

Front; that all bombing of North Vietnam would stop, with America reserving the right of reconnaissance flights over the north and, if attack on the South Vietnamese cities ensued, the right of retaliation. On the next day, October 28th, President Thieu of South Vietnam—but *not* the South Vietnamese government—assented.

By October 29th, Tuesday, the promised end of the war in Vietnam was beginning to leak from every news source around the world—Ottawa, London, Paris, Saigon, Washington, New York. Fume and smoke steamed from the secret negotiations, with all the enwrapping prelude to drama that comes as an Apollo spacecraft spews downblast before sailing off into orbit.

The climate of the moment is important to remember. The American people had been emotionally buffeted all through the year. The words of the two major candidates had become dull. And now, suddenly, pressing through the worn rhetoric of the campaign was the hard profile of a peace in Asia. For forty-eight hours of anticipation, the campaign faded to secondary importance, and then, on Thursday evening, October 31st, it was Lyndon Johnson's moment. Licking his lips, shorn of emotion, the departing President announced, "I have now ordered that all air, naval, and artillery bombardment of North Vietnam cease as of eight A.M. Washington time, Friday morning. I have reached this decision . . . in the belief that this action can lead to progress towards a peaceful settlement of the Vietnamese war. . . . What we now expect . . . are prompt, productive, serious and intensive negotiations in an atmosphere that is conducive to progress."

Neither of the two candidates—Nixon or Humphrey—who later that evening followed the President on television with their own paid broadcasts could compete for impact; and the next morning, Friday, the nation's press was dominated once more by Lyndon Johnson, for the first time since his renunciation, for the last time in his career. In the public blur of appreciation, in the mingling of politics and concern, commentators and editorialists made what attempt they could to clarify a fuzzy, obscure and unwritten agreement with the enemy, and all concluded that peace was near.

This conclusion lasted no more than twenty-four hours, for by Friday afternoon and Saturday morning, it had been succeeded by another headline: SAIGON OPPOSES PARIS TALKS

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PLANS, SAYS IT CAN'T ATTEND NEXT WEEK, read *The New York Times* front page; and across the country bewilderment spread. If Saigon had not agreed to the agreement, there was no agreement, and who was befuddling whom? Never was climax to election presented to Americans in more blurred form with less time for consideration: Was there a peace agreement? Or was this just talk? Was the administration trying to bring an end to war? Or was it trying to save Hubert Humphrey from defeat? And never was public confusion more justified, for the leaders of both parties and of the American government were equally confused.

For the Democrats, the governing party, it may be said that they had acted in good faith. When the American administration announced the bombing halt of Thursday night, it did so believing that it had the full assent of the South Vietnamese government. It had, however, only the assent of its president, General Nguyen van Thieu. And so solemnly had Thieu been admonished by the American government to keep the secrecy of the preceding weeks of negotiation that he had kept the details of agreement secret even from his cabinet, his national assembly, and his vice-president and rival, Nguyen Cao Ky. Faced with a revolt of his assembly as the news leaked, menaced by a *coup d'état* of his vice-president, Thieu reneged. On Friday, Saigon time (Saturday, American time), came his shattering statement, "The Government of South Vietnam deeply regrets not to be able to participate in the present exploratory talks."

There could be no doubt that someone had blundered; of such blunders great issues in politics can be made. But over the weekend of November 1st and 2nd, with the Presidency of the United States apparently at stake, both sides approached the blunder as if it were a political explosive. Given the proper twist, it could explode either way, and one must see the temptation of the Democrats to exploit hidden opportunity, the temptation of the Republicans to exploit public confusion.

There is no way of getting at the dilemma of both parties except by introducing, at this point, the completely extraneous name of a beautiful Oriental lady, Anna Chan Chennault, the Chinese widow of wartime hero General Claire Chennault. Mrs. Chennault, an American citizen since 1950, comes of a line that begins with Mei-ling Soong (Madame

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Chiang K'ai-shek) and runs through Madame Nhu (the Dragon Lady of South Vietnam)—a line of Oriental ladies of high purpose and authoritarian manners whose pieties and iron righteousness have frequently outrun their brains and acknowledged beauty. In the campaign of 1968, Mrs. Chennault, a lady of charm, energy and great name, had become chairman or co-chairman of several Nixon citizen committees, wearing honorific titles which were borne by many but which she took more seriously than most. In that circle of Oriental diplomacy in Washington once known as the China Lobby, Anna Chennault was hostess-queen. Having raised (by her own statement later) some \$250,000 for the Nixon campaign, she felt entitled to authority by her achievement. And, having learned of the October negotiations by gossip and rumor and press speculation, as did most Americans, she had undertaken most energetically to sabotage them. In contact with the Formosan, the South Korean and the South Vietnamese governments, she had begun early, by cable and telephone, to mobilize their resistance to the agreement—apparently implying, as she went, that she spoke for the Nixon campaign.

She had, however, neglected to take the most elementary precautions of an intriguer, and her communications with Asia had been tapped by the American government and brought directly to the perusal of President Johnson.

Although Johnson had been made aware of Mrs. Chennault's messages even before his announcement of the bombing halt, he had not taken them seriously. It was not until Saturday, with the announcement of eleven South Vietnamese senators in Saigon of their support of Richard M. Nixon(!) and the repudiation of the Paris agreement by President Thieu, that the President's wrath was lit. By Saturday he had accused Senator Everett Dirksen of a Republican plot to sabotage peace (which Dirksen, presumably, hastened to relay to Nixon headquarters); and by Sunday, Johnson was in direct and bitter telephonic contact with Richard Nixon in Los Angeles (see footnote, page 475).

What could have been made of an open charge that the Nixon leaders were saboteurs of the peace one cannot guess; how quickly it might, if aired, have brought the last forty-eight hours of the American campaign to squalor is a matter

of speculation. But the good instinct of that small-town boy Hubert Humphrey prevailed. Fully informed of the sabotage of the negotiations and the recalcitrance of the Saigon government, Humphrey might have won the Presidency of the United States by making it the prime story of the last four days of the campaign. He was urged by several members of his staff to do so. And I know of no more essentially decent story in American politics than Humphrey's refusal to do so; his instinct was that Richard Nixon, personally, had no knowledge of Mrs. Chennault's activities; had no hand in them; and would have forbidden them had he known. Humphrey would not air the story.

For the sake of the record, I must add that in probing this episode during the weekend of its happening, this reporter's judgment was that Humphrey's decision was morally, if not tactically, correct. At the first report of Republican sabotage in Saigon, Nixon's headquarters had begun to investigate the story; had discovered Mrs. Chennault's activities; and was appalled. The fury and dismay at Nixon's headquarters when his aides discovered the report were so intense that they could not have been feigned simply for the benefit of this reporter. Their feeling on Monday morning before the election was, simply, that if they lost the election, Mrs. Chennault might have lost it for them. She had taken their name and authority in vain; if the Democrats now chose to air the story, no rebuttal of the Nixon camp would be convincing; and they were at the mercy of Humphrey's good-will.

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The events that led to the bombing halt and the events of the final weekend have never yet been fully explained. But the shadows they cast as they were happening conditioned the public environment of American thinking. And as the shadows flickered and fell, Americans had to make judgment on them. On Friday morning, Americans were convinced that peace was at hand; on Saturday, Saigon's repudiation of peace upset them; by Sunday, no one knew what was happening, and every dial and index of public-opinion sampling was spinning.

Never did a campaign close more erratically than that of