

The Almost Scoop on Nixon's 'Treason'

Special Report: At the end of Campaign 1968, as Richard Nixon feared his narrow lead could disappear if progress were made on Vietnam peace, a U.S. correspondent in Saigon got wind of a cabal between Nixon and South Vietnamese leaders to block peace talks and secure his victory. History was at a crossroads, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In late October 1968, Beverly Deepe, a 33-year-old Saigon correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor, came upon a story that could have changed history. A six-year veteran covering the Vietnam War, she learned from South Vietnamese sources that Richard Nixon's campaign was collaborating behind the scenes with the Saigon government to derail President Lyndon Johnson's peace talks.

On Oct. 28, Deepe sent her startling information to her Monitor editors in the United States, asking them to have the Washington bureau "check out a report that [South Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States] Bui Diem had sent a cable to the Foreign Ministry about contact with the Nixon camp," she told me in a recent e-mail exchange.

At that moment in 1968, the stakes surrounding Nixon's secret contacts could hardly be higher. With half a million U.S. soldiers serving in the war zone and with more than 30,000 already dead a peace deal could have saved countless lives, both American and Vietnamese. Progress toward a settlement also could have meant defeat for Nixon on Election Day, Nov. 5.

History was at one of those forks in the road. A peace agreement could have brought the divisive war to an end before the social fabric of the United States was thoroughly torn apart. Besides the lives and treasure that could have been saved, decades of political recriminations could have been averted.

The possible election of Vice President Hubert Humphrey could have given LBJ's Great Society a chance to work, alleviating the nation's poverty and reducing racial tensions. Johnson himself might have been viewed quite differently, recognized more as the President who enacted landmark legislation like the Civil Rights Act and Medicare, rather than the leader forever stained by the catastrophe of the Vietnam War and the divisions that it created at home.

Also, the course of the Republican Party and modern American politics might have been very different. The darkly paranoid Nixon might not have had the chance to infuse the GOP with his win-at-all-cost ethos. His campaign's brazen attempt to

ensure his victory in 1968 by sabotaging peace talks was so shocking then that Democrats shied away from discussing it publicly even after they found evidence.

The Scoop

In other words, much was at stake on Oct. 28, 1968, when Deepe cabled her source information to her Christian Science Monitor editors. But she heard nothing back, even after the South Vietnamese government surprisingly backed out of attending planned peace talks in Paris.

Finally, on Nov. 4 in Saigon (and Nov. 3 in Washington), she fashioned her information into an article and submitted it for publication. Her draft began: "Purported political encouragement from the Richard Nixon camp was a significant factor in the last-minute decision of President [Nguyen van] Thieu's refusal to send a delegation to the Paris peace talks at least until the American Presidential election is over."

In her e-mail to me, Deepe (who now uses her married name Keever) recalled that "The Monitor deleted those references [to collaboration between the Nixon team and the Saigon government] and picked up much of the rest of my article" for stories that were published.

The editors told "me that my lead had been 'trimmed and softened' because the editors could get no confirmation and thus without it, they could not print such sweeping charges before the election," Deepe said in the e-mail.

But Deepe had no idea how high up her story had gone and how close it had come to changing history.

What happened to Deepe's scoop remained a mystery to her for more than 43 years until I published [a story](#) on March 3, 2012, after reviewing tapes of previously secret White House phone calls and accessing a onetime classified file at the LBJ presidential library in Austin, Texas. [I subsequently tracked down Deepe, who now lives in Hawaii, and sent her the article.]

In those White House calls and in the file, which Johnson's national security adviser Walt Rostow labeled "The X Envelope," was the back story of what happened to Deepe's scoop as LBJ personally wrestled with whether to confirm her information before the 1968 election.

It turned out that at about the same time Deepe was hearing about Nixon's gambit from South Vietnamese sources, Johnson was learning about it from American sources and from FBI wiretaps of the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington.

On Oct. 29, 1968, national security adviser Walt Rostow received word from his

brother, Eugene Rostow, who was Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, 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,” Eugene Rostow wrote in a memo.

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 second 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.” [To read Walt Rostow’s memo, click here, here and here.]

An Angry President

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 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.

On Oct. 31, at 4:09 p.m., Johnson his voice thick from a cold began working the phones, trying to counteract Nixon's gambit. 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 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."

Johnson 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."

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.

That night, Johnson announced a bombing halt of North Vietnam, a key step toward advancing the peace process. The North Vietnamese government was onboard for a negotiated peace.

However, on Nov. 2, 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 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.

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. "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.

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

What to Do?

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 Monitor’s Washington bureau was finally checking out Deepe’s story.

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 Deepe’s draft article. 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 Walt Rostow, Rusk 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."

Though sounding reluctant to go along, Johnson concurred with the judgment. 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."

Busy with Other News

Back in Saigon, Deepe was busy at work writing another story, "a play-by-play of the miscommunications between Thieu + top Vietnamese and U.S. Ambassador Bunker and U.S. envoys," she told me in the e-mail.

As for her erstwhile scoop about the Nixon campaign sabotaging the peace talks, "I didn't have time to think much about it because on Nov. 5 I began filing the detailed play-by-play of the miscommunication between U.S. and Vietnamese leaders in Saigon."

So, on Nov. 5, the American people went to the polls not knowing about Nixon's sabotage of the peace talks. Many voters assumed that Johnson's last-ditch peace initiative had simply collapsed on its own or perhaps was just a political ploy to help Democrat Hubert Humphrey. Some thought that Nixon might be able to succeed where Johnson had failed.

In one of the closest elections in U.S. history, Nixon edged out Humphrey by less than 500,000 votes. After the election, Nixon and his friends in Saigon continued to stall Johnson on his last desperate efforts to bring the war to an end before he left the White House. Despite his bitter frustrations, Johnson kept the secret of Nixon's sabotage.

After becoming President, Nixon escalated the Vietnam War, expanding U.S. bombing raids across Indochina and ordering an invasion of Cambodia. Under Nixon, the war would grind on for another four years at the loss of 20,000 more U.S. troops and possibly a million more Vietnamese. In late 1972, Nixon agreed to a peace settlement similar to the terms available to Johnson in 1968.

For the Americans, the war was finally over, though it continued for the Vietnamese. Less than three years after Nixon's peace agreement, the South Vietnamese government fell to North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces. The conflict also spread into Cambodia with more disastrous consequences.

The cost of the war to the United States was incalculable. Besides the horrific death toll and the wasted money, the political cohesion of America was torn asunder. Parents turned against their children, hard-hats were pitted against hippies, and deep divisions within the national security elite gave rise to a new group of pro-war intellectuals known as the neoconservatives.

Belated Knowledge

Over the past four decades, bits and pieces have emerged, too, about the Nixon campaign's secret contacts with the South Vietnamese government, how Nixon's emissaries had urged Saigon to boycott the peace talks and thus deny Humphrey the last-minute boost in the polls that might have cost Nixon's his narrow victory. But the story has never been fully accepted as genuine history.

In early 1969, after seven years of covering the war, Deepe left Vietnam. She returned to the United States and married U.S. Navy officer Charles Keever. In the late 1970s, she moved to Hawaii and taught at the University of Hawaii.

She didn't think much more about Nixon's peace talk sabotage until she began working on her memoir, which is scheduled for publication next year. As part of her research, she read several books from insiders about their knowledge of Nixon's gambit.

"In my memoirs that are now at the copyeditor I had pieced together much of what happened," she said in the e-mail. "My piecing was based on [former Ambassador] Bui Diem's book, *In the Jaws of History*; Larry Berman's *No Peace, No Honor* and *The Palace File* by [Thieu's adviser Nguyen Tien] Hung and [Jerrold L.] Schecter."

But Deepe/Keever said she was unaware that her story had gone directly to President Johnson until she read my article about "The X Envelope." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[LBJ's 'X' File on Nixon's 'Treason.'](#)"]

"This was the news bulletin that I learned from your story based on your investigative reporting and so I really appreciate your digging and writing," she said. "I had no such idea about my lead being discussed by LBJ and others."

As for her thoughts about what might have happened if history had taken a different fork in the road if Johnson had overruled his advisers and confirmed her story, Deepe/Keever wrote:

"If Johnson had confirmed my story or the Monitor had run it as filed, it's hard for me to say what the impact would have been on the election. However, given how narrow Nixon's margin of victory was, certainly Johnson's confirmation might have swayed enough votes to be decisive.

"Hard for me to say without doing my own legwork, but polls I've come across indicate that might have been the case. Bui Diem quotes William Safire saying that Thieu made Nixon president.

"Tho[ugh] I can't judge the impact of pre-election news about the Nixon camp's liaison with Thieu, I think the more interesting question for me is: What would the U.S. and Vietnam be like if Humphrey had won?

"I think the final outcome would ultimately be the same for Vietnam, with the Communists seizing control of the South, perhaps via a coalition government to permit the U.S. to save face.

"And the war would have been shorter and less bloody without the incursions and bombing in Laos and Cambodia. Far fewer casualties and less cost to the treasuries on all sides."

That, however, was the road not taken.

[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.
