

Admissions on Nixon's 'Treason'

Special Report: Definitive proof of a historical mystery is often elusive, even with archival documents and memoirs. Skeptics can always say some witness or some evidence isn't perfect. But the case that Richard Nixon sabotaged the Vietnam peace talks in 1968 to win that pivotal election is clear, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Republicans have long bristled at allegations that Richard Nixon's 1968 presidential campaign helped sink Vietnam peace talks to win the election, but Nixon's Asian counterparts both in Saigon and Washington have been much more open about the collaboration, what President Lyndon Johnson privately called "treason."

In perhaps the most complete account from the South Vietnamese side *The Palace File* by Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold L. Schecter Hung recounts detailed interviews with his former boss, South Vietnam's President Nguyen van Thieu, and with Nixon's chief emissary to Thieu, China Lobby leader Anna Chennault.

Both Thieu and Chennault described messages from Nixon's campaign urging the South Vietnamese to boycott Johnson's peace talks in the crucial days before the Nov. 5, 1968, election, according to *The Palace File*, published in 1986. Chennault made similar admissions in her own memoir, *The Education of Anna*, in 1980.

Upset by LBJ's efforts to negotiate an end to the war with North Vietnam, Thieu followed the Republican advice and just days before the election balked at the Paris peace talks, thus denying Democrat Hubert Humphrey a last-minute boost that might have cost Nixon his narrow victory. Nixon then continued the war for four more years.

Another key figure in the 1968 drama was South Vietnam's Ambassador to the United States Bui Diem, who addressed the sabotage allegations in his own memoir, *In the Jaws of History*, published in 1987.

Bui Diem acknowledged many of the facts about his meetings with Republicans and his infamous cable to Saigon conveying the desire of "many Republican friends" that Thieu "stand firm" against Johnson's pressure. But Bui Diem insisted there was nothing wrong in these contacts and communications.

Despite his claims of innocence, Bui Diem's admissions lend factual support to the case against Nixon. For instance, Bui Diem recounted a private meeting with

Nixon at the Hotel Pierre in New York City on July 12, 1968. It was attended by Nixon's campaign manager John Mitchell and Chennault.

At the end of the meeting, "Nixon thanked me for my visit and added that his staff would be in touch with me through John Mitchell and Anna Chennault," Bui Diem wrote.

According to Chennault's account of the same meeting, Nixon also told Bui Diem that as President he would make Vietnam his top priority and "see that Vietnam gets better treatment from me than under the Democrats." [See *The Palace File*.]

Deeper Distrust

After the meeting with Nixon, Bui Diem said he grew more alienated from President Johnson and the Democrats as they pressed for peace talks to end the war. By then, more than 30,000 American troops had died and the conflict was ripping the United States apart.

"As the Democrats steered with all due haste away from the Indochinese involvement they had engineered, I was increasingly attracted to the Republican side," Bui Diem wrote. "As far as courting Republicans went, there were few places in Washington like Anna Chennault's penthouse apartment at the Watergate.

"By October [1968] I was back in touch with Anna, who was now co-chairman of Nixon's fundraising committee, and Senator John Tower, chairman of the Republican Key Issues Committee. I also got together with George [H.W.] Bush and other Republicans from whom I was trying to elicit support for a strong Vietnam policy."

Bui Diem's reference to Bush may seem odd, since Bush at the time was only a freshman congressman from Texas. However, Bush, the son of former Sen. Prescott Bush and the scion of a well-connected Wall Street family, was already emerging as an important behind-the-scenes player in Washington.

Despite his back-bench status in Congress and his relative youth then 44 Bush made Nixon's short list for vice president before Nixon picked Spiro Agnew. Nixon then recruited Bush to be a leading surrogate for the 1968 campaign.

(In subsequent years, Bush would remain a Nixon favorite, getting financial support from a Nixon slush fund to run for the U.S. Senate in 1970 and, after losing, getting appointments as United Nations ambassador and as Republican National Committee chairman in 1973, when he spearheaded efforts to contain the Watergate scandal.)

But Bui Diem's linking Bush to the Republican/Saigon collaboration in fall 1968

is provocative. Bush was later implicated in a similar scheme in 1980 when he was Ronald Reagan's running mate and allegedly took part in secret Republican efforts to sabotage President Jimmy Carter's talks with Iran to free 52 American hostages. [See Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege* or Consortiumnews.com's "*New October Surprise Series*."]]

In fall 1968, Bui Diem said he was surprised that discovery of his covert contacts with Republicans angered the Johnson administration. In his memoir, he also claimed to be perplexed to receive an inquiry from the Christian Science Monitor, just before the election, about those contacts and his possible interference with peace talks.

Bui Diem said he rebuffed the Monitor's questions, but then went back to examine his recent cables to Saigon. He noted that there were a couple of messages that might have understandably raised suspicions about his role in Republican efforts to disrupt Johnson's peace initiative.

"I found a cable from October 23 in which I had said, 'Many Republican friends have contacted me and encouraged us to stand firm. They were alarmed by press reports to the effect that you [President Thieu] had already softened your position.'

"In another cable, from October 27, I wrote, 'I am regularly in touch with the Nixon entourage,' by which I meant Anna Chennault, John Mitchell, and Senator [John] Tower," a Texas Republican and another Nixon favorite.

Bui Diem said those were the only two relevant cables, adding: "They certainly did not mean that I had arranged a deal with the Republicans. But putting the two together and looking at them in the context of the charged pre-election atmosphere, I saw that they constituted circumstantial evidence for anybody ready to assume the worst."

He also conceded that Chennault "had other avenues to Thieu, primarily through his brother, Nguyen Van Kieu, a South Vietnamese ambassador to Taiwan."

Thieu's Version

President Thieu's fullest account of the peace-talk gambit was recounted by his former aide, Nguyen Tien Hung, in *The Palace File*. Hung (with Jerrold Schechter) wrote, Thieu "believed that Richard Nixon owed him a political debt as a result of his refusal to support President Lyndon Johnson's peace initiative just before the U.S. 1968 election.

"Although he never said so publicly, Thieu was certain that his refusal to take part in the peace talks with the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong when

President Johnson halted the bombing of North Vietnam on October 31, 1968, just five days before the election, played a decisive role in Nixon's victory."

Hung said that after he became a special assistant to Thieu in 1973, they discussed these events over many hours. Thieu described his arrangement with the Republicans as one of mutual benefit, since he believed "a Humphrey victory would mean a coalition government in six months" but "with Nixon at least there was a chance."

Hung/Schechter reported that "Anna Chennault visited Saigon frequently in 1968 to advise Thieu on Nixon's candidacy and his views on Vietnam. She told him [Thieu] then that Nixon would be a stronger supporter of Vietnam than Humphrey."

Thieu also bypassed his Washington embassy for some of his messages to Chennault, Hung/Schechter wrote. "He relied heavily on his brother Nguyen Van Kieu" and that "Mrs. Chennault often sent messages to Thieu through aides to his brother."

Based on interviews with Chennault, Hung/Schechter reported that she claimed that John Mitchell called her "almost every day" urging her to stop Thieu from going to the Paris peace talks and warning her that she should use pay phones to avoid wiretaps.

Hung/Schechter wrote: "Mitchell's message to her was always the same: 'Don't let him go.' A few days before the election, Mitchell telephoned her with a message for President Thieu, 'Anna, I'm speaking on behalf of Mr. Nixon. It's very important that our Vietnamese friends understand our Republican position and I hope you have made that clear to them.'"

Chennault said, "Thieu was under heavy pressure from the Democrats. My job was to hold him back and prevent him from changing his mind."

Nixon's Trump Card

Nixon's intelligence operation also benefited from inside information from Henry Kissinger, a foreign policy aide to banker David Rockefeller and an informal adviser to the Vietnam negotiations. But Kissinger wasn't Nixon's only source of news. Johnson himself apprised Nixon and the other leading candidates of the peace-talk progress.

But Nixon's trump card may have been knowing that Johnson's efforts to achieve a breakthrough before the Nov. 5 election could be countered by President Thieu's intransigence, privately encouraged by the Republicans.

As Hung/Schechter wrote: "Throughout October 1968 Thieu tried to delay the

Johnson bombing halt decision and an announcement of Paris Talks as long as possible to buy time for Nixon. He knew that Johnson would proceed on his own, so he did not openly object to Johnson's proposal but only to the specifics of its terms."

For his part, Johnson became increasingly aware of the double game being played by Thieu and Nixon as the days counted down to the election. Johnson was hearing sketchy reports from U.S. intelligence that Thieu was dragging his feet in anticipation of a Nixon victory.

"Top Secret" reports from the National Security Agency informed President Johnson that 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.

Wall Street Tip

The next day, Oct. 29, national security adviser Walt Rostow received the first clear 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

adhttps://consortiumnews.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=4333&action=editversely 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 a 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 ordered FBI wiretaps of Americans in touch with the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington and quickly learned that Anna Chennault was holding curious meetings with South Vietnamese Ambassador Bui Diem.

Working the Phones

Johnson began working the phones contacting some of his old Senate colleagues, including Republican Senate Leader Everett Dirksen, to urge that they intercede with Nixon to stop his campaign's peace-talk sabotage.

"He better keep Mrs. Chennault and all this crowd tied up for a few days," Johnson told Dirksen on Oct. 31, 1968, according to a tape recording of the call released in 2008. That night, Johnson announced a bombing halt intended to ensure North Vietnamese participation in the talks.

However, on Nov. 2, 1968, Johnson learned that his protests had not shut down the Nixon 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. At 1:54 p.m. on Nov. 3, trying to head off that possibility, Nixon spoke directly to Johnson, according to an audiotape released in 2008 by the LBJ Library.

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

However, 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 by Nixon's denials. "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.

According to some reports, Nixon 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.

A Last Chance

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.

Saville Davis of the Monitor's Washington bureau approached Ambassador Bui Diem and the White House about a story filed by the Monitor's Saigon correspondent, Beverly Deepe, regarding contacts between Thieu's government and the Nixon campaign.

Deepe's draft article 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 chance 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 Rostow, Rusk and Defense Secretary Clark Clifford in a Nov. 4 conference call. The advisers were unanimous that Johnson shouldn't go public, citing the risk that the scandal would 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. [See Consortiumnews.com's "The Almost Scoop on Nixon's 'Treason.'"]

The Consequences

The next day, 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. The report 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."

Johnson continued to hope that Nixon, having won the election, would join in pressing for Saigon's participation in the peace talks and a breakthrough before Johnson left office on Jan. 20, 1969. But the breakthrough was not to be.

When Nixon met Thieu on Midway Island on June 8, 1969, in their first face-to-face sit-down since the election, Nixon unveiled his plan for a gradual "Vietnamization" of the war, while Thieu sought more U.S. guarantees, according to *The Palace File*.

Hung/Schechter recounted Thieu explaining Nixon's assurances in a later meeting with Taiwan's leader Chiang Kai-shek.

"He promised me eight years of strong support," Thieu told Chiang. "Four years of military support during his first term in office and four years of economic support during his second term. By the time most of the Americans have withdrawn, so will the North Vietnamese; by then Saigon should be strong enough to carry on its own defense with only material support from the United States."

Nixon's plan proved unsuccessful. Yet, 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.

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.

The failure of Johnson and the Democrats to call Nixon out on his possible "treason" also left Nixon with a sense of invulnerability, a gambler's confidence after succeeding at a high-stakes bluff.

When it came to his reelection campaign, Nixon pushed more chips onto the table. Feeling that he had snookered the savvy Johnson, why not hoodwink the entire democratic process by rigging the selection of his Democratic opponent?

Nixon's worries about Johnson's file on the peace-talk gambit led him into a frantic search for its location. He didn't realize that Johnson had ordered Rostow to take the file out of the White House when Johnson departed on Jan. 20, 1969.

On June 17, 1971, upon hearing that the file might be in a safe at the Brookings Institution, Nixon ordered a break-in by operatives under former CIA officer E. Howard Hunt. The order apparently marked the start of Nixon's "plumbers' operation" that led to the failed Watergate break-in at the Democratic National Committee one year later. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Dark Continuum of Watergate.](#)"]

Though Nixon's Watergate bet turned bad forcing Nixon to resign in disgrace on Aug. 9, 1974 his legacy of ruthless politics lived on, in part, because he and his cohorts were never held accountable for their interference in the Vietnam peace talks. In fact, there was never even an official investigation of the case.

Many of the same Republican characters circled back to a parallel situation in 1980 when President Carter was struggling to negotiate the release of 52 American hostages held in Iran.

The tale of the 1980 October Surprise case involved George H.W. Bush (who also had served as CIA director under Nixon's successor, President Gerald Ford); Kissinger (who shows up on the fringes); and even Nixon himself (who continued to offer advice to Republicans from his post-resignation exile). [See Parry's [Secrecy & Privilege](#) or Consortiumnews.com's "[New October Surprise Series.](#)"]

Over the ensuing years, a pattern emerged. Republicans played an anything-goes game of hardball, while Democrats sought to avoid ugly confrontations. Even at the rare moments when the Republicans appeared to get caught, they became masters at raising doubts about witnesses and noting that the evidence wasn't

perfect.

To read more of Robert Parry's writings, you can now order his last two books, *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, at the discount price of only \$16 for both. For details on the special offer, [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.
