

# LBJ's Conclusion: We Kept

*This is the 14th of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.*

**"IT'S THE RIGHT THING TO DO"  
VIETNAM 1968-1969**

**(PART TWO)**

An election year is a difficult time to try to carry out an objective and unemotional foreign policy—or a domestic policy, for that matter. I am certain the fact that 1968 was an election year influenced Hanoi and affected the attitude of numerous Americans concerning our dealings with the North Vietnamese and our search for peace. Some people felt the most important political objective was the election of Richard Nixon and anything that helped that cause was good. To those people, movement toward peace in Vietnam before Election Day would not help Nixon and therefore was bad. Others felt the election of Hubert Humphrey was the critical political goal. In their minds, any movement toward peace before Election Day would help his campaign and therefore was good. Some officials in Moscow, and perhaps in Hanoi, may have thought it would be easier to deal with Humphrey than with Nixon. And in Saigon there may have been those who thought it would be easier to deal with Nixon than with Humphrey.

For our part, I wanted to be absolutely certain that several things were totally clear to everyone concerned with the negotiations. First and most important, I wanted every American involved, whether in Washington, Paris, or Saigon, to understand precisely what we were doing, why we were doing it, and what we expected to happen if we stopped the bombings and the North Vietnamese grossly violated what we regarded as our understanding with them. I talked this over at length in mid-September with our principal negotiator in the Paris talks, Ambassador Harriman. On September 17 he came to Washington and we met in my office. Harriman, who had been dealing with Communist leaders since his days as Ambassador in Moscow during World War II, told me that on balance he thought Hanoi's delegation in Paris was serious about making progress. He was convinced the North Vietnamese knew clearly our position regarding any violation of

## Our Word to

## Southeast Asia

the demilitarized zone of any significant attacks on South Vietnamese cities during a total bombing halt. But he doubted we would ever get any formal commitment from them on these matters because they wished to claim any bombing halt was "unconditional."

As Harriman was preparing to leave after our review of the Paris talks, I turned to him and said: "I will count on you, Averell, to lead the government in demanding a resumption of bombing if they violate these understandings." He assured me that he would urge a bombing resumption "with enthusiasm" under those circumstances.

The break in the stalemate came during the second week of October. In a private meeting with our delegation the North Vietnamese asked if we would stop the rest of the bombing if we had a clear answer concerning South Vietnam's participation in the next stage of talks. Harriman said that he would consult Washington. When the report came from Paris, we felt the ice was beginning to melt. But I wanted some things taken care of before I moved. "First," I said, "get this [Paris message] out to Bunker and Abrams. Tell them we are thinking of going ahead, if we do not take an un-



warranted gamble with the safety of our men, and I want their completely frank reactions—with the bark off.”

Bunker and Abrams responded promptly and we had their written reaction the next morning. The Ambassador reported that he and our field commander thought the latest exchange with Hanoi in Paris was “a fairly clear indication that Hanoi is ready for a tactical shift from the battlefield to the conference table.” They agreed with our proposal to instruct our Paris negotiators to tell the North

Vietnamese we were ready to set an early date for total cessation of armed attacks against the North. We planned to suggest that “serious talks” begin the day after the bombing halt and would insist that representatives of the Republic of Vietnam had to take part.

Harriman and Vance would also emphasize that we could not maintain the total bombing halt if North Vietnam used the area in and near the demilitarized zone to attack our forces or otherwise take advantage of our restraint. Nor would we maintain a

bombing cessation if the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong continued to strike at the major cities in the South. When we had the Bunker-Abrams answer in hand, I said: “All right, now go back to them and ask them to talk it over with President Thieu. We must be sure he is with us on this.”

The next day, Bunker discussed the entire situation with Thieu. He reported that the South Vietnamese leader was ready to go along. “After all,” Thieu had told Bunker, “the problem is not to stop the bombing but to stop the war, and we must try this path to see if they are serious.”

On October 14 I called my senior advisers to a meeting. We discussed all the possible interpretations of Hanoi's position and the likely outcome if we went ahead. Then I asked each man what he thought. One by one they answered: “I would go ahead.” Later that day, I met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Cabinet Room. We went through the same kind of review and discussion. They unanimously favored the halt, provided that we continued aerial reconnaissance over the North and would resume bombing if Hanoi grossly violated the understanding.

At the end of the day I met once again with Rusk, Clifford, Wheeler, and Rostow. We went over final details, including the cables to our Ambassadors in allied countries. We wanted the agreement of our friends before moving ahead in Paris. Once again I asked if we were all agreed. They all answered “yes.”

In Paris we went through two weeks of stalling and haggling and new demands from Hanoi's delegates. They wanted more time. They wanted us to sign a paper stating that the bombing halt was “unconditional.” They wanted us to agree to a conference of “four parties” rather than the “two side” we had consistently demanded.

Finally, step by step, hour by hour, argument after argument, we worked out a new arrangement with the North Vietnamese. They dropped the idea of a written agreement. They shortened the time between the bombing halt and the first meeting from “weeks” to two weeks, to one week, to about three days. They also understood we would regard the meetings as “two-sided” and

would not recognize the Liberation Front as an independent entity.

Once all the differences were resolved and Hanoi had met our essential requirements, we felt obliged to go forward on the pledges our negotiators had made. But as we reached accord in Paris, our agreement with President Thieu fell apart. We had planned a joint announcement with the South Vietnamese on the bombing halt. As late as October 28, when Ambassador Bunker and Thieu had gone over the final version that both governments had worked on long and hard, the South Vietnamese President had said: “I don't see how we can ask for anything more.” By the next day, however, the South Vietnamese were asking for more — more time and assurances that they could deal with Hanoi, not the Liberation Front. Neither demand was practical. We had narrowed the time between a total bombing halt and the beginning of full-scale talks largely on Saigon's insistence. As for the Liberation Front and Hanoi, we could not force them to act as we desired.

I knew that Thieu had many problems with his compatriots in the government and the National Assembly. When he began trying to win the agreement of his colleagues to move ahead in Paris, he ran into much more apprehension and resistance than he had anticipated. But I believe South Vietnam's failure to move with us on the bombing halt announcement and to send a delegation promptly to Paris had, at least as much to do with American domestic politics as with Saigon politics. Thieu and Vice President Ky and their colleagues had become convinced, I believe, on the basis of reports from their Embassy in Washington, that Mr. Nixon would win the Presidential election. Also they had been shaken up by Vice President Humphrey's speech in Salt Lake City on September 30, in which the Democratic candidate had said that he would stop all bombing if he were President. On October 12, McGeorge Bundy made a speech which I believe created further concern in Saigon. Bundy called for the next administration to “steadily, systematically, and substantially” reduce the number of Americans in Vietnam and the cost of

the war. Both speeches shook our allies and, I am convinced, created doubts and anxiety in Saigon.

I believe Thieu and his colleagues were eager to go on good terms with what they thought would be the new administration. I had reason to believe they had been urged to delay going to the Paris meetings and promised they would get a better deal from a Nixon administration than from Humphrey. I had no reason to think that Republican candidate Nixon was himself involved in this maneuvering, but a few individuals active in his campaign were.

Before I made my decision, I wanted to be absolutely certain that Hanoi understood our position. I asked Secretary Rusk to find out how often and in what detail we had spelled out our view of the restraints Hanoi should display if we ended all bombing of the North. Rusk relayed my questions to Paris. The next day, October 28, Harriman and Vance cabled their reply. By that time the North Vietnamese had accepted participation of the South Vietnamese government in future talks. The other two requirements, restraint in the demilitarized zone and foregoing attacks on major cities, had been spelled out in twelve separate sessions with Hanoi's representatives. Our negotiators reported that the North Vietnamese would give no flat guarantees; that was in keeping with their stand that the bombing had to be ended without conditions. But they had told us that if we stopped the bombing, they would “know what to do.” Harriman and Vance were confident Hanoi knew precisely what we meant and would avoid the actions that we had warned them would imperil a bombing halt. They concluded their report by saying: “As we have previously stated on several occasions, the bombing should be resumed if our demands with respect to either the DMZ or the cities are violated.”

One other feature of the planned bombing halt deserves mention, and that is aerial reconnaissance. We had



decided, even before our delegation went to Paris, that we would have to continue reconnaissance flights after a bombing halt.

At Paris the North Vietnamese demanded from the outset that we stop not only the bombing of the North but "all other acts of war" against their country. They indicated that they regarded reconnaissance as one of those "acts." To meet this point, we proposed a new formulation in July. We told Hanoi's representatives we were prepared to stop all bombardment of the North as well as "all other activities that involve the use of force." Clearly, that would exclude reconnaissance by unarmed or even unmanned flights. We knew, of course, that the North Vietnamese would never formally agree that our reconnaissance could continue with their blessing. We hoped that by making our intentions clear the North Vietnamese would find it possible quietly to accept our actions. We felt reassured on this when, in October, Hanoi's negotiator finally agreed to drop their "acts of war" formula for our "Acts involving the use of force."

To make doubly sure that there was no misunderstanding of our basic requirements for a bombing halt, either in Hanoi or in other capitals friendly to it, I decided to restate our position to the Soviet Union. On October 27 we called in Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin and gave him a detailed written explanation of our position. We specified that the South Vietnamese would be full participants in the new talks. We also expected, we said, that while the talks continued the demilitarized zone and the cities of South Vietnam would be respected. We urged that the Soviets restate this position to the North Vietnamese "so as to avoid any charge of deception and any risk of misunderstanding." We reminded Moscow of Chairman Kosygin's earlier message that he had "reason to believe" that if the bombing ended productive discussions would follow promptly. We asked for any comments

or reactions the Soviet government wished to make.

The following day, we received Moscow's answer. The Soviets welcomed the progress that the Paris talks seemed to be achieving. They said they were convinced the North Vietnamese were "doing everything possible to put an end to the war in Vietnam and to reach a peaceful settlement." Moscow expressed the opinion that any doubts regarding Hanoi's position were "groundless."

Throughout the next day, October 30, I met in lengthy session with my advisers, beginning at ten o'clock in the morning and ending at six that evening. We were following developments in Saigon intently, as well as the conversations in Paris. I had sent President Thieu a personal message on October 29 urging him to join us in

Paris under the arrangements already worked out. On the 30th, just before noon, I received his answer.

It was friendly and expressed deep appreciation for everything the United States had done to help his country survive, but it was clear that Thieu would not accept our proposal unless certain conditions were met. First, he wanted firm assurance that Hanoi would join in deescalating the war. Second, he wanted Hanoi's pledge to negotiate directly with his government. Finally, he wanted Hanoi to agree that the Liberation Front would not attend the conference as a separate delegation. My advisers and I recognized that these conditions were impossible. Moreover, we had been explaining for months to the South Vietnamese in Saigon and in Paris why

they could not be met.

I decided then, with genuine regret, that we had to go forward with our plans.

I felt I was turning over to President Nixon a foreign policy problem that, although serious, was improving; an ally that was stronger than ever before; an enemy weakened and beaten in every major engagement; and a working forum for peace. These we had achieved through the months and years of pain and sacrifice. But we had accomplished far more than that. We had kept our word to Southeast Asia. We had opposed and defeated aggression, as we promised we would. We had given 17 million South Vietnamese a chance to build their own country and their own institutions. And we had seen them move well down that road.

We had also demonstrated, with our resources and with our blood, that we cared about Asia. I was certain that every man, woman, and child in that vast and important part of the world was, at that moment, more secure and more hopeful because of what we had done — because America had cared enough to stand and to fight, and to keep its promises.

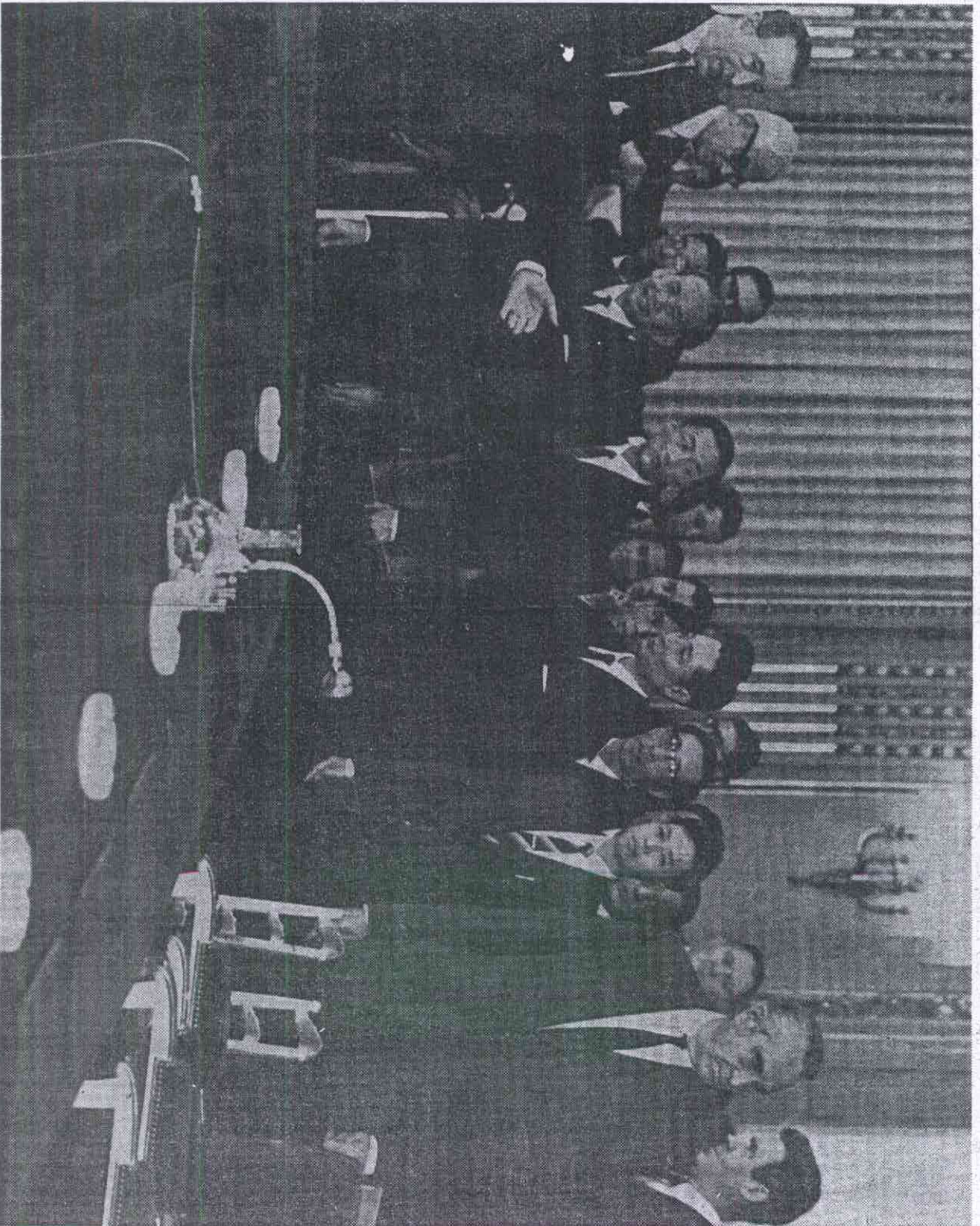
All this we accomplished, but not without great cost at home. The strain of prolonged engagement in a distant war stirred deep controversy among our people. The war created or deepened divisions — between the President and Congress, between "doves" and "hawks," between generations, between those who felt that Asia was deeply important to our future and those who put Europe first, between those who fought and those who objected to fighting.

As I left the Presidency, I was aware that not everything I had done about Vietnam, not every decision I had made, had been correct. Should we have sent as many men to Southeast Asia as we did? Or should we have sent more and sent them sooner? Was I right in refusing to risk expanding the war by using ground forces to attack the enemy's supply lines and sanctuaries in neighboring countries or to mine the port of Haiphong? Did I make a mistake in stopping most of the bombing of the North on March 31? And all the bombing on October 31? Did I do all I could have done to make clear to our people the vital interests that I believed were at stake in our efforts to help protect Southeast Asia?

History will judge these questions and will render its verdict long after current passions have subsided and the noise in the streets has died away. History will judge on the basis of facts we cannot now know, and of events some of which have not yet happened.

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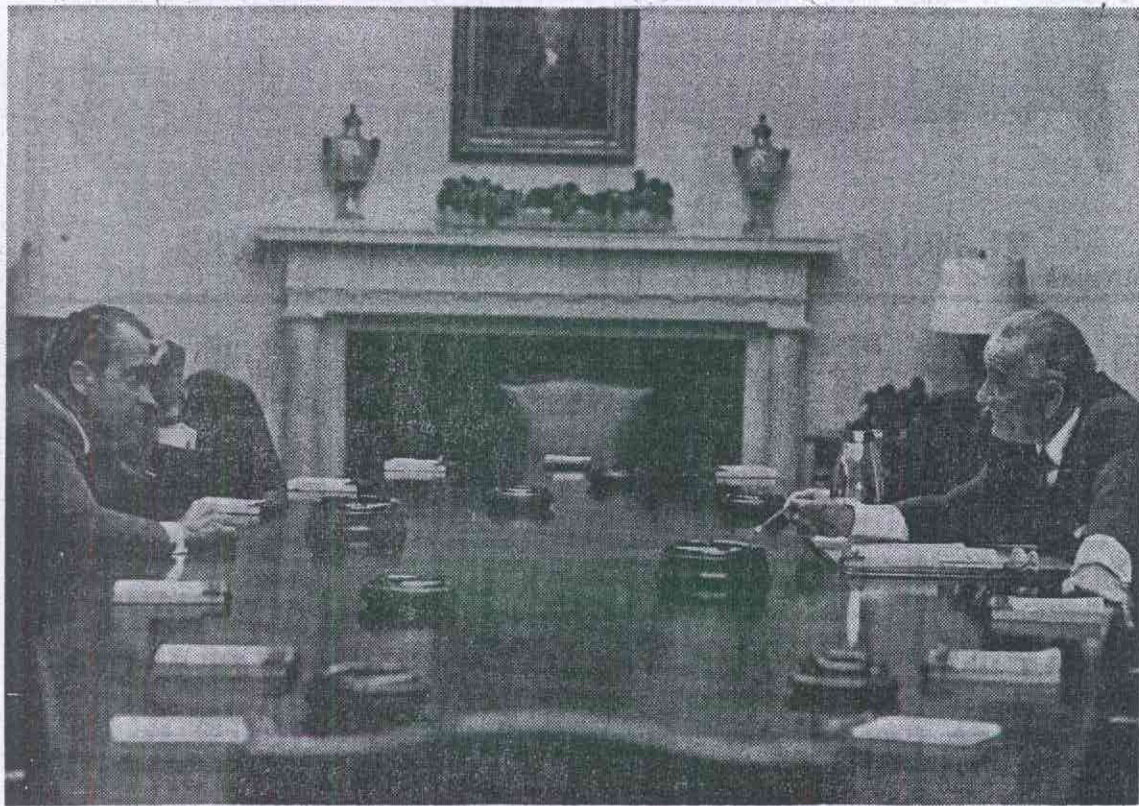




Averill Harriman and Cyrus Vance, at right, prepare to negotiate with Hanoi spokesman Xuan Thuy, third from left, in Paris in 1968.

Associated Press





Y. R. Okamoto

Mr. Johnson briefs 1968 presidential candidates Hubert Humphrey, top, and Richard Nixon on the war situation.



# Nagging Doubts Reflected

By Chalmers M. Roberts

Former President Johnson's concluding chapter on the Vietnam war, presented in excerpts published yesterday and today, covers the final agony of his administration—the total bombing halt and the beginning of four-sided talks in Paris.

Running through all Mr. Johnson writes, and in the documentation he presents, is his nagging feeling that he may have been doing what he really should not have done. But the partial bombing halt of March 31, 1968, led on inexorably, propelled by both clever Communist diplomacy on the part of Hanoi aided by Moscow and by the rising pressures on the President from officials within his own administration.

Mr. Johnson confirms what we know: Walt Rostow and Maxwell Taylor were the most hawkish; Clark Clifford became the most doveish; Dean Rusk, whose opinion the President valued the most highly, was torn by doubt. Rusk like the President wanted to hold the line but he influenced the President to bow to the inevitable.

Perhaps Rusk in

those final months had reached the conclusion he was to voice publicly on July 2, 1971: "I personally, I think, underestimated the persistence and the tenacity of the North Vietnamese." Judging from the Johnson memoir, Rusk clearly was right when he said last March that the portrayal in the final year of the Johnson administration of himself as Clifford's inflexible hawkish antagonist was "grossly distorted."

All the material in these excerpts from Mr. Johnson's book cover the period after the close of the Pentagon papers. There is no new or startling factual information but there is a further portrait of top-level discussions and debate and of presidential decision making.

Inclusion of some of the Clifford quotes, even one of Averell Harriman's, seems designed to cast doubt on Clifford's own public account of what occurred and to point out that Harriman was not then as totally dovish as many, apparently including Mr. Johnson, now take him to be. Senator J. W. Fulbright continues to be the former President's bete noir, a feeling fully reciprocated.

In today's excerpts the former President absolved

candidate Richard Nixon from the "maneuvering" that led to South Vietnamese President Thieu's refusal to go along with the total bombing halt in the days just before the 1968 presidential election. But Mr. Johnson tells us he "had reason to believe" Thieu and his colleagues "had been urged to delay going to the Paris meetings and promised they would get a better deal from a Nixon administration than from Humphrey."

"A few individuals" in the Nixon campaign, whom Mr. Johnson refrains from naming, are credited with the successful "maneuvering." This story, of course, was widely circulated at the time but the former President in the end states that "we never knew for certain" exactly why Thieu engaged in the last minute foot dragging.

As one would expect, Mr. Johnson concludes his account of the Vietnam finale in his administration with a strong contention that he had accomplished much, that he was turning over to the new President a problem that "although serious, was improving." A judgment on that depends on just what one considers the problem then to have been.

To the outgoing President it meant a stronger South Vietnam, a weaker Communist force, and above all that "we had kept our word to Southeast Asia." Aggression had been opposed and "defeated."

The cost, however, was enormous even if one accepts Mr. Johnson's judgment of the results. "Reasonable debate and fair disension" went far too far, he writes. "It became a self-inflicted wound of critical proportions" he tells us.

President Nixon today is struggling with the legacy of the Johnson years as well as with the problems he himself has created by his own conduct of the war in Indochina. We do not yet know the outcome of the contest over that part of Southeast Asia now in its 26th year. Some in Washington and Hanoi think they do but the past quarter century has been too full of surprises for anyone to be sure.

If one forgets all the pettiness and abuse of the Johnson years, the deception, the ruses, it can be said that the former President now has told the story of the war as he saw it and fought it and that is an essentially honest tale. Whether he was right or wrong is something else again.