

# Nixon Tried to Spoil Johnson's Vietnam Peace Talks in '68, Notes Show

By PETER BAKERJAN. 2, 2017

Photo



President Richard M. Nixon in 1970. His campaign's intervention in peace talks in 1968 has captivated historians for years. Credit Mike Lien/The New York Times

[Richard M. Nixon](#) told an aide that they should find a way to secretly “monkey wrench” peace talks in Vietnam in the waning days of the 1968 campaign for fear that progress toward ending the war would hurt his chances for the presidency, according to newly discovered notes.

In a telephone conversation with [H. R. Haldeman](#), who would go on to become White House chief of staff, Nixon gave instructions that a friendly intermediary should keep “working on” South Vietnamese leaders to persuade them not to agree to a deal before the election, according to the notes, taken by Mr. Haldeman.

The Nixon campaign's clandestine effort to thwart President [Lyndon B. Johnson](#)'s peace initiative that fall has long been a source of controversy and scholarship. Ample evidence has emerged documenting the involvement of Nixon's campaign. But [Mr. Haldeman's notes](#) appear to confirm longstanding suspicions that Nixon himself was directly involved, despite his later denials.

“There's really no doubt this was a step beyond the normal political jockeying, to interfere in an active peace negotiation given the stakes with all the lives,” said John A. Farrell, who discovered the notes at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library for his forthcoming biography, “[Richard Nixon: The Life](#),” to be published in March by Doubleday. “Potentially, this is worse than anything he did in Watergate.”

Mr. Farrell, [in an article in The New York Times Sunday Review](#) over the weekend, highlighted the notes by Mr. Haldeman, along with many of Nixon's fulsome denials of any efforts to thwart the peace process before the election.

## [Document](#)

### [H.R. Haldeman's Notes from Oct. 22, 1968](#)

[During a phone call on the night of Oct. 22, 1968, Richard M. Nixon told his closest aide \(and future chief of staff\) H.R. Haldeman to "monkey wrench" President Lyndon B. Johnson's efforts to begin peace negotiations over the Vietnam War.](#)

RN

10/22  
late

file

RTG  
2

F - indicate tomorrow

preparing & recording 2 radio speeches  
Hawes - Hawes monitoring V. Nam

Re - Andrews - if take a poll - inform us w/ing.

Rhodes says we've dropped on older people  
done - see radio for 5 or 6 Sept  
of a newspaper ad - nail the tie

Roh - sit down w/ RW + Moore etc. -  
in terms of their that on tempo + content  
how do you want him to hit NH - how hard?  
F? maybe have to bite V.N.

→ W - keep <sup>Anna</sup> Chennault working on SVN  
- insist fully on the 3  
Johnson conditions

Z say for Fin - doing 3 hrs of TV spots

Moore - elat - get a reading on how they think we're doing

Hawes - be sure ce of Defense goes to DDC  
& to an defense staffers.

## [OPEN Document](#)

His discovery, according to numerous historians who have written books about Nixon and conducted extensive research of his papers, finally provides validation of what had largely been surmise.

While overshadowed by Watergate, the Nixon campaign's intervention in the peace talks has captivated historians for years. At times resembling a Hollywood thriller, the story involves colorful characters, secret

liaisons, bitter rivalries and plenty of lying and spying. Whether it changed the course of history remains open to debate, but at the very least it encapsulated an almost-anything-goes approach that characterized the nation's politics in that era.

As the Republican candidate in 1968, Nixon was convinced that Johnson, a Democrat who decided not to seek re-election, was deliberately trying to sabotage his campaign with a politically motivated peace effort meant mainly to boost the candidacy of his vice president, [Hubert H. Humphrey](#). His suspicions were understandable, and at least [one of Johnson's aides later acknowledged](#) that they were anxious to make progress before the election to help Mr. Humphrey.

Through much of the campaign, the Nixon team maintained a secret channel to the South Vietnamese through Anna Chennault, widow of Claire Lee Chennault, leader of the Flying Tigers in China during World War II. Mrs. Chennault had become a prominent Republican fund-raiser and Washington hostess.

Nixon met with Mrs. Chennault and the South Vietnamese ambassador earlier in the year to make clear that she was the campaign's "sole representative" to the Saigon government. But whether he knew what came later has always been uncertain. She was the conduit for urging the South Vietnamese to resist Johnson's entreaties to join the Paris talks and wait for a better deal under Nixon. At one point, she told the ambassador she had a message from "her boss": "Hold on, we are gonna win."

Learning of this through wiretaps and surveillance, Johnson was livid. He ordered more bugs and privately groused that Nixon's behavior amounted to "treason." But lacking hard evidence that Nixon was directly involved, Johnson opted not to go public.

The notes Mr. Farrell found come from a phone call on Oct. 22, 1968, as Johnson prepared to order a pause in the bombing to encourage peace talks in Paris. Scribbling down what Nixon was telling him, Mr. Haldeman wrote, "Keep Anna Chennault working on SVN," or South Vietnam.

A little later, he wrote that Nixon wanted Senator Everett Dirksen, a Republican from Illinois, to call the president and denounce the planned bombing pause. "Any other way to monkey wrench it?" Mr. Haldeman wrote. "Anything RN can do."

Nixon added later that [Spiro T. Agnew](#), his vice-presidential running mate, should contact Richard Helms, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and threaten not to keep him on in a new administration if he did not provide more inside information. "Go see Helms," Mr. Haldeman wrote. "Tell him we want the truth — or he hasn't got the job."

After leaving office, Nixon denied knowing about Mrs. Chennault's messages to the South Vietnamese late in the 1968 campaign, despite proof that she had been in touch with John N. Mitchell, Mr. Nixon's campaign manager and later attorney general.

Other Nixon scholars called Mr. Farrell's discovery a breakthrough. Robert Dallek, an author of books on Nixon and Johnson, said the notes "seem to confirm suspicions" of Nixon's involvement in violation of federal law. Evan Thomas, the author of "Being Nixon," said Mr. Farrell had "nailed down what has been talked about for a long time."

Ken Hughes, a researcher at the Miller Center of the University of Virginia, who in 2014 published "Chasing Shadows," a book about the episode, said Mr. Farrell had found a smoking gun. "This appears to be the missing piece of the puzzle in the Chennault affair," Mr. Hughes said. The notes "show that Nixon committed a crime to win the presidential election."

Still, as tantalizing as they are, the notes do not reveal what, if anything, Mr. Haldeman actually did with the instruction, and it is unclear that the South Vietnamese needed to be told to resist joining peace talks that they considered disadvantageous already.

Moreover, it cannot be said definitively whether a peace deal could have been reached without Nixon's intervention or that it would have helped Mr. Humphrey. William P. Bundy, a foreign affairs adviser to Johnson and John F. Kennedy who was highly critical of Nixon, nonetheless concluded that prospects for the peace deal were slim anyway, so "probably no great chance was lost."

Luke A. Nichter, a scholar at Texas A&M University and one of the foremost students of the Nixon White House secret tape recordings, said he liked more of Mr. Farrell's book than not, but disagreed with the conclusions about Mr. Haldeman's notes. In his view, they do not prove anything new and are too thin to draw larger conclusions.

"Because sabotaging the '68 peace efforts seems like a Nixon-like thing to do, we are willing to accept a very low bar of evidence on this," Mr. Nichter said.

An open question is whether Johnson, if he had had proof of Nixon's personal involvement, would have publicized it before the election.

Tom Johnson, the note taker in White House meetings about this episode, said that the president considered the Nixon campaign's actions to be treasonous but that no direct link to Nixon was established until Mr. Farrell's discovery.

"It is my personal view that disclosure of the Nixon-sanctioned actions by Mrs. Chennault would have been so explosive and damaging to the Nixon 1968 campaign that Hubert Humphrey would have been elected president," said Mr. Johnson, who went on to become the publisher of The Los Angeles Times and later chief executive of CNN.

Mr. Farrell found the notes amid papers that were made public by the Nixon library in July 2007 after the Nixon estate gave them back.

Timothy Naftali, a former director of the Nixon library, said the notes "remove the fig leaf of plausible deniability" of the former president's involvement. The episode would set the tone for the administration that would follow. "This covert action by the Nixon campaign," he said, "laid the ground for the skulduggery of his presidency."

Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/02/us/politics/nixon-trying-to-spoil-johnsons-vietnam-peace-talks-in-68-notes-show.html>