

The picture of the world's greatest super-power killing or seriously injuring 1,000 non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one. It will conceivably produce a costly distortion in...the world image of the U.S....

Now you have a clearer idea of why nations go to war and what they risk in the act. As we study the decisions that deepened America's involvement in Vietnam, remember the Five P's. How did they influence such decisions? Which of them seemed to be most important to U.S. leaders? What evidence was there that such goals were attainable? What indications were there that the war could cause the U.S. to lose any of the five P's? Were there alternative Vietnam policies that might have achieved U.S. goals with less risk?

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## Early American Involvement

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On September 2, 1945, a frail man stood before a hushed crowd in central Hanoi and spoke these words: "We hold the truth that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The speaker was Ho Chi Minh, and he was declaring the independence of Vietnam. Later in the day, as the independence celebrations continued; American airplanes flew overhead in a display of friendship; United States Army officers joined dignitaries on the reviewing stand, and a Vietnamese band played the "Star-Spangled Banner."

Few people in Hanoi recognized the passage from the American Declaration of Independence or knew the American national anthem. But Ho Chi Minh, though a deeply committed communist, was a practical man. He allowed the United States to play a prominent role at the birth of modern Vietnam for a good reason. Seeking international support for his nation's independence, he feared that it would only be a matter of weeks before France, the former colonial ruler of Vietnam, returned in force. He was right.

For more than a half century before the outbreak of World War II, Vietnam had been part of the French colony of Indochina. Then, in 1940, world events swept

over Southeast Asia. Japanese forces moved down from China, taking over French Indochina. The Japanese pushed on, driving the Americans from the Philippines, the Dutch from Indonesia, and the British from Malaya. European colonialism in Asia had been challenged successfully—and by an Asian nation.

Throughout Southeast Asia, nationalists fighting European colonialism welcomed the Japanese. Ho Chi Minh, however, opposed replacing one colonial ruler with another. Aligning himself with the Allies (the United States, the Soviet Union, China, Great Britain, and progressive elements in France), he and his Vietminh revolutionaries worked for the defeat of Japan. In return, he expected to gain independence for his country after the war.

The defeat of Japan in 1945 gave Ho his long-awaited opportunity. At the time, however, Vietnam was in chaos. To disarm the Japanese forces still in the country, a Chinese Nationalist army had been dispatched to the northern part of Vietnam, while British troops had moved into the south. Meanwhile, rival Vietnamese groups were at each other's throats. More ominously, French merchants and officials still in Vietnam were calling for the return of the French army.

Late in 1945, fighting broke out in Saigon between French civilians and the Vietminh. To restore order, the outmanned British decided to transport French forces back into the region. Ho was disappointed when the United States agreed to the plan. Meanwhile, the Chinese Nationalists had arrived in the north, which they began to loot. Confronted with the Chinese presence, Ho concluded that he had no choice but to ask the French back—on the condition that they honor Vietnam's independence. France agreed to do so.

Distrustful of the French, Ho had at least found a way to rid his nation of the Chinese—Vietnam's traditional enemy. As he told critics of his plan:

You fools! Don't you realize what it means if the Chinese remain? Don't you remember your history? The last time the Chinese came, they stayed 1,000 years. The French are foreigners. They are weak. Colonialism is dying. The white man is finished in Asia. But if the Chinese stay now, they will never go.

Despite the agreement with the French, it was clear from the start that peace would not last. The French public, for one thing, opposed any kind of compromise with the Vietminh. Every French political party—from the most conservative to the communists—longed to

restore the national prestige that had been lost to Germany and Japan during World War II. Reinstating the colonies to their prewar status seemed one way to do it.

The short-lived agreement between France and the Vietminh came apart at the port city of Haiphong. After a minor dispute late in 1946 over the collection of customs duties, French armored units attacked the city. Ships anchored in the harbor lobbed shells into Haiphong, and airplanes dropped bombs. When it was over, entire neighborhoods had been flattened; and at least 6,000 civilians had lost their lives. Meanwhile, the French moved toward Hanoi, once capital of all Indochina, and after bloody street fighting, took the city.

As rebellion raged throughout the region, the United States was just beginning to formulate its policy on Vietnam. At first, it looked as if President Franklin Roosevelt might support the movement for independence. In a memo to Secretary of State Hull in 1944, Roosevelt stated:

I had for over a year expressed the opinion that Indochina should not go back to France but that it should be administered by an international trusteeship. France had the country—thirty million inhabitants for nearly one hundred years and the people are worse off than they were in the beginning.... France has milked it for one hundred years. The people of Indochina are entitled to something better than that.

At a press conference on February 23, 1945, Roosevelt again suggested that Vietnam might be made a "trustee" to be educated for "self-government" just as

the U.S. had done in the Philippines. However, he never took any action to initiate such a plan.

In April 1945, G.H. Blakeslee of the U.S. State Department saw the dilemma of choice for the U.S. as between causing "French resentment" which would "impose a serious strain on our relations" or weakening "the traditional confidence of eastern peoples in the United States."

From October 1945 to February 1946, Ho Chi Minh sent at least eight communications to the President of the United States asking that Vietnam be allowed the chance to prepare itself for independence or asking for U.S. and United Nations protection against French aggression. Ho also approached other American officials with informal proposals for closer U.S.—Vietnamese relations. George M. Abbot, First Secretary of the U.S. Embassy in Paris, met with Ho on December 12, 1946, and reported that Ho said he "would continue to resist the French desire for...economic monopoly." Instead, Ho proposed that "Indochina offered a fertile field for American capital and enterprise" and he "hinted that the policy might apply to military and naval matters as well," including the naval base at Cam Ranh Bay.

Ho had good reason for appealing to the United States. His Vietminh forces had cooperated with the Americans during World War II, providing them with information about Japanese troop movements and assisting downed Allied pilots.

Ho and military advisor Giap with U.S. forces during the Second World War.



Back in Washington, however, questions were raised about Ho's communism. Many of the experts contended that Ho was primarily a nationalist. For example, A. L. Moffat, Chief of the Division of South-east Asian Affairs in the State Department, testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

I have never met an American...who had met Ho Chi Minh who did not reach the same belief: that Ho Chi Minh was first and foremost a Vietnamese nationalist. He was also a communist and believed that communism offered the best hope for the Vietnamese people...the top echelon of competent French officers held almost unanimously the same view.

Some argued that, regardless of his communism, it was crucial that the U.S. recognize that Ho was the only leader in Vietnam who commanded the respect of the majority of the people. For example, here is Thurston Morton, Assistant Secretary of State for Congressional Relations under John Dulles:

Whether we like the particular economic system or social system that he might develop or not, we must remember that he [Ho Chi Minh] is, indeed, considered by many peasants, the small people, little people of South Vietnam and North Vietnam as the George Washington of his country.

Still others argued that Ho's communism should not threaten the U.S. precisely because he was a strong nationalist and not aligned with the Soviet Union. Indeed, investigations by both the State Department and American officials in Saigon in 1948 found "no evidence" of any link, let alone a chain of command, between Ho Chi Minh and "Moscow, China or the Soviet Legation in Bangkok."

Still, American policymakers remained suspicious of Ho. Many viewed him as part of an alleged Soviet plot to dominate the world. France's efforts to hold on to its former colony had somehow become recast as a confrontation between the superpowers.

By the end of World War II, tensions had started to build between the United States and the Soviet Union. These tensions would soon grow into a bitter rivalry known as the cold war.

Early in 1946, George Kennan, a leading State Department expert on Russia, pointed out that in the future the United States would have to resist the Soviet Union's plans of world conquest. Kennan did not expect the communists to launch all-out war, as Hitler

had done in 1939. He thought they would be more patient, taking control of any area of the world where the forces of democracy seemed weak.

Many western leaders believed that World War II might not have taken place if the west had forcefully opposed Hitler's expansionist aggression in the 1930s. As the Soviet Union strengthened its domination over the countries of eastern Europe, Kennan's policy of containment of communism became a cornerstone of American foreign policy.

In the first years after the end of World War II, Americans felt deep concern about communist gains in western Europe too, particularly in Italy and France. In France, economic problems and political instability were sapping the country's strength. Some French politicians warned that France's recovery would be set back by the loss of its Indochinese colony. That development, in turn, could play into the hands of the growing French Communist Party. In a conversation with the American ambassador to France in 1945, French President Charles De Gaulle warned:

The Russians are advancing apace as you well know.... If the public here comes to realize that you are against us in Indochina, there will be terrific disappointment and nobody knows to what that will lead. We do not want to become communist; we do not want to fall into the Russian orbit, but I hope you do not push us into it.

Other events also influenced American policymakers. One was the takeover in 1949 of China by the communist forces of Mao Zedong. President Harry S. Truman quickly asserted that the containment policy, at first focused on Europe, would be extended to Asia. By late 1949, the United States faced its first tough decision in Vietnam. Leading figures in Truman's administration were urging him to send aid to help the French forces in Indochina. Consider their recommendation as you answer the following questions.

### You Decide!

1. *Fact Check* What reasons did France give for fighting in Vietnam?
2. *Fact Check* According to American officials, what interests did the United States have in the region?
3. *Constructing a Valid Argument* What arguments would a supporter of American aid to France have been likely to offer?