

## **The United States and Vietnam: A Lost Opportunity**

Robert Taylor

One of the more intriguing historical questions posed by historians of the Vietnam War centers on the possibility of establishing an alliance with Ho Chi Minh during or immediately following the Second World War. Ho was firmly committed to expelling all invading forces from his homeland, including the French, and was equally dedicated to his ultimate goal of establishing an independent Vietnam. The United States, given its classical liberal tradition and historical enmity towards colonialism, seemed a natural ideological ally to Ho's burgeoning independence movement. As recently as 1941, the US had publicly committed itself to defending its traditional classical tenets by signing the Atlantic Charter. Among other lofty utopian goals such as liberating the world from hunger and want, the document stressed that all peoples possess the right to self-determination and self-government. Further, throughout the war, President Roosevelt issued a steady stream of anti-colonial rhetoric and often explicitly expressed disapproval of returning Indochina to the French. The President also proposed a trusteeship program which

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sought to secure eventual independence for colonized nations and thus seemed ideally suited for the Vietnamese. In addition, during the waning days of the war, Ho and his guerilla forces (the Vietminh) worked closely with American Special Forces to combat the Japanese within Indochina. Such favorable interaction seemed to further solidify the larger ideological bonds between the two nations and led Ho to frequently initiate diplomatic overtures to the United States in an effort to secure official aid and recognition during the postwar period.

However, the American political establishment emerged from World War II on precarious ideological footing. The United States' literally unprecedented military and economic power following the war triggered a profound intellectual transformation within American political life that led to a reassessment of the country's guiding tenets. Ominously, a return to neutrality was never seriously considered. A policy of intervention was essentially a foregone conclusion; the only question was as to what form said intervention should take. For example, President Roosevelt clearly expressed his wishes for Wilsonian intercession throughout the world directed towards abolishing all colonial empires. Meanwhile, various policymakers within the State Department expressed far more pragmatic realpolitik measures predicated upon curtailing Soviet power. Central to this goal

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stood a strong, sovereign, and staunchly anti-Communist and pro-American Europe. As such, this group possessed a vested interest in placating the United States' European allies at the expense of less developed countries. Indeed, given the European powers' desire to reclaim all the territories which composed their fading empires, such a strategy necessitated a decidedly pragmatic worldview in which traditional American ideological fare was relegated far less importance. Given France's post-war desire to regain its lost colonies, including Indochina, such a shift presented severe challenges to Ho's independence movement and to Roosevelt's Wilsonian outlook as a whole. Ultimately, these two conflicting foreign policy goals would muddle US foreign policy until the shocks of 1949 (Mao's Revolution and the USSR's emergence as a nuclear power) spawned a pervasive, almost hysterical fear of Communism which placed the containment doctrine above all else.

It was within this confusing context that Ho Chi Minh extended his olive branch. Given the American political landscape's complexity at the time, it is perhaps unsurprising to note that the US was unable to formulate effective policy quickly enough to have prevented external circumstances, mainly by the British and French, from forcing their hand. However, the fact remains that the prospect of alliance and

friendship with the Vietnamese was eminently plausible had the United States wished to explore it. Unfortunately, Ho was almost completely ignored by American policymakers at all levels. The uncertain political and ideological transition taking place within the American government immediately following World War II resulted in indecisive action towards Vietnam which allowed the French to reestablish control over the colony and prevented American response during the critical 1945-1946 period in which Ho actively sought American support.

### **I. FDR and Ambiguous US Foreign Policy**

At least ideologically, President Roosevelt appeared most sympathetic to the Vietnamese cause. Roosevelt viewed the world through Wilsonian lenses; he broadly supported the principles outlined in the Atlantic Charter and wholeheartedly sought to dismantle colonial empires. Indeed, one of the charter's main points (and of particular relevance to Ho) asserted that the US and UK would "respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and... [that the US and UK] wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them..." (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol 1, p. A-19).

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While the idea that Churchill signed the document without his fingers crossed is laughable, Roosevelt seems to have truly supported such measures. Throughout the war, he issued vociferous anti-colonial diatribes and frequently propounded independence proposals. The President even went so far as to formulate a “trusteeship” plan which dictated that the UN or an individual nation provide tutelage for underdeveloped colonial countries for a period of time until they were deemed ready to assume full independence. Ideally, the plan was to be enacted across the globe. Although Ho sought outright independence without the sponsorship period, the plan nonetheless stood as a promising alternative to French colonialism.

The French, however, were firmly committed to regaining all their pre-war possessions and restoring their fading empire. As such, they unsurprisingly disdained Roosevelt’s plans and demanded that Indochina be returned to them. The British staunchly supported the French position. While not directly threatened by American designs in Indochina, they feared that an American presence in Southeast Asia would initiate a domino process of decolonization throughout the region. As Churchill wrote in February 1944, “If the Japanese should withdraw...or make peace as the result of the American thrust, the United States Government would...feel greatly strengthened in its

view that all possessions in the East Archipelago should be placed under some international body [in] which the US would exercise a decisive concern” (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol I, p. A-15). This was to be avoided at all costs, and the British frequently indicated as such to their American allies: “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...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” (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol I, p. A-15).

Such harsh words did not faze Roosevelt. As early as January 1944, he began to issue exasperated and slightly annoyed rebuttals to British queries over the status of Indochina:

I saw [Lord] 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....The only reason they [the British] 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 Indochina... France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indo-China are entitled to something better than that (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol 1. p A-14).

Further, the President refused to allow French re-deployment in the area and insisted that Indochina’s status be decided during post-war

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discussions. In addition, he continued to propound his trusteeship plan.

In early 1945, US military commanders resolved to concentrate all available forces on the Japanese in the Pacific theatre and to essentially cede authority over military operations in the area to the British. Such a decision greatly eased Churchill's fears that the US would establish a presence within Southeast Asia from which they could expound their liberal ideals and effectively allowed the British to regain control of their pre-war colonies in the Netherlands East Indies and New Guinea. However, Roosevelt continued to greatly frustrate the French. He did not lift the ban on French troop deployments in Indochina. In fact, the President even ordered officers to ignore official US military policy when possible by committing US troops to Indochina which avoided "alignments with the French" and which did not detract from the campaign against Japan (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol I, p. A-16). He clearly feared (correctly, as it turned out) that French troops would be used in part to re-establish French authority over the colony and thus nip trusteeship proposals in the bud.

However, to confuse matters, the United States had also broadly committed itself to reestablishing the French Empire as it had existed before the outbreak of hostilities, and had issued a number of

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public statements to this effect. For example, Roosevelt's personal representative informed French General Giraud in 1942 that "French sovereignty will be reestablished as soon as possible throughout all the territory, metropolitan and colonial, over which flew the French flag in 1939" (Porter, 1979, Doc 14, p. 22). More ambiguously, in a 1942 Department of State press release: "The policy of the Government of the United States has been based upon the maintenance of the integrity of France and of the French Empire and of the eventual restoration of the complete independence of all French territories" (Porter, 1979, Doc 15, p. 24). Unsurprisingly, such statements, especially when coupled with Roosevelt's rhetoric, left the French confused and wary.

In early March, the Japanese attempted to consolidate their remaining forces within Southeast Asia by launching a coup and formally seizing power from the collaborationist Vichy French government in Indochina. The Vietminh immediately launched a guerilla war against Japanese forces. Soon after, an American OSS team parachuted into the country and worked closely with Ho to supply and help coordinate Vietminh assaults. Predictably, General Charles De Gaulle and other Free French officials demanded that the Americans allow Free French military and naval forces to participate in the conflicts in Southeast Asia. Still, Roosevelt remained firm and

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refused to allow French troops into the area. He did, however, slowly begin to turn away from his steadfast insistence that Indochina be placed under an international trusteeship. Charles Taussig, Roosevelt's advisor on Caribbean affairs, summarized a conversation he had with the President on March 15, 1945, in which Roosevelt declared that "If we can get the proper pledge from France to assume for herself the obligations of a trustee, then I would agree to France retaining these colonies with the proviso that independence was the ultimate goal" (Porter, 1979, Doc 14, p. 22).

Still, while France was issuing reassuring statements regarding the liberal policies it would pursue in Indochina, the idea that it would assume the role of a trustee was unlikely. Even Communists within France were unprepared to even contemplate bestowing full independence upon the Vietnamese; their national emasculation and wounded psyche clearly wouldn't allow such a loss. As such, while diplomatically shrewd, Roosevelt's statement in practice hardly represented a softening stance towards the French, as it presumed an eventuality he knew the French were unwilling to agree to.

The Department of State, however, certainly gauged the postwar situation far more pragmatically than did Roosevelt. In a memorandum drafted by the Far Eastern division in April 1945, the

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idea of placing Indochina under trusteeship was rejected outright due to the inevitable strains it would place upon US-Franco relations. As the document summarized, “French resentment will be such as to impose a very serious strain upon our relations and thus tend to defeat basic elements underlying our policy towards France. A disgruntled, psychologically sick and sovereign-conscious France will not augur well for post-war collaboration in Europe and the world as a whole” (Porter, 1979, Doc 15, p. 23). Instead, the Far Eastern division advocated the more conservative position of restoring Indochina to French rule under the provisions that the French liberalize their policies towards the colony. Such an attitude reflected a markedly different opinion on the matter than that propounded by Roosevelt, and again indicated the indecision which characterized the American government towards the end of the War.

In any case, Roosevelt’s opinions were rendered moot on April 12, when the President suffered a massive cerebral hemorrhage and died. Given the mounting pressure towards restoring Indochina to French rule, it is unclear whether or not Roosevelt would have dramatically altered the course of history had he lived longer. The inherent unfairness of forcing trusteeship upon a French colony when similar demands were not imposed upon British colonies in the region

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seemed too much for the French to bear. As he neared the end of his life, Roosevelt himself appeared to reluctantly grasp this fact. On April 3, 1945, the Secretary of State, with Roosevelt's approval, issued the following statement at Yalta: "The Trusteeship structure...should be defined to permit the placing under it of the territories taken from the enemy in this war, as might be agreed upon at a later date, and also such other territories as might be voluntarily placed under trusteeship" (Porter, 1979, Doc 18, p. 40). In other words, the President had apparently publicly resigned himself to bestowing trusteeship status to colonies only with the approval of the colonizing nation – an authorization the French would never issue in the case of Indochina.

Still, Roosevelt's influence should not be understated. The aforementioned declaration may have eased his allies' nerves, but it did not erase the memory of Roosevelt's many other statements and actions to the contrary, nor did it officially clarify ambiguous declarations regarding French imperial restoration and colonial independence. As such, upon Roosevelt's death, official US policy towards its allies' colonial possessions remained in disarray. As the Pentagon Papers summarizes,

The British remained apprehensive that there might be a continued US search for a trusteeship formula which might impinge on the Commonwealth...The French were restive over continued US refusal to provide strategic transport for French forces in Indochina, and deeply suspicious that the United States – possibly in concert with the Chinese – intended to block their regaining control of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia [Indochina] (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol I, p. A-20).

## **II. Softening Relations with France**

Following Roosevelt's death, the State Department Division of European Affairs initiated a policy review on Indochina and formally concluded that the US should not oppose restoring the territory to French rule (Porter, 1979, Doc 18, p. 41). The Far East division, after reviewing the document, agreed in principle with the European Division's findings, but, in line with its previous recommendations, stressed that the French should not be permitted to regain the territory without a concurrent liberalization of its policies toward the colony, including instituting measures towards actual self-government (again, however, not outright independence). Noting that the French had collaborated with the Japanese and that their administration of Indochina had been "the least satisfactory" of all the colonial powers, the document advised restoring French rule under 5 conditions, the most important of which demanded the "Development of a democratic national or federal government to be run for and increasingly by the

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Indochinese themselves with no special privileges for French or other persons who are not inhabitants and citizens of Indochina” (Porter, 1979, Doc 19, p. 46)... Further, the Far Eastern division cautioned that “...the United States must not jeopardize its own increasingly important interests in Southeast Asia” (Porter, 1979, Doc 19, p. 44), while the European Division ignored such a qualifying statement. Nonetheless, both documents recognized the obligations the US had committed itself to regarding the restoration of French integrity and its overseas possessions; further, they reflected a belief that French cooperation was vital towards future US interests in Europe and in maintaining peace and security throughout the world.

Unfortunately, the government’s eventual policy embraced the European division’s memorandum rather than that of the Far Eastern division. In May, acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew assured French Ambassador Jefferson Caffery that the French would regain sovereignty over Indochina, officially ending any question as to whether or not Roosevelt’s trusteeship concept would apply to the territory (Porter, 1979, Doc 20, p. 46). While the document called into question French treatment of the colony and warned that the Americans disdained French colonial management – “Certain elements of American public opinion...condemned French governmental

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policies and practices in Indochina” – no official constraints or conditions were imposed upon the French.

The policy battle over Indochina represents in microcosm the overarching paradigm shift the United States experienced in the aftermath of World War II. Ironically, while American policymakers never seriously considered returning to their neutral, non-interventionist roots, their indecision over how to properly micromanage world affairs effectively resulted in a temporary non-interventionist policy within Southeast Asia that allowed both the British and the French to regain their colonial possessions in the area. While such a decision initially left Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese in an untenable situation, ultimately the Americans ended up placing themselves in danger as their move towards imperial pragmatism and anti-Communism led to their own war in Vietnam 20 years later. Perhaps even more ironically, had the United States simply remained true to its neutral roots, or had fully embraced enforcing Wilsonian self-determination, the Vietnam War could have easily been avoided. However, while pro-Vietnamese intervention would have resulted in severe damage to US-Franco relations (and probably US-British relations as well), a continuous neutrality would have precluded US intervention in Vietnam at any juncture and resulted in Vietnamese

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independence following their victory over the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

It should also be noted here that Ho's Communism was only a secondary factor, if that, in determining US policy at this stage. Indeed, as discussed above, the United States staggered to the decision to return Indochina to France; further, American rationale encompassed a desire to secure French goodwill and re-establish the nation's integrity, not to stem the flow of Communism in Asia. Indeed, at this early date, America only dimly perceived the "threat" of international Communism, and the country's foreign policy, while increasingly belligerent, had not yet been marred by an attitude that demanded thwarting the Soviets at all costs.

### **III. The Vietminh Take Matters into Their Own Hands**

Ho and the Vietnamese were unaware of the transition the American government had undertaken, and did not know that the Americans had decided to allow the French to re-take Indochina. Ho shrewdly perceived, however, that tension between the USSR and the Allies could cause the Americans to concede Indochina to the French. Indeed, as party documents indicate, fundamental Vietnamese geostrategic analyses were extremely sound:

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We must avail ourselves of the contradictions in the Allied camp concerning the Indochina question, between the British and the French on the one side, and the Americans and Chinese on the other. [However, we must be wary that] The contradictions between Britain, the United States and France on the one side and the Soviet Union on the other, might lead the British and Americans to make concessions to the French and allow them to come back to Indochina... We must win the Soviet Union and the United States over to our cause so that we can oppose French attempts to resume their former position in Indochina and the maneuvers of some Chinese militarists to occupy our country (Porter, 1979, Doc 28, p. 59).

As such, Ho decided to forestall a French return by decisively asserting Vietnamese sovereignty. On August 16, 1945, the day after the Japanese indicated that they would capitulate and accept the Allies' terms of surrender, Ho and his commander-in-chief, General Vo Nguyen Giap, again ordered a nation-wide insurrection against the last vestiges of the Imperial Japanese government. By August 26, the rebellion had succeeded in securing the puppet Emperor Bao Dai's abdication. On September 2<sup>nd</sup>, Ho declared Vietnamese independence and established an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV).

However, the Allies had plans of their own, and the DRV did not fit into them. At the Potsdam conference in July 1945, President Truman and British Prime Minister Clement Atlee had agreed to divide Vietnam in two at the 16<sup>th</sup> parallel in order to facilitate Japanese disarmament in the area. The treaty gave China jurisdiction over

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military operations in the North, while the British were charged with securing the South. Unsurprisingly, confusion and disorder immediately arose when the two powers arrived in September 1945. While the Chinese recognized the legitimacy of the newly created DRV in Hanoi, the British, pursuant to their own goals of reinforcing colonial holdings and supporting the French, refused to do the same in Saigon and deferred power to the French from the outset. They further aided the French by helping plan and execute a coup on September 23, 1945 in which French P.O.W's (with aid from British troops in the area) overthrew the DRV and ostensibly restored French authority over Indochina. The Vietminh immediately responded by again launching a guerilla war, this time directed against the French.

The US did not respond to these events for almost two full weeks. Finally, on October 5, Secretary of State Dean Acheson (who was to become a staunch Cold Warrior), issued the following telegram to diplomats in India and China:

US has no thought of opposing the reestablishment of French control in Indochina and no official statement by US government has questioned even by implication French sovereignty over Indochina. However, it is not the policy of this Govt to assist the French to reestablish their control over Indochina by force and the willingness of the US to see French control reestablished assumes that French claim to have support of the population of Indochina is borne out by future events (Porter, 1979, Doc 46, p. 82).

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Again, it is clearly evident that a certain reluctance to fully support the French prevailed within the American government. The Department of State even went so far as to advise the Secretary of War on January 15, 1946 that it was contrary to American policy to “employ American flag vessels or aircraft to transport troops of any nationality to or from the Netherlands East Indies or French Indochina, nor to permit use of such craft to carry arms, ammunition or military equipment to these areas” (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol I, p. A-24). Further, the precondition that the French secure a measure of popular approval from elements within Indochina before the US would lend their wholehearted support to French ambitions yet again indicates the Americans’ desire to balance the dictates of the new world order, in which a vibrant and friendly France was integral, with their desire to enforce the American ideological tenets of self-determination and freedom across the globe. However, it was also made explicitly clear that the US had no intention of backing Ho Chi Minh, either materially or diplomatically. The Vietminh were on their own.

Unflinching British assistance, however, aided the French in retaking Indochina. The UK arranged for the transport of additional French troops to Saigon as early as October 1945, and donated around 800 US lend-lease jeeps and trucks to the French. On 4 March 1946,

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British Admiral Lord Mountbatten transferred full control of Indochina to the French authorities by formally deactivating the colony from Allied Southeast Asia command. With the British withdrawal, the fighting that had begun in September became a singularly French affair.

Ho continued to make overtures to the United States and frequently wrote directly to Truman and the Secretary of State. His attempts were summarily ignored. In the summer of 1945, he had even gone so far as to profess a desire for Vietnam to be granted the “the same status as the Philippines;” i.e., an undetermined period of tutelage preliminary to independence – trusteeship (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol 1, C-4). His subsequent communiqués constantly invoked the Atlantic charter and US statements that propounded self-determination; further, he contrasted Vietnamese assistance to the Allies during the war with the French collaboration with Axis powers, all to no avail. In his last letter addressed directly to Truman, Ho reasonably stated that French “aggression is contrary to...the pledges made by the Allies during the World War...It violently contrasts with the firm stand you have taken in your twelve point declaration, and with the idealistic loftiness and generosity expressed by your delegates to the United Nations assembly” (Porter, 1979, Doc 58, p. 95)...

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Again, despite his well-reasoned and logical arguments, the United States ignored Ho's appeals.

The situation for the DRV was dire. With the United States ignoring its pleas, a hostile French force within its borders, and threatening Chinese warlords in the North, Ho and the DRV turned to diplomacy in order to buy time for the Vietnamese independence movement. Ho was desperate to expel the Chinese. Historically Vietnam's most hated enemy (the Chinese continuously invaded and/or intervened within Vietnam for almost 2000 years before Westerners arrived), Ho feared that the Chinese would attempt to overthrow the Vietminh and establish an anti-Communist puppet government composed of members of the pro-Chinese parties in the DRV. Fortunately for Ho, the French and Chinese concluded an agreement on February 28th which gave the French control of all operations in Northern Indochina by March 31<sup>st</sup>. Ho, still paranoid that the Chinese would initiate a coup as they evacuated, quickly negotiated an accord with the French that established Vietnam as a "free state" within the French Union with details of independence to be worked out at a later date. As a concession, Ho allowed the French army to remain within Vietnamese territory for a period of 5 years (Porter, 1979, Doc 59, p. 96-97). Unsurprisingly, the pro-Chinese

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forces within Vietnam again bitterly attacked Ho. He responded angrily:

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 are weak. Colonialism is dying out. Nothing will be able to withstand world pressure for independence. They may stay for a while, but they will have to go because the white man is finished in Asia. But if the Chinese stay now, they will never leave. As for me, I prefer to smell French shit for five years, rather than Chinese shit for the rest of my life (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol I, p. C-3).

While Ho would continue to “smell French shit” for another 8 years rather than just 5, he had succeeded in expelling the Chinese and threw himself into the task of negotiating with France the terms with which Vietnam might eventually assume independence. The talks eventually resulted in a *modus vivendi* between the French and Vietnamese that allowed a semblance of Vietnamese self-government while preserving French cultural and economic interests within Indochina. However, it was clear that such agreements were only temporary. Indeed, by the end of 1946, the French and Vietnamese had again engaged themselves in concerted warfare which would continue until the dramatic Vietnamese victory at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, finally caused the French to abandon their colony.

However, as mentioned above, as these events transpired, the Americans began to grow increasingly sensitive to the perceived threat

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of international Communism and moved further and further away from Ho Chi Minh. The United States increasingly feared Ho's Communist connections, and sought at all costs to avoid an outcome in which Ho led an independent Vietnam. As Acheson stated in a cable on 2 December 1946, "Keep in mind Ho's clear record as agent international communism, absence evidence of recantation Moscow affiliations, confused political situation France and support Ho receiving French Communist Party. Least desirable eventuality would be establishment Communist-dominated, Moscow oriented state Indochina" (Porter, 1979, Doc 81, p. 128)... Unfortunately, the US failed to recognize that Ho was really the only Vietnamese leader capable of uniting all the disparate forces in Vietnam into a functioning entity; he was the only man capable of securing mass support. The US, increasingly wary of Communism, could not accept this, and thus sought answers for Vietnam in anyone but Ho. This sentiment would only grow in the late 40's as Ho openly embraced Communism and turned towards the Soviets and the (now Communist) Chinese for assistance.

Still, as the Pentagon Papers succinctly state, "Ho's behavior in 1949-1950, however convincingly it endorsed US policy at that juncture, does not necessarily explain away his earlier eagerness for

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US and UN intervention in Vietnam<sup>1</sup>” (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol I, p. C-5). Indeed, Ho had always been a nationalist first and a Communist second. As early as 1941, the Indochinese Communist party’s official ideology dictated the subordination of the “agrarian” revolution to the more important task of gaining independence: “With regard to the Indochinese people at present, the anti-imperialist task is more serious and urgent than the agrarian task. At present the national rights are higher than anything else. The interests of one segment must serve the interests of the entire nation. The interests of one class must stand behind the interests of all the people” (Porter, 1979, Doc 2, p. 4). Or, as Ho himself stated in 1941, “National salvation is the common cause of our entire people. Every Vietnamese must take part in it. He who has money will contribute his money, he who has strength will contribute his strength, he who has talent will contribute his talent” (Porter, 1979, Doc 1, p. 2).

As such, the question remains: would Ho have turned towards the Communist bloc, or would he have become an “Asian Tito” had the US embraced his overtures during the critical 1945-1946 juncture? With the benefit of hindsight, the latter appears an almost certainty.

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<sup>1</sup> Which, as the Pentagon Papers admits, “...even a Leninist may have scrupled” (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol 1, C-4).

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Nearly all Ho's writings and communiqués indicate a deep admiration for the United States that only would have increased had the US actively promoted Vietnamese independence. Further, his clear nationalism indicated a decided hatred for any sort of subordination to another power; certainly he would not have allowed Moscow to dominate the Vietnamese the way the Soviets dominated the majority of its satellite states. In hindsight, it's clear that if Ho was willing to fight the Chinese, the Japanese, the French, and then the Americans, he certainly would have also fought the Soviets had they attempted to intervene within Vietnamese affairs.

Nonetheless, in the final analysis, it is evident that the United States left Ho with little option as it deferred authority to the French almost from the outset and refused to negotiate directly with Ho. Further, a great deal of indecision over Vietnam reigned within the US government and prevented legitimate opportunities for a real US-Vietnamese relationship to develop. In the end, the US simply decided that its relationship with France overrode fulfillment of its propounded ideological tenets across the globe and thus deferred handling of the Indochinese affair to its European ally. Further, to support Ho Chi Minh, the US government would have "involved perspicacity and risk...unique in US history" (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol I, p. C-6). It

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was obviously unclear what would have happened had the US supported this Communist upstart, while continued support of the French would probably not result in any surprises for US policymakers. As such, “the path of prudence rather than the path of risk seemed the wiser choice” (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol 1, p. C-6). By 1949, when Acheson issued the following infamous statement, US policy had essentially resolved around its own self-fulfilling prophecy:

Question whether Ho as much nationalist as Commie is irrelevant. All Stalinists in colonial areas are nationalists. With achievement national aims (i.e., independence) their objective necessarily becomes subordination state to Commie purposes and ruthless extermination not only opposition groups but all elements suspected even slighted deviation... (Acheson, 1949) (Pentagon Papers, 1971, vol 1, p. C-5)

Communism, no matter its history or its context, was the enemy. Ho’s previous willingness to embrace the Americans no longer mattered; it was all seen as a feint to achieve the ultimate goal of establishing a Communist dictatorship.

In the first instance of what has become a recurring theme, the United States’ broad commitments to self-determination and the right of all peoples to freedom were ultimately undermined by an underlying pragmatism that subordinated principle to security from an overblown monolithic threat. Indeed, during the critical period in

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1945-1946, when Ho repeatedly turned towards the Americans for assistance, US policy makers at every level ignored him. American foreign policy displayed a certain amount of indecision during the time, as it wavered between general advocacy of the principles defined by the Atlantic Charter and an unwillingness to compromise the integrity and lingering prestige of colonial allies. Specifically, the United States was unwilling to risk poor relations with France by placing Indochina under trusteeship during an uncertain postwar period in which growing Soviet power generated increasing paranoia within the American political landscape. As such, the question of whether or not Ho Chi Minh should have been taken seriously as an alternative to French rule was never adequately addressed; by the time full scale warfare broke out between the French and the Vietnamese in the late 40's, American foreign policy had become obsessed with containing communism, and any arrangement with Ho by this period was out of the question. Further, Ho had by this time clearly moved closer to the Communist bloc and no longer looked to the United States for any kind of serious political assistance. As such, the period 1945-1946, in which Ho Chi Minh appeared relatively open to American alliance, was wasted due to the dictates of the French and

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the British and American unwillingness to risk the possible consequences of an independent Communist Vietnam.

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