

**Nixon at War**  
**Episode Two - Madame Chennault**  
**Release Date - June 21, 2021**

Where possible, we have included links to the archival audio or transcripts.

Key

*Bold = Narrator, Kurt Andersen*

*ADST = Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training*

*GBH = GBH Open Vault Collection*

*LBJL = Lyndon B. Johnson Library*

*Intvw = Original interview*

*MC = Miller Center*

*OH = Oral History*

*RNL = Richard Nixon Library*

*WHT = White House Tape*

**The 1968 presidential campaign was down to its final month, and Richard Nixon was nervous. On Vietnam, his opponent Vice-President Humphrey had finally broken ranks with President Johnson.**

*Hubert Humphrey 9.30.68*

As president, I would stop the bombing of the North, as an acceptable risk for peace...

**Humphrey's "break" is really an artful straddle...trying to appeal to anti-war liberals and middle-of-the-roaders. And it's apparently working. At the end of summer Nixon had been way, way ahead in the polls. In October, Humphrey is catching up fast.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

The American voters - mainly the Democrats - saw that there may be a glimmer of hope that there was going to be a peace deal with Humphrey, that either Johnson or Nixon would not have approved of.

**Nixon biographer John Farrell.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

At the same time, you had the McCarthy voters and the Robert Kennedy voters getting over their heartbreak from the summer and realizing that as much as they hated "the Hump," like they called him, he was better than Richard Nixon and there was a slight chance of peace. So all of a sudden, you had the Democratic coalition coming back together.

**Nixon and his team are getting anxious—which amps up wildly when their political spies tell them an October Surprise on Vietnam is imminent.**

[Robert Haldeman \(RNL OH\)](#)

We were getting intelligence reports that Johnson was planning something.

**Nixon campaign chief of staff H.R. Haldeman.**

[Robert Haldeman \(RNL OH\)](#)

We got information from people within the Johnson administration the President was going to call a bombing halt in order to get Humphrey elected, to make Humphrey a "peace" candidate, and give Humphrey the credit. The Nixon/Humphrey election, we knew, was close, and a small thing could make a very big difference. Nixon had lost a close election once before, so there was concern about what Johnson might do to affect the course of the war that would in the process affect the course of the election.

**But concerning LBJ's political intentions, that intel is wrong— the president really isn't focused on helping his vice-president win.**

**But try convincing Nixon of that.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

Nixon had his antenna up. He was suspicious. Then they got word from Henry Kissinger, who was acting as an agent for the Nixon campaign, telling them what he was picking up from his sources in the Paris peace talks. And so they began to get a good, healthy dose of paranoia.

**A tightening election, only a month left: Richard Nixon would do whatever it took not to lose again.**

**I'm KA, and from PRX this is..."Nixon at War."**

**Episode 2, "Madame Chennault"**

[LBJL WHT8556 8.18.65](#)

*Operator.* Secretary Rusk for the president...

**The first Monday morning of October 1968, Secretary of State Dean Rusk calling. To tell LBJ he's just met with Nixon, at Nixon's request — and briefed him on the peace talks with North Vietnam.**

**As far as Rusk could tell, the Republican candidate is playing nice.**

[LBJL WHT13516 10.7.68](#)

Dean Rusk: I went over again what we expect from the other side if we stop the bombing. He said it's very important that we come out of that situation with something we can live with, even if it takes another year or two.

Lyndon B. Johnson: That's interesting. That's comforting. I was real concerned that he might be wobbling like our other friends have.

**Wobbly friends like vice-president Humphrey.**

[LBJL WHT13516 10.7.68](#)

Rusk: Well, I saw no evidence of it today. Now I don't know what he's gonna say in a speech in the next two weeks, but today, he couldn't have been more solid.

**“What he’s going to say in the next two weeks”? How about today? Right after talking to Rusk, Nixon tells a big Washington press gathering that if he’s elected, he’d be able to negotiate peace in Vietnam faster because he’d have no JFK-LBJ baggage.**

**And as that story breaks, he calls LBJ.**

[LBJL WH13523 10.7.68](#)

Richard Nixon: Mr. President?  
Lyndon B. Johnson: Yes?  
Nixon: This is Dick Nixon.  
Johnson: Yes, Dick...

**First some small talk about his former boss and imminent in-law, President Eisenhower, currently recovering from a heart attack.**

[LBJL WH13523 10.7.68](#)

Nixon: I just went over and had a half hour with the General. He just looks great.  
Johnson: Isn't he? Isn't he?  
Nixon: Yeah, you saw him.

**With some...competition for who was closer to Ike. Long before “frenemies” was a thing, Nixon and Johnson were the very definition.**

[LBJL WH13523 10.7.68](#)

Johnson: Did he tell you what he tried to do to me?  
Nixon (*laughing*): No, no.  
Johnson: Well, now, you must not tell this.  
Nixon: No, I won't.  
Johnson: He said, “Mamie came in here a while ago...”

**Mamie was President Eisenhower’s wife.**

[LBJL WH13523 10.7.68](#)

Johnson: ...and said that while you're visiting me, she's going to go down and put a Nixon sticker on your car.”

**Even when they finally got down to business, neither man directly refers to the candidate's big Vietnam flip-flop just hours before.**

**But LBJ is irritated, and lets Nixon know his public posturing, like Humphrey's, undercuts his leverage with the North Vietnamese.**

[LBJS WH13523 10.7.68](#)

Johnson: I don't think they're going to do anything before the election. I think they read all these statements and they see the *Times* ... So my judgment is there's not going to be much movement.

**This isn't just speculation -- there's a new statement from North Vietnam's chief negotiator.**

[LBJS WH13523 10.7.68](#)

Johnson: Le Duc Tho says there's nothing new whatever in the statements made by Vice President Humphrey. "It is still the same demand for reciprocity, which we totally reject."

**"Reciprocity." This has been the big U.S. demand for moving the peace talks forward: only if North Vietnam reciprocates up front—by agreeing to stop sending troops into South Vietnam and shelling its cities, will the U.S. stop bombing the North.**

**But lately Johnson has dangled a much easier deal. If they just let our allies, the GVN, attend the peace talks, that'll be reciprocal enough...and Operation Rolling Thunder, the three-and-a-half-year-long U.S. bombing campaign, stops.**

[LBJS WH13523 10.7.68](#)

Johnson: Well, Dick, I think everybody's pushing for a bombing pause. I think you are. I think I am, I think everybody is —

Nixon: Oh, sure.

Johnson: I am. I think everybody is.

Nixon: With the right deal.

Johnson: That's right. But so far as I know, Vance, or Harriman or Rusk

**– Cyrus Vance and Averill Harriman, Johnson's Paris negotiators –**

[LBJS WH13523 10.7.68](#)

Johnson: ...I believe every one of those men would recommend to me that we not stop bombing *unless* they would agree to let us take the GVN into the meeting. Now, they've told us definitely they will not do that.

**Apart from North Vietnam's intransigence, LBJ tells Nixon that if he were to go forward with a bombing halt and peace talks without South Vietnam on board —**

[LBJL WH13523 10.7.68](#)

Johnson: If we did, and the GVN quit us, we'd just be out of business.

Nixon: Yes. Well, that makes sense, and we'll . . . we wish you well. We'll—

Johnson: Keep your good humor. Don't overdo it. You just got a month more, and I know all of you will be happy when you get it over with, and nobody'd be happier than I am.

**But U.S. negotiators discover that North Vietnam's position really has softened.**

*Hang Nguyen (intvw)*

It became clear that they better turn to talks at this point...

**Hang Ngyuen, Columbia University historian.**

*Hang Nguyen (intvw)*

..and possibly try to influence it in terms of getting Humphrey elected over Nixon. If they if they soften their position, if they don't keep putting up obstacles and barriers to South Vietnamese participation in the talks, this will help Humphrey. And if this works, we'll get the less hawkish president, even though all Americans, no one can trust them. Let's try it.

**So in exchange for a bombing halt, they'll let the "puppet regime" sit across the table from them in Paris. And Saigon is apparently on board too. Suddenly, a peace breakthrough seems doable.**

[LBJL WHT13547 10.16.68](#)

Operator: Go ahead, please.

**The president convenes a conference call with Nixon...**

[LBJL WHT13547 10.16.68](#)

Lyndon B. Johnson: Dick, is that you?

**and Humphrey...**

[LBJL WHT13547 10.16.68](#)

Johnson: Hubert, are you on?

**...and the 3<sup>rd</sup> party candidate George Wallace**

[LBJL WHT13547 10.16.68](#)

Johnson: Hello, George.

**to brief them... and demand that they keep quiet about it.**

[LBJL WHT13547 10.16.68](#)

Johnson: This is in absolute confidence, because any speeches or any comments at this time will be injurious to your country.

**In other words, don't mess up this delicate moment of U.S. foreign policy.**

[LBJL WHT13547 10.16.68](#)

Johnson: There has been no basic change in the situation. No breakthrough. When there is anything to report, you will of course be informed promptly. This formula must be our government position as long as I'm here.- Is that clear to all of you?

**Nixon answered first.**

[LBJL WHT13547 10.16.68](#)

Nixon: We got it.

**“We got it.”**

*(fade in Smith Dinner)*

**As it happened, that night in New York City...**

[23rd Alfred E. Smith Dinner 10.15.68](#)

Terence J. Cooke (Archbishop of New York): I have the honor to present, our president, Lyndon B. Johnson

**...all of them except Wallace delivered remarks at the same fancy annual Roman Catholic charity dinner.**

[23rd Alfred E. Smith Dinner 10.15.68](#)

Lyndon B. Johnson: I was sitting here thinking that whoever put this head table together should really be our president *(laughter, applause)*

**And Nixon was in full duplicitous suck-up mode.**

[23rd Alfred E. Smith Dinner 10.15.68](#)

Richard Nixon: Mr President, I say here what I think every American should hear about their president during this time: he is the hardest working president we have had in this century in the United States. At this time when in Paris delicate negotiations may be going on which might bring some progress in bringing this war to a conclusion, I say again, we have one president at a time. Let none of us say anything that will undercut his chance to bring that war to a conclusion.

**“Let none of us say anything”? Nixon was about to do and say quite a lot.**

*(music)*

**The November election was now just three weeks away, and since Humphrey's televised peacemaker speech, he was catching up fast. The Nixonites, meanwhile, in addition to Professor Kissinger in Paris, had another spy slipping them intel on the peace talks.**

[Bryce Harlow \(LBJL OH\)](#)

I had a double agent working...in the White House.

**Nixon's aide Bryce Harlow.**

[Bryce Harlow \(LBJL OH\)](#)

I knew about every meeting they held. I knew what their next move was gonna be. And I said, "Boss" - Nixon - "he's going to dump on you. It's just a question of timing."

**Their spy in the White House told them LBJ was about to stop bombing North Vietnam. Which jibed with Kissinger's reports in mid-October – that the U.S. negotiators in Paris had quote “broken open the champagne.”**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

The way they got that information, that was from a leak within the White House,

**Nixon biographer John Farrell.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

- so it made it sound like the whole thing was a trick. And, of course, Lyndon Johnson, he was known by the fellow politicians as a cardsharp. And so all these things came together in Nixon's mind and drove him really to a sense of acute paranoia. Here he thought he had this election cinched, and now it was dribbling away – and not just dribbling away, but they were going to cheat him out of it with this phony bombing halt.

**For President Johnson, the bombing halt really isn't an election play—it's his last chance to make a big move toward ending the war. His only ulterior motive is his historical reputation, his legacy.**

**But to Nixon – imagining how he'd be playing this – a peace breakthrough announced now was a dirty trick, meant to make Nixon lose the election.**

**So he had his go-between, party elder Everett Dirksen phone the president.**

[LBJL WHT13587 10.23.68](#)

Everett Dirksen: I had a call from Nixon. He was rather upset. He insisted there was some hard evidence that something was going to happen, that you probably would go to the country on television with an announcement.

Lyndon B. Johnson: Well, Everett, I have told Nixon if there's anything that requires consultation I'll get them on the phone as I did the other day. Until then, I don't think it's good to be discussing these things.

Dirksen: So I'll drop it right there.

Johnson: OK. I'll be in touch with you if there's anything to consult about. And I'll be in touch with him when and if there is.

Dirksen: Good. Well, be assured that this call never took place.

Johnson: OK. Bye.

*(music)*

**Three days later, Johnson phones his old Senate mentor and confidante Richard Russell to talk over the possible deal.**

[LBJL WHT13602 10.26.68](#)

Johnson: We're still rassing on this general subject. The last week, the breakthrough, if there has been one, has been that they have implied that if everything else could be worked out, they would let them come in. And that's what we're getting. Our people think that that would give the government of South Vietnam a hell of a boost.

**But...with the election now just ten days away, when to announce it?**

[LBJL WHT13602 10.26.68](#)

Johnson: The question is, do I want to let this go, and let somebody else come in and agree to it right after the election, or do I want to do it myself. I do not want this war to go on one minute more. I want to de-escalate it as quick as I can. On the other hand, it seems like I'd have a hell of a lot less problems with the country and with the world and with history if I did it the day after the election instead of the day before.

**Damned if he does it now, damned if does it later.**

[LBJL WHT13602 10.26.68](#)

Johnson: You see, all the Democrats are going to say that we called the damn thing after the election so we'd elect Nixon. And the Republicans are going to say you did it before the election to elect Humphrey. I don't want any politics to enter in to this decision, one way or the other.

*(music)*

**Nixon's lead in the Gallup Poll is now down to 2 points. So the very next day he takes the offensive...gets a Republican ally to accuse LBJ of using the possible peace breakthrough to help his vice-president...so that he, Nixon, can then repeat the accusation and simultaneously disavow it: "I am told" of "a cynical, last-minute attempt by President Johnson to salvage**

**the candidacy of Mr. Humphrey. *This I do not believe.*" The next day on CBS News' *Face the Nation*, they make Nixon explain himself.**

[\*Face the Nation 10.27.68\*](#)

Martin Agronsky: Mr. Nixon, when you raised the possibility, that the peace negotiations that were being linked to an effort to elect Hubert Humphrey. The president clearly feels that in raising that, you yourself ended your moratorium on bringing peace negotiations into the political campaign. How would you respond to that?

Richard Nixon: I would respond that there was a lot of speculation that there were insiders in the White House staff who were attempting to work out some sort of a settlement and that the president was going to be used for that purpose. I don't go along with those that think that he's going to play politics with this.

Agronsky: Mr. Nixon, why if you didn't believe it, did you raise it at all?

Nixon: Because it seemed to me that with all the speculation that was going on, that there was about to be a bombing pause and that it would be negotiated for political reasons, that I would be the man, I suppose, that was supposed to be harmed by a bombing pause it was important for me to nail it once and for all.

**Total classic tricky-dickishness.**

**As the final week before the election begins, President Johnson decides to hell with Dick Nixon -- he told his aides he was "80% ready" to announce the deal with North Vietnam.**

*Tom Johnson (intvw)*

It was a very intense time.

**LBJ's aide-de-camp Tom Johnson.**

*Tom Johnson (intvw)*

He so wanted it. I mean, to be able to leave the White House with a peace agreement. There was a sort of a sense of "Wow, perhaps we could bring this off, perhaps we can bring it off."

**But the president insists on bringing his Vietnam war commander Creighton Abrams to Washington, a 9,000-mile overnight flight, to make sure he's totally on board.**

[\*Harry McPherson \(LBJL OH\)\*](#)

I remember we had been writing on a speech to stop the bombing.

**Johnson's aide Harry McPherson.**

[\*Harry McPherson \(LBJL OH\)\*](#)

And I got home about 10:30 or 11 o'clock and the telephone was ringing as I walked in the door, and it said, "be back at 2:00." Horrible thought. "General Abrams is going to be here."

Interviewer: 2 a.m.?

McPherson: A.M. Well, I got back down there at 2:00 and Abrams walked in. It was an astonishing meeting. The President greeted him as if he had just come over from the Pentagon. And Abrams had flown incognito all the way from Saigon and helicoptered into the Pentagon and rushed over by car at two in the morning.

**The president and his whole senior military and foreign policy team pull an all-nighter at the White House.**

[Walt Rostow \(WGBH OH\)](#)

Because of its timing, it was a most painful decision for the President to make.

**National Security Adviser Walt Whitman Rostow.**

[Walt Rostow \(WGBH OH\)](#)

The decisive voice in that incidentally was General Abrams, who with a most moving session around the cabinet table which went on into early hours of the morning was finally asked by the President, "General, if you were in my position, would you make this decision?" And Abrams thought, and he said, "Mr. President, it will plunge you into a cesspool of controversy, but I would make the decision." The president felt, and I felt, in support of him, if there was any chance that this could bring peace a day earlier, that he had no right to reject it.

**Now the president wants to *announce* his decision – and let the presidential candidates know right away. "Where will Nixon be at 5:00 p.m.?" he says to McPherson and his other aides. "Have a phone they can cram right up their butts."**

[Harry McPherson \(LBJL OH\)](#)

We broke up the meeting in the Cabinet room around five o'clock in the morning, after having had breakfast. I went over and borrowed a pair of the President's pajamas and went upstairs to the third floor of the Mansion and went to sleep about six.

**In Saigon it's early evening. As a formality, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker meets with South Vietnam's president Thieu to inform him the deal is about to be announced.**

[Harry McPherson \(LBJL OH\)](#)

Came back down at eight, and boy, there were long faces around.

**Remember how the president told Nixon how bad it would be if our Vietnamese allies turned against a deal?**

[Harry McPherson \(LBJL OH\)](#)

Bunker had gone in to see the South Vietnamese, to tell them that the basic arrangement that we agreed to several weeks before was about to be put into effect. Well, they had about ten reasons why it ought to not be. They had to bring it before their national assembly, had to consult with all sorts of people. You know, every kind of dog-in-the-manger reason why we shouldn't do it.

**General Abrams tells them that in Saigon just two weeks ago, President Thieu had given him and the ambassador his quote “unequivocal” approval of the peace talks deal. In fact, just the day before Thieu gave ambassador Bunker his okay yet again.**

**So...what happened? What changed their minds at the last minute?**

[Harry McPherson \(LBJL OH\)](#)

Personally, I believe that they'd had a very direct communication from the Nixon people, that they should stand fast, and there should be no bombing halt shortly before the election.

Interviewer: Is that conjecture or do you have some sort of empirical evidence?

McPherson: Well, I think even on this thing, which won't be public for a long time, I think I'd rather not say. I think there is some reason to believe that that's so.

**“Some reason to believe”? L-O-L, as people did not say back then.**

*(music)*

[LBJL WHT13612 10.30.68](#)

Lyndon B. Johnson: I've got one this morning that's pretty rough for you.

**As more incriminating evidence flows into the White House — now also from an FBI wiretap of South Vietnam's D.C. embassy — the president again calls his confidante Senator Russell to discuss the dirty tricks of He Who Must Not Be Named.**

[LBJL WHT13612 10.30.68](#)

Johnson: We have found that our friend, the Republican nominee, our California friend, has been playing on the outskirts with our enemies and our friends both, our allies and the others. He's been doing it through rather subterranean sources here. And he has been saying to the allies that “you're gonna get sold out. You better not give away your liberty just a few hours before I can preserve it for you.” Now, when we got that pure by accident, that caused me to look a little deeper. And I have means of doing that, as you may well imagine.

**“Means” like wiretaps and other surveillance.**

**Then the president names one of Nixon’s primary “subterranean sources.”**

[LBJL WHT13612 10.30.68](#)

Johnson: Mrs. Chennault is contacting their ambassador from time to time. Seems to be kind of the go-between.

**Remember Anna Chennault? The pro-war hawk who’d introduced Nixon to the South Vietnamese ambassador a few months back?**

[LBJL WHT13612 10.30.68](#)

Johnson: She’s young and attractive. I mean, she’s a pretty good-looking girl.

Richard B. Russell: Certainly is.

Johnson: And she’s around town, and she is warning them to not to get pulled in on this Johnson move.

*John Farrell (intvw)*

What Anna Chennault did was...

## **John Farrell**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

...send a message via the South Vietnamese ambassador in Washington telling President Thieu to drag his feet, to hold on, that her clients in the United States, her friends, were telling her that South Vietnam would get a better deal under a Nixon administration. We do know that there were a couple of dozen contacts between Anna and the Nixon campaign at this time.

**And although J. Edgar Hoover tried wiretapping her...**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

The eavesdropping that went on was handicapped by the fact that, believe it or not, Anna Chennault lived in the Watergate apartment buildings and they had an old-fashioned switchboard, which made it very difficult for the FBI to tap her phone.

**Back to my chess metaphor: Anna Chennault was the rook who raced around the board in 1968 making a big difference in these games.**

**But back to our story.**

**President Johnson is still determined to seal the deal to stop the bombing now, to hell with the South Vietnamese regime. On Halloween night he’d announce it on TV. As he’d told Senator Russell the day before.**

[LBJL WHT13612 10.30.68](#)

Johnson: We're going to stop in the next few hours. And we're going to make an announcement of that. We're not going to let Thiệu force us to keep on bombing when we don't want to. If they come aboard, all well and good. If they don't, why, we're just in shambles, I guess, but I don't think I could defend to the people of this country, that I had everything I'd asked for, and then this son of a bitch vetoed it.

**The next day, now just five days before the election, he talked again with Dirksen. This time, the president was more forthright. practically threatening.**

[LBJS WHT13614 10.31.68](#)

Johnson: I have information about who you had a glass of beer with last night. You don't know it, but I do. And you have ways and means—

Everett Dirksen: I don't drink beer.

Johnson: You have ways and means -- you get my point though, don't you?

Dirksen: Yeah.

**His point is that he now has a damning trove of intel about what Nixon has been doing to press a pause button on the peace talks.**

[LBJS WHT13614 10.31.68](#)

Johnson: Some of Mr. Nixon's people are getting a little bit unbalanced and frightened. About the time you called me last week, they started going in to the South Vietnamese embassy and also sending some word to Hanoi, which has prolonged this thing a good deal.

Dirksen: Yeah.

Johnson: The net of it, and it's despicable, and if it were made public I think it would rock the nation.

**“It would rock the nation – if it were made public.” Although Johnson is still being careful – not explicitly accusing Nixon personally, just “Mr. Nixon's people.”**

[LBJS WHT13614 10.31.68](#)

Johnson: We could stop the killing out there. We could get everything we've asked for. But they've got this question, this new formula put in there—namely, wait on Nixon. And they're killing 4 or 500 every day waiting on Nixon. Now, I've been at this five years and if I'd have wanted to sell my country out, I'd have sold it out five months ago and gone on and run for president and got this war behind us and been overwhelmingly elected. But I'm a conscientious, earnest fellow trying to do a job, and I'm going to do it and if I can get peace at four o'clock this afternoon, I'm damn sure going to get it, come hell or high water, and woe be unto the guy that says you ought to keep on killing. But 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.

**Johnson, the great political powerbroker of his age, is now making the moral case to his Republican counterpart -- saying he has acted honorably to save lives and make peace, that Nixon is “messing with the South Vietnamese” for domestic political reasons.**

[LBJL WHT13614 10.31.68](#)

Johnson: This last few days, Dick is just getting a little bit shaky, and he's pissing on the fire a little.

Dirksen: Uh-huh.

Johnson: As a matter of fact, we have a transcript >>

**A transcript of the Nixon people's conversations, Everett.**

[LBJL WHT13614 10.31.68](#)

Dirksen: Well, I certainly don't quarrel with the way you've handled this matter. And, of course, I recognize also that the fellows on our side get antsy-pantsy about this. They wonder what the impact would be if a cease-fire or a halt of the bombing, what its impact would be on the result next Tuesday.

Johnson: To me, when Nixon's saying, I want the war stopped, I'm supporting Johnson, that I'm not going to pull the rug out. He better keep Mrs. Chennault and all this crowd just tied up for a few days

*(music)*

**Halloween night, a few hours after the president, via the Republican leader, had read Nixon the riot act, LBJ's big bombing halt announcement was on prime time TV.**

[Lyndon B. Johnson 10.31.68](#)

I have now ordered that all air, naval, and artillery bombardment of North Vietnam cease as of 8am Washington time, Friday morning. I have reached this decision in the belief that this action can lead to progress toward a peaceful settlement of the Vietnamese war.

**That same night, Nixon was on TV too...**

[Richard Nixon on Laugh-In Sept. 68](#)

Nixon: Sock it to 'em!

**...with a campaign rally live from Madison Square Garden. A footnote: the Nixon show on ABC was directed by the future creator of Fox News, 28-year-old Roger Ailes.**

*Richard Nixon in Madison Square Garden 10.31.68*

As you are probably aware tonight, the President announced another bomb halt in Vietnam. (*Cheers and boos*) I will not comment. I will not comment on those talks that are going on in Paris. And I will say further my friends, as a Presidential candidate and my Vice Presidential running mate joins me in this, neither he nor I will say anything that might destroy the chance to have peace. We want peace above politics in America. (*Applause, cheers, and horns*)

**Right then, as Nixon is again vowing to say nothing that might jeopardize the peace talks, his campaign manager John Mitchell is on the phone with Anna Chennault doing precisely that. "I'm speaking on behalf of Mr. Nixon. It's very important our Vietnamese friends understand our Republican position, and I hope you have made that clear to them."**

**I'm Kurt Andersen, and this is Nixon at War.**

**On Friday, Nov 1st, with the election just four days away and the two main candidates in a dead heat, the president frantically works the phones, trying to keep his peace talks from unravelling. One call is to his former campaign manager Jim Rowe -- who is now managing Humphrey's campaign.**

[LBJS WHT13704 11.1.68](#)

Lyndon B. Johnson: Jim?

James Rowe: Yes, Mr. President.

Johnson: I don't want anybody to know that I've called you if I can avoid it, Rowe. I think only your Secret Service people know.

Johnson: All right, just— just keep the candidate from mentioning Vietnam until Tuesday night. This is the most explosive thing you've ever touched in your life. His statement that he would stop bombing the North -- no period, no semi-colon -- it took us two weeks to get around that one. And it's just so delicate. And what I would say is just please bar him from mentioning Vietnam. If I had to have just one statement, I'd say, "like Nixon and Wallace and every other American, I pray for peace every night." Period. That's all I'd say.

Rowe: Yeah.

Johnson: We do not know where our allies are. We've lost Thiệu.

Rowe: Yeah.

Johnson: Because he thinks that we'll sell him out.

Rowe: Mm-hmm.

Johnson: And Nixon has convinced him. This damn little old woman, Mrs. Chennault, she's been in on it.

Rowe: Mm-hmm.

Johnson: And I—

Rowe: I wouldn't doubt it.

Johnson: Well, I know it. Hell, I know it. I'm not doubting it. Now we have to wait and see what they do.

**In fact, right then on TV in Saigon, President Thieu was making it official: South Vietnam would not play along with the U.S. on their deal with the communists, would not immediately send a delegation to the peace talks in Paris.**

[Clark M. Clifford \(LBJL OH\)](#)

I was deeply disturbed at what was taking place.

**Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford.**

[Clark M. Clifford \(LBJL OH\)](#)

We'd worked awfully hard to get the substantive peace talks going. They were the hope. They could end the killing in Vietnam and here now the Saigon government was dragging its feet. And all the time American boys were dying in Vietnam.

**On Saturday night President Johnson phones the Republican leader Dirksen again...ratcheting up his threats even higher.**

[LBJL WHT13706 11.2.68](#)

Lyndon B. Johnson: We're skirting on dangerous ground and I thought I ought to give you the facts and you ought to pass them on if you choose. If you don't, then I will a little later.

Everett Dirksen: Yeah.

Johnson: Here's the latest information we got. The agent says, she's just talked to the boss. And that he says, just hold on until after the election. Now, I'm reading their hand, Everett -- I don't want to get this in the campaign.

Dirksen: That's right.

Johnson: And they oughtn't to be doing this. This is treason.

Dirksen: I know.

**This is treason, says the president. I know, replies the Republican leader.**

[LBJL WHT13706 11.2.68](#)

Johnson: Now, I know who's doing this. I don't want to identify it. I think it would shock America if a principal candidate was playing with a source like this on a matter this important. I don't want to do that.

**And now the president is accusing not just the campaign, but the candidate himself.**

[LBJL WHT13706 11.2.68](#)

Johnson: Now I don't want to get in a fight with him there. I think Nixon's going to be elected. And I think we ought to have peace, and I'm gonna work with him.

But I know this, that they're contacting a foreign power in the middle of a war.

Dirksen: That's a mistake.

Johnson: And it's a damn bad mistake.

Dirksen: Oh, it is.

Johnson: Now, I don't want to say so, and you're the only man that I have enough confidence in to tell them. But you better tell them they better quit playing with it.

**Dirksen promptly calls Nixon on the campaign trail in L.A....and gets Bryce Harlow, Nixon's man with the White House peace talks spy...who immediately delivers the message to the boss.**

[\*Bryce Harlow \(LBJL OH\)\*](#)

Harlow: So I skittered upstairs.

Interviewer: You woke him up?

Harlow: I told him, "You've got to talk to LBJ. Someone has told him that you're dumping all over the South Vietnamese to keep them from doing something about peace and he's just about to believe it. If you don't let him know quickly that it's not so, then he's going to dump. And so he did. He called him, He got him on the phone and said there was absolutely no truth in it.

Interviewer: Are you convinced that it was not true?

Harlow: No. I'm not convinced it was not true. It was too tempting a target. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if there were some shenanigans going on.

**But when Nixon calls the president the next afternoon, Sunday, two days before the election?**

**He denies everything.**

[\*LBJL WHT13710 11.3.68\*](#)

Nixon: Any rumblings around about somebody trying to sabotage the Saigon government's attitude there certainly have no—absolutely no credibility as far as I'm concerned.

Johnson: I'm very happy to hear that, Dick, because that is taking place. Now, here's the history of it.

**Johnson calmly goes over the last few weeks -- all his maneuverings on Vietnam. And inches closer to accusing Nixon directly:**

[\*LBJL WHT13710 11.3.68\*](#)

Johnson: As I said to you the other day, I didn't say that it was with your knowledge, I hope it wasn't.

Nixon (*laughing*): Ah, no.

Johnson: But—

Nixon: Well, as a matter of fact, I'm not privy to the—what you were doing, of course, but—

Johnson: Well —

**Another lie, given Nixon's spies in the White House and Paris. And then the grand whopper:**

[LBJL WHT13710 11.3.68](#)

Nixon: —my God, I would *never* do anything to encourage Hanoi—I mean, Saigon not to come to the table, because, basically, that was what you got out of your bombing pause, that, good God, we want them over in Paris. We've got to get them to Paris, or you can't have a peace.

Johnson: Well, I think if you take that position, then you're on very, very sound ground. I don't think they're going to do anything now. The important thing is for your people not to tell the South Vietnamese—if they'll tell them just what you tell me, it'll be the best for all concerned.

**Rein in "your people" the president says over and over.**

**But all the while...**

*Tom Johnson (intvw)*

The staff of the campaign knew about Anna Chennault and we knew about her meetings with the South Vietnamese ambassador and we knew the information going back to Thieu.

**LBJ's aide Tom Johnson.**

*Tom Johnson (intvw)*

But the real smoking gun would have been if at that point it could have been disclosed that Nixon himself was telling Bob Haldeman to keep Mrs. Chennault going on this. I mean, these guys don't freelance like that. But I think John was the one that finally found the note.

**"John" is John Farrell, researching his Nixon biography 40-odd years later, wading through Haldeman's contemporaneous 1968 notes:**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

So you literally had to sit there and go through page after page after page — notes from Bob Haldeman to his secretary, "Will you please pick up my dry cleaning?" Should we give the White House gardener a raise? All this minutia. And then all of a sudden, documents, information relating to what Haldeman and Nixon always called "the bombing halt story."

**And on that, a direct quote of candidate Nixon:**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

"Keep Anna Chennault working on the South Vietnamese."

**The smoking gun.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

He probably felt quite justified in saying to Bob Halderman, his chief of staff “make sure that everybody in Saigon knows they'll get a better deal, do what we can to monkey-wrench Lyndon Johnson's announcement and deprive Humphrey of whatever benefit he might get.”

**In fact, before that smoking gun was found, Nixon's own aides had been quietly confirming the buried Anna Chennault story.**

**Tom Charles Houston, President Nixon's White House aide had been assigned to track down the evidence that Nixon's political enemies might have on him.**

*Tom Charles Huston (RNL OH)*

Based on what I have seen, Johnson was never able to establish with any certainty that Nixon had personally any role whatsoever in that. But over the years, as I've studied it, I've concluded that there was no doubt that Nixon was -- would have been directly involved, this was not something that anybody would have undertaken on their own.

*(music)*

**In 1968 Richard Nixon colluded with a foreign government, South Vietnam, to help him get elected.**

**Maybe not “treason” ...but almost certainly a federal crime.**

*Daniel Hemel (intvw)*

I think if you rewind the tape to 1798 and asked Congress, “What are you worried about?” It's exactly this.

**University of Chicago Law school professor Daniel Hemel:**

*Daniel Hemel (intvw)*

The Logan Act says that if you're a citizen of the United States and “without the authority of the United States, you carry on any correspondence with any foreign government with the intent to influence the conduct of the foreign government in relation to disputes or controversies with the United States,” then you go to jail.

**The final weekend of the campaign couldn't have been more intense for Humphrey and the Democrats. They had serious momentum.**

*Hubert Humphrey Astrodome Houston 11.3.68*

This is politics Texas style, American style -- big, enthusiastic, friendly, and that's the Democratic style too...

[William J Connell \(LBJL OH\)](#)

In three weeks, Humphrey had come from twenty-two points behind, to even. All this happened from October 20th, or whenever the hell it was that we had the Salt Lake City speech.

**And Bill Connell's campaign colleague, the candidate's old friend and adviser Max Kampelman, had intel that their chances were even better.**

[Max Kampelman \(ADST OH\)](#)

On the Saturday before the election I received a telephone call here from from Lou Harris, the pollster. He said, Max, I can't find Hubert. I can't reach him. Can you get him a message? Tell him that he's won the election as of this afternoon." He said, "Our polls show him steadily and speedily getting up and as of our poll this morning he has passed Nixon. And this trend continuing, he'll be comfortable by Tuesday. That was quite a report.

**The next day, Sunday, Humphrey got the inside dope from the president about Nixon's monkey-wrenching.**

[William J Connell \(LBJL OH\)](#)

Humphrey was absolutely furious. He stormed around. He was not someone who got angry easily. He was a very optimistic kind of a nice guy all the time. But he was furious. He wanted to go public with it that day and denounce both Mrs. Chennault and the South Vietnamese government.

**The election was in 48 hours -- and back then there was practically no early voting. Should Humphrey announce that he had damning evidence of his opponent's foreign policy sabotage? Or...as his advisers urged, just let it be: It was a tough call.**

[William J Connell \(LBJL OH\)](#)

He was furious. He could see his election going down the tubes, and was with great difficulty persuaded not to go public. He finally calmed down and said, "Okay, that's it," and he went out and campaigned.

**At the time, the president gave Tom Johnson a first-hand report of Humphrey's anguish:**

*Tom Johnson (intvw)*

He said he could not put the country through more of what it had been through in 1968, that he just couldn't put a country that had been through the trauma. And if that's what it took to win, he he he just wasn't going to do it.

**So that was that.**

**But no, wait! The next day, Monday November fourth, one final, 11th hour twist: a national newspaper reporter, Savile Davis, has the story... and shows up at the White House, asking for confirmation.**

**Minutes later, an emergency conference call with the national security principals—the Secretaries of State and Defense...and from his ranch, the president.**

[LBJL WHT13713 11.4.68](#)

Johnson: I know we'll be charged with trying to interfere with the election. But I'm rather concerned by this Savile Davis conversation with the embassy this morning. The *Christian Science Monitor* man called the embassy this morning and wanted to see the ambassador, and he was unavailable.

**The South Vietnamese embassy, whose phone they'd bugged -- the president now quoting the FBI report from that day.**

[LBJL WHT13713 11.4.68](#)

Johnson: He told the party answering that he wanted to check out a story received from his correspondent in Saigon. That the dispatch from Saigon contained the elements of a major scandal, which involves the Vietnamese ambassador, and which will affect presidential candidate Nixon if the *Monitor* publishes it. Time is of the essence inasmuch as Davis has a deadline to meet.

Dean Rusk: Right.

Johnson: "He speculated that should the story be published, it will create a great deal of excitement." (*Snorts*) Now, what he gets from Saigon is well and good and fine, but if he gets it from us, I want to be sure that, (a) we try to do it in such a way that our motives are not questioned and (2) I want to be sure that what we say is—can be confirmed.

RUSK: Well, Mr. President, I have a very definite view on this.

**Secretary of State Rusk.**

[LBJL WHT13713 11.4.68](#)

Rusk: I do not believe that any president can make any use of telephone taps in any way that would involve politics. The moment we cross over that divide, we're in a different kind of society.

**And the Secretary of Defense?**

[LBJL WHT13713 11.4.68](#)

Johnson: Clark, do you have any reaction?

Clark Clifford: I think that some elements of the story are so shocking that I'm wondering whether it would be good for the country to disclose the story and then possibly have a certain individual elected.

**In other words, if they expose that “certain individual” Nixon, but he still wins, the country might not consider him legitimate.**

[LBJL WHT13713 11.4.68](#)

Johnson: Well, I have no doubt about that, but what about the story being published, and our knowing of it, and our being charged with hushing it or something?

Clifford: I don't believe we have the kind of story that we would be justified in putting out.

**So here are the president and two partisan Democratic elders at this critical moment, in private, choosing to put country above party. Even if it means sacrificing the presidency.**

**White House aide Tom Johnson, past and future journalist, was flabbergast.**

*Tom Johnson (intvw)*

I am a young aide. All of my news instincts were, “This must be made public.” This many years later, I cannot explain it, I cannot understand why we didn't fully, fully confirm the Christian Science Monitor and the work that they had done. But more importantly, you know, bring in The New York Times, The Washington Post and others and even on either all the record or on background, go with it. Now is that saying something about me as a partisan, or as a journalist? I think it was more as a journalist.

**On the other hand...**

*Tom Johnson (intvw)*

There was deep concern about the revelation of how we accumulated all the information. It was just overwhelming evidence, but it was gathered very secretly using all kinds of national intelligence means. We were taping... Illegally, I guess, an ally, the South Vietnamese. We were, we were using the FBI to tape a domestic political campaign.

**And Farrell thinks Nixon and his team had all that figured out—that they had the other side in a scandal-versus-scandal standoff.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

I don't get the feeling that they were worried at this point about it coming out. They also knew that there was two sides to this, that Johnson would be operating under a handicap because if he made this announcement, the first thing anybody to report to the press would have said would be, what's your proof? And he would have to say, “Well, I've been wiretapping the opposition party.”

**So for Nixon in this chess game, it was...check.**

**With no confirmation from the White House, the newspaper kills their story. And the next day, 73 million Americans vote, blissfully ignorant.**

[CBS News 11.5.68](#)

Announcer: Reporting from election headquarters -- Walter Cronkite.

Cronkite: Well, it's midnight in the East, and all we know right now about the presidential race is that it is very, very close. It may be the closest in our history.

[Leonard Garment \(RNL OH\)](#)

It was very close.

**Nixon's aide and former law partner Leonard Garment was with him before dawn on election day as they prepared to head back from Los Angeles to New York.**

[Leonard Garment \(RNL OH\)](#)

It was -- it was one of those hairy moments in politics when everything in the world ceases to exist except the campaign. And it was really quite -- it is a strange moment. We packed up, went to the airport, we climbed aboard the President's plane, and flew into the darkness of the east and the uncertainty of the vote.

*(music)*

[Leonard Garment \(RNL OH\)](#)

And it was kind of very dramatic time, anxiety, not much talking. A lot of reflecting on what had happened, what was going to happen. With the quality of a church meeting. Flying into the east, lights coming on below, knowing voting had taken place. Landed, I picked up my wife in Brooklyn Heights and we went to the Waldorf. We all got together there and we waited for the returns.

[NBC News 11.6.68](#)

David Brinkley: Let's look at the popular vote total. Nixon has 41% of it, Humphrey 37. That means that Humphrey is closing in on Nixon. At one time this evening, there were eight percentage points dividing them, now there are four.

[Leonard Garment \(RNL OH\)](#)

I don't know whether it was 2:00 in the morning -- but whenever it was, Nixon had called us in. I think he was drinking. He had a bottle of beer and a sandwich I think at that point, he finally felt he had crossed the line and was going to win but then, it just hung there and hung there, through that whole night like a post-term baby, couldn't budge it. But then it finally came loose.

[NBC News 11.6.68](#)

And that's the NBC News checkmark, Nixon the projected winner...

**The election wasn't called by the networks until noon the following day.**

[News 11.6.68](#)

Nixon: Ladies and Gentlemen. I hadn't realized so many of you would stay up so late...

**Nixon won the popular vote by only seven-tenths of one percent – back in the last century when the candidate with the most votes always became president.**

**So..what if the Administration's big pre-election peace announcement had proceeded without a hitch -- would Vice-President Humphrey have gotten enough of a boost to win?**

**And more to the point, if the Democrats had gone public about the Republicans' shocking, almost certainly illegal monkey-wrenching, would that have caused Nixon to lose?**

*Tom Johnson (intvw)*

That is my absolute conviction — that if this story had come out and had it been reported accurately, that it would have made the difference.

**After his job at the White House, Tom Johnson became publisher of the Los Angeles Times, then president of CNN.**

*Tom Johnson (intvw)*

The Nixon lead had been narrowed substantially. And all of my media instincts, all of my political instincts, were that unquestionably Hubert Humphrey would have been elected, it was so tight. And look, this was, this was *huge* front page news.

**But it happened as it happened...and President Nixon's guilty secret, almost like in Edgar Allen Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart," would eventually lead to his undoing.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

The secret of Nixon's knowledge held for four decades.

**John Farrell.**

*John Farrell (intvw)*

Well past his Watergate, he was asked point blank directly by David Frost in the famous interviews and just denied it completely.

*David Frost interviews Richard Nixon 1977*

David Frost: One little brief, rather bewildering footnote to history...

**During their remarkable 29 hours of conversation in 1977. The exchange wasn't broadcast at the time — nor anywhere since...until now.**

*David Frost interviews Richard Nixon 1977*

Frost: There have been a lot of reports that Madame Chennault was in touch with President Thieu via the Vietnamese embassy, urging him to take a firm line because he would get better, better terms, better support from you than from a Democratic president and so on. Did you ever hear about that?

Nixon: I have -- of course, I'm hearing about it from you today, and I have read the reports.

**And monkey-wrenching the peace talks in 1968?**

*David Frost interviews Richard Nixon 1977*

Nixon: I would do nothing to undercut them. I did nothing to undercut them. Ah, as far as Madame Chennault or whoever may have felt, if they did, that the talks should not go forward or that the South Vietnamese should not go along, I did not authorize them, and I had no knowledge of any contact with the South Vietnamese at that point, because I couldn't have done that in good conscience.

**Pure, disingenuous, sanctimonious Richard Nixon.**

*David Frost interviews Richard Nixon 1977*

Frost: So that when Madame Chennault says--she stated recently, "From the very first conversation I made it clear I was speaking for Mr. Nixon, and it's clear the ambassador was only relaying messages between Mr. Nixon and Mr. Thieu"--she's not telling the truth?

Nixon: Whatever she has said, uh, she has said. What I am telling you is the truth as far as my position was concerned.

**Around that time, speaking privately to Max Kampelman, friend and adviser to Hubert Humphrey, Nixon's take was....rather different.**

[Max Kampelman \(ADST OH\)](#)

After Nixon resigned as president, we were sitting outside on his lawn before we went in to dinner, and he said, "Hubert was a great patriot," and I said, "Are you referring to election eve of 1968?" He said, "I'm referring to election eve of 1968 and Hubert was a great patriot."

**A great patriot -- because he hadn't snitched on Richard Nixon.**

**One piece of the supposedly damning evidence was something Nixon had been told about, as president-elect at the end of 1968. Told by no less than director of the FBI since 1924.**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

He's scared that Hoover has bugged his plane because Hoover's told him he's bugged his plane.

### **Nixon biographer, Evan Thomas**

*Evan Thomas (intvw)*

But Hoover is not actually bugged his plane. It's a classic Hoover thing that Hoover tells them at the Pierre Hotel, LBJ bugged your plane, but that was not true. Nixon's plane had not been bugged.

**Imaginary blackmail -- such a life-imitates-fiction twist.**

**Nixon's chief of staff Haldeman was at that meeting with J Edgar Hoover. And after Hoover left, was told by Nixon: "I don't blame" Johnson, "he's been under such pressure because of the damn war — I'm not going to end up like LBJ, Bob. I'm going to stop that war, fast."**

*(music)*

**I'm Kurt Andersen, and from PRX, this was the second episode of Nixon At War.**

**In the next episode:**

[Mel Laird \(GBH OH\)](#)

I didn't have any reservations about bombing Cambodia, but I didn't want it kept secret.

**Thanks for listening. I'm the writer and a co-producer of this series.**

**The executive producer is Steve Atlas.**

**The series producer is Emma Weatherill.**

**And the producer and researcher is Caitlin Rathe.**

**Our original music is by Mason Daring with additional music by Tim Dickinson.**

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**Nixon at War has been made possible...**