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## The First Indochina War (1945-1954)

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Negotiations having failed, both sides now attempted to achieve their goals by force. The French, confident of their military superiority, hoped to suppress the rebellion quickly and restore French control over all of Indochina. The Vietminh armed forces were smaller in number and weaker in firepower. However, Ho Chi Minh sought to mobilize the mass of the population to wage a protracted guerrilla struggle, leading eventually to a major offensive to drive the French out of Vietnam.

The first two years of the war were inconclusive. The Vietminh built a base area in the mountainous region north of the Red River Valley, frustrating French efforts to win a quick victory. Gradually they began to build up their guerrilla forces. Poor peasants were attracted by the promise of land and urban middle class youth by the Vietminh program of national independence from foreign rule.

By 1948, growing Vietminh effectiveness clearly showed the French that more was needed than mere

military pressure. The French lacked sufficient troops to suppress the revolt. They also lacked a symbol to unite the Vietnamese population against the "menace" of communism. For that symbol, Paris turned to the former emperor of Vietnam, Bao Dai. The last of the Nguyen emperors, Bao Dai, had come to the throne in 1925 while still an adolescent. In the 1930s, he was ruler in name but was given little power by the French.

After the August Revolution of 1945, Bao Dai was pressured by the Vietminh to abdicate the throne to assume another figurehead position as supreme political adviser in Ho's new republican government. Bao Dai soon sensed that he was being manipulated by the communists; however, and in the late summer of 1946, he settled in the British colony of Hong Kong.

The French then began a campaign to persuade Bao Dai to return to Vietnam to serve as Chief of State in a new "autonomous government" which would rally non-communist forces in Vietnam to join with the French against the Vietminh. Bao Dai was willing to return, but only on condition that the Vietnamese would be granted independence or at least substantial autonomy. The French, on the other hand, desperately needed some cooperation from the local population, but were unwilling to abandon their authority in Vietnam.



Ho Chi Minh and his high command planning the battle of Dienbienphu in their jungle headquarters.



French tanks departing Haiphong on May 11, 1954, ending 100 years of French colonial rule in the port city.



October 9, 1954: Vietminh troops enjoy a "Parade of Victory" through the streets of Hanoi following the French withdrawal.

This fact became increasingly clear in 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong seized control of China from the disintegrating Nationalist government under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek.

By October, Chinese communist troops had arrived at the Vietnamese frontier and were in a position to provide assistance to the Vietminh. Under the pressure of this new threat, Bao Dai and the French agreed on the formation of an "Associated States of Vietnam" that would have some of the attributes of an independent state. However, the French would retain substantial authority in foreign and military affairs. Similar agreements were reached with Laos and Cambodia, both of which became "Associated States" under their monarchs.

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## The United States Enters the War

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Under these conditions the United States first became actively involved in the Indochina conflict. Indochina had played a major role in bringing the United States into World War II. The United States had few interests in the region, except for its colony in the Philippines. The Roosevelt administration viewed Southeast Asia as a strategically important area with vast resources of tin, rubber and oil. In fact, the Japanese occupation of Indochina in 1940 had been a major factor in bringing Washington into a confrontation with Tokyo.

During World War II, U.S. intelligence sources watched Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh movement and even agreed to provide limited military assistance to it in return for information on Japanese troop movements in the area and Vietminh help in rescuing downed U.S. fliers. Ho Chi Minh attempted to use that relationship to obtain U.S. recognition of his movement as the legitimate representative of the Vietnamese people; but the United States was unwilling to antagonize the French, and ignored Ho's appeals. This decision is explored in depth in Chapter 2.

After the beginning of the Franco-Vietminh conflict, the French approached President Harry Truman for aid in fighting the communists. The Truman administra-

*"Join strength, join hearts.  
The hardest job we'll finish."*

Ho Chi Minh 20th century

tion was not happy about the communist complexion of the DRV but it also disapproved of French reluctance to grant independence to nationalist elements in Vietnam. At first, the United States refused to become involved. However, the victory of the communists in the Chinese Civil War convinced many U.S. officials that the Vietminh must be stopped in order to prevent the spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia. Several countries in the area had recently received their independence from colonial rule and Washington feared that the entire area could fall into the communist orbit if Ho Chi Minh were victorious in Indochina. In early 1950, the Truman administration agreed to provide military and economic assistance to the new "Associated States of Vietnam" under Chief of State Bao Dai, which it now recognized as the legitimate government of Vietnam. Although the new government did not possess full political or economic powers, the U.S. hoped that it would develop gradually into a viable state that could defeat the Vietminh and prevent the further spread of communism in the region.

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## The Road to Negotiations

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For the Vietminh, the victory of communism in China presented a major opportunity to achieve a total victory in their struggle with the French. In early 1950, Ho Chi Minh visited Beijing. The Chinese agreed to provide assistance in the form of weapons and training for Vietminh forces in Indochina. Later in the year, the strengthened Vietminh forces launched a major offensive on the border to wipe out French posts and open up the area to the increased shipment of Chinese military equipment. In January 1951, Vo Nguyen Giap launched a major campaign designed to sweep French forces from the Red River Delta and achieve a total

victory in the war. But French airpower proved too powerful, and the battered Vietminh were forced to regroup. At that point, the Vietminh returned to their guerrilla tactics. Vo Nguyen Giap's strategy featured surprise attacks on French installations and military posts all over the country so as to disperse enemy forces and wear down public support in France for the war.

During the next three years, the war dragged on inconclusively with no major breakthrough on either side. The level of U.S. aid increased gradually, and by 1953 the United States was paying almost 80 percent of French military expenditures for the war. The results, from Washington's point of view, were disappointing. The Vietminh situation improved steadily. In Laos and Cambodia, resistance forces under Vietminh direction posed an increasing threat to the new "Associated States" set up by the French. The French were losing the support of the Vietnamese people. Chief of State Bao Dai lacked leadership qualities and spent much of his time in France. His inexperienced government proved unable to meet the challenge of building popular support while the French retained ultimate control. In particular, the Bao Dai regime did little to end the inequality in landholdings that kept the majority of the rural population in conditions of abject poverty. In fact, at this time, a mere one-quarter of one percent of the population owned forty percent of the rice land in South Vietnam, 1,600 times their equal share. More importantly, two out of three peasants in the rice lands of the Mekong River Delta owned no land at all. These were the people for whom the Vietminh revolution had the most appeal.

By 1953, the French public was turning against the war, placing growing pressure on the government in Paris to seek a negotiated settlement. In October, for the first time, Premier Joseph Laniel mentioned the possibility of peace talks. A month later, Ho Chi Minh indicated that his government was willing to seek a cease-fire and a peace agreement. Early in 1954, arrangements were reached to hold a peace conference at Geneva in the spring.

News of the coming of peace talks, however, did not

*'What's So Funny, Monsieur? I'm Only Trying to Find My Way'*



slow down the war itself. In March, hoping that a significant battlefield victory would lead to success at the conference table, the Vietminh launched a major attack on the French outpost at Dienbienphu, in the mountains northwest of Hanoi.

The French government asked the United States to help by bombing Vietminh artillery emplacements near Dienbienphu. But President Eisenhower was reluctant to comply without the consent of Congress and without a larger U.S. role in making strategy. He proposed instead that the major western powers form a military alliance to ensure the defeat of the Vietminh. In early April, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles visited London and Paris to seek agreement on the formation of such an alliance. But the British were convinced that defeat in Indochina was inevitable and refused to join in

such an agreement before the chances for a peace settlement had been explored at Geneva.

The French, too, were reluctant to expand the war and did not want to torpedo the conference. In the end, the proposal was temporarily shelved, and the U.S. reluctantly agreed to attend the proceedings at Geneva. This decision is analyzed in depth in Chapter 2. On May 7, 1954, delegations from the major world powers as well as the involved states in Indochina met at Geneva to discuss a settlement of the conflict. On the eve of the conference, the French military post at Dienbienphu fell to the Vietminh, leaving the French in a defeatist mood. In June, the Laniel government resigned. The new Prime Minister, Pierre Mendes-France, favored a French withdrawal and pledged to bring the war to an end by mid-summer. Similar pressure for a settlement was also imposed on the DRV by the Soviet Union and China. They both wanted an end to the conflict in order to promote peaceful coexistence with the West so they could concentrate on domestic concerns.

On July 21, an agreement to end the conflict was finally reached. There were in fact two agreements: a cease-fire between France and the DRV, and a political accord to achieve a lasting solution to the issues that had led to the war. The cease-fire was achieved by establishing two roughly equal regroupment zones, divided at the seventeenth parallel where a demilitarized zone (DMZ) was set up at the Ben Hai River. All Vietminh forces were to retreat north of the DMZ, while supporters of the Bao Dai government were to move to the south. On the insistence of both Vietnamese governments, these zones were not to be construed as sovereign political entities but as a temporary division to end the war until a political agreement could be reached (see Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of the Geneva Agreement).

The process of achieving such an agreement was contained in the Political Accords, the second component of the Geneva Agreement. According to this arrangement, representatives of the two zones were to consult in July 1955 to agree on plans to hold reunification elections one year later. An International Control Commission was created to make sure the agreements were carried out. Related agreements brought an end to the conflicts in Laos and Cambodia. The "Associated States" created by the French were recognized as the legal government in both countries.

In Laos, the Vietminh-supported Pathet Lao move-

ment was granted two provinces in the mountainous northeast as a regroupment zone prior to negotiations with the royal government in Vientiane. The Khmer Rouge revolutionary forces in Cambodia received no such recognition. The government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk in Phnom Penh was recognized as the sole legal entity in the country, and all foreign troops—both French and Vietminh forces—were to withdraw. At the insistence of China, the entire area was declared neutral. None of the governments in Indochina were permitted to join military alliances, although they were allowed to seek military assistance if their security were threatened.

With the signing of the Geneva Agreements, the first Indochina war came to an end. But it ended on an ominous note. The United States, believing that reunification elections would lead to a victory for the widely popular Ho Chi Minh, refused to adhere to the political accords. In a written statement, it promised not to disturb them. But the Eisenhower administration also announced that it intended to build up what Secretary of State John Foster Dulles called "the truly independent states of Cambodia, Laos, and southern Vietnam." Finally, it served notice that it would seek to create an anti-communist alliance among its western allies and friendly states in Southeast Asia to resist further communist encroachment in the region. The stage was set for a new Cold War confrontation in Asia.

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## The Regime of Ngo Dinh Diem

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After Geneva, two hostile governments faced each other across the DMZ. In North Vietnam, with its capital returned to Hanoi, President Ho Chi Minh's DRV attempted to build a socialist society with assistance from China and the Soviet Union. In the cities and towns, industry and commerce were nationalized. In the countryside, a massive program of land reform confiscated the property of wealthy farmers and redistributed it to the poor. According to contemporary estimates, about 60 percent of the peasants in North Vietnam received some land under the program. There