

VIETMINH REPRESENTATIVE

You are a member of the Vietminh and a supporter of the government of the Democratic Republic of (North) Vietnam. This is the first all-Vietnamese government in almost a hundred years — since the French first took over your country.

You are from a peasant family in Vietnam. You grew up hating the French colonialists who controlled your country. As far as you are concerned, the French brought all the evil upon your people.

In order to force Vietnamese to work for them, the French put taxes on all huts and on salt — an important ingredient in the Vietnamese diet. The only way you could get money to pay for the hated taxes was to go to work for the French — on their railroads, in their mines, on their plantations. Conditions were hard. Many people died of injuries or disease.

The French drafted your people to fight in their wars against other people. You had no vote — no say-so. And the French provided few services; there were more jails than schools and hospitals combined.

The French made fun of your music, your art, your religion. They even outlawed your village's homemade rice wine and forced you to buy their stronger French wine. Each village also was required to purchase a certain amount of opium.

Angered by all these injustices, you joined Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh, an organization fighting for the independence of Vietnam. Like Ho, you became a communist, believing that everyone should share the wealth of Vietnam, not just a few foreigners.

In 1940, the Japanese invaded Vietnam and you switched from fighting the French to fighting the Japanese. During the war you helped the United States, providing them valuable information and rescuing downed flyers.

When the Japanese were defeated, the Vietminh took control of the country and proclaimed independence. You are very excited about all the wonderful changes you feel have come to Vietnam. For the first time in Vietnam's history, national elections were held. People could choose their own leaders — communist or non-communist.

A literacy program was launched which taught two and a half million people to read and write. You took over much of the land that the French had stolen and gave it back to the peasants. The new government passed a law legalizing labor unions and strikes and proclaiming an eight hour day.

Your goal is freedom and independence for your country. But the French appear to want to take back Vietnam. They complain about the communists like Ho Chi Minh. You will fight to the death before your country is a colony again. You hope the United States will support you in this struggle.

To persuade President Truman and his advisors you must provide arguments that appeal to U.S. self interest as well as to common values.

Handout — CHAPTER/UNIT 2: America at War in Vietnam: Decisions and Consequences

FRENCH BUSINESS/GOVERNMENT LEADER

You are a French businessman and a high-ranking government leader. Times are tough in France and you face some real challenges. During World War Two, many of your country's factories and businesses were destroyed, crops burned and animals killed. This has left your economy in quite a mess.

Because of hard times, many workers and poor people have turned to the communists. Though they do not yet control the government, the Communist Party is now the largest political party in France. As you see it, unless you can rebuild your economy, the communists will ultimately come to power through elections or even revolution. But how to rebuild the economy?

Before World War Two, France had a number of colonies around the world, the most important being in Indochina (including Vietnam). Vietnam was central to the French economy. You got most of your rubber from Vietnam—also coal, tin and tungsten.

French businesses owned plantations and made great profits selling rice to other countries in Asia. Your government also forced the Vietnamese to buy certain French products, such as Bordeaux wine, so French companies made profits that way as well.

But here's your problem. During the war, the Japanese took control of Vietnam from your country. The communist leader, Ho Chi Minh, organized an army, the Vietminh, to fight against the Japanese occupation. With Japan now defeated, Ho has declared Vietnam an independent country. However, as far as you're concerned, Vietnam is still French.

You are angry. The Vietminh already have given some of the French-owned land to Vietnamese peasants! They have said that now the wealth of Vietnam will belong only to the Vietnamese. Imagine that, uneducated peasants thinking they can run a country!

If you can't take back your colony in Vietnam, French businesses will suffer tremendously. However, you don't have enough money to pay for a war against Ho Chi Minh. You need the support of a more powerful country to win back Vietnam from the communists.

You also need the help of a stronger country to rebuild France. Your country was devastated by the Nazis who destroyed cities and towns and burned crops. You need loans and grants to buy American machinery and farm products like wheat and corn so you can get back on your feet. Remember too that if your economy doesn't begin to get stronger, the French communists will probably come to power by offering people equal distribution of wealth.

The U.S. also needs you. They want to sell their surplus products to you and to invest in France. You might point out to the Americans that, if the communists come to power, they won't allow U.S. corporations to invest freely and take their profits back home.

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PRESIDENT TRUMAN'S ADVISORS

Throughout the 1930s the U.S. economy was wracked by the Great Depression. Companies closed, banks failed, and millions lost their jobs. Your predecessor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, developed a vast array of government programs to provide relief, create jobs, accomplish public works and assist the recovery of private industry. These programs significantly expanded the role and functions of the federal government in American life. Many conservatives resented this "creeping socialism" and would later lead a reaction against "big government." Many radicals complained that such programs did not go far enough and called for a more profound transformation of U.S. society.

These debates were amplified in Europe where fascists, communists and liberals struggled for control of the government in country after country. By 1941, despite the positive effects of many FDR reforms, the U.S. economy was still stagnant. Factories were underutilized and unemployment was high. However, World War II changed all that. The total mobilization for the war effort virtually wiped out unemployment. In fact, many women entered the work force for the first time, producing war materials while the men were off fighting.

After the war, the U.S. suddenly finds itself the most dominant industrial and military power in the world. It is one of the few countries that is not touched by the war's destruction, and the economy is back on its feet. One cost, however, is the continuation of a large military budget into peace time. In addition, there are problems of inflation and of how to absorb the millions of soldiers home from the war. Labor unions are growing rapidly and strikes are more frequent.

With the settlement of the war, U.S. national attention has become re-focused on the Soviet Union, who is rivaling it for influence in Europe. Many countries in Eastern Europe are joined in a military and economic alliance with the Soviet Union, and communist movements are being revived in other parts of Europe and Asia.

In the midst of this transition, President Roosevelt suddenly passes away and his Vice President, Harry S. Truman, is thrust into leadership. Truman is confronted with numerous problems at home and around the globe and must develop policies in little time. President Roosevelt was critical of French colonialism and had spoken of the possibility of making Vietnam a "trustee" to be educated for "self-government" as had been done in the Philippines. However, he never took any action to initiate such a plan.

You are an advisor to President Truman who has agreed to grant a meeting to representatives of the French government and the Vietminh to state their case for support. You expect them to make many appeals, but it is your responsibility to focus on U.S. national interest — power, prestige, profits, principles and protection. It is up to them to persuade you

- * Why the U.S. should care what happens in France or Vietnam
- * Whether the U.S. should feel threatened by communism in France or in Vietnam
- * What moral obligations the U.S. has to France or Vietnam
- * Why you should support France or the Vietminh

Your time is limited and you cannot afford to be distracted by irrelevant arguments. You are in charge of the meeting and can press for clarification and more information and prod each side to respond to the claims of the other.