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Summary

INDOCHINA IN U.S. WARTIME POLICY, 1941-1945

Significant misunderstanding has developed concerning U.S. policy towards Indochina in the decade of World War II and its aftermath. A number of historians have held that anti-colonialism governed U.S. policy and actions up until 1950, when containment of communism supervened. For example, Bernard Fall (e.g. in his 1967 postmortem book, *Last Reflections on a War*) categorized American policy toward Indochina in six periods: "(1) Anti-Vichy, 1940-1945; (2) Pro-Viet Minh, 1945-1946; (3) Non-involvement, 1946-June 1950; (4) Pro-French, 1950-July 1954; (5) Non-military involvement, 1954-November 1961; (6) Direct and full involvement, 1961- ." Commenting that the first four periods are those "least known even to the specialist," Fall developed the thesis that President Roosevelt was determined "to eliminate the French from Indochina at all costs," and had pressured the Allies to establish an international trusteeship to administer Indochina until the nations there were ready to assume full independence. This obdurate anti-colonialism, in Fall's view, led to cold refusal of American aid for French resistance fighters, and to a policy of promoting Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh as the alternative to restoring the French bonds. But, the argument goes, Roosevelt died, and principle faded; by late 1946, anti-colonialism mutated into neutrality. According to Fall: "Whether this was due to a deliberate policy in Washington or, conversely, to an absence of policy, is not quite clear. . . . The United States, preoccupied in Europe, ceased to be a diplomatic factor in Indochina until the outbreak of the Korean War." In 1950, anti-communism asserted itself, and in a remarkable volte-face, the United States threw its economic and military resources behind France in its war against the Viet Minh. Other commentators, conversely-prominent among them, the historians of the Viet Minh-have described U.S. policy as consistently condoning and assisting the reimposition of French colonial power in Indochina, with a concomitant disregard for the nationalist aspirations of the Vietnamese.

Neither interpretation squares with the record; the United States was less concerned over Indochina, and less purposeful than either assumes. Ambivalence characterized U.S. policy during World War II, and was the root of much subsequent misunderstanding. On the one hand, the U.S. repeatedly reassured the French that its colonial possessions would be returned to it after the war. On the other hand, the U.S. broadly committed itself in the Atlantic Charter to support national self-determination, and President Roosevelt personally and vehemently advocated independence for Indochina. F.D.R. regarded Indochina as a flagrant example of onerous colonialism which should be turned over to a trusteeship rather than returned to France. The President discussed this proposal with the Allies at the Cairo, Teheran, and Yalta Conferences and received the endorsement of Chiang Kai-shek and Stalin; Prime Minister Churchill demurred. At one point, Fall reports, the President offered General de Gaulle Filipino advisers to help France establish a "more progressive policy in Indochina"--which offer the General received in "Pensive Silence."

Ultimately, U.S. Policy was governed neither by the principles of the Atlantic Charter, nor by the President's anti-colonialism but by the dictates of military strategy and by British intransigence on the colonial issue. The United States, concentrating its forces against Japan, accepted British military primacy in Southeast Asia, and divided Indochina at 16th parallel between the British and the Chinese for the purposes of occupation. . U.S. commanders serving with the British and Chinese, while instructed to avoid ostensible alignment with the French, were permitted to conduct operations in Indochina which did not detract from the campaign against Japan. Consistent with F.D.R.'s

guidance, U.S. did provide modest aid to French--and Viet Minh--resistance forces in Vietnam after March, 1945, but refused to provide shipping to move Free French troops there. Pressed by both the British and the French for clarification U.S. intentions regarding the political status of Indochina, F.D.R. maintained that "it is a matter for postwar."

The President's trusteeship concept foundered as early as March 1943, when the U.S. discovered that the British, concerned over possible prejudice to Commonwealth policy, proved to be unwilling to join in any declaration on trusteeships, and indeed any statement endorsing national independence which went beyond the Atlantic Charter's vague "respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live." So sensitive were the British on this point that the Dumbarton Oaks Conference of 1944, at which the blueprint for the postwar international system was negotiated, skirted the colonial issue, and avoided trusteeships altogether. At each key decisional point at which the President could have influenced the course of events toward trusteeship--in relations with the U.K., in casting the United Nations Charter, in instructions to allied commanders--he declined to do so; hence, despite his lip service to trusteeship and anti-colonialism, F.D.R. in fact assigned to Indochina a status correlative to Burma, Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia: free territory to be reconquered and returned to its former owners. Non-intervention by the U.S. on behalf of the Vietnamese was tantamount to acceptance of the French return. On April 3, 1945, with President Roosevelt's approval, Secretary of State Stettinius issued a statement that, as a result of the Yalta talks, the U.S. would look to trusteeship as a postwar arrangement only for "territories taken from the enemy," and for "territories as might voluntarily be placed under trusteeship." By context, and by the Secretary of State's subsequent interpretation, Indochina fell into the latter category. Trusteeship status for Indochina became, then, a matter for French determination.

Shortly following President Truman's entry into office, the U.S. assured France that it had never questioned, "even by implication, French sovereignty over Indo-China." The U.S. policy was to press France for progressive measures in Indochina, but to expect France to decide when its peoples would be ready for independence; "such decisions would preclude the establishment of a trusteeship in Indochina except with the consent of the French Government." These guidelines, established by June, 1945--before the end of the war—remained fundamental to U.S. policy.

With British cooperation, French military forces were reestablished in South Vietnam in September, 1945. The U.S. expressed dismay at the outbreak of guerrilla warfare which followed, and pointed out that while it had no intention of opposing the reestablishment of French control, "it is not the policy of this government to assist the French to reestablish their control over Indochina by force, and the willingness of the U.S. to see French control reestablished assumes that [the] French claim to have the support of the population in Indochina is borne out by future events." Through the fall and winter of 1945-1946, the U.S. received a series of requests from Ho Chi Minh for intervention in Vietnam; these were, on the record, unanswered. However, the U.S. steadfastly refused to assist the French military effort, e.g., forbidding American flag vessels to carry troops or war materiel to Vietnam. On March 6, 1946, the French and Ho signed an Accord in which Ho acceded to French reentry into North Vietnam in return for recognition of the DRV as a "Free State," part of the French Union. As of April 1946, allied occupation of Indochina was officially terminated, and the U.S. acknowledged to France that all of Indochina had reverted to French control. Thereafter, the problems of U.S. policy toward Vietnam were dealt with in the context of the U.S. relationship with France.

U.S. NEUTRALITY IN THE FRANCO-VIET MINH WAR, 1946-1949

In late 1946, the Franco-Viet Minh War began in earnest. A chart (pp. 37 ff) summarizes the principal events in the relations between France and Vietnam, 1946-1949, describing the milestones along the route by which France, on the one hand, failed to reach any lasting accommodation with Ho Chi Minh, and, on the other hand, erected the "Bao Dai solution" in its stead. The U.S. during these years continued to regard the conflict as fundamentally a matter for French resolution. The U.S. in its representations to France deplored the prospect of protracted war, and urged meaningful concessions to Vietnamese nationalism. However, the U.S., deterred by the history of Ho's communist affiliation, always stopped short of endorsing Ho Chi Minh or the Viet Minh. Accordingly, U.S. policy gravitated with that of France toward the Bao Dai solution. At no point was the U.S. prepared to adopt an openly interventionist course. To have done so would have clashed with the expressed British view that Indochina was an exclusively French concern, and played into the hands of France's extremist political parties of both the Right and the Left. The U.S. was particularly apprehensive lest by intervening it strengthen the political position of French Communists. Beginning in

1946 and 1947, France and Britain were moving toward an anti-Soviet alliance in Europe and the U.S. was reluctant to press a potentially divisive policy. The U.S. [words illegible] Vietnamese nationalism relatively insignificant compared with European economic recovery and collective security from communist domination.

It is not as though the U.S. was not prepared to act in circumstances such as these. For example, in the 1945-1946 dispute over Dutch possessions in Indonesia, the U.S. actively intervened against its Dutch ally. In this case, however, the intervention was in concert with the U.K. (which steadfastly refused similar action in Indochina) and against the Netherlands, a much less significant ally in Europe than France. In wider company and at projected lower cost, the U.S. could and did show a determination to act against colonialism.

The resultant U.S. policy has most often been termed "neutrality." It was, however, also consistent with the policy of deferring to French volition announced by President Roosevelt's Secretary of State on 3 April 1945. It was a policy characterized by the same indecision that had marked U.S. wartime policy. Moreover, at the time, Indochina appeared to many to be one region in the troubled postwar world in which the U.S. might enjoy the luxury of abstention.

In February, 1947, early in the war, the U.S. Ambassador in Paris was instructed to reassure Premier Ramadier of the "very friendliest feelings" of the U.S. toward France and its interest in supporting France in recovering its economic, political and military strength:

In spite any misunderstanding which might have arisen in minds French in regard to our position concerning Indochina they must appreciate that we have fully recognized France's sovereign position in that area and we do not wish to have it appear that we are in any way endeavoring undermine that position, and French should know it is our desire to be helpful and we stand ready assist any appropriate way we can to find solution for Indochinese problem. At same time we cannot shut our eyes to fact that there are two sides this problem and that our reports indicate both a lack French understanding of other side (more in Saigon than in Paris) and continued existence dangerously Outmoded colonial outlook and methods in area. Furthermore, there is no escape from fact that trend of times is to effect that colonial empires in XIX Century sense are rapidly becoming thing of past. Action Brit in India and Burma and Dutch in Indonesia are outstanding examples this trend, and French themselves took cognizance of it both in new Constitution and in their agreements with Vietnam. On other hand we do not lose sight fact that Ho Chi Minh has direct Communist connections and it should be obvious that we are not interested in seeing colonial empire administrations supplanted by philosophy and political organizations emanating from and controlled by Kremlin. . . .

Frankly we have no solution of problem to suggest. It is basically matter for two parties to work out themselves and from your reports and those from Indochina we are led to feel that both parties have endeavored to keep door open to some sort of settlement. We appreciate fact that Vietnam started present fighting in Indochina on December 19 and that this action has made it more difficult for French to adopt a position of generosity and conciliation. Nevertheless we hope that French will find it possible to be more than generous in trying to find a solution.

The U.S. anxiously followed the vacillations of France's policy toward Bao Dai, exhorting the French to translate the successive "agreements" they contracted with him into an effective nationalist alternative to Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh. Increasingly, the U.S. sensed that French unwillingness to concede political power to Vietnamese heightened the possibility of the Franco-Viet Minh conflict being transformed into a struggle with Soviet imperialism. U.S. diplomats were instructed to "apply such persuasion and/or pressure as is best calculated [to] produce desired result [of France's] unequivocally and promptly approving the principle of Viet independence." France was notified that the U.S. was willing to extend financial aid to a Vietnamese government not a French puppet, "but could not give consideration of altering its present policy in this regard unless real progress [is] made in reaching non-Communist solution in Indochina based on cooperation of true nationalists of that country."

As of 1948, however, the U.S. remained uncertain that Ho and the Viet Minh were in league with the Kremlin. A State Department appraisal of Ho Chi Minh in July 1948, indicated that:

1. Depts info indicates that Ho Chi Minh is Communist. His long and well-known record in Comintern

during twenties and thirties, continuous support by French Communist newspaper Humanite since 1945, praise given him by Radio Moscow (which for past six months has been devoting increasing attention to Indochina) and fact he has been called "leading communist" by recent Russian publications as well as Daily Worker makes any other conclusion appear to be wishful thinking.

2. Dept has no evidence of direct link between Ho and Moscow but assumes it exists, nor is it able evaluate amount pressure or guidance Moscow exerting. We have impression Ho must be given or is retaining large degree latitude. Dept considers that USSR accomplishing its immediate aims in Indochina by (a) pinning down large numbers of French troops, (b) causing steady drain upon French economy thereby tending retard recovery and dissipate ECA assistance to France, and (c) denying to world generally surpluses which Indochina normally has available thus perpetuating conditions of disorder and shortages which favorable to growth communism. Furthermore, Ho seems quite capable of retaining and even strengthening his grip on Indochina with no outside assistance other than continuing procession of French puppet govts.

In the fall of 1948, the Office of Intelligence Research in the Department of State conducted a survey of communist influence in Southeast Asia. Evidence of Kremlin-directed conspiracy was found in virtually all countries except Vietnam:

Since December 19, 1946, there have been continuous conflicts between French forces and the nationalist government of Vietnam. This government is a coalition in which avowed communists hold influential positions. Although the French admit the influence of this government, they have consistently refused to deal with its leader, Ho Chi Minh, on the grounds that he is a communist.

To date the Vietnam press and radio have not adopted an anti-American position. It is rather the French colonial press that has been strongly anti-American and has freely accused the U.S. of imperialism in Indochina to the point of approximating the official Moscow position. Although the Vietnam radio has been closely watched for a new position toward the U.S., no change has appeared so far. Nor does there seem to have been any split within the coalition government of Vietnam. . . .

Evaluation. If there is a Moscow directed conspiracy in Southeast Asia, Indochina is an anomaly so far. Possible explanations are:

1. No rigid directives have been issued by Moscow
2. The Vietnam government considers that it has no rightist elements that must be purged.
3. The Vietnam Communists are not subservient to the foreign policies pursued by Moscow.
4. A special dispensation for the Vietnam government has been arranged in Moscow.

Of these possibilities, the first and fourth seem most likely.

ORIGINS OF U.S. INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM

The collapse of the Chinese Nationalist government in 1949 sharpened American apprehensions over communist expansion in the Far East, and hastened U.S. measures to counter the threat posed by Mao's China. The U.S. sought to create and employ policy instruments similar to those it was bringing into play against the Soviets in Europe: collective security organizations, economic aid, and military assistance. For example, Congress, in the opening paragraphs of the law it passed in 1949 to establish the first comprehensive military assistance program, expressed itself "as favoring the creation by the free countries and the free peoples of the Far East of a joint organization, consistent with the Charter of the United Nations, to establish a program of self-help and mutual cooperation designed to develop their economic and social well-being, to safeguard basic rights and liberties, and to protect their security and independence.." But, the negotiating of such an organization among the disparate powers and political entities of the Far East was inherently

more complex a matter than the North Atlantic Treaty nations had successfully faced. The U.S. decided that the impetus for collective security in Asia should come from the Asians, but by late 1949, it also recognized that action was necessary in Indochina. Thus, in the closing months of 1949, the course of U.S. policy was set to block further communist expansion in Asia: by collective security if the Asians were forthcoming; by collaboration with major European allies and commonwealth nations, if possible; but bilaterally if necessary. On that policy course lay the Korean War of 1950-1953, the forming of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization of 1954, and the progressively deepening U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

January and February, 1950, were pivotal months. The French took the first concrete steps toward transferring public administration to Bao Dai's State of Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh denied the legitimacy of the latter, proclaiming the DRV as the "only legal government of the Vietnam people," and was formally recognized by Peking and Moscow. On 29 January 1950, the French Nation, Assembly approved legislation granting autonomy to the State of Vietnam. On February 1, 1950, Secretary of State Acheson made the following public statement:

The recognition by the Kremlin of Ho Chi Minh's communist movement in Indochina comes as a surprise. The Soviet acknowledgment of this movement should remove any illusions as to the "nationalist" nature of Ho Chi Minh's aims and reveals Ho in his true colors as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina.

Although timed in an effort to cloud the transfer of sovereignty France to the legal Governments of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, we have every reason to believe that those legal governments will proceed in their development toward stable governments representing the true nationalist sentiments of more than 20 million peoples of Indochina.

French action in transferring sovereignty to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia has been in process for some time. Following French ratification, which is expected within a few days, the way will be open for recognition of these local governments by the countries of the world whose policies support the development of genuine national independence in former colonial areas. . . .

Formal French ratification of Vietnamese independence was announced 4 February 1950; on the same date, President Truman approved U.S. recognition for Bao Dai. French requests for aid in Indochina followed within a few weeks. On May 8, 1950, the Secretary of State announced that:

The United States Government convinced that neither national independence nor democratic evolution exist in any area dominated by Soviet imperialism, considers the situation to be such as to warrant its according economic aid and military equipment to the Associated State of Indochina and to France in order to assist them in restoring stability and permitting these states to pursue their peaceful and democratic development.

The U.S. thereafter was deeply involved in the developing war. But it cannot be said that the extension of aid was a volte-face of U.S. policy precipitated solely by the events of 1950. It appears rather as the denouement of a cohesive progression of U.S. policy decisions stemming from the 1945 determination that France should decide the political future of Vietnamese nationalism. Neither the modest O.S.S. aid to the Viet Minh in 1945, nor the U.S. refusal to abet French recourse to arms the same year, signaled U.S. backing of Ho Chi Minh. To the contrary, the U.S. was very wary of Ho, apprehensive lest Paris' imperialism be succeeded by control from Moscow. Uncertainty characterized the U.S. attitude toward Ho through 1948, but the U.S. incessantly pressured France to accommodate "genuine" Vietnamese nationalism and independence. In early 1950, both the apparent fruition of the Bao Dai solution, and the patent alignment of the DRV with the USSR and Communist China, impelled the U.S. to more direct intervention in Vietnam.

(End of Summary)

1. INDOCHINA IN U.S. WARTIME POLICY, 1941-1945

In the interval between the fall of France in 1940, and the Pearl Harbor attack in December, 1941, the United States watched with increasing apprehension the flux of Japanese military power into Indochina. At first the United States urged Vichy to refuse Japanese requests for authorization to use bases there, but was unable to offer more than vague assurances of assistance, such as a State Department statement to the French Ambassador on 6 August 1940 that:

We have been doing and are doing everything possible within the framework of our established policies to keep the situation in the Far East stabilized; that we have been progressively taking various steps, the effect of which has been to exert economic pressure on Japan; that our Fleet is now based on Hawaii, and that the course which we have been following, as indicated above, gives a clear indication of our intentions and activities for the future.

The French Ambassador replied that:

In his opinion the phrase "within the framework of our established policies." when associated with the apparent reluctance of the American Government to consider the use of military force in the Far East at this particular time, to mean that the United States would not use military or naval force in support of any position which might be taken to resist the Japanese attempted aggression on Indochina. The Ambassador [feared] that the French Government would, under the indicated pressure of the Japanese Government, be forced to accede . . .

The fears of the French Ambassador were realized. In 1941, however, Japan went beyond the use of bases to demands for a presence in Indochina tantamount to occupation. President Roosevelt himself expressed the heightening U.S. alarm to the Japanese Ambassador, in a conversation recorded by Acting Secretary of State Welles as follows:

The President then went on to say that this new move by Japan in Indochina created an exceedingly serious problem for the United States . . . the cost of any military occupation is tremendous and the occupation itself is not conducive to the production by civilians in occupied countries of food supplies and new materials of the character required by Japan. Had Japan undertaken to obtain the supplies she required from Indochina in a peaceful way, she not only would have obtained larger quantities of such supplies, but would have obtained them with complete security and without the draining expense of a military occupation. Furthermore, from the military standpoint, the President said, surely the Japanese Government could not have in reality the slightest belief that China, Great Britain, the Netherlands or the United States had any territorial designs on Indochina nor were in the slightest degree providing any real threats of aggression against Japan. This Government, consequently, could only assume that the occupation of Indochina was being undertaken by Japan for the purpose of further offense and this created a situation which necessarily must give the United States the most serious disquiet . . .

. . . The President stated that if the Japanese Government would refrain from occupying Indochina with its military and naval forces, or, had such steps actually been commenced, if the Japanese Government would withdraw such forces, the President could assure the Japanese Government that he would do everything within his power to obtain from the Governments of China, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and of course the United States itself a binding and solemn declaration, provided Japan would undertake the same commitment, to regard Indochina as a neutralized country in the same way in which Switzerland had up to now been regarded by the powers as a neutralized country. He stated that this would imply that none of the powers concerned would undertake any military act of aggression against Indochina and would remain in control of the territory and would not be confronted with attempts to dislodge them on the part of de Gaullist or Free French agents or forces.

The same date, Secretary of State Cordell Hull instructed Sumner Welles to see the Japanese Ambassador, and

Make clear the fact that the occupation of Indochina by Japan possibly means one further important step to seizing control of the South Sea area, including trade routes of supreme importance to the United States controlling such products as rubber, tin and other commodities. This was of vital concern to the United States. The Secretary said that if we did not bring out this point our people will not understand the significance of this movement into Indochina. The Secretary mentioned another point to be stressed: there

is no theory on which Indochina could be flooded with armed forces, aircraft, et cetera, for the defense of Japan. The only alternative is that this venture into Indochina has a close relation to the South Sea area and its value for offense against that area.

In a press statement of 2 August 1941, Acting Secretary of State Welles deplored Japan's "expansionist aims" and impugned Vichy:

Under these circumstances, this Government is impelled to question whether the French Government at Vichy in fact proposes to maintain its declared policy to preserve for the French people the territories both at home and abroad which have long been under French sovereignty.

This Government, mindful of its traditional friendship for France, has deeply sympathized with the desire of the French people to maintain their territories and to preserve them intact. In its relations with the French Government at Vichy and with the local French authorities in French territories, the United States will be governed by the manifest effectiveness with which those authorities endeavor to protect these territories from domination and control by those powers which are seeking to extend their rule by force and conquest, or by the threat thereof.

On the eve of Pearl Harbor, as part of the U.S. attempt to obtain Japanese consent to a non-aggression pact, the U.S. again proposed neutralization of Indochina in return for Japanese withdrawal. The events of 7 December 1941 put the question of the future of Indochina in the wholly different context of U.S. strategy for fighting World War II.

A. ROOSEVELT'S TRUSTEESHIP CONCEPT

U.S. policy toward Indochina during World War II was ambivalent. On the one hand, the U.S. appeared to support Free French claims to all of France's overseas dominions. The U.S. early in the war repeatedly expressed or implied to the French an intention to restore to France its overseas empire after the war. These U.S. commitments included the August 2, 1941, official statement on the Franco-Japanese agreement; a December, 1941, Presidential letter to Pétain; a March 2, 1942, statement on New Caledonia; a note to the French Ambassador of April 13, 1942; Presidential statements and messages at the time of the North Africa invasion; the Clark-Darlan Agreement of November 22, 1942; and a letter of the same month from the President's Personal Representative to General Henri Giraud, which included the following reassurance:

. . . The restoration of France to full independence, in all the greatness and vastness which it possessed before the war in Europe as well as overseas, is one of the war aims of the United Nations. It is thoroughly understood that French sovereignty will be re-established as soon as possible throughout all the territory, metropolitan or colonial, over which flew the French flag in 1939.

On the other hand, in the Atlantic Charter and other pronouncements the U.S. proclaimed support for national self-determination and independence. Moreover, the President of the United States, especially distressed at the Vichy "sell-out" to Japan in Indochina, often cited French rule there as a flagrant example of onerous and exploitative colonialism, and talked of his determination to turn Indochina over to an international trusteeship after the war. In early 1944, Lord Halifax, the British Ambassador in Washington, called on Secretary of State Hull to inquire whether the President's "rather definite" statements "that Indochina should be taken away from the French and put under an international trusteeship"-made to "Turks, Egyptians and perhaps others" during his trip to Cairo and Teheran-represented "final conclusions in view of the fact that they would soon get back to the French (The French marked well the President's views-in fact as France withdrew from Vietnam in 1956, its Foreign Minister recalled Roosevelt's assuring the Sultan of Morocco that his sympathies lay with colonial peoples struggling for independence. Lord Halifax later recorded that:

The President was one of the people who used conversation as others of us use a first draft on paper . . . a method of trying out an idea. If it does not go well, you can modify it or drop it as you will. Nobody thinks anything of it if you do this with a paper draft; but if you do it with conversation, people say that you have changed your mind, that "you never knew where you have him," and so on.

But in response to a memorandum from Secretary of State Hull putting the question of Indochina to F.D.R., and reminding the President of the numerous U.S. commitments to restoration of the French empire, Roosevelt replied (on January 24, 1944), that:

I saw Halifax last week and told him quite frankly that it was perfectly true that I had, for over a year, expressed the opinion that Indo-China should not go back to France but that it should be administered by an international trusteeship. France has had the country-thirty million inhabitants for nearly one hundred years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning.

As a matter of interest, I am wholeheartedly supported in this view by Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and by Marshal Stalin. I see no reason to play in with the British Foreign Office in this matter. The only reason they seem to oppose it is that they fear the effect it would have on their own possessions and those of the Dutch. They have never liked the idea of trusteeship because it is, in some instances, aimed at future independence. This is true in the case of Indo-China.

Each case must, of course, stand on its own feet, but the case of IndoChina is perfectly clear. France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indo-China are entitled to something better than that.

1. Military Strategy Pre-eminent

Throughout the year 1944, the President held to his views, and consistent with them, proscribed U.S. aid to resistance groups-including French groups-in Indochina. But the war in the Asian theaters moved rapidly, and the center of gravity of the American effort began to shift northward toward Japan. The question of U.S. strategy in Southeast Asia then came to the fore. At the Second Quebec Conference (September, 1944), the U.S. refused British offers of naval assistance against Japan because Admiral King believed "the best occupation for any available British forces would be to re-take Singapore, and to assist the Dutch in recovering the East Indies," and because he suspected that the offer was perhaps not unconnected with a desire for United States help in clearing the Japanese out of the Malay States and Netherlands East Indies." Admiral King's suspicions were not well-founded, at least insofar as Churchill's strategic thought was concerned. The Prime Minister was evidently as unwilling to invite an active American role in the liberation of Southeast Asia as the U.S. was to undertake same; as early as February, 1944, Churchill wrote that:

A decision to act as a subsidiary force under the Americans in the Pacific raises difficult political questions about the future of our Malayan possessions. If the Japanese should withdraw from them or make peace as the result of the main American thrust, the United States Government would after the victory feel greatly strengthened in its view that all possessions in the East Indian Archipelago should be placed under some international body upon which the United States would exercise a decisive concern.

The future of Commonwealth territories in Southeast Asia stimulated intense British interest in American intentions for French colonies there. In November and December of 1944, the British expressed to the United States, both in London and in Washington, their concern "that the United States apparently has not yet determined upon its policy toward Indochina." The head of the Far Eastern Department in the British Foreign Office told the U.S. Ambassador that:

It would be difficult to deny French participation in the liberation of Indochina in light of the increasing strength of the French Government in world affairs, and that, unless a policy to be followed toward Indochina is mutually agreed between our two governments, circumstances may arise at any moment which will place our two governments in a very awkward situation.

President Roosevelt, however, refused to define his position further, notifying Secretary of State Stettinius on January 1, 1945:

I still do not want to get mixed up in any Indo-China decision. It is a matter for postwar.-- . . . I do not want to get mixed up in any military effort toward the liberation of Indo-China from the Japanese.-- You can tell Halifax that I made this very clear to Mr. Churchill. From both the military and civil point of view, action at this time is premature.

However, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff were concurrently planning the removal of American armed forces from Southeast Asia. In response to approaches from French and Dutch officials requesting aid in expelling Japan from their former colonial territories, the U.S. informed them that:

All our available forces were committed to fighting the Japanese elsewhere in the Pacific, and Indochina and the East Indies were therefore not included within the sphere of interest of the American Chiefs of Staff.

American willingness to forego further operations in Southeast Asia led to a directive to Admiral Lord Mountbatten, Supreme Commander in that theater, to liberate Malaya without U.S. assistance. After the Yalta Conference (February, 1945), U.S. commanders in the Pacific were informed that the U.S. planned to turn over to the British responsibility for operations in the Netherlands East Indies and New Guinea. The President, however, agreed to permit such U.S. military operations in Indochina as avoided "alignments with the French," and detraction from the U.S. military campaign against Japan. The latter stricture precluded, in the U.S. view, the U.S. cooperation with the French at Mountbatten's headquarters, or the furnishing of ships to carry Free French forces to Indochina to undertake its liberation. This U.S. position came under particularly severe French criticism after 11 March 1945, when the Japanese overturned the Vichy regime in Vietnam, and prompted the Emperor Bao Dai to declare Vietnam unified and independent of France under Japanese protection. On 16 March 1945, a protest from General de Gaulle led to the following exchange between the Secretary of State and the President:

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Washington
March 16, 1945

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Subject: Indo-China.

Communications have been received from the Provisional Government of the French Republic asking for:

- (1) Assistance for the resistance groups now fighting the Japanese in Indo-China.
- (2) Conclusion of a civil affairs agreement covering possible future operations in Indo-China.

These memoranda have been referred to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in order to obtain their views concerning the military aspects of the problems, and I shall communicate with you further on the subject upon receipt of the Joint Chiefs' reply.

Attached herewith is the text of a recent telegram from Ambassador Caffery describing his conversation with General de Gaulle on the subject of Indo-China. From this telegram and de Gaulle's speech of March 14, it appears that this Government may be made to appear responsible for the weakness of the resistance to Japan in Indo-China. The British may likewise be expected to encourage this view. It seems to me that without prejudicing in any way our position regarding the future of Indo-China we can combat this trend by making public [material illegible] a suggested statement, subject to your approval, by the State Department.

/s/ E. R. Stettinius, Jr.