

Democrats, Too Clever by Half on Clinton

Exclusive: Democratic Party honchos who wanted Hillary Clinton's coronation are having some regrets as her weaknesses become obvious, her poll numbers sink, and Donald Trump surges toward the lead, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Last year when Democratic insiders looked forward to Election 2016, they expected a run-of-the-mill Republican, possibly even legacy candidate Jeb Bush. So they countered with their own "safe" next-in-line legacy candidate, Hillary Clinton, who would supposedly win by playing up the prospect of the first woman president.

In such an expected match-up, the concern of rank-and-file Democrats about Clinton's hawkish foreign policy would be negated by the GOP nominee still defending President George W. Bush's Iraq War and again surrounded by neocons pounding the drums for even more wars. With both parties putting forward war candidates, anti-war Democrats would accept Clinton as the lesser evil, or so the thinking went.

The likely Republican nominee also would be burdened by reactionary domestic proposals, including GOP plans for privatizing Social Security and Medicare. By contrast, centrist Clinton would look reasonable in promising to protect those popular programs, albeit with some modest trimming of benefits to please the budget hawks.

But the Democratic insiders didn't count on the unlikely emergence of populist billionaire Donald Trump, who repudiated Bush's Iraq War and the GOP's neocon foreign policy and rejected Republican orthodoxy on "entitlement reform," i.e., slashing Social Security and Medicare.

The unabashed Trump also has made clear that he is not afraid of countering Clinton's "woman card" by playing his own "man card," including attacks on her troubled marriage and her tolerance of Bill Clinton's notorious womanizing, even claiming that she was her wayward husband's "enabler."

At first, the Democratic hierarchy couldn't believe its luck as the Republican Party seemed to splinter over Trump's disdain for the GOP's neocon interventionism and rejection of the party's cutbacks in Social Security and Medicare. Trump's mocking attacks on his rivals also shattered the decorum that Republican leaders had hoped would mark their primary campaign.

So, the Democratic insiders initially rubbed their hands with glee and imagined

not only an easy presidential victory but major gains in the House and Senate. However, new polls show Trump running neck-and-neck with Clinton nationally and in key battleground states, while other polls reveal strong public doubts about Clinton's honesty, thus wiping the premature smiles off the Democrats' faces.

Panic Mode

Indeed, some Democrats reportedly are slipping into panic mode as they watch Clinton's poll numbers tank and the Republican Party come to grips with the Trump phenomenon. The new storyline of Campaign 2016 is the tale of top Republicans reconciling to Trump's populist conquest of the party. At least, these GOP leaders acknowledge, Trump has excited both average Republicans and many independents.

The obsessive media coverage of Trump's meetings on Thursday with senior congressional Republicans made the narcissistic real estate mogul and reality TV star look like some major world leader being received in Washington as a conquering hero. And, with the GOP rallying behind Trump, the likelihood is that his poll numbers and favorable/unfavorable ratings will continue to improve.

So, instead of Democratic dreams of a landslide victory, the party insiders are worrying now about their decision to coronate a deeply flawed and wounded candidate in Hillary Clinton. Not only could she lose to Trump but she could take many of the House and Senate candidates down with her. It's dawning on some Democrats that they may have squandered a historic opportunity to realign American politics to the left by promoting the wrong person in 2016.

At a moment when the American people are demanding change – even willing to risk entrusting the White House to the unorthodox and inexperienced Donald Trump – the Democratic Party may be stuck with an uninspiring status quo candidate who also is pro-war, indeed far more hawkish than President Barack Obama.

Thus, in the fall election, not only would Trump be in a position to bait Clinton about her dysfunctional marriage, reminding the nation of the messy scandals of the 1990s, but he could challenge her on her warmongering positions, including her years of support for the Iraq War and her hawkish policies as Secretary of State, including her instigation of the disastrous “regime change” war in Libya. [See Consortiumnews.com's [“Yes, Hillary Clinton Is a Neocon.”](#)]

This November could be the first time in modern American history when the Republican nominee would be the relative “peace candidate” and the Democrat would be the “war candidate.” That changing places could lose Clinton much of the “anti-war left,” a significant faction within the Democratic coalition with many “peace Democrats” either voting for Trump or choosing a third party, such

as the Greens.

Of course, the Democrats didn't have to be in this position. The party leaders could have encouraged a more competitive primary contest instead of trying to keep alternative candidates, such as Sen. Elizabeth Warren and some younger Democratic prospects, on the sidelines, all the better to give Hillary Clinton an unimpeded path to the nomination. The party insiders treated Clinton like an incumbent president seeking reelection, a foregone conclusion.

Alternatives, Anyone?

But the best laid plans of mice and politicians often go astray. How weak Clinton is as a candidate has been underscored by her struggle to put away a progressive challenge from Sen. Bernie Sanders, a 74-year-old "democratic socialist" from Vermont, who isn't even technically a Democrat, listing himself as an Independent.

Even though the vast majority of "super-delegates" – i.e., party insiders – have lined up behind Clinton and she leads in pledged delegates, Sanders continues to win primaries, including recent ones in Indiana and West Virginia, and he could roll up a series of victories in upcoming western state races.

Clinton could stagger to the Democratic convention in July with a dispirited party lining up glumly to witness her long-delayed coronation. The onlookers might sense that they had made a terrible mistake but couldn't correct it. They would be left to grit their teeth and hope that Clinton's self-inflicted wounds, such as her private emails as Secretary of State, don't fester and become fatal.

Arguably, it is the Democrats who would benefit the most from a contested convention, one that might give them an opportunity to reconsider the choice of Clinton and either nominate Sanders, who fares much better against Trump in poll match-ups, or pick someone else, possibly a fresh face like Sen. Warren.

While that may be highly unlikely – even if Sanders sweeps the remaining primaries – it is beginning to dawn on Democratic insiders that their scheme to grease the skids for a Clinton nomination might end up slipping Donald Trump into the White House.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Ghosts of '68 in Election 2016

Longtime observers of American politics have noted striking parallels between the unpredictable wartime election of 1968 and the bizarre presidential contest of 2016, another time of war and distress, as Michael Winship recalls.

By Michael Winship

Watching the mad, mad, mad, mad world that is the 2016 presidential campaign, I was trying to remember a presidential campaign that was as jaw-dropping, at least in my lifetime, and easily settled on 1968.

For those too young to remember, imagine: As fighting in Vietnam rages on and the Tet Offensive makes us all too aware of the futility of our Southeast Asian military fiasco, Minnesota Sen. Eugene McCarthy decides to run as an antiwar candidate against incumbent President Lyndon Johnson.

Supported by an army of "Clean for Gene" college students knocking on doors and making phone calls, McCarthy does surprisingly well, and then New York Sen. Robert Kennedy gets into the race, too. Johnson makes a surprise announcement that he will not seek a second term in the White House and McCarthy and Kennedy duke it out in the primaries.

In the midst of all this, civil rights giant Martin Luther King Jr., is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, and riots erupt across the cities of the United States. Two months later, Kennedy is murdered in the kitchen of a Los Angeles hotel just minutes after winning the California primary.

In August, eight years after his defeat by John F. Kennedy, the Republicans bring back Richard Nixon as their presidential candidate and the Democrats select Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who has not run in a single primary, as their party's standard bearer.

Simultaneously, a police riot against protesters outside the Democratic convention in Chicago leaves an indelible image of chaos, tear gas and blood. Nixon wins the election with a well-executed campaign set to the accompaniment of dog whistle signals against minorities and left-wing dissenters.

Oh, and one other thing – Alabama Gov. George Wallace, arch segregationist and race baiter, runs as the third-party candidate of the American Independent Party, campaigning as a rebel populist seeking the votes of the angry, white working class. He wins almost 10 million votes and carries five states in the South.

All of which brings me to one of the curiosities of that manic '68 campaign season, a slim volume written by Russell Baker, former *New York Times* columnist and veteran White House and congressional reporter. First serialized in *The Saturday Evening Post*, it was published as a book under the title *Our Next President: The Incredible Story of What Happened in the 1968 Elections*.

But here's the thing: Baker's book was written *before* all the events I just described. It was imaginary, a work of speculative fiction that soon found the real thing giving it a run for its money. And yet, much of what Baker dreamed up presaged what really happened and is eerily reminiscent of what's going on in 2016 America.

In the book, President Johnson is indeed as besieged as the actual LBJ – “being ground in a politics of frustration more bitter than any could remember since the Depression election of 1932,” Baker writes. “A seemingly endless war, record food prices, rising taxes, intractable poverty, a surly unmanageable Congress and now an incipient revolution of race – and Johnson bore the burden of public blame for all.” It's all too similar to the climate today.

But in Baker's version of history, Johnson uses his legendary political wiles to create a scenario that he believes will lead to his reelection – Hubert Humphrey is made to step down as vice president, becoming secretary of state, and Kennedy is named as the next vice president, creating a Johnson-Kennedy ticket. Pandemonium ensues.

Art Anticipating Life

As in the actual summer of 1968, there are race riots that impact the campaign and as is the case in 2016, the Republican Party is in complete disarray, riven by a plethora of potential candidates, many of whose names may now seem unfamiliar but all of whom were genuine presidential possibilities – Mitt Romney's father, George, the governor of Michigan; Ohio Gov. James Rhodes; former Pennsylvania Gov. William Scranton and Illinois Sen. Charles Percy, among others. There's Nixon, of course, New York's Gov. Nelson Rockefeller and, oh yes, California Gov. Ronald Reagan.

After much shouting and disruption, eventually they choose as their slate New York City Mayor John Lindsay and running mate John Tower, conservative U.S. senator from Texas.

George Wallace is prominent in Baker's story, too, running just as he really did in 1968... and in 1972 (when he was shot and forever after wheelchair-bound)... and in 1976. Here's Baker's description of the Southern populist's campaign:

“Wallace's crude animal reaction to the complexities of American society found a

sympathetic hearing that summer among millions baffled by the speed at which the future was hurtling upon them and frustrated by their individual impotence against the tyranny of vast computerized organizations spreading through American life. With his snake-oil miracle cures, Wallace satisfied a deep public yearning to be deluded with promises of easy solutions.”

And here’s Baker’s version of Wallace inveighing against protesters: “If I ever get to be president and any of these demonstrators lay down in front of my car, it’ll be the last car they ever lay down in front of.”

If, as Mark Twain supposedly said, history does not repeat itself but certainly does rhyme, Russell Baker’s description of the state of the union nearly 50 years ago and a Wallace candidacy that’s so very much like Donald Trump’s is as blank verse from the past, reflecting a national mood that today is perhaps even more confused and enraged.

I’m far from the first to draw the parallel. George Wallace’s own daughter, Peggy Wallace Kennedy, recently told National Public Radio that both men have played to our basest instincts. “Trump and my father say out loud what people are thinking but don’t have the courage to say,” she said. “They both were able to adopt the notion that fear and hate are the two greatest motivators of voters that feel alienated from government.”

And back in January, Dan T. Carter wrote in *The New York Times*, “Both George Wallace and Donald Trump are part of a long national history of scapegoating minorities: from the Irish, Catholics, Asians, Eastern European immigrants and Jews to Muslims and Latino immigrants. During times of insecurity, a sizable minority of Americans has been drawn to forceful figures who confidently promise the destruction of all enemies, real and imagined, allowing Americans to return to a past that never existed.”

An aversion to spoilers tempts me to not tell you how Baker’s story ends but you may have trouble tracking down a copy of this long out-of-print little book, so here it is: the three-way election – Johnson vs. Lindsay vs. Wallace – is deadlocked in the Electoral College. As per the Constitution, the choice of president is turned over to the House of Representatives, and the Senate chooses the vice president. A series of maneuvers, miscalculations and skullduggery ultimately results in a second President Kennedy.

We should be so lucky.

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

From the Archive: The 1968 election had one shocking turn after another, but its final and arguably worst twist – still largely unknown to Americans – traded untold death in Vietnam for political power in Washington, Robert Parry wrote in 2012.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on March 3, 2012)

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 Saville 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 20th [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 *America's Stolen Narrative*]

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.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

Turkey’s Erdogan Clears Path to Dictatorship

The ouster of Turkish Prime Minister Davutoglu marks another troubling milestone in President Erdogan’s consolidation of dictatorial power, a development that Alon Ben-Meir sees as further enflaming the region.

By Alon Ben-Meir

The forced resignation of Turkey’s Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu suggests only one thing – President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is totally absorbed by his lust for power, will tolerate no one in his government to deviate from any of his political positions. Prime Minister Davutoglu was no exception.

Although the Turkish constitution grants the Prime Minister executive powers while leaving the role of the president largely ceremonial, this is not what Erdogan had in mind when he asked then-Foreign Minister Davutoglu to form a new government following the last election.

Erdogan’s ambition and aggressive drive to spread his Islamic agenda are what has determined every political move he made. Seeking to constitutionally transfer the executive authority of the country to the Presidency is the final

step to legally consolidate his power, albeit he was already exercising such power throughout his tenure as Prime Minister for 11 years.

For more than 15 years, Davutoglu served Erdogan with the utmost loyalty – first as his top foreign policy adviser, then his Foreign Minister, and for the past two years as his hand-picked Prime Minister. Erdogan chose Davutoglu for this post precisely because he expected him to continue to be his “Yes man.”

Being that as Prime Minister, Davutoglu would assume leadership of the AK Party, Erdogan expected him to push for the transformation of the largely ceremonial Presidency into the most powerful executive position in Turkey, which Davutoglu pursued in a lukewarm manner as this would constitutionally diminish his own powers considerably.

Not surprisingly, once Erdogan assumed the Presidency, he continued to chair cabinet meetings and even established a shadow cabinet with a handful of trusted advisers. He pointedly sidelined Davutoglu, who quietly resented Erdogan’s usurpation of the role and responsibility of the prime minister as if nothing had changed.

The premiership became a ceremonial post and the ceremonial presidency became the all-powerful office without a formal constitutional amendment to legally grant him the absolute authority he is now exercising.

I have known Davutoglu from the time he was the chief adviser to Erdogan and I found him to be a man of integrity and vision, always a moderating force, and committed to making Turkey a stabilizing regional power and a significant player on the international scene. I had many opportunities to talk to Davutoglu face-to-face about Israeli-Turkish relations, as I was actively involved behind the scenes to mitigate their conflict in the wake of the Mavi Marmara incident.

On another occasion, I arranged for Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations to take place with Turkish mediation, not only because of its proximity and (at that time) good relations with both Syria and Israel, but also because I felt that Davutoglu would be the ideal interlocutor.

Moreover, by playing such a role, Davutoglu was also very consistent with his commitment to realize his political philosophy of having “zero problems with neighbors,” which initially led to Turkey’s friendly and cooperative relations with most of its neighbors.

An Ambitious Kingpin

Erdogan’s ambition to become the kingpin of the region through his brazen political approach, however, did nothing but create problems with every

neighboring country. A former top Turkish official told me that had Davutoglu been given the flexibility to carry out his foreign policy vision, Turkey's regional standing would be completely different today.

During the past two years, however, several conflicts between the two began to surface. Whereas Davutoglu sought to renew the peace negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the search for a solution, Erdogan not only refused but vowed to wage war until the last PKK rebel is killed. In addition, although Davutoglu said nothing publicly about Erdogan's systematic attack on the free press, the jailing of journalists, and human rights violations, he disagreed with these unlawful measures and failed in his efforts to quietly persuade his boss to ease the pressure on the press.

Erdogan's insistence on silencing any criticism and the constant chipping away of what is left of Turkey's democracy has basically sealed off (contrary to what is being said publicly) any prospect for Turkey to become an European Union member, which Davutoglu sought to realize with zeal.

On top of all that, Erdogan is now seeking to strip Kurdish lawmakers of their political immunity to make it possible to charge them with being aligned with the PKK who are fighting for semi-autonomous rule, to which Davutoglu surreptitiously objected. It is now being left to the next prime minister to engineer this unlawful scheme to meet Erdogan's draconian will.

Finally, while Davutoglu was busy in his effort to achieve an agreement with the E.U. to take back illegal migrants in exchange for visa-free entry for Turkish nationals to the Schengen region, Erdogan publicly belittled Davutoglu's efforts to deprive him of any political gains that he could derive from his success.

The leader of the opposition Republican People's Party, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, condemned the way Davutoglu was forced out, stating that "Davutoglu's resignation should not be perceived as an integral party issue. All democracy supporters must resist this palace coup."

Interestingly enough, in what was seen as a farewell speech to the parliament, Davutoglu stated that "No one has ever heard a word against our president from my mouth, my tongue, my mind – and no one will."

To me and many other observers, Davutoglu's words expressed the precise opposite of what he appeared to be saying: that Erdogan is beyond criticism. There was no better diplomatic way of putting it lest he be accused by Erdogan of treason, as customarily befalls anyone who opposes his political positions on any issue.

Due to the turmoil throughout the Middle East, the influx of millions of Syrian refugees and the battle against ISIS, Turkey's role has become increasingly

important. Although the United States and the E.U. have grown weary of Erdogan's absurd conduct, they feel compelled to deal with him, however distasteful that might be. Leave it, of course, to Erdogan to drain every ounce of blood from Western powers to serve his personal agenda.

When the constitution is used as a tool for power grabbing, when conspiracy theories justify a cruel witch-hunt, when people are terrified to speak publicly about politics, when journalists are detained without trial, when the academic community is regularly attacked, when human rights are grossly violated, and when democratic principles are trampled upon, this is not a mere travesty for Turkey, it is a tragedy.

With the departure of Davuto?lu, and a rubber-stamp AK Party, Turkey has become a de facto dictatorship, and there is now no one to stand in Erdogan's way. It is a sad day for the Turkish people, as the country is now governed by a ruthless dictator with no checks and balances, no accountability, and with no prospect of any change for the better as long as Erdogan remains in power.

The Turkish people should once again take to the streets but this time they should remain persistent until Erdogan relents or resigns. Otherwise, Turkey will continue to rapidly race toward an ever bleaker future where freedom will be a thing of the past and an authoritarian regime led by a ruthless leader sets in.

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