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# Walking the Tightrope: The United States' Policy in Vietnam, 1952-1954

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Walking the Tightrope:  
The United States' Policy in Vietnam, 1952-1954

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History 490 Senior Thesis

Providence College  
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## **Table of Contents**

Map of Indochina.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: From Truman to Eisenhower.....	10
Chapter 2: 1953, A Monumental Year.....	33
Chapter 3: Dien Bien Phu and the Tragedy at Geneva.....	46
Conclusions.....	60
Bibliography.....	62

Map of Indochina



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## **Introduction**

The Vietnam War has always provoked debate amongst scholars, citizens, and politicians. Most often, this debate centers around the Johnson Administration of the 1960s; historically, United States involvement in Vietnam began much earlier, with the Truman Administration, and expanded more and more under his successors. Particularly under the leadership of Truman and Eisenhower, American policymakers pursued conflicting goals in Indochina, and the failure of American policy objectives in the region became clear long before the Johnson era. With the mounting power of the Soviet Union after World War II, the world became polarized, divided between communism on one side and capitalism on the other. Many American politicians believed that the Kremlin directed all communists; similarly, many Sino-Soviet leaders believed that the United States controlled all capitalists. The monolithic view of communism in the Free World was matched by a monolithic view of capitalism in the Soviet sphere. The ideological conflict also centered on a rivalry between the democracy and authoritarianism. The United States and other Free World nations depicted themselves as great advocates of egalitarian principles and individual rights, while they portrayed the Communist bloc as chiefly concerned with the predominance of the state over the value of the individual. This multi-faceted polarization amounted to a Cold War between the Free World and the Communist Bloc lasting well into the 1980s. It was described as cold in its avoidance of total war between the United States and the Soviet Union, but undoubtedly, proxy wars in smaller countries occurred quite frequently.

The war between Vietnam and France provides an example of one of these proxy wars. The war, however, involved not only France and Vietnam, and it was also not as clear-cut as friend versus foe. Vietnam itself was divided between a coalition of nationalists, communists, and non-communists in the North and the French-controlled South. Some nationalists certainly resided in the South, but the area was still under French hegemony. At the start of the war, the French had the upper hand in manpower and weaponry, but this all changed with the fall of China and the subsequent deterioration of effective French leadership. With the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek's regime in October 1949, the communists, under the leadership of Mao Tse-tung, ascended to power. Chiang's regime, exiled to the island of Formosa (Taiwan), continued to receive American support, while Mao's mainland regime obtained support from the Soviets. Mao's ascension also allowed the North Vietnamese to receive direct support from their Chinese neighbor to the North. In response, the United States, on May 1, 1950, began monetarily aiding the French in their effort against the Vietnamese nationalists, initially committing ten million dollars.<sup>1</sup> This aid only expanded exponentially as time went on, with ever-increasing American involvement, at least financially each and every year.

Already a belligerent in the war in Korea, the United States did not want to involve ground troops in another proxy war in Asia. On the other hand, American officials wanted to ensure that Vietnam would not suffer the same fate as China and fall to communism. To maintain these goals, the United States continued increasing their aid to the ever more floundering French. With aid from China paralleling United States aid to the French, the Viet Minh, Ho Chi Minh's nationalist, guerrilla force headquartered in the North, had gained efficiency, weaponry, and training, transforming them from "peasants by day, [into] snipers,

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Morgan, *Valley of Death: The Tragedy at Dien Bien Phu that led America into the Vietnam War* (New York: Random House, 2010), 114.

guerrilla fighters, and saboteurs by night.”<sup>2</sup> Though the French still maintained ground forces in greater numbers than their Viet Minh counterparts, they were lacking in their organization, morale, and leadership. The weak South Vietnamese government was another disadvantage. Chiefly led by Emperor Bao Dai, the government lacked motivated leaders, and the population suffered from great apathy, often deemed “fence-sitters” by American and French officials alike. Starting in 1952 and continuing throughout their involvement in the region, the United States was acutely aware of all these disadvantages but remained convinced that its financial and technological aid could save Southeast Asia from communist takeover. In reality, the United States could not prevent the looming intervention they would eventually enter into. Funding the majority of the French effort, in fact, guaranteed their eventual intercession in the region. The United States essentially tried to avoid direct intervention *and* stem the spread of communism simultaneously, when, in reality, one goal was not feasible without the other. As the inability of achieving a French victory became clear towards the end of 1953, the United States remained committed to delaying the entrance of American troops unless it was under united action. Ultimately, the United States would only commit to full involvement in an ideologically based conflict in the region, while the rest of the world saw the issue from a more practical standpoint. Undeniably, Southeast Asia was valuable strategically, containing numerous natural resources and occupying a decisive location. The United States recognized this and wanted to preserve control in the region to guarantee success in Japan and other Asian territories in the Free World. Other nations, however, such as England and France, while acknowledging the tactical value of Indochina, also analyzed their own nation’s floundering public opinion on the Indochina War

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<sup>2</sup> “Memorandum by the Director of the Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs (Bonsal) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison),” November 16, 1952, Washington, D.C., U.S. Department of State. *Foreign Relations of the United States 1952-1954*. Vol. XIII, Indochina, Part I, 289.



and refused to commit themselves for any further involvement. American policymakers virtually ignored this issue, as is clear from the implications of public opinion in the 1960s, when the United States was fully involved in a war not between communism and capitalism, but between the United States and Vietnam. The Vietnam War that would occur in the late 1960s and early 1970s was essentially determined by the escalations from 1952 to 1954.

Modern scholars have disagreed on the United States' role during these three monumental years. Some place the blame clearly on one group, such as French or American officials, while others offer more unbiased views of the overall situation at the time. Placing the blame for the conflict on one side or another will not alter the effects that European and American intervention have had in Vietnam. It is better to look at all the players in the conflicts through clear glass and then make a final assessment considering all the factors involved.

Archimedes L.A. Patti, in his book, *Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross*, occupied a position somewhere in the middle. He equally criticizes the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, in their monolithic vision of the world, for their ignorance of Vietnamese nationalism and desire for independence. This is in fact his most apparent and harsh criticism, taking a tough stand against the United States, proclaiming, "Despite our good intentions, in holding that our form of democracy is the only answer, we fail to accept for other peoples the basic tenet of democracy—the right to self-determination."<sup>3</sup> Presenting impartial views of each administration, Patti proves to be most critical of United States policy in general. For example, unlike the French, who admitted their desires for French hegemony in Indochina, the Americans claimed they were committed to self-determination while gradually increasing their level of intervention in the region. This gradual increase was all in the name of halting the spread of

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<sup>3</sup> Archimedes L.A. Patti, *Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 391.

communism. The French, on the other hand, were chiefly concerned with the prestige of the French Union, not the power of the Free World. American policymakers did not take this important difference fully into account, falsely believing that they could avoid direct intervention and communism's spread in the region by financially and technically backing the French.

Nicholas Tarling's *History of Southeast Asia* offers another unbiased perspective. Though only an overview, Tarling offers a concise analysis of United States involvement from 1952 to 1954. He focuses his attention on the Eisenhower administration, for more involvement and aid occurred under this administration than under that of his predecessor, Harry Truman. Truman began the aid programs, but Eisenhower and his advisors, particularly Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, truly developed them. Tarling also provides information on the political structures of the North and South, with the many contrasts between them. Analyzing the differences between each player involved in the conflict, as Tarling did, is certainly essential and incredibly helpful in developing a broader picture of the situation. Focusing on Eisenhower over Truman, however, is not as effective, for Truman began the trends that Eisenhower followed and enlarged. Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly's text is yet another that provides an overview of the events in the region. Focusing on a large time frame, from 1858 to 1954, there is not much information in their text on 1952 to 1954, but the little information contained there is quite balanced. They also provide several useful maps throughout their book. Furthermore, Jean Sainteny's memoir on Ho Chi Minh, though expected to be quite one-sided and leaning toward the French, is actually rather impartial. He did exhibit some French prejudices, arguing, for instance, that French establishments created stability within the weak infrastructure of South Vietnam. Though this is partially true, Sainteny ignores the barrier that French establishments often created against Indochinese independence. He also possesses a favorable opinion of Ho Chi

Minh, establishing him as Vietnam's symbol for independence. Though an instrument of French diplomacy, he understood the emblematic value Ho Chi Minh held in the region. Without the symbolism and power of Ho Chi Minh, the nationalist leaning of the Indochinese would not have been nearly as strong. Overall, despite slight inclinations towards one side or a certain camp, Tarling and Sainteny both occupy the latter position.

Other writers' books have a more refined focus, such as those of Jeff Broadwater and Ted Morgan. Broadwater focuses on Eisenhower's anticommunist views but mainly on the domestic front, analyzing, for example, how Eisenhower and his executive wrested control from Senator Joseph McCarthy. Despite this limit, the overall anticommunist outlook of the time, an outlook that affected United States-Indochina policy, shines through. Broadwater also seems more critical of Eisenhower's advisors, particularly Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, than Eisenhower himself, a critique many other scholars shared. Truman and his advisors, however, had started the tendency towards United States intervention; the Eisenhower administration merely brought the trends to their full fruition. Ted Morgan's book on the battle of Dien Bien Phu is not focused on domestic policy but, instead, military policy. He discusses the military events in the region leading up to the decisive battle, and he also provides overviews of Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap's backgrounds, something most other writers largely ignore.<sup>4</sup> His text is useful in its well-rounded assessment despite its nominally minimal focus. The texts of both Broadwater and Morgan, though focusing on specific policy aspects, manage to communicate various larger ideas such as the effects of anticommunism on Eisenhower's policies as well as the larger implications of the loss at Dien Bien Phu. For instance, without anticommunist sentiment, particularly the stigma of Truman's loss of China, the reality of United

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<sup>4</sup> Morgan, 31-35.

States intervention would have been questionable, for preventing the spread of communism was the main rationale for increasing American aid efforts. The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu illustrated how these aid efforts were not enough to impede a Viet Minh victory. Clearly, the United States could not avoid direct intercession if they wished to preserve Free World interests in the region.

Nicola Cooper is another writer with a narrower focus, centering on the French press and their depictions of the war in Indochina. His analysis of various documents from the time period are quite useful in learning the shifts in French morale on the home front and at war, but overall, they do not offer much that was pertinent to the focus of this paper. The French article proves much more useful in terms of analyzing the French views on United States involvement in the region. For instance, these include the development of the “withdrawal psychology” in France throughout the early 1950s that opposed further United States and French intervention in the region. Though certainly biased towards the French position, the article offers a different opinion than the other English sources consulted and thus gives more developed insight into the true nature of French public opinion.

Finally, the two remaining books, by William J. Duiker and Weldon Brown, agree that United States officials were overly optimistic in their assessment of the conditions in Vietnam at the time. As Brown articulates, “Excessive optimism followed by contradictory failure was to be common practice in the story of Vietnam.”<sup>5</sup> In attempting to conform to the ideal set forth by United States policy, officials often exaggerated the importance of certain victories, such as those at various installations on the Laotian-Vietnamese border, or lessened the devastation of certain failures, especially the successful Viet Minh invasion of Laos. The United States also

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<sup>5</sup> Weldon Brown, *Prelude to Disaster: The American Role in Vietnam 1940-1963* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 49.

avoided the use of its own troops out of legitimate fears of the negative public opinion that would surely result. From the death of French General de Lattre in January 1952 onward, however, French-Vietnamese troops did not enjoy the successes they once had under his leadership. Confined to mainly defensive operations, the chance of a French victory lessened as time went on. Clearly, United States policymakers did not take their differences with the French fully into account. While the French wanted to withdraw from the war in Indochina as quickly as possible, the United States was committed to holding the line against the Communists as long as they deemed necessary.

The dual goals of holding the line against communism and avoiding direct intervention ultimately proved impossible to accomplish. Truman, by the end of his last term, and Eisenhower, his successor, were fully aware that the French wanted to withdraw from the region as soon as they could, but they both remained committed to avoiding American intervention in the region. They also sought to keep Indochina within the Free World, knowing that some type of Free World intervention was necessary to hold the region away from the Communist Bloc, especially considering Indochina's proximity to the People's Republic of China. Conscious of some type of necessary intervention and attentive to the French desires to pull out, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations remained committed to avoiding formal American entrance in the region. Successively through the years of 1952, 1953, and 1954, however, American officials gradually increased their contributions to the region in the forms of finances, technology, supplies, and equipment. These gradual increases that ultimately amounted to the United States fighting the Indochina War with French troops on the ground proved how nonintervention would not succeed. In order to keep Indochina in the hands of the Free World, the United States would have to intervene. Clearly, the Indochina War, termed by most as a French defeat, was also a loss

for American interests. After the defeat, the United States refused to sign the Geneva Accords and soon succumbed to the intervention they had been leading themselves to for the past several years.

Clearly, from the American perspective, the containment of communism was essential. Also essential, however, was nonintervention in the region. Ultimately, during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, accomplishing both goals proved impossible. In seeking to prevent a communist takeover in the region, American officials under the two administrations chose continually to increase American aid to the French and their allies without going so far as to make the United States an official belligerent in the conflict. With this nonintervention policy, however, French troops with ever-decreasing morale were fighting on the ground with American funds, supplies, and equipment. This soon led to a disastrous defeat, and the peace accords at Geneva called for eventual, nationwide free elections. These free elections would almost certainly lead to a victory by Ho Chi Minh, in other words, a victory for the communist forces. The two chief goals of the United States in Indochina between 1952 and 1954—preventing communist control of the region while not intervening directly—had clearly failed. This failure of American policy in Indochina was proven not just at Geneva; it gradually developed throughout their first years in the region, during the early 1950s.

## **Chapter 1: From Truman to Eisenhower**

Even before United States involvement in the French-Indochinese conflict, Indochina was a region that suffered from almost constant oppression from outsiders. French hegemony in the area encompassed Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, also known as the Associated States, lasted almost seventy years, beginning in the 1880s and lasting into the mid-1950s.

In the 1950s, Vietnam was an agricultural nation with few large cities. The great majority of Vietnamese were Buddhists, while the other ten percent, particularly the Montagnard people of the highlands, practiced Catholicism. Confucianism was another influence on Vietnamese culture. Overall, with China directly to its North, Vietnam and Indochina as a whole were influenced immensely by their Mandarin neighbor. Furthermore, the patriarchal village structure was the basis of the society. Village councils ran the local affairs, with tradition and custom reigning supreme.<sup>6</sup> Vietnam also had a history of foreign occupations by China, Japan, France, and eventually America.

In light of the dominion of foreign powers in his country, Ho Chi Minh emerged as the great symbol of Vietnamese nationalism. Born in 1890, he grew up in the French Indochinese empire and was a champion of Vietnamese independence from a young age. He began his secondary school studies in the city of Hue in central Vietnam and also was employed as a translator for French officials. At the age of seventeen, Ho was caught in a violent peasant

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<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Tarling, ed., *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, Vol 4: From World War II to Present (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 62.

demonstration in the city, causing his expulsion from school and his name to be placed on a French black list. In response, he soon traveled to Saigon in 1911 and eventually made it all the way to Paris. Ho still resided in France during the Versailles Peace Conference that ended the First World War. The first part of the peace accords, concerning the League of Nations, explained how “The members of the League undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League.”<sup>7</sup> Motivated by this clause and its implications for Vietnamese independence, Ho wrote to President Woodrow Wilson, listing various French colonial abuses in Vietnam. Ho later proclaimed, “It was patriotism, not communism, that inspired me.”<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, Wilson ignored Ho’s letter, as did the other major powers. Then, in Paris, after the rebuff by Wilson, one can see the first indication of Ho’s communist ties, for in 1920, he joined the communist party. His ties to the Kremlin were further corroborated by his enrollment in the University of Toilers in the Soviet Union and his work in China as a Comintern agent. His training and education in the Sino-Soviet territories undoubtedly led to his founding of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1930 in Hong Kong,<sup>9</sup> but Ho’s main concern was not an alliance to China and the Soviet Union; his chief desire was independence for his country, and independence for Ho and other nationalists meant the absence of all foreign control, capitalist or communist. For example, while in Hong Kong in 1930, Ho outlined his desires for Vietnamese sovereignty. Among his many goals was the desire “to make Indochina completely independence,” as well as the ambition, “to

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<sup>7</sup> "The Versailles Treaty, June 28, 1919," *Yale Law School: The Avalon Project*, Available from <http://avalon.law.edu/imt/parti.asp>. Internet; accessed 1 December 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Karnow, "Ho Chi Minh," *Time Magazine*, Available from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,988162,00.html>. Internet; accessed 1 December 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan, 31-32.



bring back all freedom to the masses.”<sup>10</sup> Clearly, though writing to communists, Ho’s main goal was Vietnamese independence. One must also consider Ho’s background in Chinese culture. With Vietnam’s position so close to the Chinese border, he spoke both Mandarin and Cantonese. As another observer emphasized, “Ho was forced into dependence upon Peking and Moscow by American opposition or indifference.”<sup>11</sup> His cultural background was undoubtedly Asian, but he always tried to balance Vietnam’s ties to the USSR and China.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, the only option he saw to gain his country’s independence was through the communists.

He continued to work in Moscow in the 1930s, but by the start of World War II, Ho realized that his nation faced the dominance of yet another foreign power, Japan. With France controlled by the German-sympathizing Vichy government, Japan essentially had free reign in the region. In response, Ho returned to Vietnam in 1940, situating himself in the caves of Pac Bo, in the Cao Bang province, on the Chinese border. There, he began training indigenous guerrilla fighters, who would eventually become the Viet Minh, the enemy of the French in their Indochinese war. Viet Minh training was on a reciprocal basis: once they were trained, they would go into the population and train others, essentially forming an indigenous, nation-wide militia. Through this fighting force and his ties to China and the Soviet Union, Ho was able to become the chief spokesman of the Vietnamese people.<sup>13</sup> He possessed great eloquence due to

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<sup>10</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "Program for Communists of Indochina, 1930," *Modern History Sourcebook*, Available from <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1930hochiminh.html>. Internet; accessed 14 December 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Patti, 392.

<sup>12</sup> Jean Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam* (Chicago: Cowles Books, 1972), 120.

<sup>13</sup> Morgan, 32-33.

his extensive classical educational training, rallying his people to support “the resistance”<sup>14</sup> against French control. He also inspired determination and spirit within the people, telling them “In each of you exists heroism in the bud, you must develop it.”<sup>15</sup> Ho’s inspiration contrasted dramatically with the lack of dynamism present in the South Vietnamese leaders.

The military leader in the North, Vo Nguyen Giap, shared in Ho’s anti-French history. Giap’s family, comprised of anti-French militants, suffered greatly under colonial rule. Various members of his family were arrested and sometimes subsequently killed under French supervision. In 1937, he joined Indochina’s communist party and helped Ho train Viet Minh cadres in the 1940s. They not only formed fighting forces but also propaganda teams, first to oust the Japanese and then to expel the French after their return to power the region in 1945.<sup>16</sup> Together, Giap and Ho were the foundation of official Vietnamese leadership in the North but were also the ostensible leaders throughout the region, Ho symbolically and Giap militarily. They appealed to the nationalist aspirations of the population and strengthened indigenous military muscle, giving the Vietnamese hope that their nation could finally be rid of foreign domination.

The situation in the South was completely different. The vast majority of the population occupied the nationalist camp, but they were ruled in the South by an elite political structure.<sup>17</sup> Emperor Bao Dai, the ruler of South Vietnam, was ultimately the antithesis of Ho Chi Minh. United States officials frequently cited him as unwilling to put forth the necessary effort to

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<sup>14</sup> Gareth, Porter, ed., *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions* (New York: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, Inc., 1979), 484.

<sup>15</sup> Porter, 414.

<sup>16</sup> Morgan, 34-35.

<sup>17</sup> Tarling, 65.

inspire those under his control to action. As Minister Donald Heath, stationed in Saigon throughout much of the 1950s, articulated, “It is not likely that he will ever be moved to the real activity that the situation requires.”<sup>18</sup> Often, he was not even in the country but, instead, was traveling elsewhere, usually in France. He also did not make worthy appointments, placing individuals in power with similar characteristics to himself, and various political groups were frequently unrepresented.<sup>19</sup> Admittedly, most of the leaders of Vietnam were stationed in posts in the North, not in posts under French hegemony. Overall, there was a lack of trained officials to comprise a South Vietnamese government and military. Some even advocated for more French officials in the government to bolster its decision-making power.<sup>20</sup> There was also the problem of the Vietnamese National Army in the South. Firstly, Bao Dai was unwilling to devote enough energy to the project, essentially dooming it from the start. Officials seem to attribute this lack of determination to something intrinsically within Bao Dai’s character. One must consider, however, the explanation offered by United States Ambassador to Indochina Donald Heath:

In the beginning, the only solution was the Bao Dai solution and that was still true...The monarchy was the only institution which could hold this deeply divided country together but monarchial sentiment was diminishing rapidly because of Bao Dai’s poor performance and example.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “The Ambassador at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” January 9, 1953, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 341.

<sup>19</sup> “The Minister at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” January 30, January 31, February 1, 1952, Saigon; “The Secretary of State to the Legation at Saigon,” February 7, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 23-28.

<sup>20</sup> “The Minister at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” March 1, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 49.

<sup>21</sup> “The Ambassador at Saigon (Heath) to the Department of State,” October 31, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 274.

Also, French Union forces were responsible for training the army, not indigenous military leaders.<sup>22</sup> The contrasts between North and South were readily apparent. The North had an effective indigenous army controlled by indigenous leaders. They also had a governmental structure supported by the population at large. The South's army, on the other hand, was led by French personnel, representing colonialism to the local population, and the weak government, comprised of ineffective Vietnamese leaders as well as French subjects, some actually from the colonial period, resulted in almost complete apathy on the part of the Vietnamese population. Ultimately, the French "offer[ed] a shadow of reform but retain[ed] the substance of French control."<sup>23</sup>

The French, in their war against the nationalists under Ho Chi Minh, sought to preserve French prestige while simultaneously scaling back their involvement in the conflict on a gradual basis. Still recovering from World War II, the French financial situation was certainly not ideal, and the French also had an obligation to contribute funds to the rebuilding and rearmament of Europe. The French, therefore, needed troops in Europe as well as in Indochina, and placing them in both areas caused shortages on each front. Essentially, the French could not afford to contribute to both efforts, so, in turn, both efforts suffered and were significantly delayed. Additionally, while the North Vietnamese and many in the south sought independence, the French wanted to preserve the French Union and prevent Indochina from falling under Chinese control.<sup>24</sup> In order to achieve these goals: the preservation of the French Union, victory in

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<sup>22</sup> "Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison) to the Secretary of State," February 11, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 34.

<sup>23</sup> "Memorandum by Eric Stan of the Office of the United Nations Political and Security Affairs to the Working Group on Colonial Problems," August 26, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol III, United Nations Affairs, 1143.

<sup>24</sup> Sainteny, 84.

Indochina, and reconstruction in Europe, the French sought help internationally, particularly from the United Kingdom and the United States. Ultimately, American and French officials alike believed that “The solution can eventually be sought only on the international plane.”<sup>25</sup> French public opinion did not look as positively on the situation, for morale on the home front seemed to only get lower as the war endured. They termed the Indochina war as “la guerre occultée,”<sup>26</sup> translated as the “obscure” war for their country. Even in early 1952, Minister Heath described how a “withdrawal psychology [was] apparently gaining ground in Paris.”<sup>27</sup> The French were clearly in precarious circumstances. With a population weary of war and apathetic towards the Indochina situation, the government faced difficult policy decisions. There also existed elements in the government, such as those from the communist and socialist factions, who advocated for withdrawal as soon as possible.<sup>28</sup> All these quandaries of French involvement in Indochina would ultimately come to a head by mid 1954.

The United States, though the main French backer financially, did not possess the same goals as their allies in the region. In 1952, President Harry S. Truman was in a precarious situation. With the rise of the Soviet Union in the period immediately after World War II, the fear of communism grew exponentially throughout the Free World. This especially manifested itself through Soviet expansion in Eastern Europe, prompting the Truman Doctrine. In the

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<sup>25</sup> “The Ambassador in France (Bruce) to the Department of State,” January 3, 1952, Paris, *FRUS*, Vol XIII, Part I, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters* (New York: Oxford, 2001), 181.

<sup>27</sup> “The Minister at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” January 6, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 10.

<sup>28</sup> “The Ambassador in France (Bruce) to the Department of State,” January 3, 1952, Paris; “The Minister at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” January 4, 1952, January 6, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 4-10.

Truman Doctrine, the President dictated the special responsibility of the United States to preserve freedom and self-determination:

I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way. I believe that our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes.<sup>29</sup>

Approved by Congress, the Truman Doctrine essentially gave the administration significant funding and personnel to halt a Soviet takeover in Greece or Turkey, setting a precedent for future United States aid. The speech also laid out the doctrine of containment—fundamental to Cold War policy; American policymakers wanted to contain the spread of communism into other areas of the world. Communism was also seen as a monolith; American officials thought all communist policy emanated from one spot, the Kremlin. Essentially, they viewed all the communists as speaking with one voice. Unfortunately for Truman, communism’s spread to China in 1949 could not be prevented despite American support for the nationalists. In response, many present and future American officials blamed Truman and his administration for the loss of China to the communists. The defeat of Chiang Kai-shek and the ascension of Mao Tse-tung thereafter affected the majority of Truman’s foreign policy decisions. The Chinese also recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the government in the North, as the legitimate Vietnamese government in 1950, further challenging the relationship between the United States and the People’s Republic of China.<sup>30</sup> Truman did not want to suffer similar blame for the loss of other countries to the Communists, so his Cold War policy began to follow more of a hard line.

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<sup>29</sup> Harry S. Truman, “Truman Doctrine,” *The Avalon Project*, Available from [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp). Internet; accessed 30 October 2010.

<sup>30</sup> William J. Duiker, *United States Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 89.

Examples of this hard line include the United States involvement in the Korean conflict in 1950 as well as increased United States aid to the French in Indochina. As Archimedes L.A. Patti eloquently articulates, United States officials did not attempt to understand the culture of Southeast Asia; they merely remained committed to preventing communist expansion there:

Our unfortunate stereotype of a monolithic communist expansionary bloc and our emotional approach to the “loss” of China were paths leading into the quicksands. Our domino theory pushed us along those paths a little faster. And then our lack of knowledge in depth of the individuality of the states of Southeast Asia and the separateness of their societies disguised the dangers along the paths we had taken.<sup>31</sup>

In the years that followed, from 1952 to 1954, and certainly beyond, North and South Vietnam, France, and the United States would all be intimately connected in a conflict with little mutual understanding.

The death of French General Jean de Lattre marked the first major turning point of 1952 in United States policy toward the French effort in Indochina. Before his withdrawal from leadership in the region in 1951, French morale and public opinion remained at a stable midpoint, for the French public did not view the war pessimistically nor advocate for withdrawal. Despite the absence of a decisive victory, the French had the upper hand militarily, and de Lattre provided effective leadership of the forces in Indochina. With his departure in 1951 and imminent death on 11 January 1952, however, a withdrawal psychology began to seriously develop within the French mindset. At this point, they certainly did not want to abandon the struggle all together, for this was most clearly indicated by the passage of the military budget for Indochina in the National Assembly by votes of 510:109. As United States Ambassador to France David Bruce reported to the State Department on 3 January, however, France “looks toward an increased Anglo-American sharing of the burden in Indo-China in connection with

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<sup>31</sup> Patti, 419.

tripartite cooperation in Southeast Asia.”<sup>32</sup> Though tripartite involvement was emphasized, the French expected the main player to be the United States. With United States aid, they hoped to reach a successful conclusion of the conflict resulting in the preservation of the French Union.<sup>33</sup>

The United States, on the other hand, was reluctant to become involved in another war in Asia, for it already had its troops on the ground in Korea. They also had different goals in the region than the French. The main reason the United States promoted French interests in Indochina was for the purpose of halting communism’s spread. Most recognized that if the French withdrew, a communist victory would follow within a short time. The region offered, among a Free World enclave, other advantages to the United States:

The fall of Indo-China would be a psychological victory of the first magnitude for the Communist Bloc, would undermine the determination of the governments and people of Burma and Thailand to resist communist aggression, would hinder the “encirclement” of Communist China by noncommunist states, would provide the Communist Bloc with control of additional sources of food and strategic materials, and would deny to the West the strategic position and resources of Indochina.<sup>34</sup>

Clearly, one could see in the region two sets of advantages, one ideological and one logistical. Ideologically, the United States wanted to stop the spread of communism out of a fear of communist domination of the entire region. This fear was articulated in the domino theory, most commonly associated with Eisenhower but actually begun under the Truman administration. A later State Department paper described the likelihood of “bandwagon jumping” by the

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<sup>32</sup> “The Ambassador in France (Bruce) to the Department of State,” January 3, 1952, Paris, *FRUS*, Vol XIII, Part I, 7.

<sup>33</sup> “The Ambassador in France (Bruce) to the Department of State,” January 3, 1952, Paris, *FRUS*, Vol XIII, Part I, 4-8.

<sup>34</sup> “National Intelligence Estimate,” March 3, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 58.



neighboring territories should there be a communist victory in Vietnam.<sup>35</sup> Outside of intervening with ground troops, the United States was willing to take all necessary measures to aid the French. Furthermore, they wanted to ensure that this aid would be based on cooperation from other nations, agreeing to “carry out...minimum courses of military action under the auspices of the UN or in conjunction with France and the UK and other friendly governments.”<sup>36</sup> To American officials, the war’s ideological basis was also immensely important, as Congressman Mike Mansfield, a Democrat from Montana, articulated in 1952:

The Indo-China danger was two fold: 1. If the Communists should win, he said, all of Southeast Asia would be open to them. That would be an extremely critical loss for us because Europe needs those resources. 2. The campaign itself, he declared, represents an increasingly heavy drain on French resources and military manpower, which affects the European build-up.<sup>37</sup>

As the paraphrasing of Congressman Mansfield indicates, Europe also needed the resources of Southeast Asia.

At the same time, the war was draining the French of their resources in the rebuilding of Europe. Practically, the region offered various resources, especially rice, rubber, and oil. The United States was particularly worried about the availability of these resources for the newly democratic Japanese government. Surrounded by China and the Soviet Union, the United States wanted to ensure that Japan would remain a part of the Free World. Without the resources of Southeast Asia, Japan might be forced to turn itself over to the communists:

Communist conquest or acquisition of Southeast Asia would spread doubt and fear among other threatened noncommunist countries and create the feeling that communism was the “wave of the future” and that the United States and the Free

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<sup>35</sup> “Paper Prepared in the Department of State,” March 27, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 83.

<sup>36</sup> Pentagon Papers, 31.

<sup>37</sup> “War Cited to Save Full Far East Aid,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1952, 4.

World were unable to halt its advance. Countries...would be encouraged to adopt policies of accommodation to communist pressures and objectives.<sup>38</sup>

The region's resources also benefited the United States, France, and other European nations. The resources in Vietnam and the neighboring areas included rice, rubber, tin, tungsten, and oil, all immensely important, especially in wartime. The French had another goal in the region not shared by the United States; they wanted to preserve French prestige through the continuation of the French Union. The United States, on the other hand, feared that this French goal would present Indochina as a "conspicuous remnant of Western colonialism in the Far East."<sup>39</sup> They instead favored a policy of independence in the region as soon as possible, as long as the resulting nation would be in the Free World camp. Despite this goal, the United States was unwilling to intervene directly in the region.

From the outset of 1952, the United States' goals in the region were bound for failure. In terms of ground forces, they sought to "supplement rather than supplant French efforts in Indochina." These supplements included financial and mechanical aid to France and the Associated States, the nations of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. They also wanted to ensure the French would stay in Indochina while at the same time commit to their burdens in Europe. While ensuring French involvement, the United States wanted independence for the Associated States, seeking to improve their armies, their economies, and their governments. Finally, the United States desired the assurance that mainland China would not become directly involved in the

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<sup>38</sup> "Memorandum by Charles C. Stelle of the Policy Planning Staff," March 23, 1954, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part II, 1147.

<sup>39</sup> "Draft Memorandum Prepared in the Department of Defense," April 3, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 119.

Indochinese War.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, the supplements would never be sufficient. Firstly, low French morale prevented much of their military strategy from being implemented and thus delayed any type of decisive French victory in the region. Also, the French and the South Vietnamese government were often unwilling to train indigenous military and political personnel. This meant the entire government was virtually controlled by Bao Dai's appointments and the entire national army controlled by French Union officers. Chinese intervention was essentially ensured throughout 1952, although Chinese intervention would only follow from United States intervention. China would not step foot in the door unless provoked by United States entrance. Clearly, the United States could not halt communism's spread without becoming directly involved in the region, and even that was questionable in terms of its success, for the Vietnamese as a national entity saw nationalist and communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader. In general, they looked to the French and the West with apathy. Even in early 1952, the United States knew these facts. The State Department considered the use of American forces as an eventual course of action. They also understood the necessity of ensuring independence to the Vietnamese while at the same time presenting communism as the enemy of true independence.<sup>41</sup> As the conflict in the region continued, there would be slight upturns amongst many disastrous downturns. The United States, however, remained committed through the next several years to the dual policy of stemming the spread of communism while not implementing ground forces, a policy that would eventually result in disaster.

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<sup>40</sup> "Paper Prepared in the Department of State," March 27, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 87.

<sup>41</sup> "Paper Prepared in the Department of State," March 27, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 87.

Different schools of thought emerged within the Truman administration regarding the implementation of US policy in Indochina, including groups led by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the State Department. Omar Bradley led the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Secretary of State Dean Acheson led the State department. Surprisingly, Secretary of Defense Robert Lovett was also usually allied with the State Department on the Indochina issue. The Joint Chiefs of Staff favored the implementation of either a direct warning to Communist China or even direct intervention in the region. They believed the United States should take a risk with regard to China, even though they admitted that United States intervention could possibly result in subsequent Chinese intervention. They also advocated for United States primacy in the region, articulating that “our allies, notably Britain and France, were expected to support us if we became engaged in a war against Communist China, but that we alone should undertake to run the show.”<sup>42</sup> The State Department, on the other hand, favored a more indirect policy, believing that “United States objectives in Indo-China can be achieved only through the French.”<sup>43</sup> Clearly, there was a difference of opinion in the Truman Administration.<sup>44</sup> One must consider, however, that the Joint Chiefs of Staff, led by the leaders of the armed forces, generally take a hard-line towards United States involvement in world conflicts. The same was the case in Indo-China. The State

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<sup>42</sup> “Memorandum for the President of Discussion at the 113<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council Held on Wednesday, March 5, 1952,” *FRUS*, Vol. XII, East Asia and the Pacific, Part I, 70.

<sup>43</sup> “Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison) to the Secretary of State,” May 7, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 125.

<sup>44</sup> “Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (Lovett),” April 18, 1952, Washington; “Memorandum by the Secretary of the Army (Pace), the Secretary of the Navy (Kimball), and the Acting Secretary of the Air Force (Gilpatrick) to the Secretary of Defense (Lovett),” April 8, 1952, Washington; “Draft Memorandum Prepared in the Department of Defense,” April 3, 1952, Washington; “Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison) to the Secretary of State,” May 7, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 115-126.

Department and Defense Secretary, on the other hand, did not support intervention because they feared all-out war with China. As Lovett said at the National Security Council meeting, “it would presumably be very sensible to spend more money...in support of resistance there. In any case, this would be very much cheaper than an all-out war against Communist China.”<sup>45</sup> The dilemma here became quite clear: direct intervention would cause Chinese aggression, while no official intervention would lead to eventual French defeat, allied withdrawal, and a communist victory.

Meanwhile, in Metropolitan France, public and governmental opinion was declining rapidly. Leading French officials Jean Monnet and Pierre Uri, for example, described the detrimental effects of the Indo-China War on both the French economy and the position of France on the European continent. Monnet even suggested that the only option for the French was withdrawal from the region. They also stressed how taxes on the French people could not be increased due to low morale. Ultimately, they believed that the mutual goal of halting communism’s spread was a goal “of common interest to all the Western powers and that the burden accordingly must be more equitably distributed.”<sup>46</sup> The stress here was upon the United States and Great Britain contributing more to the conflict and eventually replacing French forces. Other French leaders were much more optimistic, most of the time overly optimistic. Jean Letourneau was the most apparent optimist, proclaiming, “There is no question of choice between the problem of Indo-China and that of Europe.”<sup>47</sup> He stressed the importance of French

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<sup>45</sup> “Memorandum for the President of Discussion at the 113<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council Held on Wednesday, March 5, 1952,” *FRUS*, Vol. East Asia and the Pacific, Part I, 71-72.

<sup>46</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation by Paul J. Sturm,” March 21, 1952, Paris, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 76.

<sup>47</sup> “Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison) to the Secretary of State,” March 25, 1952, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 77.

involvement in both areas on the condition that the United States would contribute more funding, which would, in turn, help to bolster the power of the Vietnamese national army and eventually make them self-sufficient in the fight against the Viet Minh. Clearly, the differences here rested on tensions between the first option of withdrawal and the other option of staying the course with increased aid. The school of thought represented here by Monnet and Uri was willing to negotiate should conditions prove favorable. Supporters of Letourneau's view, however, did not believe it was likely that the North would want to negotiate presently.<sup>48</sup> Clearly, in both the United States and France, there were competing policy decisions at work that would directly affect the actions of both nations in Southeast Asia.

Another important development of 1952 was the Mutual Security Program, enacted in March. Under the program, the United States proclaimed its goals for collective security as well as self-determination, as long as it was in the national interests of the United States. The program also called for assistance to allied nations to bolster Free World defenses.<sup>49</sup> The program clearly aligned with processes of increased aid to the French in Indochina as well as anticommunist policy, and gave "Broad discretion...to the President in use of these funds."<sup>50</sup> The funding required for the program amounted to almost eight billion dollars, some of which would go to French-Vietnamese forces in Indochina. In his message to the American people, President Truman proclaimed the necessity of the program in light of the world situation:

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<sup>48</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation by Paul J. Sturm," March 21, 1952, Paris; "Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison) to the Secretary of State," March 25, 1952, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 75-79.

<sup>49</sup> "Key Data Book Prepared by the Reporting Unit for the National Security Council for the President," undated, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. II, National Security Affairs, Part I, 174.

<sup>50</sup> "Current Economic Developments," August 31, 1954, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. I, General: Economic and Political Matters, Part I, 745.

History has thrust a fearful responsibility upon the United States. Today, the survival of freedom and civilization on this earth may depend on the initiative and decisions taken in our own nation's capital. The free peoples look to us for leadership. Leadership implies more than a recognition of the problem.<sup>51</sup>

This theme of the United States' special responsibility to the Free World would appear again and again throughout the 1950s. This responsibility would eventually plunge the United States closer and closer into taking the full responsibility for the fight against the communists in Vietnam as French efforts faltered throughout 1952 and after.

The developments occurring during the first half of 1952 in Vietnam obviously affected French and United States interests alike. From 1952 to 1954, Donald Heath, the Foreign Minister at Saigon, presented an increasingly overly optimistic opinion of the situation in Southeast Asia and thus managed to slightly skew United States policy in the region. In January of 1952, for instance, he admitted the threat posed by the increases in Viet Minh force concentrations in the Tonkin Delta and on the Black River, saying that "Viet Minh regular forces have not declined in strength or spirit and that they can infiltrate the Delta while conducting massive frontal attacks."<sup>52</sup> He also described the ineffective nature of the Vietnamese national army, especially as opposed to the Viet Minh's current strength. Finally, Heath asserted his doubts on a French offensive in the future, when he stated how "20 fighters and as many bombers used systematically by Viet Minh or Chi could jeopardize even holding operation."<sup>53</sup> Despite these underlying disadvantages, he advised increases in United States aid, emphasizing that

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<sup>51</sup> "Text of the President's Message to Congress Asking \$7,900,000,000 for Mutual Security," *New York Times*, March 7, 1952, 6.

<sup>52</sup> "The Minister at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department," January 8, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 11.

<sup>53</sup> "The Minister at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department," January 8, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 11.

“Internatizing[sic] probably boils down to stipulating use [of] US force if burden becomes too great for France or if Chi[sic] invades.”<sup>54</sup> Despite his pushes for increased American involvement, he remained a constant critic of Bao Dai, frequently painting him as an overconfident leader with little concern outside his own personal interests. Secretary of State Dean Acheson expressed similar views negative on Bao Dai, expressing that “Until he has demonstrated [the] will [to] buckle down to [the] job and [to] put existing auth[sic] to good use in dealing with immed[sic] and pressing problems, it is premature [to] encourage [the] enlargement of his role.”<sup>55</sup> Both individuals agreed with Letourneau, emphasizing increased American monetary support while the French shouldered the burden of the actual fight.<sup>56</sup>

Militarily, the withdrawal of French forces from Hoa Binh, located in Northwestern Vietnam, had major repercussions for France and the United States. On 25 January 1952, General Salan, the three star general who replaced General de Lattre, expressed confidence in French-Vietnamese ability to hold the post.<sup>57</sup> Heath also expressed how “Salan said he entirely confident that Fr Union would throw back Viet Minh.”<sup>58</sup> Strategically, Hoa Binh was the only route connecting Viet Minh forces in the north with those south of the Tonkin Delta. Due to Viet

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<sup>54</sup> “The Minister at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” January 8, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 13.

<sup>55</sup> “The Secretary of State to the Legation at Saigon,” February 7, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 28.

<sup>56</sup> “The Minister at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” January 6, 1952, Saigon; “The Secretary of State to the Legation at Saigon,” February 7, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 11-13, 28.

<sup>57</sup> “The Minister at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” January 25, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 21.

<sup>58</sup> “The Minister at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” January 25, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 21.



Minh pressure, the French had to withdraw on 22 February, losing almost 1,600 men, who were wounded, captured, or killed in action. Though Viet Minh casualties were upwards of 20,000, French withdrawal remained significant, especially in terms of the public's view. Withdrawal was truly the only option because "The Viet Minh had succeeded in developing a parallel route bypassing Hoa Binh...and the number of forces pinned down at Hoa Binh jeopardized loyalist control of other more important parts of the Red River Delta into which the Viet Minh had already begun to infiltrate."<sup>59</sup> The North Vietnamese also successfully used propaganda techniques to present the withdrawal as a Viet Minh victory and a French defeat despite the casualty figures. For example, the Viet Minh lost 22,000 (killed, wounded, or captured), while the French only lost 1588 in comparison. The implications in France were similar, as certain newspapers sympathizing with the withdrawal school of thought published negative articles on the operation.<sup>60</sup> The military implications of the withdrawal were not nearly as disastrous as the press presented them. The defensive perimeter was reduced, but the French-Vietnamese combined forces were actually now in a better offensive position according to American officials both inside the region, like Heath, and outside the region, like Acheson.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, Edmund Gullion, the Chargé d'Affaires, believed that the withdrawal "placed [French] forces in a

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<sup>59</sup> "Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison) to the Deputy Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs (Matthews)," February 28, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 42.

<sup>60</sup> "Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison) to the Deputy Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs (Matthews)," February 28, 1952, Washington; "The Minister at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department," February 29, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 42-43, 47.

<sup>61</sup> "The Chargé at Saigon (Gullion) to the Department of State," June 3, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 172.

position to strike within the delta or meet an attack against the perimeter elsewhere.”<sup>62</sup> The withdrawal of Hoa Binh, though not amounting to a decisive loss, reinforced the view that the war in Indochina remained a stalemate, particularly because of “French-Vietnamese insufficiency of power to move permanently outside the Tongking delta and clean up the main bases of Vietminh strength.”<sup>63</sup> Both United States and French officials knew that the Hoa Binh withdrawal was not as disastrous as the press published, but they were essentially powerless to alter well-established public opinion.

Further escalations in financial aid to Indochina marked American policy in the second half of 1952. In order to keep the French and South Vietnamese in the battle, a view particularly supported by Secretary of State Acheson, the United States had to increase its monetary aid to the region and even to Metropolitan France.<sup>64</sup> As the Pentagon Papers reveal, “We will recommend to the Congress appropriate military, economic and financial aid to France and the Associated States.”<sup>65</sup> In June, representatives from the United States and France met in Washington, D.C., to discuss their general policies toward Indochina. The French believed it would be impossible to negotiate with the Viet Minh because the Viet Minh would probably bring in the Chinese, especially considering Ho Chi Minh’s connections to the communists. They also emphasized their inability to maintain their efforts in both Indochina and Europe without sacrificing in one area. United States aid could help immensely in the maintenance of their

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<sup>62</sup> “The Chargé at Saigon (Gullion) to the Department of State,” June 3, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 172.

<sup>63</sup> Tillman Durdin, “War in Indo-China Seen Deadlocked,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1952, 3.

<sup>64</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Nitze),” May 12, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 143.

<sup>65</sup> *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 5, Part 4, Boston, 1971, 30.

efforts in both regions. American officials spoke next, mostly avoiding the topics of aid while proclaiming that the French must accelerate the process of independence to the Associated States, emphasizing how “we were determined to bring forward the three states to the position where they could stand alone.”<sup>66</sup> While stressing that the United States, France, and Britain were united against communism in all their efforts, they simultaneously differentiated between zones of interest; the United States was in Korea, the British were in Malaya, and the French were in Indochina. Each had its own region of influence in the common fight against communism.<sup>67</sup> United States officials knew, however, that the French could not maintain their fight without outside assistance, for it was accepted that. “The French have continued to make the great sacrifices in men and treasure which they have made only because they were given assurances of American support—political, economic, and military.”<sup>68</sup>

Throughout the summer of 1952, both sides of the fight regrouped in preparation for the end of the rainy season. By October, the belligerents resumed the battle, and the French effort crumbled more and more. Viet Minh offensives against the Franco-Vietnamese forces were abundant, particularly at Nghia Lo and Lai Chau as well as throughout the Thai country. Though the French had more troops in total than the Viet Minh, they were organized less efficiently and were thus easily overwhelmed by Viet Minh forces. By the end of October, the Viet Minh had gained control throughout Tonkin with the exception of the Hanoi-Haiphong perimeter, which

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<sup>66</sup> “United States Summary Minutes of a Meeting Between Representatives of the United States and France at the Department of State, June 16, 1952, 10 AM,” *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 192.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-195.

<sup>68</sup> “Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison) to the Secretary of State,” May 7, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 127.

was still in French control.<sup>69</sup> Viet Minh victories continued throughout the year, with frequent French withdrawals. By the end of the year, many predicted that the Viet Minh were planning a large-scale offensive in Laos and in the Thai country in the near future.<sup>70</sup> These French setbacks created greater urgency for United States aid. Requests for both more monetary funds and mechanical aid, such as United States Air Force mechanics, were abundant.<sup>71</sup>

Overall, the Truman administration continually escalated their aid to the French throughout 1952 in the promotion of containment policy. To contain communism from reaching Southeast Asia, both schools of thought, one under the Joint Chiefs, the other under the State Department, believed that the United States had to aid the French in their Indochina war. If not, the French would certainly be defeated, withdrawing from the region and leaving it open to Chinese intervention. Though the schools of thought differed in their views on the approaches and methods this aid should take, continued aid was never questioned. It was deemed a necessity for the perpetuation of Free World interests in general and American interests in particular. Despite recurrent French setbacks, Truman and his advisors granted constant aid in even-increasing numbers. The swelling aid numbers were bringing the United States closer and closer to the fight.

This is the situation incumbent Dwight Eisenhower faced when he was elected on November 2, 1952. He did not enter office until January of the next year, but the importance of

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<sup>69</sup> “Memorandum by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Johnson) to the Undersecretary of State (Bruce),” October 24, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 270-271.

<sup>70</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation by the Secretary of State,” December 22, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 323.

<sup>71</sup> “The Ambassador at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” December 5, 1952, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 308.

Vietnam would only grow. The courses of action set in place by the Truman administration would only be increased under Eisenhower, for “Eisenhower’s administration felt it had little choice left except to follow the course laid down by Truman.”<sup>72</sup> As United States involvement in Korea scaled down throughout his first term in office, United States involvement in Indochina would increase and essentially become the more important foreign policy issue of the 1950s. As one American observer proclaimed, “If they pull out, the question is put to us,”<sup>73</sup> meaning that French defeat in the region would leave the problem of retaining Southeast Asia to the United States.

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<sup>72</sup> Brown, 41.

<sup>73</sup> Theodore H. White, “The *New York Times Magazine*: France Holds On to the Indo-China Tiger,” *New York Times*, June 8, 1952, SM9.

## Chapter 2: 1953, A Monumental Year

With the ascension of Dwight Eisenhower to the presidency, a coalition of cooperationists and hard-line cold warriors joined the ranks of Eisenhower's advisors. The fear of communist domination of the world still remained a problem, but unlike the witch-hunting schemes of Senator Joseph McCarthy during Truman's administration, Eisenhower emphasized that, "The primary responsibility for keeping out the disloyal and the dangerous rests squarely on the executive branch."<sup>74</sup> Eisenhower and his advisors did not want to suffer the same fate as the Truman administration with China's entrance into the Communist bloc.

Policy nominally shifted toward a "New Look", but the policy in Indochina remained quite the same, following the trend of increasing aid to the French. Eisenhower was elected on several premises, promising this "New Look" for American policy, as well as "More Bang for the Buck." The New Look rested on three principles articulated by Eisenhower in a campaign speech:

*First*, America must be militarily and productively strong... *Second*, we must build greater cooperative unity with every nation in the Free World that is prepared to stand with us, work with us, build with us for the security of all of us... *Third*, our Government, once and for all, with cold finality, must tell the Kremlin that we shall never recognize the slightest permanence in Russia's position in Eastern Europe and Asia.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Jeff Broadwater, *Eisenhower & the Anti-Communist Crusade* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 54-59.

<sup>75</sup> Robert L. Branyan and Lawrence H. Larsen, ed, *The Eisenhower Administration 1953-1961: A Documentary History* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1971), 35-36.

Implicit in this New Look policy was “More Bang for the Buck.” In making America militarily strong, military spending would be reduced in an effort to get more productivity for a lower price, replacing conventional forces with nuclear capabilities. Further, Eisenhower and his advisors, most notably Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, sought to expand NATO alliances with new nations throughout the world to bolster the strength of the Free World against the Sino-Soviet sphere. Finally, the Eisenhower administration did not want to suffer the same fate as the Truman Administration, ever-blamed for the loss of China to the communists. Like his predecessor, he emphasized self-determination throughout the world, proclaiming, “we shall never use our strength to try to impress upon another people our own cherished political and economic institutions.”<sup>76</sup> In reality, the United States supported any regime that was not communist in nature. Indochina clearly took a prominent place in this discussion. With China neighboring directly to the North, communist infiltration was quite plausible. Indochina thus became the major foreign policy issue of Eisenhower’s administration.

On 18 November 1952, President-elect Eisenhower met with Truman and his cabinet members to discuss the issues Eisenhower would face once inaugurated in January. Secretary of State Dean Acheson conveyed the various implications the Indochina conflict had on United States policy:

We are helping France to the extent of carrying between one-third and one-half of the financial burden of the Indochinese War. We have had military discussions between the five powers...which have not been effective in devising agreed military solutions against the contingency of overt Chinese intervention in Indochina.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> “Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison) to the Secretary of State,” February 11, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 30.

<sup>77</sup> “Editorial Note,” November 18, 1952, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 298-299.

This clearly implied the stalemate, both militarily and diplomatically. Militarily, the French suffered repeated attacks by the Viet Minh and were unable to hold their defensive positions. Diplomatically, neither side could agree to a solution; the United States was also assuming the main burden of financing the war. As Donald Heath said at the start of the New Year, “Thanks to United States arms aid, the Franco-Vietnamese forces now have an edge over the Viet-Minh.”<sup>78</sup> One can see here once again Heath’s undue optimism. Though the French had agreed to increase the Vietnamese National Army by about 40,000 men by October, the Viet Minh retained the edge militarily. For instance, the Thai Country offensive of the previous year had forced the Franco-Vietnamese into defensive positions. The Viet Minh retained the psychological advantage, as well, giving the population something to fight for and using effective propaganda, while Bao Dai remained completely ineffective in the South. The French were also weak in their devotion to the war. Though individuals such as Letourneau did not favor negotiation, others, such as Pierre Mendes-France, wanted to get out of the war as soon as possible.<sup>79</sup> For example, Mendes-France, a member of both the French National Assembly and the left-wing, “look to negotiations with Ho Chi Minh as means permitting French withdrawal.”<sup>80</sup> Eisenhower faced quite the quandary.

The French Union forces had to confront the growing strength of the Viet Minh forces. The Viet Minh had 400,000 men, while the French-Vietnamese possessed 460,000 men. While

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<sup>78</sup> “The Ambassador at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” January 9, 1953, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 342.

<sup>79</sup> “The Ambassador at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” January 19, 1953, Saigon; “The Ambassador at Saigon (Heath) to the State Department,” January 25, 1953, Saigon *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 353, 356.

<sup>80</sup> “The Ambassador in France (Dillon) to the Department of State,” May 23, 1953, Paris, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 579.



the Viet Minh were a largely homogeneous entity of Vietnamese and possibly some Chinese, the French Union forces contained members of the Associated States, Metropolitan France, and various other regions of the French Union. These other individuals included Senegalese, North Africans, and French Legionnaires, among others. Essentially a conglomerate of different individuals with no common goal, the French-Vietnamese force was no match for the Viet Minh. Territorially, the Franco-Vietnamese controlled Hanoi, Saigon, and a few other small areas. Throughout Tonkin, Central Annam, and certain parts of Cochin Chinese, they had nominal control but suffered Viet Minh guerrilla operations very often. The Viet Minh, on the other hand, gained territory in the last several years of the war and were in positions to win further victories.<sup>81</sup> In light of these military deficiencies, the French pushed for more United States aid to continue the fight in Indochina.

Two schools of thought developed within the Eisenhower administration on Indochina. One believed there would be no development in the region until they achieved a military victory against the communists. The spokesmen for this approach were the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The other school of thought believed it was effectively impossible to accomplish a military victory until the governments in the area were improved and granted more autonomy. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and other officials of the State Department supported this approach.<sup>82</sup> Neither school of thought denied the necessity of more United States aid nor wanted United States ground troops involved in the conflict. The Eisenhower administration furthered the development of a policy that assumed American aid would cover France's Indochina War. There was also

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<sup>81</sup> "Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison) to the Secretary of State," January 28, 1953, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 366-367.

<sup>82</sup> "Memorandum of Discussion at the 138<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Wednesday, March 25, 1953," *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 428.

little Congressional opposition to this trend For example, Representative Mansfield conveyed early in Eisenhower's first term the necessity of Free World control of Indochina:

Indochina is at this time the most important area on the Continent of Asia. Its loss would start a chain-reaction extending to the Persian Gulf and would give to the Soviets and their satellites the rubber, the tin and the oil which are in such short supply within the Soviet Union and which mean so much in the conduct of war.<sup>83</sup>

Under the Truman administration, increasing aid was more questioned by Congress and other government officials. Now, the trend toward increasing American involvement was much more accepted. Both administrations up to this point, though, agreed that United States ground troop involvement was still not a possibility for victory in Indochina.

The Viet Minh invasion of Laos in April 1953 affected both the French effort in Indochina as well as United States policy in the region. Militarily, the French responded by requesting loans of United States aircraft to transport ammunition, supplies, and equipment, all of which would aid them in the upcoming rainy season. At the 141<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, all who were present questioned the true effectiveness this aid would actually provide. They wanted to pressure the French "that unless they formed larger units of native forces and took the offensive against the enemy, further U.S. aid would not be forthcoming."<sup>84</sup> They also advocated for a new French general to help turn the tides in the war. Surprisingly, the aid request was eventually granted despite these misgivings. Diplomatically, the United States wanted the French to approach the United Nations for a resolution condemning the Viet Minh aggression. The resolution, if vetoed by the Soviet Union or if the Soviet Union chose to abstain, would amount to some conflict within the communist camp. A veto would cause the invasion

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<sup>83</sup> William S. White, "President Weighs More Aid to French in Indo-China War," *New York Times*, February 21, 1953, 1.

<sup>84</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation at the 141<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Tuesday, April 28, 1953," *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 518.

itself to rest on Russia, while an abstention would cause China to question the Soviet Union's commitment to victory in Southeast Asia. The French, however, as Dulles said at another Presidential meeting the day before, "indicated a reluctance to take this step, a reluctance born out of fear that this might precipitate a colonial debate."<sup>85</sup> Despite American pressures, the French never went before the United Nations. They instead remained on the defensive in Laos, still underestimating the power of the Viet Minh. The French did agree, however, to appoint a new commander.<sup>86</sup>

General Henri Navarre replaced General Salan in May 1953 as the French commander in Indochina. The rainy season from May to October in Vietnam halted all military actions on both sides. The interim was the time for planning. Navarre had developed an extensive plan for an offensive operation against the Viet Minh, something that had been pushed by United States officials for several years. He would start with local offensives in the summer. Beginning in September, the offensive would expand to the North to prevent or at least delay an enemy attack. The bulk of the offensive would be fought during the winter of 1953 to 1954 against the flanks and rears of enemy forces. Battalions would be grouped into regiments and regiments into divisions, producing larger units. Cooperation with the navy and air force would be essential in the operation. The Vietnamese Army and the armies of Laos and Cambodia would also play a more prominent role in the operation. To conduct the operation, Navarre needed two more

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<sup>85</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation by the Counselor (MacArthur), Washington, April 27, 1953, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 513.

<sup>86</sup> "The Chargé at Saigon (McClintock) to the Department of State," April 24, 1953, Saigon; "Memorandum of Conversation by the Counselor (MacArthur)," Washington, April 27, 1953; "Memorandum of Conversation at the 141<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Tuesday, April 28, 1953," *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 491, 513, 517.

divisions from the French.<sup>87</sup> This Navarre Plan would influence both French and American policy well into 1954.

While the Navarre Plan was in its first stages of development, American officials discussed the dire situation in Vietnam. Through mid-1954, a National Intelligence Estimate predicted an increase in Viet Minh power and a subsequent decrease in French hegemony in the area: “The lack of French Union military successes, continuing Indochinese distrust of ultimate French political intentions, and popular apathy will probably continue to prevent significant increase in Indochinese will and ability to resist the Viet Minh.”<sup>88</sup> The Viet Minh would increase their military strength by continuing attacks in the Tonkin delta as well as areas outside the delta. French domestic pressures were probably another influence on the decline of French power. They could reduce the military commitment the French were willing to undertake in the region. Additionally, the approaching armistice in Korea, though often compared to Indochina by French officials, would not affect the communist goal of complete control in Indochina and the rest of Southeast Asia. It was admitted, however, that “The Chinese communists will not invade Indochina during this period.”<sup>89</sup> Despite these predictions, the United States was still willing to contribute \$385 million for Indochina alone.<sup>90</sup> They also contributed funds to Metropolitan France to help in their European initiatives. In light of French public opinion and even some political opinion in favor of withdrawal from Indochina, the United States should have assumed

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<sup>87</sup> “The Ambassador in France (Dillon) to the President,” May 15, 1953, Paris; “Lieutenant General John W. O’Daniel to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Radford),” June 30, 1953, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 567, 624- 625.

<sup>88</sup> “National Intelligence Estimate,” June 4, 1953, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 593.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

American involvement would eventually have to increase in the form of ground forces. The military and political situation in favor of the Viet Minh should also have influenced their views, for the estimate proclaimed how “the overall French Union position in Indochina therefore will probably deteriorate during the period of this estimate.”<sup>91</sup> They remained, however, committed to keeping the French in the war as long as they could, and in turn, contributing as much United States aid as possible to accomplish this.

American officials had developed a thorough involvement plan for Indochina by July of 1953. Whether this program could be implemented would only be determined by the future course of events. State Department officials and French diplomats first considered the French position on the conflict. Overall, the French wanted to reduce the scale of their involvement in the region. Different factions on both sides disagreed over the speed of the reduction, but all were in agreement that eventual reduction was necessary for France to retain her rebuilding capacities in Europe. To accomplish this reduction, as one could guess by now, they expected more United States aid. Furthermore, public opinion in France often compared the Korean armistice talks to the possibility of a similar solution in the near future for Indochina. French official and former Prime Minister Georges Bidault explained that “The French government is confronted with the war weariness resulting from seven years of efforts and sacrifices.”<sup>92</sup> Bidault also articulated how “Peace, too, is contagious.”<sup>93</sup> As the United States ended their Korean conflict, the French wanted to end their Indochina War. United States government officials,

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<sup>91</sup> “National Intelligence Estimate,” June 4, 1953, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 601.

<sup>92</sup> “United States Minutes of the First United States-French Meeting at the Residence of the Secretary of State, Washington, July 12, 1953, 3 p.m.,” *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 656.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

however, were confident that negotiations in Indochina would cause a quick communist takeover. They knew that Ho Chi Minh, the nationalist symbol for the majority of Vietnamese, “would dominate elections or any coalition government.”<sup>94</sup> They also recognized many differences between Korea and Indochina. Firstly, the populations of North and South Vietnam were about equal, around eleven million. The populations of North and South Korea were not nearly as proportional, for there were only six million individuals in the North while twenty-three million inhabited the South. Militarily, there was a continuous front in Korea, something virtually nonexistent in Indochina, where guerrilla operations became the norm.<sup>95</sup> Even Eisenhower, though, could not ignore the fact “that there could be no real peace in Korea that ignores the broader problems in Asia.”<sup>96</sup> By opting for negotiations in Indochina, however, the French were essentially challenging the goal of the United States to halt the spread of communism. This difference in policy objectives would plague the eventual negotiations at Geneva in 1954. Withdrawal occupied the number one spot in the French mindset, so a positive result in the region was unlikely.

Opinion in France and the United States continued to differ, especially later into 1953. The differences at this point were clearly articulated by Harold S. Callender, a writer for the *New York Times*:

The interest of Washington officials is to save Southeastern Asia from Communist domination and to this end to get a military plan that promises to

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<sup>94</sup> “Position Paper Prepared in the State Department,” July 9, 1953, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 645.

<sup>95</sup> “Position Paper Prepared in the State Department,” July 9, 1953, Washington; “United States Minutes of the First United States-French Meeting at the Residence of the Secretary of State, Washington, July 12, 1953, 3 p.m.,” *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 644-645, 656.

<sup>96</sup> “Transcript of the Eisenhower Press Conference on Domestic and Foreign Affairs,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1953, 3.

defeat the Communist-led forces in Indo-China. Such a plan would entail additional United States aid... The predominant French aim, however, is to get rid of the responsibility and the human and financial cost of the war in Indo-China, to "bring the boys home."<sup>97</sup>

Clearly, the differences here are obvious. The French wanted to end the war quickly on the most favorable terms they could. The United States, on the other hand, wanted to stay the course and keep aiding French-Vietnamese forces to ensure Free World control of the region.

Despite the unlikelihood of victory, State Department officials had several recommendations. The American government pushed the French to enhance the national armies programs in the Associated States to bolster the military situation. To motivate the population to fight valiantly, they also pressured the French to give Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam dominion status, increasing their autonomy. They further recommended that French troop strength should be increased temporarily in order to take the initiative offensively. To help the French accomplish these suggestions, the United States would continue to increase their aid proportional to Chinese aid to the Viet Minh. The Korean armistice would also help the French because it would release valuable material that could soon be put to French usage. Finally, the United States was prepared to help train the native armies.<sup>98</sup> This marked a major shift in United States policy in the region. Though informal suggestions had been made frequently on the possibility of Americans training the armies of the Associated States, this was the first time the suggestions were made official. Rather than just financial and technical aid, a role for American training forces was proposed. Ground troops still remained out of the question, but American officials

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<sup>97</sup> Harold S. Callender, "Paris Debate on Indo-China Shows Differences with U.S.," *New York Times*, July 24, 1953, 3.

<sup>98</sup> "Position Paper Prepared in the State Department," July 9, 1953, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 646.

had pushed their definition of aid very far. Ultimately, the United States offered anything outside of ground troops to stunt the communist threat.

The French requested an extra \$400 million in United States aid for Indochina. Believing that Free World ideology in Indochina was essential to containment, the United States agreed to send an additional \$385 million to the French. This sum was in addition to \$460 million in aid promised in April of 1953 and \$85 million approved by Congress for arms to the French NATO forces in Europe. Other types of aid were tacked on as well, such as end-item aid, economic aid, and basic development assistance. The total aid for Fiscal Year 1953/1954 was \$1.07 billion.<sup>99</sup> They believed this aid necessary “in support of the additional military effort, with a view to helping to bring the hostilities in Indochina to a satisfactory conclusion within the foreseeable future.”<sup>100</sup> In the public eye, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was the main supporter of this aid. In a speech to the American Legion in September 1953 on the newly increased independence program for the Associated States, he highlighted the importance of the region for United States interests:

The outcome [in Indochina] affects our own vital interests in the western Pacific, and we are already contributing largely in material and money to the continued efforts of the French and of Viet-Nam, Laos, and Cambodia... This independence program is along lines which the United States has encouraged and justifies increased United States aid, provided that will assure an effort there that is vigorous and decisive.<sup>101</sup>

Dulles here used the new independence program as a way to rationalize increased United States involvement in the region. In reality, Bao Dai remained South Vietnam’s leader, an individual

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<sup>99</sup> “Step 3,” September 29, 1953, Paris, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 814-815.

<sup>100</sup> “Step 3,” September 29, 1953, Paris, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 815.

<sup>101</sup> “Editorial Note,” September 2, 1953, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 747.



often associated with sympathizing with the French. He also remained ineffective in inspiring the population to action.

The lack of improvements in the region and the ongoing rainy season encouraged American officials to formulate several courses of action to respond to different “what if” scenarios. The two scenarios considered the reactions and consequences of 1) The defeat of the French Union and Viet Minh control of the entire region, or 2) The intervention of United States forces (ground, naval, and air) before such a victory could occur. If the Viet Minh forced France to withdraw, the risk of communism spreading to all of Southeast Asia would be extremely perilous for Free World interests. A Viet Minh victory would be “a defeat for the west and a major blow to U.S. power and prestige in Asia.”<sup>102</sup> On the other hand, if American forces intervened, the noncommunist Indochinese would support them if “they believed that such U.S. action would soon bring the Indochina war to a close and would ensure the Independence of the Associated States.”<sup>103</sup> United States action, however, would have to be allied action; America could not militarily act alone in the region.<sup>104</sup> Another escalation was clearly visible here. Not only had training teams been offered, but also now, the United States was beginning to consider replacing French troops with American troops under united action. Though this was considered, remaining French involvement was still the main goal. The United States did not seek an individual war with the Viet Minh. Instead, if necessary, they now were willing to become involved in a collective conflict that pitted communism against capitalism, the Free World

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<sup>102</sup> “Special Estimate,” September 16, 1953, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 866.

<sup>103</sup> “Special Estimate,” September 16, 1953, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 867-868.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 865-868.

against the Communist Bloc. They unfortunately had not yet considered the practical implications their allies would take into account.

The Dien Bien Phu operation also began in November. Dien Bien Phu was the offensive Navarre was looking for in the region, or so he thought. A basin surrounded by mountains, Dien Bien Phu was not geographically ideal, but it was certainly a strategic region in Vietnam. It would become a decisive battle in the war, actually ending the conflict and prompting the Geneva Conference, an utter failure in United States foreign policy.

### **Chapter 3: Dien Bien Phu and the Tragedy at Geneva**

On 20 November 1953, three French battalions parachuted into Dien Bien Phu, only to be followed by more throughout the remainder of the month. There, they rebuilt the air facilities, particularly the all-important air strip, so as to make it usable to French Union and indigenous Vietnamese forces. The purpose of the operation at Dien Bien Phu was the establishment of a French-Vietnamese base in the Thai Country. The base would help in the defense of Laos and would also aid the local guerrilla forces against the Viet Minh. Additionally, the base could send out mobile attack parties in all directions. Franco-Vietnamese forces from other surrounding areas also descended on Dien Bien Phu to add to its strength. Since mountains and hills surrounded Dien Bien Phu, all the men and supplies had to be brought in using air power, rendering control of the skies essential to the operation. This need prompted a further request for United States supplies, particularly planes and the mechanics that helped them run efficiently.<sup>105</sup> Both the United States and France hoped the eventual offensive at Dien Bien Phu would turn the tides in the war toward a French military victory.

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<sup>105</sup> “Ambassador in Saigon (Heath) to the Department of State,” November 21, 1953, Saigon; “Consul at Hanoi (Sturm) to the Department of State,” November 23, 1953, Hanoi; “Memorandum by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Bonbright),” November 23, 1953, Washington; “The Secretary of State to the Embassy in the Philippines,” November 27, 1953, Washington; “The Acting Special Assistant to the Secretary of State for Mutual Security Affairs (Nolting) to the Deputy Director for Program and Planning, Foreign Operations Administration (Ohly),” November 27, 1953, Washington; “Memorandum by the Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs (Bonsal) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Robertson),” November 27, 1953, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 881-887.

Despite the moderate successes at transferring Franco-Vietnamese forces into Dien Bien Phu, the French had to confront yet another Viet Minh invasion of Laos, which, unlike the previous invasion, targeted central Laos. By the end of December, the Viet Minh had cut communication and travel lines between Northern and Southern Laos.<sup>106</sup> The invasion caused the evacuation of French Union forces in the area and also bred fears “that the developing mil[itary] sit[uation] may be so played up in France as to strengthen hand of those political elements receptive to Ho’s proposal to negotiate settlement between France and Viet Minh.”<sup>107</sup> While Dien Bien Phu currently seemed rather stable, Laos was floundering.

On 8 January 1954, the National Security Council had its 179<sup>th</sup> Meeting and discussed Indochina. Vice President Nixon stressed the differences between the French and native Vietnamese goals. The French fought there to keep Indo-China in the French Union and thus preserve French prestige, while the Vietnamese fought for independence from the French Union. President Eisenhower emerged as the individual weariest of introducing United States ground troops into the region, asking, “When we start putting our men into Indo-China, how long will it be before we get into the war? And can we afford to get into such a war.”<sup>108</sup> Admiral Radford said that the United States was already in the war now and would be only escalating its involvement with future aid packages and personnel. By the end of the meeting, they had agreed

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<sup>106</sup> “The Ambassador at Saigon (Heath) to the Department of State,” December 9, 1953, Saigon; “The Consul at Hanoi (Sturm) to the Department of State,” December 9, 1953, Hanoi; “Memorandum by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Drumright) to the Secretary of State,” December 26, 1953, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 915-916, 931-932.

<sup>107</sup> “The Consul at Hanoi (Sturm) to the Department of State,” December 29, 1953, Hanoi, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 934.

<sup>108</sup> “Memorandum of Discussion at the 179<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Friday, January 8, 1954,” *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 951.

to put more United States planes in Indochina with the insignia painted over. American personnel would also enter the region, but not personnel directly from the Air Force. Only General Cutler, special assistant to the President, played the devil's advocate, emphasizing that despite Eisenhower's fears and Radford's hopes, the United States currently had no authorization for sending combat forces to the region, asking "Wasn't the real question before the Council whether we propose to give in if the French turn to us and request the participation of U.S. forces in the war in Indochina?"<sup>109</sup> He was the only individual at the meeting who stressed government liability. The other individuals confirmed the very issue at the heart of United States foreign policy: keeping the French in the war on the ground, while using American supplies, equipment, and money.<sup>110</sup> They would soon learn that this would not be enough to save the French effort in Indochina.

Meanwhile, Europe, France, the United States, and Great Britain confronted the Soviet proposal for a Five Power Conference to deal with the problems in Asia. The French, represented by Bidault, would only support the conference if it were specifically meant to deal with the problem in Indochina. Dulles countered by saying that a conference on Indochina would not be a Five Power Conference because the Associated States would obviously want to participate. This would imply Viet Minh participation. If the participation of the Associated States were prohibited, however, the major powers would be denying them their freedom and independence. Eventually, Dulles was able to work out separate conferences for Korea and Indochina rather

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<sup>109</sup> "Memorandum of Discussion at the 179<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Friday, January 8, 1954," *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 951.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 949-954.

than one large Five Power Conference concerning both foreign policy issues.<sup>111</sup> They would both be held at Geneva, beginning with the Korean Conference on 26 April. Representatives from the United States, France, the United Kingdom, the USSR, China, North Korea, and South Korea would be present. The conference on Indochina would follow, with representatives of the Five Powers participating.<sup>112</sup>

The military situation for the French deteriorated day by day. The Viet Minh were gaining positions throughout Tonkin, Laos, and around Dien Bien Phu. Most significantly, at Dien Bien Phu, the Viet Minh had the high ground while the French occupied the main basin in the middle. This made the position reliant on air support all the way from Hanoi, two hundred miles from Dien Bien Phu. The National Security Council met again, at its 183<sup>rd</sup> meeting, to discuss these developments as well as the implications for the Vietnamese people. The ability of the Viet Minh to capture forty French outposts in ten days clearly indicated the indigenous Vietnamese support they possessed in contrast to the French Union. While French military leaders remained committed to fighting, public opinion was turning against continued involvement by France and the United States as military developments further devolved.<sup>113</sup> The eventual failure of the French became quite clear, but American officials were still unwilling to involve their troops in the field or to accept a communist victory. As Eisenhower said in a news conference in February, "I cannot conceive of a greater tragedy for America than to get heavily

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<sup>111</sup> "The Chargé in France (Achilles) to the Department of State," January 27, 1954, Paris; "Memorandum for the Record by the Counselor (MacArthur)," January 27, 1954, Berlin; "The Acting Secretary of State to the Embassy at Saigon," February 8, 1954, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 998-999, 1022.

<sup>112</sup> "Department of State Press Release," February 19, 1954, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 1058.

<sup>113</sup> "Memorandum of Discussion at the 183<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council," Thursday, February 4, 1954," *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 1014-1017.

involved now in an all-out war in any of those regions, particularly with large units.”<sup>114</sup> Unfortunately, Eisenhower’s fears came true; his administration’s policies also played a leading role in the war between the United States and Vietnam that played out in the 1960s.

Earlier in his first term, Eisenhower formed a Special Committee on Indochina. Their recommendations in the region were finally formulated in the beginning of March 1954. In order to achieve its goal of an anticommunist region in Southeast Asia, the United States would have to do several things. Firstly, they must convince the populations of the individual nations that communism would not help them achieve their nationalist aspirations. The Free World ideologies, on the other hand, would be better options for eventual self-determination. The United States would also have to contribute more funds to the region and possibly increase the number of American personnel there. To accomplish victory against the communists, Bao Dai had to be strengthened, and the Vietnamese Army also had to be bolstered. Finally, the committee advocated for the implementation of an American psychological warfare program in Indochina to convince the people that the Free World supported their national aspirations. This included the distribution of fabricated propaganda as well as the construction of fake demonstrations against the opposition.<sup>115</sup> The Special Committee recommendations, though offering this new psychological warfare program, amounted to more of the same overall. Increases in aid and American personnel had been occurring throughout Truman and

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<sup>114</sup> “Editorial Note,” February 10, 1954, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 1035.

<sup>115</sup> “The Consul at Hanoi (Sturm) to the Department of State,” February 1, 1954, Hanoi; “The Acting Secretary of State to the Secretary of State at Berlin,” February 2, 1954, Washington; “Memorandum of Conversation by Noel Hemmendinger of the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs,” February 2, 1954, Washington; “The Chargé in France (Achilles) to the Department of State,” February 4, 1954, Paris; “Memorandum of Discussion at the 183<sup>rd</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, February 4, 1954,” *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 1110-1115.

Eisenhower's administrations. Also, American and French officials both had attempted to strengthen Bao Dai, but he continued to place his personal interests above national interests. Finally, the committee did not take the immense influence of Ho Chi Minh into account. Seen as the leader of the nation by the grand majority of Vietnamese people, the nationalist bloc chiefly supported him, but if he were forced to lean one way or the other, he would go with the communists rather than the Free World. The Free World had established colonialism over the nation and its neighbors for decades. Though the Special Committee's recommendations would eventually be implemented after Geneva, the static nature of the recommendations remained a fact. Undeniably, American involvement increased from Truman to Eisenhower, but the overall policy trend remained the same, involving as few American forces as possible while paying almost the entire bill for French ground troops. This was all done to halt communism, when, in reality, the Vietnamese only wanted independence.

Just as the Special Committee's report became available, the complete downfall of the French at Dien Bien Phu became a reality. Strong points began to fall one after the other, and casualties were high on both sides. The French were surrounded, so both the Americans and the French analyzed the implications of a defeat at Dien Bien Phu. For the French public, Dien Bien Phu had symbolic value in terms of garnering great respect for French fighting forces. It also possessed practical implications, for "probably if Dien Bien Phu falls, the government will be taken over by defeatists."<sup>116</sup> The defeatists would then be exceedingly likely to favor a withdrawal strategy and negotiate with the Viet Minh. A loss at Dien Bien Phu would also cause fear amongst non-communist Vietnamese, for they would be afraid of all-out communist takeover. The Viet Minh, however, would feel great pride, and Asiatic people as a whole would

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<sup>116</sup> "The Secretary of State to the Department of State," April 23, 1954, Paris, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 1374.



be proud to have proven their bravery against whites of the Western powers.<sup>117</sup> Ultimately, losing Dien Bien Phu had great implications on United States policy and on the impending conferences at Geneva.

Dulles believed the principle of united action was utterly essential to confront the growing defeatist sentiments. He started to formulate his first ideas for what would become SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization). Mostly, he sought a regional grouping of nations that would support United States action in Indochina. He knew “that there appeared to be no chance of keeping the French fighting in Indochina unless they know that the British and the United States were going to be in their with them.”<sup>118</sup> Dien Bien Phu had made United States involvement with ground forces a necessity to save the region from communist domination. The United States, however, was unwilling to act alone in the region and particularly wanted support from the British and French. The opinion enforced again and again by British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden clearly indicated that the British were not willing to fight in Indochina. He “expressed to [Dulles] grave doubts that Britain would cooperate in any active fighting to save Indochina.”<sup>119</sup> They were most worried about its implications on British public opinion. Seeing the financial drain Indochina put upon the French for the past several years, the British public would certainly be unwilling to get involved in another ground war. The French, however, pushed for American troops in order to save Dien Bien Phu. Dulles admitted that the French

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<sup>117</sup> “The Secretary of State to the Department of State,” April 23, 1954, Paris; “The Ambassador at Saigon (Heath) to the Department of State,” March 31, 1954, Saigon, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 1374, 1190.

<sup>118</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation by the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Merchant),” April 26, 1954, Paris, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 1386.

<sup>119</sup> “The Secretary of State to the Department of State,” April 21, 1954, Paris, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 1375.

could not continue without assistance from United States and Britain, but he was not willing to commit Americans to the fight unless British accompaniment could be assured, for Eisenhower emphasized how “we must have collective security or we’ll fall.”<sup>120</sup> If the British had agreed to intervene, the President would have gone to Congress with a proposal for joint intervention. British reservations, however, prevented this shift in policy.<sup>121</sup>

A great rift formed between the United States and Great Britain on the question of Indochinese intervention. The United States wanted to intervene collectively at Dien Bien Phu to prevent its fall, but the British were unwilling, for Churchill wrote to the United States that “Her Majesty’s Government are not prepared to give any undertakings about UK mil[sic] action in Indo-China in advance of the results at Geneva.”<sup>122</sup> At Geneva, with all the powers working together, the British sought to avoid intervention altogether. The United States saw their unwillingness as “on a very narrow basis strictly in terms of local UK interest without regard to other areas of the Far East such as Japan.”<sup>123</sup> Clearly, a rift had formed. The United States saw themselves as preserving the interests of the Free World, while they saw the United Kingdom as preserving only their own national interests. The United States thus entered the Geneva conference standing quite alone in its views. The British did not want to get involved in the

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<sup>120</sup> “Hagerty Diary, April 26, 1954,” Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part II, 1410.

<sup>121</sup> “Memorandum by Charles C. Stelle to the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Bowie),” March 31, 1954, Washington; “The Secretary of State to the Department of State,” April 21, 1954, Paris; “Memorandum of Conversation by the Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (Merchant),” April 26, 1954, Paris; “Hagerty Diary, April 26, 1954,” Washington [undated], *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part I, 1195, 1375, 1386-1387, Part II, 1410.

<sup>122</sup> “The Ambassador in the United Kingdom (Aldrich) to the Department of State,” April 27, 1954, London *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part II, 1423.

<sup>123</sup> “The Ambassador in the United Kingdom (Aldrich) to the Department of State,” April 26, 1954, London, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part II, 1416.

region, and the French wanted to withdraw after a long struggle ending in defeat. This United States' singularity increased with time, as the other powers worked together to create a favorable settlement to which *only* the United States refused to agree.

At Geneva, the Korean settlement was solved quite quickly, especially in comparison to the Indochina question, which will be the focus here. At the start of the Indochina conference, each nation's role became clear. The British emphasized how they would support the French in the event that a satisfactory settlement was formulated. The French were still struggling at Dien Bien Phu, and their defeat remained imminent. In the event of this loss, the French government would almost certainly change toward a policy more oriented toward complete withdrawal from the region. The Soviets and the Chinese hinted that American intervention in the region would prompt Chinese intervention, resulting in a total war between communism and capitalism. The United States, however, remained committed to a regional grouping "for the defense of Southeast Asia against Communist efforts by any means to gain control of the countries in that area."<sup>124</sup> The regional grouping was essential to any further United States intervention; they were still unwilling to act alone.<sup>125</sup> Eisenhower particularly emphasized this view in his private memoirs on the recent National Security Council Meeting:

If the United States were, unilaterally, to permit its forces to be drawn into conflict in Indochina and in a succession of Asian wars, the result would be to drain off our resources and to weaken our over-all defensive position. If we, without allies, should ever find ourselves fighting at various places all over the region, and if Red Chinese aggressive participation were clearly identified, then

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<sup>124</sup> "Memorandum by the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Cutler) to the Undersecretary of State (Smith)," April 30, 1954, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part II, 1446.

<sup>125</sup> "Memorandum of Discussion at the 194<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, April 29, 1954"; "Memorandum by the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Cutler) to the Undersecretary of State (Smith)," April 30, 1954, Washington, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part II, 1432-1433, 1446.

we could scarcely avoid, I said, considering the necessity of striking directly at the head instead of the tail of the snake, Red China itself.<sup>126</sup>

Clearly, Eisenhower wanted to avoid total war with China, especially since both countries possessed nuclear weapons that could effectively destroy one another. He, like most of his other advisors, favored united action rather than unilateral American action against the Viet Minh, which would effectively be viewed as a strike against the Chinese.

The United States effectively wanted to continue the war in Indochina. They knew the French would withdraw as soon as possible with their imminent defeat at Dien Bien Phu, so they committed themselves to pressuring the French as much as possible to remain in the region. If this could not be accomplished, however, they knew the United States and its allies would have to become involved in the region with combat troops. The United States was fearful of a communist takeover of all of Southeast Asia beginning with Vietnam.<sup>127</sup>

The Chinese views on the situation were, according to Chinese Delegation papers for the Geneva Conference, quite similar to those of the other nations involved, besides the United States. They argued in favor of foreign military withdrawal from the region after a certain period of time, as well as general elections in each nation to promote independent governments determined by the people themselves. They even advocated for “economic, cultural, and technological cooperation [of the three nations] with France for the purpose of developing the economic and cultural relations.”<sup>128</sup> The level of commitment to such a policy by the Chinese

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<sup>126</sup> “Editorial Note,” April 29, 1954, *FRUS*, Vol. XIII, Part II, 1449.

<sup>127</sup> Branyan and Larsen, eds., 325, 336-339.

<sup>128</sup> “A Comprehensive Solution for Restoring Peace in Indochina,” *Cold War International History Project*, CFMA, Record No. 206-00055-04, 4 April 1954.  
<[http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=665137E1-C7A5-B289-085B152AE46312B1&sort=Collection&item=The%20Vietnam](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=665137E1-C7A5-B289-085B152AE46312B1&sort=Collection&item=The%20Vietnam)

remained questionable, but the significance of the document has continued importance. Even the Chinese, a people the United States refused to communicate with directly, seemed willing to allow the people of Southeast Asia to determine their own destiny. This could have been because they were confident the Vietnamese, especially, would orient themselves toward communism; one must keep in mind that Ho Chi Minh had his own intentions in the region and was not completely directed by the Chinese or the Soviet. In fact, Truman admitted Ho's nationalist ties. Early in 1946, Ho had actually written to Truman asking for "The American people to interfere urgently in support of our independence."<sup>129</sup> The willingness of the United States to grant such a right to the people of Southeast Asia obviously remained dubious.

While Secretary of State Dulles was in Geneva working at the conference, the United States Congress discussed the implications of the Indochinese situation. Senators from both the Republican and Democratic parties expressed their support for united action and urged the allies of the United States to participate. As *New York Times* writer William S. White noted, "The Senate's entire discussion of an hour and a half brought only a single outright expression of opposition to any and all circumstances to the intervention of United States troops in Indo-China."<sup>130</sup> This opposition came from Republican Senator Everett M. Dirksen of Illinois, who argued that American troops were not needed in the region. His peers refuted this continually; for instance, Senator John F. Kennedy emphasized that "the United States and other nations may

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%20(Indochina)%20War(s)>.

<sup>129</sup> Ho Chi Minh, "Letter from Ho Chi Minh to President Truman, 02/28/1946," *National Archives*. Available from <http://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/index.html?doc-date=228>. Internet; accessed 1 December 2010.

<sup>130</sup> William S. White, "Senate Weighs Indo-China; Bipartisan Stand Shapes Up," *New York Times*, April 7, 1954, 1.

properly be called upon to play their fullest part.”<sup>131</sup> Collective security was clearly necessary before United States troops could intervene.

The differences between America’s objectives and the objectives of other Free World nations would eventually doom the success of the conference. As the United States feared, Dien Bien Phu fell on 7 May 1954. The fall was a direct hit to the old tradition of the colonial empire of France and posed a challenge to the current government of Prime Minister Joseph Laniel, an opponent of the withdrawal psychology.<sup>132</sup> Unfortunately for the United States, though, on June 19, 1954, Pierre Mendes-France took office as Prime Minister of France after Laniel’s resignation. Mendes-France had been opposed to French involvement in Indochina since 1950 and had always argued for negotiations with the Viet Minh. His focus at Geneva thus rejected united action and favored the best compromise to ensure French withdrawal from the region.<sup>133</sup> The ascension of Mendes-France to power in France<sup>131</sup> marked a transformation in French policy. Though voices like Mendes-France’s had been present in France and elsewhere throughout the 1950s, with Mendes-France in power, these voices were able to triumph. Unlike the United States, for example, France was willing to talk directly with the Chinese. On 17 July 1954, Mendes-France met with Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai, and overall, they seemed to agree on the necessary negotiations needed in the region. Enlai emphasizes how the Chinese “hoped to see the expansion of a peaceful region,” and Mendes-France agreed completely.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> William S. White, “Senate Weighs Indo-China; Bipartisan Stand Shapes Up,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1954, 2.

<sup>132</sup> Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémerly. *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 372.

<sup>133</sup> Duiker, 181.

<sup>134</sup> “Minutes of Zhou Enlai’s Meeting with [Pierre] Mendes-France,” *Cold War International History Project*, CFMA, 17 July 1954.

This trend of agreement would continue in the next few days, when the accords from the conference were announced and signed by the majority of conference participants.

On 21 July 1954, the Final Declaration at Geneva was issued. According to the accords, hostilities in the region would cease, and foreign troops could not intervene. The nonintervention of foreign troops also included a prohibition of military bases in the region. Additionally, in two years time, in July 1956, free elections by secret ballot would take place in Vietnam and would be supervised by an international commission. The inhabitants of Vietnam, who would be divided by a demarcation line at the seventeenth parallel, were free to choose in which region they wanted to live. The issue of partition was very important at the conference. It was decided upon in lieu of some support for an enclave system, carving out certain areas of French and Vietnamese control, respectively. The enclave system, however, was viewed as a remnant of French colonialism, so it was eventually rejected.<sup>135</sup> French withdrawal was also placed on a timeline. Ultimately, the accords respected the eventual complete sovereignty of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos over foreign interference. All the nations at the conference except the United States signed these agreements. Instead, the American delegation “takes note” of the declaration.<sup>136</sup> Soon after the declaration was issued, they announced their views: “We share the hope that the agreements will permit Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam to play their part, in full independence and sovereignty, in the peaceful community of nations, and will enable the peoples

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<[<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=75C04336D2D95025C4309188E94E4289&sort=Collection&item=The%20Vietnam%20\(Indochina\)%20War\(s\)>](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=75C04336D2D95025C4309188E94E4289&sort=Collection&item=The%20Vietnam%20(Indochina)%20War(s))>.

<sup>135</sup> Laurent Césari, "La menace d'intervention militaire américaine pendant la conférence de Genève et la stratégies des Etats-Unis," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, No. 23 (1989): 4.

<sup>136</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, 50-52.

of that area to determine their own future.”<sup>137</sup> One would then be prompted to ask why the United States did not sign the declaration if these were truly their views. Ultimately, the United States was confident that elections in the region would result in a communist victory, proclaiming how “if the elections were held at present, Viet Minh would win it.”<sup>138</sup> Signing the accords meant that they could intervene neither in these elections nor in any other internal matters in the country. By not signing, the United States felt that they were not bound to the accords. Essentially, the dual crusade against both communist control of the region and American intervention had ended in failure.

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<sup>137</sup> *Pentagon Papers*, 53.

<sup>138</sup> “Heath-Dac Khe-Bonsal Meeting, Geneva, June 14, Morning: The United States Delegation to the Department of State,” June 14, 1954, *FRUS*, Vol XVI, The Geneva Conference, 1135.



## **Conclusions**

American policy-makers of the 1950s could not relinquish their crusade against communism, even if it meant challenging the self-determination of foreign peoples. After the announcement of the Geneva accords, the United States began to enter Indochina unilaterally and would undermine the Geneva agreements again and again in both words and actions. Geneva also marked the end of the United States' struggle to avoid intervention in the region while simultaneously preventing the region from succumbing to communist control.

The era after World War II inaugurated a period of fear in the United States. This fear was a fear of communist domination and capitalist defeat. From Europe to Asia, the United States did all it could to stop the spread of communism. In this struggle, they often neglected the self-determination and sovereignty of the affected populations. The nations of Southeast Asia, and particularly Vietnam, were such victims. In their struggle for independence, the Vietnamese rallied behind Ho Chi Minh. He was their nationalist and symbolic leader, technically supported by the communists but also retaining his own agenda. Ho Chi Minh saw his nation's best chance for independence in the communist camp. The Free World did not offer such an opportunity. Both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations did not take these factors into account, for they only concerned themselves with aiding the French in hopes of a communist defeat. The communists in Vietnam, however, were ultimately more nationalistic than anything else. Their chief goal was not to be a satellite of either the Soviets or the Chinese; it was sovereignty.

As aid continued throughout the transition from Truman to Eisenhower, it became clear that the United States was not going to halt the rising communist tide. At the same time, the country was unwilling to involve American troops in the region. In lieu of ground troops, the United States sent in equipment, supplies, funds, and technical assistance, but all these efforts to help the French retain Indochina had failed. At Geneva, then, the United States began its unilateral campaign against self-determination in Vietnam. This would only be expanded with time, and the Americans finally realized that in order to prevent Ho Chi Minh's victory, they would have to involve their own troops in the region. Had the United States signed the accords at Geneva, its eventual violations of the agreements would have been challenged; but in abstaining, they were essentially not bound to them. Continuing the trends began by the Truman administration, the United States, under Eisenhower, abandoned the opinions of its allies and subsequently began to act independently in the region. The quagmire of United States intervention did not start after Geneva but actually began with the Truman administration; involvement would only further expand under Eisenhower and future presidents.

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