

May 14, 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

The attached file contains the information available to me and (I believe) the bulk of the information available to President Johnson on the activities of Mrs. Chennault and other Republicans just before the presidential election of 1968.

As the raw data themselves indicate (and the chronologies I prepared for the President on November 7 and November 11, 1968), the story falls into three parts:

- the period from October 17 to October 29;
- the period from October 29 to the election, November 5;
- the post-election period.

From October 17 to October 29 we received diplomatic intelligence of Saigon's uneasiness with the apparent break in Hanoi's position on a total bombing cessation and with the Johnson Administration's apparent willingness to go forward. This was an interval, however, when Hanoi backed away from the diplomatic breakthrough of the second week of October. Only towards the end of the month was the agreement with Hanoi re-established. As late as October 28, Thieu, despite the uneasiness of which we were aware, told Amb. Bunker he would proceed, as he had agreed about two weeks earlier. [REDACTED]

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In the early morning hours of October 29 the President and his advisers met with Abrams. Before going to that meeting, I was telephoned at home by my brother, Eugene Rostow. He reported the first of his messages from New York on Republican strategy -- from Alexander Sachs.

During the meeting with Abrams word came from Bunker of Thieu's sudden intransigence. The diplomatic information previously received plus the information from New York took on new and serious significance.

President Johnson, in the course of October 29, instructed Bromley Smith, Executive Secretary of the National Security Council, to get in touch with the Deputy Director of the FBI, Deke DeLoach and arrange that contacts by Americans with the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington be monitored.

SANITIZED

E.O. 13526, Sec. 3.5

NLJ 10-96

By isj NARA, Date 1-10-11

REFERENCE FILE

This was done, yielding the FBI evidence the folder contains.

Before the election, President Johnson asked Rusk, Clifford, and me to consider the question of whether the story should be made public. On November 4 we recommended unanimously against that course on the grounds indicated in paragraph 3 of my teletype report to President Johnson, then at his Ranch.

President Johnson agreed.

Therefore, he continued, as he had since October 29, to confine his actions to the implications of Mrs. Chennault's effort for foreign policy. He indicated to Nixon and (probably) Dirksen that he was aware of "China Lobby" activity interfering with peace negotiations and wished it to stop. (I can only vouch personally for his reference during the conference call with the three candidates on October 31; but, on the basis of President Johnson's later recollections, it is likely that he took the matter up more bluntly with Dirksen on November 2 and when Nixon called on him at the Ranch on November 3.

After the election, he actively sought and obtained Nixon's cooperation (via Dirksen) in delivering the word that the President-elect wished the South Vietnamese to proceed to cooperate in moving towards a negotiation with Hanoi.

Press clippings reflecting the incident were collected; and, as the file indicates, the matter arose subsequently from time to time.

So much by way of a brief guide to the file.

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I would only add these personal reflections as of mid-May 1973.

I am inclined to believe the Republican operation in 1968 relates in two ways to the Watergate affair of 1972.

First, the election of 1968 proved to be close and there was some reason for those involved on the Republican side to believe their enterprise with the South Vietnamese and Thieu's recalcitrance may have sufficiently blunted the impact on U.S. politics of the total bombing halt and agreement to negotiate to constitute the margin of victory.

Second, they got away with it. Despite considerable press commentary after the election, the matter was never investigated fully.

Thus, as the same men faced the election of 1972, there was nothing in their previous experience with an operation of doubtful propriety (or, even, legality) to warn them off; and there were memories of how close an election could get and the possible utility of pressing to the limit -- or beyond.

W W Rostow

W. W. Rostow