

## The Election of 1968

With both major-party presidential candidates promising to end the war in Vietnam and with Americans deeply concerned about such tumultuous domestic issues as violent urban disturbances, cultural and social revolutions, and an increasingly shaky economy, it would appear at first glance that the election of 1968, like most U.S. presidential elections, did not turn on foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> But such a superficial reading of that storied election ignores the fact that Vietnam was the central issue in the campaign, defining the terms of battle for the nominations and the trajectory of political discourse.<sup>2</sup> The political wars at home also dramatically affected crucial military and diplomatic developments in the combat theater, and had an impact on the first Nixon administration, and even on Nixon's last run for president, that few foresaw during that most turbulent year in the most turbulent decade in modern American history. Indeed, the election of 1968 was the foreign policy election of the twentieth century.

The main advantage of writing about oxymoronic contemporary history is that in some cases, you can report as both an historian and as a participant-observer. In 1968, I was starting a scholarly career in which I would specialize in the impact of public opinion on policymaking. I was against the war—who among young American historians in 1968 wasn't?—but was skeptical about the abilities of the antiwar movement to move Lyndon Johnson. My wife, on the other hand, was a committed and idealistic activist who won a precinct-delegate seat running as an antiwar insurgent against a police officer representing the party regulars in Michigan's Seventeenth Congressional District. I watched her from the sidelines and also served occasionally as a footsoldier at local demonstrations. I was witness to such amazing sights as Orville Hubbard, the segregationist mayor of Dearborn, Michigan, but also a former Marine

1. For an overview of foreign policy and recent elections, see Melvin Small, "Presidential Elections and the Cold War," in *A Companion Guide to American Foreign Relations*, ed. Robert Schulzinger (Boston, MA, 2003), 404–21. See also the indispensable Robert A. Divine, *Foreign Policy and U.S. Presidential Elections* (New York, 1974).

2. As the authors of the best journalistic book on the election concluded, "Nothing is clearer than the imperative that an account of the politics of 1968 must start with Vietnam, the progress of which dominated the struggle for the Presidency from first to last." Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodgson, and Bruce Page, *An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968* (New York, 1969), 21. See also Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President* (New York, 1969), 466.

opposed to the war, demanding a seat at the head table at a Concerned Democrats dinner (featuring Robert Vaughn, of *The Man from Uncle*, as guest speaker) at Detroit's Cobo Hall in 1967.<sup>3</sup> And I spent ten hours in jail after being arrested for peacefully marching outside a local church in violation of Governor George Romney's proclamation prohibiting street gatherings following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968.<sup>4</sup>

I was also committed enough to deny my vote to Hubert Humphrey in November. Although such a quixotic act did not mean much (since Humphrey took Michigan), I have regretted it ever since, because I now am certain that U.S. participation in the war would have ended in 1969 or 1970 had "The Hump," whom I was trying to dump, won the close election.

The main disadvantage of writing about contemporary history is the possibility that emotional baggage and fuzzy nostalgia may so color this scholarly excursion into the sixties as to make my analysis hopelessly subjective. I trust that enough time has passed for me to look back at that period through the eyes of a disciplined historian who can hold back the tears.<sup>5</sup>

We can begin tracing the impact of the Vietnam War on the election of 1968 in October 1966, when Republicans reached a "turning point" in their contest for the presidential nomination.<sup>6</sup> Richard Nixon's political career seemed over after his loss in the California governor's race in 1962 and his disastrous press conference, in which he informed the media that they would no longer have him to kick around. But he moved to New York, became a rainmaker for a large law firm, and returned to politics as a Republican moderate who, for the sake of party unity, worked tirelessly for premature Reaganite Barry Goldwater in 1964. Waiting in the wings for the 1968 election after earning a good deal of credit within his party for his efforts on the rubber-chicken circuit, he was anointed the Republican frontrunner by, of all people, President Lyndon Johnson.

At the end of October in 1966, upon returning from a conference with his Vietnamese allies in Manila, Johnson issued a communique describing U.S. progress in the war and outlining the administration's goals. With the assistance of William Safire, Nixon composed a lengthy response, "Appraisal of Manila,"

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3. Vaughn was not just an actor: in 1967 he was also working on a Ph.D. at the University of Southern California. His revised thesis was published as *Only Victims: A Study of Show Business Blacklisting* (New York, 1972).

4. We had hoped to challenge the governor's authority to ban marches all the way up to the Supreme Court, but after having our case dismissed in a local court because of a hung jury, in a classic example of jury nullification, we did not pursue the constitutional issue. Alas, our idealism disappeared after we spent four long days in court listening to mind-numbing legalese.

5. This intense passion for the best of times and the worst of times is reflected sensitively in the film *The Big Fix* (1978), in a scene where private detective Richard Dreyfuss, once a campus radical, begins crying uncontrollably while viewing film clips of Berkeley demonstrations.

6. White, *The Making of the President: 1968*, 58.

which Safire persuaded the *New York Times's* Harrison Salisbury to publish. In a front-page news story on 4 November that appeared alongside the text, Nixon criticized the president's call for a mutual withdrawal of American and North Vietnamese forces from South Vietnam. Johnson responded angrily to Nixon, calling him a "chronic campaigner," but in so doing made him appear to be the chief Republican spokesperson. Although Nixon's supporters relished the attention that the contretemps had created, Johnson allegedly knew what he was doing by choosing as his Republican rival "the most vulnerable man in American politics," who would be easy to beat in 1968.<sup>7</sup>

Nixon appeared vulnerable in good measure because of his reputation as a Neanderthal anticommunist and an unprincipled politician. He had always prided himself on his understanding of international relations, and had begun to fashion a new image as a statesperson through foreign travel, and especially in a piece he published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1967 on "Asia After Vietnam." In the article, he sounded a good deal more moderate on relations with China than he had in the past.

While Nixon was establishing his gravitas, his main rival for the nomination, George Romney, was losing his because of the Vietnam War. On 31 October 1967, on a local Detroit television talk show, Romney reported that "when I came back from Vietnam, I just had the greatest brainwashing anybody can get."<sup>8</sup> The national media picked up the Detroit story five days later, with some critics suggesting that Romney had insulted General William Westmoreland and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, while others concluded that anyone who could be brainwashed so easily was not fit to be president. From this gaffe, it was all downhill for the well-meaning, moderate Republican governor, who had looked like the candidate from Central Casting.

The greatest political drama in 1966 and 1967, however, was taking place in the Democratic Party, where insurgents were preparing to challenge Lyndon Johnson for the 1968 nomination. The key issue was the war, with most of the antiwar opposition to be found in the liberal and left wings of the party. Few Democrats objected to Johnson's sweeping domestic reform program, the Great Society and, in fact, many refrained from opposing the war in public because they did not want to weaken the most productive progressive presidency since the New Deal. Nonetheless, the war was such an overriding issue that many Democrats began working on trying to end it or, if that did not work, unseating the president in 1968. Thus it was that three influential Democratic intellectuals, Kennedy and Johnson speechwriter Richard Goodwin, Kennedy aide Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and former ambassador and economics

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7. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician, 1962-1972* (New York, 1989), 97.

8. Lewis L. Gould, *1968: The Election that Changed America* (Chicago, IL, 1993), 28. Minnesota senator Eugene McCarthy, then contemplating his own presidential run, thought "a light rinse would have been sufficient." Chester et al., *An American Melodrama*, 113.

professor John Kenneth Galbraith, met at the Quo Vadis restaurant in New York in the spring of 1966 to plot strategies to convince the president to adopt policies that would lead to American withdrawal from Vietnam before the next presidential election.<sup>9</sup>

The exponential growth of antiwar sentiment among Democrats in 1966 and 1967 made it difficult for the president to move very far from his middle-of-the-road policy between the hawks and the doves. Had he moved too far to the left and arranged a peace that resulted in a Communist takeover of South Vietnam before the election of 1968, he would lose the election. But he could not move too far to the right. In the aviary of the period he was a “dawk,” whose military options to end the war through more pronounced escalation, an option urged by his Republican critics, among them Richard Nixon, was limited by opinion makers like Galbraith, Arkansas senator J. William Fulbright, the *New York Times*, and, of course, the antiwar movement.<sup>10</sup>

During the summer of 1966, somewhat below the political radar, Democratic activist Allard Lowenstein began tentatively exploring the possibility of challenging the powerful sitting president for the 1968 nomination. At the same time, Democrats in many states who worried about what the war was doing to the nation as well as to their party’s chances in 1968 were meeting in informal groups to develop institutional structures to challenge the leadership from district to district. This movement emerged in 1967 as the Committees of Concerned Democrats, some of whom were attracted to Lowenstein’s quest to find an alternative to Lyndon Johnson. Typical was the California Democratic Council, with a membership of thirty-three thousand, which decided in March to wait six months to see whether the war was moving toward a close, and if not, to run an anti-Johnson delegate slate in their June 1968 primary.<sup>11</sup> The next month the liberal bellwether Americans for Democratic Action announced that it would support any candidate who promised to end the war. At its annual convention that summer, the National Student Association, prodded by Lowenstein, launched a Dump Johnson movement. Lowenstein explained, “We had to start with the students because we had no money.”<sup>12</sup>

Lowenstein not only had no money, he had no candidate. New York senator Robert F. Kennedy, whose angry dispute with Johnson over Vietnam broke into the newspapers in February, was the obvious choice for antiwar standard-bearer, but he refused, saying that “[p]eople would say that I was splitting the party out of ambition and envy.”<sup>13</sup> Unable to convince, among others, senators George

9. All three published dovish articles on the war in 1966.

10. See Melvin Small, “Who Gave Peace a Chance? LBJ and the Antiwar Movement,” in *The Vietnam War: The Search for Peace in the Johnson Years*, eds. Lloyd Gardner and Ted Gittinger (College Station, TX, forthcoming).

11. The liberal California Democratic Council, like the Reform Democratic Movement in New York, were “Concerned Democratic” factions in all but name.

12. Chester et al., *An American Melodrama*, 63.

13. Gould, 1968, 21. Johnson’s bitter hostility to Kennedy might have made him more adamant in his opposition to dovish suggestions about how to end the war.

McGovern and Frank Church, General James Gavin (who explained that he was a Republican), or Galbraith to run, Lowenstein and his supporters settled at the eleventh hour on a backbench senator from Minnesota, Eugene McCarthy, as their candidate. He was far from a popular choice. According to one Democratic operative, he was “so weak he makes even Johnson look good.”<sup>14</sup> On the stump, he struck the liberal *Village Voice* as “dull and vague, without either poetry or balls.”<sup>15</sup> He certainly was not as charismatic as Robert Kennedy, from whom he claimed he had obtained a promise not to enter the race before he committed himself in November.

A member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the poetry-writing, baseball-playing former professor had expressed doubts about the war as early as 1965, but became an especially strong critic in 1967, influenced in part by a meeting with clerics from the Clergy and Laymen Against the War (CALCAV) in February, and by an administration spokesperson’s congressional testimony in August referring to the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution as a blank check. He offered no other reason to run against Johnson than the war, except for the more general argument that the president was “abusing the Senate.”<sup>16</sup>

Aside from his relative obscurity and less than energetic campaigning style, McCarthy’s main problem was that there were not enough binding primary elections to gather enough delegates to cobble together a majority at the convention. That majority was controlled by the president, who controlled most of the levers of power within the party. McCarthy could only hope that his candidacy would energize antiwar sentiment in the Democratic Party to compel the president to alter his Vietnam policy.

Although Johnson looked like the certain nominee as the election season began, January 1968 was not one of his better months. To be sure, he was *Time*’s “Man of the Year,” but David Levine’s cover cartoon featured him as King Lear, assaulted by Democratic “family” members. One such family member was Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare John Gardner, who resigned because he could not support the president for reelection. In addition, more than 40 percent of the population told pollsters that they thought getting involved in Vietnam had been a mistake; Johnson’s approval ratings hovered in the low thirties; American battle deaths and casualties had reached twenty thousand and 150,000, respectively; and economic weakness, affected by the president’s guns *and* butter policies, had compelled him to call for an unpopular 10 percent tax surcharge. With a run on gold in March, the chair of the Federal Reserve Board worried about the “worst financial crisis” since 1931.<sup>17</sup> McCarthy’s low-key

14. Irwin Unger and Debi Unger, *Turning Point: 1968* (New York, 1988), 299.

15. Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York, 1995), 189.

16. Jules Witcover, *The Year the Dream Died: Revisiting 1968 in America* (New York, 1997), 38.

17. Unger and Unger, *Turning Point*, 61.

Vietnam stump speech stressed the cost of the war to the nation in terms of lives, its values, and the economy.

On 21 January 1968 a B-52 carrying four H-bombs crashed off the coast of Greenland. That accident was all but forgotten two days later when North Korea captured an American intelligence vessel, the *Pueblo*, without a fight. Nixon, who felt that Johnson had made “an incredible blunder” in the incident, referred to it throughout the campaign as an example of the administration’s pusillanimous policies.<sup>18</sup> In early January, Robert Kennedy had begun rethinking the decision about his candidacy and seemed ready to enter the campaign on 19 January, in part because he was upset about the appointment of Clark Clifford, whom he erroneously equated with Attila the Hun, as secretary of defense.<sup>19</sup> However, the *Pueblo* crisis caused him to back off to a point where, on 30 January, he could “not conceive of any circumstances in which I would run.”<sup>20</sup>

Circumstances changed almost at once with the Tet Offensive, news of which reached the United States just after Kennedy offered his seemingly categorical disavowal. In his State of the Union message on 17 January, Johnson had hailed the “progress” being made in Vietnam with “The enemy . . . defeated in battle after battle.”<sup>21</sup> That optimism had followed the victory lap taken by General William Westmoreland and Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in November speaking tours across the country. And now the Communists had launched a nationwide conventional offensive, with Vietcong sappers entering the U.S. embassy compound in Saigon, a shocking and bloody intrusion seen on newscasts. McCarthy was quick to pick up on the political significance of the Tet Offensive: “Only a few months ago we were told that 65 percent of the population [of South Vietnam] was secure. Now we know that even the American embassy is not secure.”<sup>22</sup>

Suddenly, McCarthy’s chances in the 12 March, first-in-the-nation New Hampshire primary improved, as thousands of students from more than one hundred colleges, “Clean for Gene,” flocked to the state to work on his campaign, along with celebrities such as Paul Newman and Dustin Hoffman. Johnson, who had taken the primary so lightly that he was merely a write-in candidate, had to dispatch loyalists like Governor John King to warn, “Ho Chi Minh and his Communist friends . . . will be scrutinizing the returns for a sign of a breaking of the American will,” while Senator Thomas MacIntyre, in a case of reverse McCarthyism, accused the Minnesota senator of supporting draft dodgers and deserters.<sup>23</sup> Three days before the primary, Johnson was hurt by

18. Witcover, *The Year the Dream Died*, 60.

19. Chester et al., *An American Melodrama*, 107.

20. Robert V. Daniels, *Year of the Heroic Guerrilla: World Revolution and Counterrevolution in 1968* (New York, 1989), 75.

21. Witcover, *The Year the Dream Died*, 57.

22. Gould, 1968, 36.

23. Eugene McCarthy, *The Year of the People* (New York, 1969), 74.

the leaking of news that the generals were asking for another 206,000 troops for Vietnam to join the more than five hundred thousand already in country. In addition, the president feared that “[e]very son-of-a-bitch in New Hampshire who’s mad at his wife or the postman or anybody is going to vote for Gene McCarthy.”<sup>24</sup>

Johnson did win the primary by a 27,243–23,820 margin among Democrats, but when Republican write-ins for both candidates were counted, the president’s lead dwindled to 230. This was more a “victory” for those who opposed the war in general than for the doves, since as many as 40 percent of McCarthy voters favored escalation rather than withdrawal. Nationally, in the wake of Tet, more than half of Americans polled felt the war in Vietnam was a mistake and seven in ten favored Vietnamization.

The Tet Offensive, Johnson’s sudden vulnerability, the certainty that McCarthy could not win the nomination, and a genuine concern about the nation in crisis led Robert Kennedy to throw his hat in the ring on 16 March, but not before he offered Johnson a unique option. On 11 March Kennedy sent Theodore Sorensen to the president with his terms for remaining on the sidelines. Sorensen suggested that if Secretary of State Dean Rusk would resign to signal a policy change (a nonstarter for Johnson), and/or the president should appoint an independent commission to review Vietnam policy, Kennedy would not compete for the nomination. Although McCarthy did not believe that his rival was serious, the senator explained, “I don’t care what they do to me with it, I said I would walk the last mile for peace, and I am going to do it.”<sup>25</sup>

For a few days, it appeared that Johnson was attracted to the idea, with Clark Clifford meeting with Kennedy and Sorensen on 14 March to discuss potential members of the commission. But, later that day, Clifford called the senator to tell him that the president had rejected the proposal. To Kennedy, “it became unmistakably clear that as long as Lyndon B. Johnson was our President our Vietnam policy would consist of only more war, more troops, more killing and more senseless destruction of a country we are supposedly there to save. That night I decided to run for President.”<sup>26</sup>

Although he never made the linkage, the president did summon a sort of independent commission to the White House to offer advice on the war when he brought together his “Wise Men” at the end of March. For the first time since 1965, the Wise Men rejected Johnson’s Vietnam policy, in good measure because of the briefing papers they had been presented by Secretary of Defense Clifford, who had decided in February to organize a “conspiracy” in the White House to convince the president to begin the process of withdrawing from

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24. David M. Barrett, *Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and His Vietnam Advisors* (Lawrence, KS, 1993), 137.

25. Chester et al., *An American Melodrama*, 123. Kennedy’s proposal can be traced to a meeting he had in February with Chicago mayor Richard Daley. The New York senator was also upset by Johnson’s rejection of the Kerner Commission’s findings on 29 February.

26. *Ibid.*

Vietnam.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, they knew that what appeared to be a war without end was tearing the country apart and weakening the economy. Their arguments and those of Clifford's cabal, in addition to the political challenge he faced from Kennedy, convinced Johnson to present his epochal 31 March speech, in which he did not give the military their 206,000 new troops, lowered the bar for the opening of talks with North Vietnam, issued bombing restrictions, and announced that he would not seek reelection. For whatever combination of reasons, including concerns about his health, Johnson was most likely sincere when he told Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, who later entered the race on 27 April, that "I've got to become totally non-political" to end the war.<sup>28</sup> McCarthy explained Johnson's decision in other terms, contending that Johnson's campaign couldn't "stand up against five million college kids just shouting for peace.—There was too much will-power there."<sup>29</sup>

The North Vietnamese accepted Johnson's offer and agreed to meet in Paris for preliminary talks about arranging formal talks. From May through November, as Americans and North Vietnamese jockeyed for position in Paris, their discussions were obviously affected by the U.S. presidential campaign. The president was convinced that the Communists appeared more conciliatory in public, to encourage the doves to pressure him into concessions as the election neared. But he held firm. His instructions to his chief negotiator, W. Averell Harriman, included obtaining Communist promises to stop attacks on cities in South Vietnam, to respect the demilitarized zone, and to accept South Vietnam's participation in the peace talks. Harriman, who despised Richard Nixon, exceeded his guidelines during the summer in an attempt to achieve a breakthrough before the election. Many observers felt that Johnson was not entirely serious about giving up the presidency and that were he able to achieve a breakthrough before the Chicago convention in late August, a convention that might be deadlocked among several candidates, he might be drafted as a "peace" candidate acceptable to all factions. At the least, the White House made preparations for a last-minute presidential trip to Chicago. However serious Johnson may have been about not running, his 31 March decision, directly tied to the Vietnam War, altered the shape of the political battlefield not only in 1968 but for years to come.

With it being too late for Humphrey to enter the primaries, Kennedy and McCarthy competed directly for the insurgent vote in Indiana, Oregon, and California. A bitter McCarthy, who had promised Kennedy he would be a one-term president if he stayed out of the race, rejected the New York senator's offer

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27. Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1988), 145. In those days before Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Madeline Albright, and Condoleezza Rice, the Wise Men were, indeed, all men.

28. Witcover, *The Year the Dream Died*, 140.

29. White, *The Making of the President: 1968*, 144.

to split the primaries between them. Even without entering the primaries, Humphrey could count on party support, as was the case in the nonbinding primary in Pennsylvania, where McCarthy won the popular election but only one-fifth of the delegates. McCarthy bore no special animus towards Humphrey. But he was angered by Kennedy's entry into the campaign after he had received his assurances that he was not going to run. He also took issue with his opponent's Vietnam policy. The Minnesota senator attacked the *Kennedy-Johnson* policy, observing, "Any man who played a prominent role in developing the policies of the early sixties, I think, can be called upon to explain his role in the process . . . [of creating a] systematic misconception of America and its role in the world."<sup>30</sup> In addition, Kennedy was not firm enough in demanding that the Saigon government be prepared to share power with the Vietcong, as it appeared to McCarthy that he began "to water down his stand on Vietnam."<sup>31</sup>

In tough primaries in Oregon and California, Kennedy campaigned nonstop, trying to touch all interest groups, including Jewish-Americans. On 26 May he made an appearance at a synagogue in Portland, where he proclaimed, "We are committed to Israel's survival," news of which aired in California, where Sirhan Sirhan allegedly came close to weeping when he heard those words.<sup>32</sup> In addition, during the candidates' televised debate in California the next week, an interviewer referred to Kennedy's strong support for Israel in a question for McCarthy.

On election night in California on 4 June, a victorious Kennedy told his aide, Richard Goodwin, who had come over from the McCarthy camp earlier, that if the Minnesota senator withdrew, he would appoint him secretary of state. McCarthy, still perceived as a one-issue campaigner, did not offer insurgent Democrats the complete reform candidate they needed to threaten Johnson's grip on the party. Kennedy never had a chance to make the offer, which would have been rejected. Sirhan Sirhan assassinated him in the early morning hours of 5 June, most likely because of his robust support for Israel, in another example of the significance of foreign policy issues in the 1968 election.

At this point, despite the fact that McCarthy and Kennedy had compiled an impressive series of primary wins and despite the fact that more Democratic voters supported them than Humphrey, the vice president was virtually assured of the nomination because of the way delegates had been selected for the Chicago convention. Nonetheless, he knew that he had to unite the party by distancing himself from administration policies in Vietnam, if only marginally. He was already confronting picketers at his rallies who wanted to "Dump the Hump" and hecklers who shouted profanities at the "fascist." Humphrey met with Johnson on 25 July to ask for his permission to deviate from the White

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30. Chester et al., *An American Melodrama*, 303.

31. McCarthy, *The Year of the People*, 163.

32. Witcover, *The Year the Dream Died*, 223.

House line by advocating a total bombing halt of North Vietnam, but the president rejected his plea. At this point, Johnson confided to an advisor, "The GOP may be more of a help to us than the Democrats in the next few months."<sup>33</sup> This was not just a matter of pride to the president. He was convinced that he had a chance to obtain a better deal from the Communists if the presidential candidates in the election did not offer terms softer than his. Richard Nixon had endeared himself to Johnson when he told him that to accept a bombing halt would "undercut our negotiating position."<sup>34</sup> It would also undercut the crafty Republican's candidacy.

The bombing halt was the key issue in the extended public and private debate over the Democrat's Vietnam platform plank. Again, Humphrey's forces wanted to meet the doves at least halfway, but the White House demanded that they hold fast to his negotiating position. The vice president needed the doves' support for the campaign, but the contest over the plank was so bitter—after all, they won all the primaries—that he feared they would withhold their labor, money, and even votes. But Johnson was adamant, telling Humphrey that "he would denounce me. . . . I would have the blood of his sons-in-law [in Vietnam] on my hands." The vice president lamented, "I've eaten so much shit in the last two years, I've almost gotten to like the taste of it."<sup>35</sup>

The administration won the platform fight by a 1,567–1,048 vote after Johnson informed his agents that the military was convinced that North Vietnam would take advantage of a unilateral bombing halt to launch major attacks on American troops. Johnson argued, "We are not going to stop the bombing just to give them a chance to step up their bloodbath."<sup>36</sup>

On 20 August the increasingly bitter preconvention debate over Vietnam policy became a minor issue when two hundred thousand Eastern Bloc troops marched into Czechoslovakia to crush the "Prague Spring." McCarthy looked a little less than presidential when he commented, "I don't see this as a major world crisis."<sup>37</sup> He meant to say that there was little the United States could do about the invasion, but it did not come out that way. The invasion was an even greater blow to Johnson. On 21 August, the day after the invasion, the president had planned to announce a summit conference with the Russians to be held at the end of September to discuss disarmament, just the sort of thing that might have appealed to dovish delegates gathering a few days later in Chicago.<sup>38</sup>

33. Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (New York, 1998), 571.

34. Gould, 1968, 98.

35. Witcover, *The Year the Dream Died*, 194.

36. Gould, 1968, 116–17.

37. *Ibid.*, 319.

38. Nixon's media advisor was pleased with the Czech crisis. "What a break!" he exulted. "This Czech thing is just perfect. It puts the soft-liners in a hell of a box." After 20 August Nixon dropped the phrase "era of negotiations" from his speeches. Joe McGuinness, *The Selling of the President: 1968* (New York, 1969), 49.

The anti-Johnson Democrats were furious about their brutal treatment at the convention, run with an iron fist by Mayor Richard Daley, while ten thousand protestors in the streets clashed with eleven thousand of Chicago's finest (1 death, 668 arrests, over eight hundred injuries), with the "whole world watching" on television what a commission later labeled a "police riot." Even though Daley complained about biased media coverage, Americans told pollsters that they supported the police by almost a two-to-one margin. Two weeks after the convention, in a sample of fifty households in the blue-collar Democratic suburb of Warren, Michigan, two thought the police were too rough, twenty-six thought they used just enough force, and twenty-two said they were not tough enough.

The Democrats never recovered from this unprecedented bloody clash at their convention, inspired by divisions over the Vietnam War, which alienated much of left-liberal America and which reenforced the Republican argument that the Democrats were the party of disorder.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the party was so horrified by what had happened that it instituted sweeping reforms for the 1972 race that led to the disenfranchisement and alienation of many party regulars, the nomination of its most left-wing candidate, George McGovern (who had headed the party's convention-reform commission), and the landslide that gave Richard Nixon his second term.

As for Nixon's path to the Republican nomination, he easily won the New Hampshire primary over George Romney, who self-destructed over Vietnam once again when he had to correct a comment he made about Vietcong participation in a South Vietnamese government. In his statements about the war, Nixon, once more hawkish than the president, softened his line without spelling out specifics. He did refer to Saigon as "the cork in the bottle of Chinese expansion in Asia," while promising that "new leadership" will "end the war and win the peace in the Pacific."<sup>40</sup> When asked for details, he responded that he did not want to undercut Johnson and that he did not want give away his policy to the enemy before he became president. The legendary "secret plan to end the war" did not exist, although Nixon may have developed a general strategy by the fall. He was asked about his plan and at least once did reply, "Yes, I have a plan to end the war," a case in which "[s]omeone put words in his mouth, and he may have swallowed them."<sup>41</sup>

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39. McCarthy thought the Chicago violence was the main reason for Humphrey's dismal showing in the polls in the weeks after the convention. McCarthy, *Year of the People*, 227. Anticipating violence, Johnson had rejected Miami as a convention site because a Republican governor would have been in control of security.

40. Tom Wicker, *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream* (New York, 1991), 341; Gould, *The Election of 1968*, 39.

41. Herbert S. Parmet, *Richard Nixon and His America* (Boston, MA, 1990), 506. He also said, "I have no magic formula. . . . But I do have some specific ideas on how to end the war. They are primarily in the diplomatic area." Richard Whalen, *Catch the Falling Flag: A Republican's Challenge to His Party* (Boston, MA, 1972), 96.

He was close to developing a more specific plan in March when his aides began working on a nationwide radio address to be taped on 30 March, for airing on 31 March. He told his speechwriters that he had “come to the conclusion that there’s no way to win the war. But we can’t say that of course. In fact, we have to say the opposite, just to keep some degree of bargaining leverage.” Instead, looking for “the least assailable middle ground,” he was going to say that he planned to rely more on airpower and to pressure the Russians and Chinese to pressure the North Vietnamese to be more accommodating.<sup>42</sup> Nixon cancelled his address when he learned that Johnson was going to speak on the same day, and then announced that he would not criticize the president’s policy while peace talks were going on. He later assured Johnson he would support him as long as he did not soften his position, an assurance that made it even harder for the president to meet the doves halfway, or as Clark Clifford noted acerbically, Nixon offered “his support in return for inflexibility in our negotiating position.”<sup>43</sup>

The Republicans were themselves split over the war, but they kept their quarrels private, and at their Miami convention hammered out a compromise platform plank that called for “de-Americanization” of the war, proclaiming that the “era of confrontation” was over and that the world was entering a “new era of negotiation.” But it would be negotiation from strength, with a stronger hand at the helm of American foreign policy.<sup>44</sup>

Nixon enjoyed a large lead in the polls after the disastrous Democratic convention. Although his stump speeches concentrated on domestic disorder, he did promise new experienced leadership in foreign affairs to end the war honorably and to stand up to the Communists. He also ran a series of sixty-second ads in which he promised to end the war.

Taking an even harder line was third-party candidate George Wallace, who emphasized internal disorder while promising a tough foreign policy line. Both Wallace and Nixon capitalized on Americans’ growing distaste for unruly mass demonstrations led by hippie-Communists.<sup>45</sup> But Wallace’s candidacy, which attracted as much as 20 percent of the electorate at its peak, foundered on a foreign policy issue when his running mate, General Curtis LeMay (a model for the crazed general in “Dr. Strangelove”), told a press conference in October, “I don’t believe the world would end if we exploded a nuclear weapon.” After Wallace tried to make LeMay tone down the rhetoric, the blustery former head

42. Whalen, *Catch the Falling Flag*, 137, 135.

43. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 571.

44. Ambrose, *Nixon*, 168. New York governor Nelson Rockefeller threatened to oppose any candidate who did not embrace a relatively moderate peace plank.

45. Late in 1967, Americans told pollsters that antiwar demonstrations were “acts of disloyalty against the boys fighting in Vietnam” by a 68–22 percent margin. Parmet, *Richard Nixon*, 465. Aside from the general turbulence of the late sixties, the violence and building seizures at Columbia University in April, related in part to defense contracts, further bolstered the advocates of “law and order” in the 1968 election.

of the Strategic Air Command shocked everyone by reiterating that he “would use anything we could dream up . . . including nuclear weapons, if it was necessary” to end the war in Vietnam.<sup>46</sup> Because of this political faux pas, Wallace and LeMay became the “Bombsey Twins” to their detractors.<sup>47</sup>

Nixon escaped a potentially more damaging embarrassment related to foreign affairs. A dissident Greek journalist told Lawrence O’Brien, the chair of Humphrey’s campaign, that the authoritarian Greek colonels’ government had contributed over one million dollars to the Nixon-Agnew campaign. O’Brien asked Johnson to investigate, but he refused. He considered the journalist in question to be a troublemaker, was angry about the direction Humphrey’s campaign was taking, and, perhaps, thought he could use the information later against Nixon were Nixon to become president and uncover nasty things about his predecessor.

Johnson did not have second thoughts about the potentially devastating revelations, even though the old Nixon began to appear late in the campaign through Spiro Agnew, who accused Humphrey of being “squishy soft” on Communism.<sup>48</sup> The old Nixon himself appeared in a radio address on 24 October, in which he pointed out that during the Eisenhower administration there was no Berlin Wall, Bay of Pigs, or *Pueblo*. Further, with echoes of 1960, he talked about “a gravely serious security gap” in the nuclear arms race, with the Soviets moving into the lead while the United States endorsed the dangerous doctrine of parity.<sup>49</sup>

Nixon took off the gloves because he feared an October foreign policy surprise. The year 1968 marks the origin of that term, which refers to the ability of the president to orchestrate a crisis, sign a treaty, or end a war just in time to assist his or her party in the election. Nixon was already running a little scared after Hubert Humphrey’s Salt Lake City speech on 30 September, when the vice president broke with Johnson on Vietnam. Almost immediately the hecklers decreased at Humphrey’s appearances, his poll numbers began to rise, and antiwar Democrats began to wander back to the party with their labor and campaign contributions. He needed them. His campaign was in such bad shape that the Soviet Union, through Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, had offered him under-the-table financial support, which, of course, Humphrey refused.<sup>50</sup>

46. Unger and Unger, *Turning Point*, 509.

47. Prefiguring the Dan Quayle issue in 1988, the Democrats ran ads suggesting that the country would be in as much danger were the impetuous, inexperienced, and loose-lipped Republican vice-presidential candidate, Spiro T. Agnew, to assume the presidency.

48. Whalen, *Catch the Falling Flag*, 218.

49. Chester et al., *An American Melodrama*, 223. Of course, turnabout was fair play. When John F. Kennedy accused the Eisenhower administration in 1960 of permitting a missile gap to develop, the Democratic candidate knew he was exaggerating.

50. When the savvy Dobrynin informed his foreign minister that it was an unwise idea, he was ordered, “There is a decision, you carry it out.” Dobrynin, *In Confidence* (New York, 1995), 190.

The Soviets tried to help Humphrey win with something more important than campaign financing. Preferring his victory to that of his anticommunist rival, in late September they influenced the North Vietnamese to soften their terms for opening serious peace talks. Even without Moscow's prodding, Ho Chi Minh knew he could get a better deal from the Democrats than from the Republicans, who were leading in the polls.

Nixon discovered that the Paris peace talks were moving toward a successful resolution through secret sources. Bryce Harlow, who later became his liaison with Congress, had a friend in the White House who offered him information about the progress of the talks. In addition, Harvard professor Henry Kissinger, who was Nelson Rockefeller's ambitious foreign policy advisor, tried to pick up information in Paris, which he visited in the fall, presumably to do research for an article. His spying for Nixon was surprising given the fact that in a letter advising Harriman that he was coming to Paris, he wrote, "I am through with Republican politics. The party is hopeless and unfit to govern."<sup>51</sup>

Although he may not have known all the details, Nixon was aware that there was a breakthrough around 11 October. On 16 October Johnson informed all three candidates of the breakthrough. However, both Hanoi and Saigon expressed reservations about the deal, resulting in a delay of the announcement until 31 October.<sup>52</sup> On 21 October 1968 Nixon enjoyed an eighteen-point lead in the polls. Two days after the deal was announced, his lead stood at two points. One wonders what would have happened had the breakthrough been made public two weeks earlier.

Johnson had worried about how his peacemaking would affect the election, fearing that "many people will call it a cheap political trick." But Clifford advised him not to "let the date of the election concern you."<sup>53</sup> Nixon was convinced it was a cheap political trick. On 25 October he issued a press release in which he maintained disingenuously that although some people would think it was "a cynical last-minute attempt by President Johnson to salvage the candidacy of Mr. Humphrey," he did not.<sup>54</sup> It was true that the breakthrough was helping the vice president and that the Russians and North Vietnamese expected better relations with the Democrats than with the Republicans. But that was a far cry from claiming that the president waited until the eleventh hour to announce his October surprise because he wanted to defeat Nixon.

In any event, a perception that Johnson was playing politics with national security apparently justified the Republicans' own unprecedented meddling in a national security matter for political purposes, in a sensational case that came

51. Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS, 1998), 58.

52. Ambassador Bunker met with Thieu ten times from 16 October to the end of the month to try to obtain Saigon's acquiescence. Hanoi came on board on 27 October.

53. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 583; Catherine Forslund, *Anna Chennault: Informal Diplomacy and Asian Relations* (Wilmington, DE, 2002), 65.

54. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 585.

close to treason. Anna Chennault, chair of the Women for Nixon-Agnew Committee, had for several months been in contact with Bui Diem, the South Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, as an official, if covert, link to the Nixon campaign. She also had ties to officials in South Vietnam. Her task was “to convey the ‘Republican Position’” to Saigon to “hold fast and not participate in the peace talks.”<sup>55</sup> As early as 23 October Ambassador Diem had informed South Vietnamese President Nguyen van Thieu that “many Republican friends have contacted me and encouraged us to stand firm,” and on 27 October he reported that he “was regularly in touch with the Nixon entourage.”<sup>56</sup> On 30 October Thieu informed Washington that he was going to publicly reject the deal, a response that Clifford labeled “horseshit” and a “calculated planned program to delay, to get through November 5.”<sup>57</sup> The peace deal had pulled Humphrey so close to Nixon in the polls that a disconsolate Pat Buchanan admitted, “By Sunday night [before the election], I thought we were finished.”<sup>58</sup> After news of Thieu’s rejection, the boomlet for Humphrey weakened and Nixon won a very close election by under five hundred thousand popular votes.<sup>59</sup>

As the North Vietnamese hoped for a better deal from the Democrats, the South Vietnamese certainly had every reason to expect a better deal from the Republicans. They probably would have rejected Johnson’s deal without encouragement from the Nixon camp.

But that encouragement came close to treasonous behavior that, at the least, violated the Logan Act. It looked worse when, several weeks after he was elected, Nixon told Saigon to accept the deal his aides had told them to reject earlier.<sup>60</sup>

Discovering the Republican plot on 29 October, Johnson ordered a phone tap on Chennault’s residence at the Watergate (!) apartments. He did not need to order one on the South Vietnamese embassy, as it was already a target for surveillance, as were government offices in Saigon.<sup>61</sup> Therein lay one of Johnson and Humphrey’s main problems: were they to go public with the story, they might have had to reveal their intelligence activities against an ally. In addition, in a frenzied Keystone Kops operation, the FBI never was able to produce the “smoking gun” that could prove that Chennault was getting her marching

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55. Forslund, *Anna Chennault*, 53.

56. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War*, 59.

57. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 587.

58. Witcover, *The Year the Dream Died*, 429.

59. In another bit of duplicity, in his election eve address Nixon told the nation that he had information that the North Vietnamese were sending “thousands of tons of supplies” down the Ho Chi Minh Trail that American forces were too weak to interdict. There was no such information. Ambrose, *Nixon*, 217.

60. Johnson had predicted that “Nixon will doublecross them after November 5.” Witcover, *The Year the Dream Died*, 414.

61. Johnson had earlier ordered illegal surveillance on Humphrey, fearing that he would adopt policies on Vietnam counter to his own. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 576.

orders directly from officials in the Nixon campaign, or even Nixon himself. But Johnson certainly had enough evidence to go public and perhaps to derail Nixon's election chances. In fact, on 3 November, a panicky Nixon called the president to tell him that "[t]here was absolutely no truth" in the rumors about Chennault, "as far as he knew."<sup>62</sup> But if Nixon did not know all of the day-to-day details, he knew plenty about the Chennault operation.

Had Johnson or Humphrey, to whom the president offered the option, gone public with stories about how Republicans had quashed a peace plan and thus cost the lives of who knows how many more American boys, the vice president might have won the election. According to Clifford, Johnson eschewed that option because he thought that Thieu might still accept the deal; he did not want to weaken American support for Saigon; it would affect negatively negotiations with Hanoi; and maybe because of his "ambivalence about Hubert Humphrey."<sup>63</sup> In addition, Johnson feared that release of the information could have led to a national crisis had Nixon won or even, perhaps, could lead to difficult times for him personally as an ex-president confronting a vindictive president.

When Americans voted for Nixon and Humphrey for president on 5 November 1968, they voted for candidates who promised to end the war. With little to choose between them on the main issue facing the nation, they made their choices based upon party loyalties, the personalities of the candidates, and, most important, the unusually volatile domestic issues of the day. However, to suggest that the Vietnam War in particular and foreign policy in general were not the key issues in the 1968 election is to ignore the many ways they affected every aspect of the contest, from 1966 to election eve, when Johnson and Humphrey chose not to go public with the Chennault bombshell.<sup>64</sup> And even the dominant domestic issue, "law and order," related in part to unruly antiwar demonstrators. Few elections in U.S. history were so dominated by foreign policy and few elections so affected foreign policy during a campaign. The 1968 election suggests that scholars interested in the impact of foreign policy on elections or in the impact of elections on foreign policy need to go far beyond the positions of the candidates and their respective platforms to understand how American activities in the international system may color or even determine the outcome of an election.

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62. *Ibid.*, 590. Four days earlier, Johnson had called the candidates to discuss rumors that "old China hands" were interfering with his diplomacy but that he knew "that none of you candidates are aware of it or responsible for it." Clark Clifford with Richard Holbrooke, *Counsel to the President: A Memoir* (New York, 1991), 593.

63. Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 584. Clifford had no ambivalence about Nixon, "a man of shrewd cunning and inherent dishonesty." *Ibid.*, 595.

64. One might also add the unprecedented counter-inaugural activities, when thousands of mostly young Americans, many of whom were antiwar activists, traveled to Washington to demonstrate in an unruly fashion against the Nixon presidency.

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