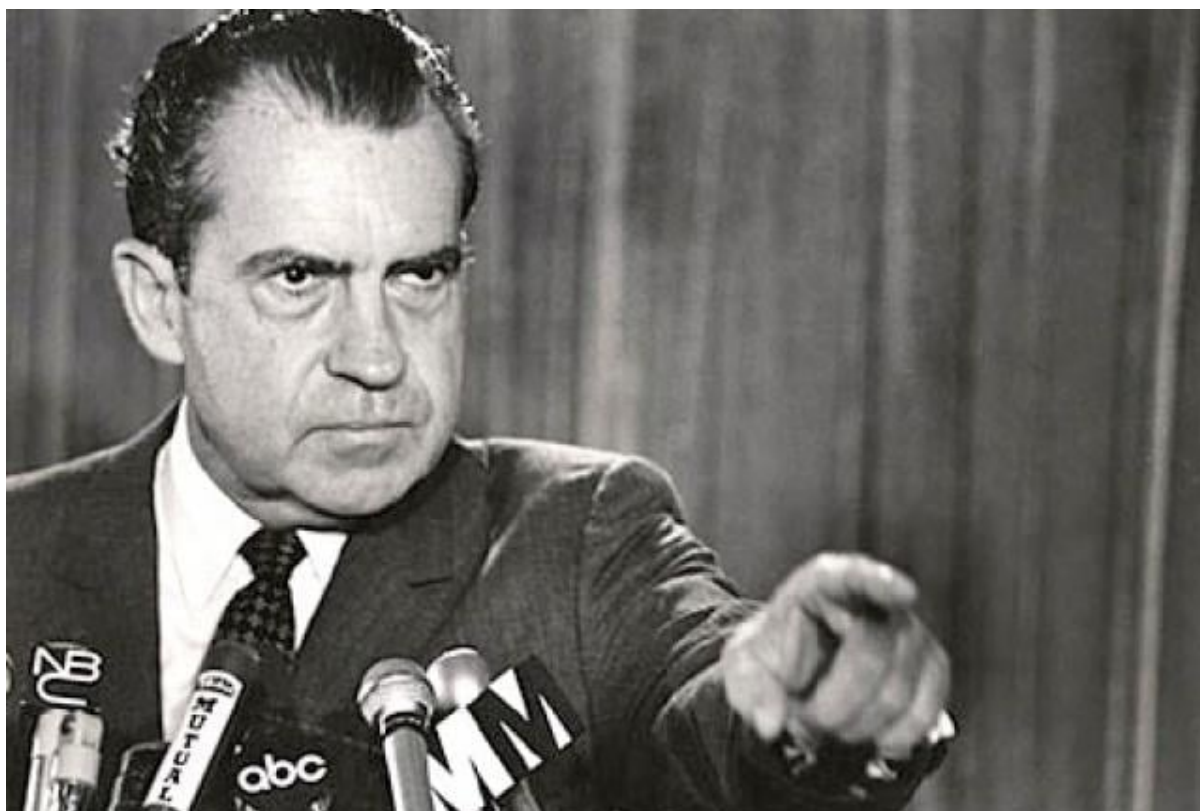


# Bogus Vietnam Charges against Nixon

An old conspiracy theory rears its ugly head, again.

by Conrad Black



Like Japanese veterans of World War II stumbling, emaciated, out of the jungles of Guam and the Philippines many years after the end of the war, near-terminal victims of Watergate fever still wander dazedly into the media with some new angle on the moldering, feculent myth that something useful was actually achieved in the bloodless assassination of Richard Nixon in the Watergate inanity. Nixon salvaged the Vietnam War the Democrats had pushed their own leader, Lyndon Johnson, into; the Democrats gave up on LBJ and pushed him out of the Forum, and he waited to die peacefully on his farm. They instantly made it Nixon's war, and went to unimaginable lengths to depose him, to sever aid to South Vietnam, deliver Indochina to Hanoi and the Khmer Rouge, and to bring back the

aging best and brightest with that most unlikely paladin, Jimmy Carter, fiddling with the thermostat in his cardigan and grumbling of the "malaise."

Nixon saw what Johnson, too shell-shocked by the desertion of his entourage and by his inept commander's call for 200,000 more draftees, did not: that the Americans and Vietnamese non-Communists won the Tet offensive of January 1968; it was a great victory. Nixon also saw that Ho Chi Minh, by denying Johnson's offer in 1966 of withdrawal of all non-indigenous forces from South Vietnam, had shown that he would not be satisfied with the conquest of South Vietnam, but rather foresaw the defeat of the United States and the decisive role for himself in the ultimate triumph of Communism over the West. (Otherwise, he would merely have withdrawn and returned in overwhelming force in six months, and the U.S. would not have come back again.)

Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger saw that South Vietnam could defeat the Viet Cong if it were powerfully enough assisted by American air power against the North Vietnamese. In April 1972, between Nixon's historic visits to China and to the Soviet Union, the North Vietnamese made their supreme play and launched an all-out invasion of South Vietnam. There were only 28,000 U.S. ground forces in-country, and they were used entirely to defend air bases. But Nixon finally put an end to Johnson's insane bombing halt of March 1968 and launched 1,000 air strikes a day on North Vietnam, moving up to 1,200 a day during his visit to the Soviet Union, so there could be no doubt about his seriousness. The North Vietnamese failed, decisively defeated by the South Vietnamese, assisted by heavy American air support – which it was always Nixon's intention to reapply when the North Vietnamese violated the Vietnam peace agreement of 1973, which the Soviets and Chinese twisted their arms to sign, so cunningly had Nixon and Kissinger triangulated that relationship. This was why Nixon submitted the peace agreement as a treaty to the Senate: to secure

Senate approval of its enforceability.

Of course, when the Watergate opportunity arose, the Democrats went cock-a-hoop for the chance to destroy the administration and deliver South Vietnam back to the brave Communist freedom fighters in the "Vietnamese civil war." Nixon was torn down, his administration was torn to pieces, and all aid was cut off to South Vietnam. There has never been any evidence that Nixon knew anything about the Watergate break-in, and although there was a criminal conspiracy within part of the White House staff and the Republican National Committee to frustrate the investigation, there was never any serious evidence that Nixon had anything to do with it. All constitutional guaranties against wrongful self-incrimination were thrown to the partisan gale-force winds by compelling the testimony of Nixon's White House counsel, John Dean, at congressional hearings, with a sweetheart promise from the prosecutor and an immunity to a charge of perjury, and the compelled production of the president's own telephone calls and conversations from and in his office. Almost all of the tapes were completely innocuous, including the so-called smoking gun. Gradually, the feebleness of the case against Nixon has emerged, as cant and emotionalism have subsided, inculpatory evidence has failed to arise, and the squalor of Deep Throat has come to light (including the effort to ignore Nixon's attempt to help him from prosecution by Carter, although he suspected his identity). The echoes of Watergate anniversaries are squeaked out, ever more implausibly, like James Joyce's famous description of the young writer's confession: "sluggish and filthy."

Just when my hopes were rising, like the green shoots of early spring, that the Nixon-demonizers had no more vitriol to propel with sinew-lean arms and quavering voice, that the much-punctured Woodstein inner tube had no more lies within, that decades of self-directed champagne toasts from firehoses had worn them down, the Woodstein Monster twitched: "It's

alive!" Barely. Peter Baker of the *New York Times* wandered blearily into the harsh winter light to give the 1968 Paris Peace Talks myth one more groaning turn of the wheel: to assert that Nixon told the South Vietnamese government to sandbag Johnson's campaign-end launch of the peace conference.

The venerable survivors of the full Bataan march of Watergate myth-making will recall this one: Nixon sent a message to the South Vietnamese government, through Anna Chennault (widow of the colorful leader of the World War II Flying Tigers in China, General Claire Chennault), who was the go-between with Bui Diem, the South Vietnamese ambassador in Washington, and with South Vietnamese president Nguyen Van Thieu. She was also the co-chair of the 1968 Nixon campaign women's committee, with Mamie Eisenhower, and was in a romantic relationship with FDR's old fixer, Thomas G. Corcoran. Corcoran was himself a friend of LBJ and a law partner of James Rowe, who was co-chair of Hubert Humphrey's Democratic presidential campaign.

Corcoran warned Anna Chennault early in 1968 about violating the Logan Act (which prohibits private citizens from unauthorized conduct of U.S. foreign policy). Ms. Chennault went to Saigon, and Thieu left her in no doubt that he thought the Republicans would be better disposed to fight the Vietnam War to a satisfactory conclusion than the Democrats would, after Johnson had removed himself from the race on March 31. That left Kennedy and Humphrey fighting with Eugene McCarthy for the Democratic nomination, and Nixon, Reagan, and Rockefeller on the Republican side. Nixon and Reagan still thought the war could be won, Rockefeller and Humphrey were for trying to negotiate something, and Kennedy and McCarthy were now effectively troops-out cut-and-run advocates who, when asked how the U.S. could get out of Vietnam, responded basically: "By plane and by ship."

Johnson had proposed his Paris peace talks in March, and seven months were wasted debating the shape of the negotiating table. Johnson was tapping everyone's phones, including the

treaty-protected phone of the country's gallant ally, the South Vietnamese ambassador, and the phone of his own vice president. The Republican campaign manager, John Mitchell, had to change phones every two days, but in fact, no one was speaking with Thieu except his own ambassador, who needed no help figuring out where their best interest lay, and the entire skullduggery was worked up by Johnson. He proclaimed at the eleventh hour that there had been a peace breakthrough, and misleadingly declared that the Viet Cong and the South Vietnamese "would be free to participate" in the talks, which were about to get past the discussion of the shape of the table but not to any other point of agreement. Thieu announced that he would attend no such talks, and Nixon's campaign co-manager, California lieutenant governor Robert Finch, said that he thought it was just a publicity stunt by Johnson to salvage the election for Humphrey. Nixon unctuously told the press that he would make no such charge against the president, but that Finch was entitled to his opinions, and he said the same to Johnson when he called Nixon, screaming down the phone, "Who is Fink anyway?"

Richard Nixon had been effectively cheated of the presidency in 1960 by Mayor Daley's stealing of ballot boxes in Chicago and Johnson's bringing in dead votes in thousands in Texas. "Thank God for a few honest crooks," John F. Kennedy famously said. Nixon was not going to allow it to be done to him again, and the skullduggery was entirely Johnson's phony peace initiative, the fraudulence of which was demonstrated when the needle didn't move in Paris for four years, until the 1972 North Vietnamese invasion was defeated and Nixon recruited Moscow and Beijing to assist him in getting a peace while he pummeled North Vietnam from the air from end to end.

This issue is a fraud, a dead canard, and had nothing to do with Watergate. It is time for truth and vengeance to be turned on the perpetrators of that sequence of catastrophic self-inflicted national wounds that destroyed one of the

country's most successful administrations, delivered Indochina to Communist mass murderers, and savaged the credibility of the much self-celebrating American national press.

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