

Eighteen Years in Vietnam - Why? An Analysis

For two decades the United States has attempted to establish a pro-American, anti-communist regime in Vietnam, south of the 17th parallel. According to the Pentagon analysts who authored the Pentagon Papers, "South Vietnam was essentially the creation of the United States."

An analysis of the beginnings of that United States commitment, its rejection of the 1954 Geneva accords, and the current cease-fire illuminates to what degree the United States has been successful in achieving its policy.

The initial United States involvement in Indochina grew out of Cold War anti-communism and an unquestioning belief in the "domino theory," which dictated that if Indochina became Communist, all of Southeast Asia would follow.

In February, 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote a memo to President Truman recommending military aid for the French in Indochina. Acheson said the United States must do so or "face the extension of Communism over the remainder of the continental area of Southeast Asia and possibly westward."

A National Security Council paper approved by President Eisenhower in January, 1954, stated that the "loss of any single (Southeast Asian) country would ultimately endanger the stability of Europe."

These ideas prevailed in spite of evidence to the contrary, including a memo from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff dated May 26, 1954, which stated that, "Indochina is devoid of decisive military objectives and the allocation of more than token U.S. armed forces in Indochina would be a serious diversion of limited U.S. capabilities."

What United States leaders saw as a communist threat began as a struggle for national independence waged by the Ho Chi Minh-led Viet Minh against the Japanese in World War II, and against French attempts to reimpose colonialism after the war.

United States leaders were aware as early as the middle 1940's that the Viet Minh were waging a war of national liberation. General Douglas MacArthur said, in response to an incident in which Britain aided the French attempt to reconquer Vietnam by rearming Japanese troops to fight against the Viet Minh, "If there is anything that makes my blood boil, it is to see our allies in Indo-China and Java deploying Japanese troops to reconquer these little people we promised to liberate. It is the most ignoble kind of betrayal."

Official U.S. policy toward Vietnam was largely ambivalent from 1945 to 1949. Policymakers like Secretary of State George C. Marshall "fully recognized France's sovereign position" yet did not want to support a "dangerously outmoded colonial outlook and method." Perhaps Marshall and others were kept from supporting Ho

Chi Minh by the belief "that Ho Chi Minh has direct Communist connections and it should be obvious that we are not interested in seeing colonial empire administrations supplanted by philosophy and political organization directed from and controlled by Kremlin."

However, the Truman administration was offered much evidence that Ho Chi Minh was far from being a Kremlin puppet. In August and September 1945, Ho Chi Minh asked President Truman to grant Vietnam "the same (protected) status as the Philippines" pending the achievement of full nation independence.

Ho Chi Minh also wrote at least eight letters to President Truman and the Secretary of State, from October, 1945 to February, 1946, requesting U.S. and U.N. aid against French imperialism.

Apparently none of the requests were answered.

The Viet Minh were left with no major western nation to turn to for aid.

Even so, as late as autumn 1948, the State Department's Office of Intelligence and Research reported that Ho Chi Minh did not appear to take orders from Moscow, and stated "if there is a Moscow-oriented conspiracy in Southeast Asia, Indochina is an anomaly so far."

The official United States position was radically altered by the communist victory in China in late 1949. Until then, the U.S. had refused direct military aid to the French as well as the Viet Minh. That changed quickly.

By December 30, 1949, President Truman and the National Security Council agreed on a change in policy. According to the Pentagon Papers, "The course of U.S. policy was set to block further Communist expansion in Asia."

In January 1950, Moscow and Peking recognized the Viet Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). On February 7, the United States recognized Emperor Bao Dai as the legitimate ruler of Vietnam.

Less than a year earlier, the U.S. had refused to support Bao Dai because "we cannot at this time irretrievably commit the U.S. to support of a native government which by failing to develop appeal among Vietnamese might virtually become a puppet government separated from the people and existing only by the presence of French military forces."

The United States announced its first official aid to the French in Indochina with a \$10 million grant on May 8, 1950. By 1954, U.S. aid had leaped to \$1.1 billion, amounting to 78 per cent of the French War costs.

The unquestioned fear of "communism" had transcended other political, military, and economic factors, and had catapulted the United States from neutral ambivalence to active partisanship in Indochina.

By 1954, the French position in Indochina was so untenable that U.S. leaders were already

considering direct intervention, ranging from supplying mechanics and pilots, to the deployment of U.S. military forces on land, sea, and air. The Joint Chiefs of Staff stated that, "The employment of atomic weapons is contemplated in the event that such course appears militarily advantageous."

By April, 1954, President Eisenhower's Special Committee on Indochina recommended that, "It be U.S. policy to accept nothing short of a military victory in Indo-China." This decision became the basis for our subsequent rejection of the Geneva peace settlement.

The United States actively attempted to force the French government to follow U.S. dictates on Indochina policy. In the spring of 1954, the National Security Council recommended that President Eisenhower inform Paris that in the event of a "Communist take-over of Indochina, (all) U.S. aid to France would automatically cease."

On April 29, 1954, the Geneva Conference to discuss the Korean settlement convened. With the fall of Dien Bien Phu on May 7, 1954 the conference shifted its attention to the conflict in Indochina.

The French resisted U.S. pressures and helped work out a peace settlement. The U.S. position, established months before, was that "the U.S. actively opposes negotiated settlement in Indo-China at Geneva." The U.S. felt that any settlement short of military victory would lead to a communist takeover in Vietnam.

On July 21 the Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference was signed by the French and the Viet Minh. The U.S. refused to support the accords.

The reasons for the United States refusal are underscored by a comparison of the key terms of the Geneva settlement with the main points of a joint British-U.S. statement issued in June, 1954. The Anglo-American memorandum outlined what those countries saw as acceptable terms for a cease-fire.

The Geneva accords stressed that "the military demarcation line is provisional and should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary." The U.S. and United Kingdom had demanded that the accords "preserve at least the southern half of Vietnam."

The conference prohibited "the introduction into Viet-Nam of foreign troops and military personnel as well as all kinds of munitions." The Anglo-American statement opposed any agreement which would "impose on Laos, Cambodia, or (southern) Vietnam any restrictions materially impairing their capacity to maintain stable non-communist regimes; and especially restrictions impairing their right to maintain adequate forces for internal security, to import arms, and to employ foreign advisors."

In a key section, the Geneva

accords stated that "the settlement of political problems, effected on the basis of respect for the principles of independence, unity and territorial integrity, shall permit the Vietnamese people to enjoy the fundamental freedoms, guaranteed by democratic institutions established as a result of free general elections by secret ballot." The accords directed that both sides being negotiations in 1955 for elections to be held in July, 1956.

While not excluding "the possibility of the ultimate reunification of Vietnam by peaceful means, the U.S.-British declaration demanded a settlement which did "not contain political provisions which would risk the loss of the retained area to Communist control."

Although historical evidence indicates that Prime Minister Diem of south Vietnam sabotaged the elections, the U.S. role in that decision is not so clear. The Pentagon Papers state that the "United States did not—as it is often alleged—connive with Diem to ignore the elections. U.S. State Department records indicate that Diem's refusal to be bound by the Geneva accords and his opposition to pre-election consultations were at his own initiative."

The Pentagon Papers also contain a number of documents which indicate that U.S. officials favored postponing the elections indefinitely, and that Diem was informed of the U.S. position.

For example, a cable from Secretary Dulles to several U.S. officials, dated July 7, 1954, stated, "Thus since undoubtedly true that elections might eventually mean unification of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh this makes it all more important they should be only held as long after cease-fire agreement as possible and in conditions free from intimidation to give democratic elements best chance."

The U.S. had begun to increase its "anti-communist" efforts before the Geneva accords were even finalized. In June 1954, a coalition of powerful U.S. Roman Catholics and anti-communist liberals persuaded Emperor Bao Dai to name Roman Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem prime minister of predominately Buddhist Vietnam. Diem faced strong internal opposition, especially from the south Vietnamese army. However, the United States used its crucial military and economic aid to maintain Diem in power—for the time being.

The U.S. policy of ignoring the Geneva accords was initiated in the summer of 1954 by the newly created Saigon Military Mission (SMM), directed by CIA operative Colonel Edward G. Lansdale. According to the SMM team's own report, "the broad mission for the team was to undertake paramilitary operations against the enemy and to wage political-psychological warfare."

Operating under the cover of

the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory (MAAG), the SMM carried out a variety of espionage, sabotage, and propaganda activities from August 1954 to August 1955.

The U.S. ignored the peace accords in other ways. In May 1956, the U.S. sent 350 military men to Vietnam, purportedly to aid Diem in the reclamation of French equipment. The Pentagon analysts who wrote the Pentagon Papers describe the action as "a thinly veiled device to increase the number of Americans in Vietnam."

The U.S. also ignored the Geneva agreement by giving Diem military aid under the guise of economic assistance. At least 80 per cent of U.S. aid to Diem was devoted to military security.

Lansdale and his cohorts began the active U.S. military involvement which resulted in at least 15 million people being killed, wounded, or made homeless, and has cost the United States at least \$140 billion.

The great sacrifices made to ensure a pro-United States, anti-communist regime in south Vietnam have culminated in the recent cease-fire. Whether or not the 18 years of warfare since Geneva have achieved the primary goal is indicated by the terms of the recent accords.

The Paris agreement begins with a direct reference to the 1954 agreement. "The United States and all other countries respect the independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of Viet Nam as recognized by the 1954 Geneva Agreements on Viet Nam."

The Paris agreement dictates the removal and prohibits the reintroduction of foreign military personnel and materials in the same terms used at Geneva.

The Paris agreement declares that "the South Vietnamese people shall decide themselves the political future of South Viet Nam through genuinely free and democratic elections under international supervision," again echoing the Geneva statement.

The recent settlement calls for the reunification of Vietnam and stresses that "the military demarcation line between the two zones at the 17th parallel is only provisional and not a political or territorial boundary as provided for in paragraph 6 of the Final Declaration of the 1954 Geneva Conference."

Both the 1954 and 1973 agreements create hopelessly weak international supervisory commissions to enforce the agreements.

It appears that the United States has engaged in over 18 years of warfare to gain a peace settlement it could have accepted in 1954. Indeed, the Paris agreement and the events surrounding it seem like a case of historical *deja vu*.

The possibility remains, in the words of Vietnam expert Don Luce, that "the U.S. has progressed back to 1954, and will be getting back into Vietnam by gradualism."