

Nixon at War
Episode One - October Surprise
Release Date - June 14, 2021

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

Key

Bold = Narrator, Kurt Andersen
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

From PRX, this is Nixon at War.

It's a beautiful day in Washington, the cusp of spring and summer 1971.

A Sunday, but Richard Nixon, pretty much all work and no play, is in his office at 8 in the morning.

And he probably felt about as happy as Richard Nixon ever felt.

Yesterday he'd presided over the wedding of his older daughter Tricia right here at the White House...

(Wedding music plays)

....already on the covers of Life and Time magazines — and this morning the front page of the New York Times, nice story, above the fold, with a big photo of him escorting her into the Rose Garden.

Just past noon the president phoned his top military aide...

[RNL WHT005-50 6.13.71](#)

Operator: General Haig, sir.

Deputy National Security Adviser Alexander Haig.

[RNL WHT005-50 6.13.71](#)

Alexander Haig: Yes, sir.

Richard Nixon: Hi, Al.

Nixon: What about the casualties last week? You got the figure yet?

Haig: No, sir, but I think it's going to be quite low.

Casualties meaning the Americans killed and wounded in the Vietnam War — the horrible problem Nixon was elected to fix.

[RNL WHT005-50 6.13.71](#)

Haig: as last week or better.

Nixon: Yeah, should be less than twenty, I would think, yeah.

And things aren't going too badly. When he took office two and a half years ago, several hundred Americans a week were dying in Vietnam, and Nixon had gotten that number down to a few dozen. His gradual withdrawal of troops was proceeding. But none of that is Haig's concern today.

[RNL WHT005-50 6.13.71](#)

Nixon: Nothing else of interest in the world today?

Haig: Yes, sir, very significant. This goddamn *New York Times* exposé of the most highly classified documents of the war.

Nixon: Oh, that. I see. I didn't read the story.

Hold on. Right next to the coverage of Tricia's wedding, page one, above the fold, the Times has this holy-moly package of articles about the Vietnam War. Drawn from a three-year-old classified Defense Department history. They're calling it "the Pentagon Papers."

And this foreign-policy-obsessed President hasn't bothered to read it? Really?

[RNL WHT005-50 6.13.71](#)

Haig: Sir, the whole study that was done for McNamara and then carried on after McNamara left by Clifford and the peaceniks over there.

"Peaceniks" in this case those working under the previous Democratic defense secretaries, Robert McNamara and Clark Clifford.

General Haig is upset.

[RNL WHT005-50 6.13.71](#)

Haig: This is a devastating security breach of the greatest magnitude of anything I've ever seen.

Nixon: Well, what's being done about it, then? Did we know this was coming out?

Haig: No, we did not, sir.

Nixon reacts not to the substance of the leak, but only to the fact of it, the bastards who talked to the press.

[RNL WHT005-50 6.13.71](#)

Nixon: Now, I'd just start right at the top and fire some people. I mean, whoever—whatever department it came out of, I'd fire the top guy.

Haig: Yes, sir. Well, I'm sure it came from Defense, and I'm sure it was stolen at the time of the turnover of the administration.

Nixon: Oh, it's two years old, then.

Almost three years old, in fact. Which may be why Nixon doesn't seem all that concerned at first.

Then, in the afternoon...

[RNL WHT005-59 6.13.71](#)

Operator: Mr. President, I have Dr. Kissinger calling you.

His National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, from out in L.A.

[RNL WHT005-59 6.13.71](#)

Henry Kissinger: Mr. President?

Nixon: Hi, Henry, how are things in California?

Kissinger: Well, I just got here

Nixon: Haig was very disturbed by that *New York Times* thing. I thought that—Unconscionable damn thing for them to do.

Kissinger: It is unconscionable.

Nixon: it's unconscionable on the part of the people that leaked it. Fortunately, according to Haig, it all relates to the two previous administrations. Is that correct?

Kissinger: That is right.

Nixon: But I hope the—my point is if—are any of the people there who participated in this thing, who—in leaking it? That's my point. Do we know?

Still focused on the leakers. But Kissinger immediately changes the subject – to the substance of the revelations....and their possible political benefits.

[RNL WHT005-59 6.13.71](#)

Kissinger: In public opinion, it actually, if anything, will help us a little bit, because this is a gold mine of showing how the previous administration got us in there. It just shows massive mismanagement of how we got there. And it pins it all on Kennedy and Johnson.

Nixon won the presidency as a tough-minded critic of the Democrats' bungled war. Like President Johnson before him, he insisted on "peace with honor." Which meant...Somehow quitting this huge war without looking like quitters.

[RNL WHT005-59 6.13.71](#)

Kissinger: So from that point of view it helps us. From the point of view of relations with Hanoi, it hurts a little, because it just shows the further weakening of resolve.

On Nixon's watch nearly 20,000 more young Americans had been killed in Vietnam. Public sentiment to pull out the remaining quarter million troops is growing, with Congress debating bills to make that happen now.

And on that front in June '71, Kissinger reassures him — the Pentagon Papers are no problem.

[RNL WHT005-59 6.13.71](#)

Kissinger: No one reading this can then say that this president got us into trouble. I've read this stuff. We come out pretty well in it.

Nixon: (*chuckles*)

But now Nixon starts fretting about files the peaceniks may have on him.

[RNL WHT005-59 6.13.71](#)

Nixon: I asked Haig about that, and he says, "Well, look, as far as the White House is concerned, we're pretty damn secure." On the other hand on Laos and Cambodia — you can be sure all that's in some file.

Kissinger: But, Mr. President, all the big things you've done in the White House, and — those files will leave with you.

Kissinger was a skillful Nixon-whisperer: *don't worry, Mr. President, not politically bad for you, and your "big things," will stay secret.*

But Nixon's worries, triggered by the leaked Pentagon Papers, festered.

By Thursday, four days later, the president has worked himself into a paranoid frenzy.

[RNL WHT525-001 6.17.71](#)

Kissinger: We have nothing here, Mr. President.

Nixon: Damn it, I asked for that, because I need it.

This recording of an Oval Office meeting with White House chief of staff Bob Haldeman and Kissinger is rough, most of the conversation cryptic, suggestive.

But that earlier vague concern — *what might they have on me, on us?* — now crystallizes around a specific secret file.

[RNL WHT525-001 6.17.71](#)

H.R. Haldeman: The whole bombing halt file...

A file about a U.S. “bombing halt” in Vietnam, before Nixon was president.

[RNL WHT525-001 6.17.71](#)

Haldeman: Huston swears to God there's a file on it at Brookings.

A file at Brookings — the big old liberal Washington think tank. And “Huston” is 30-year-old White House aide Tom Charles Huston, a right-wing plotter mocked by colleagues as “*Secret Agent X-5*.” But not mocked by Nixon.

[RNL WHT525-001 6.17.71](#)

Nixon: Now you remember Huston's plan? I want it implemented on a thievery basis. Goddamn it, get in and get those files. Blow the safe and get it.

“Huston’s plan, on a thievery basis...Blow the safe.”

Says the president of the United States to the White House chief of staff.

Ken Hughes (intvw)

It's one of the most remarkable moments on Nixon's tapes.

Nixon historian Ken Hughes has spent years at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center of Public Affairs sifting through White House recordings.

Ken Hughes (intvw)

It's the only time that the president recorded himself ordering a break-in. And it's not a break-in at Watergate where you'd expect. He actually orders his aides to break in to the Brookings Institution, crack open the safe and steal the report. And he’s dead serious.

A break-in at the think tank – “get those files” -- a year before the Watergate break-in, which he never explicitly ordered...and this wasn’t a one-time outburst.

Two weeks later, he’s talking about it again, banging on his Oval Office desk.

[RNL WHT534-02 7.1.71](#)

Nixon: We are going to use any means. Is that clear? Did they get the Brookings Institute raided last night?

“Did they get the Brookings Institute raided last night?”

[RNL WHT534-02 7.1.71](#)

Nixon: Get it done! I want it done. I want the Brookings Institute safe cleaned out.

[Charles \(Chuck\) Colson \(RNL\)](#)

I took him very literally, I thought, this is really what he means, he's the president....

Nixon aide Chuck Colson.

[Charles \(Chuck\) Colson \(RNL\)](#)

When we left the Oval Office that day I turned to Haldeman and I said, "What are we supposed to do with this?" And Haldeman said, "Well, we've got to get somebody to do something about those Brookings papers."

So in 1971, with a re-election campaign about to start, what dirt do his enemies have? What are these "bombing halt" secrets that have him in such a tizzy?

I'm Kurt Andersen, and from PRX, this is... "Nixon At War."

Episode 1: October Surprise

I'm just a writer. Novels and American histories, not any kind of expert on Vietnam or Richard Nixon.

I thought I knew the story of Richard Nixon's downfall. The Watergate break in, the cover up, exposed, busted, resignation, the end.

But now, from reading and searching through remarkable archives of recordings,

Archival tape: testing one...

listening to hours of interviews with the people in the room

Interviewer: this is the interview with Harry McPherson...

Presidential phone calls

Operator: Senator, the president...

and conversations in the Oval Office and interviewing our own squad of expert historians and authors...

I've come to a whole new understanding of the war, and of the president who presided over its end.

For instance, I always thought of the Vietnam War as a completely separate topic, a different disaster that happened to occur at the same time as all the misdeeds we know as Watergate. But in fact. The two stories are deeply intertwined.

The true story, the bigger, deeper, underlying back story, the untold stories and the monumentally tragic consequences of Nixon's paranoia and lying and ruthlessness...all have their roots in the Vietnam War.

The heart of Nixon at War is the second half of the U.S. shooting war in Vietnam – a war in which 58,000 Americans and as many as three million Vietnamese were killed. But it's also about the collateral cold wars Nixon fought here in America...against protesters and the press and the Washington establishment...as well as his battles with his own psychological demons.

But back to our story: in 1971, exactly what were the secrets about his Vietnam War misbehavior that Nixon was so freaked out might get leaked? Put another way, what was the first domino in the chain that led to his eventual downfall?

For that, we need to turn back the dial three years... Johnson, "LBJ," is president. It's the beginning of election year, 1968. First Friday in February, and like every evening, a huge majority of Americans watching TV, 50 million or more, are tuned into one of the three half-hour network news shows.

CBS News

Announcer: In color, this is the CBS Evening News, with Walter Cronkite...

And on that Groundhog Day, they might have watched Richard Nixon officially launch his second presidential campaign.

[Richard Nixon Announces Candidacy 2.1.68](#)

I will be the strongest candidate, and I believe I can beat Lyndon Johnson.

But what Americans watching the news that day remember was...

[CBS News 1.31.68](#)

The oriental new year, and it's a new war...

The communists' massive Tet Offensive.

[CBS News 1.31.68](#)

The Vietcong simultaneously attacked just about every major city and town in South Vietnam. In one day, they increased the scope of the war dramatically.

The communists actually lost most of the battles of Tet, but the scale and scope and shock started winning them the war ...strategically, politically.

More than half a million American servicemen were now deployed in Vietnam, and every week hundreds of them were killed...and every week

another 6,000 young Americans were drafted into the Army.

At the end of that month, I was 13, sitting there in the TV room as usual with my family. We watched Mr. Objective CBS Evening News Anchor Walter Cronkite, freshly back from the war, deliver his special prime-time report that ended with this stunning plain truth:

[Walter Cronkite 2.27.68](#)

It is increasingly clear to this reporter that the only rational way out then will be to negotiate, not as victors, but as an honorable people who lived up to their pledge to defend democracy, and did the best they could. This is Walter Cronkite. Goodnight.

American public opinion started shifting against the War in Vietnam.

Including mine, quickly. As I finished 8th grade I turned from this eager-beaver Republican campaign volunteer with a “Nixon’s the One” poster on my wall to a pot-smoking antiwar Abbie Hoffman fan.

One Sunday night my new favorite TV show, The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour, was pre-empted so President Johnson could talk about the war.

[Lyndon B. Johnson 3.31.68](#)

Good evening, my fellow Americans. Tonight I want to speak to you of peace in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

He announced he was cutting back the bombing, and reiterated that he was open to peace talks. But the speech was remembered for what he announced about his own political plans.

[Lyndon B. Johnson 3.31.68](#)

Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President

That night Johnson took a late-night phone call in his White House bedroom from one of the top candidates for the Republican presidential nomination, New York governor Nelson Rockefeller.

[LBJL WHT12859 3.31.68](#)

Lyndon B. Johnson: Hi Nelson

“Rocky” told the president that not running for re-election was the “fabulous” act of “a great patriot.”

The president didn’t disagree.

[LBJL WHT12859 3.31.68](#)

Johnson: When I wind up, I want to wind up with the thing worked out and I've got nothing to do now except try to do the big job.

“The big job” – meaning the war on its way to resolution. For his first two years in office, Johnson was the civil rights president, the War on Poverty and Great Society president. But now he'd become the goddam Vietnam War president. He was desperate to be done with it, and salvage his reputation.

[LBJL WHT9601 2.1.66 \(Full Conversation\)](#)

Johnson: Gene, how are you?

To Senator Eugene McCarthy, now running against him for the Democratic nomination as the peace candidate, LBJ had confessed two years earlier:

[LBJL WHT9601 2.1.66](#)

Johnson: I know we oughtn't to be there, but I can't get out. I just can't be the architect of surrender. I'm willing to do nearly anything a human can do, if I can do it with any honor at all.

Definitely by 1968 he wasn't after military victory, but some kind of face-saving negotiated withdrawal.

And then, a couple of days after his big speech, a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel—the North Vietnamese agree for the first time to begin peace negotiations, immediately, with the Americans, in Paris.

So...unbowed communist revolutionaries sitting down, in the capital of their former colonial occupier, with the capitalist superpower...

(1968 Paris Riots Newsreel)

...in early May, 1968 -- as it happens the very moment France erupts in spectacular, historic, nationwide anti-American anti-capitalist anti-war protests and strikes and riots by millions of students and workers.

(1968 Paris Riots Newsreel)

In a work of fiction, in a movie, it'd be totally implausible.

In fact, the North Vietnamese were just going through the motions of peace talks in Paris. More than a quarter century into their war against the French and now the Americans, their goal was victory, period.

Hang Nguyen (intw)

The leadership of North Vietnam did not trust negotiations with the United States.

Hang Nguyen, a Columbia University historian of the Vietnam war.

Hang Nguyen (intw)

They never believed in going anywhere to talk about peace. It was always just a way to maintain the Saigon government and keep the country divided. And if the party leadership sought to liberate the south and reunify the country under Communist auspices, nothing the Americans would do short of withdrawing their support from Saigon would be acceptable.

Cut to later that summer, Miami Beach

The 1968 Republican convention.

Richard Nixon's early political career had gone like gangbusters in the 1950s -- Senator at 37, vice-president at 40, presidential nominee at 47 -- but after the quick rise came a quick fall.

Richard Nixon, [In the Arena](#) (audiobook)

Nixon: In 1960, I had suffered a shattering defeat in the presidential campaign.

Against John F. Kennedy.

Richard Nixon, [In the Arena](#) (audiobook)

Nixon: It was no comfort that it was the closest election in history. Two years later, I suffered another defeat that was even more shattering because the election was for a lesser office -- governor of California.

And that second loss to a Democrat who wasn't even younger or handsome or charismatic.

[Richard Nixon 8.8.68](#)

But I have news for you, this time, there's a difference. This time, we're gonna win. (applause)

[NBC News 8.8.68](#)

Wisconsin is proud to cast its 30 votes for the nominee of this convention, Richard M. Nixon.

It's Nixon's comeback moment.

[NBC News 8.8.68](#)

Huntley & Brinkley: That does it...there it isNixon is the nominee.

And with accelerating rebellion and disorder and death in the U.S. as well as Vietnam, he had his last chance. His nomination speech depicted...American carnage.

[Richard Nixon 8.8.68](#)

As we look at America, we see cities enveloped in smoke and flame. We hear sirens in the night. Did American boys die in Normandy, and Korea, and in Valley Forge for this? Listen to the answers to those questions. It is another voice. It is the quiet voice in the tumult of the shouting. It is the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans -- the non-shouters; the non-demonstrators...

This would become Nixon's domestic political pitch: that he shared normal Americans' fear and loathing of the rioters and hippies... and antiwar protesters—even though he was also campaigning as the person best-suited to end the war.

[Richard Nixon 8.8.68](#)

When the strongest nation in the world can be tied down for four years in a war in Vietnam with no end in sight; when the nation with the greatest tradition of the rule of law is plagued by unprecedented lawlessness; when a nation that has been known for a century for equality of opportunity is torn by unprecedented racial violence -- then it's time for new leadership for the United States of America....

His “law and order” pitch was all about things no president can suddenly “fix” — hippies, radicals, rioters. But the war? That was entirely Washington's doing, and a president actually could end it soon.

[Richard Nixon 8.8.68](#)

We all hope in this room that there is a chance that current negotiations may bring an honorable end to that war. And we will say nothing during this campaign that might destroy that chance.

Notice that: the Republican nominee going out of his way three months before the election to promise that of course he wished the Democratic president the best possible luck making peace. But...

[Richard Nixon 8.8.68](#)

But if the war is not ended when the people choose in November, the choice will be clear -- For four years this Administration has had at its disposal the greatest military and economic advantage that one nation has ever had over another in a war in history. Never has so much military and economic and diplomatic power been used so ineffectively. And I pledge to you tonight that the first priority foreign policy objective of our next Administration will be to bring an honorable end to the war in Vietnam.

[LBJL WHT13304 8.8.68](#)

Richard Nixon: Hello, Mr. President.

Lyndon B. Johnson: How are you?

That same day, the president who'd spent the last 4 years using "so much power so ineffectively" phones Nixon in Miami from the Texas White House, his ranch near Johnson City. They'd known each other for two decades.

[LBJL WHT13304 8.8.68](#)

Nixon: Well, I'm just fine. I haven't had any sleep, but you know how that is.

Johnson: I sure do and I give you my congratulations and my sympathy.

Nixon: [laughing] Boy, I'll tell you, isn't that the truth.

And that was it for the small talk. Vietnam was the president's agenda, the war, possible peace – over which Johnson would continue as commander-in-chief for five more months.

[LBJL WHT13304 8.8.68](#)

Johnson: I want to try to play this thing as much in the national interest as is humanly possible, and as fair as possible, and as fair as possible. And I believe that your conduct has been very responsible. We're both supposed to be great political animals, but we both want to do what's best for our country, I think it's awfully important, dealing with these Commies for the next four months, for us to be completely informed with the same facts, and then we can do whatever our judgement dictates.

Nixon: Good deal.

In fact, as far as the War in Vietnam goes, Richard Nixon is focused on the best interests of Richard Nixon, and what's best for his presidential campaign.

I'm Kurt Andersen, and from PRX, this is... "*Nixon At War.*"

Richard Nixon had lived in California and Washington, D.C. But then in the early 1960s, middle-aged Mr. Middle America up and moves to New York City.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

He had a love hate relationship with what he thought of as the East Coast establishment. He hated it, but he also wanted to make it there.

Biographer Evan Thomas, the author of *Being Nixon.*

Evan Thomas (intvw)

He thought it was the center of the universe, even as he loathed it. He thought the center of the universe was the Upper East Side, uh but also the place that where you had to make it and show your stuff. He knew that to please the establishment, that you have to pay court to network executives and people who

work for The New York Times. He joined the Metropolitan Club. It wasn't one of the best clubs, but it was the club that would take him.

A block from his club and his apartment was the fancy Pierre Hotel, where he kept an office while running for president.

And there in July, 1968:

Ken Hughes (intvw)

Nixon holds this extremely secret meeting,

Historian Ken Hughes.

Ken Hughes (intvw)

so secret that he doesn't even inform his Secret Service detail that it is taking place. And the only people present are Nixon; his campaign chairman, John Mitchell; Bui Diem, the South Vietnamese ambassador to the United States--and Anna Chennault, whom Nixon knows and Chennault introduces Nixon and ambassador Diem for the first time.

Anna Chennault — not famous nowadays. But that day she became one of the key pieces in an epic 3-D chess game of wartime presidential politics and diplomacy.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

At this meeting, Nixon said to the Dragon Lady, as she was called, "You are to be my personal representative to the South Vietnamese government, meaning my back channel to the Thieu government."

Evan Thomas (intvw)

Now, this is a secret designation. No one outside the room knows that when Anna Chennault speaks to the South Vietnamese, she can speak for Richard Nixon.

Anna Chennault could really be the subject of her own podcast.

At age 19 in China during World War II —

[Anna Chennault 1999](#)

I got a job with the Central News Agency as the first woman reporter. I met my late husband, General Chennault, in 1944.

— the U.S. Air Force general leading the famous Flying Tigers squadrons against the Japanese —

[Anna Chennault 1999](#)

...so one thing led to another, he was courting me and finally we got married.

...they marry, the communists take over, the Chennaults move to America, start a cargo airline...

[Anna Chennault 1999](#)

We were only married for 10 years and then he died of cancer.

So in 1968 she's this rich young glamorous Washington widow living at the Watergate... a well-connected anticommunist political activist...and a Vietnam War hawk.

[Anna Chennault 1999](#)

Every time we stop the bombing, only give the other side the opportunity to rebuild their military installations, more of our men will have to be sacrificed. The sooner we win this war, the better off we will be.

Not “end” this war, “win” it. In 1968, she flew to Saigon to meet with president Nguyen van Thieu. And then through the November election, she'd stay in close touch with the top rungs of the Vietnamese government and the Nixon campaign. And...possibly...change history.

[\(Chicago Protest Sounds\)](#)

Six weeks later, at the end of August, came the infamous Democratic convention in Chicago.

The new leader of the antiwar left, Bobby Kennedy, had been assassinated in June... It was 1968, America in the throes of radical cultural change. So of course thousands of young people showed up in Chicago to protest against the war and the Establishment.

Inside the old International Amphitheater, the convention had its own milder protests and ruckuses, but the so-called “Happy Warrior” was having none of it:

[Hubert Humphrey 8.29.68](#)

My fellow Democrats—I proudly accept the nomination of our party! (applause)

Hubert H. Humphrey was an old-school liberal who entered the Senate the same time as Lyndon Johnson. As his vice-president, he'd urged him long ago to “cut losses” and get out of Vietnam.

But now he still wouldn't definitively separate himself from the unpopular president and his war.

[Hubert Humphrey 8.29.68](#)

What we are doing is in the tradition of Lyndon B. Johnson, who rallied a grief-stricken nation, and in the space of five years since that tragic moment, President Johnson has accomplished more of the unfinished business of America than any of his modern predecessors. And tonight I say, thank you, thank you, Mr. President.

Meanwhile, outside, Chicago police went on a rampage against the antiwar protesters, tear-gassing and beating them bloody by the score on TV.

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

It was a disaster at the convention.

The nominee's long-time major domo William Connell.

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

The confrontation with the demonstrators and the Chicago police over Vietnam, politically it was a terrible disaster. Humphrey was dogged from that day. Demonstrations everywhere he went, there was always demonstrators, and they were always kids and they were very skillful, and the television cameras would go over and pick them up. So the gestalt that the American people had about Humphrey was "Humphrey and those damn, loud kids and banners and so on," and inability to be in control.

The damn loud kids on his party's left and Nixon on his right were both against Humphrey on the war — politically the worst of both worlds. But as the election really gets going, Nixon is 45% to 29% ahead. With the white supremacist 3rd party candidate George Wallace set to win some Democratic Southern states, the Republican nominee now looked like the sure winner.

But Nixon was never complacent. Especially given how his last presidential campaign ended.

John Farrell (intvw)

Nixon comes out of the 1960 campaign...

Biographer Jack Farrell.

John Farrell (intvw)

...believing that Jack Kennedy, who had been his friend when they were in the Senate had cheated and stolen the election from him in Chicago and in Texas. So all this bitterness leaves him seething.

So in his final grab for the brass ring, what would he do to make sure he didn't lose again? That is, what wouldn't he do?

[Connie Francis singing "Nixon's the One" 1968](#)

<< – Shout it, the world's gonna shout it, there's no doubt about it, yes, Nixon's the one to...go...with, *Nixon* – remember Dick Nixon >>

Richard Nixon was not born for retail politics: charmless, uninspiring, the most un-Californian Californian ever.

Evan Thomas (intvw)

He was not a natural politician. He was uncomfortable, uneasy, paranoid.

Nixon biographer, Evan Thomas

Evan Thomas (intvw)

And so he had to compensate for it. He'd always arrive late so that he took command presence. One of his tricks was to walk into a room and immediately start playing the piano so that he wouldn't have to make small talk.

In other words, he would do whatever was necessary ...

...such as appearing on the #1 TV show “Laugh-in” in the fall of 1968.

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

Nixon: Sock it to *me*?

Concerning the war, just two years earlier on his way back from Saigon, Nixon had essentially declared victory for the U.S.

[Richard Nixon 8.12.68 \(GBH\)](#)

Nixon: There's no question now as to the outcome in Vietnam. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong are not going to succeed. The question now is how long it's going to take....

But now, his posture was neither hawk, looking to win, nor dove who would “bug out.” Nixon had a familiar catch phrase —

[Richard Nixon on Face the Nation 10.27.68](#)

Nixon: Let me make one thing very clear...

—but about Vietnam he was authoritatively...vague. And as the race began, that strategy was definitely working for him.

By 1968 the war was routinely referred to as a “quagmire.” And Nixon's success now depended on that quagmire continuing at least through the first Tuesday in November.

For three years the U.S. had dropped a thousand tons of bombs every day on North Vietnam, a country the size of New York state. And getting that

stopped was Hanoi's one unbudging condition for going forward seriously with peace talks.

Johnson did *not* want to halt the bombing unilaterally -- he wanted the North Vietnamese to agree to also cut back on *their* attacks in South Vietnam.

But his vice-president wasn't feeling so steadfast.

His aide Bill Connell accompanied him on the campaign trail.

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

Every single time that Humphrey would have a press conference, be it in Dubuque, Iowa, or New York City, the first question was always Vietnam, and the second question was Vietnam, and the third question was Vietnam. And he couldn't get on the attack. Every stop was just a disaster.

All through September the Gallup Poll still had Nixon ahead by fifteen points.

Humphrey decided he had to move publicly toward the peace-now side.

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

We went out there and started drafting a statement which would indicate Humphrey's intention to do something drastic if he were president in terms of changing the direction of the war and finding a peaceful solution. There was almost an all-night session and we rewrote, rewrote, argued and argued. That was it. Bang.

Humphrey *taped* his 20-minute speech to be broadcast on September 30th, five weeks before the election. And then *just* before it aired phoned LBJ with a heads up.

[*LBJL WHT13435 9.30.68*](#)

Humphrey: Mr. President.

Johnson: Hi, Hubert.

Humphrey: How are you this evening?

Johnson: Fine.

Humphrey: Say, I'm going to be on your TV in about five or six minutes.

Johnson: All right, I'll tune it on —

Humphrey: On NBC, and I just thought I shoulda called you a little earlier. They'd had me taping here all day, and I've been about half dead.

The vice-president soft-pedaled what he was about to do, quoting from his speech.

[*LBJL WHT13435 9.30.68*](#)

Humphrey: “Let me make clear first what I would not do: I would not undertake a unilateral withdrawal. Peace would not be served by weakness or withdrawal” -- and I make that very clear.

Then Humphrey read the president his key line:

[LBJL WHT13435 9.30.68](#)

Humphrey: As president, I would be willing to stop the bombing of the North as an acceptable risk for peace, because I believe it could lead to success in the negotiations and a shorter war.

Johnson: Now, does that mean without any—

Humphrey: No, now, wait a minute! “This would be the best protection of our troops.”

Except in the version he’d already recorded, he hadn’t included that crucial softening phrase “willing to.” Instead, on TV that night he told America:

Hubert Humphrey 9.30.68

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

Hubert Humphrey would stop the bombing, period – all but pre-emptively granting the communists’ big demand.

Tom Johnson (intvw)

Kurt Andersen: Did you get the sense that Johnson felt more in sync on Vietnam with Nixon than Humphrey?

Tom Johnson: Yes.

Tom Johnson LBJ’s ever-present young aide d’camp:

Tom Johnson (intvw)

He felt that Nixon's policy toward Vietnam was stronger, where Vice President Humphrey had become softer, had become more of a dove.

And with Humphrey’s new dovish left turn on the bombing halt, Nixon felt threatened.

John Farrell (intvw)

Nixon had his antenna up. He was suspicious.

Biographer John Farrell.

John Farrell (intvw)

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 gonna cheat him out of it with this phony bombing halt.

So that day in the Nixon-Johnson chess game, it was Nixon's move – he phoned the White House...giving the president more of a heads up about his imminent TV appearance than LBJ's own vice-president had provided.

Next morning, Johnson heard from Senator Everett Dirksen -- the Washington Republican, Senate minority leader.

[LBJL WHT13501 10.1.68](#)

Everett Dirksen: Are you at liberty to make some comment on Hubert's speech last night?

Lyndon B. Johnson: I think, a literal interpretation would show there's no great difference in it and our present policy. I think his intention is to try to do that ~~and~~ still leave the impression that there is. You get what I mean?

Dirksen: Yeah.

Johnson: So here is our present policy: we're ready, anxious, willing, eager to stop the bombing just as we are eager to stop the war. But we just can't stop one side of it, the other side's got to stop something', too. We found out that when we stop, and they don't stop, it kills more men. So we have said to them, "If we did stop the bombing, what would you do?" They're now considering that. They have not given us a firm answer.

Dirksen: Yeah.

So Johnson has revealed to his main Republican go-between something big -- that a U.S. bombing halt was on the table, and North Vietnam was "considering" a deal.

[LBJL WHT13501 10.1.68](#)

Johnson: But they refuse to have anything to do with this government that's elected and has a million-man army that's doing a lot of the fighting. So, that is a second consideration, that they must talk to the GVN.

The "GVN," our allies the government of South Vietnam – and if they didn't get to attend the peace talks, if they felt disrespected...

[LBJL WHT13501 10.1.68](#)

Johnson: Now, if this group walked out from under us, we'd really be left. And the thing that both Bunker and Abrams, the two best men we have, are more concerned about than anything else, is something that would make them distrust us, and make them think we'd sell 'em out.

Negotiations were at a delicate point, and Johnson didn't want his vice-president or Nixon screwing them up.

The president knew his inside dope about the peace talks would go straight to Nixon. Did he not also imagine that Nixon might use that information to help himself get elected?

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

The question of a bombing halt was a question very much at the front of Nixon's mind during the campaign.

Bob Haldeman was chief of staff for the campaign.

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

There was great concern within the campaign organization and on Nixon's part that Johnson was planning to pull a trick out of the hat. There were all kinds of rumor-type things as to what Johnson was up to. All I knew was that there was a Harvard professor who had some ties to the Johnson administration and to Rockefeller, who was concerned about what Johnson was doing.

A super-ambitious 44-year-old government professor named Henry Kissinger.

As a teenager, Kissinger had escaped Nazi Germany, then returned as an Army intelligence operative during the war. And now in the summer '68 was back in Europe, advising the U.S. peace negotiators.

And once again working as an intelligence operative...this time for Richard Nixon's campaign.

[Richard Allen \(MC OH\)](#)

Henry Kissinger volunteered information to us through a spy he had in the, a former student, that he had in the Paris peace talks.

Richard Allen, Nixon's foreign policy adviser.

[Richard Allen \(MC OH\)](#)

....he called me from pay phones and we spoke in German. And he offloaded mostly every night what had happened that day in Paris.

In late September, the Nixon spy Kissinger, speaking from Paris in German -- in order to, I don't know...be more spy-like? -- informed Allen and the Nixonites of a secret breakthrough in the peace talks -- of the quote "better than even chance Johnson will order a bombing halt in October."

Suddenly, it seemed as if the Democratic administration's peace talks were actually leading toward...peace.

“October surprise” wasn’t yet an idiom in American presidential politics. But with Humphrey morphing into a peace candidate and catching up in the polls, Richard Nixon knew this October surprise could cost him the presidency.

It was time to activate the agent he called the “Dragon Lady”.

Tom Johnson (intvw)

And then along came the Chennault affair. Or the Chennault saga.

Anna Chennault.

In an interview not long before she died in 2018 at age 92.

[Anna Chennault 2017](#)

Interviewer: You also became involved in politics, correct?

Anna Chennault: Yes.

Interviewer: How did that happen?

Chennault: Ahhhh, long story.

I’m Kurt Andersen, and from PRX, this has been the first episode of Nixon At War. Next episode: “Madame Chennault.”

[LBJL WHT13612 10.30.68](#)

Lyndon B. Johnson: She’s young and attractive. I mean, she’s a pretty good looking girl. And she’s around town. Seems to be kind of the go between.

Thanks very much 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.

Our mix engineer is Robin Wise.

And the producer and researcher is Caitlin Rathe.

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

To find out more, visit our website, NixonAtWar.org. And if you like what you’ve heard, please give us a rating and a review.