Beverly Deepe arrived in Vietnam as a 26-year-old reporter in 1962 and remained for seven years, becoming one of the longest-serving Western journalists to cover the war. As a freelancer early in the war, she explored the life and problems of the South Vietnamese in rural villages. In 1968, reporting for the Christian Science Monitor, the Nebraska native covered the Tet Offensive and Khe Sanh and pursued an unlikely lead she received from South Vietnamese sources a week before the U.S. presidential election: that the Richard Nixon camp was undermining President Lyndon Johnson’s three-point peace plan. In an excerpt from her memoir Death Zones and Darling Spies, Beverly Deepe Keever explains how the politically explosive revelations were softened when the story ran on election day, and how information declassified in 2008 now seemingly confirms the story, 45 years after LBJ’s private allegations to the Republican camp that Nixon was guilty of treason and had “blood on his hands.”

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Describing my June series as “unique in-depth reporting of complex and hazardous events,” managing editor Courtney Sheldon in his nominating letter also summed up some of my work throughout the year: “During 1968, Miss Deepe produced no fewer than 18 series of major articles on Vietnam for the Monitor, plus her regular string of daily articles. Among the best examples of her work under combat conditions was a series of six articles (March 20–27) from Khe Sanh on the plight of the encircled Marines there…. Indeed, she traced the pattern of conflict all the way from the man in the Khe Sanh dugout to General [William] Westmoreland in Saigon and the Pentagon in Washington.”

The shock and awe of the Communists’ Tet blitz was on the U.S. “leadership segment”—the press, politicians and official Washington, according to a well-established polling firm. Clark Clifford, who had replaced Robert McNamara as secretary of defense on March 1, 1968, explained, “Tet hurt the administration where it needed support most, with Congress and the American public—not because of the reporting, but because of the event itself, and what it said about the credibility of American leaders.” Within Johnson’s official circles the psychological shock produced by Tet was profound. “The pressure grew so intense that at times I felt the government itself might come apart at its seams,” Clifford, the 61-year-old confidant to several U.S. presidents, explained. “There was,” he said, “something approaching paralysis, and a sense of events spiraling out of control of the nation’s leaders.”

Some linked the loss of credibility to Johnson’s own mismanaged public relations campaign months earlier. “The adverse impact of Tet on the United States government and its policies would never have been as serious as it was if the Johnson Administration had not spent the better part of the preceding fall in a massive propaganda campaign to raise the level of American support by [sic] the war with a flood of reports and

Did Richard Nixon secretly try to scuttle President Johnson’s peace talk plan days before the 1968 presidential election? New evidence supports an unpublished story that he did. By Beverly Deepe Keever

The Unexploded Election-Eve Bombshell

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Party's presidential nomination and promised to bring an honored Hanói, and sought input from others who assessed what that meant. Hereasoned, “To say that the press was responsible for the walling off of the Vietnamese, the public, and the collapse of their role in the world.”

Not so much because of Tet, the year 1968 was significant because of the U.S. economic crisis caused by a run on the dollar and gold resulting from Johnson's spending on both the Vietnam War and his cherished Great Society programs, according to U.S. political economist Robert M. Collins. Collins argues that the U.S. economic crisis of 1968 “both revealed and contributed to the patterns of postwar U.S. economic hegemony.” He called 1968 “the year the American Century came to an end.”

After Johnson’s stunning announcement that he would not seek reelection, Khe Sanh had lost its political significance. Officials in Saigon largely viewed the besieged base as important to the Communists only as a lure to swing the American political pendulum. Thirty days later, the Vietnamese government agreed to preliminary peace talks, and a month later, on May 3, both Hanoi and Washington agreed to begin discussions in Paris. On August 8 Richard Nixon accepted the Republican Party’s presidential nomination and promised to bring an honorable end to the war in Vietnam.

During October 1968, I was busier than usual covering the impact of a talked-about permanent bombing halt, which was Hanoi’s precondition for entering into peace talks with the U.S. My dispatches to Western newspapers were published on page 1, often leading the Monitor. I interviewed senior military commanders along the DMZ and in Saigon, secured comments from Western diplomats, including one who had recently visited Hanoi, and sought input from others who assessed troop movements in Laos. At the same time I was synthesizing reports that Pham Xuan An [a stringer hired to help with oral and written translations] had gleaned from sources inside and outside the palace and the Vietnamese High Command.

Then, out of the blue, I learned of such outlandish rumblings that on October 28 I sent an advisory to the Monitor’s overseas editor, [Henry S.] “Hank” Hayward: “There’s a report here that Vietnamese Ambassador to Washington Bui Diem has notified the Foreign Ministry that Nixon aides have approached him and told him the Saigon government should hold to a firm position now regarding negotiations and that once Nixon is elected, he’ll back off from his current demands. If you could look into it down with the Bui camp, it would probably be a very good story.” I was so busy I had no chance to remember my own interesting story, that we genuinely want peace talks.”

Hayward told me within a day or so: “The alleged Nixon involvement was interesting but needed confirmation from this end—which was not forthcoming—before we could print such sweeping charges on election day. It was a good story nonetheless, and you get major credit for digging it out.” Knowing the time-honored journalistic tradition of fairness, I understood when Hayward told me that without such confirmation, the Monitor had “trimmed and softened” my lead. The Monitor’s substitute lead simply implied that Thieu had acted on his own.

Upon receiving the Monitor’s Western edition days later, however, I saw my supposed-to-be scoop relegated to page 2, with no mention of Nixon, under a one-column headline. I could hardly recognize it. Yet 44 years later I was stunned to learn that President Johnson had indeed read and agonized over my report. Just as this book was being readied for publication, I was queried about my scoop’s Nixon-Thieu connection by veteran investigative reporter Robert Parry. On March 3, 2013, Parry published an amazing expose on his online investigative news service headed: “The JFK Assassination: Louis Freeh, Robert Mueller’s chief aide at the FBI, ordered the files to be destroyed.”

To explain Thieu’s stunning announcement, I called Hayward on November 4: “Purported political encouragement from the Richard Nixon camp was a significant factor in the last-minute decision of President Nguyen Van Thieu’s refusal to send a delegation to the Paris peace talks—at least until the American Presidential election is over.” I relied mostly on “informed sources” for my scoop—an eye-opening exclusive news report—and added that “the only written report about the alleged Nixon support for the Thieu government was a cable from Bui Diem, Vietnamese ambassador to Washington,” confirming what I had asked Hayward to check out days earlier.

But my momentous scoop was not published. Hayward cabled back that the Monitor had deleted all my references to Bui Diem and to the “purported political encouragement from the Nixon camp,” which, he wrote, “seems virtual equivalent of treason.”

Hayward could not have known then, but his description of Nixon’s “virtual equivalent of treason” was being privately echoed at the time by Johnson when he sputtered: “It would rock the world if it were known that Thieu was conniving with the Republicans. Can you imagine what people would say if it were to be known that Hanoi has met all these conditions and then Nixon’s conniving with them kept us from getting it.”

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A new FBI wiretap of the South Vietnamese Embassy reported on November 2 that Anna C. Chennault, an old China Lobby, is still alive. "This is treason," Vice President Hubert Humphrey said. "I'll be God-damned if the China Lobby can decide this government." Yet that is what happened. Thieu's explosive address made national headlines and cast doubts on Johnson's ability to get a peaceful peace talk ending the war. Nixon's speechwriter, William Safire, voicing the sentiments of numerous pundits and a reputable polling firm, observed, "Nixon would probably not be president were it not for Thieu."

After the election, [Pham Xuan] An and I gleaned a play-by-play of the final confrontations between Thieu and U.S. ambassador Ellsworth Bunker that revealed why the Vietnamese had backed out of going to Paris. A Vietnamese source close to the palace conversations shared with An and me his notes detailing what I described as "one of the most bizarre—if not scandalous—American diplomatic maneuvers in war-time history."