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The Secret Business Diplomacy of Anna Chennault as Nixon's Envoy in South Vietnam, 1967–1974

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ABSTRACT

The Republican Party's presidential candidate, Richard Nixon, enlisted Anna Chennault, a prominent lobbyist who belonged to high society circles in Washington, DC, to open a direct channel of communication with the South Vietnamese president, Nguyen Van Thieu, in 1967. Her brief was to convince Thieu to reject the peace negotiations that the president, Lyndon Johnson, had begun with North Vietnam. The diplomatic papers of the Thieu regime, housed in Ho Chi Minh City, reveal that Chennault conducted business diplomacy for American companies, without Nixon's knowledge. Through her consulting firm, she negotiated with Thieu business contracts for an American public relations firm, GM International Inc., and for Northrop-Page Communications. She breached the Foreign Agents Registration Act by failing to disclose her lobbying activities, and both Nixon and Chennault violated the Logan Act that bars private citizens from conducting diplomacy. Chennault's transcontinental diplomacy raises questions about her role within the American military-industrial complex during the late Vietnam War.

KEYWORDS

Informal diplomacy; Vietnam War; peace studies; Nixon presidency; economic and business diplomacy

As the front-running presidential candidate of the Republican Party, Richard M. Nixon employed Anna Chan Chennault, a China-born American citizen who belonged to the high society circles of Washington, DC, to conduct a secret diplomatic venture in Saigon aimed at outmaneuvering the president, Lyndon B. Johnson, during the 1968 election campaign. In her audacious and illegal interventions, she enacted a double role by not only carrying messages from Nixon to the president of South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thieu, but by also clandestinely pursuing her own ambitious business agenda with Thieu. Chennault's foreign policy interventions for Nixon are well documented in the public domain, however her private business diplomacy has remained undisclosed, and even Nixon was unaware of it.

The diplomatic papers of the Thieu government, housed at National Archives Center Number 2 in Ho Chi Minh City, reveal previously unknown facts: That Chennault requested Thieu to provide funds to organize a public relations campaign in the United States that was to be created by an American firm in order to embellish the tarnished image of the Thieu regime and its 'good work'.[1] It aimed to reassure the American public and US Congress that their South Vietnamese ally had made substantial progress toward democracy by holding elections that helped take the country out of the grip of military generals and Saigon elite that had monopolized power through coups. She also assiduously promoted the business interests of the American company, Northrop-Page Communications, in its attempt to re-enter the emerging South Vietnamese market for development of infrastructure.[2] In her role as the president of TAC International Inc., a

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Washington consulting firm in aerospace and communications, Chennault traveled frequently to Southeast Asia to lobby foreign governments on behalf of her clients such as Northrop Corporation, General Electric Company, Grumman International, as well as the cargo airline, Flying Tiger Line (FTL). As she worked as a vice-president of FTL, she negotiated landing rights and other business agreements in Asia.[3]

Chennault's intervention in South Vietnam began when Nixon directed her, through his campaign staff, to instruct Thieu that he should reject the peace negotiations that Johnson had begun with North Vietnam since May 1968 in an effort to end the war, and to reassure Thieu that a future Nixon administration would serve his government's long-term interests better than a Democratic Party president ever would.[4] Nixon used her services as his personal envoy because he was worried that Johnson's peace negotiations with Hanoi would improve the electoral prospects of the Democratic Party candidate, Hubert H. Humphrey, in the presidential election. Nixon attempted to disrupt the peace efforts, through Chennault.

Nixon selected Chennault to conduct his secret diplomacy because of her close personal relationship with Asian leaders such as Thieu, as well as with the president of Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek, and the president of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos. Not only did she possess exceptional Asia-wide connections, but her Asian ethnicity had enabled her to develop privileged associations with national leaders in a part of the world that was at the center of US diplomacy.

Although she was in direct touch with Thieu, she had other avenues to Thieu as well, primarily through his brother, Nguyen Van Kieu, who was the ambassador of South Vietnam to Taiwan, and through Saigon regime officials.[5] Nobody on the Nixon campaign staff possessed such an extensive range of contacts in Asia.

It was easy for Nixon to secure her assistance because she was a loyal Republican known to her friends as 'Little Flower', whom Nixon nicknamed 'Dragon Lady'. Nixon used her as his informal diplomat for seven years (1967–1974) without ever giving her an official position in the State Department, and she resented being denied what she believed was owing to her. He was impressed with her credentials as a leading fundraiser for his presidential campaign in her capacity as the vice-chair of the Republican National Finance Committee, and her effort to rally the women's vote as co-chair of Women for Nixon. He had sought her out because of her resourcefulness, and he soon became aware that she was politically ambitious as well.

Anna Chennault (née Chen Hsiengmei) was born in Beijing on 23 June 1923. She was the second of six daughters of Chen Ying-yung (Sam) and Isabelle Liao. Her father was a law professor at Beijing National University and editor of the *New China Morning Post*. After a stint on her school newspaper, Anna began work at the China Central News Agency, becoming its first woman correspondent and reporting on the US 14th Air Force. She developed a romantic relationship with Major General Claire Lee Chennault (1893–1958), who was thirty years older than her, and was already a war hero. He appeared on the cover of both *Life* and *Time* magazines in 1942 and 1943 in recognition for his role as the 'air force adviser' to Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Air Force, which he helped to organize and fight in the Second Sino-Japanese War from July 1937 to September 1945.[6]

The couple married in December 1947, and she moved from China with her husband to his home in Monroe, Louisiana. The Chennaults divided their time between Shanghai, San Francisco, Monroe, and Taiwan, where they operated the two Taipei-based airlines, Civil Air Transport and FTL, which had helped relocate Chiang's nationalists to Taiwan.[7] They had been married for eleven years when her husband died in July 1958 (he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general a few days before he passed away), and Anna then settled down in Washington, DC, locating herself at the center of power. She gradually came out of her husband's shadow to shape her own public persona and identity, and began representing Taiwan's nationalist government.[8] She grew close to one of her husband's friends, the capital's leading lobbyist, Thomas Corcoran, a registered foreign agent representing Taiwan.[9] Corcoran mentored her and she grew increasingly dependent on him.[10] He shared with her his impressive network of political, social,

and diplomatic contacts in Washington that he had nurtured since his days as one of the principal strategists of the New Deal for the president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, drafting such historic innovations as the Securities Act of 1933, the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, and the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.[11] Evidence of her connections with powerful people in Asia and the United States is displayed in a list of attendees at her husband's funeral at the Arlington National Cemetery that included Chiang's wife, Soong Mei-ling, and senior officials of the former Guomindang government in China, as well as a galaxy of American Second World War generals.[12]

In her penthouse apartment overlooking the Potomac in Washington - guests commented that it resembled a James Bond movie set - she entertained up to one hundred people a week, serving appetizers like 'concubine's delight' (chicken/snow peas) and 'negotiator's soup' (prepared for Secretary of State Henry Kissinger).[13] Dressed in Chinese cheongsam dresses and stiletto heeled shoes, the diminutive Chennault, below five feet tall, cut a larger than life figure. The *Washington Post,* noting the frequency with which she threw parties for presidential staff and influential Republican Party officials, commented that she was a 'figure of glamour and mystery in the nation's capital'.[14] Washington newspapers regularly carried articles on her wardrobe, on her apartment's décor, lifestyle, and entertaining. At one party, her guest list included General William Westmoreland (who commanded US forces in Vietnam from 1964 till his removal following the fiasco of the Tet Offensive in 1968), Representative Gerald Ford, and several US generals and diplomats: They all sang the nursery rhyme, 'Old Macdonald'.[15] She had nurtured her political connections in Southeast Asia, China, and Taiwan during her years in China when Maj. Gen. Chennault's Flying Tigers squadrons operated in the country. After the 1968 US election, she was appointed a special advisor to the chairman of the 1969 presidential Inaugural Committee headed by J. Willard Marriott.[16]

The new evidence from Vietnam

This article presents new and unpublished historical evidence from the Vietnamese archives that provides the first glimpses of the Chennault-Thieu diplomatic cameo, captured in their extensive correspondence that has remained unrevealed in the historical literature, and which demonstrates a tireless effort by her to lay the foundation of a working relationship with Thieu. By using both Vietnamese documents and declassified Nixon presidential papers, this study considerably increases an understanding of the secret diplomacy undertaken by Nixon because existing accounts of Chennault's secret diplomacy, authored by her and by other scholars, explain little about the substance of the discussions - and the atmosphere - at her meetings with Thieu during her frequent visits to Saigon.[17]

Offering a new perspective on two critical diplomatic relationships within the orbit of Nixon's secret diplomacy, this article examines the Thieu-Chennault liaison, and the Nixon-Chennault connection. Her personal correspondence with Thieu is most remarkable, revealing that they became good friends and were not just ordinary acquaintances. She gradually became disenchanted with the Nixon administration, over its failure to properly reward her with a befitting diplomatic position in return for all her work for his election campaign and for her secret diplomacy with Thieu that had made an invaluable contribution in promoting Nixon's foreign policy agenda.

She had aimed to gain both from Nixon and Thieu. After becoming president, Nixon would belatedly appoint her to unimportant US government committees that she really did not want to serve on, but he would not offer her a formal diplomatic position that she had wanted. Nixon's presidential papers reveal Chennault's transcontinental informal diplomacy as a fascinating case study of how he treated his informal diplomat, and how she acted. And from Thieu she

expected to win business contracts which ultimately did not come through because both the presidencies, of Nixon and Thieu, would collapse in 1974 and 1975, respectively.

Chennault's commercial diplomacy occurred under the rubric of Nixon's collusion with the Saigon regime to sabotage Johnson's diplomacy with both North and South Vietnam to end the war. While Nixon's effort to subvert Johnson's negotiations has been investigated in the literature, none of these works use Vietnamese historical documents.[18] The significance of Vietnamese documents is, first, that the record of Chennault's diplomacy with Thieu is only available in Vietnamese archives (and not in any other repository). Secondly these papers, often written in the Vietnamese language, provide a Vietnamese perspective. Biographical histories of Chennault are fewer: The historian Catherine Forslund has covered the Asian diplomacy conducted informally by Anna Chennault.[19] But Forslund uses American and Western documents. Another scholar, Helena Grice, has focused on Chennault's work as a writer and biographer.[20]

Chennault and the military-industrial complex

This study locates Chennault's business diplomacy within the parameters of the hegemonic economic impulses of the US military-industrial complex and its desire to seek markets overseas during the country's expansionist climb to global power. Her industriousness in conducting negotiations in Saigon served the interests of the military-industrial complex to obtain lucrative contracts.

There exists a vast and varied historical literature that explores the relationship between domestic American economic entities and diplomacy. The historian Charles A. Beard linked the American economy to foreign policy as early as the 1920s, arguing that US capitalism needed an aggressive search for foreign markets, raw materials and investment avenues abroad in order to survive. In his critique of US hegemonic practices in 1959, William Appleman Williams characterized US foreign policy as 'open door' expansionism in his seminal work, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*.[21]

This study is a part of the historiography exploring the multifaceted collaboration between American diplomats (formal and informal) and US companies in pursuit of the foreign policy goal of gaining control of foreign sources of vital commodities such as rubber, oil, and minerals, and operating cable and radio companies overseas. The investment bank, J.P. Morgan & Co, for example, played a pivotal role in strengthening American economic domination of Europe.[22] The field has been enriched by influential historical works on the intersection of informal diplomacy with trade and business,[23] and by area-specific studies exploring cooperation between the State Department and American companies as they pursued common interests overseas.[24] Paul Dosal, for instance, argues that United Fruit owed its phenomenal success to the cozy relationship with corrupt and repressive dictatorships in Guatemala and Honduras that granted it outrageously generous tax breaks and concessions on land, ports, and railways from the turn of the century till 1944.[25] In South Vietnam, likewise, Saigon officials provided patronage to local businesses.

For her part, Chennault intervened on behalf of American business and the larger military-industrial complex in two instances: First, her public relations campaign aimed to improve the tarnished image of the Thieu regime. And secondly, her negotiations on behalf of Northrop-Page Communications reveal that the company was still searching for business opportunities after having built communications networks in Vietnam for American military forces since 1960. Northrop had previously won contracts directly from the US military, but the company began using the services of Chennault's consultancy, TAC International Inc., to lobby for building a communications earth station. The company needed her services because the US military was no longer handing out lucrative orders as Washington had signed a peace agreement in 1973 to end its intervention in Vietnam. Chennault began negotiating an important contract for Northrop in 1974 toward the end of the US presence in Vietnam.

While Chennault conducted a private diplomatic effort to help US companies gain contracts, most of the industry in South Vietnam had developed without private lobbying. Many factories were set up across South Vietnam, funded by the US Agency for International Development (US AID) and the Commodity Import Program (CIP), particularly the textile, rubber, wire, glass and plastics units.[26]

Nixon, however, had not asked Chennault to conduct business in Saigon. She exceeded her brief. She used her role of a 'direct channel of communication' with Thieu to pursue her own interests. She appears to have given Saigon officials an impression that she was equally interested in promoting her own agenda as that of the Nixon administration. At times their interests converged: Nixon benefited from her business diplomacy because it gave the Saigon regime the false assurance that his administration was engaged in developing the economy when, in fact, US Congress frowned upon widespread economic corruption in South Vietnam and was loathe to provide more aid.

The 'smoking cable gun' and LBJ's 'X files'

Diplomatic vignettes of Chennault's interventions have generated debates about the existence, or non-existence, of a 'smoking gun:' Whether Nixon had personally instructed Chennault to tell Thieu to reject Johnson's peace initiative. At any rate, Chennault did carry Nixon's messages, and there certainly is a smoking gun (actually a 'smoking cable', and a 'smoking file') but scholars and the foreign policy community differ over whether Nixon had personally issued instructions, or that his aides had done so on his behalf, or both.[27]

Johnson's adviser on Vietnam, William Bundy, has confirmed that there was indeed a smoking gun. The South Vietnamese ambassador to Washington, Bui Diem, had sent a cable to Thieu on 27 October 1968 (a copy of which came into Johnson's hands) in which he confirmed to the Nixon campaign that Saigon was maintaining 'a firm attitude' to reject the Johnson peace talks.[28] The 'smoking cable' showed that Chennault was conveying, via Bui Diem, messages from the Nixon campaign urging Thieu to abort or cripple the deal by refusing to participate.

The biggest revelations came with the release of the 'X Files' (a sealed envelope containing reports of surveillance by US intelligence agencies of Chennault, the South Vietnamese embassy in Washington, DC, and the presidential palace in Saigon) which provided both 'the gun and the smoke', as the historian John Farrell describes it. The breakthrough occurred when trustees at the Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library decided to ignore instructions given by Johnson's national security adviser, Walt Whitman Rostow, and made public the tapes and files that LBJ had wanted sealed. The 1994 opening of the so-called 'X-envelope', and the 2008 release of the Johnson tapes from the 1968 election campaign provided historians with a new perspective on the war.

The presidential papers help explain Johnson's predicament. He knew from wiretap reports that Chennault was conveying Nixon's words to the South Vietnamese. Johnson did not, however, possess direct evidence against Nixon himself. Farrell's biography of Nixon now provides the proof. In his research, Farrell discovered notes taken by Nixon's chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, in which Nixon instructs Haldeman to keep Chennault working on the Thieu government. Haldeman's notes have demonstrated that Nixon himself was behind the secret plan. On 22 October 1968 Nixon instructed Haldeman to 'monkey wrench' Johnson's negotiations with North Vietnam. 'Keep Anna Chennault working on' South Vietnam, Haldeman scrawled in his diary, recording Nixon's orders. 'Any other way to monkey wrench it? Anything RN can do.'[29] Nixon also told Haldeman to have his personal secretary, Rose Mary Woods, contact another Nationalist Chinese figure, the businessman Louis Kung, and have him persuade Thieu as well. 'Tell him hold firm,' Nixon instructed. The historian Kyle Longley, however, believes 'there is no smoking gun that Nixon told Thieu to not support the Johnson peace talks'.[30]

Nixon's informal diplomacy breached the seldom-used Logan Act of 1799, barring private citizens from engaging in diplomatic contacts with foreign governments. Johnson knew about Nixon's violation but he did not report it because going public would have revealed his own misuse of the FBI to secretly wiretap Chennault and South Vietnamese offices. While many scholars believe that there certainly was a case against Nixon under the Logan Act, Longley argues that he cannot be sure whether Nixon was a party to it 'because we don't have that smoking gun'.[31] But he concedes that the Nixon campaign was involved. Longley adds: 'If I had to do a criminal case, I probably couldn't win because I would have to prove beyond a shadow of doubt and had to win all the jurors.' Longley tempers his conclusion with the comment: 'But if I had to do a civil case, I could use the circumstantial evidence that needed to prove a simple majority, [so that would be] highly problematic'.

Disagreeing with Longley, the author Ken Hughes argues that 'the Nixon case shows why the Logan Act remains an important and valuable law' because 'he was sabotaging peace talks in a very costly war in order to win an election', which is 'tremendously consequential'.[32] The historian Melvin Small believes that Nixon's assurance to Saigon of a better deal 'came close to treasonous behaviour that, at the least, violated the Logan Act'.[33]

Chennault weighed in with her own testimony confirming her secret role: 'The only people who knew about the whole operation were Nixon, John Mitchell and [Republican senator] John Tower, and they're all dead. But they knew what I was doing. Anyone who knows about these things knows I was getting orders to do these things. I couldn't do anything without instructions,' she told the author, Jules Witcover.[34]

Yet, her foray into informal diplomacy is problematic. On the one hand, it can be argued that her business diplomacy with Thieu was not anti-national and may not have violated US law (and may have served the interests of the American companies she represented). She could, for instance, have argued that she was acting in a personal capacity in those commercial dealings. On the other hand, her conduct of US wartime foreign policy did break the law. It may not, however, be possible to delink her business negotiations and her promotion of Nixon's foreign policy because some of her commercial proposals were in the form of US investment inflows into South Vietnam and could, therefore, be considered as a sweetener or an inducement to persuade Saigon to adhere to Nixon's policies. The breach of the Logan Act becomes significant because of the demonstrable fact that Chennault's intervention produced the result that Nixon desired. South Vietnam did not participate in the peace talks and the Johnson effort was aborted.

Nixon was elected but he prolonged the war and expanded it into Laos and Cambodia. By the time war ended in 1975, an additional 21,202 Americans had died in Vietnam, and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese were killed. The peace agreement in 1973 was no different from the terms of settlement that had been offered in Paris in 1968. In effect, the United States finally signed a peace deal - after five more years of killing - that was the same as what Johnson had been prepared to accept in the fall of 1968. This is what makes the Nixon-Chennault secret diplomacy such a monumental betrayal. Their conspiracy served the purpose of bringing Nixon to power.

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Chennault first encountered Nixon in the spring of 1967. He sent her a cable, requesting a meeting with her at his Fifth Avenue apartment in New York City. At the meeting Nixon revealed that he was seeking the presidential nomination, and that he needed her help as an advisor on Southeast Asian affairs, particularly on Vietnam, which he believed would be a 'hotly debated issue among candidates'.[35] Chennault asked if Nixon would 'be willing to go to Vietnam to meet President Thieu'. Nixon's 'response was quick and eager'. He said: 'Oh yes, I really need to talk to him personally. I've never met him.'[36] Neither Nixon nor anybody from his campaign staff would meet Thieu. It fell upon Chennault to travel to Saigon to meet the South Vietnamese president.

Chennault recounts in her biography, *The Education of Anna,* about her first visit to Saigon, and her meeting with Thieu, which was 'intended as an informal presentation of credentials'. She was 'delivering a message from Nixon requesting that I be recognized as the conduit for

any information that might flow between the two'.[37] She declares that Thieu, having won an election, was in 'his first flush of power and triumph, full of ebullience and optimism', and that she 'spent a long evening together' with him and his wife, Nguyen Thi Mai. Chennault recalls that the visit was 'memorable for the light-hearted affection that seemed to flow between Thieu and his wife, a lovely attentive woman with equal proportions of shyness and sparkle who seemed to thrive on her husband's teasing'. At the meeting, Thieu quipped that he was the commander-in-chief, but she was the 'controller of the commander-in-chief'. Nguyen Thi Mai was born in June 1930 in the Mekong Delta city of My Tho in a middle class Catholic family. After marrying Lieutenant Thieu she became a housewife and had two children, a boy and a girl. She participated in social work, helping families of invalid soldiers and aiding war victims, and she set up the Vietnam Women's Association Charitable Society.[38]

Chennault was accorded high level diplomatic protocol. On her second visit in the spring of 1968, she was received at Saigon's Tan Son Nhat Airport by madame Khiem, the wife of the prime minister, Tran Thien Khiem, and senior officials of the Saigon government and the US Embassy. Thieu's special assistant for foreign affairs, Dr. Nguyen Tao Duc, accompanied her for 'informal conversations with President Thieu'.[39] In her biography, Chennault appears to have misspelt the name Nguyen Phu Duc as Nguyen Tao Duc, after her first meeting with him. In her later correspondence, described below, she corrected her error and referred to him as Nguyen Phu Duc. In her writings, Chennault has not revealed the specifics and the substance of her talks with Thieu. The diplomatic papers of the Thieu regime, however, offer a much more detailed portraiture of Chennault, of her speaking eloquently with Thieu about geostrategy, the Cold War in Asia, and domestic Vietnamese and US politics.

After her initial meetings with Thieu, she was instructed to open a direct channel of communication with the South Vietnamese ambassador, Bui Diem, through whom the Nixon campaign would communicate with the government in Saigon. Chennault recounts that a meeting with Nixon took place at his apartment in New York in July 1968, when Nixon told Bui Diem that Chennault 'would be the sole representative between the Vietnamese government and the Nixon campaign headquarters', and that 'Anna is a very dear friend. We count on her information for Asia. She brings me up to date'.[40] (This article, however, focuses on Chennault's informal commercial diplomacy and not on Nixon's official diplomacy with Bui Diem, which has been thoroughly discussed in the literature).

Chennault made it clear to Nixon that she opposed Johnson's policy of halting the bombing of North Vietnam that was intended to pave the way to peace talks. She wrote Nixon a 'confidential' memo on 15 October 1968, discussing at length Johnson's policy of frequently halting US bombing so that negotiations could begin between US and North Vietnamese officials. She argued that 'bombing pauses' had enabled Hanoi to label the United States as an aggressor because of its bombing policy, and that the pauses had hurt US soldiers fighting in Vietnam. Any future 'de-Americanization of the war' must be conducted in close cooperation with Saigon in an atmosphere of confidence, she suggested. She claimed that she was the first person to propose to Nixon the idea of de-Americanizing the war, at a time when he was a Republican Party presidential candidate.[41]

Exploiting the insecurities of Thieu

By playing on Thieu's insecurities, Chennault shaped his understanding of Nixon's foreign policy. Thieu was primarily motivated by self-preservation, of his presidency and his Republic of Vietnam, and his fear that a Democratic Party president such as Humphrey may cut or reduce financial and military aid. These worries determined Thieu's decision-making and his evaluation of important political questions such as (a) how did Humphrey differ from Nixon in their Vietnam policy, and (b) why would Thieu prefer one over the other. Chennault reassured him

that Nixon was committed to maintaining the stability of the Thieu regime. Eventually, however, Thieu believed that Nixon owed him for his victory over Humphrey.

As a close observer of US politics, Thieu knew that Humphrey was distancing himself from Johnson's aggressive policies in Vietnam in 1968. After the Democratic Convention in late August, Humphrey trailed Nixon by double digits in most opinion polls, and his chances seemed hopeless. But Humphrey managed to close the gap in the polls due to growing support from antiwar activists, as well as Johnson's announcement of a bombing halt, the weekend before the election.[42]

Chennault had a large hand in raising Thieu's expectations of continuing support from Nixon, as well as heightening his distrust of Humphrey. Thieu preferred Nixon to Humphrey, reassured by the former's image as a prominent Cold Warrior, and the latter as a liberal who had objected to the Americanization of the war in the first place.[43] The North Vietnamese, by some accounts, preferred Humphrey to Nixon: The leaders in Hanoi knew that any de-escalation by the United States would be almost irreversible in the domestic political environment in Washington. The South Vietnamese, for the same reasons in reverse, preferred Nixon to Humphrey.[44]

The positive signals of peace coming from Hanoi in the last weeks of the presidential election campaign were aimed at boosting the fortunes of Humphrey.[45] In the Johnson White House and in Hanoi, a pro-Humphrey strategy was driven by the president's decision to call a halt to the bombing on 31 October 1968, and to launch a new round of peace talks with North Vietnam.

Thieu believed that Nixon owed him for his victory in return for his compliance with Chennault's instructions to reject the Johnson peace effort: Thieu had spoken about getting a 'quid pro quo' from Nixon, which is mentioned in Haldeman's notes.[46] Nixon's campaign staff, John Mitchell, had informed Nixon that Thieu was feeling 'tremendous pressure' from Johnson, and that the South Vietnamese wanted the Republicans to take Saigon's side and determine what the 'quid pro quo' would be for their cooperation. 'They propose to hold out long as poss', Haldeman wrote in his notepad. Furthermore, the 'smoking gun' cable mentioned above included promises of later favors by Nixon, including a possible visit to Saigon before his inauguration if he were elected.[47]

Bundy went much further in his book, *A Tangled Web,* explaining that having conspired with Nixon to scuttle Johnson's peace process, 'Thieu was in a position to blackmail the new American president'.[48] Bundy inferred that Thieu emerged from the Chennault affair 'convinced that Nixon owed him a great political debt', that he 'attached great weight to it throughout' the Nixon years, and that it was 'the most important legacy of the whole episode'. Bundy's view should be taken seriously on account of his long service as an assistant secretary of defense under Robert McNamara, and then as assistant secretary of state for East Asia in the last five years of the Johnson administration, as well as his editorship of *Foreign Affairs.* According to Bundy, the story demonstrates that Nixon stole the election from Humphrey by means of a 'covert operation' which, he believes, was a 'preview of techniques used at Watergate.'

Later during the US presidential election in 1972, Thieu's choices were restricted to Nixon (who campaigned on the slogan of 'peace with honor' in Vietnam, but would actually prolong the war), and George McGovern (who had called for a complete withdrawal of US troops from Indochina). In the end, Thieu had to stick with a peace agreement signed in Paris in January 1973, and with the empty promises of Nixon and Kissinger that they would retaliate against Hanoi.

Nixon and Thieu preferred one another because of the stability they offered each other. Thieu was able to cling to power till 1975 because he had decimated the opposition by amending the electoral law, erecting cumbersome bureaucratic hurdles that prevented opponents from running in the 1971 election, and due to American support in large measure.[49] According to a special Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report: 'the growing American perception of Thieu as indispensable to political stability in South Vietnam gradually reduced the pressure on the Vietnamese for progress toward authentic democracy', and 'as early as 1970, the American focus shifted to the

need to ensure a Thieu victory in the 1971 elections while avoiding the appearance of an electoral process manipulated in his favour'.[50] The CIA station in Saigon, pursuant to such a policy, 'became deeply involved as it joined in the maneuvers designed to achieve this self-contradictory goal'.

Chennault appeased Thieu with a guarantee of US support under a future Nixon administration. Having satisfied Thieu, she believed that she could call in a favor at a later date. The foundation of her business arrangement had been set.

Chennault's early business diplomacy, 1968–1969

At the start of her diplomatic assignment Chennault began seeking business opportunities. Having personally met Thieu and Saigon officials several times, she wrote a flurry of letters to them. All of her letters, and their replies to her, were written in English, which stand out among a plethora of documents in Vietnamese such as the reports of her visits, filed in Thieu's presidential papers.

Chennault's commercial diplomacy was of a different type from the usual arrangements between American government agencies and US companies. As a matter of policy, US government agencies routinely awarded contracts to American companies from the 1950s onwards to build infrastructure in South Vietnam. In all, some 3,000 km of highways and roads were built at a cost of $455.9 million. Two American companies, Capital Engineering Corporation, and Johnson, Drake and Piper, for example, built a system of highways and bridges across southern Vietnam from 1955 to 1962.[51] The difference, however, is that Chennault repeatedly intervened on behalf of American firms. Right after her visit to Saigon, she wrote to the special assistant to Thieu, Nguyen Phu Duc, in March 1969, explaining the rationale for establishing a Committee of America for Facts in Vietnam, which would provide 'true' information to Americans at a time when 'the Vietnam War has become such an unpopular issue that we are not in the majority but the minority. For that reason it is even more important that the Committee of America for Facts on Vietnam should be founded'.[52] She told Duc that a public relations consultant, Robert K. Gray, would be in touch soon to start the project. The same day, Gray, who represented the Washington public relations firm, GM International, Inc., wrote to Duc, warning him against reducing the budget for the propaganda campaign that would present the concerns and needs of the Saigon regime. 'I do caution you against greater curtailment than necessary, however, since the job to be done is a big one and is growing rapidly each day as the anti-war sentiment in the United States builds up.'[53] One of the projects Gray recommended was an 'opinion survey to study the attitude of the United States citizens toward Vietnam', because 'this would be a valuable tool to measure the effectiveness of the things we will be doing but if something must be cut from the program, it is a tool which reluctantly we would do without'. Gray suggested that costs could be reduced in the 'manhours of creative people' in Washington who would write and design advertisements and propaganda materials for South Vietnam.

Chennault proposed the public relations campaign in March 1969, against the backdrop of the 1967 presidential election in South Vietnam that had eleven candidates in the fray, and marked the beginning of a long-delayed process that would supposedly move South Vietnam toward democracy.[54] By all accounts, US officials were heartened that the ticket of presidential candidate Thieu and his running mate Nguyen Cao Ky had won 34.8 percent of the vote. A successful election was a part of Johnson's policy of encouraging the growth of constitutional methods in South Vietnam that had been destabilized by coups since November 1963, when the president, Ngo Dinh Diem, was overthrown by a military junta. The CIA described the elections as the 'most successful ever'.[55] But in *Vietnam: A History*, Stanley Karnow claims that most of the people that voted for the Thieu-Ky ticket were in the 'outlying districts where local commanders managed the political contests', implying that the military was responsible for Thieu's victory.[56]

It was at an appropriate moment that Chennault began negotiating the public relations campaign because Thieu's governance had become progressively more embarrassing to the United States. Saigon newspapers regularly published reports on how the regime funneled US aid into the prison system, bogus newspapers, and the Saigon secret police.[57]

The public relations campaign, however, would have diverted attention from the truth about the regime. The extent of the long-festering corruption was properly recorded when the RAND Corporation interviewed several senior Saigon regime officials after the fall of Saigon in 1975. They declared that the regime harbored 'pervasive corruption, which led to the rise of incompetent leaders, destroyed army morale, and created a vast gulf of social injustice and popular antipathy'.[58] The Saigon officials considered corruption the 'fundamental ill' that manifested in racketeering, bribery, buying and selling positions and appointments, and pocketing the pay of 'ghost soldiers' whose names were listed on the duty roster but were either nonexistent, or who paid their commanders to be released from duty. The United States tried to reform the regime in late 1967 when the American official, Robert Komer, established the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support program, known as CORDS. Aware of Thieu's caution in tackling corruption, Komer sought less intrusive means of encouraging action by threatening to withhold resources.

The incoming president, Nixon, viewed Vietnam more as a theater of Cold War diplomacy and less as a state that needed US-supervised reform. Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, were more interested in maintaining a stable and compliant South Vietnamese government than in tackling corruption, which Johnson had half-heartedly tried to combat. Nixon had declared that Thieu was 'getting an undeservedly bad reputation', adding that while some people wanted the Nixon administration to pressure Thieu to 'crack down on corruption', he (Nixon) did not care what Thieu did as long as he cooperated in the war.[59] The issue of corruption could not be glossed over, and in late 1971 the deputy national security advisor, Alexander Haig, commented during a fact-finding mission to South Vietnam: 'Thieu's actions against corruption have been inadequate. He has not spoken out against corruption as strongly as he should, and he has not removed the more notoriously corrupt officials.'[60] The longstanding problem entered the public domain in 1974 with the press reporting an effort by Thieu to block an investigation into the opaque business dealings of a fertilizer company owned by his brother-in-law who had allegedly built houses and acquired land with government money, and had profited from the distribution of scarce rice in famine affected areas.[61]

Chennault's public relations campaign - and indeed the full spectrum of her diplomacy in Saigon - required her to register with the Department of State under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) of 1938, and to periodically declare her activities and funds received.[62] But since her entire intervention was clandestine she did not report it. She was answerable because an amendment to FARA in 1966 had shifted the thrust of the law from control of 'political propaganda' to the disclosure of foreign economic interests, and there were no major amendments since then.[63] The term 'political propaganda' covered oral, visual, graphic, written or pictorial expression, precisely the work that Chennault was doing for Thieu in the United States.[64] Her activities - lobbying and preparing a public relations campaign - were not exempt from registration, and did not fall under the list of foreign agents that were exempted such as the officials of foreign governments, diplomatic or consular officers and their staff, and individuals engaged in 'bona fide religious, scholastic, academic, or scientific pursuits'.[65]

Johnson believed that her activities were a matter of national security and a possible violation of both the Neutrality Act (forbidding Americans from taking sides between belligerent countries) and the FARA. Therefore, no questions of illegal bugging arose when he ordered the wiretaps on Chennault.[66] The FBI disclosed in Senate Committee hearings in 1975 that 'the surveillance of Mrs. Chennault was consistent with FBI responsibilities to determine if her activities were in violation of the provisions of the Foreign Agents Registration Act and of the Neutrality Act'.[67]

Chennault's public relations work for the Saigon regime positioned her within the well-known lobbies in the United States, each of which had advanced a cause in favor of a specific foreign country such as the pro-South Vietnamese lobby, the China Lobby, the pro-Israel lobbies, and the anti-Castro campaign.[68] After the Second World War, she joined her husband as a member of the China Lobby - more appropriately known as the Taiwan Lobby - a group in the United States that supported the Guomindang (GMD) regime of Chiang Kai-shek and successfully pressured the US government to give billions of dollars in aid to the GMD. Lt. Gen. Chennault was memorialized in Taiwan as a steadfast ally of Chiang's with a statue in the capital city of Taipei. As a prominent personality in the China Lobby in the United States, he paved the way for his wife to become an activist within the lobby, and after his death she became a leading Washington figure supporting Taiwan.[69] She was naturally involved with the pro-South Vietnamese lobby, which was similar to the China lobby: Both were driven by ideologically motivated Americans.[70] She was also aligned to the American Friends of Vietnam, or AFV, whose anti-communist members ranged from the far right to the moderate left.[71]

Chennault's public relations campaign was not unprecedented. The South Vietnamese president, Ngo Dinh Diem, had attempted to 'win the hearts and minds' of the American public in his first year in 1954 by hiring an American public relations firm to implement information programs in the United States. Diem believed that public support from Americans would translate into economic and political benefits for his regime, and could help strengthen his position as head of state. The following year, South Vietnam signed a contract with Harold Oram and Associates to manage its propaganda in the United States. The Oram group worked closely with the AFV to influence opinion among American elites about Diem, and it helped stage an exhibition of Vietnamese artifacts at the Smithsonian in 1960.[72] As Diem stabilized conditions, he expanded the propaganda programs: The Oram group organized conferences and symposia, published editorials, and distributed propaganda materials, targeting a select group of 'policy initiators and thought-molders' in the United States.[73]

Chennault, for her part, was succeeding brilliantly in forging a personal relationship with Thieu, and they enjoyed each other's company. Just a day after she wrote to Duc, she penned a long letter to Thieu, thanking him for spending 'a most inspiring day in Viet Nam' in her company. She wrote: 'You are not only an outstanding President, but also a very artistic photographer. Each time we meet, I find out about some more of your talents - a very pleasant experience for me.'[74] She said she would send the photographs Thieu had taken as soon as the prints were developed. In this letter Chennault cleverly combined praising Thieu with a persuasive justification of the Nixon Doctrine. Thieu viewed the Nixon Doctrine with great alarm, believing that any reduction in US military aid was a signal of American abandonment of South Vietnam and eventual seizure of the south by North Vietnam. She wrote:[75]

> The few hours we spent together was [sic] most fruitful and we could spend the whole day talking, or should I say, listening to your ideas and advice? Now I know and understand why, and firmly believe, your people will never be conquered. The courage and determination accomplished by patience, and maybe a touch of wisdom, will carry you and your people through many more crises to come. It is unfortunate that only a very few of us in the United States understand the necessity of collective security and the importance of keeping the balance of power. We are a country of instant coffee and instant tea, and we are inclined to seek instant solutions. The communists are smart enough to touch on our weakest position, that is to outlast our patience and to use propaganda to form public opinion in favor of the communist objective. My husband, General Chennault, often said, 'We have to be more aware of the enemy trying to destroy us from within by infiltration'. And we see this happening each day in the rich land of America. I don't believe that the Viet Nam War can be lost in Saigon and the enemy realizes this also, therefore, they are very active in Paris and in Washington, DC. We who believe in freedom no matter how dark the hour, never give up hope for hope is tomorrow and I do believe tomorrow belongs to us.

Chennault ended the letter by thanking Thieu 'for your lovely gift, the gold cigarette lighter. Each time when I use it I shall think of our meeting, and when peace should come to Vietnam I want to be the first one to be invited to spend my vacation at the lovely sea shore in Vietnam's

south'. She had achieved her goal of establishing the foundations of a strong personal relationship with Thieu.

Reassured by her closeness to Thieu, she immersed herself in preparing the public relations campaign. Funds for the campaign were to be sourced from the corpus of annual economic aid the United States provided. From 1963 to 1973, the American government, through US AID, injected over $2 billion into South Vietnam under the CIP.[76]

Ten days later, Chennault wrote again to Duc, reminding him that Gray of GM International was 'still waiting for a commitment from you' on the business proposal to create the Committee of America for Facts on Vietnam.[77] She clarified her own position in the business venture: 'Of course, as I have said before, I am working and helping as a friend.' She pressed Duc to give his approval to the venture: 'Mr. Gray feels very deeply of our cause and is willing to give his own time and efforts. However, he told me he would prefer some kind of commitment from your side before he goes on any further.' She was aware of Duc's busy schedule, but 'it is important you give approval to begin the public relations campaign as quickly as possible'. Gray's office, she explained, had 'already devoted several days and thousands of dollars in the preparation of materials which already have been presented' [to Duc], and that Gray's firm could not be asked to 'take further time away from paying clients until we have given them a signed agreement to proceed and an advance of funds to work with to launch the activity on a businesslike basis'. She argued that there was 'so much to be done and opposing forces are so hard at work that I counsel you to proceed without further delay'.

Nixon had never instructed Chennault to conduct a public relations campaign for Thieu. He had wanted to strengthen the South Vietnamese army, but he had no interest in improving the image of his regime in the United States. She was, thus, conducting an independent policy. There were two reasons for her desire to improve Thieu's image: First, GM International would profit from it, and secondly any improvement in the perception of Thieu may have convinced US Congress to continue to financially support his regime. As a devoted anti-communist, Chennault was ideologically allied to non-communist regimes in Asia, seen in her support of Taiwan and her struggle to ensure that South Vietnam remained an independent state. Though she had no personal stake in the business venture, she lobbied for the contract to be given to GM International.

As an informal diplomat, she endeavored to remove formality in her relationship with Saigon regime officials. Toward this end, she enclosed a copy of the *Washington Post* which had carried a lifestyle article, partly devoted to her, entitled 'Women in Pants: Where and When?' The article featuring a photograph of her in the Vietnamese national costume, the *ao dai,* had her commenting: 'I think the West is just catching up with the East by wearing dresses over pants, which is very graceful looking'. The dress featured in the article, she said, was presented to her by the wife of the prime minister of South Vietnam, Mrs. Khiem.

Chennault's personalized form of informal diplomacy encompassed gestures small and large, both in Washington, DC and in Saigon: Mailing photographs to Thieu's office, hosting a tea party in Washington honoring the wife of the vice president, Nguyen Cao Ky, and lobbying Americans to support Thieu. In another letter written just two days later, she informed Duc that the photographs of herself with Thieu had been developed and that she had mailed them to Duc, casually inserting a gentle reminder about the public relations project: 'I have talked to many people in the Hill regarding our educational project'.[78]

She was aware that Thieu and Ky were bitter rivals, but she still maintained a separate channel to Ky to widen her list of contacts, unconcerned about what Thieu might deduce from it. Thieu knew about her meetings with Ky because he had placed his rivals and subordinates under surveillance. Thieu was leery of those whom he believed were more loyal to Ky, so he used his brother, Kieu, and others to contact Chennault.[79] After his victory in the 1967 election, Thieu marginalized Ky's clique of supporters, denying them influential military and cabinet

posts.[80] Chennault, however, remained close to both Thieu and Ky through the byzantine intrigues of Saigon politics.

She was friends with senior members of the Vietnamese legislature and military going back to her years in China. Her friendship with Ky and his wife began when she interviewed them in the early 1960s. She also had a strong relationship with the South Vietnamese prime minister, Tran Thien Khiem, and his wife, as he had served as the ambassador to Taiwan and the United States in the early 1960s. These connections gave her a privileged insider's view of the government in Saigon.

Distressed at not hearing from Duc, she wrote to him again two weeks later, on 17 April 1969: 'I have sent you two letters since my return and also two packages of color slides … ', and adding: 'Both Mr. Gray and myself are very anxious to get our committee organized', drawing attention again to her proposal to establish a Committee of America for Facts in Vietnam. Her letter carried a hint of annoyance: 'I know you are just as busy as I am at this very critical time. Whatever your decision is going to be, please send a reply to Mr. Gray's letter, otherwise next time when we go and ask him for help he might not be so sympathetic.'[81]

She kept up the pressure, writing to Duc on 11 June 1969, enclosing a couple of speeches that she had delivered at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco and at the Los Angeles Breakfast Club, and writing a postscript in her own hand: 'I had a long talk with Dr. Henry Kissinger before he left for Midway. See you in Saigon in July'.[82]

She was carrying out her informal diplomacy with Thieu at the same time that Nixon and Kissinger were engaging North Vietnam in secret peace talks, without the participation of Thieu. Soon, Thieu would realize that he had gained nothing substantial by rejecting the Johnson peace plan because Nixon was even negotiating a US troop withdrawal, as part of his talks with Hanoi. The Saigon regime now believed that Nixon was betraying them.

Duc eventually replied to Chennault on 20 June, thanking her for sending copies of her two speeches, and adding that he had 'enjoyed them tremendously', and that he was 'sure that the audience did not let your glamorous appearance detract them from the wisdom of your penetrating observations'. While praising her for making a 'number of very thoughtful and pertinent remarks', Duc did not respond to her repeated requests for a speedy decision on the business proposal of Gray's public relations firm.[83] The government of war-ravaged South Vietnam did not think it wise to spend US funds on an image-building project in Washington, DC.

Chennault heaped praise on Thieu in order to gain his trust. Just ahead of her July 1969 visit to Saigon, she wrote to him, lavishing rich tributes: 'your courage, your wisdom, your determination, plus your practical common sense', had gained much admiration in the United States. She did not make any concrete proposals at this time, but added that she had 'talked to Dr. Henry Kissinger' after his return from an important meeting with Thieu at Midway Island.[84]

A revised business proposal, and struggle for a diplomatic post

Now began a long saga of her fight-back to obtain compensation, reward, or recognition for her informal wartime diplomacy. She faced formidable hurdles in her effort to attain these goals. Officials at the Nixon White House had come to realize that 'Anna Chennault is unhappy because she has not been recognized by the Administration'. An assistant to the president, Peter M. Flanigan, wrote to the attorney general, John Mitchell, in October 1969, with a timely suggestion: that since the AG 'had the liaison (if it can be called that) with the good lady I'd like your suggestions as to whether we should take some action to recognize her'. Flanigan added: 'If the answer is 'yes' should this be in terms of an invitation to dinner at the White House or something more important such as an appointment to a State Department Commission on the Far East'.[85] Flanigan's memo brought no results, and no action was taken to recognize her contribution. Chennault was not dismayed by the lack of reward for her labor, and she continued her informal diplomacy with Saigon, this time asking Thieu to participate personally in a propaganda campaign in the United States.

Since Thieu administration officials had not shown an interest in hiring Gray's public relations firm for a fee, Chennault offered an alternative method of refurbishing the regime's image - without charge. She wrote to Thieu on 4 November 1969, requesting him to send a letter signed by himself and addressed to the American people, in which Thieu should list the achievements of his regime. She was deeply concerned about the widespread negative image of the regime, that it was mired in corruption and had imposed an authoritarian and undemocratic style of governance. She, therefore, believed it was 'important to let the American people know how much the Vietnamese have done for themselves and I think a letter from you would be very timely and be helpful to our cause'.[86]

The revised public relations proposal coincided with Thieu carrying out a half-hearted anti-corruption campaign following the shock of the Tet Offensive in January 1968, but his real interest lay in consolidating personal power, which he accomplished by removing from office supporters of his chief rival, Ky, and by cracking down on the Saigon press, causing many Vietnamese to label him 'the little dictator'.[87] At the end of the same letter, Chennault took the opportunity to inform Thieu of her forthcoming visit to Saigon the following month, adding: 'look forward to seeing you'.

Some officials of the Nixon administration believed that the president had dragged his feet on rewarding Chennault. The White House had wished to offer her a position on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), but the appointment was delayed because of the difficulty of finding a role that best suited her talents. She had been complaining that 'she had been waiting nine months for an announcement of the promised appointment to the UNESCO Advisory Board'. A White House memo records that Chennault 'finds this infuriating'.[88] White House officials worried that she might not get the job she wanted, and that she may be offered a position on a White House East Asia Advisory panel. She was, instead, appointed member of the Performing Arts Advisory Committee of the John F. Kennedy Center on 26 March 1970 - a less important position, and not the job she had wanted.

In April 1970, Lamar Alexander (an assistant to Bryce Harlow, who served as Nixon's executive assistant at the White House) inquired: 'Is it time to ask [the concerned authorities] on what day the 'Dragon Lady' will receive her UNESCO appointment'. In reply, Jon Rose, a White House staffer, announced that Chennault 'had accepted' the offer.[89] Eventually, she was appointed member of the National Commission on UNESCO on 23 June 1970.[90]

Throughout these challenges, Chennault kept up a hectic foreign travel schedule. On 12 March 1971, she informed Nixon in writing that she had just returned from a trip to Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries, as well as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hawai'i: 'As a personal friend of many of the leaders of Asia, I was given the privilege of long talks with presidents and prime ministers.' She had met president Marcos, president Chiang Kai-shek, the prime ministers of Korea and Thailand, as well as Thieu, all of whom 'have asked me to convey personal messages to you'. She declared that the 'situation is Asia is not as gloomy and discouraging as the American public reads in the media', but she cautioned that 'our friends in Asia at this moment are a little confused, as well as concerned about the United States' policy toward Asia as it relates to each of them', a reference to persisting worries among US allies in Asia over impending US troop withdrawal from Vietnam under the Nixon Doctrine.[91]

The same day, she requested the White House to arrange for her to meet Nixon.[92] She realized that securing an appointment with the president was much more difficult than it had been to meet with Nixon when he was a presidential candidate. A secretary forwarded Chennault's request to a special assistant to the president, Dwight L. Chapin, who handled the president's daily diary. Chapin, in turn, forwarded her letter to attorney general Mitchell, with the handwritten remark: 'Call Sue in AG's office - see if he recommends for or against apt. with Chennault'.[93] On not hearing from the White House, Chennault wrote to Chapin on 23 March, urging him to arrange an appointment with the president because 'the matter is rather urgent and I intend to return to the Orient within the next two weeks …'[94] Six days later, Kissinger conveyed to the president

Chennault's 'desire to see you'. He told Nixon that she was carrying messages for him from various leaders in Asia, but he cautioned that 'while there is probably nothing of substance in these personal messages which we have not gained through other channels, you may wish to see her briefly on this account. Her connections with many key Asian leaders are, in fact, quite good'.[95] Kissinger told Nixon about her unhappiness over being denied a formal diplomatic appointment.

Chennault had voiced her discontent to several senior Nixon administration officials, telling them that 'Asian leaders have wondered why your Administration has not appointed a prominent lady of Asian ancestry to a high position, perhaps as an Ambassador'. The remark conveyed that she preferred a formal diplomatic appointment instead of short-term positions on cultural committees. She believed that she deserved a much more important diplomatic position than an informal role as Nixon's personal channel to Saigon because a formal appointment would carry greater weight in her meetings with Asian leaders. The attorney general, meanwhile, made no recommendation on whether or not the president should meet her.

Eventually, Kissinger fixed her appointment with Nixon on 12 April 1971 at 11.45 a.m. Ahead of the meeting, Kissinger briefed Nixon about her concerns: 'In her conversations since her return [from Asia] with a State Department official and a member of my staff, Mrs. Chennault pointed out how useful it would be to utilize the informal good offices of Americans of Asian ancestry for personal contacts with Asian leaders'. Kissinger added: 'Mrs. Chennault described Asian leaders as worried about the application of the Nixon Doctrine to them.' In his briefing for Nixon, Kissinger misinterpreted Chennault's wishes. Whereas she had wanted a formal appointment as an ambassador, Kissinger told Nixon that she had asked to be 'utilized' in an 'informal' manner. It is clear that Kissinger did not support her request for a diplomatic position.

Kissinger placed before the president several points that he 'may wish to make' during his meeting with Chennault: That the president was 'grateful to Mrs. Chennault's courtesy in taking the trouble to report on her trip to Asia'; that the president believed 'despite our many problems in Asia, the situation is not gloomy or discouraging', that the president hoped that 'on her travels Mrs. Chennault will do everything she can to reassure our friends in Asia about the firm intent of your policies as they relate to each country'; that 'Mrs. Chennault should not hesitate to contact Dr. Kissinger's office again if she has any messages she wishes conveyed to you'; and that should she bring up Taiwan's concerns over its representation in the United Nations, the president might ask her to convey his personal reassurance to the Taiwanese that the United States will continue to vigorously defend Taipei's rights in the UN.[96]

Kissinger's talking points for Nixon were crafted to reiterate to Chennault, first, that the president appreciated her informal diplomacy in Southeast Asia, a role that the president hoped she would continue to play. Secondly, Kissinger did not want her to directly contact the White House to seek appointments with the president, and he made it clear that she should go through Kissinger's office. Thirdly, Nixon and Kissinger were aware of Chennault's emotional ties with the Nationalist government of Taiwan and her dislike of mainland Chinese communists. Kissinger, therefore, advised Nixon to reassure her about US commitment to defend the right of Taiwan to hold its seat at the United Nations. Taiwan kept its seat till 25 October 1971, when the UN general assembly recognized the People's Republic of China as the sole lawful representative of China that would hold the UN seat.

Chennault strove continually to conduct her brand of informal diplomacy in support of Nixon. On 20 April 1971 she wrote to Nixon: 'I deeply appreciate the honor and opportunity of talking to you in the White House last week', assuring him that she would 'continue to do my best serving my country as a private citizen'.[97] Nixon replied on 28 April: 'Praise is always welcome, of course, but I particularly appreciated your letter of April 20 as well as the copies of the recent article' that she sent to the editorial board of the *New York Times*, in which she argued against the United States normalizing relations with China, or conducting trade with the communist government in Beijing, which she believed had little to offer the United States aside from 'textiles, hog bristles, peanuts, soybeans - or heroin'.[98]

By October 1971, Chennault had performed a volte-face. From publicly advocating that the United States must not trade with China because it would strengthen the hands of the authoritarian regime in Beijing, she now praised Nixon's effort to promote travel and trade with China, realizing that it would be unproductive to oppose his China outreach. The *Washington Post* noted that Chennault had 'surprisingly kind words' for Nixon's softening toward China because she was 'one of Nationalist China's [Taiwan] strongest supporters in America'.[99] She told the newspaper: 'Certainly, communist China will take every advantage of this gesture to make their pitch. But we (Asian Americans) should not be discouraged simply because Americans are trying to make some communication.' Many US politicians were supportive of Nixon's policy of initiating a diplomatic normalization with China. Senator Henry M. Jackson, for one, remarked that he was 'delighted' with the president's proposal.

At this time, Chennault's public relations project assumed greater relevance and urgency following the presidential election in Saigon in October 1971 with the incumbent president, Thieu, as the only candidate. He had engineered an election law to disqualify his major opponents, Ky and General Duong Van Minh. The single-candidate election badly hurt his image. Thieu orchestrated his re-election, winning 100 percent of the vote with more than 87 percent of voters casting their ballots.[100] Kissinger believed that the uncontested election of Thieu weakened him both in South Vietnam and the United States. The Chennault public relations makeover, thus, assumed importance.[101] Yet, the Saigon regime did not show much interest in the project, believing that its own power was unchallenged.

Back in Washington, Chennault was occasionally invited to the Nixon White House for meetings of the Asian Pacific Advisory Group that were held under the leadership of the assistant to the president for international economic affairs, Peter G. Peterson.[102] The principal task of these meetings was to organize visits of US businesspersons to Southeast Asia and East Asia, and Chennault played a significant advisory role. She remained active in Washington on the issue of Vietnam. On one occasion she helped arrange a meeting between the senator, Charles H. Percy, and South Vietnamese of the so-called Vietnam Democratic Force, the Asian Parliamentarians' Union, and the South Vietnamese Embassy in Washington. The meeting discussed the Thieu regime's concerns over the presence of North Vietnamese troops in southern Vietnam. Saigon regime officials argued that it would be 'disastrous to accept their presence in South Vietnam in a ceasefire agreement for it would reward aggression'.[103]

Nixon did not offer Chennault a fitting diplomatic position, but he always gave her recognition and respect in his letters to Asian officials. Nixon, for example, thanked the former Philippine ambassador, Ernesto V. Lagdameo, for the 'thoughtful remembrances you sent for us with your warm greetings through the courtesy of Anna Chennault,' and adding: 'I am particularly pleased with the cufflinks, designed with such an appropriate motif, and Mrs. Nixon is delighted with the very beautiful filigree necklace you chose for her. We shall treasure these gifts, especially for the friendship and support they represent'.[104] Nixon also delivered - through Chennault - an important message on the occasion of the Philippine Aviation Week. A State Department cable circulating the message described her as the president's special representative. Nixon affirmed that he was 'pleased that Mrs. Anna Chennault can serve as my special representative on this occasion and that she will be present at the 38th foundation day of the Philippine Air Force'.[105]

She ignored Kissinger's admonition that she should contact the president only through him. In order to centralize power, Kissinger had restricted American officials from gaining direct access to Nixon, requiring them to approach Kissinger's office first. Chennault was a seasoned Washington insider who knew how to get things done, and she always maintained a direct link to the president through his White House staff.

She had the ear of the executive assistant to Nixon, Bryce Harlow. He wrote to the counselor to the president, Anne Armstrong, in September 1973: 'Anna Chennault, who as you no doubt know is a minorities chieftain-ess at the RNC [Republican National Committee], has softly said to

me on September 24 that the White House badly needs a person looking after the ethnic groups, as distinct from a separate representative for Blacks and one for Spanish-Americans.' Harlow deferred to Armstrong because she was taking care of this appointment.[106]

In a final attempt to help Chennault get a suitable job, her friend Corcoran secured an appointment with Nixon in 1973. At their meeting in the Oval Office, he reminded the president that she had 'kept her mouth shut' when the press was investigating her secret diplomacy. 'Oh, yeah', the tight-mouthed president replied.[107] Corcoran, of course, did not know that the White House tape machines were recording the conversation.

There are conflicting perceptions of Chennault's struggle for recognition. One view is that she was not interested in a diplomatic job because she might have to answer difficult questions during Senate confirmation hearings.[108] Such a portrayal can be discounted in light of her assiduous pursuit of a diplomatic position. The other view is that she had hoped she would be offered a major post in the Nixon administration, but she was offered nothing substantial because Nixon was reluctant to nominate her for a job requiring Senate confirmation as he was concerned that she might divulge his secret diplomacy under oath.[109] The second view is in conformity with the historical evidence as it confirms that while she had indeed wished to be rewarded, Nixon demurred. These perceptions complicate her legacy.

The Northrop-Page Communications project

Chennault began interceding on behalf of Northrop at an opportune moment for her purposes because the Thieu administration and its aid lobby in Washington had begun a campaign in March 1973 to gain more US military and economic aid, using the services of a South Vietnamese three-star general, a cabinet member with Washington connections, and a former South Vietnamese ambassador to the United States.[110] Thieu had given his lobbyists $2 million to 'wine and dine potential Washington supporters of increased US aid'. The Saigon daily newspaper, *Dien Tin,* reported that the regime pursued a policy of 'anything goes in seeking aid'.

US Congressmen, however, were restrained by the Paris Peace Agreements of January 1973 that required the United States to end its military interference, stipulating that Washington must not 'intervene in the internal affairs of South Vietnam'.[111] Yet, Article 14 of the agreement realistically sought to create a liberal economic model for South Vietnam. It stated that South Vietnam 'will be prepared to establish relations with all countries irrespective of their political and social systems', and that it would 'accept economic and technical aid from any country with no political conditions attached'. Article 14 opened the door for American companies to enter the Vietnamese market.

But many US Congressmen were increasingly skeptical about the pleas of the American ambassador, Graham Martin, for more weapons, as well as his request for aid which would supposedly induce an 'economic takeoff'. In order to achieve the goal, Thieu's trusted minister, Hoang Nha, explained to US officials in March 1974 that 'South Vietnam would need some $700 million in economic aid from the US each year until 1980, at which point it could get along with $80 million to $90 million'.[112]

The Congressmen now believed that official aid should be accompanied by a policy of encouraging American companies to invest in South Vietnam so that it would become less dependent on aid. The House Committee on Foreign Affairs reported in July that 'if the US is going to continue to provide economic and military assistance to South Vietnam it makes no sense to exclude incentives for private American companies to invest in that country', explaining that private investment was needed to shift South Vietnam toward economic self-sufficiency and 'to cushion reductions in grant assistance programs'.[113] US companies, however, were not rushing to invest in the country because of the continuing war.

By the time Chennault began lobbying for Northrop-Page in December 1974, a few major US communications companies were well entrenched in Vietnam. Collins Radio, for example, had sold six transportable troposcatter communication systems to the US Signal Corps that were deployed in Vietnam in 1963.[114] Page Communications Engineers (PCE, a subsidiary of Northrop Corporation of Washington, DC), won a contract in competition with Collins to supply and install a propaganda-broadcast transmitter in South Vietnam in September 1965 at a location close to the northern border. Hal Gershanoff, a technical executive with Page, recalls: 'It seemed that president [John F.] Kennedy had given his commitment that the US would help counter North Vietnamese propaganda broadcasts by supplying the South with its own station'.[115] Page installed and operated an Integrated Communication System in South Vietnam that 'expanded the previously installed communications facilities into a modern multimillion dollar fixed communications network with the capacity, flexibility and necessary control complex to support the dynamic communications in that combat area'.[116] In 1965–66 Page constructed a new troposcatter communications system at an isolated mountainous site near Dalat.[117]

Resuming her commercial diplomacy, Chennault wrote a three-page letter to Thieu on 4 December 1974 on her new letterhead embossed with the name 'Mrs. Claire Lee Chennault'. She wrote: 'Forgive me for not writing to you sooner to thank you for the lovely picture you sent me in the care of your brother, Ambassador Kieu, and also to tell you how much I cherish and appreciate our meeting …'[118] She began with general comments on the 'apathy and pessimism of the US public' which was 'alarming' because less than forty percent of them had voted in the mid-term election of 1974. She remarked that 'these are most challenging days for you as a leader of a country that is going through a most difficult period after long years of war and destruction'.

It was only in the fourth paragraph of the letter that she raised the topic of an unfinished business plan. 'As you may recall, during our last two meetings this year, we had discussed many items. One particular item concerned the Northrop-Page project in which you are personally interested because of better communications systems in Vietnam,' she began.[119] The rest of the lengthy letter concerned a proposal by Northrop-Page Communications to build an earth station in South Vietnam at a cost of $2.5 million. She reminded him that 'as you and I have agreed that in order to encourage foreign investment in your country a better communications system is urgently needed'. But she noted that 'due to various reasons and interruptions, the proposal of financing an earth station by Page Communications' had been 'repeatedly postponed'. The government bureaucracy in Saigon had delayed the approval process, which was particularly galling to Chennault.

She then identified herself as the promoter of the project: 'As a friend to you and to your country, you can be assured that I would not promote any project which does not benefit the people of Vietnam.' She told Thieu that since the US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1973, many foreign companies had tried to establish themselves in Vietnam for their own 'business interests alone with no concern for the future of Vietnam', and that some of these proposals were not practical. About the Northrop-Page earth station project, she argued: '… I don't think this project has been given proper attention and approval as you have instructed your cabinet members to do so'. She added: 'I am deeply concerned if the cabinet members wait much longer, the opportunity will be lost as we all realize how difficult it is to convince US industry to invest in Vietnam'.

She reassured Thieu that her business proposal was 'a practical, realistic and workable project of an earth station without getting your country financially involved'. Under the deal, 'Page is planning to invest at least 30 per cent in this project', and that the rest would be raised from loans from the U.S. Ex-Im Bank, Chase Manhattan Bank, and the U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation. She informed the president that Page officials had talked to the minister of public works and transportation, Duong Kich Nhuong, as well as the minister of planning, Nguyen Tien Hung, and the president of Air Vietnam, Nguyen Tan Trung. She argued that it was 'extremely

important that you and your Prime Minister be fully informed of this project and in turn advise your Minister of Public Works and Vietnam Telecommunications Authority to give first priority to this project'. She thanked the president for having met with the president of Northrop-Page Communications, Irving Kaufman, and stated that 'there are other major projects with Northrop which we had discussed previously and I shall continue to keep you informed as we move along'.

Thieu, however, was confronted with a national economic crisis at the very moment when Chennault began promoting the Northrop-Page project, initially during her meeting with president Thieu in mid-1974, and then in a letter to him in December 1974. The South Vietnamese economy and currency were in free fall, and his regime was paralyzed by fear of looming North Vietnamese attack of the south. Just four months later, Hanoi's military forces would overrun Saigon, causing the collapse of the Thieu regime and reunifying both halves of Vietnam under communist rule.

Thieu, at such a moment of catastrophe, was not able to look into Chennault's business proposals. Saigon officials were unwilling to approve her plans because an embattled Nixon, under fire for his involvement in the Watergate scandal, was not in a position to offer Thieu economic and military aid. Thieu was vulnerable because his ally, Nixon, had resigned on 9 August 1974 following his involvement in Watergate, and US officials had made it clear that they would not provide any more funds to support the regime in Saigon.

Chennault proved to be of invaluable help to Nixon. By exploiting Thieu's insecurities, she served Nixon's purposes by persuading Thieu to reject Johnson's peace negotiations with North Vietnam. Her diplomacy served Nixon's agenda of falsely reassuring Thieu that Nixon was committed to the preservation of his regime. Her parallel business diplomacy with Thieu may well have fructified if the Saigon regime had been stable, and if Nixon had survived.

There remain gray areas in her interventions: In her role as an influential lobbyist who ran her own consulting firm, Chennault did not declare her activities, as required, to the US State Department. And she assiduously represented the interests of major companies in the American military-industrial complex.

There was a link between her public relations campaign for Thieu and her promotion of Northrop's business interests. The public relations effort in the United States sought to improve the image of the Thieu regime and would persuade US Congress to maintain or increase aid to Saigon. The continuation of American aid was essential for her long-term business goals as it would be used to pay some of the companies that she represented. Indeed, she had told Thieu that Northrop was interested in participating in other projects as well.

Toward the end of the Nixon presidency, Chennault was re-elected co-chair of the National Republican Heritage Groups in 1973, and she assisted the entry of many South Vietnamese leaders who fled to the United States in 1975 after the fall of Saigon. She remained engaged in Asia after Nixon's resignation.

She was active in Ronald Reagan's presidential election campaign, and when he became president he sent her to China as his unofficial envoy at a time of warming US-China relations in January 1981. She normalized her personal relationship with the Chinese communist leadership during her visit to Beijing when she met the paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping. She revealed that Deng had asked her: 'Why do all the so-called China experts have blue eyes and blond hair?'[120] She later explained that she had battled for many years to gain recognition for her expertise in China but had become increasingly frustrated as she was never offered a major policymaking role. 'I am not a hostess,' she commented. 'For years I have despised that description. Why don't people recognise me as a China expert?'[121]

She was appointed vice-chairman of the President's Export Council (PEC) in 1981, and she maintained a good relationship with President Reagan and his wife, Nancy. On returning from a visit to China, Taiwan, the Soviet Union, Europe and the Middle East, she wrote to Reagan in September 1983, informing him about the highlights of her travels in her capacity as vice-chair

of the PEC.[122] In China, she was a 'special guest' of Deng, who spoke to her on four issues: US-China relations, the future of China-Taiwan relations, present and future Sino-Soviet relations, and the Chinese view on the divided Korean peninsula. Accompanied by US senators, she then traveled to Taiwan, where she arranged for the senators to meet the president, Chiang Ching-kuo. In Moscow, she discussed with Soviet officials the issue of US export controls that were harming the business interests of Caterpillar Tractor Co. of Peoria, Illinois, as the Soviet buyers had begun purchasing from Komastu Co of Japan that faced no export controls. The controls had been imposed by the president, Jimmy Carter, in July 1978 in response to the jailing of two Russian dissidents.

She now began slowing down the pace of her work, but she revisited China 1984. In 1988 Federal Express purchased the FTL, where she worked as a vice-president. She stopped doing political work for the Republican Party in 1988, possibly because she had never been properly recognized. After the Tiananmen Square episode in 1989, when China's People's Liberation Army shot down protesting university students who were demanding democracy, the United States publicly distanced itself from China by imposing sanctions. Afterwards, at the request of the US government, Chennault passed along a message to Deng saying that Washington still wanted a good relationship with Beijing, and explaining that the sanctions were imposed to appease American public opinion, and that they would be ended soon.[123]

Chennault died at the age of ninety-four in March 2018 at her home in Washington, DC, following complications from a stroke that she had suffered the previous December, leaving behind a legacy of an influential multifaceted career, but best remembered for her secret diplomacy for Nixon.[124] She seemed to have no regrets about playing a behind-the-scenes role. 'My whole life, from studying in exile to working in journalism to fighting it out alone in the US, has been filled with all kinds of bittersweet experiences', she told Chinese reporters in 2002.[125] 'Under eight US presidents, I have taken on many important but unpaid jobs. This road I've travelled on has been very interesting - so I have not lived for nothing.'

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