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AMERICA IN VIETNAM: CONTAINMENT LOST

BY

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20020502 026

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ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Roy A. Merrill III

TITLE: America in Vietnam: Containment Lost

FORMAT: Strategy Research Project

DATE: 09 April 2002

PAGES: 24

CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

This research project examines world events leading up to United States involvement in Vietnam with the purpose of determining whether these events were instrumental in the shaping of the decision to enter the conflict.

These events include the actions of nations, governments and individuals. The period of examination is limited to the years of the first Truman and first and second Eisenhower administrations.

This research will determine whether the United States' decision to enter the war in Vietnam was to protect her vital national interests or interests so skewed by the effect that world events had on political decision making that the interests were neither national nor vital.

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AMERICA IN VIETNAM: CONTAINMENT LOST

To gain an understanding of how America became involved in the Vietnam War, it is useful to understand the events of the period 1949 to 1960 that preceded her direct participation, which is defined here as the use of United States' combat forces, and their affect on the decision to enter the war in Indochina. This period was selected for study because it covers the United States' debut on the world stage poised for the first time to take a leadership role in world events. It was a time in America that was marked by McCarthyism, post war fiscal constraints, the stalemate of the Korean Armistice, the emergence of the Peoples Republic of China, Soviet "containment" as foreign policy and, to a lesser extent, an American reluctance to support France's attempt to regain its colonial empire.

The foreign policy of the United States during this period was consumed with how to deal with the expansion of communism, be it Soviet or Chinese. Containment, the Truman Doctrine and the domino theory had all become the pillars of a foreign policy designed but for one thing—halt the expansion of communism wherever it occurred.

America's entry into the conflict in Vietnam was unique in its Twentieth Century experience in that there was no cataclysmic event that provided instantaneous public support for war while at the same time silencing all remaining options. With events such as the sinking of the Lusitania, the attack on Pearl Harbor, North Korea's attack south and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, there always had been unequivocal provocation that preceded and drew America into the conflict. This was not the case for Vietnam.

America's early indirect involvement in Vietnam was both subtle and insidious and actually began before the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu on 7 May 1954. In an early effort to resist the forces of Ho Chi Minh and the north, known as the Vietminh, the Truman administration established a Military Assistance and Advisory Group in Vietnam in 1950 to assist the French.¹ While this may not have been direct involvement such as the insertion of troops, it was significant financial and material assistance and was surely as permanent and marked the beginning of America's stay in Vietnam that would span five presidencies, divide its population in a manner second only to the Civil War and squander far too many lives and untold resources.

America's understanding of events in Indochina was by no means clear. As late as the summer of 1953, given the French would capitulate within the year, pentagon officials after a visit to Vietnam still believed that "French General Henri Navarre's approach to the insurgency was correct and that he would decisively defeat the Vietminh guerrillas by 1955."² The CIA

offered the different view of the First Indochina War that even with American troops to help the French that the "guerrilla action could continue indefinitely."³ The CIA was not alone nor the last in this assessment. Then Senator Kennedy and President Eisenhower, each with a significant future role in the conduct of the Indochina Wars, shared the early view that a war in Vietnam could not be won.^{4 5} Although with the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the debate would be temporarily settled, this bifurcation of assessments, that would continue long after Dien Bien Phu, would haunt America until the very end of her experience in Vietnam that would be known internationally as the Second Indochina War.

To complicate matters further, Indochina was not the only thing on America's mind in the early 1950's, as "America's interests appeared threatened on many other fronts such as; Korea, Iran and Guatemala to cite a few."⁶ The common source of the trouble in these three countries, as well as Southeast Asia, rested with the communist expansionism of the Soviet Union supplemented recently by the Peoples Republic of China.

America's entry into the Second Indochina War, given the French loss of the first, clearly did not begin as others had. Rather than a galvanizing event such as the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, America allowed the foreign policy and actions of two different administrations, of alternating political persuasion, to drag her into a war where she would neither defeat nor contain communist expansionism in Southeast Asia.

This paper will investigate American foreign policy of the second Truman and Eisenhower administrations, the Geneva Accords, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, the early Diem regime, the actions of the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union and, most importantly, the American political landscape with the purpose of determining the root causes of American involvement in a war to contain communist expansionism in Southeast Asia.

CONTAINMENT

The importance of containment in the foreign policy of the late 1940's can not be overstated. Containment, in the classic "ends- ways- means" model, was the way for the United States to achieve her end which was stop communist expansionism wherever it existed. The means to accomplish the containment of communist expansion would begin with support of the French and end with the direct American involvement. Interestingly, containment in its purest sense was to be accomplished principally with the diplomatic and economic instruments of national power.

The idea of containment as a way to achieve the American end of effectively dealing with Soviet communist expansion began during the Truman administration with its origins grounded

in the famous Kennan "X" cable as a response to a Soviet supported insurgency in Greece in 1947.

The stage for what would occur in Indochina in the 1950's, however, was set in 1949 with Mao Tse-tung's defeat of Chiang Kai-shek in late 1949. The Truman administration's decision to not support the Nationalists in the final stage of their war against the Communists was inconsistent with their approach in Greece and earned them and the Democrats the credit for losing China to communism. This politically damaging turn of events, buttressed by the stalemate in Korea, on the eve of the 1952 presidential elections caused a strategic political response that would dominate American foreign policy in Southeast Asia for the coming two plus decades. Albeit after the loss in China and before the war in Korea began, on December 30, 1949, President Truman approved NSC 48/2 that set the course of United States Asian policy "to block further Communist expansion in Asia with particular attention given to the problem in French Indochina."⁷

With the Republican victory in the 1952 presidential election, the Eisenhower administration faced an uncertain situation in Indochina. The foreign policy that would draw the Eisenhower administration and United States into the First Indochina War was but a continuation of the Truman administration's policy. The first aspect of the new administration's foreign policy was to contain the Soviets in Western Europe through the French ratification of the European Defense Community Treaty and the second was to continue to support the French in Indochina. While ratification of the Treaty and the material support of the French effort appear separate, they were connected by the conduct of the Soviet Union and its effect on the French in Indochina as well as Europe.

The Eisenhower administration viewed the European Defense Community as a means to counter, therefore contain, the Soviet Union's expansionist intentions in Western Europe through the rearmament of Germany. While there were problems for America elsewhere, Europe which was where "East met West was the fulcrum of international power" and the focus of her foreign policy.⁸ Although France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg signed the European Defense Community Treaty in May of 1953, it would only become effective after the parliamentary requirements of each signatory country were met. The strength of the Treaty, designed to contain the Soviets, was contained in an important provision that stated "an attack against its members constituted an attack against NATO."⁹ Although France had signed the Treaty along with other countries in 1953, ratification was another matter as she had significant reservations with the European Defense Community provision for the rearmament of Germany.¹⁰ Given her situation in Indochina and understanding its importance

to the United States, France would use the ratification of the European Defense Community Treaty to garner American support for her efforts in Vietnam. As evidence of this contention, during a visit by Secretary of State Dulles in the spring of 1953, French Foreign Minister Bidault told Dulles that "active United States' support" of France's war efforts in Vietnam was necessary for French ratification of the European Defense Community Treaty.¹¹ The foreign policy of the United States with regard to the Soviet question can be summed up in a National Security Council position paper, NSC 160/1. This formalized the American view that Germany should be reunified and integrated into Europe and emphasized the importance of the European Defense Community.¹² France was essentially "playing both ends against the middle" as she needed the United States' support to win the war in Indochina and the Soviet Union's support to win in a negotiated settlement.

The ratification of the European Defense Community Treaty was for the Americans a means to accomplish the containment of the Soviet threat in Western Europe through a collective defense and thus became an important element of the Eisenhower administration's foreign policy and in effect an unintended continuation of the Truman Doctrine. This came with a price, as although the containment aspect of the Truman Doctrine was successful in Greece, it was clearly unsuccessful with the loss of China and the start of the Korean War.¹³ In the end, a policy that would be labeled as appeasement by the Republicans, in their defeat of the Democrats in 1952, became the principle way that the Americans would attempt to meet their objectives in Southeast Asia, which was to prevent further communist expansion and keep the next "domino" from falling.

With respect to the Eisenhower administration and the Indochina War, the President and Secretary of State were convinced that if the Vietminh were allowed to be successful, the balance of Indochina would surely fall, and hence publicly stated that Vietnam would be the first of many dominos that would fall in Southeast Asia giving birth to the "domino theory." With containment and the Truman Doctrine, the language of the previous administration, the Eisenhower administration chose to continue what was essentially the same policy but under a different name. Given the outcome in Korea, and the loss of China that came before, American foreign policy faced continued difficulty with what lay before it in Vietnam.¹⁴ Perhaps the adhesive that reinforced and sustained the American commitment to the policy of containment in Indochina in the coming years found its beginnings in politics as "statesmen and diplomats became prisoners of their own anti communist rhetoric" which kept America committed to her chosen path.¹⁵

Interestingly, George F. Kennan, credited with creating the modern concept of containment, while supportive of military action in the Korean Conflict was not so inclined when it came to Vietnam. He felt that it was not worth the damage it would do to American-Russian relations.¹⁶

DIEN BIEN PHU

The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu on 7 May 1954 was a watershed event as it was both a beginning and an ending for the First Indochina War. It marked the end of a seven-year French effort to retain Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in its Union of Associated States, which was a thin disguise for the remnants of France's colonial empire in Indochina. Equally significant, America's role, which had been limited to four years of indirect material support to the French, also changed to direct involvement as she began replacing France in Vietnam later that year.¹⁷

The Vietminh victory at Dien Bien Phu could not have come at a worse time. It led to the capitulation by the French at home and on the battlefield in Indochina just as her faith was about to be decided at the table of negotiation in Geneva. Her "strategic center of gravity, which was France's popular and political support for the war, was destroyed."¹⁸ The damage, however, was not limited to the battlefield, as the effect was felt in her other Indochinese colonies as well as in her relationship with the United States. With the outcome of the Geneva Conference the loss was not limited to Vietnam as Laos and Cambodia were, for all intent and purpose, also lost at Dien Bien Phu. The United States, on the other hand, was clearly not concerned with the loss of France's colonies, as it had opposed the Associated States as a guise for colonialism from the beginning, but greatly regretted the loss to the Vietminh, which was tantamount to a loss to communism and validation of the "domino theory" and a blow to the effectiveness of containment the United States had exercised through her material support to the French. France's already tenuous negotiating position at Geneva, given her battlefield accomplishments, was decimated with the loss at Dien Bien Phu and would, much to the vexation of the United States, necessitate her looking to the Soviets for help brokering any deal that might preserve what was left of her influence in Indochina.

As a footnote to the unfortunate turn of events, the United States who did provide significant material assistance to the France prior to Dien Bien Phu, when asked for bombs and troops in the waning hours of the battle did not respond. In a last minute attempt to assist the French at Dien Bien Phu, the Eisenhower administration put forth a plan for a coalition response, which was demanded by Congress, known as "United Action." The plan which was in

the category of "too little, too late" was doomed from the start as neither Great Britain nor France, key participants of any successful operation, gave their support.¹⁹

THE GENEVA ACCORDS

With the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, on the day the Indochina phase of the conference began, the world turned its attention to the Geneva Conference for a solution to the First Indochina War not completely achieved by armed conflict. Although the world might have been ready, the parties to an agreement were not. Issues such as who would be present at such a conference and events in Europe, such as the ratification of the European Defense Community Treaty, posed difficult roadblocks and detractors to the intended outcomes of the conference.

For the United States, China's participation in the conference at Geneva posed the greatest problem. Still dealing with the "loss of China" in 1949 and the outcome of the Korean War, America was adamantly opposed to participation by the Peoples Republic of China. The Eisenhower administration who had used these two events to make the Democrats look soft on communism in the recent election that gave them the presidency could not sit at the table with the Chinese Communist and remain loyal to their election rhetoric. Equally important, China's participation in the Geneva Conference amounted to the international recognition of the government of the People's Republic of China, which was a step the United States was unwilling to take.²⁰ Eventually the United States after great resistance was unable to prevail and took the position to participate as an observer and would in the end only "take note" of the Geneva accords and agree not to overturn them vice adopt them as Russia and China desired.²¹

France was under even greater strain as she faced the prospect of losing Vietnam as a colony and the follow on effect on her other colonies as well as problems closer to home such as the loss of popular support for her defense of colonialism. During this same period the European Defense Community plan, which provided rearmament for Germany, was undergoing the ratification process in Europe. France was expected to ratify the agreement, perceived as required for continued American support, but knew that ratification would "cost the French whatever cooperation the Russians were prepared to give" on a settlement on Indochina which was essential in a beneficial outcome.²² In the end, France, being unable politically to ratify the European Defense Treaty, negotiated in her best interests a deal that would eventually end her involvement in Indochina.

Despite the fact that the European Defense Community would not be ratified, the Chinese did participate in the conference, with the attendant international recognition, and America did not, an agreement was reached that provided for: the partition of Vietnam at the 17th parallel; the removal of all French forces from the northern section of Vietnam as well as northern Vietminh forces from the south; the neutrality of Cambodia and Laos; prohibition of increased military materials on either side; the creation of an International Control Commission made up of delegates from India, Canada and Poland; and a requirement for reunification elections by July 20, 1956.²³

Interestingly, the People's Republic of China through their representative Chou En-Lai played a significant role in the outcome of the Accords. When negotiations became stalled over the timing of the reunification elections and, more importantly, the location of the line of partition between the north and south that fairly represented the battlefield gains of the Vietminh, the Chinese convinced the Vietminh to accept a less favorable position.²⁴ These two aspects of the Accord did provide a pause that would allow the belligerents to recover from the conflict. Diem, who denounced the Accords the day after they were signed, benefited greatly from the outcome of the Accords for as long as the partition remained in place it "provided the major world powers an imperfect but acceptable solution to a dangerous situation" that ensured Diem's survival.²⁵

Faced with what appeared to be a dismal failure of foreign policy by the Eisenhower administration and the need to set things right before the comparison to Democratic effectiveness was made, Secretary of State Dulles set out to create a coalition to replace the failed "United Action" devised to provide last minute military assistance to the French forces at Dien Bien Phu. That coalition would be the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization which would open the door for increased American involvement in Southeast Asia.

SOUTHEAST ASIA TREATY ORGANIZATION

Secretary of State Dulles began work on the development of an organization to arrest communist expansion in Southeast Asia almost immediately after the Geneva Accords were signed. By September 8, 1954, the process that began in Manila a few months earlier was complete with birth of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization with France, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, Pakistan and the United States all pledging to defend Southeast Asia.²⁶ Although the former French colonies of Laos, Cambodia and the State of Vietnam, as it was known at that time, were not included in the group of signatories because they were prohibited by the Geneva Accords, they became known as the "protocol states" and were extended protection because they were within the area of the treaty coverage. That area

was loosely defined as the general area of Southeast Asia south of 21 degrees 30 minutes north latitude excluding Taiwan and Hong Kong.

The treaty completed the ratification process by the signatory countries and became effective February 4, 1955. How effective it actually was depended on who you were. The most satisfied party was the Eisenhower administration. For the Americans, the Southeast Asia Treaty gave them everything that they were unable to achieve with "United Action" as a vehicle to resist communist aggression in Indochina and as a means to continue its policy of containment necessary to achieve its national objective of stopping the expansion of communism wherever it erupted.

Perhaps a greater signal to the international community was the United States' determination to deal decisively with the communist problem. Eisenhower could not afford to look soft on communism given that McCarthyism that continued to grasp the United States and the fact that he had run successfully against Stevenson in the recent presidential campaign over the issue that the Democrats had "lost China" to the Communists in 1949. The Geneva decision which was followed swiftly with the advent of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization provided Eisenhower two outcomes that would influence his foreign policy. It gave him both a plausible position against the French defeat at the negotiating table, as Eisenhower was on the record opposing the Accords, as well as placed a stake in the ground for an American response with future acts of aggression by the Vietminh in Vietnam.²⁷

On the foreign policy front the Southeast Asia Treaty gave much more. It validated the Eisenhower administration's "domino theory" and confirmed the continued need for containment as a means to deal with further communist aggression.²⁸ Clearly part of the first domino had fallen with the loss of the northern half of Vietnam, which was more palatable to the American public than the entire nation. The treaty provided the Eisenhower administration with means, a coalition required by congress, to act militarily to contain further communist expansion in Southeast Asia. But there was a dark side as by putting all their eggs in the containment basket, Dulles and company condemned themselves and perhaps those who followed to a policy that would end in American armed conflict and defeat in Indochina.

NGO DINH DIEM

With the end of the official French involvement in Indochina after the Geneva Accords, all parties began a search for a replacement for the French puppet, Bao Dai who was the head of government for the State of Vietnam as it was called after the signing of the Accords. The United States, favoring an anti French candidate, sought the change to isolate itself from the

position that it had been supporting France's attempt to regain her colonies after World War II, which had troubled both Truman and Eisenhower greatly. Of even greater importance to the United States, would be the requirement that the State of Vietnam's new leader would be a staunch anti-communist.

On those two counts, Ngo Dinh Diem was ideal which was fortunate because the choice of candidates that met the requirements was limited given that most Vietnamese were either in the French or Communist camp. Having left Vietnam on several occasions rather than serve the French and having lost a brother to the Vietminh, as well as, being marked for murder himself by the Vietminh, Diem appeared the best candidate for the United States. It also helped that he had a reputation as incorruptible.²⁹

Diem was not unknown to the United States before 1954. Before returning to France, he was exiled in the United States while he attended seminary and became known to the likes of Senators John F. Kennedy and Mike Mansfield as well as Cardinal Spellman.

Unfortunately, as the first Premier of the State of Vietnam and later the President of South Vietnam, Diem left much to be desired. Obviously not a favorite of the French given his anti-French history or those sympathetic to the Communists, Diem also had difficulty building consensus among his own people. Early in his tenure he also alienated the United States with his early lackluster performance so much so that Eisenhower, on the occasion of a religious sect uprising that threatened the Diem government, was on the verge of removing American support to his administration. In the spring of 1955, Diem's principle American detractor was Ambassador J. Lawton Collins who was later removed when the Premier was able to stabilize the situation, with the help of the CIA, and regain the confidence of the Eisenhower administration.³⁰

During this period Diem was not without his American supporters. A group chartered to help with refugee resettlement in Vietnam, "The American Friends of Vietnam," with the support of John Kennedy, Mike Mansfield and Cardinal Spellman evolved into an effective lobby for Diem in Washington.³¹ The group later expanded to include numerous prominent Catholics, soldier diplomats such as retired General John W. O'Daniel, members of the American Socialist Party, wealthy business individuals and academics many of which with connections to the highest levels of the United States' government that afforded Diem considerable support and access.

Diem's performance with regard to the Geneva Accords is noteworthy. It is fair to say that he "persistently ignored the terms of the political settlement afforded at Geneva."³² Diem claimed that since the agreement was between the French and the Democratic Republic of

Vietnam, he was not bound by its terms. Specifically, Diem refused to consult with the Vietminh on the subject of reunification elections in 1955 and did not allow the elections to take place in 1956 as stipulated in the Geneva Accords. Given the population advantage in the north, had the elections occurred as scheduled by the Accords the Vietminh would have easily gained control of Vietnam, which was a result not acceptable to Diem or the United States.

In the long run, Diem proved an unreliable partner, or surrogate, in the efforts of the United States to contain communist expansion in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Never able to muster the popular support to form an effective government which was deemed essential by the American military to defeat the forces of the Vietminh, Diem remained ineffective in his country's fight against the communist north. President Diem was assassinated by his own countrymen in November of 1963 shortly after the United States withdrew its support.

THE SOVIET UNION'S AND CHINA'S ROLE

To understand the role that China and the Soviet Union played in the First and Second Indochina wars, it is useful first to understand the relationship of those countries vis-à-vis the United States. All three countries had, within the previous five years or less in the case of China, just taken their respective positions on the world stage when America became involved in the First Indochina War at the side of France. It could hardly be said that the United States got along with either.

By the time America entered the First Indochina War, through its significant material support of France, the People's Republic of China had developed a significant but subordinate relationship with the Soviet Union. From the beginning each saw the United States as a threat in their respective sphere of influence, which strengthened their bond as long as Stalin was alive.

With Nikita Khrushchev, following Stalin's death, relations between the Chinese and the Soviets deteriorated rapidly setting conditions that would adversely affect the support that the Vietminh received until the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. The most significant factor, and in effect the principle reason, in this change was the perceived warming of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union which led the Chinese to suspect the Soviets were planning against them.

Even before the development of her difficulties with the Soviet Union, China harbored deep dislike for the United States. The genesis of this animosity can be found in the six years between the birth of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954. During this period, the two countries faced off over at least seven issues of

contention for both sides. The initial event, that set the stage for their future and set their relationship, was the American support of the Nationalist Chinese during the revolution, which was followed by a close second, the Korean War. The two events drove the two countries apart and were the source of considerable animosity that provided the necessary fuel for the fervent American anti-communist policies of the time. Although not as significant, China took considerable issue with American interference in Laos and Cambodia as well as her attempted influence in India and occupation of Japan all considered by China as within her sphere of potential influence. The final points of contention were America's successful blocking of People's Republic of China's international recognition and stationing of troops in Japan and Korea all within striking distance of the Chinese mainland.³³

The People's Republic of China's poor relationship with the United States, from its beginning in 1949, made it the ideal candidate to support the Vietminh with their struggle initially against the French and then the Americans. This was not the case. China with the Soviets in Manchuria, the Americans in Korea and the French in Indochina, was concerned with the security of her borders and probably more importantly the economic reconstruction of China in that early period of her history.³⁴ These factors tempered the People's Republic of China support for the Vietminh significantly in the years before the Geneva Accords. The adequateness of the support to Vietminh after the French withdrew may be debatable by both sides, but at the end of the day their common opponent, the United States, sought a settlement at the negotiating tables of Paris, not unlike the French, and subsequently withdrew.

THE AMERICAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

To understand the strategic decisions that were made during the Truman and early Eisenhower administrations, it is useful to understand the political climate that produced the decisions that would guide the actions of the United States in Southeast Asia for the coming years. The Congressional election of 1950 and the presidential election of 1952 that pitted Robert Taft against Dwight Eisenhower for the Republican nominee who faced Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic candidate, offers great insight into the American political climate during the period under review.

The Congressional elections of 1950 resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Republican with the gain of 5 seats in the Senate and a gain of 20 seats in the House of Representatives. The campaign was decided largely on the issues of communism in the United

States, the loss of China to the Communists, the Korean War and the Soviet's detonation of a nuclear device all seen as jeopardizing America's national security.³⁵

The campaign issues of communist subversion in the American government, international communist expansion and growth of the federal government also dominated and decided the presidential election of 1952.³⁶ Although Eisenhower had perhaps not been as strong on anti-communism as the right wing of the Republican party desired, the Democrats and their candidate Stevenson's record documented that, domestically, the government had been infiltrated by communist or sympathizers and, internationally, the policies of a democratic administration had been unable to prevent the "loss of China" or produce a favorable outcome in Korea while increasing the size of the federal government.

Ironically, the very issue that helped Eisenhower defeat Stevenson in 1952, which was his lack of a staunch anti-communist stance, would turn against him in the early years of his administration. Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, who Eisenhower had grudgingly endorsed for reelection, directed his fervent anti-communist actions against Eisenhower which kept the issue at the forefront of political policy making. What followed was a series of events that included McCarthy's attempts to block Eisenhower's political appointees to the continuations of purges of suspected anti-communists in government. Most notable, and perhaps most damaging, was the purge of the China specialists in the State Department which created an "official ignorance" of Asia that ostensibly helped to compel the United States into the quagmire of Vietnam.³⁷

CONCLUSION

The United States' War in Vietnam, the Second Indochina War, ended in 1973 just as the French in 1954 only at a much greater cost. Although the end was the same, America's entry was quite different from the French effort which was to regain and sustain her colonial past enjoyed before World War Two.

From the beginning, which can be traced to the Truman presidency, America's foreign policy actions in Asia as well as the rest of the world, settled on her preoccupation with the stopping of the spread of communism in the free world. The evidence of the spread was prolific and undeniable. China in 1949 and Korea in 1950, just to name a few recent failures, played major roles in shaping a foreign policy sufficiently strong to guide and sustain America's course in Vietnam until 1973.

Domestically, America fared no better having endured the wringer of McCarthyism, which had infected the entire country from the State Department to Hollywood. Foreign policy was not

spared nor were domestic politics, for to appear weak on communism, internationally or at home, had brought unacceptable political consequences to both the executive and congressional branches of the American government. The role of Truman in the "loss of China" to the communists and its effect on the 1952 presidential elections was not lost on President Eisenhower or future Presidents Kennedy and Johnson as it was never a question of whether we would oppose communism in Indochina but rather how and to what degree.

While it is relatively easy to grasp and understand the intentions of the United States and, perhaps the Vietminh, where Indochina is concerned, it is not the same for the Chinese or Soviets. What is certain is that through the decade of the 1950's both the Soviets and the communist Chinese were occupied with other things besides Indochina.

The Soviets were dealing with matters closer to home and in fact provided the Vietminh little more than encouragement in their struggle against the French and the Americans after Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Accords. The Soviets faced the United States daily in Europe and had no desire to expand their uneasy relationship into Indochina any more than was necessary.

The People's Republic of China was barely a year old when the United States began supporting the French in their fight against the Vietminh in 1950. China too had obvious, and perhaps greater, problems of her own that required her immediate attention. The major internal problem, besides consolidation of power, was the economic reconstruction, albeit socialist, of China, which was necessary to sustain the communist takeover. A second area of concern was China's borders, which were tentative with Manchuria, Korea and Vietnam, which had seldom enjoyed good relations with China. The final concern for China was her desire for international recognition, which was and would continue to be blocked by the United States with China's continued support for the Vietminh's attempt to gain control of all of Vietnam.

The Geneva Accords provide an excellent window into the positions of the major powers in 1954 and subsequent years. Through this window an alternate appraisal of the situation comes into view, which puts forward the position that given the turbulent Vietnamese history with China that the West had over estimated Vietnam's probability as the first domino to fall to communist expansionism.

The Soviets had only one purpose at Geneva, which was to prevent the French from ratifying the European Defense Community Treaty, which if ratified would thwart Soviet efforts in Western Europe. The Soviets had provided little but moral support to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the years that led up to the Geneva Conference and used the opportunity to act in

her best interest which was to use her influence to benefit the French at the Vietminh expense, if necessary.

The French had lost the will to fight and only wanted out of the First Indochina War with as much remaining influence in the area as possible. As for the ratification of the European Defense Community Treaty, France had no desire to see Germany rearmed. For France, non-ratification of the Treaty made the best of a bad situation with the ire of the United States as the only cost to be paid.

The Chinese like the Soviets were less concerned with the Vietminh and were more interested in their internal problems. They were pleased with the outcome of the Conference and welcomed the pause afforded by the planned elections of the Accords as an opportunity to strengthen their movement as well as the propaganda value and associated international recognition of participating in a negotiated peace in Indochina.

The Vietminh of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam came away from Geneva the biggest loser. Although she came with the stronger negotiating position as the Indochina phase of the Geneva Conference began, she came away from the negotiating table with much less than her battlefield position dictated. The partition line of the 17th Parallel did not reflect her combat gains and a two-year delay in the reunification election was not to her benefit as it only allowed the Diem regime to consolidate power with the help of the United States.

The United States, although she would publicly malign the outcome of the Geneva Accords, did as well as could be expected given she was only an "observer" and the agreement was between and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and France who, it must be remembered, had an arrangement with the Soviets. In the end the loss of half of Vietnam to the communists was somewhat palatable and perhaps proof that containment, properly exercised by the United States, could prevent the fall of the remaining half of the first Southeast Asian "domino."

In the final analysis, America became involved in Vietnam because on a political level it was impossible not to. The Eisenhower administration, that used Truman's inability to stop the spread of communism with the "loss of China" as a political bludgeon in the 1952 presidential election, soon found itself in the same quagmire with similar performance. If politicians remember anything, they remember the effect that an issue such as communist expansionism had on the Congressional elections of 1950 and devoted themselves to preventing a reoccurrence. Truman's lesson drove the Eisenhower administration to accept nothing less than the complete halt of communist expansion in Vietnam, and the remainder of Southeast Asia, at whatever cost.

The strategic objective for the United States in Vietnam which began as the containment of communism in the Kennan sense, evolved into something altogether different. Unfortunately, success in defeating communism became inextricably linked to American political success, which pushed administration decision makers to the use of the ultimate instrument of national power, the military, having discarded the diplomatic and economic instruments long ago. President Johnson said what all the presidents of the Vietnam era probably thought, when he said, "he would not be the first American president to lose a war."

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ENDNOTES

¹ Rolf Steininger, "John Foster Dulles, the European Defense Community, and the German Question," in John Foster Dulles and the Diplomacy of the Cold War, ed. Richard H. Immerman, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 79

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⁴ Senator John F. Kennedy, The Strategy of Peace (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 59.

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¹⁵ Paul M. Kattenburg, The Vietnam Trauma in American Foreign Policy, 1945-1975 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction, 1980), 22.

¹⁶ Anders Stephanson, Kennan and the Art of Foreign Policy (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), 264.

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³³ Donald S. Zagoria, Vietnam Triangle: Moscow/Peking/Hanoi (New York: Pegasus, 1967), 25.

³⁴ Duiker, 23.

³⁵ Alonzo L. Hamby, Man of the People: A Life of Harry Truman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 549.

³⁶ Jeff Broadwater, Eisenhower & the Anti-Communist Crusade (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 43.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

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