case is not open and shut.

"On the question of the 'public's right to know,' Sec. Rusk was very strong on the following position: We get information like this every day, some of it very damaging to American political figures. We have always taken the view that with respect to such sources there is no public 'right to know.' Such information is collected simply for the purposes of national security.

"So far as the information based on such sources is concerned, all three of us agreed: (A) Even if the story breaks, it was judged too late to have a significant impact on the election. (B) The viability of the man elected as president was involved as well as subsequent relations between him and President Johnson. (C) Therefore, the common recommendation was that we should not encourage such stories and hold tight the data we have."

According to a "memorandum for the record," presumably written by Walt Rostow, "our contact with the man in New York" reported on Election Day, Nov. 5, that Nixon remained nervous about the election's outcome and thus reneged on his commitment to Johnson not to exploit the peace-talk stalemate for political gain.

"On the question of the problem with Saigon, he [Nixon] did not stay with the statesman-like role but pressed publicly the failure of Saigon to come along as an anti-Democrat political issue," the memo said. So, even as Johnson refused to exploit evidence of Nixon's "treason," Nixon played hardball until the last vote was cast.

### **Nixon's Victory**

Nixon narrowly prevailed over Humphrey by about 500,000 votes or less than one percent of the ballots cast.

On the day after the election, Rostow relayed to Johnson another FBI intercept which had recorded South Vietnamese Ambassador Bui Diem saying, prior to the American balloting, that he was "keeping his fingers crossed" in hopes of a Nixon victory.

On Nov. 7, Rostow passed along another report to Johnson about the thinking of South Vietnam's leaders, with a cover letter that read: "If you wish to get the story raw, read the last paragraph, marked."

That marked paragraph quoted Major Bui Cong Minh, assistant armed forces attaché at the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, saying about the peace talks: "Major Minh expressed the opinion that the move by Saigon was to help presidential candidate Nixon, and that had Saigon gone to the conference table, presidential candidate Humphrey would probably have won."

The White House also learned that Anna Chennault remained in contact with Ambassador Bui Diem, including a cryptic conversation on Nov. 7, in which she told him she had conveyed a message from President Thieu to "them," presumably a reference to the Nixon team.

The cable read: "She advised she had given 'them' everything when she finally got back to her office to call, that 'they' got the whole message. Chennault continued that 'they' are still planning things but are not letting people know too much because they want to be careful to avoid embarrassing 'you', themselves, or the present U.S. government. Therefore, whatever we do must be carefully planned. Chennault added that Senator John Goodwin Tower had talked to her today. and Chennault and Tower plan to meet [Ambassador] Diem 'either Monday.'"

After reading the cable on the morning of Nov. 8, Rostow wrote to Johnson, "First reactions may well be wrong. But with this information I think it's time to blow the whistle on these folks." Of course, as the president-elect, Nixon was now in the driver's seat and there wasn't anything Johnson could do to change that.

Another report on Nov. 8 described a breakfast meeting between Ambassador Bui Diem and "a reliable and trustworthy American," who discussed President Thieu's revised approach to the Paris talks which "gave the GVN [South Vietnam] a more prominent status than the NLF [Viet Cong] and put negotiations on a Vietnamese-to-Vietnamese basis rather than a U.S.-to-Vietnamese basis.

"Asked if he [Bui Diem] thought there was much chance of Hanoi's acceptance, he replied 'no,' but he added that it put the GVN on the offensive rather than in the position of appearing to scuttle negotiations."

In other words, the South Vietnamese government was making a public relations move to ensure the talks would fail but without Thieu getting the blame. Bui Diem also expressed satisfaction that the U.S. elections had ousted key anti-war senators, Wayne Morse, Ernest Gruening and Joseph Clark. [Click [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).]

### **Pressuring Nixon**

The report upset Johnson, but he chose to continue trying to persuade Nixon to live up to his pre-election commitment to do whatever he could to push the peace process toward success. At 2:54 p.m. on Nov. 8, Johnson spoke again with Sen. Dirksen to stress the urgency of Nixon getting Thieu to reverse his position on the peace talks.

"Hell, no, this ought to go right now," Johnson declared. "If they [the South Vietnamese] don't go in there this week, we're just going to have all kinds of problems. We want Thieu to get a message so he can get a delegation from Saigon to Paris next week. We think we've held up each day, we're killing men. We're killing men.

"Saigon now thinks that they will play this out and keep this thing going on until January the 20<sup>th</sup> [Inauguration Day] and we think that's a mistake."

That evening at 9:23, Nixon called Johnson from Key Biscayne, Florida, where Nixon was taking a vacation after the grueling election. Nixon sounded confident and relaxed, even as Johnson continued to push regarding the peace talks. Johnson recounted the evidence of the continued interference by Nixon's emissaries and even described the Republican motivation for disrupting 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 peace-talk 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 threat, Nixon promised to tell the South Vietnamese officials to reverse themselves and join the peace talks. However, nothing changed.

At a Nov. 11 dinner party, President Thieu discussed what he termed a U.S. “betrayal” of him when he was getting pressured regarding the Paris peace talks, according to a “secret” U.S. government report on Thieu’s comments. The report added, “Thieu told his guests that during the U.S. election campaign he had sent two secret emissaries to the U.S. to contact Richard Nixon.” [Click [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).]

On Nov. 13, South Vietnam’s Minister of Information Ton That Thein held a press conference criticizing Johnson and his diplomats for rushing matters on the peace talks. Thein also acknowledged possible pre-election contacts with elements of Nixon’s campaign.

A U.S. Embassy cable reported that “Asked whether Nixon had encouraged the GVN [the government of South Vietnam] to delay agreement with the US, Thein replied that, while there may have been contacts between Nixon staffers and personnel of the [South Vietnamese] Embassy in Washington, a person of the caliber of Nixon would not do such a thing.” [Click [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).]

On Nov. 15, ten days after the election, suspicions of the peace-talk sabotage began seeping into the U.S. news media. Columnist Georgie Anne Geyer [reported](#), “Top Saigon officials are boasting privately they helped assure the election of Richard M. Nixon. They are pleased about it. ‘We did it,’ one of them said. ‘We helped elect an American President.’”

Columnists Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson noted in a Nov. 17 [column](#) that Johnson “learned that Saigon’s Ambassador Bui Diem had been in touch secretly with Richard Nixon’s people. There were unconfirmed reports that South Vietnamese

leaders had even slipped campaign cash to Nixon representatives.”

### **‘Lady Still Operational’**

As the weeks passed and the peace talks remained stalled, Anna Chennault kept up her contacts with South Vietnam’s Embassy, briefing a senior diplomat there on Dec. 9, 1968, about Nixon’s selection of “her very good friend” Melvin Laird to be Secretary of Defense.

According to the FBI cable, “She went on to say that ‘we’ should be very happy about this [and] not to be too concerned about the press’s references about a coalition government. Chennault indicated that Laird is a very strong man.” Rostow forwarded the cable to Johnson on Dec. 10, with the notation, “The Lady is still operational.”

But Johnson’s White House remained tight-lipped about its knowledge of Nixon’s treachery. According to the documents in “The ‘X’ Envelope,” the first detailed press inquiry about the peace-talk sabotage came from St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter Tom Ottenad who contacted Rostow on Jan. 3, 1969, just 17 days before Johnson would leave office.

Ottenad outlined the activities of Anna Chennault on behalf of the campaign and pressed Rostow to confirm that the administration was aware of the subterfuge. Rostow responded, “I have not one word to say about that matter.”

An FBI intercept also picked up the Post-Dispatch questioning Bui Diem about contacts with Chennault. While he denied any improper contacts with the Nixon administration, Bui Diem acknowledged that Chennault “has visited the Vietnamese embassy from time to time, but not frequently.”

As published, Ottenad’s article began, “A well-known top official of committees working for the election of Richard M. Nixon secretly got in touch with representatives of South Vietnam shortly before the presidential election. It was in connection with an apparent effort to encourage them to delay in joining the Paris peace talks in hopes of getting a better deal if the Republicans won the White House.”

But there was little follow-up to Ottenad’s scoop. A sketchy account also appeared in author Teddy White’s *The Making of a President 1968*, which was published in summer 1969, drawing a response from Chennault, who called the accusations an “insult.”

Even in retirement, Rostow remained mum about the Chennault episode, rebuffing another overture from Ottenad on Feb. 11, 1970. Ottenad also approached ex-President Johnson, but he too chose to hold his tongue, though his legacy had

been devastated by his conduct of the Vietnam War and by his failure to end it.

After Ottenad's inquiry, Johnson's aide Tom Johnson offered a heads-up to Nixon's chief of staff "Bob" Haldeman about another possible story on this touchy topic. To a somewhat baffled Haldeman, Tom Johnson volunteered that ex-President Johnson had given no authorization to anyone to discuss the matter.

"Haldeman said he was most appreciative that we had advised him of this information and would keep the telephone call completely confidential," Tom Johnson's memo to ex-President Johnson read. "Haldeman seemed genuinely pleased and surprised that we would call on such a matter and expressed his thanks again for the attitude we have been taking toward President Nixon." [Tom Johnson later served as president of CNN.]

### **More Dead**

From the start of Nixon's presidency in 1969, the U.S. participation in the Vietnam War continued for more than four years at horrendous cost to both the United States and the people of Vietnam. Having allegedly made his secret commitment to the South Vietnamese regime, Nixon kept searching for violent new ways to get Thieu a better deal than Johnson would have offered. Seeking what he called "peace with honor," Nixon invaded Cambodia and stepped up the bombing of North Vietnam.

In those four years, the war bitterly divided the United States, as anti-war protests turned increasingly confrontational; parents turned against their children and children against their parents; "hard-hats" attacked "hippies"; Nixon baited one group of angry protesters with his "V" for victory sign and called other protesters "bums"; four students were gunned down at Kent State.

But it seemed nothing could stop the war, not massive protests, not even disclosures about the deception that had gotten the United States into the conflict. Former Defense Department official Daniel Ellsberg leaked the "Pentagon Papers," a secret history of the war's early years, but the conflict still ground on.

Fatefully, Nixon struck back at Ellsberg by organizing a White House "plumbers unit" that broke into the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist. The "plumbers," including ex-CIA operatives, later switched their attention to Nixon's political rivals, burglarizing the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate building in search of intelligence, including what dirt the Democrats might have on Nixon.

Before U.S. participation in the war was finally brought to a close in 1973 – on terms similar to what had been available to President Johnson in 1968 – a

million more Vietnamese were estimated to have died. Those four years also cost the lives of an additional 20,763 U.S. soldiers, with 111,230 wounded.

Ironically, as the Democrats stayed mum, Nixon apparently judged that they were more concerned about the information regarding his Vietnam War "treason" coming out than he was. So, after some of his "plumbers" got arrested at the Watergate on June 17, 1972, Nixon began to view the 1968 events as a blackmail card to play against Johnson to get his help squelching the expanding probe.

Nixon discussed the 1968 bugging in his Oval Office meetings about Watergate as early as July 1, 1972. 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 in 1968 when she was serving 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."

By early November 1972, as Nixon was cruising to an easy victory over McGovern but was worried about future problems with the Watergate scandal, the tale of Johnson's supposed wiretaps of Nixon's campaign was picked up by the Washington Star, Nixon's favorite newspaper for planting stories damaging to his opponents.

Washington Star reporters contacted Rostow on Nov. 2, 1972, and, according to a Rostow memo, asked whether "President Johnson instructed the FBI to investigate action by members of the Nixon camp to slow down the peace negotiations in Paris before the 1968 election. After the election [FBI Director] J. Edgar Hoover informed President Nixon of what he had been instructed to do by President Johnson. President Nixon is alleged to have been outraged." But Rostow still was unwilling to help on the story.

Hoover apparently had given Nixon a garbled version of what had happened,

leading him to believe that the FBI bugging was more extensive than it was. According to Nixon's White House tapes, he pressed Haldeman on Jan. 8, 1973, to get the story about the 1968 bugging into 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 finally reveal that Nixon's campaign had sabotaged the Vietnam peace talks. The stakes were suddenly raised. However, events went in a different direction.

On Jan. 22, 1973, ten days after Haldeman's diary entry and two days after Nixon began his second term, Johnson died of a heart attack. Haldeman also apparently thought better of publicizing Nixon's 1968 bugging complaint.

Several months later with Johnson dead and Nixon sinking deeper into the Watergate swamp Rostow, the keeper of "The 'X' Envelope," mused about whether history might have gone in a very different direction if he and other Johnson officials had spoken out in real time about what Johnson called Nixon's "treason." Still, Rostow chose to keep the facts from the American people.

And the silence had consequences. Though Nixon was forced to resign over the Watergate scandal on Aug. 9, 1974, the failure of the U.S. government and the American press to explain the full scope of Nixon's dirty politics left Americans divided over the disgraced president's legacy and the seriousness of

Watergate.

Many Republicans viewed Watergate as a Democratic plot to reverse the landslide results of the 1972 election. Other observers saw the scandal as an isolated event provoked by Nixon's personal paranoia. But almost no one made the connection that Rostow did, that Nixon's high-handed political espionage had involved an earlier scheme that dragged out the Vietnam War for four bloody years.

If the public had known that story – including the evidence that some of Nixon's Wall Street friends were using inside knowledge of the peace-talk sabotage to play the markets – the Republicans would have been hard-pressed to argue that Nixon was simply a victim of partisan Democratic scandal-mongering.

Over the years, pieces of the story about Nixon's "treason" did surface from time to time, but never getting much traction with the major U.S. news media or the political classes. It fell into that hazy category between "conspiracy theory" and "old news."

In 1980, Anna Chennault published an autobiography entitled *The Education of Anna*, in which she acknowledged that she, indeed, had been a courier for messages between the Nixon campaign and the South Vietnamese government.

She quoted Nixon aide John Mitchell as calling her a few days before the 1968 election and telling her: "I'm speaking on behalf of Mr. Nixon. It's very important that our Vietnamese friends understand our Republican position and I hope you made that clear to them." But still there was no outcry for a serious investigation.

### **An October Reprise?**

The lack of interest in Nixon's Vietnam peace-talk gambit also might have encouraged the Republicans to dig into Nixon's bag of dirty tricks again in 1980 when some of his old allies, including George H.W. Bush and William Casey, were key figures in Ronald Reagan's campaign and saw another prospect for ousting another Democratic president over another "October Surprise."

After all, if Nixon could get away with sabotaging Vietnam peace talks when half a million U.S. soldiers were in harm's way, what was the big deal about upsetting President Jimmy Carter's negotiations to free 52 U.S. embassy employees then held hostage in Iran? And if the Democrats eventually did get wind of any GOP-Iran hanky-panky, what were the chances that they would hold anyone accountable?

Wouldn't these Democrats be just as susceptible as Johnson's team was to appeals

that telling the whole sordid tale wouldn't be good for the country? The Democrats had even taken a strange sort of pride in keeping these dirty Republican secrets secret.

As it turned out, Democrats did show the same reluctance to seriously investigate allegations of Republican interference in Carter's hostage negotiations with Iran as they did regarding the Nixon campaign's sabotage of Johnson's Vietnam peace talks. [For details on the 1980 reprise of Nixon's "treason," see Robert Parry's [Secrecy & Privilege](#) or Consortiumnews.com's "[New October Surprise Series](#)."]

Democrats also presided over timid investigations of Reagan's later arms-for-hostage deals with Iran, known as the Iran-Contra Affair, and of Reagan's secret military support for Iraq's Saddam Hussein in the 1980s, the so-called Iraq-gate scandal.

In 1992, I interviewed R. Spencer Oliver, a longtime Democratic Party figure whose phone was one of those that had been bugged at Watergate. Oliver also was one of the few Washington Democrats with the toughness and tenacity to push serious investigations into these Republican scandals.

When I asked him why the Democrats so often retreated in the face of fierce Republican resistance, he explained that the Watergate scandal though it led to the ruin of one Republican president had taught the Republicans how to thwart serious inquiries: "What [the Republicans] learned from Watergate was not 'don't do it,' but 'cover it up more effectively.' They have learned that they have to frustrate congressional oversight and press scrutiny in a way that will avoid another major scandal."

While Oliver was surely right, there was also the tendency of Democrats to avoid the risks required to stand up to Republican abuses. The failed investigations of the 1980 October Surprise case, the Iran-Contra Affair and Iraq-gate seemed part and parcel with avoiding a confrontation with Nixon over the Vietnam peace talks in 1968.

In all those cases, there was the echo of Rostow's musings in 1973, wondering whether the silence of Johnson's White House regarding Nixon's "treason" in 1968 had proved not to be "good for the country" after all.

By not holding the Republicans accountable, Rostow had reflected, "There was nothing in their previous experience with an operation of doubtful propriety (or, even, legality) to warn them off, and there were memories of how close an election could get and the possible utility of pressing to the limit and beyond." But even with that recognition, Rostow still had kept silent.

Indeed, if Rostow had had his way, "The 'X' Envelope" today would still be locked away from the American people for another decade and possibly 50 years longer.

By the time Rostow died on Feb. 13, 2003, the Republican Party had muscled its way back into power once more, via the tainted election in 2000 and the latest GOP president, George W. Bush, was marching the United States into another destructive war behind another smokescreen of lies and distortions, in Iraq.

**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](http://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.**

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