

# THE VIETNAM WAR

A FILM BY KEN BURNS & LYNN NOVICK

## Richard Nixon and the 1968 Presidential Campaign

### Activity 1: Video Segment Questions and Script

#### Setting the Scene

Polls in the fall of 1968 indicated that the upcoming election between Republican candidate Richard Nixon and Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey was going to be a close one. There was concern that third-party candidate George Wallace might take votes away from Humphrey. Both Republican and Democrat party leaders wanted to do what they could to win the election. As you watch the video clip from **THE VIETNAM WAR**, you will see several paths that each party took to help its side in the election.

#### Cast of Characters

Below is a cast of characters to guide your understanding as you study Nixon's interference with the 1968 presidential election.

- **Lyndon Baines Johnson:** US president from 1964 to 1968 who chose not to run for president in 1968
- **US Presidential Candidates, 1968**
  - **Hubert H. Humphrey:** Democratic presidential candidate, Johnson's vice president
  - **Richard M. Nixon:** Republican presidential candidate
  - **George Wallace:** Former governor of Alabama and American Independent Party candidate
- **Nguyen Van Thieu:** South Vietnam's president
- **Le Duan:** Communist Party general secretary in North Vietnam
- **Everett Dirksen:** US Senate minority leader

#### Four Sides Represented at the Paris Peace Talks

- **North Vietnam**
- **Viet Cong:** Military branch of the North Vietnamese Communist political party
- **National Liberation Front:** The formal name of the National Front for the Liberation of the South
- **South Vietnam**
- **United States:** Ally of South Vietnam

#### Video Viewing Instructions

As you view the video segment, take notes that will help you answer the following questions. To assist you with the details, a portion of the script and a portion of President Johnson's televised announcement are included below.

1. What was the status of the presidential race in the fall of 1968? Who was ahead? What challenges did candidate Humphrey face?

2. What was the intended effect of Johnson's bombing halt and the announcement about the progress at the peace talks? Why did he make that announcement at the time that he did?
  
3. What evidence exists to document that Nixon instigated or knew about the advice to President Thieu to delay South Vietnam's involvement in the peace talks?
  
4. Did this advice/admonition from the Republican Party influence Thieu's decision to pull out of the proposed peace talks just days before the presidential election?
  
5. Why was Johnson concerned about Nixon's interference?
  
6. What was the impact of South Vietnam's late arrival at the peace talks?
  
7. To what degree did Nixon's actions impact the US presidential election results?

## Episode 7 Script Excerpt

**Narrator:** Hubert Humphrey's presidential campaign was in trouble. Richard Nixon was comfortably ahead in the polls and refused to debate.

"I've come to the conclusion that there's no way to win the war," he told three of his speechwriters in private. "[But] we have to say the opposite, just to keep some bargaining leverage."

Compounding Humphrey's problem was a third-party candidate, George Wallace, the segregationist former governor of Alabama. He was sure to peel away some of the white voters who normally voted Democratic.

Humphrey had confided his doubts about the war to Johnson early on, but had always remained stubbornly loyal to him in public.

Now his advisers told him that if he wanted to win he had to break with the president and make a bold gesture toward ending the war.

On September 30, he called for a total halt to the bombing of North Vietnam.

**Hubert Humphrey:** I would stop the bombing in the North as an acceptable risk for peace because I believe it could lead to success in the negotiations and thereby shorten the war. This would be the best protection for our troops.

**Narrator:** Johnson felt betrayed and refused to speak to his own vice president for a time.

But on October 31, just five days before the election, the president himself made a surprise announcement.

He was stopping all bombing of North Vietnam. There had been real progress in Paris, he said.

Hanoi had agreed for the first time to talk with Saigon, and the United States had agreed to include the Viet Cong.

It suddenly looked as if peace were possible.

Humphrey was jubilant. His poll numbers rose overnight. He was confident he would now be able to overtake Nixon.

But then, on November 2, with just three days to go until the Americans went to the polls, President Thieu (Tyoo) suddenly announced that the South Vietnamese government would not attend the proposed talks after all.

A representative of the Nixon campaign had secretly contacted the Saigon government urging Thieu (Tyoo) to stay away from the talks, promising that once Nixon was elected, he would drive a harder bargain with Hanoi than Humphrey would.

Thanks to a CIA bug planted in Thieu's (Tyoo's) Saigon office and an FBI bug on the South Vietnamese embassy in Washington, Johnson got wind of what had happened and called his friend, Everett Dirksen, the Republican Senate minority leader, to warn him that the Nixon people were committing "treason."

LYNDON JOHNSON: I'm reading their hand, Everett. I don't want to get this in the campaign.

EVERETT DIRKSEN: That's right.

LYNDON JOHNSON: And they oughtn't to be doing this. This is treason.

EVERETT DIRKSEN: I know.

LYNDON JOHNSON: And, I think it would shock America if a principal candidate was playing with a source like this on a matter this important.

EVERETT DIRKSEN: Yeah.

LYNDON JOHNSON: I know this, that they're contacting a foreign power in the middle of a war.

EVERETT DIRKSEN: That's a mistake.

LYNDON JOHNSON: And it's a damn bad mistake.

November 3, 1968

RICHARD NIXON: Mr. President?

LYNDON JOHNSON: Yes.

RICHARD NIXON: This is Dick Nixon.

LYNDON JOHNSON: Yes, Dick.

RICHARD NIXON: I just went on "Meet the Press" and I said that I had given you my personal assurance that I would do everything possible to cooperate both before the election, and if elected, after the election. I just wanted you to know that I feel very, very strongly about this and any rumblings around about somebody trying to sabotage the Saigon government's attitude—certainly has no, absolutely no credibility as far as I am concerned.

LYNDON JOHNSON: That's, that's ... I'm very happy to hear that, Dick, because that is taking place.

RICHARD NIXON: My God, I would never do anything to encourage Saigon not to come to the table because basically that was what you got.

LYNDON JOHNSON: Well, that's good, Dick.

RICHARD NIXON: We've got to get this goddamned war off the plate, the quicker the better, and the hell with the political credit. Believe me.

LYNDON JOHNSON: Thank you, Dick.

RICHARD NIXON: Bye.

NARRATOR: Nixon was lying and Johnson knew it. But to go public with the information, the president would have to reveal the methods by which he had learned of the Republican candidate's duplicity. He was unwilling to do so.

Nixon's secret was safe. The American public was never told that the regime for which 35,000 Americans had died had been willing to boycott peace talks to help elect Richard Nixon—or that he had been willing to delay an end to the bloodshed in order to get elected.

On Election Day, Richard Milhous Nixon won the presidency with a 43.4 percent vote. Hubert Humphrey received 42.7 percent. The Nixon campaign's secret maneuvering may have helped him win the election, but the president-elect's fear that that maneuvering might someday be exposed would be part of his undoing.

Thieu (Tyoo) waited several weeks after the election before finally agreeing to send a delegation to Paris.

There, everything stalled—over the seating arrangements.

The North Vietnamese had insisted on a square table, with separate sides for all four parties to the talks—Hanoi, the Viet Cong, Saigon, and the United States.

Saigon refused to take part unless Hanoi and the Viet Cong sat on the same side of the table.

The standoff went on for 10 weeks. It was the Soviets who finally came up with a solution: a round table.

***End of script of video clip.***

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**Transcript from President Johnson's October 31, 1968, Televised Announcement to Halt the Bombing in Vietnam**

The president also briefed our congressional leaders and all of the presidential candidates.

Last Sunday evening, and throughout Monday, we began to get confirmation of the essential understanding that we had been seeking with the North Vietnamese on the critical issues between us for some time. I spent most of all day Tuesday reviewing every single detail of this matter with our field commander, General Abrams, whom I had ordered home, and who arrived here at the White House at 2:30 in the morning and went into immediate conference with the president and the appropriate members of his cabinet. We received General Abrams's judgment and we heard his recommendations at some length.

Now, as a result of all of these developments, I have now ordered that all air, naval, and artillery bombardment of North Vietnam cease as of 8 a.m., Washington time, Friday morning.

I have reached this decision on the basis of the developments in the Paris talks.

And I have reached it in the belief that this action can lead to progress toward a peaceful settlement of the Vietnamese war.

I have already informed the three presidential candidates, as well as the congressional leaders of both the Republican and the Democratic parties, of the reasons that the government has made this decision.

<http://www.lbjlibrary.org/exhibits/the-president-announcing-his-decision-to-halt-the-bombing-of-north-vietnam>