

# 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 20<sup>th</sup> [Inauguration Day] and we think that’s a mistake.”

That evening at 9:23, Nixon [called](#) Johnson from Key Biscayne, Florida, where Nixon was taking a vacation after the grueling election. Nixon sounded confident and relaxed, even as Johnson continued to push regarding the peace talks. Johnson recounted the evidence of the continued interference by Nixon’s emissaries and even described the Republican motivation for disrupting the talks, speaking of himself in the third person.

“Johnson was going to have a bombing pause to try to elect Humphrey; they [the South Vietnamese] ought to hold out because Nixon will not sell you out like the Democrats sold out China,” Johnson said.

“I think they’ve been talking to [Vice President-elect Spiro] Agnew,” Johnson continued. “They’ve been quoting you [Nixon] indirectly, that the thing they ought to do is to just not show up at any [peace] conference and wait until you come into office.

“Now they’ve started that [boycott] and that’s bad. They’re killing Americans every day. I have that [story of the peace-talk sabotage] documented. There’s not any question but that’s happening. That’s the story, Dick, and it’s a sordid story. I don’t want to say that to the country, because that’s not good.”

Faced with Johnson’s threat, Nixon promised to tell the South Vietnamese officials to reverse themselves and join the peace talks. However, nothing changed.

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

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

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

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

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

leaders had even slipped campaign cash to Nixon representatives.”

### **‘Lady Still Operational’**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **More Dead**

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Nixon discussed the 1968 bugging in his Oval Office meetings about Watergate as early as July 1, 1972. According to Nixon's White House tapes, his aide Charles Colson touched off Nixon's musings by noting that a newspaper column claimed that the Democrats had bugged the telephones of Anna Chennault in 1968 when she was serving as Nixon's intermediary to Thieu.

"Oh," Nixon responded, "in '68, they bugged our phones too."

Colson: "And that this was ordered by Johnson."

Nixon: "That's right"

Colson: "And done through the FBI. My God, if we ever did anything like that you'd have the "

Nixon: "Yes. For example, why didn't we bug [the Democrats' 1972 presidential nominee George] McGovern, because after all he's affecting the peace negotiations?"

Colson: "Sure."

Nixon: "That would be exactly the same thing."

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

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

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

leading him to believe that the FBI bugging was more extensive than it was. According to Nixon's White House tapes, he pressed Haldeman on Jan. 8, 1973, to get the story about the 1968 bugging into the Washington Star.

"You don't really have to have hard evidence, Bob," Nixon told Haldeman. "You're not trying to take this to court. All you have to do is to have it out, just put it out as authority, and the press will write the Goddamn story, and the Star will run it now."

Haldeman, however, insisted on checking the facts. In *The Haldeman Diaries*, published in 1994, Haldeman included an entry dated Jan. 12, 1973, which contains his book's only deletion for national security reasons.

"I talked to [former Attorney General John] Mitchell on the phone," Haldeman wrote, "and he said [FBI official Cartha] DeLoach had told him he was up to date on the thing. A *Star* reporter was making an inquiry in the last week or so, and LBJ got very hot and called Deke [DeLoach's nickname], and said to him that if the Nixon people are going to play with this, that he would release [deleted material, national security], saying that our side was asking that certain things be done.

"DeLoach took this as a direct threat from Johnson," Haldeman wrote. "As he [DeLoach] recalls it, bugging was requested on the [Nixon campaign] planes, but was turned down, and all they did was check the phone calls, and put a tap on the Dragon Lady [Anna Chennault]."

In other words, Nixon's threat to raise the 1968 bugging was countered by Johnson, who threatened to finally reveal that Nixon's campaign had sabotaged the Vietnam peace talks. The stakes were suddenly raised. However, events went in a different direction.

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

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

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

Watergate.

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

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

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

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

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

### **An October Reprise?**

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

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

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

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

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

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## LBJ’s ‘X’ File on Nixon’s ‘Treason’

**From the Archive:** The letter to Iran from 47 Republican senators, seeking to kill President Obama’s talks on limiting Iran’s nuclear program, recalls other GOP sabotage of foreign policy by Democratic presidents, including Richard Nixon’s scheme to stop a Vietnam peace deal in 1968, as 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 20<sup>th</sup> [Inauguration Day] and we think that’s a mistake.”

That evening at 9:23, Nixon called Johnson from Key Biscayne, Florida, where Nixon was taking a vacation after the grueling election. Nixon sounded confident and relaxed, even as Johnson continued to push regarding the peace talks. Johnson recounted the evidence of the continued interference by Nixon’s emissaries and even described the Republican motivation for disrupting the talks, speaking of himself in the third person.

“Johnson was going to have a bombing pause to try to elect Humphrey; they [the South Vietnamese] ought to hold out because Nixon will not sell you out like the Democrats sold out China,” Johnson said.

“I think they’ve been talking to [Vice President-elect Spiro] Agnew,” Johnson continued. “They’ve been quoting you [Nixon] indirectly, that the thing they ought to do is to just not show up at any [peace] conference and wait until you come into office.

“Now they’ve started that [boycott] and that’s bad. They’re killing Americans every day. I have that [story of the peace-talk sabotage] documented. There’s not any question but that’s happening. That’s the story, Dick, and it’s a sordid story. I don’t want to say that to the country, because that’s not good.”

Faced with Johnson’s threat, Nixon promised to tell the South Vietnamese officials to reverse themselves and join the peace talks. However, nothing changed.

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

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

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

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

Columnists Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson noted in a Nov. 17 [column](#) that Johnson "learned that Saigon's Ambassador Bui Diem had been in touch secretly with Richard Nixon's people. There were unconfirmed reports that South Vietnamese leaders had even slipped campaign cash to Nixon representatives."

### **'Lady Still Operational'**

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

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

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

Ottenad outlined the activities of Anna Chennault on behalf of the campaign and pressed Rostow to confirm that the administration was aware of the subterfuge. Rostow [responded](#), "I have not one word to say about that matter."

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

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

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

Even in retirement, Rostow remained mum about the Chennault episode, rebuffing another overture from Ottenad on Feb. 11, 1970. Ottenad also approached ex-President Johnson, but he too chose to hold his tongue, though his legacy had been devastated by his conduct of the Vietnam War and by his failure to end it.

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

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

## **More Dead**

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

In those four years, the war bitterly divided the United States, as anti-war

protests turned increasingly confrontational; parents turned against their children and children against their parents; "hard-hats" attacked "hippies"; Nixon baited one group of angry protesters with his "V" for victory sign and called other protesters "bums"; four students were gunned down at Kent State.

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

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

Before U.S. participation in the war was finally brought to a close in 1973, on terms similar to what had been available to President Johnson in 1968, a million more Vietnamese were estimated to have died. Those four years also cost the lives of an additional 20,763 U.S. soldiers, with 111,230 wounded.

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

Nixon discussed the 1968 bugging in his Oval Office meetings about Watergate as early as July 1, 1972. According to Nixon's White House tapes, his aide Charles Colson touched off Nixon's musings by noting that a newspaper column claimed that the Democrats had bugged the telephones of Anna Chennault in 1968 when she was serving as Nixon's intermediary to Thieu.

"Oh," Nixon responded, "in '68, they bugged our phones too."

Colson: "And that this was ordered by Johnson."

Nixon: "That's right"

Colson: "And done through the FBI. My God, if we ever did anything like that you'd have the "

Nixon: "Yes. For example, why didn't we bug [the Democrats' 1972 presidential

nominee George] McGovern, because after all he's affecting the peace negotiations?"

Colson: "Sure."

Nixon: "That would be exactly the same thing."

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

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

Hoover apparently had given Nixon a garbled version of what had happened, leading him to believe that the FBI bugging was more extensive than it was. According to Nixon's White House tapes, he pressed Haldeman on Jan. 8, 1973, to get the story about the 1968 bugging into the Washington Star.

"You don't really have to have hard evidence, Bob," Nixon told Haldeman. "You're not trying to take this to court. All you have to do is to have it out, just put it out as authority, and the press will write the Goddamn story, and the Star will run it now."

Haldeman, however, insisted on checking the facts. In *The Haldeman Diaries*, published in 1994, Haldeman included an entry dated Jan. 12, 1973, which contains his book's only deletion for national security reasons.

"I talked to [former Attorney General John] Mitchell on the phone," Haldeman wrote, "and he said [FBI official Cartha] DeLoach had told him he was up to date on the thing. A *Star* reporter was making an inquiry in the last week or so, and LBJ got very hot and called Deke [DeLoach's nickname], and said to him that if the Nixon people are going to play with this, that he would release [deleted material, national security], saying that our side was asking that certain things be done.

"DeLoach took this as a direct threat from Johnson," Haldeman wrote. "As he [DeLoach] recalls it, bugging was requested on the [Nixon campaign] planes, but was turned down, and all they did was check the phone calls, and put a tap on

the Dragon Lady [Anna Chennault].”

In other words, Nixon’s threat to raise the 1968 bugging was countered by Johnson, who threatened to finally reveal that Nixon’s campaign had sabotaged the Vietnam peace talks. The stakes were suddenly raised. However, events went in a different direction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She quoted Nixon aide John Mitchell as calling her a few days before the 1968

election and telling her: "I'm speaking on behalf of Mr. Nixon. It's very important that our Vietnamese friends understand our Republican position and I hope you made that clear to them." But still there was no outcry for a serious investigation.

### **An October Reprise?**

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

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

Wouldn't these Democrats be just as susceptible as Johnson's team was to appeals that telling the whole sordid tale wouldn't be good for the country? The Democrats had even taken a strange sort of pride in keeping these dirty Republican secrets secret.

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

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

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

When I asked him why the Democrats so often retreated in the face of fierce Republican resistance, he explained that the Watergate scandal though it led to the ruin of one Republican president had taught the Republicans how to thwart



serious inquiries: “What [the Republicans] learned from Watergate was not ‘don’t do it,’ but ‘cover it up more effectively.’ They have learned that they have to frustrate congressional oversight and press scrutiny in a way that will avoid another major scandal.”

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

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

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

Indeed, if Rostow had had his way, “The ‘X’ envelope” today would still be locked away from the American people for another decade and possibly 50 years longer.

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

**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](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).**

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## When ‘Lesser-Evil’ Misses the Point

The American Left is engaged in its quadrennial debate, whether to vote for “the lesser evil” Democrat or maintain political purity and either boycott the

election or cast a ballot for a minor-party candidate. A similar argument in 1968 helped change the course of U.S. history, Ted Lieberman recalls.

By Ted Lieberman

I get uneasy when I see liberals and progressives complaining so vigorously about President Barack Obama's lack of accomplishments. Sure, the last four years have seen many mistakes and disappointments by the White House. But when I think about the realistic choices in the 2012 election, I remember with embarrassment my own private scandal from many years ago.

Okay, it's time to come clean. Remember the election of Richard Nixon in 1968? That was my fault.

So there I am, a college sophomore, helping to run a local campaign office in Rockville Centre for Allard Lowenstein, an antiwar Democrat running for Congress in the Fifth District on Long Island. It's the night before the election, and we are busy finalizing plans to contact voters, offer rides to the polls, respond to election irregularities, and flood our district with flyers.

Four nights before, President Lyndon Johnson had announced a partial halt in U.S. bombing of North Vietnam as a way of jump-starting the peace negotiations in Paris – and helping Vice President Hubert Humphrey win a close race against Republican Richard Nixon.

Lowenstein, who did more than anyone to dissuade Johnson from seeking reelection, who recruited Eugene McCarthy and then Robert Kennedy to run against him, has so far refused to endorse Humphrey. Now, he says in a large meeting of staff and volunteers, the bombing halt and Humphrey's recent speech in Salt Lake City on the war have convinced him that endorsing Humphrey is necessary. Many of us are dismayed at his decision and, though we continue to work hard for Lowenstein, resolve not to help Humphrey.

As we work on election eve, a union rep comes in and, noting the lack of any campaign materials for Humphrey, starts loading up our front table with flyers, brochures and bumper stickers. We coolly inform him not to leave those materials there, as this office is not supporting Humphrey. Angry and incredulous, he storms out. We pat ourselves on the back for our moral conviction and work through the night to prepare for the big day.

Election Day is hectic, and we're still at the campaign party at 3 a.m. the day after. Lowenstein has won by a narrow margin, and the vote for President is still too close to call, with Humphrey trailing slightly.

You know the end of the story. Nixon wins, keeps the war going, expands it to Cambodia and Laos, wiretaps his friends as well as his enemies, amasses huge amounts of illegal slush funds, assembles a secret spy team known as the Plumbers, obstructs justice, and ultimately goes down in flames, resigning from office in 1974 while facing near-certain impeachment by the House of Representatives.

And why did Nixon win in 1968? Plenty of reasons, but the most immediate, and the one we had some control over, was the lack of effort by antiwar Democrats and the New Left who saw no important distinction between the candidates.

Maybe that's true if you take the 30,000-foot view of politics but almost no one lives their lives at 30,000 feet. They live on the ground, with their hopes and fears as they raise families, seek and keep employment, pay the mortgage, and cope with the outside world. Here on the ground who becomes President means the difference between health and safety regulations being enforced or ignored, between the water becoming more drinkable or more dangerous, between corruption being attacked or encouraged, between quality health care becoming more accessible or further out of reach, between pointless wars being encouraged or avoided.

The 2012 election presents a pretty stark choice. Either you support President Obama and fight for a government responsive to the needs of living human beings, based on the principle of one person, one vote or you go with Mitt Romney and the Republican vision of one dollar, one vote, where corporations and fetuses are people but women and workers are second-class citizens.

If Romney wins, Wall Street will be invincible and Sesame Street will be toast. Oh and the Supreme Court? Kiss it goodbye for a generation.

Some lefties talk about the trap of electoral politics, and how voting distracts from the real world of organizing. I'm all in favor of organizing (quick which candidate used to be a community organizer?), but no one says organizers can't take 30 minutes one day every two years to vote. Voting is not the denial of popular sovereignty but its affirmation.

This is not about the lesser of two evils. This is a choice between two roads, between moving however slowly and haltingly to protect citizens through democratically elected government; or moving further towards *de facto* government by corporate giants. Your vote, your choice.

But don't make that stupid, naive decision that it doesn't matter. Even though Humphrey took New York by over 350,000 votes, I still feel like I learned the hard way.

Ted Lieverman is a free-lance photographer and former lawyer in Philadelphia.

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## The Vanity of Perfectionism

**Exclusive:** As President Obama faces a tough reelection fight, some on the Left vow to sit it out or vote for a third party, saying support for Obama would dirty them. But there is another moral imperative, to mitigate the harm a U.S. president can inflict on the world's people and the planet itself, says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Some Americans view elections as a time to express their disappointment or even their anger at the shortcomings of the major party candidates closest to their own positions, a tendency particularly noticeable on the Left. In recent decades, this behavior has contributed to a string of Democratic defeats at the presidential level Hubert Humphrey in 1968, Jimmy Carter in 1980 and Al Gore in 2000 as well as key setbacks in Congress in 1980, 1994 and 2010.

And, with its disproportionate prevalence on the American Left, this voting pattern now threatens to cost Barack Obama a second term. Some on the Left feel no compunction about aiding in Obama's defeat even if it means installing Mitt Romney, an unabashed one-percenter in the White House.

Romney also would likely be accompanied by a Republican-controlled Congress with a mandate to complete the dismantling of the New Deal at home and, abroad, to extend the Afghan War and possibly start a new war with Iran. So the question is: should politics be an expression of your feelings or your expectation of consequences?

For the past 40-plus years, this "lesser-evil" debate has been fought primarily on the Left in America. By contrast, the Right tends to challenge Republican candidates in primaries but then lines up behind the party nominees whoever they are.

Progressives have shown less determination to fight for control of the Democratic Party, preferring instead to vote for third-party candidates or simply express their displeasure by sitting out November elections.

While brushing aside alarms about the dangers from the Republicans, many progressives instead focus on the failures and misdeeds of the Democrats.

Humphrey was too slow in opposing the Vietnam War; Carter shifted too much to the center; Gore supported the NAFTA trade agreement and military intervention in Yugoslavia; and Obama continued prosecuting the “war on terror” (albeit by a different name and in a more targeted fashion) and didn’t do enough to enact progressive priorities.

### **Much Worse?**

While there is surely merit in all these complaints, the other side of the debate would note – from a progressive perspective – that the Republican alternative is often worse, sometimes much worse.

Indeed, one way to view this question is to ask: What might the world look like if the “lesser-evil” Democrat had prevailed in those earlier elections? What if Richard Nixon had lost in 1968, Ronald Reagan in 1980, and George W. Bush in 2000? Would Americans and the people of the planet be better off?

We now know, for instance, that in 1968, President Lyndon Johnson was serious about negotiating an end to the Vietnam War and was closing in on that objective. The evidence is also overwhelming that Nixon’s campaign went behind Johnson’s back to sabotage the peace talks, denying Vice President Humphrey a last-minute boost and enabling Nixon to hang on for a narrow victory.

Nixon then continued the Vietnam War for four more years, while infusing U.S. politics with his paranoid win-at-all-cost poison.

Though many progressives in 1968 may have felt justified in expressing their anger at Johnson and Humphrey by boycotting the Democratic campaign, the practical effect of that behavior was to turn the U.S. government over to a dangerous individual, Nixon, whose policies not only extended the unimaginable horror across Southeast Asia but helped overthrow Chile’s democratic government in 1973 and unleashed a spasm of right-wing terror across Latin America.

For all his faults on the Vietnam War, Humphrey would have supported Johnson’s efforts to bring the war to a close quickly and would have worked to refocus the U.S. government on domestic priorities, like poverty and racism. Humphrey had long been a stalwart for civil rights and economic fairness. The United States also would have been spared the Watergate scandal and the ugly way it changed American politics.

### **Anger at Carter**

In 1980, many progressives were angry with President Carter for shifting the Democratic Party toward the center, a trend that prompted a primary challenge from Sen. Edward Kennedy.

After defeating Kennedy, Carter had trouble rallying the Left behind him heading into the fall election against Ronald Reagan (whose campaign apparently had learned some of Nixon's old tricks and undercut Carter's efforts to negotiate freedom for 52 Americans held hostage in Iran).

It was common to think then and it is conventional wisdom now that Carter was an inept president who lacked a grand vision and over-emphasized issues like alternative energy, human rights, arms control with the Soviets, and peace in the Middle East.

In retrospect, however, a Carter second term could have proved crucial in weaning Americans from their dependence on fossil fuels, restraining right-wing repression in Latin America and elsewhere, pushing nuclear non-proliferation, and pressuring Israel to reach a two-state solution with the Palestinians.

In 1980, the anti-Carter intensity on the Right was driven by those same priorities. Carter was a threat to Big Oil which wanted nothing to do with alternative energy, a threat to Cold Warriors who wanted to heat up international tensions (though the Soviet Union was in a steep decline), and a threat to the Likud's strategy of blocking a Palestinian state by moving more and more Jewish settlers onto the West Bank.

The election of Ronald Reagan along with the Republican victory in the Senate sent the United States off on a very different course than the one Carter had charted.

Reagan more than halved the top marginal income tax rate for the rich; he expanded the military budget even as the Soviets were seeking detente; he created a gigantic federal deficit; he smashed unions; he slashed federal regulations, including on financial institutions; he gutted Carter's programs for alternative energy and reversed environmental policies; he collaborated with death squads across Latin America and in Africa; he vastly expanded U.S. support for Islamic fundamentalists fighting a Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan; he looked the other way as Pakistan developed a nuclear bomb; and he put Middle East peace on the backburner as Israel bolstered the West Bank settlements and invaded Lebanon.

Ronald Reagan also imposed a new orthodoxy on the way journalists, scholars and politicians could talk about the United States. Whereas the 1970s offered a brief window for looking back honestly at the many wrongful acts committed by the U.S. government, the 1980s saw an enforced "patriotism" that frowned on as Reagan's UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick put it those who would "blame America first." Critical voices were marginalized, controversialized and effectively silenced.

While it's impossible to chart alternative histories precisely, it is safe to say that many of America's problems were made worse by Reagan's presidency.

He began the systematic savaging of the Great Middle Class, widening the gap between the rich and everyone else; he sharply increased the national debt; he pushed the deregulation frenzy on Wall Street; he continued America's dependence on fossil fuels and disdained environmental safeguards; he alienated Washington from much of the Western Hemisphere by supporting state terror across Central America; he transformed Afghanistan into a home for Islamic terrorism; he permitted nuclear proliferation in South Asia; he allowed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to fester.

It is perhaps a commentary on how Reagan neutered the U.S. press corps and duped the American people that he is remembered as one of the greatest U.S. presidents. To this day, almost no one in Washington's mainstream dares to speak critically about the real effect that Reagan's presidency had on the country and the world.

### **Bush v. Gore**

In 2000, the United States was at another crossroads. Eight years under President Bill Clinton had addressed some of the problems left behind by 12 years of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

For instance, by slightly raising the top marginal tax rate on the rich, restraining spending and riding the wave of the new Internet economy, Clinton had succeeded in eliminating the federal deficit. By the end of Clinton's presidency with employment expanding and poverty shrinking government budget estimates foresaw the complete elimination of the national debt.

But Clinton had upset the American Left by continuing many of the tough-guy policies from the Reagan-Bush-41 era. Clinton kept in place harsh sanctions against Iraq and intervened militarily in sectarian clashes in the old Yugoslavia. He also had worked with Republicans to limit welfare, to expand trade agreements and to loosen more regulations on the banking system.

So, when his Vice President Al Gore faced off against Texas Gov. George W. Bush, some on the Left decided it was time to teach those "triangulating" Democrats a lesson. However, instead of challenging Gore for the Democratic Party nomination in the way that the Right has reshaped the Republican Party these progressives supported Green Party candidate Ralph Nader and ignored warnings that this strategy might doom Gore's election chances.

Nader encouraged this result by telling young and impressionable voters that Gore was "Tweedle-dee" to Bush's "Tweedle-dum." Nader ran on the slogan, "not a

dime's worth of difference" between Bush and Gore. On the Left, many activists appeared persuaded that there really were no meaningful distinctions between Bush and Gore.

However, in retrospect, there were key differences. Experienced on the world stage, Gore was alert to the terror threat from al-Qaeda, while Bush pooh-pooed the danger. He blew off a CIA warning in August 2001 and then sat dumbstruck in a second-grade classroom reading "The Pet Goat" on 9/11 when two hijacked commercial jets struck the Twin Towers in New York and another headed toward the Pentagon.

Bush then followed the advice of neoconservative advisers – rushing through a retaliatory invasion of Afghanistan and letting al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden slip away – so the U.S. military could move on to invading Iraq, which had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks.

The Iraq invasion and resulting chaos led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and ironically helped al-Qaeda establish a foothold in the Sunni areas of Iraq. Meanwhile, Bush's neglect of the Afghan conflict allowed al-Qaeda's allies, the Taliban, to stage a comeback there.

If Gore had been president, it's very possible 9/11 never would have happened and even if it did Gore would have almost surely responded in a less blunderbuss way. Gore also had a strong record for respecting the constitutional rights of Americans and the principles of international law, while Bush treated both as inconveniences to be ignored or overridden.

Bush also enacted more tax cuts weighted toward the wealthy, blowing a huge hole in the federal budget and hollowing out more of the middle class. Bush appointed two more right-wing justices to the U.S. Supreme Court, John Roberts and Samuel Alito, key votes in the 2010 *Citizens United* case, which opened the floodgates to special interest spending to buy elections.

But perhaps most significantly, Gore cared about the looming existential crisis of global warming, while Bush treated the issue with disdain, thus contributing to the hostility now expressed by right-wingers who depict the science on climate change as a myth and as part of some grand socialist conspiracy.

If the planet continues toward climate devastation with ice caps melting, sea levels rising and droughts disrupting food supplies a key turning point will have been the presidency of George W. Bush, rather than the presidency of Al Gore.

While many institutions and individuals share the blame for installing Bush in the White House, part of the responsibility must fall on the Green Party and



Ralph Nader, who helped Bush get close enough to steal Florida's electoral votes and thus the presidency. The bitter irony is that the one major mark that the American Green Party may have on history is enabling an anti-environmental president to put the world on course for ecological destruction.

Yes, I know Nader and the Green Party deny all responsibility for this catastrophe; they point their fingers at everybody else including Al Gore. But their arguments are sophistry. The truth is they ignored many timely warnings about the danger that ultimately came to pass; they knew they were playing chicken with the planet; their reckless words (about "Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee" and "not a dime's worth of difference") were unsafe at any speed.

### **Obama's Reelection?**

Which brings us to 2012 and what many on the Left insist is another meaningless election between two politicians whose only differences are cosmetic. We are told again that it doesn't matter whether President Obama gets a second term or if Mitt Romney and the Tea-Party Republicans take full control of the U.S. government.

We're told that elections simply don't matter, even if these right-wing Republicans will likely gut what's left of the New Deal and the Great Society; will further concentrate wealth at the top; will free Wall Street from even the modest burden of the Dodd-Frank regulations; will drive more middle-class families into poverty; will let thousands of Americans die prematurely without health care; will put neocons firmly back in charge of U.S. foreign policy with plans to extend the Afghan War and start possible new wars in Syria and Iran.

After all, Barack Obama has not been perfect on these issues. He has blood on his own hands. He has made many compromises. He is far from the socialist that some Tea Partiers claim he is. I'm often told by progressives that they are "disappointed" in Obama as if their feelings are the most important part of this equation.

It does seem that some on the Left will only be satisfied with perfection. They act more like critics whose job is to find fault with a politician than as participants in a political process. "Obama should have done this; Obama should have done that."

Indeed, some behave as if what's truly important is that they be recognized as staking out the "perfect" the most uncompromising position, regardless of how impractical that stance might be or what harmful side effects it might have.

This vanity of perfectionism sometimes takes precedence even if it may help empower an unstable or incompetent U.S. leader who would implement horribly

destructive policies that could kill millions.

What some on the Left fail to grasp is that who is elected President of the United States even with the deep gradations of gray among the major-party choices can mean life or death to people around the planet, even life or death for the planet itself.

So, this choice over how to vote should not be a decision based upon personal feelings or one's flattering desire for a perfect self-image. The American people are hiring the person who will be entrusted with the nuclear codes, who will have the power to start wars, who will decide whether to take action on global warming.

Real people in other countries live or die by such U.S. decisions. Even if some Americans feel that voting for some imperfect candidate is too degrading, too compromising, the decision can have devastating consequences for others.

Yes, there is an element of triage here, since neither Obama nor Romney would be a pacifist. Some people will die regardless of who's elected, but there can be an order of magnitude difference. There is a distinction between targeted killings of al-Qaeda operatives (even with "collateral" deaths of people in the vicinity) and the mass slaughter inflicted by fullscale war.

At minimum, it would seem to be the duty of American voters to minimize the damage that their country might inflict on people in faraway lands. Even if perfection is not an option, one of the choices is likely to cause fewer deaths and wreak less havoc than the other. It may be impossible to know the future but history can be some guide.

While this responsibility to mitigate harm to the world may seem unsatisfying to Americans who yearn for something much closer to moral purity and who don't want to sully their consciences with such moral relativism this lesser-evilism does have a profoundly moral basis.

Just stop and ask: as imperfect as Humphrey, Carter and Gore were, would the world be in a better place if they had been elected in 1968, 1980 and 2000, respectively.

Would there likely be fewer people living in poverty in the United States or dying without health care? Would American politics be more democratic and less corrupt than it is today? Would the environment be less endangered? Would science and reason be disparaged the way they are today?

Would a lot of innocent Vietnamese, Cambodians, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, Afghans, Iraqis and people from many other countries be alive

today? Might they have escaped horrible deaths, rapes and maiming? While no one can say for sure, you can make a reasonable guess.

So, in the end, what's more important? What's more moral? The vanity of perfectionism when perfection is not an option or doing the imperfect thing to save some innocent lives and maybe save the planet?

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](http://neckdeepbook.com). His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.

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## The Price of Political Purity

**Special Report:** Some activists on the Left are rejecting President Obama and the Democrats even if that means electoral victories for Mitt Romney, the neocons and the Tea Party. But Sam Brown, a veteran of a similar debate in 1968, cautions against the allure of political purity, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In 1968, Sam Brown, like many of his youthful contemporaries, was disgusted by the Vietnam War which had already claimed more than 30,000 American lives and killed countless Vietnamese. So, he poured his energy into Eugene McCarthy's anti-war campaign for the Democratic nomination, serving as McCarthy's Youth Coordinator.

Then, after McCarthy lost to Hubert Humphrey at the tumultuous Chicago convention, the 25-year-old Brown faced a tough choice: whether to sit out the general election in protest of Humphrey's support for President Lyndon Johnson's war policies or accept Humphrey as superior to his Republican rival, Richard Nixon.

I contacted Brown about that old dilemma in the context of my recent reporting about Johnson's desperate bid to negotiate an end to the Vietnam War in 1968 and

the now-declassified evidence that Nixon's campaign sabotaged those efforts through back-channel contacts, encouraging the South Vietnamese government to boycott Johnson's peace talks.

Of course, in 1968, Brown was unaware of what Johnson privately called Nixon's "treason," in part, because Johnson chose to keep the evidence secret, rather than risk releasing it before the election only to have Nixon still win and start off with a deeply marred presidency.

Brown's 1968 dilemma also has recurred periodically for Democrats as some on the Left prefer to cast votes for third parties or simply not vote to protest some shortcoming of the Democratic nominee even if the Republican alternative is likely to pursue more warlike policies and roll back programs aimed at helping the poor and the middle class.

In 1980, many on the Left abandoned Jimmy Carter because of his tacking to the political center, thus clearing the way for Ronald Reagan. In 2000, nearly three million voters cast ballots for Ralph Nader (who dubbed Al Gore "Tweedle-Dum" to George W. Bush's "Tweedle-Dee"), thus helping Bush get close enough in Florida to steal the White House (with further help from five Republican partisans on the U.S. Supreme Court). Today, some on the Left are turning their backs on Barack Obama because he has disappointed them on health-care reform, the Afghan War and other policies.

It seems that on the Left even more than on the Right there is this quadrennial debate over whether one should withhold support from the Democratic nominee out of a sense of moral purity or hold one's nose and accept the "lesser evil," i.e. the major-party candidate who will inflict the least damage on Americans and the world.

Yet, as intensely as some on the Left disdain President Obama's actions and inaction today, the cause for anger in 1968 was much greater. After running as the "peace" candidate in 1964, President Johnson had sharply escalated the U.S. involvement in Vietnam with Vice President Humphrey loyally at his side.

Then, in 1968, the bloody Tet offensive shattered U.S. assurances of impending victory; Johnson confronted a surprisingly strong challenge from Sen. Eugene McCarthy and decided not to seek reelection; Sen. Robert F. Kennedy entered the race, but was assassinated (as was civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.); and the Democratic convention in Chicago descended into chaos as police clashed with anti-war protesters on the streets.

### **Appeal to the McCarthy Youth**

It was in that maelstrom of tragedy and anger that Sam Brown, like other

McCarthy (and Kennedy) supporters had to decide whether to line up behind Humphrey, who was admired for his support for social and economic justice (even if he was condemned for his loyalty to Johnson), or to stay on the sidelines (and risk Nixon's victory).

In a recent interview, Brown told me that he was on the fence about which way to go, saying his decision depended on Humphrey making a clean break with Johnson on the war. There was a widely held view at the time that Johnson was so psychologically "owned by the war" – and his responsibility for the terrible bloodshed – that he couldn't take the necessary steps to make peace, Brown said.

Humphrey did not want to betray Johnson but understood that his campaign depended on his reuniting the shattered Democratic Party. So, Humphrey sent emissaries to approach Brown and other anti-war activists.

"The campaign in a formal way reached out to those who had supported McCarthy," Brown recalled. The campaign's emissary to about a dozen activists was Vermont Gov. Philip Hoff, who had "cred" because he was an early opponent of the Vietnam War, Brown said.

But Hoff faced a hard sell. "We were so bitter about Johnson that we weren't going to listen to Humphrey," Brown said about himself and some of the other activists. "It can't be just, 'he's a good guy, trust us.' You had to give us something to believe in. There needed to be some lifeline thrown."

The anti-war activists also thought they might be able to use Humphrey's outreach to pry him away from his pro-war position. "We had a little leverage now to move Humphrey," Brown said. "It sounds pretentious. I had just turned 25 years old" but simply endorsing him "would have given up all the leverage we had to move Humphrey on the war."

Brown was one of the McCarthy people who ultimately withheld support for Humphrey as the Vice President continued to balk at repudiating the war. So, as Nixon built up an imposing lead in the presidential race, Brown returned to his home state of Iowa to work for anti-war Senate candidate Harold Hughes.

Humphrey waited until Sept. 30 before he gave a speech in Salt Lake City, Utah, calling for a unilateral U.S. bombing halt. "Humphrey didn't break with the President until way too late," Brown said. "It was just too late to turn that ship around."

However, Humphrey's speech helped close the gap against Nixon. There also was more happening on a possible peace deal behind the scenes. In October 1968, the North Vietnamese began to show flexibility toward Johnson's peace overtures and Johnson started pressing the South Vietnamese government to come onboard and

join peace talks in Paris.

Johnson kept the leading presidential candidates informed of the progress. Even though few Americans knew how close Johnson was to ending the war, Nixon was told and grew alarmed that a breakthrough on peace would put Humphrey over the top, another heartbreaking loss for Nixon.

### **Nixon's Back-Channels**

Yet, while Nixon was in the know on the Paris peace talks also getting tips from Henry Kissinger, an informal adviser to the negotiations Johnson was largely in the dark about Nixon's own channels to the South Vietnamese leadership.

Nixon's early outreach to Saigon included a private meeting with South Vietnam's Ambassador Bui Diem at the Hotel Pierre in New York City on July 12, 1968, attended by Nixon's campaign manager John Mitchell and one of his top fundraisers, China Lobby figure Anna Chennault.

At the end of the meeting, "Nixon thanked me for my visit and added that his staff would be in touch with me through John Mitchell and Anna Chennault," Bui Diem wrote, in his 1987 memoir, *In the Jaws of History*.

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

After the meeting with Nixon, Bui Diem said he grew more alienated from President Johnson and the Democrats as they pressed for peace talks to end the war.

"As the Democrats steered with all due haste away from the Indochinese involvement they had engineered, I was increasingly attracted to the Republican side," Bui Diem wrote. "By October [1968] I was back in touch with Anna, who was now co-chairman of Nixon's fundraising committee, and Senator John Tower, chairman of the Republican Key Issues Committee. I also got together with George [H.W.] Bush and other Republicans from whom I was trying to elicit support for a strong Vietnam policy."

Bui Diem acknowledged sending cables to Saigon, conveying the interest of the Nixon campaign in having President Nguyen van Thieu resist pressure to join the peace talks.

"I found a cable from October 23," Bui Diem wrote, "in which I had said, 'Many Republican friends have contacted me and encouraged us to stand firm. They were

alarmed by press reports to the effect that you [President Thieu] had already softened your position.'

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

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

### **Thieu's Version**

President Thieu's fullest account of the peace-talk gambit was recounted by his former aide, Nguyen Tien Hung, in *The Palace File* (coauthored with Jerrold Schecter). Hung/Schecter reported that "Anna Chennault visited Saigon frequently in 1968 to advise Thieu on Nixon's candidacy and his views on Vietnam. She told him [Thieu] then that Nixon would be a stronger supporter of Vietnam than Humphrey."

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

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

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

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

As Hung/Schecter wrote: "Throughout October 1968 Thieu tried to delay the Johnson bombing halt decision and an announcement of Paris Talks as long as possible to buy time for Nixon."

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

anticipation of a Nixon victory.

For instance, a “top secret” report on Oct. 23, 1968, report presumably based on National Security Agency’s electronic eavesdropping quotes Thieu as saying that the Johnson administration might halt U.S. bombing of North Vietnam as part of a peace gesture that would help Humphrey’s campaign, but that South Vietnam might not go along.

“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.” [For the document, [click here](#) and [here](#).]

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

### **Wall Street Intrigue**

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

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

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

“They would incite Saigon to be difficult, and Hanoi to wait. Part of his strategy was an expectation that an offensive would break out soon, that we would have to spend a great deal more (and incur more casualties) a fact which would 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, though Nixon's original Wall Street contact is not named and remains unknown to history.)

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

That same day, Johnson ordered FBI wiretaps of Americans in touch with the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington and quickly learned that Anna Chennault was holding curious meetings with South Vietnamese Ambassador Bui Diem.

### **Working the Phones**

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

"He better keep Mrs. Chennault and all this crowd tied up for a few days," Johnson told Dirksen on Oct. 31, 1968, according to a tape recording of the call released in 2008.

That night, Johnson announced a bombing halt intended to ensure North Vietnamese participation in the talks. The Democrats were finally taking the action that Brown and other anti-war activists wanted, but it was late in the game and many voters remained dubious over whether Johnson was serious or was engaging in a political stunt.

"The President had no credibility," said Brown. "When he said, 'I'm ending the war,' the assumption was that we'd bomb them back to the Stone Age."

However, the historical evidence now indicates that Johnson was serious about ending the war. Indeed, he apparently felt a powerful responsibility to do so before leaving office, possibly thinking that it was the only way to salvage his legacy. But he discovered that Nixon's operatives continued to obstruct the process.

On Nov. 2, 1968, Johnson learned that his protests had not shut down Nixon's gambit. 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, Walt Rostow noted that the reference to New Mexico "may indicate [Republican vice presidential nominee Spiro] Agnew is acting," since he had taken a campaign swing through the state.

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

"The agent [Chennault] says she's just talked to the boss in New Mexico and that he said that you must hold out, just hold on until after the election," Johnson said. "We know what Thieu is saying to them out there. We're pretty well informed at both ends."

Johnson then renewed his thinly veiled threat to go public. "I don't want to get this in the campaign," Johnson said, adding: "They oughtn't be doing this. This is treason."

Dirksen responded, "I know."

Johnson continued: "I think it would shock America if a principal candidate was playing with a source like this on a matter of this importance. I don't want to do that [go public]. They ought to know that we know what they're doing. I know who they're talking to. I know what they're saying."

The President also stressed the stakes involved, noting that the movement toward negotiations in Paris had contributed to a lull in the violence. "We've had 24 hours of relative peace," Johnson said. "If Nixon keeps the South Vietnamese away from the [peace] conference, well, that's going to be his responsibility. Up to this point, that's why they're not there. I had them signed onboard until this happened."

Dirksen: "I better get in touch with him, I think."

"They're contacting a foreign power in the middle of a war," Johnson said. "It's a damn bad mistake. And I don't want to say so. You just tell them that their people are messing around in this thing, and if they don't want it on the front pages, they better quit it."

### **A Worried Nixon**

After hearing from Dirksen, Nixon grew concerned that Johnson might just go public with his evidence of the conspiracy. At 1:54 p.m. on Nov. 3, trying to head off that possibility, Nixon spoke directly to Johnson, according to an audiotape released in 2008 by the LBJ Library.

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

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

Johnson recounted some of the chronology leading up to Oct. 28 when it appeared that South Vietnam was onboard for the peace talks. He added: "Then the traffic goes out that Nixon will do better by you. Now that goes to Thieu. I didn't say with your knowledge. I hope it wasn't."

"Huh, no," Nixon responded. "My God, I would never do anything to encourage Saigon not to come to the table. Good God, we want them over to Paris, we got to get them to Paris or you can't have a peace."

Nixon also insisted that he would do whatever President Johnson and Secretary of State Dean Rusk wanted, including going to Paris himself if that would help. "I'm not trying to interfere with your conduct of it; I'll only do what you and Rusk want me to do," Nixon said, recognizing how tantalizingly close Johnson was to a peace deal.

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

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

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

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

According to some reports, Nixon and his aides were gleeful after the conversation ended, believing they had tamped down Johnson's suspicions. However, privately, Johnson didn't believe Nixon's protestations of innocence.

### **A Last Chance**

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

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

Deepe's draft article began: "Purported political encouragement from the Richard Nixon camp was a significant factor in the last-minute decision of President Thieu's refusal to send a delegation to the Paris peace talks at least until the American Presidential election is over."

The Monitor's inquiry gave President Johnson one last chance to bring to light the Nixon campaign's gambit before voters went to the polls, albeit only on the day before and possibly not until the morning of the election when the Monitor could publish the story.

So, Johnson consulted with Rostow, Rusk and Defense Secretary Clark Clifford in a Nov. 4 conference call. The advisers were unanimous that Johnson shouldn't go public, citing the risk that the scandal would reflect badly on the U.S. government.

"Some elements of the story are so shocking in their nature that I'm wondering whether it would be good for the country to disclose the story and then possibly have a certain individual [Nixon] elected," Clifford said. "It could cast his whole administration under such doubt that I think it would be inimical to our country's interests."

Johnson concurred with the judgment, and an administration spokesman told Davis,

“Obviously I’m not going to get into this kind of thing in any way, shape or form,” according to another “eyes only” cable that Rostow sent Johnson. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “The Almost Scoop on Nixon’s ‘Treason.’”]

## **The Consequences**

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

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

On Nov. 7, Rostow passed along another report to Johnson about the thinking of South Vietnam’s leaders. The report quoted Major Bui Cong Minh, assistant armed forces attaché at the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, saying about the peace talks: “Major Minh expressed the opinion that the move by Saigon was to help presidential candidate Nixon, and that had Saigon gone to the conference table, presidential candidate Humphrey would probably have won.”

Johnson continued to hope that Nixon, having won the election, would join in pressing for Saigon’s participation in the peace talks and achieve a breakthrough before Johnson left office on Jan. 20, 1969. But the breakthrough was not to be, and Johnson went into retirement in silence about Nixon’s “treason.”

Johnson did, however, instruct Rostow to take with him the secret file of wiretaps and other evidence, which Rostow labeled “The ‘X’ Envelope.” (It remained unopened until the mid-1990s and has gradually been declassified since then.)

Contrary to the hopes of many Americans including some anti-war voters who cast their ballots for Nixon thinking he had a “secret plan” to end the war the new President had no intention to end the war quickly.

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

Hung/Schechter recounted Thieu explaining Nixon’s assurances in a later meeting with Taiwan’s leader Chiang Kai-shek. “He promised me eight years of strong support,” Thieu told Chiang. “Four years of military support during his first term in office and four years of economic support during his second term.

“By the time most of the Americans have withdrawn, so will the North Vietnamese; by then Saigon should be strong enough to carry on its own defense with only material support from the United States.”

Nixon’s plan proved unsuccessful. Yet, having allegedly made his secret commitment to the South Vietnamese regime, Nixon kept searching for violent new ways to get Thieu a better deal than Johnson would have offered. Seeking what he called “peace with honor,” Nixon invaded Cambodia and stepped up the bombing of North Vietnam.

Before U.S. combat 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-plus years also cost the lives of an additional 20,763 U.S. soldiers, with 111,230 wounded.

### **On to Watergate**

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

When it came to his 1972 reelection campaign, Nixon pushed more chips onto the table. Feeling that he had snookered the savvy Johnson, why not rig the entire democratic process by spreading dissension among the Democrats and hoodwinking the Democrats into selecting the weakest possible opponent?

But Nixon also fretted about his possible vulnerability to undisclosed information that the Democrats might have on him. After entering the White House, Nixon worried about Johnson’s file on the peace-talk gambit and those fears led Nixon into a frantic search for its location. He didn’t know that Johnson had ordered Walt Rostow to take the file out of the White House when Johnson departed on Jan. 20, 1969.

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

Though the investigations of Nixon’s Watergate-related dirty tricks forced him to resign in disgrace on Aug. 9, 1974, his legacy of ruthless politics lived on, in part, because he and his cohorts were never held accountable for their interference in the Vietnam peace talks. In fact, there was never an official inquiry into their actions.

Arguably, Nixon, the master political strategist, also succeeded in driving a permanent wedge into the Democrats' New Deal alliance. By dragging out the Vietnam War for four more years, Nixon managed to cleave the Democratic Party in two, carving away many "hard-hat" white voters from what they saw as "hippie" anti-war activists and their minority allies.

Reflecting on the consequences of the 1968 election and after seeing the latest evidence of Nixon's Vietnam "treason" Sam Brown said he regrets his decision to rebuff appeals for his support of Humphrey, especially since he thinks endorsements from former McCarthy activists might have erased Nixon's narrow victory margin.

"In '68, there was plenty of blame to go around," Brown said. "You had to forgive us somewhat."

Still, Brown acknowledged that American democracy could have gone in a much more positive direction if Nixon had been defeated. "What he did to our politics," Brown lamented. "He was every bit as duplicitous as people said he was, maybe more so."

On a personal level, Brown said his decision in 1968 still causes him pain and embarrassment. "I'm not proud about what I'm about to tell you," Brown said, adding that he cast his ballot for a minor third-party candidate as "a throwaway vote."

Brown said he justified his choice because he was living in Iowa, which was expected to go for Nixon anyway. However, in retrospect, he called his rationalization "a cop-out" and told me, "I wish I had voted for Humphrey even in a place that didn't count. In retrospect, everybody should have been for Humphrey."

There is a larger lesson from his youthful choice, Brown believes, understanding the danger of political purity. Brown, who later in his career ran the government ACTION agency for President Jimmy Carter and headed the U.S. mission to the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe for President Bill Clinton, worries that a return of this attitude among young activists could lead to Mitt Romney defeating President Barack Obama in 2012.

Brown said that on every important issue, "this guy [Obama] is 100 times better than the alternative" and that activists should put aside whatever disappointments they feel about Obama and not repeat the mistake of 1968.

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Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](http://neckdeepbook.com). His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.

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