

# The 1968 Paris peace negotiations: a two level game?

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**Abstract.** This article draws on fresh archival research to challenge Robert Putnam's 'Two Level Game Theory'. In his seminal article, 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two Level Games', published by *International Organization* in 1988, Putnam contended that international negotiations proceed at the domestic level and at the international level. In taking diplomatic initiatives forward, leaders are compelled to respond to the needs of domestic constituencies, through granting concessions and building coalitions, while international negotiations are pursued with one goal in mind: that any agreement will not damage the domestic political calculus. This article contends that Lyndon Johnson's actions in 1968 disprove this thesis. The President was in fact relaxed about a Richard Nixon victory in the general election as his commitment to defend South Vietnam from communism was stronger than that of his sitting Vice President, Hubert Humphrey. The President's concern for the fate of South Vietnam thus superseded his concern for his 'normal supporters' – the Democratic Party at large – who had become so hostile towards his management of the Vietnam War.

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An important aspect of the late Robert S. McNamara's transformation from self-assured Cold Warrior to chastened critic of expansionist US foreign policy was his willingness in the 1990s to scour the Vietnam War-era for 'missed opportunities' that might have spared the US and Vietnam its devastating conflict. In *Argument Without End*, the former defense secretary contends that 'there were [. . .] opportunities either to have avoided the war before it started or to have terminated it long before it had run its course.'<sup>1</sup> In McNamara's estimation, the failure of the

\* I am grateful to the British Academy for funding an important research trip to consult W. Averell Harriman's papers at the Library of Congress and to the LBJ Library for a grant that allowed me visit Austin and consult its holdings. My thanks also go to Matthew Jones, Andrew Preston, Fredrik Logevall, Spencer Mawby, Emma Griffin and two anonymous readers at the Review of International Studies for their insightful comments. Any errors are mine alone.

<sup>1</sup> See, Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight and Robert K. Brigham, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), p. xii.

US and North Vietnam to broker a mutually acceptable peace settlement was one of the great failures of post-war international relations. With a team of former diplomats, and US-based academics, McNamara debated numerous third party peace initiatives with counterparts from North Vietnam, including luminaries such as General Vo Nguyen Giap and First Deputy Foreign Minister Tran Quang Co.<sup>2</sup> In six meetings held in Hanoi from November 1995 to February 1998, the participants discussed what went wrong and sought to determine whether a credible peace was possible in the Johnson years. Surprised at how receptive the North Vietnamese claimed to have been to negotiations, McNamara concluded that ‘the extent of missed opportunities is truly mind boggling [...] there were a great many missed opportunities to move to a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam War between May 1965 and October 1967.’<sup>3</sup>

As McNamara’s tenure at the Pentagon ended on 1 February 1968, *Argument Without End* does not examine the direct US-North Vietnamese negotiations that took place in Paris from May 1968. This is an unfortunate omission, if understandable given McNamara’s circumstances, for the third party initiatives – known by the codenames MAYFLOWER (April–May 1965), XYZ (May–September 1965), PINTA (December 1965–January 1966), MARIGOLD (June–December 1966) SUNFLOWER (January–February 1967) and PENNSYLVANIA (June–October 1967) – were predicated on fragile behind-the-scenes manoeuvring, and all had scant chance of success. The bilateral negotiations held in Paris from May 1968 to January 1969, conversely, provided President Johnson with a gilt-edged opportunity to end the war: LBJ had removed himself from the presidential race, securing a compromise peace would have boosted the Democratic Party’s electoral prospects, and few advisers to the administration (both internally and externally) by that stage regarded ‘victory’ in Vietnam as a meaningful possibility. Many international historians – such as George Herring, Lloyd Gardner and Robert Schulzinger – have examined this important period as part of wider book projects. But just one article or book chapter has examined the Paris peace negotiations in their entirety: Herbert Schandler’s fine essay, ‘The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations after March 31, 1968.’<sup>4</sup> Yet the author has not consulted two vital primary sources: National Security Adviser Walt Rostow’s papers at the *Lyndon Baines Johnson Library* in Austin, Texas and Chief Negotiator W. Averell

<sup>2</sup> See, Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight and Robert K. Brigham, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), pp. 262–301 for former Defense Secretary McNamara’s interpretation of what went wrong with these third party initiatives.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>4</sup> The best single-volume analysis of the Johnson administration’s negotiating efforts with North Vietnam is Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger (eds), *The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964–1968* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004). Other books dealing with the Johnson administration’s ill-fated negotiating efforts include Henry J. Graff, *The Tuesday Cabinet* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970) and David Kraslow and Stuart Loory, *The Secret Search for Peace in Vietnam* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968). On the Paris negotiations specifically, see, Lloyd C Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), pp. 459–539; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time For War: The US and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 268–73 and George Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), pp. 158–77. Walter LaFeber’s *The Deadly Bet: LBJ, Vietnam and the 1968 Election* (Lanham, MA.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006) is engagingly written but contains little on the substance of the negotiations. On the Vietnamese perspective on negotiations see Ang Cheng Guan, *Ending the Vietnam War: The Vietnamese Communists’ Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Harriman's Papers at the *Library of Congress* in Washington DC. These two influential figures were at loggerheads during this period, and the disintegration of Harriman's efforts in Paris can be attributed to an unsupportive atmosphere in Washington that hawkish figures like national Rostow did much to create.<sup>5</sup>

But there is much more to this story than the bureaucratic infighting so ably analysed by scholars such as Graham Allison.<sup>6</sup> During a private conversation in September 1968, Harriman asked Defense Secretary Clark Clifford 'bluntly whether he felt the president wished to see [Vice President] Humphrey defeated [in the presidential election].' After pausing for a while to measure his response, Clifford replied that 'if you agree it is just between you and me, I believe you're right: the president wants to see him defeated.'<sup>7</sup> Exasperated by President Johnson's lack of interest in the Paris negotiations, both men surmised that, firstly, the president wanted to leave peacemaking to his successor and, secondly, that Johnson believed that Richard Nixon would safeguard South Vietnam's independence more assuredly than his sitting Vice President, Hubert Humphrey.

This article explores the tenability of this incendiary claim and concludes that the allegation carries significant weight. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Walt Rostow and LBJ – Democrats to a man – were all reconciled to a GOP victory on 5 November 1968. LBJ's preferred option was in fact for Nelson Rockefeller, a patrician, centrist Republican whom he admired greatly, to beat Richard Nixon to the GOP nomination and then win the general election against either Humphrey or Kennedy. But these hopes were dashed on 8 August when Nixon secured the Republican nomination comfortably.<sup>8</sup> The president was then confronted with a vexatious choice as to whom to privately support. Hubert Humphrey was keen to withdraw the US from the Vietnam conflict and this defeatism was unacceptable to the president and the hawkish advisers who had invested such energy and personal credibility in the battle against Vietnamese communism. While Richard Nixon's conservative domestic politics were anathema to progressives such as Rusk, Rostow, and Johnson, his geopolitical backbone was never in doubt. And so the prospect of a Nixon victory was tacitly accepted by the president – prodded in this direction by his hawkish advisers – as the least bad option for America's world position.

<sup>5</sup> For Rostow's take on the Paris negotiations see Walt Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History* (New York: Macmillan, 1972). Other useful insider accounts include Dean Rusk, as told to Richard Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990); Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1991); Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983); General William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976); George Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982); and Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979). Also see George Herring (ed.), *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1983) for an invaluable primary source collection. The *Foreign Relations of the United States* series (*Volume VII, Vietnam, 1968*) contains important source material but is weaker from Averell Harriman's and Cyrus Vance's perspective.

<sup>6</sup> Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> Averell Harriman, 'Absolutely Personal, General Review of Last Six Months, December 14, 1968, Box 521, W'. Averell Harriman Papers, *Library of Congress, Washington DC, (LOC)*.

<sup>8</sup> See, Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 845.

The four main bureaucratic players in this story are divided into two camps: Averell Harriman and Defense Secretary Clark Clifford – who were focused on achieving a negotiated settlement in Paris that engaged seriously with both North Vietnam and the South Vietnamese communist/nationalist insurgent force, the National Liberation Front (NLF) – and Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Walt Rostow, who were determined that any compromise peace that directly involved the NLF in a South Vietnamese coalition government would not happen on their watch.<sup>9</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson was the final arbiter and he chose to side with Rusk and Rostow. Ultimately, Richard Nixon was the main beneficiary of Lyndon Johnson's disinterest in bringing a negotiated end to the Vietnam War during his presidency. As Harriman recalled bitterly in December 1968, 'There is little doubt that the manner in which Viet-Nam was handled, with Rusk's and Rostow's advice or urging, elected Nixon.'<sup>10</sup> The bleakest repercussion of this missed opportunity for peace in Paris was the fact that the final peace terms agreed by Henry Kissinger and North Vietnam's chief negotiator, Le Duc Tho, in January 1973 were little different in headline substance to what Harriman and Tho had privately agreed in Paris in November 1968. Having devoted so much time and energy to the Vietnam War, however, Johnson had no desire to cut South Vietnam adrift and stem the blood being spilt in what was, by that stage, a forlorn military cause.

This argument has important implications for Robert Putnam's 'Two Level Game Theory'. In his seminal article, 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two Level Games', published by *International Organization* in 1988, Putnam contended that international negotiations between nations proceed at the domestic (intra-national) level and at the international level. In taking negotiations forward, leaders are compelled to respond to the needs and concerns of domestic constituencies through granting concessions and building coalitions, while international negotiations are pursued with one primary consideration in mind: that any agreement will not cause serious damage to domestic constituencies. 'Win-sets' occur when the priorities of actors at both levels overlap and hence international agreement becomes possible. As Putnam concludes, 'The most portentous development in the fields of comparative politics and international relations in recent years is the dawning recognition among practitioners in each field of the need to take into account entanglements between the two [...] Far-reaching empirical research is needed now to test and deepen our understanding of how such games are played.'<sup>11</sup> Through deploying the methodology of international history, relying primarily on underused archival records, this article responds to Putnam's challenge.<sup>12</sup> In doing so I hope to establish a connection between international

<sup>9</sup> Walt W. Rostow was the Johnson administration's chief civilian proponent of bombing North Vietnam to win the war. For more on Rostow's influential foreign policy career, see, Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC and Vietnam* (Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 75–101 and David Milne, *America's Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War, 1961–1968* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> W. Averell Harriman, 'Absolutely Personal, General Review of Last Six Months, 14 December 1968, Box 521', W. Averell Harriman Papers, LOC.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Putnam, 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games', *International Organization*, 42: 3 (Summer 1988), pp. 459–60. Also see Peter B. Evans, Harold K. Jacobsen, and Robert D. Putnam (eds), *Double-Edged Diplomacy: International Bargaining and Domestic Politics* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> Many other scholars have responded to Putnam's challenge. They include Robert Paarlberg, 'Agricultural Policy Reform and the Uruguay Round: Synergistic Linkage in a Two-Level Game',

history and international relations theory; two disciplines that do not interact with one another as much as they should.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, Putnam's two level game theory is useful in explaining why the 1968 negotiations proceeded as they did, although not quite in the way that he originally envisioned. In giving up on securing a peace settlement in 1968 Lyndon Johnson wilfully ignored the Democratic party's grass-roots – ignoring a key domestic constituency – to cede a significant advantage to the GOP. He declined to build a natural domestic coalition at home – as Putnam's theory holds – instead choosing to gift Nixon a significant electoral boost: the denial of a peace that LBJ deemed unworthy, but that would have almost certainly made Humphrey president. In directing negotiations with Hanoi, Johnson was concerned first and foremost with ensuring South Vietnam's continued viability as a state – a principled goal, in many respects. But resigning himself to a Nixon victory – indeed, actively aiding it with his inaction – against his sitting vice president was, bizarrely, the surest possible way to achieve this goal. The Paris peace negotiations, therefore, constituted a two-level game in the most peculiar fashion. President Johnson's overwhelming goal of protecting South Vietnam's independence required him to jettison the logic of party politics, consign Humphrey and the Democratic party to a dismal fate, and ignore the Nixon campaign's duplicitous (and, technically, treasonous) tactic of encouraging the South Vietnamese President Thieu to rebuff efforts at a compromised peace until after the presidential election, and Nixon's likely victory. The interconnectedness of diplomacy and domestic politics was never clearer, nor more cut-throat, than during the final year of Lyndon Johnson's presidency.

Following the devastating psychological blow of 30 January 1968 Tet Offensive – in which communist insurgents attacked every major town and city in South Vietnam – Lyndon Johnson, in consultation with his trusted, recently-appointed Defense Secretary, Clark Clifford, reached sobering conclusions about America's military prospects in Vietnam. While the communist attacks on the South were repulsed comprehensively by the US military, the 'light at the end of the tunnel' touted at the close of 1967 was shown to be illusory. The offensive begged an uncomfortable question for the Johnson administration: how was the US to win the war if it could not even secure central Saigon? Unable to find a compelling answer, the president, on 31 March 1968, announced a unilateral restriction of bombing, a call for substantive peace negotiations, and finally added that he would not seek a second elected term in office. Henceforth, LBJ declared that his substantial energies would be devoted to securing peace with North Vietnam. As Johnson recalled in his memoir, 'I was never more certain of the rightness of my

*International Organization*, 51: 3 (June 1997); Lee Ann Parsons, 'Agricultural Policy Reform in the European Community: a Three-Level Game Analysis', *International Organization*, 51: 1 (December 1997); Yungwook Kim, 'Negotiating with Terrorists: The iterated game of the Taliban Korean Hostage Case', *Public Relations Review*, 34: 3 (September 2008), and many others beside.

<sup>13</sup> There have been some admirable attempts to explain and bridge the disciplinary divide between international history and international relations. See Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (eds), *Bridges and Boundaries: Historians, Political Scientists and the Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001); Ngaire Woods, *Explaining International Relations since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Odd Arne Westad, *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, Theory* (London: Frank Cass, 2000); and Marc Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History: A Guide to Method* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

decision. I was putting everything I could command and everything I had personally into the search for peace [. . .].<sup>14</sup> The president had apparently conceded that South Vietnam could not remain America's responsibility indefinitely and that diplomacy was the only credible strategy left at his disposal. In a Lou Harris poll conducted the next day, Johnson's 57 per cent disapproval rating had spun 180 degrees to become a 57 per cent approval rating.<sup>15</sup> But this short-term boost in popularity could not mask the fact that the Vietnam War had drained from the president much of the political effervescence which made him such a skilled and potent agent for domestic reform through his first few years in the Oval Office. The North Vietnamese, for their part, were delighted that Johnson had decided to step back and seek peace. 'We are very happy about President Johnson's decision', revealed North Vietnam's Ambassador to Czechoslovakia, 'I am of the opinion that this will bring this war to an end. Negotiations can now start and they can start soon.'<sup>16</sup>

To head up his negotiating team Johnson chose W. Averell Harriman, a celebrated diplomat whose influence runs Zelig-like through twentieth century American history.<sup>17</sup> Franklin Roosevelt's emissary to London and Moscow during the Second World War, and the Democratic Governor of New York from 1955 to 1959, Harriman had long believed that the Vietnam War was entirely injurious to America's world position. He was also keen to reach a settlement that would enhance Democratic prospects in the November 1968 presidential election; when Vice President Hubert Humphrey was likely to face Richard Nixon, a man who Harriman reviled.<sup>18</sup> Having brokered the neutralisation of Laos in 1962, Harriman had a proven track record in making peace in Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup> It was entirely in Lyndon Johnson's interests to charge Harriman with considerable diplomatic latitude to achieve a settlement before election-day on 5 November. Securing an ostensibly honourable peace would enhance his historical reputation (that looked thin in the sphere of foreign policy) and give his vice president a better chance to safeguard the legacy of the Great Society.

Following Lyndon Johnson's dramatic speech on 31 March, the administration's key foreign policy players jockeyed for position with respect to the substance of the negotiations with North Vietnam to follow. Johnson had not yet announced that Averell Harriman would lead the search for peace, but the elder statesman realised that his chances of appointment were good and wanted to ensure that America's bombing campaign against North Vietnam would not stand in his way of achieving a settlement. On 31 March, the president had imposed a partial US bombing halt at the twentieth parallel, but American military infractions were becoming increasingly commonplace. On 2 April, Harriman wrote

<sup>14</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963–1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p. 422.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, p. 837.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Lloyd C Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, p. 459.

<sup>17</sup> For a comprehensive account of Harriman's life and career see Rudy Abramson, *Spanning the Century: The Life of W. Averell Harriman, 1891–1986* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1992).

<sup>18</sup> On Harriman's dim view of Nixon see *Ibid.*, pp. 651–74.

<sup>19</sup> David Halberstam's, *The Best and the Brightest: Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993) is excellent at conveying a sense of Harriman's place within the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. All scholars of the Vietnam War are indeed indebted to Halberstam for his perceptive portraits of the main players.

to the president congratulating him on his ‘masterful statement on Sunday night’ but warned him that US bombers had since destroyed Thanh Hoa airbase, and appeared to treat as fair game any target ‘45 miles from Hanoi and 30 miles from Haiphong’. Concerned that the negotiations with the North Vietnamese would be torpedoed before they had even begun, Harriman wrote: ‘I strongly urge that you take action to reverse this disastrous trend. I suggest that as a clarification of your intent, you announce that the bombing is specifically limited to South of Vinh, which is clearly the northern end of the North Vietnamese narrow panhandle.’<sup>20</sup> Worried that his widely admired moment of statesmanship was being undermined by reckless American fliers, Johnson instructed the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Earle G. Wheeler to restrict all American bombing south of the nineteenth parallel – not the twentieth as had been specified earlier. This was probably the first and last time that the president followed Harriman’s advice in 1968. Nevertheless, this restriction stayed in place, more or less, for the remainder of Johnson’s presidency.<sup>21</sup>

The same day that Harriman urged clarification on bombing, Walt Rostow advised the president that ‘I still believe the critical objective is to get Thieu to make in a month’s time or so, an offer to the VC to let them run as a political party under the Constitution.’ Rostow recognised that this suggestion was unlikely to meet a warm welcome in Saigon but believed that South Vietnam’s ‘behavior could be quite different if they knew that we intended that they be the central participant in the negotiation for a settlement.’<sup>22</sup> Rostow wanted South Vietnamese President Thieu, *not* an American diplomat, to be the key player in any negotiation with North Vietnam. He reasoned that Thieu would more fiercely resist calls to rein in the US military, and would only agree to a peace based on the most favourable terms to his divided nation. ‘While not surrendering our freedom of action wholly or giving Thieu a blank check’, Rostow conceded, ‘we must convince both Thieu’s government (and his military) and the South Vietnamese people that we shall be in the closest possible consultation with their government.’<sup>23</sup> The best chance that Rostow had for saving South Vietnam, and ensuring a continued American commitment to the nation, was to push Thieu to the forefront of negotiations. Rostow’s strategy for securing ‘peace’ was therefore directly at odds with that envisioned with the president’s chief negotiator. Harriman believed that the US and North Vietnam were the two key players in the negotiations. Harriman understood that President Thieu would be hostile to his efforts to secure a compromise peace, and was relaxed at the prospect of presenting South Vietnam with a *fait accompli* based on a bilateral understanding with Hanoi.

The choice of Harriman to head up negotiations was one that Rostow viewed with hostility. On 3 April, Rostow joined forces with the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and US Ambassador to Saigon, General Maxwell Taylor, in expressing significant doubts about Harriman’s suitability for the job. ‘With all due respect to Governor Harriman’, Rostow and Taylor wrote with very little respect,

<sup>20</sup> W. Averell Harriman to the President, 2 April 1968, Box 571, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>21</sup> See Herbert Y. Schandler, ‘The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations after March 31, 1968’, p. 322.

<sup>22</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 2 April 1968, NSF, Files of Walt Rostow, Box 16, *Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (LBJL)*.

<sup>23</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 3 April 1968, NSF, Files of Walt Rostow, Box 6, *LBJL*.

‘we do not believe that he is the man to carry this negotiation – should it develop – beyond its first stage’. Rostow and Taylor identified two reasons to support their objections. First, ‘his health is not all that good’, and, second, ‘he lacks – and has always lacked – an understanding and sympathy with the South Vietnamese’. While Rostow and Taylor conceded that ‘Averell is 100 per cent correct that we should not let Saigon have a veto over our position in the negotiations’, he doubted whether ‘he is in a mood to bring them along and to give them the confidence that will be necessary if a viable solution, in the US interest, is to emerge’.<sup>24</sup> Rostow had earlier bested Harriman over the contested necessity of bombing pauses and he suspected that the ageing diplomat was primarily driven by personal glory and partisan politics – not by any desire to keep South Vietnam out of harm’s way. The national security adviser was probably correct on both counts.

Nonetheless, Rostow’s anti-Harriman campaign failed. Johnson opted for a man who had contributed significantly to the shaping of twentieth century international relations. Averell Harriman possessed the kind of diplomatic kudos that the president could scarcely ignore, and he already held the job title of ‘Ambassador for Peace’, bestowed in 1966. Nevertheless, Johnson did share some of Rostow’s concerns about Harriman’s lack of sensitivity to the South Vietnamese and his desire to secure peace at a potentially unacceptable cost. In a handwritten note to Rostow, the president agreed that ‘the point about reciprocal concessions needs to be understood within the US government at the earliest possible time. Otherwise, we will find that we have given away the present position of negotiating strength which Hanoi has so generously given us [through the strategic failure of the Tet Offensive] – with nothing in return.’<sup>25</sup>

It is worth stressing here that Johnson had opted for Harriman from a position of weakness – he did not share John F. Kennedy’s fondness and respect for the redoubtable negotiator. Johnson’s credibility was tarnished in the aftermath of Tet and he felt he had little choice. As events unfolded CBS anchor Walter Cronkite had famously asked, ‘What the hell’s going on here? I thought we were winning this war.’<sup>26</sup> In such a hostile national environment, ignoring Harriman’s expertise and assistance would have looked petty. Nevertheless, the president was going to make quite sure that his head diplomat adhered to some strict negotiating criteria.<sup>27</sup> Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance was eventually chosen to accompany Harriman to Paris, yet LBJ and Rostow still remained concerned that the team looked dovish. With the president’s approval, Rostow placed a trusted hawk, NSC staffer William J. Jorden, on the inside to keep tabs on what was happening. As Jorden recalled, Rostow sent him to Paris ‘to keep an eye on those bastards [Harriman and Vance] and make sure that they didn’t give away the family jewels’.<sup>28</sup> In a studiously polite phone conversation with Rostow on 4 April,

<sup>24</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 3 April 1968, NSF, Walt Rostow, Memos to the President, Box 32, *LBJL*.

<sup>25</sup> Handwritten note from the President to Walt W. Rostow, Undated [approximately April 1968], NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 1, *LBJL*.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Cronkite is quoted in Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for War*, p. 263.

<sup>27</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 3 April 1968, NSF, Memos to the President: Walt W. Rostow, Box 32, *LBJL*.

<sup>28</sup> William J. Jorden, Oral History, *LBJL*, p. 4.



Harriman's graciousness compelled him to observe that 'You'd be doing a tremendous favour if [Jordan] could come along.'<sup>29</sup> Harriman was evidently unaware that Jordan's primary purpose was one of surveillance.

As preparations for Harriman's mission began in earnest, Rostow expressed concern to the president that one of his 'negotiating objectives' was to wind down the US air war. 'Our 'objective' is not a cessation of bombing', Rostow argued, 'it is prompt and serious substantive talks looking towards peace'.<sup>30</sup> Through a timely interjection from Clark Clifford, Harriman was permitted to retain his negotiating criteria untouched. Responding to what he interpreted as meaningless nitpicking, Harriman complained that Rostow's objections to his position were 'irrelevant' and that 'there is no doubt that Clifford's initiative saved the [negotiating] instructions from mutilation'. Ominously, Harriman wrote that 'the Secretary of State did not make any contribution'.<sup>31</sup> That the man charged with managing US diplomacy seemed so little interested in Harriman's efforts did not augur well. It was becoming clear to Harriman that Rusk's and Rostow's newfound purpose was to impede his efforts to secure a swift settlement. The *Washington Post's* influential columnist Drew Pearson had long been concerned by Rostow's leverage with the president and was appalled that Harriman's *bona fides* were being questioned so aggressively. On 19 April, Pearson wrote despairingly that Rostow has 'been able to make his ideas on Southeast Asia stick with Lyndon Johnson [. . .] No one who knows Rostow questions his integrity. But they do question his judgment'.<sup>32</sup>

On 28 April, Rostow presented Dean Rusk with what he described as 'an off-beat idea'. Since the southern settlement was the heart of the matter, Rostow wondered whether it might not be possible for 'Thieu to take the initiative and actively seek private negotiations with "a member" of the NLF, using a trusted man'. Placing Thieu at 'the center of things' would mean that the 'initiative to shape [South Vietnam's] destiny' would be in the correct hands. This was infinitely preferable to predicating peace on 'the outcome of US-Hanoi talks, etc'.<sup>33</sup> Concerned by Harriman's 'lack of sympathy for the South Vietnamese', Rostow wanted the president to transfer power from his negotiating team to the government of South Vietnam. That Hanoi would countenance direct negotiations with Thieu – the leader of a 'puppet' state it did not recognise – was unrealistic. Yet Rostow believed that Hanoi would agree to settle with Saigon, and had the evidence to prove it. 'In VC villages', Rostow reported to Johnson, 'the children are being taught to chant the following: "Blood will flow in May; there will be peace in June"'. If they are stirring these kinds of hopes, it must mean, technically, that they are thinking about a quick, rather than protracted, negotiation.<sup>34</sup> Technically, alas, the children's chants meant nothing of the sort. The North

<sup>29</sup> Memorandum of phone conversation between Averell Harriman and Walt W. Rostow, 4 April 1968, W. Averell Harriman Papers, Box 499, *LOC*.

<sup>30</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 8 April 1968, NSF, Walt W. Rostow, Memos to the President, Box 32, *LBJL*.

<sup>31</sup> Averell Harriman, Memorandum for Personal Files, 9 April 1968, W. Averell Harriman Papers, Box 571, *LOC*.

<sup>32</sup> Drew Pearson and Jack Anderson, *Washington Post*, 19 April 1968, B15. It is possible that sources sympathetic to Harriman fed Pearson this story.

<sup>33</sup> Walt W. Rostow to Dean Rusk, 29 April 1968, NSF, Walt Rostow, Memos to the President, Box 33, *LBJL*.

<sup>34</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 6 May 1968, NSF, Walt Rostow, Memos to the President, Box 33, *LBJL*.

Vietnamese government was unwilling to agree terms with Saigon that amounted to a bilateral settlement. Rostow was partial to using CIA intercepts in partisan, often colourful, ways as this memorandum to the president illustrates.

Rostow had another factor in mind when recommending that Thieu should become the key player in the negotiations: the South Vietnamese president would be more amenable to lifting the restrictions imposed upon the bombing campaign than Harriman. On 10 May, Rostow expressed hope that the US would begin ‘bombing between the 19th and 20th parallels soon’. Rather than destroying negotiations, Rostow believed that if America failed to bomb North Vietnam with sufficient vigour, Hanoi might ‘overrate the effectiveness of pressure on us on the whole bombing issue.’ This erroneous assumption on Hanoi’s part ‘might protract the phase of negotiating reciprocal action in return for a total bombing cessation’. ‘Bombing for peace’ was evidently Rostow’s mantra. But of course, these none-too-subtle promptings were not all about the negotiations. Rostow also felt ‘that we could get more trucks before they got to South Vietnam if we bombed along the road between the 19th and 20th’.<sup>35</sup> Harriman was predictably opposed to Rostow’s plan, writing that ‘reinstitution of the bombing between the nineteenth and twentieth parallels might retard the [negotiation]’.<sup>36</sup> Harriman later remarked of Rostow that ‘I never want to see another memo from that man.’<sup>37</sup>

Informal negotiations with the North Vietnamese delegation began in Paris on 10 May. Harriman’s brief was relatively straightforward: he was to establish contact with North Vietnam’s representatives, convince them to embark on a mutual de-escalation of violence, and agree to support free elections in South Vietnam in which the NLF would lay down its weapons and stand for election as a peaceful, legitimate political party. Harriman declared upon his departure from Washington that ‘we shall leave no path unexplored for an honourable peace [...] We go in a spirit of sincerity and good faith. If that spirit is matched by the other side, progress can be made toward our goal of a peaceful settlement.’<sup>38</sup> It took little time, however, for Rostow to detect problems and argue yet again in favour of a rapid military escalation to pull the rug from under America’s principal negotiator.

In doing so, Rostow clashed with Harriman and Clark Clifford. Of the defense secretary’s objections to his plans for more bombing, Rostow wrote, ‘What Clark’s analysis does not say [...] is what policy we should follow if there is no break in the Paris talks and if they continue to “read the telephone book” to us each time we meet. I doubt that we can sit still indefinitely under such circumstances.’ Were the Democratic Party to select New York Senator Robert Kennedy at their National Convention in Chicago, and were the US public to elect him in November, Rostow feared that North Vietnam would simply stall until the second President Kennedy offered a more favorable settlement.<sup>39</sup> To prevent this from

<sup>35</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 10 May 1968, NSF, Walt Rostow, Memos to the President, Box 34, *LBJL*.

<sup>36</sup> Averell Harriman to Richard Helms, attached to Walt W. Rostow to the President, 16 May 1968, NSF, Walt W. Rostow, Memos to the President, Box 34, *LBJL*.

<sup>37</sup> W. Averell Harriman quoted in Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1986), p. 641.

<sup>38</sup> Departure statement by W. Averell Harriman, 9 May 1968, Box 557, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>39</sup> In a discussion with W. Averell Harriman, Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin remarked that there was a ‘joke going around the Diplomatic Corps of President Johnson’s preference for a

happening, Rostow recommended that the president mine 'the North Vietnamese harbors and/or send some of our forces northwards across the DMZ'.<sup>40</sup> Invading North Vietnam, Rostow reasoned, would render President Robert F. Kennedy an unlikely prospect.<sup>41</sup>

Frustrated by Rostow's belligerence, Harriman wrote on 4 June that 'it would be a great mistake to threaten to bomb urban areas in North Vietnam if enemy attacks against Saigon continue [...] To actually bomb Hanoi or Haiphong in present circumstances would, we believe, lead Hanoi to break off these talks and have other adverse reactions.'<sup>42</sup> Responding to Harriman's concerns, Rostow dispatched a brutally pessimistic memorandum to the president. 'I have reluctantly come to the conclusion', Rostow warned, 'that if we are to preserve the talks in Paris, we shall have to take the risk of breaking them up [...] I believe they are laughing at us and playing us for suckers on the diplomatic-military front, in the short-run.' Rostow advised the president that he 'have Averell tell the North Vietnamese that we shall have to match every rocket in Saigon with, at least, a bomb on Hanoi'. Rostow was sympathetic to 'Clark Clifford's view that this could be a mortal blow to the Vice President's political position'... Nevertheless, 'Clark is wrong in believing that we – or the Vice President – can continue to live with the undignified and humiliating position where [...] they refuse to negotiate seriously in Paris.'<sup>43</sup> Concerned by the defense secretary's lack of backbone, Rostow even tried to cut the Pentagon out of the information loop, refusing to forward reports from the Paris negotiations to Clifford. The State Department's executive secretary Benjamin Read was appalled by this crass discourtesy and set up a 'private messenger service' to circumvent Rostow's information embargo.<sup>44</sup> It is little wonder that Harriman, Clifford's closest ally, took to describing Walt Rostow as 'America's Rasputin' for the unsavoury influence he exerted on presidential decision-making.<sup>45</sup>

Prospects for some sort of breakthrough were increasingly promising on the North Vietnamese side and on 4 June, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin wrote to the president stating that 'I and my colleagues believed with good reason' that North Vietnam was willing to negotiate a settlement, providing that the US ceased its bombing campaign. A renowned expert on the USSR, Harriman could not recall 'a Soviet leader taking such a direct position'. Delighted at the prospect of such a breakthrough, Clifford joined him in calling for a bombing pause. A typically

successor: First, Hubert Humphrey; second, Nelson Rockefeller; third, McCarthy; fourth, Nixon; fifth, Ho Chi Minh; sixth, Kennedy.' Memorandum of Conversation with Anatoly Dobrynin, 24 April 1968, Box 571, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>40</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 22 May 1968, NSF, Walt Rostow, Memos to the President, Box 34, *LBJL*.

<sup>41</sup> Rostow was no fan of RFK. He pandered to Johnson's loathing of Kennedy by quoting Karl Marx's dictum that 'history never repeats itself except as farce'. Rostow cattily observed that he 'suspected this would prove true of both Dienbienphu and Khe Sanh; and the Kennedy efforts of 1960 and 1968.' See, Walt W. Rostow to the President, 29 March 1968, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 16, *LBJL*.

<sup>42</sup> W. Averell Harriman to the President, 4 June 1968 attached to Walt W. Rostow to the President, 4 June 1968, NSF, Walt W. Rostow, Memos to the President, Box 35, *LBJL*.

<sup>43</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 11 June 1968, NSF, Walt W. Rostow, Memos to the President, Box 35, *LBJL*.

<sup>44</sup> See Herbert Y. Schandler, 'The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations after March 31, 1968', p. 329.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Times Books, 1995), p. 144.

undemonstrative Dean Rusk said little but appeared broadly in favour of responding positively to Kosygin's appeal, based as it was on some compelling insider information. The US could always resume its bombing campaign if nothing came of the move.

In a meeting with the president the following day, Rusk changed tack, however, and 'cut the ground from under Clifford's proposal, [taking] the position that of course we couldn't take what Kosygin said seriously'. Blindsided by the secretary of state's *volte-face*, Clifford and Harriman stuck to their guns but to no avail. As Harriman recalled, 'The net effect of this was an extremely hard line, turning Kosygin down, and Clifford and I both thought we lost an opportunity to get the Soviet government on the hook in a way that would be most valuable in future negotiations.' Upset by Rusk's behaviour, Harriman recalled that 'I have never participated in any discussion in the White House where there was such a clear attempt made on the part of one member of the President's Cabinet to destroy the position of another before the second man had a chance to present it.' Returning to Foggy Bottom together, Rusk told Harriman that 'The trouble with Clark is that he has lost his nerve since he has taken over at the Pentagon.' Angered by this slur, Harriman told his boss that he disagreed fundamentally with his reading of Clifford's motives. He later recorded that 'I feel Dean must have used this attack on Clark's character with the President. To me, this kind of attack on a colleague is contemptible.'<sup>46</sup>

Harriman and Clifford had a candid telephone conversation on 21 June in which they discussed the central problem facing them; namely, that they appeared to be the only two high-level Johnson administration employees interested in securing peace in Vietnam. For Clifford the main problem was that the president was under the sway of 'pessimistic' advisers who were counselling an aloof response to the North Vietnamese. Clifford told Harriman that the president 'is informed that it is terrible with our position with SVN, our own troops and even our posture in the world for us to permit Saigon to be shelled while Hanoi is not touched. He is beginning to get restive. Tied up with this approach is, I think, an effort on the part of some to indicate that perhaps nothing will come out of Paris.' Clifford believed there was only one way to quiet the complaints of those 'very militaristic gentlemen' (by which he meant Rusk and Rostow) who recommended the escalation of the air war and that was to stress the fact that the talks in Paris were producing some hopeful 'straws in the wind', even if this did not tally with the facts. If the US media were to report that Harriman was making some headway in Paris, then it would be harder for the president to sanction the type of bombing raids being recommended by Rostow. 'What I think we must do', Clifford observed with rare cunning, 'is in the most guarded manner to indicate that something is happening'.<sup>47</sup> Clifford hoped that expressions of exaggerated hope on the issue of negotiations would trump Rostow and Rusk's undue confidence in the ability of the US military to still win the war.<sup>48</sup> It was a remarkable way for the Johnson administration to

<sup>46</sup> See W. Averell Harriman, 'General Review of the Last Six Months', 14 December 1968, Box 562, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>47</sup> Notes on telephone conversation between W. Averell Harriman and Clark Clifford, 21 June 1968, W. Averell Harriman Papers, Box 571, *LOC*.

<sup>48</sup> The North Vietnamese negotiators Xuan Thuy and Ha Van Lau were perplexed that Clifford had used the phrase 'straws in the wind' with reference to their inconsequential negotiations. In a frosty

operate. The secretary of defense was counselling diplomacy and the secretary of state was recommending military escalation. Clifford believed that prospects were so hopeless for the administration's doves that a gentle deception might convince the US public to undermine the hawks.

In what remained of the Johnson administration, the president veered between bellicosity and restraint, mirroring the divisions amongst his policy advisers and, indeed, across America. Clifford later lamented that Lyndon Johnson acted more 'like a legislative leader, seeking consensus among people who were often irreconcilably opposed than like a decisive commander-in-chief giving his subordinates orders.'<sup>49</sup> While Clifford described 1968 as the most difficult year of his life, Dean Rusk recalled that the negotiating period was 'a blur' in which he survived only through a daily dose of scotch, aspirin and cigarettes.<sup>50</sup> Recognising that his presidency had little time left, Johnson was too exhausted to lift himself above the ennui that had set in. *Time* magazine reported that there was an 'unfamiliar atmosphere of tranquility' in the White House, detecting signs that Johnson 'had placed himself in the past tense'.<sup>51</sup> In showing such lack of interest in the Paris negotiations, Johnson was signalling to his vice president that he would have to beat Richard Nixon unaided.

Harriman and Vance wanted the president to buck up and impose far more restraint on the military, but Johnson was unwilling to provide this necessary boost to the Paris negotiations. The president's negotiators wanted peace for its own sake, but also feared that protracted negotiations, with no end in sight, would leave the door ajar for a Republican election victory. And both men viewed President Richard Nixon as an appalling prospect.<sup>52</sup> In late August, Harriman wrote to Hubert Humphrey that 'I am deeply concerned that you become our next President and wish to do whatever little I can to support that objective. Also, I am appalled at the calamity to our country if Richard Nixon should be elected. Aside from the setback to our country of his reactionary policies and those of the Republican right wing he represents, unfortunately around the world he has aroused a personal mistrust.'<sup>53</sup> Lyndon Johnson, however, was relaxed by the prospect of Democratic defeat in the November election. Hubert Humphrey's attempts to placate the liberal wing of the Democratic Party had angered the president, and he seemed

meeting with Harriman, they argued that 'You are attempting to soothe public opinion on your failure to act.' Little could they know that Clifford's words were part of a concerted effort by doves to undermine Walt Rostow and Dean Rusk. Telegram from Averell Harriman and Cyrus Vance to Dean Rusk, 10 July 1968, Box 561, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>49</sup> Clark Clifford with Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President*, p. 527.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in George Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), p. 164.

<sup>51</sup> *Time* (3 May 1968). For a compelling critique of Lyndon Johnson's inability to impose any form of cohesion on war-making and negotiations see, Wallace J. Thies, *When Government's Collide: Coercion and Diplomacy in the Vietnam Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). Johnson's consistent search for consensus within his administration 'provides an almost perfect example of how not to engage in coercion'. In veering between the advice dispensed by hawks and doves, meant that 'errors and misunderstandings did exist, and their effect was to make an already difficult problem virtually insoluble'. See *Ibid.*, pp. 373–74.

<sup>52</sup> See W. Averell Harriman, 'General Review of the Last Six Months', 14 December 1968, Box 562, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC* and Robert Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, p. 268.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from W. Averell Harriman to Hubert Humphrey, 31 August 1968, Box 470, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

unfussy as to whether the Minnesotan succeeded him.<sup>54</sup> At one point, Johnson argued that the Republicans had been ‘a lot more help to us [on Vietnam] than the Democrats in the last few months’.<sup>55</sup> These sentiments did not augur well for Humphrey’s prospects, or for peace.

Through July there had been a lull in the intensity of the fighting in South Vietnam. Harriman interpreted this as ‘the kind of indication of restraint that that the president had asked for in his 31 March statement’ and was keen to take diplomatic advantage by having the American military mirror the NLF’s curtailment of its activities. On 29 July Harriman wrote to Dean Rusk that ‘in addition to moving the negotiations forward, stopping the bombing could over the near future save the lives of many American troops who might otherwise be killed in defeating North Vietnamese attacks’.<sup>56</sup> Harriman hoped that such a rationale would prove compelling to the secretary of state. In inadvertent concert with Harriman’s request, the *New York Times* editorialised in favour of a bombing pause that very same day and the vice president also ‘prepared a memorandum of his own position, which included stopping the bombing’.<sup>57</sup> Virtually assured of the Democratic nomination following Bobby Kennedy’s assassination in Los Angeles, Humphrey wholeheartedly supported Harriman’s efforts, and wanted the president to give him the greater negotiating flexibility he desired.

This combination of advice could not have been worse from Harriman’s perspective. Johnson despised the *New York Times* and believed that Humphrey was displaying a disloyalty that placed him beyond the pale. LBJ ‘went through the roof’ when he heard that Humphrey had endorsed Harriman’s bombing halt. The president dug in his heels and the US bombing campaign continued as before. Dean Rusk supplied the *coup de grace* on 31 July when he delivered what Averell Harriman described bitterly as a ‘hard line press conference that cut the ground from all the work Vance and I had been doing in Paris since early May’.<sup>58</sup> In a letter to Harriman, Rusk wrote, ‘We have reason to believe that Hanoi, Moscow and others are trying to mount a concerted campaign to force us to stop all of the bombing without any corresponding action at all from Hanoi. It may well be that they are counting on the convention and electoral period to achieve this end. They must be disabused of this idea if there is to be peace.’<sup>59</sup> Lyndon Johnson described Harriman’s telegram as ‘mush’ and complained bitterly that ‘The enemy is using my own people as dupes.’<sup>60</sup>

On 22 August, an unrepentant Harriman wrote that ‘I believe that the failure of the President to stop all bombing of North Vietnam in late July or early August

<sup>54</sup> For a comprehensive account of Humphrey’s life and career, see Carl Solberg, *Hubert Humphrey: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984).

<sup>55</sup> Notes of President’s Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisers, 24 July 1968, Tom Johnson’s Notes of Meetings File, Box 4, *LBJL*.

<sup>56</sup> W. Averell Harriman to Dean Rusk, 29 July 1968, Box 561, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>57</sup> W. Averell Harriman, ‘General Review of the Last Six Months’, 14 December 1968, Box 562, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>58</sup> W. Averell Harriman, ‘General Review of Last Six Months’, 14 December 1968, Box 521, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>59</sup> Dean Rusk to W. Averell Harriman, 30 July 1968, Box 561, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Herbert Y. Schandler, ‘The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations after March 31, 1968’, p. 334.

(as we recommended) is an historic tragedy of possibly wide consequences.<sup>61</sup> At this stage, former national security adviser McGeorge Bundy (now a 'wise man') and Clark Clifford also rounded on Johnson's unwillingness to restrain the military to facilitate a negotiating breakthrough in Paris. Clifford felt that there was little point in only partially muzzling the military to help Harriman do the job. If the president truly intended to seek peace, Clifford reasoned that he must do it properly: it was nigh on impossible to negotiate sincerely with a partner whose throat you held in a chokehold. Disagreeing sharply with Clifford's line of argument, Rostow informed the defense secretary that he 'was troubled by some of [his] remarks on the bombing [...] The major constraint acting against [Hanoi] is our forces and allied forces in the south. One of the other constraints has been and remains our bombing in the north.' Clifford's belief that Hanoi could simply move men and supplies at will – that US bombing could never decisively hinder northern re-supply – was simply erroneous. Rostow patronisingly informed Clifford that 'life and war are simply not like that'.<sup>62</sup>

Turning next to McGeorge Bundy's objections, Rostow drafted a long letter that the president dispatched to his former national security adviser. 'I know it's hard to believe on the outside', the president stressed in the letter, 'but the simple fact is that the other side is not yet ready for settlement. I do not despair that they might be ready sometime in the weeks and months ahead – although I am not counting on this.'<sup>63</sup> Finding solace in Rostow and Rusk's steadfast support, the president flatly refused to pander to his liberal critics by curtailing the bombing. In a pugnacious speech made to the 'Veterans of Foreign Wars', Johnson declared 'Let's not be hoodwinked. Let's not be misled. In short our people and their people must understand one thing: We are not going to stop the bombing just to give them a chance to step up their bloodbath.'<sup>64</sup> It is a difficult, nonetheless, not to view Johnson's hard-line as informed by anger at Humphrey's and Harriman's perceived disloyalty – by a siege mentality that his hawkish advisers did much to sustain.

Through August 1968, the vice president made some tentative steps to detach himself from the Johnson administration's position on negotiations with North Vietnam. On a special NBC-TV 'Meet the Press' programme, Humphrey declared that 'I believe that we could and should stop the remaining bombing of the north if we receive indication that there is restraint and reasonable response from Hanoi. I think that is a common sense provision.' In a clearly worded warning to Richard Nixon to steer clear of politicising the Paris negotiations in the forthcoming presidential campaign Humphrey added: 'I believe that the candidates who are nominated by the respective political parties owe it to the American people and owe it to the men in the field in Vietnam to make it crystal clear to Hanoi that they are not going to get a better deal [if elected]'.<sup>65</sup> During the Democratic

<sup>61</sup> W. Averell Harriman, Memorandum for the Record, 22 August 1968, Box 558, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>62</sup> Walt W. Rostow to Clark Clifford, NSF, 23 August, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 6, *LBJL*.

<sup>63</sup> See Draft Letter from the President to McGeorge Bundy attached to Walt W. Rostow to the President, 23 August 1968, NSF, Walt W. Rostow, Memos to the President, Box 39, *LBJL*.

<sup>64</sup> Speech made by President Lyndon Johnson to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Cobo Hall, Detroit, Michigan, 19 August 1968, Box 521, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>65</sup> Telegram from Dean Rusk to W. Averell Harriman, 'Excerpts of Vice President Humphrey's statements today on Vietnam on special NBC-TV "Meet the Press" programme', 26 August 1968, Box 470, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

Convention in Chicago, Humphrey had reluctantly agreed to support the president's hard-line platform on Vietnam – a decision that had split the party and that had led to Humphrey being taunted as the president's lapdog. Stung by this criticism, Humphrey was beginning to realise that defeating Nixon would require him to adopt a position that placed him closer to his fellow Minnesotan presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy.

On the weekend of 14/15 September, Harriman and Vance reported some positive news from Paris. They had held an important private conversation with the main North Vietnamese negotiators Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy, who had displayed a willingness to commence serious negotiations as soon as the bombing stopped.<sup>66</sup> Hanoi has also indicated, through separate discussions taking place with Norwegian intermediaries in Oslo, that it was ready to accept a South Vietnamese presence at the official Paris talks.<sup>67</sup> Unimpressed by what was in reality a significant breakthrough, Rostow wrote speculatively to the president on 16 September that 'if you judge diplomacy has failed', he might consider 'bombing Cambodia [...] bombing Hanoi-Haiphong, mining Haiphong [...] and [launching] ground attacks north of the DMZ'.<sup>68</sup> Even at this late stage in proceedings, Rostow remained hopeful that president might accede to his incendiary invasion plans. In making such recommendations Rostow displayed little appreciation of the temper of the times – and the manner in which popular perceptions of the Vietnam War had changed.

Rostow continued to express concern that Harriman was exceeding his limited mandate, and wanted the president to make clear that he was not to pursue peace at any cost. During a 17 September meeting with Harriman, with Rostow in attendance, Johnson made clear, 'as Ambassador Harriman was leaving', that 'I shall count on you, Averell, to lead the Party and the Government in demanding a resumption of bombing if they violate these understandings'.<sup>69</sup> The situation was looking grim for Harriman and the vice president – who was lagging behind Nixon in the polls. 'Do not believe what you hear about Humphrey's campaign being bad', Harriman wrote to Vance despairingly, 'because it's worse than you think'. To compound his problems, Humphrey was getting scant support from the president himself. During a volatile meeting in late September, LBJ berated Humphrey for leaking sensitive information on Vietnam. As the vice president later confided to his doctor, 'Do you know what [LBJ] had the nerve to say to me, after all the insults I've taken from him the last four years? He said that if I didn't watch my ps and qs, he'd see to it personally that I lost Texas [on election day] He said he'd dry up every Democratic dollar from Maine to California – as if he hasn't already. I had trouble holding back, but I wasn't going to come down to that bastard's level'.<sup>70</sup> In mid-October Humphrey travelled to the White House to meet with the president for an off-the-record discussion on the election. LBJ refused to meet him, however, because news of the meeting had been leaked to the press. As

<sup>66</sup> See Herbert Y. Schandler, 'The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations after March 31, 1968', p. 335.

<sup>67</sup> Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, p. 868.

<sup>68</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 16 September 1968, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 10, *LBLL*.

<sup>69</sup> Walt W. Rostow, Memorandum for the Record, 17 September 1968, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 6, *LBLL*.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Walter LaFeber, *The Deadly Bet*, pp. 157–8.



the Secretary of Agriculture, and close ally of Humphrey, Orville Freeman observed despairingly, 'It's the same old business of the president's petulance and pettiness.'<sup>71</sup>

Johnson was clearly shedding few tears over Humphrey's poor showing at the polls. Nevertheless, pressure was growing on LBJ to test out North Vietnam's willingness to embark on substantive negotiations. Finally agreeing to Harriman's requests for a substantial diplomatic bargaining chip, the president set the date for a US bombing halt as 31 October – just a few days before the presidential election. The decision was made a little too late to push Humphrey over the finish line, but in a timely enough fashion to suggest that Johnson remained interested in securing peace before his presidency ended. LBJ had gained watertight assurances from the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the military could manage a bombing pause. The chair of the JCS Earle Wheeler explained that the US could easily resume bombing if North Vietnam unwisely embarked on another offensive.<sup>72</sup>

This news provoked panic within the Nixon campaign team, which feared correctly that Humphrey would be the main beneficiary of Johnson's last-minute peacemaking gambit. Henry Kissinger was the insider who informed Nixon's campaign manager John Mitchell that the Johnson administration planned to halt the bombing campaign. As Herbert Schandler writes, 'Kissinger had met privately in Paris with Harriman, Vance, and other members of the delegation in mid-September, just before the first Harriman-Vance meeting with the North Vietnamese, and they had shared with him their frustration and brought him up to date on the state of negotiations.'<sup>73</sup> In setting up this meeting, Kissinger had deployed a tactic that was close to his heart – disingenuous manipulation – to build Harriman's confidence. He wrote to Harriman on 15 August that 'There is a chance that I may be in Paris around 17 September and I would very much like to stop in and see you then. I am through with Republican politics. The party is hopeless and unfit to govern.' Kissinger lied to convince Harriman that he was sympathetic to his efforts and that any issues discussed would be held in the strictest confidence.<sup>74</sup>

Representing Richard Nixon, a prominent Chinese-American businesswoman named Anna Chennault – head of the nationwide 'Republican Women for Nixon' – informed South Vietnamese Ambassador Bui Diem that the sitting president planned to embark upon substantive, direct negotiations.<sup>75</sup> Chennault advised that President Thieu should refuse to participate in these talks prior to the election,

<sup>71</sup> Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, p. 869.

<sup>72</sup> See Notes of Meeting with Foreign Policy Advisory Group, 14 October 1968, Tom Johnson's Notes of Meeting File, Box 5, *LBJL*.

<sup>73</sup> Herbert Y. Schandler, 'The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations after March 31, 1968', p. 336.

<sup>74</sup> Henry Kissinger to W. Averell Harriman, 15 August 1968, Box 481, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*. For an unrestrained attack on Kissinger's actions then, and through the Nixon administration, see Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (London: Verso, 2001). Kissinger himself skirts around the allegation – providing a somewhat limp defence for his behaviour – in Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), pp. 49–55.

<sup>75</sup> For some insider perspectives, see Anna Chennault, *The Education of Anna* (New York: Times Books, 1980), p. 174 and Bui Diem with David Chernoff, *In the Jaws of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), pp. 234–45. For further discussion of the Chennault affair, see William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), pp. 35–56 and Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 433–40.

since he was certain to get better terms under the hawkish Nixon than the liberal Humphrey. This scurrilous manoeuvre placed partisan politics ahead of the lives of American troops in the field. They acted in concert with a foreign nation to frustrate the declared intentions of the US government.

It did not take long for the Nixon team's manoeuvring to reach the president's line of vision. At the end of October, Walt Rostow's brother, Undersecretary of State Eugene Rostow, discovered that Nixon wanted the Paris negotiations stymied.<sup>76</sup> Based on information provided by an informant in the Republican campaign, Rostow explained that 'these difficulties would make it easier for Nixon to settle after January. Like Ike in 1953, he would be able to settle on terms which the president could not accept, blaming the deterioration of the situation between now and January or February on his predecessor.'<sup>77</sup> Later on 29 October, Walt Rostow reported to the president that he possessed incendiary information 'on how certain Republicans may have inflamed the South Vietnamese to behave as they have been behaving'. Rather than going public with evidence that might have derailed the Nixon campaign, however, Rostow cautioned that the 'materials are so explosive they could gravely damage the country whether Mr. Nixon is elected or not.'<sup>78</sup> It is likely that Rostow, while disapproving at the Republican tactics deployed, was sympathetic to Chennault's aim of securing a peace better likely to preserve South Vietnam. Rostow instinctively favoured a Nixon, rather than Humphrey-brokered peace.

Rather than making a public case against Nixon's meddling, therefore, Rostow advised the president to set up a private meeting with the Republican presidential candidate in which Johnson should advise Nixon that he 'may wish to caution his men to be exceedingly circumspect in dealing with the inexperienced and impressionable South Vietnamese.'<sup>79</sup> The president was amenable to Rostow's advice. On 30 September, Hubert Humphrey had delivered a speech in Salt Lake City that declared his political independence from the Johnson administration's Vietnam policy and expressed unqualified support for an unconditional bombing pause. The president was angered by Humphrey's lack of respect in voicing such defeatist sentiment. In Johnson's opinion, the vice-president had turned towards the doves for selfish political gain, and in doing so he had proven his own disloyalty.<sup>80</sup>

LBJ was initially tempted to publicise the Chennault revelation: 'It would rock the world if it were said he [Thieu] were conniving with the Republicans. Can you imagine what people would say if it were to be known that Hanoi has met all these conditions and then Nixon's conniving with them kept us from getting it.'<sup>81</sup> In a conversation with Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen on 2 November, the president described Nixon's actions as 'treason', with Dirksen replying 'I

<sup>76</sup> Eugene Rostow's bombshell was corroborated by evidence gathered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency. See Herbert Y. Schandler, *The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations after March 31, 1968*, p. 342.

<sup>77</sup> Notes of Meeting, 29 October 1968, Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings File, Box 1, *LBJL*.

<sup>78</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 29 October 1968, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 6, *LBJL*.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> See Notes of the President's Weekly Luncheon Meeting, 15 September 1968, Tom Johnson's Notes of Meeting File, Box 5, *LBJL*.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Robert Schulzinger, *A Time For War*, p. 272.

know'.<sup>82</sup> Ultimately, however, Johnson decided to ignore Nixon's Machiavellian manoeuvre. Lyndon Johnson did exactly as Rostow advised. He called Nixon on 3 November and delivered a private rebuke, which the latter laughed off as unsubstantiated: 'my God, I would never do anything to encourage Hanoi – I mean Saigon – not to come to the table.'<sup>83</sup> Of course, lying was a process that came naturally to Richard Nixon.

This episode was hugely significant, both with regard to the extended duration of the Vietnam War, and the future of US domestic politics. The Vietnam War dragged on until January 1973, while 1968 was a nadir for the Democratic Party from which it has only recently recovered. Yet it should be noted that other less hawkish figures were also squeamish about publicising the Chennault revelation. Clark Clifford, for example, wanted Humphrey to win desperately, but was concerned that 'some elements of the story are so shocking in their nature that I'm wondering whether it would be good for the country to disclose this story, and then possible to have a certain individual elected. It could cast his whole administration under such doubts that I would think it would be inimical to our country's interest.'<sup>84</sup> The worst scenario for national unity was, in Clifford's opinion, for the story to break and Nixon to still win.

Nonetheless, Hubert Humphrey's diary entries express regret that more was not made of the Chennault revelation: 'I wonder if I should have blown the whistle on Anna Chennault and Nixon. He must have known about her call to Thieu. I wish I could have been sure. Damn Thieu. Dragging his feet this past weekend hurt us. I wonder if that call did it. If Nixon knew. Maybe I should have blasted them anyway.' One is left with the impression that Humphrey remained bitter that Johnson had not advised him in stronger terms to publicise the Chennault/Nixon-Thieu connection. As Humphrey's election-day diary reveals mournfully, '[...] I could cry. Never quite felt like this. I did some things so badly. You make such mistakes in a campaign. Maybe another week would have done it. We were coming on so fast. Why, why, why did we start so far back?'<sup>85</sup> There was of course a major reason why Humphrey had started so far back. Any advantages that a breakthrough the Paris peace negotiations might have brought Humphrey's campaign were forestalled by the president's reluctance to proceed on that front with any sense of urgency.

The president ordered that a US bombing pause take effect as planned on 31 October.<sup>86</sup> In a candid, affectionate memorandum to LBJ, Rostow confided that 'the only safety I have known over these difficult eight years has been to consult my judgment and my conscience. And I know that has also been your only solace.' In making this difficult decision, Rostow observed, 'you can always count on me'.

<sup>82</sup> See Robert Johnson, 'Did Nixon Commit Treason in 1968? What the New LBJ Tapes Reveal' (26 January 2009, *History News Network*. Available at: {<http://hnn.us/articles/60446.html>} accessed on 15 February 2009.

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, p. 875.

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 875.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Hubert H. Humphrey, *The Education of a Public Man: My Life and Politics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), pp. 8, 9, 14.

<sup>86</sup> On 14 October, Earle Wheeler had rather presumptuously announced that the 'military war has been won'. It is possible that this positive reading of the conflict convinced Johnson that he had little to lose in stopping the bombing. One wonders why negotiations were necessary, however, if the South Vietnamese insurgency had already been defeated. See Notes of Meeting, 14 October 1968, Tom Johnson's Notes of Meetings File, Box 4, *LBJL*.

Sympathising with Johnson's predicament, Rostow wrote that 'You will be accused of playing politics if you let this slide – and politics against the party you lead. Harriman and the Russians will see to that.'<sup>87</sup> Averell Harriman had obviously sunk very low in Rostow's estimation for him to warrant comparison with the nefarious Soviets. Nevertheless, Rostow believed that the US Air Force could still land a few blows in the interim. Like a teenager being dragged from a fight, still swinging punches, Rostow added that 'we cannot guarantee that every unit will get the word by the time of the bombing cessation. Therefore, they should not complain if there is some spill over for, say, 7 hours after the time they specify.'<sup>88</sup>

While the bombing pause gave a belated boost to Humphrey's hitherto listless campaign, the American people elected Richard Nixon their president by a narrow popular plurality of 510,000 votes. Predictably, the Paris negotiations henceforth foundered on Saigon's unwillingness to agree to terms under a lame duck president, with the appealing prospect of the hard-line Nixon just around the corner. While genuine prospects for negotiating peace were evident earlier in the year, Lyndon Johnson's 31 October bombing pause was too little too late. Yet even at this stage – as negotiations flat-lined with little prospect of resuscitation – Rostow wanted Harriman out of Paris. He concocted a devious plan to achieve this aim. Writing on 7 November, Rostow informed the president that Harriman was to turn 77 years of age on 15 November: 'It just occurred to me that if we wish to send him off in style, we could give him a big party, involving all his friends over the years – and then get him out of Paris for the next stage.' Aware that this scheming advice might well be frowned upon Rostow added sheepishly that 'Whether that's a good idea or not, I thought you would wish to know that his birthday is coming up.'<sup>89</sup>

From 31 October to inauguration day, President Thieu implemented the stalling strategy that Nixon, Chennault and Kissinger expected of him. Thieu had reacted 'emotionally and disjointedly' to Johnson's bombing halt and warned US Ambassador to Saigon Ellsworth Bunker that 'you cannot force us to do anything against our own interests'.<sup>90</sup> On 1 November, Thieu made a pugnacious speech in which he pilloried Johnson's decision and disassociated the South Vietnamese government from Harriman's efforts in Paris. Bunker reported the following day that that an increasingly petulant Thieu had 'closeted himself in his private apartment in independence palace' and was refusing to meet with him in person. Bunker concluded that Thieu is 'convinced that Nixon will win and will follow a hawkish policy, and therefore he can afford to wait.'<sup>91</sup> When Bunker was finally granted an audience with the president, they talked for nine hours, during which Thieu continued to stall in the face of Johnson administration pressure to agree to send a delegation in Paris. Bunker reported that this marathon session 'turned out

<sup>87</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 28 October 1968, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 6, *LBJL*.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Walt W. Rostow to the President, 7 November 1968, NSF, Walt W. Rostow, Memos to the President, Box 42, *LBJL*. Johnson ignored Rostow on this occasion and sent the following message: 'Happy Birthday to a man who does not seem to get any older. It has been obvious for years that you have found what Ponce De Leon looked for in vain. As one about to become an elder statesman myself, I offer you five acres of Blanco County for your secret.' Lyndon Johnson to W. Averell Harriman, 15 November 1968, Box 558, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>90</sup> Ambassador Bunker to Dean Rusk, 30 October 1968, Box 560, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>91</sup> Ambassador Bunker to Dean Rusk, 2 November 1968, *Ibid.*

to be a sterile exercise, with the GVN [South Vietnam] generally throwing up obstacles faster than we could remove them [...] It became clearer and clearer that Thieu and his colleagues had little regard for the time that was slipping by. (We kept looking at our watches, they never looked at theirs).<sup>92</sup> If a South Vietnamese delegation were ever to depart for Paris, they would have to be dragged from Saigon, kicking and screaming. Thieu refused point blank to send anyone to the proposed talks in Paris.

It was abundantly clear from that point onwards that Harriman's negotiations were going to achieve nothing. Dean Rusk, for one, believed that it was nigh-on impossible for the US to compel South Vietnam to do anything against its will: 'President Kennedy said we would make a battle there to save South Vietnam. That set us on course. We lost 29,000 men killed and invested \$75 billion to keep South Vietnam from being overrun. We must be careful not to flush that down the drain.'<sup>93</sup> For anything to happen, the president had to subject Thieu to the 'Johnson treatment' and threaten to cut off US military support. As LBJ had long conceded that securing an exit from Vietnam was the job for the next guy, this was not going to happen. A few days after the 31 October bombing halt one of Averell Harriman's aides, Daniel Davidson, reported on an illuminating conversation he had recently conducted with Murrey Marder of the *Washington Post*. The journalist had asked the secretary of state if it was worth his time to travel to Paris to cover the first ever official negotiations between the US and North Vietnam. Rusk replied that 'he was wasting his time [...] that nothing was going to happen in Paris – that both sides had opposing views which they would not move from and that a negotiated compromise was therefore impossible.' Marder further reported that Rusk 'strongly implied that, not only would nothing happen in Paris but that nothing had happened in Paris [Davidson's underline].'<sup>94</sup> Rusk evidently believed that the Paris negotiations represented little more than window dressing. A crushed Harriman surmised that 'the only thing I can gather about Rusk is that he wants to end his career as the strong Cold Warrior, with all guns firing, with Nixon giving in and being the appeaser'.<sup>95</sup>

Inevitably, the period from Nixon's election victory on 5 November to his inauguration on 20 January was a frustrating one for Harriman's team in Paris. Kissinger and Anna Chennault had done their jobs well. There was no chance that Thieu would agree to terms during the remainder of the Johnson administration.<sup>96</sup> The stalling tactic that the South Vietnamese president deployed for the remainder of the Johnson administration was to raise concerns about the shape of the negotiating table. Saigon was unwilling to enter into four-way negotiations in Paris (with the US, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the National Liberation

<sup>92</sup> Ambassador Bunker to Dean Rusk, 3 November 1968, *Ibid*.

<sup>93</sup> Rusk is quoted in Herbert Y. Schandler, 'The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations after March 31, 1968', p. 345.

<sup>94</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between Daniel I. Davidson and Murrey Marder, 5 December 1968, Box 571, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>95</sup> W. Averell Harriman, Notes on Conversation with Dean Rusk, 14 December 1968, Box 558, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>96</sup> For a brief biography of Thieu and his intransigence toward negotiations during the Johnson and Nixon presidencies, see John Prados (ed.), 'The Shape of the Table: Nguyen Van Thieu and Negotiations to End the Conflict', in Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger (ed.), *The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964–1968* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004).

Front) if the NLF was recognised as an entity distinct from Hanoi. Therefore, a table had to be found that could accommodate all four parties but that would give the impression that the North Vietnamese and NLF delegations were one and the same. A triangular shape was obviously unacceptable to Hanoi as it meant that North Vietnam was outnumbered two-to-one by the US and South Vietnam. A traditional square or rectangle did not work for Saigon because the NLF would then get an entire side of the table all to itself. South Vietnam's preference was for two separate rectangular tables, which was hardly a seating arrangement designed to inspire mutual confidence. The obvious compromise option was a circular design, but somehow Thieu managed to muster opposition to what was a rational choice.

On 11 December, Harriman reported to Rusk that the South Vietnamese position on the shape of the table remained intransigent. Harriman observed that 'It is clear that GVN are locked in a totally rigid and unreasonable position on seating arrangements. [The South Vietnamese] literally cannot even consider anything other than two rectangular tables facing each other [...] If matter drags on, Hanoi is going to have a propaganda field-day [...]'.<sup>97</sup> Harriman's distinguished career as one of America's great diplomats was ending in the most inauspicious fashion. A 15 December memorandum from Bunker to Rusk says much about the sometimes absurd nature of diplomacy:

We do not see how a single continuous round table can be seen as a compromise, and we do not believe that the GVN would see it either. While such an arrangement would permit us to indulge in the fiction that the two sides were opposite each other, in fact there would be as much separateness of the four delegations in their relation to each other as if they were sitting along the side of the same table [...] On the other hand, there are other alternatives that could be explored, aside from the round table, the flattened ellipse, and the broken diamond [...] We note that the DRV has talked about a parallelogram and about its angles. This might well have been a signal. Unless we are greatly mistaken, a parallelogram with equal sides is the same thing as a diamond. A greatly flattened diamond, even if it is unbroken, could be plausibly represented by our side as embodying the essentials of a two-sided meeting while the other side could still point to the fact that it is four-sided.<sup>98</sup>

Bunker's memorandum would have been purely comical had the stakes not been so high. In the nine months that followed the Tet Offensive, American and Vietnamese forces suffered their most devastating losses during the war.<sup>99</sup> Peace was at its most opportune in this period, but casualties on both sides were at their highest. Eventually the president himself got involved, writing to Thieu that 'neither the American public nor the American Congress can understand your inability to accept a continuous, and if necessary, unmarked, round table. Such a table is not inherently four sided in any way. With space at the table divided, as it would be, on a 50–50 basis, the table would indeed have a clear two-sided tendency even if it were not marked.' Even Lyndon Johnson was tiring of this game of musical tables, concluding this remarkable letter with the warning, 'Please do not force the

<sup>97</sup> W. Averell Harriman to Dean Rusk, 11 December 1968, W. Averell Harriman Papers, Box 559, LOC.

<sup>98</sup> Ellsworth Bunker to W. Averell Harriman, 15 December 1968, *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> See Herbert Y. Schandler, 'The Pentagon and Peace Negotiations after March 31, 1968', p. 352, and Ronald Spector, *After Tet: The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1993), p. 25.

US to reconsider its basic position on Vietnam.<sup>100</sup> Sadly this tough talk was too little too late. Johnson as a lame duck president was just as unwilling to dedicate himself to achieving a settlement as he was when he possessed political potency.

Averell Harriman was understandably bitter that his negotiations had been so undermined by Rusk, Rostow and, ultimately, Johnson. There was no doubt in Harriman's mind that had the president taken the opportunity 'to stop the bombing about three weeks before the Democratic Convention, the Democrats would have been united, without serious divisions, Humphrey would have been nominated without conflict over the plank on Viet-Nam, and as the polls had been showing on June and July, would have started a campaign in which he would have been elected comfortably.' In a memorandum drafted for the historical record, Harriman wrote that 'For several years I have taken the position that Viet-Nam was important in US policy, but that other things were more important. When asked what was more important, I always give my first point, not permitting it to elect Nixon as President.'<sup>101</sup>

The Vietnam War drove Johnson away from the party to which he had devoted his life. The year 1968 marked the beginning of a terrible electoral slump for the Democratic Party as it steadily lost its position, established during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency, as the party with the largest natural numerical constituency. In his hostile stance towards Harriman's peace efforts, Lyndon Baines Johnson – one of history's great Democrats – displayed scant concern for the fate of his party across the nation. The Great Society was halted in its tracks by a Republican ascendancy because Vietnam had drained from Johnson his political fight, and concern for the egalitarian goals, that had driven him throughout his career. Through 1968 a convoluted domestic political drama played out, and international diplomacy was at its heart. As Dean Rusk had candidly observed in November 1968, 'as long as Lyndon Johnson was President and [I] was Secretary of State there would not be any progress in Paris.'<sup>102</sup> This is as clear a repudiation of partisan politics as one might imagine.

For Robert Putnam 'politicians may be willing to risk a few of their normal supporters in the cause of ratifying an international agreement, but the greater the potential loss, the greater their reluctance'.<sup>103</sup> Lyndon Johnson's actions in 1968 powerfully disprove this thesis. The president's concern for the fate of South Vietnam superseded his concern for his 'normal supporters' – the Democratic Party at large – which had become so hostile towards his management of the Vietnam War. But the failure of the 1968 negotiations testifies to the wisdom of Putnam's larger insight that international agreements are forged, or rendered stillborn, by a complicated interchange between domestic politics and international geopolitical realities. The factors underlying their creation or undoing, however, do not always follow an ostensibly logical pattern.

<sup>100</sup> Letter from Lyndon Johnson to President Thieu, 8 January 1969, Box 561, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>101</sup> W. Averell Harriman, 'Absolutely Personal, General Review of Last Six Months', 14 December 1968, Box 521, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>102</sup> Memorandum of Conversation between Daniel I. Davidson and Murrey Marder, 5 December 1968, Box 571, W. Averell Harriman Papers, *LOC*.

<sup>103</sup> Robert Putnam, 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games', p. 458.