

**Lost Opportunities for Peace:  
Vietnam, 1945-1950**

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In 1945, a U.S. intelligence team parachuted into the jungles of Southeast Asia to meet with America's staunchest ally in Indochina's resistance against imperial Japan, Ho Chi Minh.<sup>1</sup> Ho, who was already in his mid-50s, had spent his entire adult life working towards an independent Vietnam. As early as the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919,<sup>2</sup> Ho had been petitioning the U.S. and other global powers to support Vietnam's status as an independent nation, free from French rule. By the 1940s, with Japan occupying Vietnam, Ho had taken the side of the Allies and was directing a guerilla campaign against the Japanese. Following Japan's surrender in August 1945, Ho quickly overthrew the French-backed feudal bureaucracy in a bloodless revolution and established an independent government in Vietnam. Throughout the next few years, Ho persistently wooed the United States as a potential ally of an independent Vietnam. These diplomatic overtures went unanswered. Instead, in 1950, the U.S., embroiled in the debate over communism, terminated this diplomatic opportunity, putting in motion a war for which both the U.S. and Vietnam would pay a terrible price.

Midway through WWII, it was recognized that the fate of Vietnam would pose a major postwar diplomatic problem. In 1943, a publication of the Foreign Policy Association argued, "The future status ... of Japanese-occupied territory will be the first major decision affecting the reconstruction of eastern Asia. Part of the difficulty lies in the different ... points of view of Americans and Europeans on this subject. Americans, from Mr. Sumner Welles to the corner

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<sup>1</sup> William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 299-300.

<sup>2</sup> Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years, 1919-1941* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 11-12.

grocer, have asserted this war must end imperialism.”<sup>3</sup> However, America did not want to deal with this issue during the war. In 1945, President Roosevelt was emphatic: “I still do not want to get mixed up in any Indochina decision. It is a matter for post-war.”<sup>4</sup>

Even before the war was over, though, France wanted to reclaim her Indochinese colonies. To the French, colonial control was an internal matter.<sup>5</sup> The British concurred, considering the fate of Indochina “a purely domestic issue.”<sup>6</sup>

Vietnam wasn’t waiting for the world’s powers to decide its future. In August 1945, Vietnam established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, with Ho Chi Minh as president. Ho and the Vietminh<sup>7</sup> sparked major debate in the U.S.: Ho had been a valuable wartime ally, but the question remained where he and the Vietminh fell on the spectrum between committed Marxists and pragmatic nationalists. The Vietminh revolution was brought about with no help from other communist nations and, in fact, seems to have caught them by surprise.<sup>8</sup> But diplomatic assessments varied. According to British diplomats, “The Viet Minh Party is ideologically based on the Communist pattern.”<sup>9</sup> An American general said the Vietminh “emphasized their interest in independence and their [Vietnamese] patriotism.... [They] should not be labeled full-fledged doctrinaire communist.”<sup>10</sup> Others thought they were not true

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<sup>3</sup> William C. Johnstone, “The Changing Far East,” *Headline Series*, Vol. 41 (August 20, 1943): 75. Sumner Welles was Under Secretary of State at the time.

<sup>4</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Memorandum by President Roosevelt for the Secretary of State,” January 1, 1945, memo in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1945, Vol. VI (The British Commonwealth, The Far East): 293.

<sup>5</sup> “French Embassy in China to the American Embassy in China,” January 20, 1945, note in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1945, Vol. VI (The British Commonwealth, The Far East): 295.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth P. Landon, Confidential Memorandum of Conversation with Mr. F.C. Everson, British Embassy, January 20, 1947, National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/1-2047.

<sup>7</sup> The Vietminh League was the organization, set up by Ho Chi Minh to fight the Japanese, that took power after World War II.

<sup>8</sup> Mari Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949-64: Changing Alliances* (New York: Routledge, 2006): 1.

<sup>9</sup> Charles S. Millet, Secret memorandum “British Military-Political Report on Conditions in Northern French Indo-China during December 1945,” March 8, 1946, National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/3-846: 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Richard L. Sharp, Memorandum of Conversation, January 30, 1946, National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/1-3046: 5.

communists at all. From one OSS telegram: “You are misunderstanding Vietminh attitude. They are ... patriots who deserve full trust and support.”<sup>11</sup>

Ho himself was generally regarded as a nationalist, rather than a doctrinaire communist. Major Archimedes Patti, an OSS officer, believed that Ho’s “ultimate ambition was to attain American support for the cause of a free Viet Nam.”<sup>12</sup> An American diplomat described Ho as “in every way a most remarkable man.”<sup>13</sup> Even the French, who were opposed to Ho’s goals, respected him. Jean Sainteny, a French diplomat, wrote, “From the time of our very first meeting ... I acquired the conviction that Ho Chi Minh was a personality of the first class.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite respect for Ho, France wanted her Indochinese colonies back, posing a diplomatic problem for the U.S. On one hand, America wanted to adhere to the principle of self-determination. One U.S. diplomat noted, “I have remarked [to French representatives] that the United States is committed to the proposition that governments should derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. ... French imperialism ... in Indochina seem[s] to me to be in conflict with these principles.”<sup>15</sup> However, French leader Charles de Gaulle, who vehemently opposed Vietnamese independence, had also been a wartime ally and was considered critical to European postwar security.<sup>16</sup> Many American officials felt it was not worth alienating France, or

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<sup>11</sup> Dixee R. Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh: Unexpected Allies in the War Against Japan* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006): 183.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*: 177.

<sup>13</sup> Millet, “British Military-Political Report on Conditions in Northern French Indo-China during December 1945”: 4.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam: A Personal Memoir*, trans. Herma Briffault (Chicago: Cowles Book Company, 1972): 51.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick J. Hurley, “The Ambassador in China (Hurley) to the Secretary of State,” January 31, 1945, letter in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945, Volume VI (The British Commonwealth, The Far East)*: 294.

<sup>16</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, State of the Union Address, January 6, 1945. [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16595#axzz1MGpNQM0o](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16595#axzz1MGpNQM0o). Also, the exchange between Alexander Kirk and Joseph Grew: Alexander C. Kirk, “Mr. Alexander C. Kirk, United States Political Adviser to the Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean Theater, to the Secretary of State,” March 8, 1945, telegram in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945, Volume IV (Europe)*: 675 and Joseph Grew, “Acting Secretary of State to Mr. Alexander C. Kirk, Political Adviser to the Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean Theater, at Caserta [Italy],” March 10, 1945, telegram in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945, Volume IV (Europe)*: 676-677.

de Gaulle, over Indochina. The U.S. decided to stay neutral for the present, evaluating Ho and the stability and aims of an independent Vietnam.

For their part, the Vietminh considered themselves working towards Vietnamese independence, not world revolution. Bui Tin, a member of the Vietminh in the 1940s, explained, “Our national tradition of opposing foreign oppression is a heritage which imbues everybody, whether rich or poor, secular or religious.”<sup>17</sup> In Ho’s speech declaring Vietnamese independence, he invoked democratic principles, opening his speech by quoting the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the aims of the Vietminh government were widely supported by the people. A U.S. diplomat wrote, “[T]he demand for independence is widespread and even in the villages the peasants refer to the example of the Philippines.”<sup>19</sup>

But as French diplomat Jean Sainteny predicted, Ho needed a powerful ally to protect Vietnam’s fledgling independence.<sup>20</sup> Ho appealed to the international community, particularly the United States, for help. In November 1945, Ho delivered a speech citing the Allies’ San

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<sup>17</sup> Bui Tin, *Following Ho Chi Minh: The Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, trans. Judy Stowe and Do Van (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995): 14.

<sup>18</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Viet-Nam, September 2, 1945,” in *Hô Chí Minh, Selected Writings, 1920-1969* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977): 53-54.

<sup>19</sup> Sharp, Memorandum of Conversation: 3. The U.S. gave the Philippines its independence following WWII.

<sup>20</sup> Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam*: 55-56. Unfortunately, it is outside the scope of this paper to detail the diplomatic “great game” Ho would need to play if he were to protect Vietnam’s independence, but suffice it to say that of the wartime Allies, the USSR was preoccupied with Eastern Europe, and Ho was no Stalinist in any case; the UK was a possibility, but it was an imperial power with its own holdings in Asia and was unlikely to favor colonial independence; France was the country Ho needed protection from, although there were elements in French politics that were definitely sympathetic to Ho’s position; the U.S. was the logical choice, philosophically and strategically, for Ho. Although China ultimately became Ho’s ally, China was perhaps Ho’s last choice. He was quoted as reprimanding a pro-China colleague, “You fools! Don’t you realize what it means if the Chinese stay? Don’t you remember your history? The last time the Chinese came, they stayed one thousand years! The French are foreigners. ... They may stay for a while, but they will have to go because the white man is finished in Asia. ... As for me, I prefer to smell French shit for five years, rather than Chinese shit for the rest of my life.” [Quoted in “Ho Chi Minh: Asian Tito? Summary,” Department of Defense, U.S-Vietnam Relations (Pentagon Papers), I, c1-c7, in *America In Vietnam: A Documentary History*, ed. William A. Williams, et al. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985): 94].

Francisco and Atlantic Charters.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, a group of Vietnamese expatriates in China wrote to General Douglas MacArthur asking the U.S. to mediate “the Indochina question” and “thank[ing] the Government of the United States for its sponsoring and establishing the Charter of the United Nations, which provides equal rights and self-determination for oppressed peoples.”<sup>22</sup> Two months later, a U.S. diplomat cabled that “Ho is willing to cooperate with Great Britain, USSR, or the United States.”<sup>23</sup> In February, Ho wrote directly to President Truman: “I therefore most earnestly appeal to you personally and to the American people to interfere urgently in support of our independence.”<sup>24</sup> The Vietnamese believed their pleas would be answered. According to a U.S. diplomatic memo, “The [Vietnamese] expected American help originally, having been thoroughly indoctrinated with the Atlantic Charter and other [American] ideological pronouncements.”<sup>25</sup> Yet, these diplomatic overtures fell on deaf ears; Ho’s appeals to the U.S. were ignored.

Meanwhile, in 1946 negotiations proceeded between the French and the Vietminh. Sainteny observed, “Ho Chi Minh had always been a realist. ... Why not avoid, then, the wasteful expenditures of a war if he could do so by negotiating?”<sup>26</sup> However, the French were unwilling to grant Vietnam’s independence. The U.S. ambassador in Paris cabled, “the French Govt at this time favors a conciliatory [policy]. ... This does not mean, however, ...

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<sup>21</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “Speech Delivered in the First Days of the Resistance War in South Viet Nam, November 1945,” in *Ho Chi Minh: Selected Articles and Speeches, 1920-1967*, ed. Jack Woddis (New York: International Publishers, 1969): 34. The Atlantic Charter was an agreement signed between the U.S. and Great Britain which laid the groundwork for many international agreements following WWII. The San Francisco Charter established the United Nations.

<sup>22</sup> Nguyen Huu Hien, Letter to Douglas MacArthur, dated November 5, 1945 (Shang-hai) on behalf of the Annamite Residents’ Association, National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/12-1845: 1.

<sup>23</sup> Sharp, Memorandum of Conversation: 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “President HoChiMinh Vietnam Democratic Republic Hanoi to the President of the United States of America Washington D.C.,” February 28, 1946. National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/doc-content/images/ho-chi-minh-telegram-truman.pdf> (accessed December 4, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Sharp, Memorandum of Conversation: 4-5.

<sup>26</sup> Sainteny, *Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam*: 55-56.

independence for Indo-China for no Frenchmen appear to be thinking in such terms.”<sup>27</sup> French admiral Thierry D’Argenlieu, who had spent time in Indochina and knew the situation there, tried to offer a compromise. D’Argenlieu knew that although the Vietminh insisted on the term independence, they were “willing to leave interpretation largely to the French.”<sup>28</sup> D’Argenlieu proposed letting the Vietnamese have “independence” while the French continued to have real control. The French rebuffed D’Argenlieu’s compromise.

Ho had warned that if negotiations broke down, he would retreat to the mountains and initiate a guerilla war,<sup>29</sup> as he had just done against Japan. He claimed the Vietnamese were willing “to sacrifice even millions of combatants, and fight a long-term war of resistance in order to safeguard Vietnam’s independence.”<sup>30</sup> The French countered with a divide and conquer strategy. Because the Vietminh were not as strong in southern Vietnam, the French established military control over southern Vietnam but promised a referendum on uniting the south with northern, Vietminh-governed, Vietnam or becoming an independent country within the French Union. However, in June 1946, France established a “provisional government” in the south until the referendum could take place, incensing the Vietminh. They, and American diplomats, realized that the upcoming referendum could not possibly be fair, owing to French control of the area and suppression of pro-Vietminh groups.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Jefferson Caffery, Secret telegram from Paris via the War Department to the Secretary of State, February 6, 1946, National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/2-646.

<sup>28</sup> Abbot Low Moffat, Telegram sent from the Department of State, Washington, to the American Embassy in Paris, February 16, 1946, National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G/2-1646.

<sup>29</sup> Millet, “British Military-Political Report on Conditions in Northern French Indo-China during December 1945”: 7.

<sup>30</sup> Ho, “Speech Delivered in the First Days of the Resistance War in South Viet Nam, November 1945” in *Ho Chi Minh*, ed. Jack Woddis: 35.

<sup>31</sup> Abbot Low Moffat, Office Memorandum to Mr. Vincent, “Critical situation developing in Indochina,” August 9, 1946, National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/8-946: 2

By August 1946, the U.S. knew the French were not negotiating in good faith. The U.S. consul in Saigon wrote that the French gave a “decided impression of ... double dealing.”<sup>32</sup> Abbot Moffat, the State Department’s chief of the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs (SEA), warned that French activities appeared “in violation of the spirit of the March 6 convention” and concluded that “widespread hostilities may result.”<sup>33</sup>

This evidence of French misconduct triggered another debate within the U.S. The Americans knew the French lacked popular support; one telegram noted, “[W]hile the Viet-Minh League may be disliked, the French are hated.”<sup>34</sup> However, the U.S. did nothing. As the expatriates’ unanswered letter to MacArthur forecast, Vietnam was proving to be “an acid test” of the ideals fought for in WWII.<sup>35</sup>

Not surprisingly, negotiations broke down. In December 1946, full-scale war broke out between France and Vietnam. Ho justified his nation’s actions to the Vietnamese, the French, and the world, arguing, “The Vietnamese people are now facing these alternatives: either to fold their arms and bow their heads and fall back into slavery, or to struggle to the end for freedom and independence.”<sup>36</sup> At the same time, Ho continued to entreat the international community: “French reactionaries ... are waging an aggressive war in Vietnam.... The Vietnamese people ask you to intervene.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Charles S. Reed, II, Confidential telegram sent to the Secretary of State, August 3, 1946 from Saigon via Manila, National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/8-346.

<sup>33</sup> Moffat, Office Memorandum to Mr. Vincent: 1. The March 6 convention was an agreement signed between France and the Vietminh provisionally recognizing Vietminh authority in the north and authorizing a referendum on Vietnamese unification.

<sup>34</sup> Charles S. Reed, II, Confidential memorandum to the Honorable Secretary of State, “Interview with General MORLIERE,” August 31, 1946, National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/8-3146: 3.

<sup>35</sup> Nguyen, Letter to Douglas MacArthur: 5.

<sup>36</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “Message to the Vietnamese People, the French People and the Peoples of the Allied Nations, December 21, 1946,” in *Hô Chí Minh, Selected Writings, 1920-1969*: 70

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*: 71.

Ironically, even before Ho delivered his speech, Moffat had arrived at the same conclusion, writing, [T]he [Vietnamese] are faced with the choice of a costly submission to the French or of open resistance...”<sup>38</sup> In another telegram, Moffat all but begged for U.S. intervention in early 1947: “[P]rompt US action aimed terminate war Vietnam not only save countless lives but protect position US and other democracies SEA.” Moffat continued, “Repeat again deep need for US moral leadership increasingly critical situation this political, economic and strategic area.”<sup>39</sup> The Vietminh government began urgent negotiations to secure the support of the Truman administration. These overtures failed.<sup>40</sup>

During this time, there was intense debate within the U.S. on how to counteract communism. The Iron Curtain had descended across Europe, and Americans feared Soviet military plans<sup>41</sup> and further Soviet expansion.<sup>42</sup> George Kennan’s famous Long Telegram, from early 1946, was seen as advocating containment of communism, whereas the Marshall Plan was begun in 1947 in large part to support fragile countries and prevent Soviet-style communist movements from taking hold. There was serious debate over which of these policies — containment or engagement — to pursue in Indochina. Ultimately, by September 1948, the containment policy won out. According to a State Department policy statement, the first U.S. objective in Indochina was “to eliminate so far as possible Communist influence in Indochina and to see installed a ... state which will be friendly to the US....”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Moffat, Office Memorandum to Mr. Vincent: 4.

<sup>39</sup> Abbot Low Moffat, Telegram sent from Singapore to the Secretary of State, January 7, 1947, National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/1-747. “SEA” is Moffat’s abbreviation for Southeast Asia.

<sup>40</sup> Olsen, *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949-64*: 2-3.

<sup>41</sup> George Kennan, “The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State,” February 25, 1946, airgram in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946, Volume VI (Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union)*: 709-710.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Bedell Smith, “The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Smith) to the Secretary of State, April 5, 1946, telegram in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946, Volume VI (Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union)*: 732-736.

<sup>43</sup> “Department of State Policy Statement on Indochina,” September 27, 1948, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948, Vol. VI (The Far East and Australasia)*: 43-49.

The U.S. started lending tacit support to various governments the French had set up in the south, even though a CIA analysis found the French military position weak enough, and Ho Chi Minh popular enough, to make French success unlikely.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the State Department knew the latest puppet ruler, former emperor Bao Dai, was considered to be an incompetent playboy with a too-large Swiss bank account.<sup>45</sup>

The rest of the world was not standing still. In October 1949, the Chinese Communists won their civil war and were poised to aid Vietnamese military efforts against the French. With this looming threat to his government, Bao Dai requested military aid from the U.S., including weapons to equip more than 200,000 soldiers.<sup>46</sup> Yet there continued to be debate within the State Department over whether the U.S. should recognize Bao Dai or Ho Chi Minh as the rightful representative of Vietnam. In 1949, two American diplomats, one favoring Bao Dai and the other Ho Chi Minh, argued back and forth. “Whether the French like it or not, independence is coming to Indochina. Why, therefore, do we tie ourselves to the tail of their battered kite?” The diplomat supporting Bao Dai replied, “Because the odds are heavily against a horse entered in a given race, is no reason to withdraw that horse from the race...”<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, the U.S. gravitated towards Bao Dai.

By January 1950, the U.S. had become decidedly hostile to Ho and the Vietminh. In a sign of the times, Secretary of State Dean Acheson cabled, “Ho Chi Minh is not patriotic

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<sup>44</sup> “French Military Capability to Settle the Indochina Conflict,” CIA analysis forwarded to the Department of State Office of Far Eastern Affairs on November 10, 1947, National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/11-1047: 5-6.

<sup>45</sup> Merle H. Cochran, Confidential memo to Department of State via air pouch, “Indian Attitude Toward Bao Dai Government,” January 31, 1950, National Archives (College Park, MD) 751G.02/1-3150.

<sup>46</sup> George M. Abbott, “The Consul General at Saigon (Abbott) to the Secretary of State,” January 31, 1950, telegram in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1950, Vol. VI (East Asia and the Pacific): 709.

<sup>47</sup> “Memorandum, Fosdick to Mr. Jessup, November 4, 1949” and “Memorandum, Butterworth to Fosdick, November 17, 1949” in *America In Vietnam: A Documentary History*, edited by William A. Williams (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985): 90-92.

nationalist but COMMIE party member with all the sinister implications involved in the relationship.”<sup>48</sup>

Ho gave diplomacy one more try: “In view of mutual interests, the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam [is] prepared to establish diplomatic relations with any Government which respects the right to equality, the territorial and national sovereignty of Vietnam, in order to safeguard world peace and to build up world democracy.”<sup>49</sup> Three days later, China recognized the Vietminh government; the U.S.S.R. followed two weeks after. In February, the U.S. recognized Bao Dai’s government. On May 1, Truman approved the first military aid to Bao Dai. In response, Ho Chi Minh lashed out at the U.S.: talking to the press, he said, “The US imperialists have long since openly intervened in Indochina. It is with their money and weapons and on their instructions that the French colonialists have been waging war in Viet Nam...”<sup>50</sup> Ho now appealed to China in earnest for military aid. In the words of one Vietminh officer, “[T]owards the end of 1950 ... Marxism had come to Vietnam via Maoism.”<sup>51</sup>

The die was cast. Several years later, the first U.S. troops arrived on behalf of South Vietnam. More than a decade of war would follow, after which Ho’s Vietnam reconquered the south and reunited Vietnam in 1975. But Ho did not live to see his country emerge from war. He died in 1969.

For Vietnam, France, and the United States, the cost of war was enormous. Over 30 years, Vietnam suffered more than three million dead and much of the country was destroyed. France lost roughly 75,000 soldiers, billions of francs, and much global influence. Direct

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<sup>48</sup> Dean Acheson, Secret telegram sent from the Department of State to the American Embassy in Bangkok, January 17, 1950, National Archives (College Park, MD), 751.G.02/1-1250. Emphasis is the original.

<sup>49</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “Statement of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to All the Governments of the World,” January 14, 1950, National Archives (College Park, MD), 751G.02/1-2950.

<sup>50</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “Answers to the Press on US Intervention in Indochina, July 25, 1950,” in *Hồ Chí Minh, Selected Writings, 1920-1969*: 94-95.

<sup>51</sup> Bui, *Following Ho Chi Minh*: 14.

American costs included nearly 60,000 dead and an estimated \$150 billion. Indirectly, as American involvement escalated, the war became increasingly unpopular at home and cost President Lyndon Johnson a second term and his ambitious Great Society program.

This unfortunate chapter in history was shaped by two major debates and a number of diplomatic failings. The first debate was over how to deal with former colonies after WWII. Instead of standing up for political self-determination, the U.S. allowed European countries to reinstate their control over much of Asia and Africa. Later, embroiled in the debate over communism, America ignored the pleas of Ho Chi Minh, instead choosing to support a corrupt puppet government. Diplomatic failures also abounded. America failed to respond to repeated Vietnamese requests for mediation of the Indochina problem. France failed to negotiate in good faith with Vietnam, dooming a peaceful settlement. The State Department failed to heed U.S. diplomats in Asia, like Abbot Moffat, who understood developments in Indochina. Ultimately, diplomacy failed to soothe tensions in Vietnam; on the contrary, the flurry of diplomatic recognitions in early 1950 only heightened the conflict. Between 1945 and 1950, Vietnam was indeed fraught with lost opportunities for peace.

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Abbott was the Consul General of the United States Embassy in Saigon. This secret telegram details Bao Dai's request for military aid in 1950. I used this source to illustrate how early the U.S. was being asked to help prop up the French-sponsored government. (The *Foreign Relations of the United States* series is the official documentary history of U.S. foreign policy, produced by the State Department's Office of the Historian and published by the Government Printing Office.)

Acheson, Dean. "The Acting Secretary of State to the Chargé in China (Robertson)," October 5, 1945, telegram in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1945, Vol. VI (The British Commonwealth, The Far East), p. 313.

This telegram, written before Dean Acheson was Secretary of State, demonstrates that America was still committed to neutrality in 1945 and was, in fact, opposed to the French use of force in re-establishing control of its colonies in Indochina.

Acheson, Dean. Secret telegram sent from the Department of State to the American Embassy in Bangkok. January 17, 1950. National Archives (College Park, MD), 751.G.02/1-1250.

I used this telegram to show how markedly our policy toward Indochina had changed in just over four years. Now Secretary of State, Dean Acheson calls Ho Chi Minh a "COMMIE" repeatedly in this memo.

Bui Tin. *Following Ho Chi Minh: The Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*. Translated from the Vietnamese by Judy Stowe and Do Van. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995.

I used this memoir, written by a former Vietnamese revolutionary who fought extensively in Vietnam's wars of independence, for his memories of life in Vietnam in the period just before and after Ho Chi Minh's August Revolution (1945). Bui later became disheartened by the communist government that took power in the 1970s and finally left Vietnam in 1990, but his enthusiasm for Ho's August Revolution remained.

Byrnes, James. "The Secretary of State to Certain Diplomatic and Consular Officers," April 18, 1946, telegram in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1946, Vol. VIII (The Far East), p. 36.

This secret telegram from Secretary of State James Byrnes documents one of Ho Chi Minh's requests that the U.S. and U.K. recognize his independent Vietnam.

Caffery, Jefferson. Secret telegram from Paris via the War Department to the Secretary of State. February 6, 1946. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/2-646.

This telegram from Jefferson Caffery, the U.S. ambassador to France, showed that in early 1946 the French government had indicated to the U.S. that France was willing to be “moderate and conciliatory” towards Indochina but was not willing to consider independence.

Caffery, Jefferson. “The Ambassador in France (Caffrey) to the Secretary of State,” January 22, 1946, telegram in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946, Vol. V (The British Commonwealth; Western and Central Europe)*, pp. 404-405.

This telegram, marked both “secret” and “urgent,” is one in a series from January 1946 in which the U.S. ambassador to France was reporting on the French political situation. France was in the midst of drafting a new constitution. Caffery reports on the maneuvers of the various political parties, of which the Socialists and Communists were two of the most powerful. This was relevant to my topic because Vietnam’s bid for independence received a fair amount of support in France from the French Communist party.

Caffery, Jefferson. “The Ambassador in France (Caffery) to the Secretary of State,” July 7, 1946, telegram in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946, Vol. VIII (The Far East)*, pp. 48-49.

This subsequent telegram from Caffery showed that as early as mid-1946 the U.S. believed the French were not negotiating in good faith with Ho Chi Minh’s government.

Cameron, Allan W., ed. *Viet-Nam Crisis: A Documentary History, Volume I: 1940-1956*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971.

I used this collection of nearly 200 documents to check the completeness of my primary source research. However, my own research in the National Archives showed that many of the documents relevant to the period 1945-1951 were not declassified until the late 1970s and would not have been available to this editor.

Cochran, H. Merle. Confidential memo to Department of State via air pouch, “Indian Attitude Toward Bao Dai Government,” January 31, 1950. National Archives (College Park, MD) 751G.02/1-3150.

Cochran, then U.S. ambassador to Indonesia, shared the Indian government’s view of Bao Dai. I used this source to demonstrate that it was well known in diplomatic circles that Bao Dai was considered corrupt, unfit for the job, and unlikely to succeed.

“Department of State Policy Statement on Indochina,” September 27, 1948, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948, Vol. VI (The Far East and Australasia)*, pp. 43-49.

This document was important to my research because it was the first official mention I could find of containment of communism as a U.S. policy objective in Indochina, let alone the first-mentioned policy objective.

“French Embassy in China to the American Embassy in China,” January 20, 1945, note in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1945, Vol. VI (The British Commonwealth, The Far East), p. 295.

I used this telegram, sent during WWII, to show that France was already thinking about the fate of its colonies in the postwar period. This telegram assured the United States that France was “thoroughly aware of the importance of the principles at stake in the present war” but considered its policy in Indochina to be an internal matter.

“French Military Capability to Settle the Indochina Conflict.” CIA analysis forwarded to the Department of State Office of Far Eastern Affairs on November 10, 1947. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/11-1047.

I found this CIA analysis of the military situation in Indochina to be evidence that, as early as 1947, the U.S. knew, or had every reason to expect, that France would fail militarily in Vietnam. An accompanying note in the file signed by W. Park Armstrong, Jr., Acting Special Assistant to the Secretary, says, “The Office of Intelligence Research (OIR) has reviewed the CIA statement and concurs.”

Grew, Joseph. “Acting Secretary of State to Mr. Alexander C. Kirk, Political Adviser to the Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean Theater, at Caserta [Italy],” March 10, 1945, telegram in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1945, Volume IV (Europe), p. 676-677.

This telegram, in response to one sent by Mr. Kirk a few days earlier (see below), was useful to me because it documented that the U.S. considered France, and Charles de Gaulle, to be vital to the future security of postwar Europe. In fact, Grew’s response was rather testy: “It is hardly necessary for [Harold] Macmillan [the wartime liaison between Churchill and Gen. Eisenhower] to remind us of the need of a strong France as though that policy were a British monopoly.” (p. 677)

Ho Chi Minh. *Ho Chi Minh: Selected Articles and Speeches, 1920-1967*. Edited by Jack Woddis. New York: International Publishers, 1969.

I found this collection of Ho’s writings and speeches, compiled and published by an American communist organization, to be a rich source for Ho’s own words. Ho spoke a number of languages and occasionally wrote in English, but most of his articles and speeches were in Vietnamese and would not have been accessible to me without translation. (The translator for this collection is not credited.)

Ho Chi Minh. *Hô Chí Minh, Selected Writings, 1920-1969*. Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1977.

Similar to the source above, this collection of Ho's articles and speeches, published in Hanoi, acquainted me with Ho's own words. The anonymous translator writes in the unnumbered preface of this book, "This collection comprises the most important speeches and writings of President Ho Chi Minh for the period extending from 1920 to 1969. They are precious landmarks which make it possible to understand the Vietnamese revolution in its historical evolution as well as in its various aspects. The reader should be warned, however, that our translation is but a very inadequate rendition of the lively, crisp, concise, often humour-tinged, in short the inimitable style of President Ho Chi Minh, who is one of the best writers and poets of Viet Nam."

Ho Chi Minh. "President HoChiMinh Vietnam Democratic Republic Hanoi to the President of the United States of America Washington D.C.," February 28, 1946. National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/doc-content/images/ho-chi-minh-telegram-truman.pdf> (accessed December 4, 2010).

This telegram first spurred my interest in the topic when I first saw mention of it in a book several years ago. I was surprised to see that Ho Chi Minh, who was known to me then only as an enemy during the Vietnam War, actually entreated President Truman for U.S. aid in the period immediately after WWII. However, when I started my research, I found this telegram is not accessible to the public, even at the National Archives; because it is considered a "valuable document," it has been placed in a vault, and this digitized version is all that is available to researchers.

Ho Chi Minh. "Statement of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to All the Governments of the World." January 14, 1950. National Archives (College Park, MD), 751G.02/1-2950.

I found this statement attached, in full, to a communiqué from John Stone, First Secretary of the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok. It shows Ho's desire, even in 1950, to establish diplomatic relations with any country willing to recognize his government. However, because China and the U.S.S.R. chose to recognize Ho's government shortly after this appeal, the U.S. decided to recognize Bao Dai's government instead the following month.

Hurley, Patrick J. "The Ambassador in China (Hurley) to the Secretary of State," January 31, 1945, letter in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945, Volume VI (The British Commonwealth, The Far East)*, p. 294.

I used this letter from Patrick Hurley, the U.S. ambassador to China, to demonstrate that, during WWII, members of the American diplomatic corps believed that France should not try to re-establish imperialism in Indochina after the war.

Johnstone, William C. "The Changing Far East," in the Foreign Policy Association *Headline Series*, Vol. 41, August 20, 1943.

I found this article, written by a professor of political science at George Washington University with a specialty in "the Orient," in a bimonthly publication of the Foreign

Policy Association. It showed that it was widely understood during WWII that France's claims to Indochina would be challenged by the native populations after the war, assuming that the Allies were successful in winning the war.

Kennan, George. "The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State," February 25, 1946, airgram in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946, Volume VI (Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union)*, p. 709-710.

Sent from Moscow, this communiqué from Kennan, written three days after his famous "long telegram," was a summary of the Red Army Day Order issued by Stalin on Feb. 23, including a demand that the "Red Army must not only keep up with military developments but must advance them still further." This source provided helpful information about U.S. awareness of and perceptions of the Soviet military threat and the wider threat of communism.

Kirk, Alexander C. "Mr. Alexander C. Kirk, United States Political Adviser to the Supreme Allied Commander, Mediterranean Theater, to the Secretary of State," March 8, 1945, telegram in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945, Volume IV (Europe)*, p. 675.

This telegram, sent by one of Gen. Eisenhower's advisors in Italy, reports on a conversation with Harold Macmillan, later British Prime Minister but then a protégé of Winston Churchill and the official liaison between Churchill and Eisenhower, in which Macmillan said that "he trusted the US would appreciate that the British could not afford to alienate [Charles] de Gaulle [the head of France's wartime government in exile] as 'we must make France as strong as possible so that she can assume her full role in the block we must build up in Western Europe in the interest of our own security and de Gaulle is the only man today around whom a strong France can be recreated.'" I used this document, and the response from Acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew (see above), to verify British and American commitment to France and to de Gaulle. De Gaulle was a staunch opponent of Vietnamese independence.

Lacy, William S. Confidential Memorandum of Conversation, January 24, 1950. National Archives (College Park, MD), 751G.02/1-2450.

This memo clearly showed me the tit-for-tat nature of diplomatic recognition regarding Vietnam as well as the U.S.'s growing concern about the influence of Communist China on Vietnam.

Landon, Kenneth P. Confidential Memorandum of Conversation with Mr. F.C. Everson, British Embassy, January 20, 1947. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/1-2047.

This memo from Kenneth Landon, who was working in the State Department's Division of Southeast Asian Affairs, documented for me that the United States was not the only country trying to remain neutral on Indochina. Landon's conversation with an official at the British embassy shows that Britain considered the matter a purely internal French affair, which is not surprising given Britain's own extensive colonial holdings.

Landon, Kenneth P. “The Assistant Chief of the Division of Southeast Asian Affairs (Landon) to the Secretary of State,” undated [received February 27, 1946], telegram in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1946, Vol. VIII (The Far East), pp. 26-27.

Landon’s telegram showed me that at least some members of the U.S. diplomatic corps believed that the French were not negotiating with Ho Chi Minh’s government in good faith well before hostilities broke out.

Landon, Kenneth P. Secret telegram “From Landon for Moffat and Culbertson to Dept of State” sent from Hanoi via Shanghai via War Department, February 16, 1946. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/2-1646.

Landon’s telegram informed the Department of State that Ho Chi Minh was requesting diplomatic assistance, including mediation, from the United Nations. For me, this document was part of a pattern of Ho Chi Minh appealing to the U.S. and Allies to stand by the principles of freedom they had declared during and immediately after WWII.

“Letter by Ho Chi Minh to President Truman, October 17, 1945.” In *Vietnam: A History in Documents*, edited by Gareth Porter, p. 39. New York: New American Library, 1979.

This letter from Ho Chi Minh to President Truman details why Ho thinks his government, and not the French, should represent Vietnam on a UN commission. This letter is from a collection of hundreds of documents, from French, Vietnamese, and American archives, selected by the editor to document the history of American involvement in Vietnam, beginning in 1941. The editor holds a doctorate in Southeast Asian Studies from Cornell.

Meeker, Leonard C. Legal memorandum to PSA – Mr. Reed, January 5, 1950. National Archives (College Park, MD), 751G.02/1-550.

This memo, written by the Legal Adviser of the Department of State, showed me that the U.S. was exploring the legal implications of recognizing Bao Dai’s government, but not Ho Chi Minh’s government, weeks, perhaps months, before the crisis precipitated by China’s recognition of Ho’s government.

Millet, Charles S. Secret memorandum “British Military-Political Report on Conditions in Northern French Indo-China during December 1945,” March 8, 1946. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/3-846.

Charles Millet was the American Consul in Canton, China, and forwarded to the U.S. State Department a British report, written by a Colonel Chapman-Walker, assessing various aspects of Vietnam as they stood in late 1945. This was one of several documents from the early postwar period showing that the U.S. was working to gather information about Ho Chi Minh and the situation in Indochina from a variety of sources, not all of which agreed in their analysis.

Moffat, Abbot Low. Office Memorandum to Mr. Vincent, "Critical situation developing in Indochina," August 9, 1946. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/8-946.

Abbot Low Moffat was a powerful New York state legislator during the Depression who began a career as a diplomat in the 1940s. By 1946, Moffat was chief of the State Department's Division of Southeast Asia Affairs; John Vincent was director of the State Department's Office of Far Eastern Affairs. Moffat seemed to support Vietnamese independence, and this memo was useful because he shares at length his observations of the situation in Vietnam in the period between Ho's declaration of independence and the outbreak of hostilities with the French.

Moffat, Abbot Low. Telegram sent from the Department of State, Washington, to the American Embassy in Paris, February 16, 1946. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G/2-1646.

In this telegram, Moffat is passing on word that French Admiral Thierry D'Argenlieu was returning to France from Indochina to press the cause for a peaceful resolution, including "independence" for Vietnam. This source was useful to me because it gave me a better idea what was happening in terms of French diplomatic efforts.

Moffat, Abbot Low. Telegram sent from Singapore to the Secretary of State, January 7, 1947. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/1-747.

By 1947, Moffat is all but begging the U.S., on moral and strategic grounds, to get involved in negotiating an end to French-Vietnamese hostilities. I could find no evidence in the records that anyone ever responded to Moffat.

Nordlinger, [Stephen] Colonel. "Memorandum of Conversation, Conditions in French Indochina," December 5, 1945. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/12-545.

Nordlinger had been sent to Vietnam to head a unit providing humanitarian relief to Allied POWs in Hanoi at the close of WWII. I used this memo, from the files of the Department of State's Office of Far Eastern Affairs, because Nordlinger was assessing the conditions on the ground in Vietnam near the end of WWII and included Col. Nordlinger's personal evaluation of Ho Chi Minh at this juncture.

Nguyen Huu Hien. Letter to Douglas MacArthur, dated November 5, 1945 (Shang-hai) on behalf of the Annamite Residents' Association. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/12-1845.

I used this letter, from the president of a group of Vietnamese expatriates in China, as an example of (1) Vietnamese other than Ho Chi Minh requesting U.S. mediation in the immediate postwar period and (2) the Vietnamese faith in America's commitment to political self-determination.

Reed, Charles S., II. Confidential memorandum to the Honorable Secretary of State, "Interview with General MORLIERE," August 31, 1946. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/8-3146.

In this memo, Reed, who was the American Consul in Saigon, was reporting on a conversation he'd had with a French general in Vietnam. This memo showed me that even before hostilities broke out, some American diplomats felt that the French position on Vietnam was hardening and that the French were in denial about the true situation in Vietnam.

Reed, Charles S., II. Confidential telegram sent to the Secretary of State, August 3, 1946 from Saigon via Manila. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/8-346.

I used this memo to illustrate that the U.S. knew, several months before talks between the French and Ho Chi Minh's government broke down, that the French were not negotiating in good faith.

Roosevelt, Franklin D. "Memorandum by President Roosevelt for the Secretary of State," January 1, 1945, memo in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945, Vol. VI (The British Commonwealth, The Far East)*, p. 293.

This memo from President Roosevelt made clear that the U.S. knew that conflicts over France's colonies in Indochina were on the horizon but that he made a conscious choice to put the matter off until after WWII was over.

Roosevelt, Franklin D. State of the Union Address. January 6, 1945.  
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16595#axzz1MGpNQM0o>  
 (accessed May 13, 2011)

President Roosevelt's last State of the Union address explicitly speaks to the importance of France's postwar role in developing a lasting solution to "the German problem" and achieving international security. This speech was useful to me in demonstrating America's intended commitment to France in the postwar world, portending America's later reluctance to alienate France over the issue of Vietnamese independence.

Sainteny, Jean. *Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam: A Personal Memoir*. Translated from the French by Herma Briffault. Chicago: Cowles Book Company, 1972.

Sainteny's memoir was very useful in giving me the French perspective on 1940s Vietnam as he seemed to be involved at all of the important junctures of the story. Sainteny first met Ho Chi Minh in 1945 when he was sent by the French government to negotiate with Ho at the close of WWII when France sought to reassert control over Indochina. By late 1946, Sainteny was in Vietnam with the French military fighting against the Vietminh. In 1969, Sainteny led the French delegation attending Ho Chi Minh's funeral. (France was the only Western nation represented.)

Sharp, Richard L. Memorandum of Conversation, January 30, 1946. National Archives (College Park, MD), 851G.00/1-3046.

In this memo, Sharp, who was with the State Department's Division of Southeast Asian Affairs, is both relating a conversation he had with Brigadier General Philip Gallagher about the Vietminh and sharing his own observations. I used this memo to document the internal debate among U.S. diplomats about whether the Vietminh were more correctly seen as communists or nationalists and to show that the U.S. was aware that the Vietnamese fully believed they would receive support from the international community for their independence.

Smith, Walter Bedell. "The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Smith) to the Secretary of State, April 5, 1946, telegram in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946, Volume VI (Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union)*, pp. 732-736.

This telegram sent from Moscow by the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union reports on a conversation with Joseph Stalin and reflects American concerns over Soviet expansionism. At this point, Smith is specifically concerned about a possible Soviet invasion of Turkey as Stalin is demanding a base in the Dardanelles. I used this telegram to show America's wariness of communism and the perceived need to contain it.

Williams, William Appleman, ed. *America In Vietnam: A Documentary History*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985.

This annotated collection of documents related to America's involvement in Vietnam (1857-1975) was useful to me because it included several documents from 1949 detailing internal U.S. policy debate just prior to the U.S. decision to back Bao Dai.

## Secondary Sources

Aldrich, Richard J. *Intelligence and the War Against Japan: Britain, America and the Politics of the Secret Service*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

This book provided me with background on Ho Chi Minh's relationship with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the American intelligence division during WWII that was the precursor to the CIA.

Bartholomew-Feis, Dixie R. *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh: Unexpected Allies in the War Against Japan*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006.

In this book I found several helpful quotes from OSS officers who actually knew Ho personally during WWII.

Duiker, William J. *Ho Chi Minh: A Life*. New York: Hyperion, 2000.

This very complete biography of Ho Chi Minh was helpful in providing unique anecdotes about events in Vietnam in the 1940s.

Halberstam, David. *Ho*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971.

Halberstam's sympathetic portrayal of Ho Chi Minh is a quick overview of the subject. Halberstam's view, which was shared by many of Ho's biographers, was that Ho Chi Minh "was a Socialist so that Vietnam could be free." (p. 32)

Marr, David G. *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

This book gave a very detailed look at the immediate postwar period in Vietnam. I found Marr's conclusion memorable: "In reality, Paris was neither interested in the ideas of Ho Chi Minh or Vo Nguyen Giap nor eager for Sainteny to develop his tentative contacts. The emphasis was on moving as many troops as quickly as possible to Saigon.... Such hubris would cling to the French government and army for years. Then it was the turn of the Americans." (p. 539)

Olsen, Mari. *Soviet-Vietnam Relations and the Role of China, 1949-64: Changing Alliances*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

This monograph by a Norwegian researcher was useful in providing me with information about Vietnam's relationship with other countries, particularly China and the Soviet Union. In a real sense, although Ho Chi Minh was communist, he wanted to remain independent of China and the Soviet Union, and the larger countries would often vie for Ho's attentions.

Quinn-Judge, Sophie. *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years, 1919-1941*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002.

This biography of Ho Chi Minh was different from others in that it focused on the years he spent largely outside of Vietnam, in France, Russia, the United States, China, and elsewhere. It was one of the first biographies written after the opening of the archives of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1992, giving researchers access to a trove of previously unknown information about Ho Chi Minh's early adult years.

Spector, Ronald H. *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the United States Army in Vietnam, 1941-1960*. New York: The Free Press, 1985.

This publication of the United States Army Center of Military History was useful in documenting the early military aid sent by the United States to Bao Dai's government.

February 1950 - Viet Minh begin an offensive against French outposts in North Vietnam near the Chinese border. February 7, 1950 - In America, the era of 'McCarthyism' erupts as Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin gives a speech claiming the U.S. State Department harbors Communists. As a consequence of McCarthyism, no U.S. politician is willing to appear to be 'soft' on Communism.Â September 16, 1950 - General Giap begins his main attack against French outposts near the Chinese border. As the outposts fall, the French lose 6000 men and large stores of military equipment to the Viet Minh. September 27, 1950 - The U.S. establishes a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Saigon to aid the French Army. 1951. Map of Vietnam. The 17th Parallel indicates the boundary separating North and South Vietnam following the peace negotiations in Geneva in 1954. In peace negotiations at Geneva, the decision was reached to divide Vietnam into northern and southern halves. The communists, headed by Ho Chi Minh, would govern the northern half, with its capital at Hanoi, while South Vietnam, with its capital at Saigon, would remain non-communist. The Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China supported the north, while the United States was determined to maintain an independent, non-communist South Vietnam. I