

26 February 1990

THE FRENCH IN INDOCHINA

TON THAT THIEN

Summary_of_lecture

- Lessons from the study of the French in Indochina: danger of making wrong assessment of political, military, psychological realities; impact of international constraints; importance of revolutionary bases; necessity of making the right decisions at the crucial moments.

- Significance of revolutionary bases: guerilla (First base), political (Second base), external (Third base).

- Deeper causes of France's defeat in Indochina: defeat by Germany in Europe ; Japanese coup of March 1945; Japanese sudden surrender; President Roosevelt's opposition to France's return to Indochina; Potsdam decision to place norther Indochina under Chinese. Consequence: Ho Chi Minh became de facto power in North Vietnam.

- French failure to perceive the new mood of the Vietnamese masses led to complacency. French and Vietnamese attitudes. Explanations. Psychology and history. The Vietnamese were convinced that the French were finished. The French thought a reconquest was easy as in the past.

- Unanimity among the French in 1945-1947: restoring French presence first, by force if necessary. March 6, 1946 agreement. Irreconcilable interpretations of "Free State in Indochinese Federation and French Union". France's failure to make decision on Vietnam's independence at crucial moment in 1947 and consequence: Ho won Second base. Stalemate to 1949.

- Consequence of Chinese Communists' victory: stalemate broken in favour of Ho Chi Minh (Third base reached).

- French government (De Gaulle and Bidault) not basically opposed to liberal status for Indochina but Ho's communism and basic hostility to France made agreement with French impossible. But France's concession of independence and unity to Bao Dai too late. Ho had too much lead.

- France missed its exit from Indochina, but French resistance prevented smooth takeover by Ho and foiled Communist entry into Southeast Asia.

UNFAMILIAR NAMES AND WORDS

1. Leclerc (General), CIC French Forces, 1945
2. O.S.S.: Office of Strategic Service (beginning of C.I.A.)
3. Yves Gras (General)
4. Archimedes L.Patti (Major), chief of O.S.S.- North Indochina
5. Henry Brain, British foreign service officer in Saigon
6. Gracey (General), British CIC in South Indochina
7. Jean Cedille, French Commissioner for Cochinchina
8. Tranh voi chang ho mat nao (Vietnamese proverb: it is not shameful to get out of an elephant's way)
9. Phan Dinh Phung, Vietnamese revolutionary mandarin
10. Phan Boi Chau, Vietnamese Confucian revolutionary
11. Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang, VNQDD, Vietnamese Kuomintang
12. thoi co (opportunity)
13. Jean Sainteny, French Commissioner for North Vietnam
14. Rene Moreau, French official prisoner of Vietminh in 1945
15. Nguyen Tuong Tam, a leader of the VNQDD
16. Vietminh (Vietnamese independence movement set up by Ho Chi Minh as cover for Communists)
17. d'Argenlieu (Admiral), High Commissioner for Indochina, 1945
18. Georges Bidault, French former prime minister
19. Maurice Thorez, French Communist leader
20. Emile Bollaert, French High Commissioner for Indochina, 1947
21. Henri Laurentie, director of political affairs, French Overseas Ministry, 1945-1946
22. Prince Vinh Sang, ex-Emperor Duy Tan
24. M.R.P. (Mouvement Republicain Populaire)
25. Max Andre, chief of French delegation at Fontainebleau
26. Fontainebleau, near Paris, site of Franco-Vietnamese conference in 1946
27. Valluy (General), CIC French Forces in 1946
28. Claude Dulong, wife of Jean Sainteny
29. Claude de Boisanger, diplomatic adviser to Governor Decoux
30. Decoux (Admiral), Governor General of Indochina, 1940-1945.

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The story of the French in Indochina is that of a failure. This failure carries a number of lessons. It shows the dangers of making incorrect assessments of political, military and psychological realities in a particular situation which results in the pursuit of ends which cannot be achieved for lack of adequate means. It also highlights the impact of international constraints on a country's freedom of action, the importance of preventing a revolutionary movement from setting up bases, and the necessity of making the right decisions at the crucial moments in order to defeat such a movement.

In dealing with a revolutionary movement in a colony after World War II, a European power could face three kinds of situation, separately or jointly. Although I have not yet grasped all the subtleties of baseball, I think I understand enough to use the analogy with bases to describe these situations.

Situation 1. The revolutionaries have already established a guerilla base in some unaccessible part of the country where they enjoy absolute protection from attack. Then, it would be impossible for the colonial power to eradicate them. I would call this First Base.

However, if the colonial government takes the right measures in time it can prevent the revolutionaries from breaking out of their base and cause serious trouble. These measures should deprive the revolutionaries of the possibility of securing the

support of the overwhelming majority of the population by appearing as those who can best lead them successfully in the fight for the achievement of their most cherished aspirations.

Since we are dealing here with people who identify their humiliation, poverty and oppressed state with their loss of national independence, the essential measure would have to deal with this issue. There may be other issues, but independence remains undoubtedly the major emotional one.

Situation 2. If the colonial power fails to take appropriate and timely action, the revolutionaries will use this issue of independence to seize the leadership of the nationalist movement by being more radical than all the other parties. In this case, they will gain wide political support, and will establish what I would call Second Base. If this happens, it will be impossible to defeat them. On the other hand, by itself, the establishment of this Second Base will not be enough for the revolutionaries to defeat the colonial power. The situation will then be a stalemate.

Situation 3. This stalemate can be broken only in one of the two following cases:

a) The colonial power accepts to meet the aspirations of the people in full and without reservations, but will offer this concession to another group, and at the same time, make an increased military effort, and remain firm in this course; in time, the revolutionary movement will break up.

b) The revolutionaries can secure from a neighbouring country which is a major power and is prepared to offer them firm and massive support, as well as sanctuary on its territory. In other words, in addition to a guerilla base and a political base,

the revolutionaries will also have a diplomatic-military base, which I propose to call Third Base. In this case, the revolutionaries are certain to score and defeat the colonial power in the long run, unless this power has the means, or the allies, or both, to take on the supporting power, even at the risk of a general war.

The situations I have described were those faced by the French in Indochina between 1945 and 1954. The French were defeated because they failed to prevent the Communist revolutionaries led by Ho Chi Minh from building successively First Base, then Second Base, then Third Base.

This defeat was, however, only partly^{ial} the result of French action. It was also the result of international developments beyond the control of France. These developments went back many years before France's engagement in Indochina in 1945. This is a very important aspect which has been neglected in past writings about Indochina. I shall deal with this aspect first.

If we search for deeper historical causes of France's defeat in Indochina, we can list five major ones.

First, in June 1940, France was defeated by Germany. As a result, its home base and its main military force ceased to be available for maintaining its position in Indochina. Japan took advantage of this situation to impose a de facto occupation of the colony. This gave the Communists a good reason to set up guerilla bases and seek Chinese and American aid, apparently for fighting Japanese fascism, but in fact for fighting the French, without contravening Soviet policy.

Second, in March 1945, in Indochina itself, France's

colonial army and security forces were disarmed and interned, and its administrations dismantled, by the Japanese. This means France's loss of its forward base and military force, which numbered 60,000 men, of whom 10,000 were metropolitan French. As a consequence, the Vietnamese Communists could operate freely, consolidate and expand their bases, recruit partisans, build up their armed forces, extend the areas under their control by terrorising those who would not cooperate.

Third, in August 1945, the dropping of two American atomic bombs forced Japan's surrender before anyone could work out a plan for Indochina, and especially before General de Gaulle could dispatch any troops to Indochina. Allied troops, ordered by General McArthur not to move before the formal surrender of Japanese forces in Tokyo, will not arrive for several weeks, and General Leclerc will land in Saigon only in October, and then with only 3,500 men. As a consequence, in the weeks following Japan's surrender, there was a total vacuum in Indochina. Into this vacuum walked Ho Chi Minh and his men, without opposition from any quarter; better still, they had the blessing and help of O.S.S. Whether this was American official policy or not, the result was the same. It gave Ho Chi Minh and his group a tremendous advantage over all their adversaries, Vietnamese or French.

Fourth, and this was the most important and decisive development, on President Roosevelt's orders the French were prevented from receiving American help and from reentering Indochina before and during the crucial month of August 1945. These orders will be countermanded by President Truman, but only

in September, and they will be actually implemented only in October. By then, for the French, it will be too late, for while some 9,000 French soldiers were kept locked up by the Japanese (5,000 in Saigon and 4,500 in Hanoi), and another 1,000 retained in China by the Chinese and Americans, and while 13,000 kilometers away General de Gaulle's government was desperately trying to assemble and equip two divisions with men scattered over the south of France, Madagascar, North and Equatorial Africa, and to find the necessary shipping to carry them to Indochina, Ho Chi Minh had already taken possession of Vietnam, North Vietnam in particular. At that time, the Communist Party of Vietnam had only 5,000 members in all of Indochina, and only 200 fully armed troops, trained and equipped by Americans, who also gave Ho the decisive support he needed to secure unchallenged leadership of the nationalist movement by appearing very visibly at his side, a gesture that was worth several divisions and saved him several months, if not years, of hard struggle against his internal and external enemies.

Fifth, at the Potsdam summit conference, in July 1945, it was decided, without French concurrence or even knowledge, to divide Indochina at the 16th. parallel and to place northern half under the authority of China. The Chinese were to prevent the return of the French until March 1946, and when French troops landed they had to obtain the consent of Ho Chi Minh's government, and, until the outbreak of war in December 1946, they could not move freely throughout the country. Thus, Ho and his men had more time and a free hand to consolidate and expand their guerilla bases, and strengthen their army.

As a result of the international developments described, Ho Chi Minh and his men became the de facto power in North Vietnam after August 1945. To restore French authority over Indochina, France would have to prevent them from consolidating their First Base, and especially from establishing Second Base. This, France failed to do, not only because at that time it was still militarily and economically weak, but especially for psychological reasons: it committed a very serious error of perception. In 1945 the mood of the ordinary Vietnamese had changed. France faced a fundamentally new situation. But this, the French failed totally to understand. This error of perception was to lead to complacency and to rigidity of policy with disastrous military and political consequences.

The French's complacency in 1945 has been described by General Yves Gras, a French military historian, as follows:

"At the headquarters of General Leclerc one was aware of these (the) possibilities of facing a very difficult fight with the Vietnamese Communist troops. Nevertheless, one could already detect a certain contempt for guerilla, considered as a form of minor war. One was convinced that the Annamite had little inclination for war and would make only a poor soldier. The army of the Vietminh was looked upon as a "caricature army".....and its "divisions" were worthy only of the pejorative of "bands". Without denying completely that the Vietminh guerilla could have military qualities, it was considered that the bickerings between its chiefs, and the general feeling of lassitude engendered by disorder would inevitably cause the Vietminh to disintegrate more or less rapidly. All the agitation one had witnessed was only artificial. By conducting a military action combined with political action aimed at rallying the population, one would surely hasten this disintegration easily and restore the prestige and authority of France. Thus reasoned the officers who knew Indochina well, on the basis of information predating the August Revolution".¹

¹. General Yves Gras, Histoire de la guerre d'Indochine, Paris, Plon, 1979, p.57.

General Gras added that such was also the view of the whole Expeditionary Corps, and

"For the officers and the men alike, all veterans of the Liberation campaigns who had volunteered for Indochina, there was no possible doubt at all: they had come to reoccupy a portion of the French patrimony and restore order, an operation viewed by them as a pleasant military stroll after their hard fights against the Germans. They had no idea at all that they were the first troops involved in a long and difficult war".²

American and British officials in touch with the French gave also similar reports. Thus Major Archimedes Patti, the O.S.S. officer who interviewed scores of French officers and civilians who had taken refuge in Kunming after the Japanese coup in March 1945, recorded in his memoirs that the French felt that their plight would soon end and they would return to Indochina to pick up "just exactly where they left off, and there would be no change". Almost to a man, Patti said, the French considered the Vietnamese "incapable of political responsibility". They admitted that nationalists existed, but they were "rabble" to be dealt with by the Surete or the Army. The French attitude at its best was paternal, and at its worst pure contempt.³

Likewise, Henry Brain, a Foreign Service officer serving on General Gracey's staff in Saigon, reported that Jean Cedille, the French Commissioner for Cochinchina, believed that once the Vietminh were eliminated all the Vietnamese friends of France who had remained silent would "throng to the French", and that all the French people he had met reassured him that "the great

². - ibid. -

³. Archimedes L. Patti, Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980, p.90.

majority of the Annamites want nothing more than to live in peace and carry on their work under French rule". The French did not realise that "in the eyes of the natives the French were no longer the superior beings that their domination and their force of arms had made them appear in the past" for the Annamites had seen the French "dictated to, humiliated, and finally disarmed and kicked out of authority by an Oriental race".⁴

Why did the French entertain such beliefs about the Vietnamese? For an explanation, we must go back one hundred years in the case of the French, and several hundred years in the case of the Vietnamese. This exploration of the past is worthwhile, for it will help you better understand the problems faced later by Americans.

Taking the Vietnamese first. They have learned from experience - a small nation living in a dangerous environment - that it is very unwise to confront an obviously stronger enemy head on. This wisdom is expressed in a popular saying that "Tranh voi chang ho mat nao", which means that staying out of the way of an elephant is no cause for shame. Thus, the Vietnamese does not fight if he is certain of losing. This explains why, for over eighty years, the French could rule Vietnam without facing any serious challenge.

Of course, there were many rebellions: those of the mandarins led by Phan Dinh Phung in the 1880s, then of the Confucian scholars led by Phan Boi Chau in the first quarter of this century, then of the western-oriented new generation - the

⁴. Peter Dunn, The First Vietnam War, New York, Saint Martin's Press, 1985, pp.193 and 279.

Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD) in 1930, and of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1930-1931 and 1940-1941. But all those rebellions, including the ones led by the Communists, failed because they were only rebellions of a small minority of activists. The mass of the Vietnamese did not participate because they knew that the French were too strong, and it would be futile to challenge them. To persist would be to get hurt unnecessarily.

However, if the Vietnamese is convinced that the enemy is weak and is defeatable, then he will fight, and he will fight hard until he wins. This was the case in 1945-1954. The French were astounded by the heroism and the determination of the Vietnamese. They could not imagine that the latter would display such a behaviour because nothing like it had ever happened before 1945.

What the French did not know, and could not know, because this was not the kind of question which the Vietnamese would discuss with foreigners, especially with Frenchmen, even if they were very close friends, was that the Vietnamese would pocket insults and accept blows, contain his anger and swallow his pride until the time - the famous Vietnamese thoi_co (opportune moment) - when he can fight back with an overwhelming chance of success.

This explains why the international developments I have described earlier were so decisive. It was these developments which, for the first time in over 80 years, drew the Vietnamese masses into the fight. For the masses of the Vietnamese, they meant that the thoi_co waited for had arrived and they could fight the French without risks of defeat and reprisals. In 1945, the Vietnamese masses believed that France was finished. It

was this fact which made General Giap's people's war possible. With the whole population willing to participate, Giap could fight a total war against an enemy fighting in effect only a rearguard battle, the main war having been lost elsewhere and at other times.

In this respect, two anecdotes are revealing, one told by Jean Sainteny, the first French official who came into contact with Vietnamese nationalists in southern China in 1944-1945, and one by Rene Moreau, a French official who was kept prisoner by the Vietminh from 1945 to 1954.

Sainteny said in his memoirs that in July 1945 he was contacted in Kunming by a Vietnamese nationalist leader, Nguyen Tuong Tam, of the VNQDD. During their conversation, Tam asked Sainteny whether he was aware of the considerable progress of the idea of independence among the Vietnamese people since the Japanese coup of March 9, and told him bluntly that, like other Vietnamese, his friends and he were determined to seize the golden opportunity - the thoi_co -, offered them to free themselves from French tutelage. He demanded a "radical revision" of the French status, "supposing, he said sarcastically, that France still had one" in Indochina.⁵

The anecdote told by Moreau relates to the Vietminh. One day, he had a conversation with a Vietminh province chief. He asked the latter why he fought, and the man answered:

"We fight because we no longer believe that you are the stronger: it is the end of the white gods. In 1940 you were compelledto negotiate with the Japanese, a second class nation.....Therefore, this time, we no longer believe that

⁵. Jean Sainteny, Histoire d'une paix manquee, Paris, Fayard, 1967, p.65.

you are stronger, and that is why we have taken up arms against you".⁶

Why did the French err so disastrously? The reason for this is historical. In 1873, a French captain, Francis Garnier, took Hanoi with a force of only 180 men, in a battle lasting only one hour, with only one dead and two wounded on the French side. Between 1855 and 1861, France conquered Vietnam with only 3,500 men (3,300 Frenchmen and 200 Spaniards). Between 1885 and 1945, France ruled Indochina with a military force which never exceeded 10,000 Frenchmen, although they had to cover some 744,000 square kilometers (an area larger than France) and control 20-25 million people. The French civilian population numbered 30,000 in 1945. Except for a short scare in 1930, this population's security was never seriously threatened before August 1945. This explains why the French believed that restoring French rule in Indochina would be an easy and simple matter.

Although, as we shall see later on, even before 1945 the French government had planned to accord Indochina a more liberal status, in 1945 the prevailing view among the French authorities was that, before introducing reforms, the first priority was to restore France's presence in Indochina, by force if necessary. General de Gaulle's instructions to Admiral d'Argenlieu, the High Commissioner for Indochina, contained frequent reminders that France must show its force first. When General Leclerc preferred the conclusion of an agreement with Ho Chi Minh's government for a peaceful landing of his forces in North Vietnam, d'Argenlieu

⁶. Institut Charles de Gaulle, De Gaulle et l'Indochine, Paris, Plon, 1982, p.207.

called it "a Munich". But Leclerc, who was thought to favour peaceful solutions, had also talked about the necessity of showing France's force. Georges Bidault, prime minister in 1946, told Sainteny "to make the cannons talk if necessary". And even Maurice Thorez, leader of the French Communist Party, who in 1946 was still in the government, also told Sainteny the same. There was thus unanimity among the French from 1945 to 1947 for a policy of restoring French presence to Indochina, by force if necessary.

As a consequence, on March 6, 1946 the French signed with Ho Chi Minh an agreement recognising the state he had established, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, as a Free State, but not an independent state, in the Indochinese Federation and the French Union. Later negotiations at Dalat in April 1946, then at Fontainebleau, near Paris, in July-August 1946, broke down on the definition of Vietnam's status in the Indochinese Federation and the French Union. Ho's representatives insisted on full independence, especially in diplomacy and defense. The French representatives rejected this claim, especially as in the eyes not only of the French government, presided by Mr Bidault at the time, but also of prominent people, General de Gaulle among them, there was no room in the French Union for an independent member state with a Communist government at its head. A deadlock ensued that was to lead to the outbreak of the war in December 1946.

Ho Chi Minh was aware that the Communist colour of his government made an agreement with France impossible and might incite the French government to turn to other Vietnamese. This was what the French government seemed to be doing in the spring

of 1947 when it approached ex-Emperor Bao Dai. If France offered Bao Dai what it had refused Ho - full national independence and the return of Cochinchina to Vietnam - Ho would lose popular support, the Vietminh front would disintegrate, and the Communists would not be able to establish Second Base.

From 1947 onward the French government was weakened by internal division and could not implement with speed and determination the so-called "Bao Dai solution" - an independent and reunified ^{Vietnam} under a ~~Vietnamese~~ non-communist government headed by Bao Dai. Vietnamese opinion was disappointed, especially in September, after the new High Commissioner, Emile Bollaert, in a major speech expected to announce a new policy, failed to pronounce the magic word "independence". From then on more and more Vietnamese, including anti-communists, turned to Ho Chi Minh, thus allowing the Communists to establish Second Base. This set the condition for a stalemate, which became obvious after the French failed to capture Ho and his government and destroy his army in a big operation in the autumn of 1947.

The stalemate continued until 1949. The French had not enough resources, especially manpower, to annihilate the Vietminh forces. General Leclerc had estimated that restoring French authority to Indochina by force would require an Expeditionary Corps of 350,000 men, of whom 100,000 had to be metropolitan French. However, the French Expeditionary Corps never reached that size. At its peak, in July 1953, it had 230,000 men of whom only 54,800 men were metropolitan French. For political reasons, call-up was out of the question. Moreover, the killed, wounded, exhausted were replaced by new recruits whose fighting quality

and morale were poorer. Then there was the need to send troops to maintain or restore order in other colonies, in particular Madagascar. Finally, there was the problem of financing the war, which became increasingly serious for a France impoverished by World War II and in need of reconstruction. The solution will be increasing American aid, which in 1954 will account for over 75% of French expenditures. But the manpower problem will remain unsolved. Thus France could not have the necessary means to pursue indefinitely a dual policy of war and refusal to conciliate Vietnamese nationalism.

On the Communists' side, although their army had escaped destruction in the French autumn offensive of 1947, they had no hope of defeating the French. General Giap had not sufficient time to build up his regular army. Although he had plenty of regional troops, and especially of guerillas, his regular army had only 60,000 men; they were not well trained and lacked organisation; in particular, they lacked the necessary arms, ammunition, and equipment for carrying out decisive operations against the French forces. In fact, until the end of 1949, it was holed up in the north western jungles of North Vietnam waiting for some new favourable international development which would enable it to break the stalemate.

This new development came in the form of the decisive victory of Mao Tse-tung's Communist forces in China in 1949. By the end of that year, the Chinese Communist forces had reached the Sino-Vietnamese border. From then on, Ho's forces would receive massive military aid as well as an absolutely safe sanctuary, thus making it possible for them to establish Third

Base, move on to the strategic offensive stage, and secure the condition for victory over the French. Ho Chi Minh's forces, fully trained, equipped and supplied by China could now confront the French forces head on from a strategically superior position.

The first major result of this development was the inflicting of a resounding defeat on the French forces along the border in the autumn of 1950. The most important impact of this victory was the swinging over of the large numbers of Vietnamese to Ho's side. They included many peasants, who until then had been hesitant to join Ho's camp because they were not quite certain that Ho would be the victor. The morale of Ho's troops also rose sky high.

On the other hand, the Vietminh victory was a serious blow to the morale of the French. They realised finally that stemming the tide of Vietnamese nationalism was not possible. At the same time, since the French government did not want a Communist Vietnam in the French Union, it had to accept the non-Communist nationalists. The result was the implementation of the so-called Elysee Agreement by which France finally conceded by treaty national independence and unity to a Vietnam headed by Bao Dai. The decision had been voted by the French Parliament in late December 1949. But by then, it was too late. Ho's government had a nine years' political and military lead on Bao Dai, and the latter would never be able to catch up, although from 1951 onward Ho no longer denied his affiliation with Moscow.

One of the least known aspects of the Indochina War is that it was the determination of Ho Chi Minh and his disciples to establish a Communist state in Vietnam and to accelerate the

coming of World Revolution which made the war inevitable and prolonged. ^{To} ~~For~~ pure Leninists, which the Vietnamese Communists constantly claimed to be, achieving national independence is only the first stage in the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat in Vietnam. This would give them the freedom to join the international Communist movement for the establishment of a World Federation of Soviet Republics in the march to world revolution, as advocated by Lenin. These are the real strategic objectives. These objectives were spelled out clearly in the program of the party on its foundation in 1930; they did not change over the years, and always underlay its demands.

The developments favourable to the Vietnamese Communists encouraged them to make demands which amounted to a simple disregard of French legitimate interests in Indochina and a weakening of France, which France found unacceptable. They amounted to 1) an immediate scrapping of the French Union, which France was trying hard to build in order to secure a strong international position; 2) a political and material dispossession of the French colons in Indochina, totally denying that in a sense they, too, were Indochinese, and giving them no opportunity and no time to adapt to the new situation. These demands for immediate and total change were not in the interests of Vietnam at the time either, since Vietnam would need twenty to thirty years of peace and stability, and extensive foreign help to train cadres of all kinds to run a modern state. In this France's help would be useful. It would be in Vietnam's best interests therefore to achieve independence with France rather than against France. But Leninism dictates the opposite course. Leninism

commands that a colony seeking emancipation must do so as part of a scheme to weaken the colonial power so as to speed up the demise of world imperialism and accelerate the coming of world revolution.

Thus, Ho's communism compelled him to achieve Vietnam's independence against France rather than with France. This, more than anything caused the French to refuse conceding independence and turning over Cochinchina to Vietnam. De Gaulle, who was opposed to any real negotiation with Ho Chi Minh while in office in 1945, continued to campaign vigourously from outside the government against a compromise with Ho Chi Minh . His attitude was summed in a sentence, which he used repeatedly in a conversation with Henri Laurentie, director of political affairs at the Ministry of Overseas France in August 1946 (when Ho was negotiating with France in Paris). De Gaulle said: "Laurentie, do not give Cochinchina to Ho Chi Minh".⁷ Another significant gesture of de Gaulle was his refusal to see Ho in spite of Ho's repeated requests through Sainteny, whereas Sihanouk was received warmly by him. Why? Because Sihanouk professed admiration for de Gaulle, harboured no basic hostility towards France, and had amicably accepted the Indochinese Federation and the French Union as conceived by the French.

Yet, de Gaulle was not basically opposed to the ideas of Vietnam's independence and unity; he was prepared to accept them if they were expressions of France's liberalism and not of its weakness. He would want France to grant independence to Vietnam -

⁷. De Gaulle et l'Indochine, p. 231.

in due time and with due respect for France's dignity --; he would refuse to see it wrested from France. Independence with France, not independence against France. Independence to a friend of France, not to an enemy of France.

If we examine carefully the declaration on Indochina issued in Algiers by the Committee of National Liberation on (8 December) 1943, and the declaration issued by the French Provisional Government in Paris on March 24, 1945, we could see that in spite of outdated terminology and paternal style, they contained great potentialities for Indochina to achieve self-government and eventually independence under the best conditions -- in peace, stability, and with the help of France. Those declarations announced France's formal intention of giving Indochina a more liberal status, access of the Indochinese to all offices, guarantee of personal and democratic freedoms, and especially a parliament with control of the budget. These are the seeds of eventual self-government and independence, as any student of the history of the British dominions knows well.

From the revelations of people close to de Gaulle, it is clear that the General had accepted to grant independence and unity to Vietnam, through a prominent Vietnamese with impeccable revolutionary record, and above all, chosen by the General himself. This Vietnamese was Prince Vinh San, ex-Emperor Duy Tan, who was exiled to the island of Reunion following an abortive revolt against France in 1916, but who, like Sihanouk, was a known admirer of de Gaulle, and had enlisted in the Gaullist forces during the war. Furthermore, Prince Vinh San accepted Vietnam's membership of the French Union and friendly cooperation

with France. De Gaulle planned to go to Saigon in January 1946 to put the prince back on Vietnam's throne, and proclaim Vietnam's independence and unity at the same time. The plan aborted because of the prince's death in a plane accident in late December 1945.

From de Gaulle's resignation in January 1946 until the Geneva Conference in July 1954, the French dominant party was the Mouvement Republicain Populaire (M.R.P.) and the dominant figure of this party, the man who practically controlled French foreign policy throughout this period was Georges Bidault.⁸ For the M.R.P., and especially for Bidault, there were two absolute Noes: 1) No Indochina outside the French Union; and 2) No Indochina under Communist control. This was summed up in Bidault's instructions to Max Andre, head of the French delegation to the Fontainebleau negotiations: "secure all necessary guaranties so that in external matters Vietnam could not become a pawn in the Soviet hand, a satellite of Moscow".⁹

Another major reason why the M.R.P. was opposed to granting independence to Vietnam was that it feared a chain reaction would result from it and would cause the disintegration of the French Empire. But in his writings, Ho made it very clear that his basic objectives were precisely Vietnam's membership of the socialist family and the break up of the French colonial empire. Basically therefore Ho was an enemy of France; he wanted France out not only of Indochina, but also of all the French colonies.

⁸. On French politics concerning Indochina, see R.E. Irving, The First Indochina War, French and American Policy 1945-1954, London, Croom Helm, 1976.

⁹. Henri Azaud, Ho Chi Minh, derniere chance, Paris, Flammarion, 1968, p.155.

This idea of being "kicked out" of Indochina and everywhere else was what many Frenchmen not only in Indochina but also in France found intolerably offensive, and was to cause certain of them, in particular Admiral d'Argenlieu, the High Commissioner, and General Valluy, the Commander in Chief of the French forces in Indochina, to welcome a military confrontation, in the belief that they could break Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh easily and rapidly.

To the French, however, opposition to granting independence to Vietnam was not a matter of eternal principle, as later, in 1949 and especially in 1954, Bidault was to accept an independent and unified Vietnam under a Bao Dai government, but then, it would be too late. According to Claude Dulong, wife of Sainteny, General de Gaulle told President Nixon in 1968 that he recognised that France had not given independence to the Vietnamese early enough, and this permitted the communists to pose as champions of national independence, first against France, then against the United States.¹⁰

De Gaulle's comment explained France's undisputable share of responsibility in the war. But, as we have seen, if France's failure was due to a fundamental error of perception, it was also the result of certain international developments.

On the other hand, Ho Chi Minh and his disciples should also be assigned their share of the blame. Their choice of Leninism caused them to adopt objectives which could be achieved only through confrontation with France, extreme violence and prolonged

¹⁰. Claude Dulong, La dernière pagode, Paris, Grasset, 1989, p.168.

war, and in the process, through the destruction and the paralysis of Vietnam. Reports coming out of Vietnam recently said that more and more people, including party members, are realising that disastrous mistakes had been made by the CPV leadership, which explains the plight suffered by the country today.

France bungled its exit from Indochina,¹¹ as Claude de Boisanger, diplomatic adviser to Admiral Decoux, Governor General of Indochina under the Vichy government, said in his memoirs. That is true. But, it is becoming clearer and clearer today, fifteen years after the Communists gained total control of Vietnam, that, objectively, the French's resistance, combined with those of the Vietnamese nationalists and the Americans later, delayed Ho Chi Minh's triumph and foiled the Communists' entry into Indochina - a smooth take-over and communisation of the region - for thirty years, and completely blocked their entry into Southeast Asia. It has given the Indochinese thirty years of relative freedom, and the Southeast Asians thirty years of necessary security and stability to solve their major problems and achieve the remarkable prosperity they enjoy today.

26 February 1990

¹¹. Claude de Boisanger, On pouvait éviter la guerre d'Indochine, Paris, Librairie d'Amerique et d'Orient, 1977, p.40.