

Civil-Military Relations in the French Fourth Republic during the First Indochina War

A Monograph

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2015-01

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 21 MAY 2015		2. REPORT TYPE Master's Thesis		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) June 2014 – May 2015	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Civil-Military Relations in the French Fourth Republic during the First Indochina War				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Major Bryan G. Fanning, US Army				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) School of Advanced Military Studies 201 Reynolds Avenue Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301				8. PERFORMING ORG REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) US Army Command and General Staff College 100 Stimson Avenue Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for Public Release; Distribution is Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT The stunning defeat of the French Third Republic by the German Third Reich at the start of the Second World War underscored the vulnerable condition of both France's political apparatus and her army. The political groups of the Fourth Republic experienced turbulence, particularly in the development of a coherent foreign policy regarding Indochina. The French Army emerged from the Second World only to face dwindling troop strength, poor equipment and training, an overreliance on colonial troops, and low morale. France started war with the Viet Minh in hopes of retaining Indochina as a French-controlled territory. France quickly found that this control would not come easy. A rigid foreign policy seeking colonial control and seemingly constant turnovers of leadership within both the government and the French Far East Command in Indochina hindered France's efforts in the region. In 1950, Southeast Asia gained international focus as a new front in the war on Communism. The French continued fighting for control over Indochina under the guise of anti-communism. The war would continue until 1954 when France suffered a strategic defeat at Dien Bien Phu. In the end, an uncompromising foreign and colonial policy required military leaders to view force as the only means to achieve success in Indochina.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Civil-Military Relations, French Fourth Republic, First Indochina War.					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: Unclassified			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Unclassified	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 59	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON Major Bryan G. Fanning
a. REPORT Unclassified	b. ABSTRACT Unclassified	c. THIS PAGE Unclassified			19b. PHONE NUMBER (include area code)

Monograph Approval Page

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other government agency.(References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

Abstract

Civil-Military Relations in the French Fourth Republic during the First Indochina War, by MAJ Bryan G. Fanning, 52 pages.

The stunning defeat of the French Third Republic by the German Third Reich at the start of the Second World War underscored the vulnerable condition of both France's political apparatus and her army. The political groups of the Fourth Republic experienced turbulence, particularly in the development of a coherent foreign policy regarding Indochina. The French Army emerged from the Second World only to face dwindling troop strength, poor equipment and training, an overreliance on colonial troops, and low morale. France started war with the Viet Minh in hopes of retaining Indochina as a French-controlled territory. France quickly found that this control would not come easy. A rigid foreign policy seeking colonial control and seemingly constant turnovers of leadership within both the government and the French Far East Command in Indochina hindered France's efforts in the region. In 1950, Southeast Asia gained international focus as a new front in the war on Communism. The French continued fighting for control over Indochina under the guise of anti-communism. The war would continue until 1954 when France suffered a strategic defeat at Dien Bien Phu. In the end, an uncompromising foreign and colonial policy required military leaders to view force as the only means to achieve success in Indochina.

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Acknowledgments

My interest in the First Indochina War grew from a short presentation that I was asked to give during a history elective in the Command and General Staff Officer Course. A bit more digging revealed the often messy relationship between politics and the use of force, and more importantly, highlighted some lessons that may benefit us today. So, thanks to Dr. Jonathan House for introducing me to a subject that became a large part of my experience here at Fort Leavenworth.

Also, I appreciate the support from my monograph director and seminar leader. Dr. Robert Davis' hands-off approach allowed me to develop my own method for research and writing, yet provided precise course corrections when needed. Likewise, Colonel David McHenry contributed greatly to my growth as a student and writer, albeit a stressful process at times. The lessons learned from both of these men will help me during and beyond my utilization tour. Thanks again.

Lastly, my greatest thanks go to Cristin, Marlie, and Emma for their patience over the last ten months. Despite some long hours, they never complained and were always waiting with a hug. I can only hope to make up some lost time during our next adventure in Hawaii.

Acronyms

DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FEC	Far East Expeditionary Corp
MRP	Mouvement Republican Populaire
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PCF	Parti Communiste Francais
RPF	Rassemblement du People Francais
SFIO	Section Francaise de l'Internationale Ouvrier
VNA	Vietnamese National Army

Introduction

The French struggle to pacify Viet Minh nationalists during the First Indochina War from 1945 to 1954 should have cautioned US policymakers and military leaders. Unfortunately, it did not, and the United States picked up where France left off. Nearly twenty years later, America signed a cease-fire with Vietnamese communists in 1973, providing an unexpected end to the Vietnam War. While the US military had success on the battlefield, rigid political goals hindered military leaders from employing an effective strategy to achieve lasting results. France experienced a similar situation after the Second World War as French politicians struggled to develop coherent domestic and foreign policies. The political elite hoped to return France to greatness by restoring their colonial empire, particularly their “crown jewel” of Indochina.¹ French forces in Indochina experienced considerable success during the eight-year war, yet France suffered its worst colonial defeat since losing Quebec to the British in 1759.² Harry G. Summers, Jr. posed the question regarding the American experience in Vietnam: How can one succeed so well yet fail so miserably?³ This monograph addresses a similar question by focusing on the interaction of policy, strategy, and military operations: Did political instability in the French Fourth Republic limit the successful use of military action to achieve political objectives? The collapse of the French Third Republic and their near-civil war during the Second World War serves a starting point to investigate this question.

¹ Frank Giles, *The Locust Years* (New York, NY: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1994), 47. France consolidated their colonial crown jewel of Indochina in the late 1800s into the five regions of Laos, Cambodia, and the three territories of Vietnam: Tonkin in the north, Annam in the center, and Cochinchina in the south.

² Bernard Fall, *Street without Joy: The French Debacle in Indochina* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1961), 33.

³ Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 1. Summers addressed the similar issues posed in this monograph. He takes an approach focused on the military aspect of the Vietnam War, particularly how the US Army’s success on the battlefield failed to achieve political goals.

The army of the German Third Reich swept across northern France in May of 1940 and destroyed more than just the French military. Unlike the First World War where a united France experienced a shared struggle and victory, France split immediately after Germany's swift defeat of the French military.⁴ The ensuing armistice between France and Germany divided France into two zones: a northern zone under Nazi authority and a southern zone governed by French Marshal Philippe Petain and the Vichy government.⁵ Remnants of the Third Republic quickly gave way to new traditions hinting of National Socialism and fascism, as "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" became "Work, Family, Homeland."⁶ Petain unilaterally decreed a Vichy constitution in July, which led many French citizens to view their new leader as an emerging dictator.⁷ However, Petain showed an understanding of the dynamics of power sharing by forming a

⁴ Giles, *The Locust Years*, 15. Julian Jackson suggested that the split of France's society began long before the start of the Second World War. For a detailed account of the problems and dissatisfaction with the Third Republic, the Vichy government and their collaboration with the German Third Reich, and the many elements of the Resistance movement, see Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁵ Philip W. Buck and John W. Masland, *The Governments of Foreign Powers* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1951), 311. Philippe Petain held great esteem in France. As a colonel in the Third Republic Army, he famously repulsed a German attack at the Battle of Verdun in 1914. By 1917, Petain commanded all French forces. He rose to French secretary of state shortly before the Second World War. After Germany occupied France, French President Albert Lebrun allowed Petain to negotiate an armistice with Germany and draft a Vichy constitution. After the war, a war tribunal sentenced Petain to death for collaborating with the Germans. De Gaulle later commuted the sentence to life in prison, where Petain died in 1951. Despite how his life ended, Petain still earned the title of Marshall, one bestowed upon France's heroes.

⁶ Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 43. The Vichy regime did not hold the same high regard as Petain did amongst French citizens. It was Vichy laws, not German, which oppressed French Jews and Freemasons. Jackson, *France: The Dark Years*, 1-2.

⁷ Alexander Werth, *France, 1940-1955* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1956), 33-35.

coalition of decision makers, a method that would later trouble the Fourth Republic.⁸ Petain tried to appease each of the power groups in the Vichy government. The more traditional right-wing members of his government saw German collaboration as an embarrassment thus a reason to rebuild the French republic, while the extreme left attacked Petain for stopping short of a full socialist state. All of these factors contributed to the turbulence experienced in the French Fourth Republic and further complicated by the emergence of a resistance movement.

The Free French movement formed shortly after the armistice with Germany. Soldier turned statesman Charles de Gaulle urged both French citizens and the Vichy government to resist German occupation, while rallying his countrymen around the idea of a new government under his leadership.⁹ The Free French movement, though, took on many identities inside of France. This movement waged a nonviolent war of ideologies in the southern area by seeking to regain their representativeness within the Vichy regime.¹⁰ In the north, the resistance movement waged a violent struggle around three different groups, each supporting liberation: the *Liberation-Nord* received its support from socialist backers, the *Organisation Civile et Militaire* had support from former Third Republic professional classes, and communists comprised the *Front National*.¹¹ These disparate views of the Free French movement, however, led to uncoordinated

⁸ Milan W. Svolik, "Power Sharing and Leadership Dynamics in Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science*, 53: 477.

⁹ Buck and Masland, *The Governments of Foreign Powers*, 314. De Gaulle ironically served under Petain in the First World War and was captured at the Battle of Verdun. After the war, de Gaulle urged French military leaders to consider a doctrine based in mobile warfare. He fled to England after Germany's march to Paris and assumed a mostly political role. After the French debacle in the Algerian War and the resulting collapse of the Fourth Republic in 1958, de Gaulle returned to lead the Fifth Republic.

¹⁰ Werth, *France, 1940-1955*, 137.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 144-45.

efforts during the war.¹² Despite this weakness, each group and de Gaulle's provisional government hoped to rebuild a unified country and recover dignity for France. Their opportunity came in 1944.

The Vichy French government fell shortly after the Allied invasion of Europe. Both active and passive supporters of the Vichy government suffered during the process of *epuration*, a violent movement to remove Vichy politicians, civil servants, and Nazi collaborators.¹³ De Gaulle took the lead as both military commander and president of the newly liberated French provisional government in August 1944. He quickly reasserted the right of the French to govern themselves despite the United States and Great Britain's concern about France's weakness and fractured political state.¹⁴ De Gaulle's leadership failed to heal the split within France as the Fourth Republic began to take shape after Victory in Europe Day. Complications abroad exacerbated the challenges at home.

The fall of the French Third Republic opened the door to outside meddling in Indochina and accelerated calls for independence from Vietnamese nationalists. The Vichy French submitted to Japanese requests in 1940 to share the economic and material privileges in Indochina.¹⁵ Five years later, Japan fully seized control in Indochina to support their operations in

¹² Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*, 7.

¹³ Jean-Pierre Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵ Frederik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York, NY: Random House, 2012), 31. Logevall also suggested that Japan wanted to cut the flow of weapons, oil, and other materiel into the Republic of China. The Japanese likely accepted this coexistence with the Vichy French to not escalate the conflict with the Republic of China.

the Pacific and Southeast Asia.¹⁶ The growing Vietnamese nationalist movement led by the Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh resisted Japan's involvement in the region.¹⁷ After Japan surrendered to end the Second World War, the Viet Minh declared an independent government in Tonkin.¹⁸ The French, who believed that losing their colonial territories would relegate them to the status of a second-rate power, sought to regain control in Indochina.¹⁹ France's renewed involvement set a collision course for the new governments of the Fourth Republic and Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Ironically, both were experiencing strong nationalist movements with obvious undertones from various socialist and communist movements.²⁰ The numerous political groups within France, though, stopped any one group from taking overall responsibility. The lack of party discipline and cooperation hampered French politicians from developing a coherent foreign policy.²¹

¹⁶ Office of Joint History, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the First Indochina War, 1947-1954* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2004), 9. As Japan's losses began to mount in early 1945, they suspected French colonial officials of aiding the Allies. Thus, the Japanese overthrew the colonial government.

¹⁷ Ho Chi Minh had also gained a reputation as a staunch supporter of communism. So, not only was he leading an imperial revolt, Ho had the backings of Soviet communists. This mix of nationalist and communist motivations proved to be a dilemma later in the First Indochina War as France's colonial policy was driven by economic advantages and the international focus remained anti-communism.

¹⁸ Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, "Introduction," in *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*, eds. Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 7.

¹⁹ Hendrik Spruyt, *Ending Empire: Contested Sovereignty and Territorial Partition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Press University, 2005), 12.

²⁰ Stein Tonnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 11.

²¹ Miles Kahler, *Decolonization in France: The Domestic Consequences of International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 7.

France's wartime and postwar political disorder and partisan divide affected the ability of the French Army to use military action to achieve political goals in Indochina. During the First Indochina War (1946-1954) French forces won many battles. France's inability to consolidate these gains into political success eventually led to their failure in the First Indochina War. The first section discusses the formation of the French Fourth Republic and the challenges faced by both the political elites and the French Army. These challenges help show how French domestic, foreign, and military policies influenced goals in Indochina. The second section provides a narrative of the First Indochina War. While discussing the events of the war with a focus on French military operations, the narrative continually touches on the tension between the strategic and tactical environments.²² The monograph concludes with the findings and their relevance to contemporary matters.

There is considerable literature on French political and social history pertinent to the Vichy years and the Fourth Republic. Modern literature regarding French domestic politics gives attention to many aspects, including the collapse of the French Third Republic, the Vichy French regime and Free French movement, and the transition to the Fourth Republic. These perspectives range from viewing the internal structures of French government to situating French domestic politics within the greater post-Second World War Europe. For example, Philip Buck and John Masland discussed the constitutional arrangements of the Fourth Republic in *Governments of Foreign Powers*. They pointed to problems created by attempting to carry over a mostly inefficient system of government from the Third Republic to an era that required strong leadership to bring France out of economic and social decline. Alexander Werth, in *France*:

²² US military doctrine identifies the strategic level of war as one when a nation determines security objectives and guidance. At the tactical level of war, the military plans and executes battles and engagements to achieve higher military objectives. These two levels of war intersect at the operational level of war where campaigns consisting of multiple battles and engagements seek to achieve strategic and political objectives. For more on the levels of war, see Joint Publication 3-0: *Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), I-12-14.

1940-1955, addressed the French Fourth Republic amidst its collapse in 1956. He pointed to the division of the country in 1940 and the subsequent attempt by the Resistance to create a “new” France in 1944 as the impetus for a reckless foreign policy that perpetuated the eight-year drama of the First Indochina War. Julian Jackson moved beyond what became the typical history of German-occupied France in *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*. Rather than view the Vichy, Resistance, and Nazi collaborators in isolation, he showed the dynamic relationship of the various groups that underscored these tumultuous years. In *The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, Jean-Pierre Rioux provided a definitive account from the beginnings of the Fourth Republic in 1944 to its collapse in the midst of the Algerian War in 1958. He addressed the fractured nature of French politics, economy, and a rehabilitating society, all within the backdrop of an evolving Europe, France’s colonial war, and the emerging Cold War. Irwin Wall, in *The United State and the Making of Postwar France, 1945-1954*, examined the US role in reshaping France’s economy, diplomacy, and society, particularly in America’s attempts to combat rising communist influence in both France and abroad.

Observations of the development and implementation of France’s foreign policy after the Second World vary from detailed accounts of events leading to the First Indochina War to the war’s larger setting within the communist and anti-communist struggle of the Cold War. Eric T. Jennings, in *Vichy in the Tropics: Petain’s National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-1944*, viewed the Vichy regime’s involvement in each of France’s three more important colonies. Particularly, he pointed out that Vichy France’s rhetoric of colonial equality failed to match reality, a theme that continued in the Fourth Republic’s foreign policy. In *Vietnam, 1945*, David Marr reasoned that although the First Indochina War became a frenzy of intense international competition, the French Fourth Republic and Ho Chi Minh’s nationalist uprising were the two key factors. Stein Tonnesson pointed to the clash of two different ideologies and the breakdown in Franco-Vietnamese negotiations in 1946 as the impetus for the

war in *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began*. Bernard Fall's *Street without Joy* focused on the international concern over communism as the motive for France's changing war aims. Frank Giles, a *Times* correspondent during the First Indochina War, charted France's postwar international politics in *The Locust Years*. He focused on the men and issues that dominated the Fourth Republic within the setting of the nationalist uprisings in its colonies. In *Ending Empire: Contested Sovereignty and Territorial Partition*, Hendrik Spruyt examined the colonial empires of both democratic and authoritarian governments. He argued that a fractured political institution, like the French Fourth Republic, provided more opportunity for hard-liners to reject compromises with colonial nationalists. Frederik Logevall offered a comprehensive account of the First Indochina War in the *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*. Although he focused on growing US involvement as a preface to the Vietnam War, Logevall concluded that there is no single cause for France's failure in Indochina.

Less attention has been given to the French Army immediately before, during, and after the Second World War. Historians often contrast French greatness under Napoleon Bonaparte in the early 19th Century to their failures thereafter, sometimes using their plight to compare the contemporary affairs of the US Army. Paul-Marie la Gorce, in *French Army: A Military-Political History*, traced the French Army from its defeat in 1870 by Prussia to its failures in Algiers and focused on the interconnected nature of French politics and her military. Similarly, John S. Ambler's *The French Army in Politics, 1945-1962* highlighted the French Army's close ties with the French political elite. More importantly, he emphasized that the fracture of French politics, economy, and society in 1940 created a similar fissure in the French Army. Anthony Clayton's *Three Marshals of France* followed three of France's greatest military leaders. Two in particular, Jean de Lattre de Tassigny and Phillippe de Hautecloque "Leclerc," had a profound influence on

the French Army and France's military operations in Indochina.²³ Finally, in *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam*, Martin Windrow, despite what the title suggests, gave a full account of the French military's operations in the First Indochina War, while touching on the opposing actions of the Viet Minh.

The French Fourth Republic

France emerged from the Second World War with a badly wounded political and military apparatus. The fissure in France's political system widened as the Fourth Republic began to form after the liberation of Paris in 1944. The numerous and disparate political groups prevented any one group from asserting direction over domestic and foreign policy. In both the military and political arenas, distrust remained after the war between those who defected to the Free French movement and those who either actively or passively supported German occupation. Underwriting this stormy relationship was a fragile society. The German occupation forced a migration of at least two million French citizens. French citizens were slow to regain their confidence in their government's ability to act in the interest of their nation. Similarly, the French military, long known as Europe's most prepared, split along Vichy and Free French lines after their catastrophic defeat in 1940.²⁴ Also, troop strength, equipment and training, France's dependence on colonial troops, and troop morale were all concerns during and after the war. Each of these factors contributed to a broken French nation after the Second World War.

From August 1944 to the beginning of 1946, Charles de Gaulle was a central figure in the initial attempt to rejuvenate the French nation. De Gaulle's Resistance Council quickly set to

²³ Hauteclouque operated under the pseudonym "Leclerc" during and after the Second World War to protect his family after he declared allegiance with de Gaulle's Free France movement. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 118.

²⁴ Robert Allan Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939* (Hamden, CT: Archon Book, 1985), 1.

enacting comprehensive economic and social reforms after the liberation of Paris in August 1944. These reforms included “dismantling of the feudal empires of money and finance, planning-based growth to ensure general prosperity, worker participation, and strategic nationalization,” all of which seemed to close the divide between the different political ideologies.²⁵ Despite this inclusive policy, de Gaulle failed to lead the provisional government to comprise. A national referendum finally approved a constitution on October 13, 1946. The Second Constitutional Assembly of 1946 created the Fourth Republic around a bicameral legislature with multiple parties, where the lower house of the National Assembly dominated the upper house of the Council of the Republic and the executive branch.²⁶ De Gaulle, frustrated with this arrangement, withdrew into semi-retirement to write his memoirs.²⁷ Ultimately, the adoption of the Fourth Republic’s constitution amounted to little more than a loose compromise between disparate political parties.²⁸

Political parties reformed along old lines with new members. Nonetheless, each of the many political parties agreed that France’s international power had dwindled and needed

²⁵ Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 49.

²⁶ Spruyt, *Ending Empire*, 96.

²⁷ Giles, *The Locust Years*, 26.

²⁸ Eric Jennings provides an account of the Vichy regimes involvement in Indochina after the collapse of the Third Republic. Specifically, he points to Vichy claims of universalism, or the extending of full French rights and privileges to colonists, while continuing to subjugate their colonists to inequality. Jennings argues this contradiction served as the impetus for the later Indochina War. See Eric T. Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Petain’s National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-1944* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

reinvigorating.²⁹ The debate began over the course to renew France to a relevant world standing. The ensuing argument over colonial policy created an abyss of political ideas. Calls ranged from approving French citizenship for Indochinese nationalists, but not independence, to those seeing anything different from the pre-war status quo as inconceivable.³⁰ The polarity of the debate waged across the various parties, and the lack of internal party discipline wreaked havoc on developing a coherent foreign policy to shape the future of Indochina.³¹ Ultimately, the humiliation of 1940 contributed to a “political and moral blindness to the utility of colonial withdrawal.”³²

The political landscape in late 1946 and early 1947 saw France’s numerous political parties generally coalesced into two camps regarding colonial policy. One side believed that France should reassert sovereignty, while the other side called for negotiations ranging from limited citizenship to full independence. The former pro-colonial camp included several parties. The de Gualle-inspired *Rassemblement du Peuple Francais* (RPF) generally resisted the entire new French system by speaking out against the dysfunctional nature of the government. The center-right parties, led by the *Mouvement Republican Populaire* (MRP), focused on stamping

²⁹ Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 53-4; Cesari, “The Declining Value of Indochina,” 176. Alessandro Brogi addressed this point in *A Question of Self-Esteem: The United States and the Cold War Choices in France and Italy, 1944-1958* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002). He says France falsely equated regaining their dignity and self-esteem to regaining their power in Europe. Each political faction wanted a restored France but with slightly different twists. Much of the political gamesmanship that went on with Russia, Great Britain, and the United States sought to restore their self-perception as a world player. Brogi concluded that this hunt for past glory actually perpetuated their failures in domestic and foreign policy. Had they realized their actual position in the world, the French political elite may have acted more humbly in their dealings with their colonial nationalists and sought compromise.

³⁰ Spruyt, *Ending Empire*, 1.

³¹ Kahler, *Decolonization in France*, 7.

³² Thomas, “French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950,” 132.

out the rising Vietnamese nationalism. The right-leaning members of the socialist party, *Section Francaise de l'Internationale Ouvrier* (SFIO), agreed to reasserting colonial control, but without violence. The civilian and military administrators in Saigon called for a return to the pre-war status quo.³³ The anti-colonial camp included the small, socially liberal Radical party and the far-left Communists in the *Parti Communiste Francais* (PCF). They argued for negotiations and the “liberalization” of French colonial control in Indochina.³⁴ Although the five separate groups seemingly fit along two colonial narratives, the uniqueness of their perspectives underwrote the eventual fracture of the groupings.

De Gaulle formed the RPF in April 1947 around of group of zealous French nationalists. The party detested much of the political elite and the National Assembly-dominated government.³⁵ Members of the party, along with center-right groups, called for greater executive powers within a parliamentary system, a position undesirable to the left-leaning groups.³⁶ Ultimately, the RPF wanted to “free France from the dictatorship of the political parties” through a greater involvement with its citizenry.³⁷ Because none of the parties held wide appeal, the largest share of votes any party garnered was twenty-eight percent. This meant that the parties

³³ Mark Philip Bradley, “Making Sense of the French War: The Postcolonial Moment and the First Vietnam War, 1945-1954,” in *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*, eds. Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 22.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ William George Andrews and Stanley Hoffmann, *The Impact of the Fifth Republic on France* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1981), 6-7.

³⁶ Thomas, “French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950,” 135.

³⁷ Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 156.

had to govern through coalition, and deciding almost any issue required hard bargaining.³⁸

Regarding colonial policy in Indochina, de Gaulle sought to return France to international power by restoring French sovereignty over her pre-war colonial territories.³⁹ The RPF, throughout the war in Indochina, opposed the idea of negotiating with the Vietnamese nationalist.⁴⁰ Although the RPF did not run for national elections until 1951, the formation of the party around the always-popular de Gaulle immediately attracted members from other conservative parties, particularly the MRP.⁴¹ These positions naturally fractured the relationship with the left wing Socialist and PCF parties that sought a peaceful settlement with the emerging nationalist movement in Indochina.

De Gaulle's exit from government in early part of 1946 allowed the MRP to dominate French politics for many years. Like the RPF, the MRP called for a strong executive branch. They hoped a strong president would counter-balance the popularly elected National Assembly.⁴² The party lacked experience in colonial administration before and during the war. Nonetheless, Georges Bidault, a strong statesman within the MRP, quickly adopted a firm colonial policy of no independence for Indochina.⁴³ The MRP's position towards Indochina also attracted the group most opposed to decolonization: the small landholders and settlers of the overseas territories.⁴⁴

³⁸ Irwin Wall, *The United States and the Making of Postwar France, 1945-1954* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 2.

³⁹ Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 81.

⁴⁰ US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954*, v. XIII, Indochina, Part 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982), 6.

⁴¹ Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 157.

⁴² Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 100.

⁴³ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 137.

⁴⁴ Spruyt, *Ending Empire*, 104.

These two groups remained interested in the capitalist opportunities presented by the colonies. In 1948, the MRP took more of a centrist approach and claimed to balance the extremes of French government consisting of the far right, anti-Fourth Republic RPF and the far left, communist sympathizing PCF.⁴⁵ Yet, the MRP could not balance the extremes without the SFIO's cooperation.

The SFIO formed around moderate socialists that balanced their traditional socialist beliefs with humanistic principles of Christianity.⁴⁶ The balance of these views presented a dilemma in supporting any particular French policy in Indochina. On one hand, traditional socialist ideals encouraged the SFIO to support the colonial control of Indochina for the production of goods and resources for France. On the other hand, the Christian principles concerning humane treatment of others went against the exploitation of the indigenous population in Indochina. The disagreement over Indochina split the socialists of the SFIO into two camps. Ultimately, the SFIO pitched a ten-year nationalization period where colonists would become eligible for a new form of imperial citizenship, which included expanded political, electoral, and employment rights.⁴⁷ The idea, however, failed to garner enough support within their own group. As the war with Vietnamese nationalists progressed, SFIO rhetoric became more anticommunist in response to the growing violence. As cooperation in the socialist camps deteriorated, the idea that a tripartite coalition of the RPF, the MRP and SFIO, and PCF could form colonial policy became inconceivable.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 152-6.

⁴⁶ Buck and Masland, *The Governments of Foreign Powers*, 354-5.

⁴⁷ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 75.

⁴⁸ Thomas, "French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950," 138.

The PCF represented the extreme-left of the political spectrum in France. Like other parties, the communist party called for restoring France's national unity.⁴⁹ Members of the communist party, though, had vivid memories of the Vichy's contempt for a representative democracy, therefore the PCF argued for a single legislature and against the separation of power sought by the center and right wings.⁵⁰ The PCF also hoped to build enough support through a nationalist movement to resist the Western belief that the future of France lay with liberalism and free trade.⁵¹ Despite the political consensus over return to colonial control, communist sympathizers argued for a gradual disengagement in Indochina.⁵² A growing anti-communist movement surfaced within France and Europe in May 1946 that isolated the PCF.⁵³ This isolation prevented the party from developing any relevant domestic or foreign policy initiatives to bring them back into the political fold.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, the PCF continued calling for the incorporation of the Indochina colonies into the French empire and granting French rights to colonial nationalists. The lingering communist threat in France stoked the fears of colonial officials, further highlighting the diverse challenges of imperial control.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 39.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

⁵¹ Spruyt, *Ending Empire*, 89.

⁵² Thomas, "French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950," 130.

⁵³ Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 100.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁵⁵ Thomas, "French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950," 139.

The average Frenchman neither understood nor liked the idea of the colonial re-conquest in Indochina.⁵⁶ Therefore, as the war continued, support for the war dwindled. In 1947, the MRP added to an already confusing situation by declaring that the French military had eliminated the Viet Minh. The SFIO continued to straddle the line between independence for Vietnamese nationalists and supporting colonial control. The PCF maintained their position of fully incorporating Indochina into the French empire.⁵⁷ By 1950, the MRP's grip on colonial policy began to loosen. A combination of increasing scrutiny from the National Assembly and public unease over growing military casualties drove the MRP toward a more secretive and authoritarian decision-making.⁵⁸ As a result, the other parties increased their calls to end the war. The PCF hardened their anti-war rhetoric. The SFIO maintained their somewhat confusing position by remaining committed to a negotiated solution, yet endorsing continued military presence. The Gaullists plainly continued opposing the entire constitutional system of the Fourth Republic, offering neither a solution nor a compromise to help France regain its position among the European powers.⁵⁹

France struggled to regain her position amongst the leading countries in Europe following the war. French elite considered colonialism important to reestablishing itself after the war. The multi-party system, fraught with conflicting party narratives, contributed to this impotence in the French government. The transition to a new Fourth Republic government characterized by a weak executive and a legislature dominated by the National Assembly allowed staunch supporters of

⁵⁶ Ibid., 140.

⁵⁷ Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 120-2.

⁵⁸ Thomas, "French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950," 147.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 148-9.

colonialism to maintain the status quo.⁶⁰ Many believed war was brewing, and the idea of entering another conflict did not appeal to many French civilians and policymakers. Yet, if France were to avoid another war then she would have to move beyond the recommendations adopted from the Brazzaville Conference of January 1944. This conference concluded, “The aims of the work accomplished by France in her colonies rule out all idea of autonomy and all possibilities of development outside the French Empire; therefore the eventual constitution, even in the far off future, of self-government in the colonies is out of the question.”⁶¹ A French Army suffering from defeat and political infighting would be responsible for carrying out the decree of the Brazzaville Conference.

The French Army stood at nine hundred thousand men in September 1939, with another five million in reserves.⁶² Both politicians and military leaders of the Third Republic held a large, reserve-based army in higher regard than a more highly trained force capable of responding quickly to unexpected events.⁶³ Nearly six years later, the French Army was only a fragment of its former self. Military leaders such as Jean de Lattre de Tassigny attempted to incorporate different armed factions of the Resistance movement into the new French Army.⁶⁴ The fighters of

⁶⁰ Spruyt, *Ending Empire*, 90.

⁶¹ Paul H. Kratoska, *Southeast Asia: Colonial History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 362.

⁶² Andrew Mollo, *The Armed Forces of World War II* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 1981), 48.

⁶³ Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster*, 21.

⁶⁴ Clayton suggested that de Lattre is perhaps the greatest leader to serve France since Napoleon. He graduated fourth in his class in St. Cyre, France’s military academy, and went on to fight in the First World War. Wounded four times, de Lattre emerged from the war highly decorated and well-known for his bravery. He spent much time in Morocco after the First World War and gained invaluable experience in combating insurrections in France’s colonial territory. Despite siding with the Vichy in the Second World War, de Lattre organized a force to disrupt German operations. He was named the first chief of staff of the Western Union Defense Force, later absorbed by NATO.

the armed Resistance groups had served well in the Second World War and largely represented the fighting youth of France. However, a bitterness seemed to grow towards these youths from the officers and soldiers whose service dated to the Third Republic and had followed Petain to Vichy.⁶⁵ In the end, the old Third Republic officers, now forming the core of the Fourth Republic Army, marginalized the experience and military potential of the Resistance troops and forced them from the ranks of the French Army. Similarly, budget deficits cut the integration short and forced other changes.⁶⁶ French politicians reduced the defense budget by nearly twenty percent in early 1946. These cuts forced the French Army to discharge some of the most experienced officers and enlisted men. This reduced the French Army by forty and forty-five percent of the officers and noncommissioned officers, respectively.⁶⁷ By the end of 1945, the Army rolls that once listed 610,000 troops had dropped to 460,000 one year later.⁶⁸ The dwindling troop strength compounded the problem of aging equipment and a lack of training within the French Army.

The German Third Reich had limited the Vichy military strength to one hundred thousand troops and forbid the possession of armored tanks, heavy artillery, and training beyond minor tactics.⁶⁹ However, the United States and Great Britain began supplying and training the Resistance forces in 1942. The United States alone outfitted and trained eight French divisions in North Africa and three more in Europe, furnished nineteen air squadrons with over fourteen

⁶⁵ Edward L. Katzenback, Jr. "Political Parties and the French Army since Liberation," in *Modern France*, ed. Edward Mead Earle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), 434.

⁶⁶ Anthony Clayton, *Three Marshals of France: Leadership after Trauma* (McLean, VA: Brassey's, 1992), 108.

⁶⁷ Paul-Marie de la Gorce, *The French Army: A Military-Political History* (New York, NY: George Braziller, 1963), 352.

⁶⁸ Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 13.

⁶⁹ Clayton, *Three Marshals of France*, 95.

hundred aircraft, and conducted a substantial overhaul of the French Navy.⁷⁰ Yet by late 1945, large quantities of the equipment belonging to these units had deteriorated, and the United States ended maintenance funding under the Lend-Lease.⁷¹ The 1946 budget cuts prevented France from investing in post-war maintenance, equipment upgrades, and training.

De Lattre, as the Army chief of staff, dominated military thinking in France after the Second World War. He believed that France needed a drastic change in military training of their younger troops. However, French politicians limited the term of conscription to one year because of funding.⁷² This meant that the most intense training needed to occur in the shortest time possible. De Lattre placed a heavy emphasis on physical fitness, basic military tactics, cleanliness and hygiene, and “the rejuvenation of the minds . . . of cadres.”⁷³ Unfortunately, past ways of thinking within the ranks led to an overemphasis on drill and ceremony. New troops spent one year shining focusing on menial tasks rather than studying maneuvers and arms handling, a period that was particularly harmful to the development of noncommissioned officers.⁷⁴ The Cold War brought a renewed emphasis to training, longer terms of mandatory service, and updated armament and equipment.⁷⁵ Even with this renewed military focus, the French Army continued relying on colonial troops to fight its wars.

Both the Vichy and Free French governments continued the practice of supplementing French formations with colonial troops. Two hundred seventy thousand Algerians of European

⁷⁰ Marcel Vigneras, *United States Army in World War II Special Studies: Rearming the French* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1957), 1.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁷² Gorce, *The French Army*, 356-7.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 373.

origin and Algerian and Moroccan natives fought under French banners during the Second World War.⁷⁶ The terms of enlistment for many of France's most experienced troops, those that entered service during the Second World War, ended in late 1947. The National Assembly dared not ask their fledgling support base for conscripted troops.⁷⁷ Thus, the Fourth Republic fought the First Indochina War with long-term volunteers, the French Foreign Legion, and colonial regiments stationed abroad.⁷⁸ At the peak of the war, French Far East Expeditionary Corps (FEC) in Indochina consisted of about 175,000 troops. However, only about 54,000 of these troops were of French nationality.⁷⁹ The greatest challenge, though, was fighting a war with sagging troop morale.

There was a reasonably strong tradition of civilian control of the military to French civilians during the Third Republic. The embarrassing defeat to the Germans in 1940 eroded this discipline by forcing officers and troops to choose between loyalty to the Vichy government or to de Gaulle's Free French movement.⁸⁰ The reunion between the old of the Vichy and the new of the Resistance failed. Therefore, the hopes of creating a new inclusive army gave way to the realization that former Third Republic officers would lead the Fourth Republic Army.⁸¹ The life

⁷⁶ Jean-Pierre Azema, *From Munich to the Liberation, 1938-1944* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 183.

⁷⁷ Laurie Cesari, "The Declining Value of Indochina: France and the Economics of Empire, 1950-1955," in *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*, eds. Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 182.

⁷⁸ James Lacey and Williamson Murray, *Moment of Battle: The Twenty Clashes that Changed the World* (New York, NY: Bantam House, 2013), 389.

⁷⁹ Martin Windrow and Mike Chappell, *The First Indochina War, 1946-54: Men-at-Arms* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1998), 11.

⁸⁰ John Steward Ambler, *The French Army in Politics, 1945-1962* (Chicago, IL: Ohio State University Press, 1966), 56.

⁸¹ Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 12.

of French troops had also been one of general isolation before the Second World War, and the victory of 1944 did little to erase the memories of 1940. Civilians began to distance themselves even further from troops who not only performed poorly against the Germans but also sympathized with them or defected to the Free French.⁸² Besides the effects on training, the gap in the military budget also hurt morale. Pay for French officers declined and began to coincide with similarly ranked civil servants.⁸³ French troops with low pay had great troubles supporting their families, whom they rarely saw. Over a twelve-year period from 1947 to 1959, the average French officer spent nearly eighty-eight months out of 144 away from their families.⁸⁴ Enlisted troops, on the other hand, stopped reenlisting because of the poor quality of training and the unceasing rotations to the French colonial hinterlands.⁸⁵ A quick troop reduction, poor equipment and training, an overreliance on colonial troops, and sagging morale posed a challenge for the politicians of the Fourth Republic. Many French elites believed a renewed commitment to colonialism was necessary for the rebuilding of their republic and return to European greatness.⁸⁶

The First Indochina War

The French Fourth Republic assumed their pre-Second World War stance of colonialism to pursue national prestige and economic interests. The onset of the Cold War allowed France to continue their colonial war under the banner of anti-communism, although many in the French government had grown impatient with failed efforts. By 1953, this frustration led many French

⁸² Ambler, *The French Army in Politics, 1945-1962*, 94.

⁸³ Gorce, *The French Army*, 354. A French Army major made about one-third of what their American counterpart did in the late 1940s

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 353.

⁸⁶ Thomas, "French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950," 130.

politicians to advocate preserving some position of advantage for French interests in Indochina short of full colonial control. This section addresses the First Indochina War in two parts. The first as a general offensive to pursue stated political goals of economic interests and a struggle against communism from 1946 to 1951, and the second period from 1951 to 1954 as a defensive campaign to hold positions in Tonkin to allow native forces to assume control. Frederik Logevall argued, “The ambiguity of the French colonial policy would never go away; ultimately it would bring the whole enterprise crashing down.”⁸⁷ This section presents a narrative and analysis of French political goals and military objectives in Indochina to highlight the conflicting and disjointed nature of the two. An account of the rise of French colonialism and the growth of Vietnamese nationalism in Indochina lay the foundation for the war’s narrative.⁸⁸

French interest in Southeast Asia grew from trade and religious missions dating to the 1600s. By the 1800s, the pursuit of resources and cheap labor propelled a French colonial enterprise.⁸⁹ In the late 1800s, Vietnamese nationalists grew tired of French meddling and began persecuting the Catholic missionaries. France responded by deploying fourteen warships and as many as three thousand French troops to occupy and control the ports near Cochinchina and

⁸⁷ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 7.

⁸⁸ David Marr provided one of the most detailed narratives and analyses on the rise of Vietnamese nationalism. He argues that 1945 was the most significant year in modern history of Vietnam. Nineteen forty-five, Marr suggests, brought the culmination of over “one thousand years of dynastic politics and monarchist ideology” and saw Vietnam become a vortex of intense international and domestic competition for power. For more on some of the most significant factors affecting the First Indochina War and the Vietnam War, see David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995). Similarly, Stein Tonnesson attempts to determine the causes of the power vacuum created in Indochina in 1945. He studied Vietnamese politics, particularly the beginnings of Ho Chi Minh and the Indochinese Communist Party, and also gives attention to American and French concerns regarding the birthing of a communist movement in South East Asia. For more, see Stein Tonnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh, and de Gaulle in a World at War* (London: SAGE Publications, 1991).

⁸⁹ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 5-7.

Annam.⁹⁰ The Franco-German War of 1870-1871 temporarily distracted French operations in Indochina. However, by 1885, the army of the French Third Republic had wrestled control of the northern region of Tonkin from China, and France now controlled all major regions of Indochina.⁹¹ French and Vietnamese elites exploited the northern region of Tonkin for its raw materials while the southern region of Cochinchina benefited some from social and economic development.⁹² France's growing oppression coupled with world events spawned Vietnamese nationalism.

The Japanese victory over Russia in 1905 gave hope to Vietnamese nationalists, as an Asian power defeated a major European nation for the first time in modern history.⁹³ The First World War saw thousands of French colonists and colonial subjects fight and die on the Western Front. Rather than acknowledge their sacrifice, France pursued an oppressive policy towards these colonial nationalists during the interwar period.⁹⁴ Colonial subjects also quickly realized that the "self determination of peoples" championed by Woodrow Wilson and other Western countries after the Great War did not apply to them.⁹⁵ Even the Japanese treated Vietnamese nationalist harshly by looting and pillaging villages during their occupation in 1945.⁹⁶ Such harsh treatment and neglect by the French and Japanese contributed to both the growing Vietnamese nationalism and calls for colonial independence. As Martin Windrow points out, "After a

⁹⁰ Spencer C. Tucker, *Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 29.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 38.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Spruyt, *Ending Empire*, 5.

⁹⁵ Tucker, *Vietnam*, 38.

⁹⁶ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 34.

thousand years of disputed independence, the patient defiance of foreign invaders was by now a defining self-image of the Vietnamese people, whose regional suspicions were far less important than their shared national identity.”⁹⁷ Ho Chi Minh provided the patriotism needed to usher along what had been a centuries-long process.

Ho Chi Minh took up the call for independence at the age of seventeen after studying classic Confucian texts and the writings of early Vietnamese nationalists.⁹⁸ During visits to the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, Ho Chi Minh hinted at the role peasantry uprisings could play in a revolution, as they were “very patriotic.”⁹⁹ He also pointed to the deplorable conditions that rural populations lived in under imperialist control at a 1923 International Peasant Conference in Moscow.¹⁰⁰ Taking advantage of these circumstances, Ho Chi Minh formed the Indochina Communist Party from a group of disparate nationalist movements in 1930 to bolster Vietnamese nationalism and stir revolutionary activity in Indochina.¹⁰¹ Movements in Cochinchina and Annam relied on nonviolent means to bring attention to the calls for Vietnamese independence, while groups in Tonkin viewed armed revolt as the only way to achieve independence.¹⁰²

Ho Chi Minh planned to use the mountainous jungle region of Tonkin to serve as the safe haven for his armed revolution.¹⁰³ The weakening of France in 1940 provided the first opportunity for open revolt. Ho Chi Minh seized this opportunity by generating uprisings in both

⁹⁷ Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 71.

⁹⁸ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 10.

⁹⁹ William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh* (New York, NY: Hyperion, 2000), 91.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Lawrence and Logevall, “Introduction,” 7.

¹⁰² Logevall, *Embers of War*, 18.

¹⁰³ Office of Joint History, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 6.

Cochinchina and Tonkin. French forces remained strong enough to crush the rebellions by destroying villages, arresting thousands of nationalist supporters, and executing hundreds of rebel cadre.¹⁰⁴ The decimation of his core group and the fractured nature of the short-lived insurrection forced Ho Chi Minh to reconsider his options. As a result, the Vietnam Independence League, or Viet Minh, formed in 1941. Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap led this Vietnamese nationalist movement against the Japanese in 1941.¹⁰⁵ Ho Chi Minh served as the political leader, while Giap led the armed resistance. The preponderance of the support came from Tonkin in the north, followed by Annam and Cochinchina. The Allied defeat of the German Third Reich combined with Japan's surrender in 1945 energized calls for Vietnamese nationalism and independence. Ho Chi Minh declared independence for a nationalist government, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, which likely provided the impetus for war.¹⁰⁶

Unbeknownst to France, the war in Indochina became a situation where the harder it fought, the more entangled they became.¹⁰⁷ In response to Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence on September 2, 1945, de Gaulle dispatched George Thierry d'Argenlieu as the

¹⁰⁴ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 34.

¹⁰⁵ Vo Nguyen Giap gained attention for his role as a military leader during the Viet Minh's resistance of Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1945. His life was marked by tragedy as his father and wife, both ardent Communists, died in French prisons in Indochina. James Warren suggested that he made no secret about his opinions of his colonial adversaries: "they were barbaric exploiters of the downtrodden masses." For more on Giap, see James Warren, *Giap: The General who Defeated America in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁰⁶ Spruyt, *Ending Empire*, 107.

¹⁰⁷ Lacey and Williamson, *Moment of Battle*, 391. Lacey and Williamson use the term "tar baby" to describe France's sticky situation. With a tar baby, the harder one struggles, the more entangled or stuck they become.

High Commissioner to Indochina.¹⁰⁸ For his success in the Second World War and experience managing colonial military affairs, de Gaulle chose General Jacques Philippe de Leclerc to lead the French Far East Expeditionary Corps.¹⁰⁹ De Gaulle gave them short instructions: “be firm and do not compromise.”¹¹⁰ D’Argenlieu showed early interest in nonviolent reconciliation. Yet, he took a rigid approach to negotiations with the Viet Minh. One subordinate even noted that he was the “most brilliant mind of the twelfth century.”¹¹¹ Assessments, such as these, showed that d’Argenlieu either misunderstood or underestimated the difficulties that the Viet Minh posed to implementing a French colonial policy driven by economic interests. Leclerc held a different view. He believed that while French forces could quickly reestablish control in Cochinchina, negotiations with Ho Chi Minh’s government in the north presented the best opportunity for

¹⁰⁸ George Thierry d’Argenlieu was born into a long line of navy officers. After graduating from the French Naval Academy in 1906, he served in the First World War as a patrol boat commander. D’Argenlieu entered the French reserves after the war and pursued an interest in theology. He was summoned to active duty at the start of the Second World War and followed de Gaulle to the Free French movement. De Gaulle appointed d’Argenlieu the commander and chief of staff of the Free French Naval Forces. In 1941, d’Argenlieu accepted a political commission as the High Commissioner of France in the Pacific. He served with full political and military powers until de Gaulle positioned him to lead political efforts in Indochina.

¹⁰⁹ Jacques Philippe de Leclerc was also born into a life of service, with his family aiding the French Revolution and fighting in the First World War. His attendance at a Jesuit boarding school and adherence to the Catholic faith likely explain his compassion for and willingness to negotiate with Vietnamese nationalists. From the defeat of France in 1940 until 1943, Leclerc served in North Africa. He earned the reputation as a great leader in battles against famous German General Erwin Rommel. After returning to France, de Gaulle placed him in command of the 2nd French Armored Division, which served under the control of US General George Patton until V-E Day. William Mortimer Moore claims that Leclerc was one of the few Frenchmen to never stop fighting for France’s freedom. See William Mortimer Moore, *Free France’s Lion: The Life of Philippe Leclerc, de Gaulle’s Greatest General* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2011).

¹¹⁰ Giles, *The Locust Years*, 48; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 118.

¹¹¹ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 124.

France to retain some level of involvement in Indochina.¹¹² These two differing opinions from the outset of the war set the stage for a divided political-military effort.

Leclerc's military objectives aimed to control the growing Vietnamese nationalist movement in Indochina to achieve French political goals. As early as February 1946, Leclerc declared Cochinchina and southern parts of Annam pacified and under French authority.¹¹³ Back in France, however, de Gaulle's exit from government shortly before Leclerc's announcement emphasized the political discord in France. The SFIO called for greater autonomy for the Vietnamese nationalists, the PCF typically steered away from taking a stance but called for some type of reform, and the MRP maintained the hardline stance of colonial control.¹¹⁴ The interim French government, now dominated by Socialists, called for a negotiated settlement with Ho Chi Minh.

Leclerc believed that a show of French power in the north would bring the Viet Minh to the negotiating table. He planned Operation *Ben Tre* to put the FEC in a position to reoccupy Vietnam north of the 16th parallel.¹¹⁵ Leclerc believed an effective amphibious landing and rapid advance toward Hanoi would catch the Viet Minh unaware.¹¹⁶ Leclerc also assumed that French forces had free access to the Haiphong port occupied by Nationalist Chinese forces. Chinese coastal forces in the Gulf of Tonkin fired on arriving French forces, while Chinese diplomats

¹¹² Giles, *The Locust Years*, 50.

¹¹³ David G. Marr, "Creating Defense Capacity in Vietnam, 1945-1947," in *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*, eds. Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 77.

¹¹⁴ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 136.

¹¹⁵ Tonnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 41.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

encouraged France and the Viet Minh to come to a resolution.¹¹⁷ The resolution, signed as a “Preliminary Convention,” brought a number of compromises. First, France recognized the DRV as a free state within the Indochinese Federation and French Union. Second, the Viet Minh agreed to a French military presence in Tonkin for five years. Third, France agreed to accept the results of a popular referendum on the issue of unifying the three regions.¹¹⁸ The agreement failed to survive changes in the French political scene at home. The seating of the MRP in June as the dominant party in the National Assembly meant a resumption of France’s stance of not negotiating with the Viet Minh.

D’Argenlieu believed that France’s position in Indochina worsened after the March agreement with Ho Chi Minh. Specifically, he felt that France’s only chance to tighten its grip on the Indochina Federation was to influence the political situation in the north.¹¹⁹ Accordingly, Leclerc sought to strike at the heart of Viet Minh power in the north and turned his attention again to the Haiphong Bay.¹²⁰ The route from Haiphong to Hanoi served as a key route from the Gulf of Tonkin to Hanoi, and the French forces would need this same route if they were to occupy northern Vietnam. Leclerc instructed his forces in the north, much like every offensive during first half of the war, to catch the whole of the Viet Minh army in a pincer-like movement using air, sea, and land forces.¹²¹ The plan, though, relied on three broad assumptions. One, Ho Chi Minh’s government would stay in Hanoi rather than flee to the countryside. Two, the operation would be successful with a massive show of force. Three, French diplomats could negotiate and

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 46-8.

¹¹⁸ Giles, *The Locust Years*, 51-2.

¹¹⁹ Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 93.

¹²⁰ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 152.

¹²¹ Giles, *The Locust Years*, 27.

sign an agreement from this position of strength.¹²² The commander of French forces in the north, General Jean-Etienne Valluy, failed to inform Paris of his intent to use overwhelming deadly force.¹²³ The Haiphong strike began on the morning of November 23, 1946. Despite harassment from Chinese naval vessels in the area, French forces destroyed much of the Vietnamese city and indiscriminately killed thousands of Vietnamese citizens through naval and aerial bombardments.¹²⁴ Within weeks, the Viet Minh responded by killing French civilians and destroying private property in Hanoi, the first coordinated act of war by Giap's People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). This act of violence led Socialist Leon Blum, the first president of the Fourth Republic, to declare, "Once the army has reestablished order, it will be again be possible to look at political problems."¹²⁵

From 1947 to 1950, the political dynamic within the French government was bitterly hostile, particularly between the MRP and PCF.¹²⁶ The formation of the RPF under de Gaulle further exacerbated the political situation in France. The October 1947 municipal elections saw the RPF win a majority of seats in France's large cities, primarily at the expense of the MRP.¹²⁷ This wider distribution of representatives in French politics amounted to nearly equal power sharing of the RPF on the right, the MRP and SFIO in the center, and the PCF on the far left. As the 1940s closed and thoughts drifted from a short, decisive colonial war, the loudest and most

¹²² Tonnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 42-4.

¹²³ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 158.

¹²⁴ Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2005), 90.

¹²⁵ Giles, *The Locust Years*, 55.

¹²⁶ Thomas, "French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950," 138.

¹²⁷ Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 120-1.

consistent voices cried out from the far left to end the *sale guerre* (dirty war) of colonial repression.¹²⁸ The constant partisan bickering and the turnover of a weak central government failed to establish convincing political leadership for the Indochina War.¹²⁹ Ultimately, the lack of domestic authority contributed to a lack of authority abroad in Indochina until 1950.¹³⁰ This lack of authority and a change of leadership in Indochina in 1947 diluted the effectiveness of military operations in Indochina during the late 1940s.

D'Argenlieu completely reversed the policy of developing the south and avoiding open conflict with the Viet Minh after the French success at Haiphong. He believed that disrupting Ho Chi Minh's government in the north would allow French forces to more easily control the south.¹³¹ D'Argenlieu sent instructions in 1947 to Valluy for a regrouping of French forces in the north to prepare for "direct forcible action against the Hanoi government."¹³² Valluy and the northern forces experienced success in many battles and small engagements. French forces in the north controlled many of the large cities in Tonkin and the Red River Delta region. Nonetheless, the Viet Minh controlled the main highways as fighting spread to Annam and northern Cochinchina.¹³³ The cumulative effects of these victories failed to bring any strategic success to French efforts during the early months of 1947. The French government also contributed to the

¹²⁸ Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 92.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹³⁰ Giles, *The Locust Years*, 107.

¹³¹ Tonnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 105.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 104-5.

¹³³ Office of Joint History, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 21.

emerging stalemate by appointing a new High Commissioner, Emile Bollaert, to Indochina in May 1947 that supported the policy of negotiations.¹³⁴

Emile Bollaert quickly pushed to reopen talks with the Viet Minh. Reopening negotiations brought more stakeholders into an already complicated war and frustrated Valluy, who believed that he should lead all war efforts.¹³⁵ Nonetheless, Valluy used the spring and summer monsoon season to plan a winter campaign. Operations *Lea*, *Ceinture*, and *Linson* aimed to envelop the whole of the Viet Minh and DRV government in the northern region by targeting their political base, supply area, and safe havens.¹³⁶ The goal of Operation *Lea*, the largest French operation to date, was to capture Viet Minh leadership in Viet Bac.¹³⁷ Pressure from Paris forced Valluy to achieve this goal through a single massive blow for two reasons. First, an impatient French legislature, and second, France faced troop shortages from growing rebellions in East Africa.¹³⁸ French forces were successful in capturing the territory of Viet Bac, though Ho Chi Minh and Giap escaped to the countryside. Valluy built on this success by attacking Viet Minh supply areas around Hanoi and their safe havens in the frontier region near the Laos and Chinese border.¹³⁹ Operations *Ceinture* and *Lison* succeeded in destroying the political headquarters and supply depots of the DRV, seizing jungle hideouts, and killing nearly ten thousand Viet Minh troops. The challenge of controlling this vast territory proved costly to limited French troops and

¹³⁴ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 192.

¹³⁵ Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 94.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹³⁷ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 201.

¹³⁸ Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 28-30.

¹³⁹ Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 95.

supplies.¹⁴⁰ At the close of 1947, the FEC had demonstrated that their superior firepower could defeat a numerically inferior opponent. These limited tactical successes, though, stopped short of getting the Fourth Republic any closer to reinstating colonial control over Indochina.

Nineteen forty-eight opened with French forces in the north spread so thinly that they were unable to exploit any of the tactical success achieved the previous year. At home, France continued to suffer through a poor economic situation, further aggravated by the failure of colonial exports to reach their prewar levels and generate the expected revenue.¹⁴¹ The growing war costs, in both money and troops, did not help domestic matters. The terms of enlistment for many of France's veterans from Second World War ended in late 1947, and the National Assembly voted against sending conscripted troops to fight an unpopular war.¹⁴² Thus, the Fourth Republic fought the Indochina War with a mix of volunteers, the French Foreign Legion, and colonial troops.¹⁴³ These problems distracted politicians from making meaningful progress on a focused political solution. A disagreement continued over whether Tonkin, where the greatest concentration of enemy troops lay, or Cochinchina, the area considered the economic epicenter, should be the focus of French colonial policy.¹⁴⁴ The thought of increasing revenue swung the focus to the south. General Roger Blaizot, a long-time veteran of Indochina who replaced Valluy as commander of French forces in Indochina in early 1948, favored a Tonkin-focused strategy.¹⁴⁵ In the north, French forces spent most of their time holding on to what little territory they gained.

¹⁴⁰ Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 30.

¹⁴¹ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 207.

¹⁴² Cesari, "The Declining Value of Indochina," 182.

¹⁴³ Lacey and Murray, *Moment of Battle*, 389.

¹⁴⁴ Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 98.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 99-102.

The Viet Minh regained the main road leading to and from their former political base captured during Operation *Lea*, forcing France to resupply this airbase entirely by air.¹⁴⁶ Although the outpost proved to have little strategic value, Valluy and Blaizot insisted on holding Viet Bac as a matter of saving face with French politicians.¹⁴⁷

The French government undertook a policy review in 1949 to consider options for Indochina. French politicians hoped to resuscitate any chance of achieving their goals. To improve the political situation, France implemented the Elysee Accords of March 1949. Under these accords, the MRP agreed to name Bao Dai as the leader of an “independent” Indochina.¹⁴⁸ These agreements were not without controversy in France. The Gaullists continued riling against the entire Fourth Republic. The PCF called this new independence a mockery since France would continue to direct Vietnamese foreign and domestic policies. The SFIO, without any major voice in government, sided with the PCF.¹⁴⁹ While French politicians debated this contentious agreement, Vietnamese nationalists also took sides. Bao Dai’s corrupt past and the faux independence granted by Elysee Accords did not convince Vietnamese nationalists to abandon Ho Chi Minh’s calls for absolute independence. These moves drove Vietnamese nationalists on the right into even more passive support for French foreign policy, while moving nationalists on the left into the waiting arms of the Viet Minh.¹⁵⁰

The French National Assembly requested an update on the war in Indochina to coincide with the Elysee Accords. General Georges Revers, the chief of the French General Staff,

¹⁴⁶ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 208; Joint Chiefs of Staff, *History of the Joint Chiefs*, 37.

¹⁴⁷ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 210.

¹⁴⁸ Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 148.

¹⁴⁹ Thomas, “French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950,” 138; Lovegall, *Embers of War*, 211.

¹⁵⁰ Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 148.

surveyed the situation from May to June 1949. His classified reports largely concluded that French forces could not achieve a decisive victory, though success was possible if they could hold on long enough to draw international monetary and materiel support, primarily from the United States.¹⁵¹ In the meantime, Revers advocated withdrawing all French forces from the frontier along the Chinese border and focusing their military efforts in the Tonkin delta.¹⁵² Politically, he criticized Paris politicians for standing up a puppet government in Cochinchina and sending French troops to war without a proper strategy, while insisting that a meaningful resolution included genuine independence for Vietnam.¹⁵³ Even more damning than the report's findings was its reading over Vietnamese airwaves later in September.¹⁵⁴ French forces in the north continued showing tactical success despite the growing strength of the Viet Minh and the DRV's use of the Revers report to stir up resentment amongst the population. Events outside of Indochina, however, brought France's struggles, both at home and abroad, into the world spotlight.

In the latter half of 1949, the Soviets detonated their first atomic weapon and Mao Zedong's Communist forces triumphed in the Chinese Civil War, leading to the establishment of the People's Republic of China. These events encouraged the United States to enter the conflict by providing economic and materiel support. More importantly, the expansion of the Cold War allowed France to maintain their political resistance to colonial change under the guise of anti-communism.¹⁵⁵ Debates continue whether the anti-communist strategy sought to bait support

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 149.

¹⁵² Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 107.

¹⁵³ Giles, *The Locust Years*, 115-117.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas, "French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950," 136.

¹⁵⁵ Giles, *The Locust Years*, 135.

from America.¹⁵⁶ The greater implication of the “new” strategy stemmed from the actions of politicians and military leaders responsible for implementing the Fourth Republic’s foreign policy. Officials in Indochina took a more liberal interpretation of policy guidance from Paris, and the split between policy and military strategy grew as the war entered the 1950s.¹⁵⁷

In Paris, the lukewarm center-left alliance between the MRP, SFIO, and PCF cooled considerably. France’s President Vincent Auriol, a member of the SFIO, accused Communist sympathizers of attempting to wreck the government’s national defense policy by encouraging work stoppages to disrupt the manufacturing of arms destined for Indochina.¹⁵⁸ The PCF and MRP remained unchanged in their bipolar views of the war. The RPF continued fomenting anger for the Fourth Republic political system by pointing to a legislature free from scrutiny and public discourse.¹⁵⁹ Each of these domestic issues hampered the ability of French politicians to focus on a unified foreign policy. Pierre Mendes France, a social liberal in the small Radical Party, pointed to the growing international debate over the rearmament of West Germany and warned that France had to choose now between Indochina and Europe.¹⁶⁰ Accordingly, he proposed an ultimatum: either choose full-scale war against the Viet Minh or begin negotiations with Ho Chi Minh to free France to focus on larger European policy issues.¹⁶¹ While politicians in France failed to come to an agreement, the FEC’s losses in late 1950 brought change.

¹⁵⁶ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 221.

¹⁵⁷ Giles, *The Locust Years*, 132.

¹⁵⁸ Thomas, “French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950,” 144.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 150-1.

¹⁶⁰ Cesari, “The Declining Value of Indochina,” 181.

¹⁶¹ Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 215.

General Giap used the monsoon season from July to September to plan a large-scale offensive in the latter half of 1950.¹⁶² The fighting on May 25, 1950 at Dong Khe should have clued the FEC into the changing nature of the war. In the days leading to the attack on the small French outpost, Viet Minh troops labored to move artillery cannons into the adjacent hills. The Viet Minh troops shelled the outpost for forty-eight hours before overrunning French forces. Though French troops later regained Dong Khe, they quickly forgot a Viet Minh tactic that proved decisive in 1954.¹⁶³ This success bolstered Giap's confidence in his troops, and he began an autumn offensive using similar tactics in Tonkin delta. One after another, the string of frontier outposts along the Chinese border that Revers urged against fell during Giap's Border Campaign.¹⁶⁴ The Viet Minh again caught French forces in the north unaware with their combined use of infantry, artillery, and mortars. As each of these outposts fell, the French military structure neared a breaking point. Rather than follow the orders of General Marciel Carpentier, the newest FEC commander, and reinforce an isolated outpost at Cao Bang, subordinate commanders decided to reinforce an outpost farther from their location.¹⁶⁵ Over six thousand French and colonial troops lay dead after the week of fighting.¹⁶⁶ These failures for the FEC at the end of 1950 created the crisis needed to chart a new course.

The Council of the French Union took an unprecedented step in December 1950 by appointing General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny as both the High Commissioner and commander of French forces in Indochina. The Council hoped the appointment of a proven leader and French

¹⁶² Lovegall, *Embers of War*, 241.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 238.

¹⁶⁴ Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 30.

¹⁶⁵ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 246-7.

¹⁶⁶ Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 33.

icon would stop both growing domestic criticism and the international humiliation of failing to defeat an economically and numerically inferior adversary.¹⁶⁷ Although he led French efforts in Indochina for only about one year, de Lattre left the French situation in Indochina much better than he found it. French forces lost most of their outposts along the Chinese border by 1951 and desperately hung on to the militarily important region of the Tonkin delta.¹⁶⁸ De Lattre's forces, though, showed a renewed fighting spirit and repelled the largest Viet Minh attack of the war. After stopping forty thousand Viet Minh troops at the battle of Vinh Yen, the FEC continued with a campaign to clear rebels in the Tonkin delta.¹⁶⁹ De Lattre reinforced the north with troops from Annam and Cochinchina to build a mobile reserve. He also ordered the construction a 235-mile line of defense, the de Lattre Line, to disrupt Viet Minh infiltration. Two problems remained, supplying troops over this dispersed area and fortifying the more than 250 strongpoints with sufficient manpower.¹⁷⁰ After completing this reorganization in Tonkin, de Lattre planned a fall offensive aimed at recapturing Hao Binh.

The Viet Minh considered Hao Binh significant, because this area allowed free access of troops and supplies to and from Hanoi.¹⁷¹ De Lattre also knew that he needed to make significant progress amidst the stagnated political environment. Success at Hao Binh held strategic implications. French control of the area would cut the flow of supplies from China and the Soviets. A victory would ease an upcoming contentious debate over the military budget in

¹⁶⁷ Thomas, "French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War, 1945-1950," 149.

¹⁶⁸ Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 34.

¹⁶⁹ Office of Joint History, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 70-1.

¹⁷⁰ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 266-7.

¹⁷¹ Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 116-7.

Indochina for 1952 within the National Assembly.¹⁷² To these ends, de Lattre parachuted five battalions into Hao Binh at the start of Operation *Lotus*. These infantrymen lacked wheeled-vehicles and were twenty-five miles from the nearest French outpost. The French and Viet Minh engaged in back and forth battles for the next three months.¹⁷³ Although de Lattre died of cancer before the end of the operation, French forces achieved tactical success by January 1952. The FEC did not possess the means to sustain itself nor the manpower to hold such a large piece of territory. Thus, Giap and his forces later moved back into the area, and French forces again failed to make a lasting difference.¹⁷⁴ Although he spent only a year leading France's efforts in Indochina, de Lattre showed an ability to manage the tension between domestic demands and the tactics needed to disrupt Viet Minh operations. France returned to a familiar defensive strategy after the death of its High Commissioner and military commander.

General Raoul Salan, de Lattre's military replacement, resumed a more defensive strategy in the north. He spent much of the 1952 monsoon season directing security operations aimed at holding the territory his forces currently occupied.¹⁷⁵ Giap and the Viet Minh used this lull to harass the sparsely manned French outposts and undermine their authority, which continued the reactionary nature of French military operations.¹⁷⁶ Salan eventually gathered up nearly every troop, tank, and airplane to launch Operation *Lorraine* in October 1952. Operation *Lorraine* intended to regain France's offensive initiative, disrupt the Viet Minh political and

¹⁷² Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 49.

¹⁷³ Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 118.

¹⁷⁴ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 288.

¹⁷⁵ Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 119.

¹⁷⁶ Lacey and Murray, *Moments of Battle*, 393.

supply bases northwest of Hanoi, and cut Giap's supply and communication lines.¹⁷⁷ Salan also used this operation to test a technique that later provide costly. He judged that an outpost armed with heavy artillery and supplied entirely by air assets could survive far from the safety of the de Lattre Line and have a significant effect on the enemy.¹⁷⁸ Operation *Lorraine* began with one of these air-land bases established at Na San. The operation succeeded in establishing the Na San air-land base, seizing two-hundred fifty tons of weapons and ammunition, and interfering with the Viet Minh's food supply.¹⁷⁹ Salan's troops forced Giap and the Viet Minh to withdraw from the area. It was a costly operation, as French forces suffered some twelve hundred casualties, which left them without enough manpower to conduct operations from Na San.¹⁸⁰ Again, this tactical success cost the FEC a large amount of resources with little to show over the long run. Meanwhile, the political debate over Indochina increased in scope.

France's hardline stance on a military victory in Indochina showed signs of weakening in the early months of 1952. The public became increasingly concerned with the inactive nature of French politics and the declining living standards in France, so much that voters called for a more fiscally conservative government to control inflation.¹⁸¹ This move indirectly reduced the influence of the MRP and SFIO as the Socialists in the center began to side more with the left. Mendes France and the center-left coalition of Socialists and Communists increased their opposition to the war. Their main argument highlighted the need to return French troops to Paris as the rearmament of Germany seemed inevitable and French relations deteriorated in their more

¹⁷⁷ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 323.

¹⁷⁸ Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 123.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 123-4.

¹⁸⁰ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 324.

¹⁸¹ Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 195.

important territories in North Africa.¹⁸² Similarly, Jean Letourneau, de Lattre's replacement as High Commissioner in Indochina, discussion with US politicians expressed a growing realization amongst politicians in France about the war in Indochina. He pointedly told politicians in Washington, DC that China's growing support to the Viet Minh would not allow them to be defeated and that France should seek an armistice.¹⁸³ With all of this turbulence in French domestic and foreign politics, a turning point seemed likely, but it never came. The hesitation of France's political parties to take an anti-colonial stance in open politics perpetuated the colonial status quo.¹⁸⁴ Besides the PCF, the political parties supporting decolonization failed to bring up the subject, thereby failing to inform public opinion. More importantly, the rigid nature of France's colonial policy largely forced the hand of military leaders. Pushing the Viet Minh to capitulation could really only be achieved through violent military action. Rather than debate a change in strategy within the National Assembly, the Viet Minh forced a change in the course of the war.

Giap and the Viet Minh ended France's hope of fighting a defensive war in Tonkin by attacking into neighboring Laos in April 1953.¹⁸⁵ The expansion of the war into surrounding provinces forced a small shift in strategy. Weeks prior to the Laos attack, Letourneau spoke to American officials in Washington, DC and requested more funding. Letourneau intended to use the funds to increase the size of the Vietnamese National Army (VNA) as the French National Assembly continued to deny requests for additional troops.¹⁸⁶ Similarly, General Henri Navarre,

¹⁸² Office of Joint History, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 105.

¹⁸³ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 318.

¹⁸⁴ Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 210.

¹⁸⁵ Office of Joint History, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 108-9.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

the latest in the revolving door of commanders in Indochina, planned military operations aimed at keeping the enemy off-balance while the VNA expanded. The Letourneau-Navarre Plan constituted a two-part strategy. First, a limited offensive in the north to disrupt Viet Minh operations as the VNA slowly assumed responsibility for security in Cochinchina and Annam. Second, the consolidation of French troops in the north would fight the Viet Minh in a decisive battle in 1955.¹⁸⁷ Behind closed doors, Socialist Prime Minister Rene Mayer already advised Navarre to “seek an honorable way of getting out.”¹⁸⁸ Navarre commented after the war that he interpreted this as advice to develop a plan to “create conditions for an honorable political solution which would be adopted when the time was ripe.”¹⁸⁹ However, the divergent nature of the goals of an honorable political solution and decisive battle likely led Navarre to chase Giap into the frontier region of the northwest.

Navarre experienced success in the autumn of 1953. Some, particularly the Socialists in the National Assembly, thought these successful raids were enough to negotiate with Ho Chi Minh. The political right, however, argued that negotiating would only embolden the enemy and hurt the morale of the FEC and fledgling VNA.¹⁹⁰ Thus, Navarre continued to execute operations in the absence of political consensus. Using a technique that proved useful at Na San, Navarre planned a massive air-land base deep in the hills of northern Vietnam. Operation *Castor* airdropped a large group of troops into Dien Bien Phu to setup a blocking position against any future attacks into Laos by the Viet Minh.¹⁹¹ Navarre continued the operation despite the protests

¹⁸⁷ Logevall, *Embers of War*, 356; Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 216.

¹⁸⁸ Giles, *The Locust Years*, 194.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 200; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 398.

¹⁹¹ Office of Joint History, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, 131.

of his subordinate commanders who pointed out that the outpost presented both a stationary target and sat nearly three hundred kilometers from their supply depots in Hanoi.¹⁹² The base required aerial resupply, further straining an already fragile French supply line. Besides a bad location in a large valley, Navarre made two poor assumptions regarding the Viet Minh. First, he guessed that Giap lacked the ability to supply his forces during a prolonged fight. Second, that French firepower would prevail in the event of a long siege.¹⁹³ The Viet Minh attack began on March 15, 1954. Nearly two months after Giap and his forces brought heavy artillery into the surrounding hills, destroyed the airstrip, and used the jungles to negate the FEC's airpower, the French base at Dien Bien Phu collapsed.¹⁹⁴ Sporadic fighting in the Tonkin delta continued until the signing of the Geneva Accords on July 20, 1954.

The Geneva Accords ended a seesaw war of eight years. France experienced some success during the course of the war and nearly ended the conflict many times. A number of problems commonly plagued the French effort in First Indochina War. First, the absence of a political consensus led to a lack of a coherent foreign policy. The lack of a dominant political party allowed the nature of politics to become fractured and disjointed. Second, the constant changing of both political and military leaders prevented a stable theater strategy from taking shape. A stable theater strategy may have helped focus French military operations towards a clearer goal. Third, French forces could not exploit tactical success, because they lacked sufficient resupplies or reinforcements to consolidate gains in an area. Finally, the conventional tactics employed by French military leaders demonstrated that they misunderstood the nature of the war. While successful during the First and Second World War, the large defensive lines and

¹⁹² Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 216.

¹⁹³ Lacey and Williamson, *Moment of Battle*, 394-5.

¹⁹⁴ Rioux, *The French Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, 217.

air-land bases were incompatible with a war fought with limited means and against a nationalist uprising.

Conclusion

The stunning defeat of the French Third Republic at the start of the Second World War underscored the vulnerable condition of both France's political apparatus and her army. Petain and the Vichy French government accepted the terms of the German armistice, which split France into two sections. The Free French movement led by de Gaulle continued to resist throughout the war, claiming a large stake in the post war government in 1945. The French Army, meanwhile, saw the end of what had been unquestioning obedience to their civil masters, a long-standing tradition since the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815. The Second World War forced troops to choose between siding with the officially recognized French state that had surrendered to Germany or with a group of nonconformists that sought to continue fighting against German aggression. These opposing viewpoints of the government and army caught the French population in the middle. During the war, Germany forced the migration of millions of French civilians, while they viewed both their contradictory governments and military with skepticism. This divided France never completely closed as the new government formed in 1945.

The French Army largely reformed around the core of the old Third Republic Army. It emerged from the Second World only to face a dwindling troop strength, poor equipment and training, an overreliance on colonial troops, and low morale. The French Army was in a state hardly fit to fight another war despite the success they experienced in 1944 and 1945. Reduced defense budgets forced the French Army to cut large portions of its experienced officer and noncommissioned officer corps. The equipment supplied by the Allied forces in the Second World War was in poor condition from numerous campaigns in Europe and North Africa. Training regimens returned to ones of drill and ceremony, so new troops spent their short year on metropolitan duty focused on things other than tactics and maneuvers. Colonial troops had long

been a part of the French way of war. That said, the ratio of metropolitan to colonial troops was disproportionate during the last year of the Second World War and into the First Indochina War. Finally, the morale of the troops suffered for some time after the Second World War. Officers spent most of their time away from their families and made a fraction of the money officers in other countries, while noncommissioned officers made repeated rotations to the French colonies. All of these issues contributed to the outcome of the First Indochina War.

The Fourth Republic political groups also experienced turbulence, particularly in the development of a coherent foreign policy in Indochina. The left, the socialist and communist parties, hoped to negotiate with the Vietnamese nationalists and extend partial citizenship. The center groups largely argued to maintain the pre-Second World War colonial status quo by returning Indochina to French control, though the means to do this varied from a military solution to one of diplomacy. The right, notably the Gaullists, seemed content with disrupting the political process by drawing attention to the growing ineffectiveness of French politics. The center view of returning Indochina to colonial control dominated foreign and colonial policy early in the war. This view eventually gave way to a one dominated by an anti-communist rhetoric as the Cold War came to Southeast Asia. In the closing years of the war, the goal of the Fourth Republic's foreign policy in Indochina was simply to save face and leave with dignity. Although the parties controlling the key positions within the National Assembly changed quite frequently, the politicians holding these posts simply moved to another influential position within the government. In short, the parties changed, but the people with the power and ideas existed throughout the war.

French High Commissioner d'Argenlieu and General Leclerc represented France in their return to Indochina in 1945. De Gaulle gave clear guidance to both that nothing short of colonial control was acceptable. D'Argenlieu interpreted this directive as solvable only through military action, while Leclerc saw negotiations and talks with Ho Chi Minh as a non-violent way to

prevent all-out war. Leclerc's less threatening methods of returning Indochina to colonial control were short lived, and the war continued on for another eight years. Both the position of the High Commissioner and FEC commander-in-chief looked like a revolving door, one politician or military general leaving as quickly as they had come. French forces in Indochina also seemed to outpace itself from their logistics and operating bases. Despite success in clearing large swathes of territory and killing large numbers of Vietnamese fighters, the FEC continually failed to hold these cleared areas and build upon their success. The outlook on the war turned positive for a short time as General de Lattre assumed the position of both High Commissioner and FEC commander-in-chief. De Lattre had success in securing financial and international support for France's cause under the policy of anti-communism. Unfortunately for France, de Lattre died after a successful year enacting French policy in Indochina. After 1952, French military leaders returned to their former ways of clearing areas without the resources to hold the areas long-term. The FEC also began training and expanding the Vietnamese National Army in hopes that they could bear more of the fighting as the Giap's fighters grew in skill and number. The final blow came in 1954 after the FEC moved into a valley that seemed necessary to cutting off the logistics routes for Giap's forces, a move that the French hoped would end the war. The end did come, just not the one France expected.

The examination of France's experiences in the Second World War, the French Army, the development of the Fourth Republic, and the First Indochina War leads to a number of findings. First, the French Army was neither prepared nor capable of fighting a protracted war. French Army leaders and politicians made the greatest mistake in the aftermath of the Second World War by failing to incorporate the Resistance fighters. The French Army and its long serving troops emerged from the Second World War a fractured body. The experience of a humiliating defeat in May 1940, choosing sides after the split, and then the thankless downsizing after the war did not instill hope in the French Army. Had the French politicians and Army

leaders incorporated the youth and vigor found in the Resistance fighters, as Leclerc attempted to do in 1944, the Army may have approached the Indochina War with less apprehension. Today, the US Army faces similar circumstances. Though it has not experienced a 1940-like defeat, the US Army is wrapping up nearly fifteen years of combat. Yet, like France, the US Army must come to grips with a significant downsizing and heavy resource constraints. The US Army must consider the cumulative effects of these circumstances as it prepares future conflict.¹⁹⁵

Second, the high turnover of French politicians and generals during the First Indochina War created a discontinuity between policy, strategy, and military operations. Fourteen different civilian and military leaders managed the eight-year war. Only de Lattre held the position of High Commission in Indochina and commander of the FEC, a period of great success. Politically, he lobbied for increased international materiel support. Militarily, de Lattre developed a coherent strategy for the FEC. This is not to suggest that military generals should serve as their own political master. It does suggest that military leaders must remain engaged with politicians. Civilian control of the military is an idea quite familiar to US politicians and military leaders. Some politicians may shy from inserting themselves into military strategy, while assertive politicians may engage in discussions of strategy with their military subordinates. During the First World War, French Prime Minister George Clemenceau purportedly said, “War is too serious a matter to entrust to military men.”¹⁹⁶ Regardless of who holds the ultimate responsibility for

¹⁹⁵ A US Military Academy white paper addresses a similar dilemma by investigating periods of force restructuring amid budget shortfalls. Particularly, the cuts made to the institutional Army after Vietnam were considered necessary to provide more troops to combat units. See John Mini, Dwight Phillips, and Courtney Short, *Historical Effects of Personnel Reductions on the Institutional Army, 1973-2009* (West Point, NY: United States Military Academy, 2009).

¹⁹⁶ French journalist Georges Suarez attributed this quote to George Clemenceau in Suarez’s 1932 book, *Soixante Années d'Histoire Française* (Sixty Years of French History). See Fred R. Shapiro and Joseph Epstein, *The Yale Book of Quotations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 185.

strategy development, strategy is doomed to failure if generals become too narrowly focused on tactics and military operations.

Third, French politics did experience instability with political turnover and party disputes during the Indochina War. However, political inflexibility was the greatest cause of the failures in Indochina. The parties in power changed throughout the First Indochina War, but the people did not. Politicians in France, whether for or against returning Indochina to French control, failed to move from this initial goal. From the beginning, de Gaulle took an uncompromising position. This continued throughout the war, though the underlying strategy changed from returning to the pre-war colonial status quo to one of anti-communism. A large source of this inflexibility came from Georges Bidault and Robert Schuman holding key positions in the French government until 1954. Each of these men maintained the stance of armed negotiations. Francois Goguel made a similar point in 1954. Yet, he viewed the continuity of politicians from one government to another as a mitigation to the fifteen cabinets the Fourth Republic saw between 1947 and 1954.¹⁹⁷ Regardless of the politician in charge, military leaders must provide their best advice and try to maintain a balance between strategy and military action, with neither dominating the other.

Richard Sinnreich argues that soldiers tend to ignore history or recall it carelessly.¹⁹⁸ The US Army, and the military in general, could benefit from better educating itself in the history and culture of our friends and allies. The successful and not so successful experiences of foreign militaries shape their current capabilities and potential in war. The French Army of the Fourth Republic and its subsequent performance in the First Indochina War support this notion.

¹⁹⁷ Francois Goguel, "Political Instability in France," *Foreign Affairs* (October 1954), accessed February 16, 2015, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/71150/francois-goguel/political-instability-in-france>.

¹⁹⁸ Richard Hart Sinnreich, "Awkward Partners: Military History and American Military Education," in *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession*, eds. Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 55.

Similarly, the condition of a friend or ally's political apparatus is equally, if not more, important. The political instability, or in the case of the Fourth Republic's inflexibility, can affect their support for US strategic goals and their willingness to accept an adaptive strategy. The greatest lesson learned from this monograph is that history can show trends over time. If we study, understand, and appreciate these trends and the experiences of others, then we can start to avoid past mistakes.

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