

# An Insider's View of Nixon's 'Treason'

**Special Report:** A recently released oral history by one of President Nixon's secretive operatives sheds new light on perhaps Nixon's darkest crime, the sabotaging of Vietnam peace talks so he could win the 1968 election, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Tom Charles Huston, the national security aide assigned by President Richard Nixon to investigate what President Lyndon Johnson knew about why the Vietnam peace talks failed in 1968, concluded that Nixon was personally behind a secret Republican scheme to sabotage those negotiations whose collapse cleared the way to his narrow victory and to four more years of war.

"Over the years as I've studied it, I've concluded that there was no doubt that Nixon was would have been directly involved, that it's not something that anybody would've undertaken on their own," Huston said in an oral history done for the Nixon presidential library in 2008 and recently released in partially redacted form.

Huston, who is best known for the 1970 Huston Plan to expand spying on the anti-Vietnam War movement, said he was assigned the peace-talk investigation after Nixon took office because Nixon was told by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover that President Johnson had learned of Nixon's sabotage through national security wiretaps.

Those wiretaps had revealed that Nixon's campaign was promising South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu a better deal if he boycotted the Paris peace talks, which Thieu did in the days before the U.S. presidential election in 1968.

"I think clearly there was no doubt that the Nixon campaign was aggressively trying to keep President Thieu from agreeing," Huston said in his oral history [To see the transcripts, click [here](#) and [here](#).]

Johnson's failure to achieve a breakthrough stalled a late surge by Vice President Hubert Humphrey and enabled Nixon to prevail in one of the closest elections in U.S. history. Nixon then expanded the war with heavier strategic bombing over Indochina and with an invasion of Cambodia before winding down U.S. troop levels by 1973.

In those Nixon years, 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 bitterly divided the United States, often turning parents against their own

children.

### **Hoover's Double Game**

According to Huston, Hoover briefed Nixon on his potential vulnerability regarding Johnson's wiretap evidence even before Nixon took office. "That goes back to the meeting that Nixon had with Hoover at the Pierre Hotel in New York after the election, at which Nixon made it clear to Hoover that he was going to reappoint him, which is what Hoover wanted.

"But, you know, Hoover was a piece of work. I mean, at the same time that pursuant to instructions from Lyndon Johnson he's got his agents scurrying all over the damn Southwest, you know, trying to dig up dirt on the vice president-elect [Spiro Agnew for his purported role in the peace-talk sabotage], [Hoover]'s sitting with the President-elect and telling him that Johnson had bugged his airplane during the '68 campaign," a specific claim that was apparently false but something that Nixon appears to have believed.

Faced with uncertainty about exactly what evidence Johnson had, Nixon ordered up a review of what was in the files, including whatever obstacles that the peace talks had encountered, an area that Huston felt required examining the issue of Republican obstruction, including contacts between Nixon campaign operative Anna Chennault and senior South Vietnamese officials.

"I wasn't really asked specifically to address Chennault, but you couldn't really look at [Johnson's] bombing halt and the politics of the bombing halt without – at least in my judgment, without looking at what Johnson was looking at," Huston said. "What Johnson was looking at was this perception that the Nixon campaign was doing whatever it could to sabotage his efforts to achieve a bombing halt."

Huston found that nearly all the national security files at the White House had been packed up and shipped to the Johnson presidential library in Austin, Texas, so Huston began piecing together the material from records recovered from the FBI and other federal agencies. According to the National Archives, Nixon, as the sitting president, would have had relatively easy access to the material shipped to Austin if he had wanted it.

### **The X-Envelope**

But Johnson had taken no chances that Nixon's team might recover the file containing the evidence on what Johnson called Nixon's "treason." As Johnson was leaving the White House in January 1969, he ordered his national security aide Walt Rostow to take that file and keep it in his personal possession. Rostow labeled the file "The X-Envelope," although it has since become known to Johnson

archivists as the "X-File."

Describing his investigation, Huston said he eventually "got so frustrated because I knew I wasn't getting all of the information that would allow me to really understand what had happened in Paris. And so I decided to go out and start bird-dogging on my own," reaching out to other federal agencies.

Huston said "there is no question" that the Nixon campaign approached senior South Vietnamese officials with promises of a better deal if they stayed away from the Paris peace talks.

"Clearly, [campaign manager John] Mitchell was directly involved. Mitchell was meeting with her [Chennault], and, you know, the question, was the candidate himself directly involved, and, you know, my conclusion is that there is no evidence that I found, nor that anyone else has found that I can determine, that I regard as credible, that would confirm the fact that Nixon was directly involved.

"I think my understanding of the way in which – having been in the '68 campaign, and my understanding of the way that campaign was run, it's inconceivable to me that John Mitchell would be running around, you know, passing messages to the South Vietnamese government, et cetera, on his own initiative."

Though Huston reported to Nixon that the Johnson people apparently lacked a "smoking gun" that personally implicated him in the scheme, the whereabouts of the missing evidence and exactly what it showed remained a pressing concern to Nixon and his inner circle, especially in June 1971 when major American newspapers began publishing the leaked Pentagon Papers. That report revealed the deceptions that had pervaded the Vietnam conflict from its post-World War II origins through 1967, covering mostly Democratic lies.

### **A Dangerous Sequel**

But Nixon knew what few others did, that there was the potential for a devastating sequel, the story of how the Nixon campaign had torpedoed peace talks that could have ended the war. Given the intensity of anti-war sentiment in 1971, such a revelation could have had explosive and unforeseeable consequences, conceivably even impeachment and certainly threatening Nixon's reelection in 1972.

Huston had come to believe that a detailed report on the failed Paris peace talks, possibly containing the evidence of the Republican sabotage, had ended up at the Brookings Institution, then regarded as a liberal think tank housing many of Nixon's top critics.

"I send [White House chief of staff H.R. "Bob"] Haldeman a memo and I said, basically, 'You're not going to believe this.' Here I've spent all these months, I've been chasing all over the God-dang'd government try to get everybody to give me bits and pieces and trying to do this job that you told me to do, and the God-dang'd Brookings Institution is sitting over here with a God-dang'd multi-volume report that I don't have. And if Brookings can get the damn thing, I don't see any reason why I can't get it."

According to Brookings officials and U.S. government archivists, Huston appears to have been wrong in his conclusions about the existence of such a "multi-volume report" hidden at Brookings, but his memo would have historical repercussions because it became the focus of a frantic Oval Office meeting on June 17, 1971, as Nixon and his top aides were assessing their own exposure as the Pentagon Papers filled the front pages of the New York Times.

### **Blow the Safe**

Nixon summoned Haldeman and national security advisor Henry Kissinger into the Oval Office and as Nixon's own recording devices whirred softly pleaded with them again to locate the missing file. "Do we have it?" Nixon asked Haldeman. "I've asked for it. You said you didn't have it."

Haldeman: "We can't find it."

Kissinger: "We have nothing here, Mr. President."

Nixon: "Well, damnit, I asked for that because I need it."

Kissinger: "But Bob and I have been trying to put the damn thing together."

Haldeman: "We have a basic history in constructing our own, but there is a file on it."

Nixon: "Where?"

Haldeman: "Huston swears to God that there's a file on it and it's at Brookings."

Nixon: "Bob? Bob? Now do you remember Huston's plan [for White House-sponsored break-ins as part of domestic counter-intelligence operations]? Implement it."

Kissinger: "Now Brookings has no right to have classified documents."

Nixon: "I want it implemented. Goddamnit, get in and get those files. Blow the safe and get it."

Haldeman: "They may very well have cleaned them by now, but this thing, you need

to “

Kissinger: “I wouldn’t be surprised if Brookings had the files.”

Haldeman: “My point is Johnson knows that those files are around. He doesn’t know for sure that we don’t have them around.”

But Johnson did know that the key file documenting Nixon’s peace-talk sabotage was safely out of Nixon’s reach, entrusted to his former national security advisor Walt Rostow.

### **Forming the Burglars**

On June 30, 1971, Nixon again berated Haldeman about the need to break into Brookings and “take it [the file] out.” Nixon even suggested using former CIA officer E. Howard Hunt to conduct the Brookings break-in.

“You talk to Hunt,” Nixon told Haldeman. “I want the break-in. Hell, they do that. You’re to break into the place, rifle the files, and bring them in. Just go in and take it. Go in around 8:00 or 9:00 o’clock.”

Haldeman: “Make an inspection of the safe.”

Nixon: “That’s right. You go in to inspect the safe. I mean, *clean it up*.”

For reasons that remain unclear, it appears that the Brookings break-in never took place although Brookings officials say an attempted break-in was made but Nixon’s desperation to locate Johnson’s peace-talk evidence was an important link in the chain of events that led to the creation of Nixon’s burglary unit under Hunt’s supervision. Hunt later oversaw the two Watergate break-ins in May and June of 1972.

While it’s possible that Nixon was still searching for the evidence about his Vietnam-peace sabotage when the Watergate break-ins occurred nearly a year later, it’s generally believed that the burglary was more broadly focused, seeking any information that might have an impact on Nixon’s re-election, either defensively or offensively.

As it turned out, Nixon’s burglars were nabbed inside the Watergate complex during their second break-in at the Democratic National Committee on June 17, 1972, exactly one year after Nixon’s tirade to Haldeman and Kissinger about the need to blow the safe at the Brookings Institution in pursuit of the missing Vietnam peace-talk file.

Ironically, too, Johnson and Rostow had no intention of exposing Nixon’s dirty secret regarding LBJ’s Vietnam peace talks, presumably for the same reasons that

they kept their mouths shut back in 1968, out of a benighted belief that revealing Nixon's actions might somehow not be "good for the country." [For details, see Robert Parry's *America's Stolen Narrative*.]

## **The Scandal Grows**

In November 1972, despite the growing scandal over the Watergate break-in, Nixon handily won reelection, crushing Sen. George McGovern, Nixon's preferred opponent. Nixon then reached out to Johnson seeking his help in squelching Democratic-led investigations of the Watergate affair and slyly noting that Johnson had ordered wiretaps of Nixon's campaign in 1968.

Johnson reacted angrily to the overture, refusing to cooperate. On Jan. 20, 1973, Nixon was sworn in for his second term. On Jan. 22, 1973, Johnson died of a heart attack.

In the weeks that followed Nixon's Inauguration and Johnson's death, the scandal over the Watergate cover-up grew more serious, creeping ever closer to the Oval Office. Meanwhile, Rostow struggled to decide what he should do with "The 'X' Envelope."

On May 14, 1973, in a three-page "memorandum for the record," Rostow summarized what was in "The 'X' Envelope" and provided a chronology for the events in fall 1968. Rostow reflected, too, on what effect LBJ's public silence then may have had on the unfolding Watergate scandal.

"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 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](#).]

## **Tie to Watergate**

What Rostow didn't know was that there was a third and more direct connection between the missing file and Watergate. Nixon's fear about the evidence in the file surfacing as a follow-up to the Pentagon Papers was Nixon's motive for

creating Hunt's burglary team in the first place.

Rostow apparently struggled with what to do with the file for the next month as the Watergate scandal expanded. On June 25, 1973, fired White House counsel 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.

"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."

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 long process of declassifying the contents.

Yet, by withholding the file on Nixon's "treason," Johnson and Rostow allowed for incomplete and distorted histories of the Vietnam War and Watergate to take shape and for Nixon and his Republican cohorts to escape the full opprobrium that they deserved.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on**

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