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PRETENSE TO DEMOCRACY: THE U.S. ROLE IN THE SUBVERSION OF THE VIETNAMESE ELECTION OF 1956

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PRETENSE TO DEMOCRACY:
THE U.S. ROLE IN THE SUBVERSION
OF THE VIETNAMESE ELECTION OF 1956
BY
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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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ABSTRACT

In July 1954, the Geneva Accords set up a mechanism by which the war between the French and the Vietnamese would end and peace would be established in Vietnam. According to the agreements, Vietnam was to be divided temporarily into two sectors. The country was to be reunited in July 1956 after a nationwide election.

The United States, having supported the French effort to retain its colony, was determined to prevent a Communist government in Vietnam. U.S. intelligence, however, acknowledged that the Communists would win if an election were held. Therefore, the United States tried to set up a friendly government in Vietnam. At the same time, U.S. officials decided to block the election through the support of the South Vietnamese government. Documents declassified by the U.S. government, plus other primary and secondary sources, illustrate the extent to which U.S. officials were involved in the subversion of the election, a topic about which little has been written.

The United States, which was ostensibly trying to export freedom throughout the world, successfully prevented the election from taking place. While claiming that the Vietnamese were not ready for independence, the American effort was actually an early Cold War struggle, with Vietnam as a battlefield. The issue of the election, which the Vietminh were counting on, helped form a foundation for the later transition from a political to a military struggle.

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INTRODUCTION

If elementary logic - the only kind wartime could accommodate - required the enemy to be totally evil, it required the Allies to be totally good - all of them. The opposition between this black and this white was clear and uncomplicated, untroubled by subtlety or nuance, let alone irony or skepticism. ... In the absence of doubt, and with the positive enjoying constant accentuation, the view easily developed that Americans were by nature, by instinct really, morally wonderful.¹

The United States set forth after World War II intent upon sowing the world with its seeds of success, which was affirmed by its victory, wealth, power and escape from the war's destruction. Twenty-eight years later, in 1973, the United States' postwar dominance in the world would end with its withdrawal from Vietnam.

Historians and journalists since then have filled libraries with analyses of what went wrong. Much of it focuses on President Lyndon Johnson's failed policy of escalation. Some blame President John F. Kennedy for sending in the first U.S. soldiers.

¹ Paul Fussell, Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 164-165.

But the U.S. role in Vietnam during the 1960s was, ironically, only a product of an unintended domino effect, one that started in 1945, when the United States took on the role of global policeman, and accelerated in 1950, when the United States decided to help the French in their fight to maintain Vietnam as a colony.

U.S. foreign policy between 1950, at the height of the Franco-Vietnamese war, and 1959, when hostilities erupted between the North and the South, was the foundation of what would be the U.S.-Vietnam War. To understand why the United States was there and why it failed, the context in which that policy was formed must be understood. That context included more than the U.S. desire for containment of Communism. It was also a morality play, a function of arrogance, and a willingness to reach an end using any means, regardless of how those means contradicted the morals preached.

It is possible to view the context in which policy toward Vietnam was formed through the lens of one issue that has been largely ignored by historians: the planned reunification of North and South Vietnam, a product of the Geneva Conference in 1954, which ended France's failed attempt to hold onto its colony. The Geneva agreements - which were signed by Vietnam, France, and Great Britain in July 1954 - stipulated that the war would end with a temporary division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel. An election would be held in 1956, according to the agreements, to unify the nation once more. In the meantime, anyone living in Vietnam could move to the South or the North, and military action would stop.

The election never happened. It was blocked by the United States and the South Vietnamese, who set up a separate

government. The reunification was delayed by nearly twenty years until 1975, when Communist forces took Saigon. Yet, the election issue, upon which Ho Chi Minh based his willingness to come to terms with the French after his victory over them at Dienbienphu, has been given relatively little attention by historians of the war. One reason may be that the history of the war, unlike that of other wars, belongs to the losers. The side that won gleaned little in the way of spoils and had long ago lost its intelligentsia to the colonial domination of the French. Postwar efforts focused on rebuilding the country, not studying the cause of the war. For the side that lost, however, the war became a breeding ground for its massive publishing machinery, which spewed forth a torrent of histories that have consistently failed, with a few exceptions, to try to understand the winners.

Understanding what drove a tiny, war-ravaged, poverty-stricken country to outlast France and then the United States is possible only by understanding the political machinations that led to the military clash. If the Vietnam War proved nothing else, it proved that politics cannot be separated from the waging of war. Once this premise is accepted, it is clear that the issue of the unheld election of 1956, and what the United States did to help sabotage it, is a synecdoche for the misdirected Vietnam policy that plagued American officials for more than 20 years. In the two years after Geneva - when the United States replaced France as the major external power in Vietnam - it became apparent to U.S. officials that Ho would easily win any election. The election, therefore, was a paradox for the United States: If it were to be held, the allegedly

anti-democratic Communists would win. If it were subverted, "free Vietnam" would be saved. After Secretary of State John Foster Dulles realized that he had to subvert an election to preserve "democracy," it was a very short road to burning down a village in order to save it.

An examination of the election issue, and why the United States believed the election should not take place, offers insight into postwar American attitudes and assumptions about the United States' role in the world. The foreign policy upon which those attitudes and assumptions were based deeply affected millions of people around the globe. Despite what eventually happened in Vietnam, they are still in place and are having much the same effect. American intervention throughout the world has often been based on faith and morality, not always of need, and it has carried with it some leaps of faith and logic that have not served the United States well. How and why the Vietnamese election of 1956 was subverted sheds some light on the U.S. need for intervention in other countries. Since that need still exists, the election issue, though nearly 35 years old, retains its relevance.

POSTWAR U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN VIETNAM

The Geneva Accords stipulated that an election would be held on July 20, 1956, to reunify the country after two years of demilitarization. To understand why that election was never held, thanks largely to the Eisenhower administration, it is necessary to examine the basis for U.S. foreign policy after the end of World War II.

U.S. policy toward Vietnam from 1945 to 1950 was, in essence, a tightrope act. American policy makers tried to maintain at least an ostensible commitment to independence for colonized peoples while trying to forge an alliance with Western Europe to offset the perceived Soviet threat. The result was a mostly tacit approval of the French effort to regain its colonies in Indochina, which had fallen to the Japanese during World War II. From the time war broke out in Indochina in 1946, after Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam independent, until 1950, the United States stayed out of the fray. State Department officials were divided over policy toward colonial independence, but the European bias in the agency won out, and the perceived need to mollify France took precedence over the struggles of the colonized. Peace and security in Indochina were the U.S. concerns as U.S. officials planned a Western alliance in response toward a perceived threat from the Soviet Union.² As far

² George McT. Kahin, Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1987), pp. 5-7 passim.

as Secretary of State Dean Acheson was concerned, the Vietnamese weren't capable of democracy, anyway. "These people," he said, "are about 95 or 96 percent illiterate. They do not have the simplest ideas of social organization. They do not know about starting schools. They do not know about dealing with the most primitive ideas of public health. They do not know how to organize to build roads. Government is something of a mystery." He said foreign advisers were needed there "... to show them the simple things about what is a school district, and what is the area that falls within a school district, how you go about collecting taxes, and how you get teachers; how to teach the children, whether you have desks or chairs and so forth."³ Dulles shared this preconception. "I don't know really whether some of these people are qualified, well qualified yet for independence," he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "I am not sure that these people are qualified to be fully independent."⁴ The Vietnamese, Dulles said, were "not capable" of exercising as much independence as India, Australia, or Canada.⁵ Few U.S. officials, if any, bothered to point out that Vietnam had a culturally and politically rich background before the French colonized it. This attitude, that the colonized were not capable of democracy, would speak volumes when the United States

³ William Conrad Gibbons, The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Relationships: Part 1, 1945-1960 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 49-50.

⁴ U.S. Senate, Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Vol. VI, 83rd Congress, Second Session, 1954, p. 23.

⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

came to its decision to subvert the election planned for 1956 in Vietnam.

Since the Soviet Union had little interest in Indochina, the United States also had little before 1950. While Soviet interest would remain low, American interest changed dramatically after 1949, when Mao was victorious and China was "lost." The Communist monolith had grown a second head, and Southeast Asia was within breathing distance. The brush fires that the Truman Doctrine promised to extinguish were multiplying, according to this belief, and Indochina changed almost overnight from a minor problem for the French to a major international concern. Problems had already been, or were about to be, sparked in Greece, Turkey, the Philippines, Guatemala, Iran, Malaya and Indonesia. With China now Communist, all of Asia, especially Japan, was now allegedly at risk. Indochina became the first line of defense against a feared domino effect originating with the Chinese, who were thought to have designs on the area.

The United States began its war against Vietnam not under Johnson or Kennedy but under Truman, in April 1950, when U.S. officials decided that Vietnam was too important now to fall to the Communists. That was when Truman signed National Security Council 64, which set forth U.S. policy toward Indochina and made it a high-priority concern for American national security. It was based on the domino theory. Thailand and Burma were expected to fall if Indochina fell to the Communists, and the rest of Southeast Asia would be in danger. The U.S. charge in Saigon, Edmund Gullion, summarized the new policy in a cable on May 6, 1950: Indochina

was a "neuralgic focus" for the Communists, as was Greece, he said. The United States had to resist Communist penetration and send in troops if the Russians or Chinese used force.

This flexible concept envisages [the] possibility [of] limited use of U.S. force, takes [into] account [the] possibility [of] checking [the] threat by [a] display [of] determination and reckons with [the] twilight zone in our constitutional system between [the] war making power of [the] executive and legislative branches. It envisages our going as far as we did in Greece and farther than was ever announced we would go. It is derivative of [the] Truman doctrine. Its execution at any given time depends on [the] relative military posture of ourselves and [the] potential enemy, particularly in atomic weapons.⁶

By June 1950, the Cold War had heated up in Korea. The war there reinforced U.S. officials' belief in containment and the domino effect, a belief which made the transition from Acheson to his successor, John Foster Dulles. The policy of containment from this point on would supersede any U.S. policy regarding colonial independence. The needs of colonized peoples throughout the world often conflicted with America's desire to influence world events and make sure that the "Communist bloc's" sphere did not expand. Struggles for independence, as long as they were in the Communist sphere, were acceptable to U.S. policy makers; those in the U.S. sphere merely served to subvert the security America needed to maintain control. Security in the periphery - i.e., beyond Europe - was needed to make sure Europe remained committed to U.S. policy.

⁶ Gibbons, The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, pp. 67-68.

This European bias is what suddenly changed Vietnam from a minor player on the geopolitical stage to a cornerstone of the Truman Doctrine and containment. It was, to a significant degree, a product of the mindset of John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's secretary of state. Eisenhower and Dulles had risen to power on the wave of anti-Communism sweeping the country in the early 1950s. They were helped along by the right wing of the U.S. Senate - including Senators William Knowland, Robert Taft and Joseph McCarthy - who blamed the Democrats for losing China. Dulles, who had been an adviser to Acheson on Far Eastern affairs, was deeply troubled by the Communist victory in China and by 1950 he was calling the situation in the Far East "most acute."⁷ Publicly, Indochina was a crucial area for John Foster Dulles. Privately, it was just a place on a map where Communism had to be stopped. "Indochina as such is of no great importance, that is, in terms of its military potential or in terms of its economic resources," he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in executive session. "It is important primarily as a staging ground for any further advance ..."⁸

Although Acheson laid the foundation for U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Dulles was the original architect. His fervent anti-Communism and preconceived notions of world order and its moral structure framed U.S. policy in Vietnam for the next quarter century. Dulles came to the State Department with fairly clearly developed attitudes about the role the United States should play in

⁷ Ronald W. Pruessen, John Foster Dulles: The Road to Power (New York, N.Y.: The Free Press, 1982), p. 436.

⁸ U.S. Senate, Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Vol. VII, 84th Congress, First Session, 1955, p. 7.

world affairs. Like Truman, Acheson, and many other Americans, Dulles believed the Soviet Union was "evil and diabolical" and intent upon world domination, and that a Soviet victory anywhere in the world could lead to the loss of Latin America, Africa and even Europe to Communism. He believed that Stalin had targeted nationalists in colonized countries as proxies in an effort to subvert capitalism, and that Ho Chi Minh was one of those proxies.

Dulles believed it was the United States' role to help reform the world's political structure. His evidence was the Americans' alleged superiority - not military or economic superiority but moral superiority. Americans were Christians, according to this argument, and therefore it was their duty to spread out amongst the unenlightened. "Salvation," "devout," "moral power" - these were the words Dulles used during the 1950s to justify the new role the United States was to play in the world. Only the United States could break the shackles of the oppressed. "Resistance cannot be organized except around the United States," Dulles said.⁹

Dulles applied this European/Christian/Western outlook to the Asian/non-Christian/Eastern problems in Vietnam and Indochina as a whole. The first thing he did was to rationalize how the Vietnamese people's shackles had been strapped on by the Christian French. "It was Christianity ... that had made tolerable the worldwide political master of the West and that now makes it possible to have a peaceful transition from that mastery to freedom," Dulles said. "People of the East feel a sense of fellowship

⁹ Pruessen, John Foster Dulles, p. 446.

with the West, largely because of what Christianity has done for them."¹⁰ This ignorance about Vietnamese history and the history of the colonized in general seems quaintly insignificant nearly 40 years later, but it is a major reason why the United States continuously subverted the democratic process in Vietnam after 1950 and ultimately shed its blood there. It is why the United States chose to prop up Ngo Dinh Diem with billions of dollars of military aid despite his lack of popularity and it explains to a large degree how the United States, through all its bluster about freedom and democracy, could choose to prevent the Vietnamese from voting for their own form of government.

Placing more importance on the prevention of Communism than the promotion of democracy gave Dulles and the United States an intrinsically negative foreign policy, in which the negation of Soviet and Chinese expansion took precedence over the imposition of the putative U.S. political values. The Korean War, therefore, led Dulles to believe not that the Chinese were exercising the decidedly American-flavored right to protect its periphery but that the Chinese were spearheading a drive to colonize its Asian neighbors. Ironically, Dulles's fears were focused on Japan - which had tried to do just that not 20 years before. Dulles was afraid that Chinese hegemony would deprive a rebuilding Japan of rice and raw goods from Southeast Asia, parts of which (including Vietnam) had been self-sufficient in rice until the French took over and began to export it. He also feared that U.S. troop deployment in the Far East would

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 447.

be significantly upset if Japan were to go Communist. As a result, Dulles was stunned by the Chinese inroads into Korea, where U.S. setbacks at the beginning of the war had "grave psychological consequences." He resolved to be more bold in the face of Communist aggression. The Vietnamese war with the French became the crucible in which to test his new resolve.¹¹ This was the basis upon which the United States moved toward full intervention in Vietnam.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 466-471 passim.

GENEVA

Almost always it seems our Western peoples underestimate the capacity of the Asian troops to move surreptitiously through the jungle at night, through trails that are impassable to white people.¹²

The French loss at Dienbienphu in 1954 was also an American loss. The United States had poured billions of dollars into the French effort since 1950, in effect taking over the financing of the war. With the disappointing Korean armistice fresh in their minds and McCarthyism in full bloom, the American leaders were not willing to accept another setback in the fight against Communism, regardless of the fact that the Communists won in Indochina.

When the participants in the negotiations gathered at Geneva in the summer of 1954 (France, the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, China, Laos, Cambodia and representatives from both the Vietminh and pro-Western element led by playboy emperor Bao Dai), their goal was to transform a military confrontation into a political solution. Merely scanning the list of participants, however, would lead many people to foresee that the outcome of the Geneva meetings would not be based upon the needs of Vietnam itself or

¹² John Foster Dulles, May 12, 1954, Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Vol. VI, 1954, p. 262.

the fact that the Vietminh scored a broad military victory throughout Indochina.

This is what was agreed upon, with the United States and the State of Vietnam (Bao Dai's regime) abstaining:

- an end to the fighting between the Vietnamese and the French;
- the temporary partition of Vietnam at the 17th parallel, which would be erased after ...
- ... nationwide elections in 1956 to reunify the nation under one government;
- neither part of Vietnam could join a military alliance;
- no new military equipment or personnel were to be brought into either area from outside;
- no foreign military bases;
- an International Control Commission consisting of representatives from Canada, Poland and India was to supervise the cease-fire and the preparations for elections.¹³

This proved to be a disaster for the victorious Vietminh. Why would Ho agree to regroup north of the 17th parallel, giving up a significant amount of land controlled by his forces? Ho was justifiably confident that a political solution would favor the Vietminh, since all sides agreed that he would win a fair election by a wide margin. U.S. intelligence even estimated that Ho would win an election with 80 percent of the vote.¹⁴ "As things stand today,"

¹³ For concise analyses of the Geneva Accords, see Kahin, pp. 52-65, and Gibbons, pp. 256-258.

¹⁴ Edward S. Herman and Richard B. DuBoff, America's Vietnam Policy: The Strategy of Deception (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1966), p. 83.

Dulles told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on July 16, 1954, "it is probable that Ho Chi Minh would get a very large vote. Therefore, we are not anxious to see an early election."¹⁵ Eisenhower was convinced. "I have never talked or corresponded with a person knowledgeable in Indochinese affairs," he said, "who did not agree that had elections been held at the time of the fighting, possibly 80 percent of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader rather than Chief of State Bao Dai."¹⁶ The U.S. support of Bao Dai, who collaborated with the French, was merely one of the first ill-advised efforts to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese, who had been thirsting for freedom from the French for 75 years. Bao Dai was, to the Vietnamese, a symbol of the elements of the mandarin class who had cooperated with the French throughout the colonial period. It was a secret to no one that in a fair election, Bao Dai would be crushed. In fact, the State Department, in 1955, admitted that

maximum conditions of freedom and the maximum degree of international supervision might well operate to Communist advantage and allow considerable Communist strength in the South to manifest itself at the polls ... It would appear on balance, therefore, seriously questionable whether the South should make a major issue of free political conditions in the

¹⁵ U.S. Senate, Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Vol. VI, 83rd Congress, Second Session, 1954, p. 642.

¹⁶ Marvin E. Gettleman, et al (eds.), Vietnam and America (New York, N.Y.: Grove Press, 1985), p. 69. The quote is attributed to Dwight D. Eisenhower, Mandate for Change (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Books, 1963), p. 372.

period preceding and during whatever type of elections might finally be decided for Vietnam.¹⁷

State Department intelligence experts cited three reasons for the Vietminh's strength: their "long identification with the struggle for independence, the larger population in the north, and an alleged ability to influence elections through "coercion and control."¹⁸ According to the report, furthermore, "the Communists could count on at least a substantial vote in their favor in the south, while the south could probably expect no more than an insignificant vote in its favor in the north."¹⁹

The election provision in the agreement, therefore, was "the heart of the Geneva Agreements" for Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese.²⁰ Two days after the fall of Dienbienphu, the Vietminh asked that a date be set for nationwide elections. After nine years of war, the Vietminh were ready for peace. Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party leadership in Hanoi had changed their policy and goals significantly. They were now intent upon establishing peace with the French so the nation could rebuild. Ho warned his people against "leftist" and "rightist" tendencies, going so far as to allow a small residue of French economic control. He told the Sixth Plenum of the Party Central Committee in July 1954 that

¹⁷ Kahin, Intervention, p. 89.

¹⁸ U.S. State Department Intelligence Report No. 6818, "Considerations Bearing on the Problem of the 1956 Elections in Vietnam," February 1, 1955, p. ii, No. 1978/432A, Declassified Documents Reference System (heretofore "DDRS").

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁰ Kahin, Intervention, p. 61.

the French were no longer the enemy. The enemy was now the United States.

Ho knew that Dulles wanted the United States to intervene militarily.²¹ Dulles, while at the Geneva negotiations, said he hoped the West could hold out in Vietnam until "the coming counterattack in two years' time."²² From the end of 1953 and through the first several months of 1954, as the French loss was imminent, Dulles had been trying to persuade the Western allies to enter into an agreement to back a U.S. military intervention, at least verbally. He was also trying to expand a treaty with Australia and New Zealand into a regional defense pact against Communism in Asia. Both efforts failed.

Ho was banking on the fact that the French would guarantee the Geneva agreements and make sure that the election was held,²³ since the French were aware that failure to do so could result in a resumption of hostilities and open rebellion on the part of the Vietnamese. Ho was also counting on the Soviets to insure the elections. Ho was confident that the election would be carried out. "We have won the day at the Geneva conference," he told the Vietnamese people.²⁴ Ho was later proved wrong - not about the Americans but about the French and the Soviets. He did not know the degree to which the Soviet Union and China wanted peace with

²¹ Gareth Porter (ed.), Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions, Vol. 1 (Stanfordville, N.Y.: Earl Coleman Enterprises, Inc., 1979), p. 636.

²² Lloyd Gardner, Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu, 1941 to 1954 (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988), p. 261.

²³ Porter, Vietnam, p. 670.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 669.

the United States, and overestimated the French commitment to the Geneva agreements.

Indochina, the ostensible subject of the Geneva negotiations, was in fact just a stage on which the superpowers were testing their wills. All held trumps. France withheld its decision on entering the proposed European Defense Community, which would have strengthened NATO and rearmed West Germany, to keep in check both the United States, which wanted the EDC, and the Soviet Union, which did not.²⁵ The Soviets had little interest in Indochina itself, so it was more free to bargain away Vietnamese interests, which it eventually did. China also had reason to sell out the Vietnamese. Indochina was much more important to the Chinese than to the Soviets, since it was so close to home. The Chinese had just fought the Americans in Korea and had been threatened with nuclear destruction. China did not want U.S. forces next door again, and it was willing to make sure that Ho did not demand too much.²⁶

So as the Vietminh negotiated a peace settlement after having defeated a U.S.-backed French army, they were faced with not only the two wartime enemies but two superpower allies that had other geopolitical goals besides trying to give the Vietminh the spoils of victory. Pinning everything on the election scheduled for 1956, the Vietminh accepted the partition of their country and the establishment of a "temporary" administration in the South.

The agreement helped the United States to immediately set up a mechanism geared toward making sure South Vietnam would

²⁵ Kahin, Intervention, p. 55.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 56.

not be a Communist-controlled nation, electorally or otherwise. But the United States did not wait for the Geneva agreements to be signed, or even for the negotiations to begin. On June 1, 1954, Col. Edward G. Lansdale arrived in Saigon to begin a program of psychological warfare aimed at subverting Hanoi's administration. His tactics included floating rumors about Chinese troops in Tonkin raping Vietnamese girls.²⁷ It was an illustration of the early commitment the United States had made toward a covert subversion of the intent of the Geneva agreements. Lansdale would become Diem's right-hand man as the United States feverishly tried to create a legitimate government in the South, despite what was agreed upon in Geneva and the popularity of the Communists.

Neither the United States nor Diem's "government" signed the Geneva agreements. The National Security Council had concluded that the Geneva agreements were a "disaster" and could lead to the loss of Southeast Asia.²⁸ The Americans issued an official statement taking note of the agreements and mouthing the usual platitudes about sovereignty, self-determination and truly free elections. Eisenhower and Dulles wanted the elections supervised by the United Nations and not the International Control Commission, something Britain and France opposed.

Eisenhower, Dulles and Diem, by the time the ink was dry on the Geneva agreements, were already laying the groundwork for

²⁷ The Pentagon Papers, *New York Times* edition (New York, N.Y.: Bantam Books, 1971), p. 55.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

imposing a South Vietnamese government outside the guidelines established by the accord.

The separation of Vietnam at the 17th parallel and the promise of the election in 1956 went hand in hand for the Vietminh, and therefore for the United States as well as Washington began its effort to negate the Geneva agreements and the popular will of the Vietnamese people. Few Americans cared, or even knew, that their government was beginning a process that would undermine the democratic process of another country. The years 1953 and 1954, in fact, may have been the peak of U.S. interventionism since World War II. Popular leaders in Guatemala and Iran were removed with the help of covert U.S. operations that year. Lansdale had just returned from covert work in the Philippines, where he helped inspire The Ugly American.

It was assumed in Washington that the United States was responsible for maintaining security throughout the world - security for the United States, that is. Congress certainly was not a source of opposition to Eisenhower's foreign policy, and would not act as a check on presidential power until long after American troops were committed. Vietnam itself was peripheral to the core of the American goal, which was to establish an international front against Communism, with Europe as top priority and the rest of the world as the barbed wire surrounding the fortress. And the sermonizing was not restricted only to John Foster Dulles. The white man's burden was still alive, no matter how colonialism was fading.

Fussell's dichotomy of elementary logic - the totally good versus the totally bad - gave birth to rationalizations reminiscent of the colonialism of the 1840s.

Wesley Fishel, a Michigan State academician who collaborated with American interventionists in Vietnam, embodied the attitudes made possible by this wartime logic. "As one travels through these newly born countries," Fishel said as late as 1959, "he comes to realize that from the standpoint of the history of thought, the people of Southeast Asia are not, generally speaking, sufficiently sophisticated enough to understand what we mean by a democracy and how they can exercise and protect their own political rights."²⁹ Cardinal Spellman of New York may have spoken for the United States as a whole when he reacted to the Vietnamese struggle against colonialism by saying, "Do you peacefully coexist with men who thus would train the youth of their godless, Red world?"³⁰ The rhetoric was similar to that of John Foster Dulles, whose criticism of Communism often evoked religious themes. Peaceful coexistence was never an alternative. The assumption made by Spellman, Dulles, Acheson, Eisenhower and all who followed them was that Communism by definition was a threat to the United States and therefore its existence was intrinsically a provocation. All else was secondary. For protection against this threat, the United States needed an ally in Vietnam, home to few, if any, pro-Americans who

²⁹ Marvin E. Gettleman (ed.), Vietnam: History, Documents and Opinions on a Major World Crisis (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1965), pp. 200-201, reprinted from *The New Leader*, "Vietnam's Democratic One-Man Rule," Nov. 2, 1959, pp. 10-13.

³⁰ Marvin E. Gettleman, et al (eds.), Vietnam and America: Documented History (New York, N.Y.: Grove Press, 1985), p. 121.

had public credibility, given the massive American support to the French military.

Ngo Dinh Diem came to power in Vietnam on July 7, 1954, as a pro-American proxy with no popular support, only a promise of U.S. backing and enough materiel to create a security force around him. Vietnam, in practically no time, became a crucial player in the fight for freedom around the world, as the Americans put it. The defeat of the French created a "void" in the world's balance of power, according to Dulles, and the question was who was going to fill that void: the democrats or the Communists?³¹ Since the Americans had already underwritten the French war effort, and lost, the answer was pre-determined, and the question was merely rhetorical. By October 1955, Diem had taken over as president and declared the south to be an independent republic. The extent to which the Americans were dependent upon Diem is illustrated by their ambivalence toward him. Few, if any, American diplomats thought Diem was a worthy leader, despite their public proclamations. Dulles, when asked by the French in 1955 to force Diem to toe the Western line, said that if Diem was the kind of man who would do the American bidding, then he would not be the kind of man who could save Vietnam from Communism.³² It was an early example of the sort of paradox that the U.S. goals in Vietnam engendered, a political corollary to what would later escalate into burning villages in order to save them. The paradox was that the

³¹ Gibbons, The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War, p. 179.

³² U.S. State Department, Foreign Relations of the United States: Vietnam, 1955-1957, Vol. I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), p. 416.

United States needed an independent-minded proxy, a blocked election, and, later, destruction to preserve "democracy." The means the United States needed to achieve its end made the end impossible.

The United States had little time to find a better ally than Diem in South Vietnam. As the 1956 date for the election neared, U.S. "prestige" and "responsibility" became increasingly at risk. By 1956, Senator John F. Kennedy was calling Vietnam "the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia."

"The fundamental tenets of this nation's foreign policy, in short, depend in considerable measure upon a strong and free Vietnamese nation," Kennedy said. " ... The United States is directly responsible for this experiment. It is playing an important role in the laboratory where it is being conducted. We cannot afford to permit that experiment to fail. ... If we are not the parents of little Vietnam, then surely we are the godparents. We presided at its birth, we gave assistance to its life, we have helped to shape its future. ... This is our offspring. ..." He went on to urge that the United States "never" approve the election stipulated by the Geneva Declaration.³³

³³ Gibbons, pp. 303-305.

THE ELECTION IS SUBVERTED

Was it conceivable that the great powers would allow Vietnamese elections to determine the issue of war and peace? Better to leave such questions unasked - you might get a truthful answer.³⁴

Communications among U.S. officials during 1954-1956 concerning the planned Vietnam election represented an eerie overture to the kind of thinking and action that characterized American military involvement in Vietnam 10 years later. Indecision and a lack of experience in dealing with a new situation retarded the formation of U.S. policy during that period toward Vietnam and the scheduled election. America had designated itself the sentinel of freedom for the world, had equated freedom with the absence of Communism, and was now faced with an election in which everyone conceded that the Communists would win.

As a result, U.S. Cold War policy toward Vietnam after the Geneva agreements was similar in character to its policy during the shooting war 10 years later: it was a policy of tactics without any strategy. Without sufficient political leverage, the United States answered a political problem with a military solution. In 1965, it was the introduction of ground troops; in 1955, it was the threat of invasion. It was a subtle threat - the influx of several hundred

³⁴ Gardner, Approaching Vietnam, p. 284.

military personnel - but it was enough to plant the idea in the minds of the war-weary Vietminh.

At the same time, Eisenhower and Dulles tried to find a way to delay the election to buy enough time to prop up Diem, whose power base was nearly nonexistent. The solution for them was to create a catch-22 for the Vietminh. According to this setup, the election could be held as long as the United States and Diem were convinced that they would be held freely. This course had been set before the Geneva agreements had been signed. "We believe, the French believe, that by stipulating for election conditions and this supervisory machinery and agreement by both regimes that the conditions are ready for elections, that election can be postponed until conditions are more favorable for them, and if by that time conditions are more favorable to them, then probably the other side won't want to have elections," Dulles told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in July 1954.³⁵ In essence, the United States, with few cards in its hand, could hope to win only by upping the ante so far that the Communists could not continue the game. The message from Diem and the United States was that they supported the election but that the Communists would have to prove that it would be executed to the West's satisfaction. This abrogation of the Geneva agreements came from two parties that refused to sign them.

What the United States and Diem ostensibly wanted, according to this stance, was freedom of speech, free campaigns, and free

³⁵ U.S. Senate, Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Vol. VI, 83rd Congress, Second Session, 1954, pp. 642-643.

assemblies before the election. Privately, they hoped it would be too much for the Vietminh to accept. They also knew that those conditions would actually help the Vietminh win an election. This was documented in a secret State Department intelligence report drafted in February 1955:

"It is not apparent that the establishment of conditions of electoral freedom is actually of vital importance to the non-Communists in Vietnam," the report stated. "As a matter of fact, such conditions might operate to favor the Communists more than their opponents."³⁶ The report then went on to say, after stating that the Communists would not need to rig an election, that "it is inconceivable that anything but a nearly completely rigged election could occur in the north."³⁷ The State Department analysts then made it clear that, despite the demands to be made of the Vietminh regarding a "free" election, the United States did not consider the democratic process to fit its needs: "In the south ... maximum conditions of freedom and a maximum degree of international supervision might well operate to Communist advantage and allow the considerable Communist strength in the south to manifest itself at the polls, where otherwise, with the *proper electoral arrangements* and a minimum of Communist pre-electoral campaigning, such strength might be kept away. It would appear on balance, therefore, seriously questionable whether the south should make a major issue of free political conditions in the period

³⁶ U.S. State Department Intelligence Report No. 6818, "Considerations Bearing on the Problem of the 1956 Elections in Vietnam," February 1, 1955, p. 9, No. 1978/432A, DDRS.

³⁷ Ibid.

preceding and during whatever type of elections may finally be decided for Vietnam." (Emphasis added.)³⁸ Evidently, not only did the United States not want democratic elections, it also was considering making the "proper electoral arrangements" to dilute Communist strength.

The contradictions within U.S. policy did not disappear over the next few months as the July 1955 date for election consultations approached. The period between February and July 1955 was when the bulk of U.S. planning was done regarding the election. During those six months, Dulles and his subordinates wrestled with the problem while furiously trying to solidify Diem's reign. Since this study is primarily an examination of the thinking behind U.S. policy during the period, the evolution of that policy and the process by which it was formed deserves a detailed account.

The communication among U.S. diplomats during this period reveals no "smoking gun" that places responsibility for the cancellation of the election squarely on American shoulders. But taken as a whole, it becomes clear that the United States had no intention of abiding by the election provision. The most damning evidence is a telegram from John Foster Dulles to the embassy in Saigon on April 6, 1955. In it, Dulles explains his position to embassy officials as preparation for a round of talks scheduled with the British and the French. The policy is based upon a proposal put forth by Anthony Eden for the planned all-German elections; that

³⁸ Ibid.

proposal was rejected by the Communists, and Dulles hoped to match Eden's success.

The basic principle is that Free Viet-Nam will insist to the Viet Minh that unless agreement is first reached by the latter's acceptance of the safeguards spelled out, that no repeat no further discussions are possible regarding the type of elections, the issues to be voted on or any other factors. After we have Diem's general acceptance we can proceed inform UK and France of this plan, which we think [is the] only formula which ensures both satisfactory response to [the] Geneva Agreement and at [the] same time [a] plan which is unassailable in intent but probably unacceptable to Communists because of provisions for strict compliance to ensure genuinely free elections.³⁹

Dulles went on to tell the embassy officials that they should not show Diem the details of their plan but should speak to him privately, to secure his approval but to make sure he "accepts it to [the] degree we can proceed with [the] French [and] British on [the] broad assumption [that] Free Viet-Nam's position [is] similar [to] our own."⁴⁰ Dulles told the embassy to remind Diem that similar proposals were used in Germany and Korea, and that in each case the Communists refused to comply with the restrictions.

With this edict from Dulles, and with Eisenhower's blessing, U.S. policy was in place. The wording of Dulles's telegram is open to interpretation, however. By itself, it does not prove that the United States took the initiative to subvert the election. It can be

³⁹ Porter, Vietnam, p. 694.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

interpreted as a benign acquiescence to Diem's desire to avoid the election. But Dulles's telegram leaves ample space for a different interpretation. The fact of the matter was that everyone, including the Americans, knew that Diem had little support in South Vietnam (the Americans were already thinking about replacing him), so it was quite obvious that Diem was against the election and would do what he could to avoid it, since he was sure to lose. All he needed was a reason to subvert it, and that reason could come only from the party that held the power in South Vietnam: the United States. The election could not have been subverted without U.S. support and complicity. Whether Diem or the United States took the initiative, therefore, is a moot point. The responsibility was always with the United States, whether it did nothing to subvert the election or took action. Dulles's telegram was that action. His concern about selling the idea to Diem was unnecessary. From that point on, Diem had the support he needed to avoid the election and create a power base.

Five days later, Dulles left no doubt about who actually held the power in South Vietnam. In a cable to General J. Lawton Collins, the special U.S. representative to South Vietnam, Dulles gave permission to "acquiesce in plans for (Diem's) replacement."⁴¹ Collins had been sent to Vietnam in November 1954 as a temporary envoy with the rank of ambassador. Collins's military expertise was beyond question, but he knew little about Vietnam. His primary goal was to establish military security there, not political stability.

⁴¹ U.S. State Department Draft Cable, "Eyes Only for Collins from Secretary," April 11, 1955, p. 1, No. 1984/2941, DDRS.

To his credit, he quickly recognized Diem's shortcomings. He also was one of the first - and one of the last for a long time - to consider withdrawal from Vietnam as a realistic solution to the already deepening political quagmire in which Eisenhower and Dulles found themselves. Unfortunately, he also thought the playboy emperor Bao Dai, who had even less support than Diem among the populace, was a possible alternative. A third alternative offered by Collins was to continue support of Diem, and that is what was chosen after U.S. officials realized that other pro-American Vietnamese had as little credibility in Vietnam as Diem.

Dulles, though he professed to be well aware of Diem's shortcomings, decided that full commitment to his regime was better than withdrawal. That meant the beginning of a massive economic and military effort to stabilize Diem's control and establish military security in South Vietnam, which was full of Vietminh sympathizers and dissident sects prone to violence. At the same time the United States and Diem were building Vietnamese armed forces and quelling disturbances, they had to walk a political tightrope. Their problem was that the Geneva agreements called for a temporary regrouping in the north and the south, not separate nations, and for a reunification in 1956 after the election. Diem and the United States, neither of whom had any intention of complying with the agreements, nevertheless had to create the illusion that the goals set forth in Geneva were their goals, too.

From Dulles's order in April 1955, to get Diem to agree to put off the election, until July 1956, when the election was scheduled to be held, U.S. policy was driven by a desire only to keep Diem in

power and to stave off any Communist inroads into the south. In May 1955, nearly a year after Geneva, the National Security Council drafted a policy on the election. It was a policy based upon a military relationship, not only a political one, and its goal was inherently negative: to prevent Communist gain. The goals, as outlined, were to "maintain a friendly non-Communist Free Vietnam; to assist Free Vietnam to maintain (a) military forces necessary for internal security, and (b) economic conditions conducive to the maintenance of the strength of the non-Communist regime; and to prevent a Communist victory through all-Vietnam elections."⁴² The NSC said Diem had to be able to maintain order, put down insurrections, and win an election in the south before he could "give lip service to the idea of national unification through elections, or to insist on adequate conditions for free elections."⁴³ The NSC suggested that Diem go ahead with consultations for the election, which was scheduled for July 1955. The United States, in the meantime, would provide information and advice about Communist "positions and tactics" in Greece, Germany, Austria, and Korea. It would also help Diem lay the blame for failing to secure the election on the Communists. The NSC then outlined what Diem's demands should be regarding "adequate guarantees" of the freedom of the election. They included: " ... safeguards to assure conditions of genuine freedom before, after, and during elections; full powers for any Supervisory Commission to act to ensure free elections and to guarantee against prior coercion or subsequent reprisal; adequate

⁴² FRUS, 1955-1957, Vol. I, p. 411.

⁴³ Ibid.

guarantees for, among other things, freedom of movement, freedom of presentation of candidates, immunity of candidates, freedom from arbitrary arrest or victimization, freedom of association and political meetings, freedom of expression for all, freedom of press, radio, and free circulation of newspapers, secrecy of vote, security of polling stations and ballot boxes. The Communists would find it most difficult to accept such conditions or to allow their implementation if accepted."⁴⁴

In Vietnam in 1955, these conditions were crucial to the U.S. effort to postpone the election. Because of the American pretense about exporting democracy, U.S. officials did not want to appear to be avoiding the election. This was especially significant because the Vietminh had already gained credence in Vietnam for leading the fight to overthrow the colonialist regime. If Diem were to seem as if he were trying to avoid the election, his effort to build an indigenous following at the expense of the Communists would be doomed. The presence of French troops in Vietnam after Geneva did not help Diem. The French were afraid that a cancellation of the election would spark another outbreak of war. And since France signed the Geneva agreements, unlike Diem and the United States, potential hostilities caused by a cancellation loomed larger in their view. The prospect of renewed hostilities was not lost upon U.S. officials. They were well aware that their attempt to subvert the election could touch off another shooting war. U.S. involvement in such a war was already justified, however: international support

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 412.

could be forthcoming, according to the NSC, "... on the grounds of a Vietminh repudiation of the Geneva Agreements and resort to force in an unwillingness to accept conditions guaranteeing the freedom of elections ..."45

From this point, the United States had two challenges: first, to convince Diem that its strategy for the election was the right one, and second, to bolster Diem's regime enough so it could withstand political and military encroachment from the north. The first proved to be no challenge at all. The second lasted 20 more years and failed.

Diem, a Westernized Catholic in an Eastern nation of Buddhists and Confucian tradition, had little power base without U.S. assistance. He had no reason to go through with the election and maintained throughout that he was not bound by the Geneva agreements since he did not sign them. Of course, neither Diem nor the United States ever mentioned that Diem played no role in bringing France to the table to end the war. He was a tool by which the United States could bypass the Geneva agreements and set up a separate nation in the south, and because it was the only way he could achieve power in his home country, he was more than willing to deal with the Americans for as long as it was necessary. Diem, however, was well aware that he was not powerless. Once it became clear that the reunification would not take place and that the South would remain separate, Diem would demonstrate a shrewd

45 Ibid., p. 410.

understanding of how the United States was as dependent on him as he was dependent on it.

Diem, in fact, had already decided to resist the election, since it would result in his fall from power. But in 1955, with his grip on power in the south still tenuous, he needed a green light from the United States, and when he got it, his opposition to the election, and even the consultations scheduled for the summer of 1955, became more vocal. Diem and Dulles now focused their attention on convincing the rest of the world that their refusal to go through with the election was justified. Diem was adamant about canceling the consultations. Dulles saw them as a good way to demonstrate good faith. The French, who still had troops in Vietnam and were more fearful than the Americans of renewed warfare, wanted the consultations to begin before the July 20 deadline so the Vietminh would not have an excuse to resume the war.⁴⁶ For Dulles, the consultations would be an opportunity to state what conditions would be needed before the election could be held. "Basically, we believe that in order to put Free Vietnam in (the) strongest position it should take initiative on free elections and insist on rigid guarantees by (the) Communists for genuinely free elections," Dulles said in a cable to the Saigon embassy. "Our experience in Germany and Korea has been that such guarantees are unacceptable to the Communists and that as a result negotiations have either broken down or been extended, in the case of Germany over ten years."⁴⁷ Dulles told embassy officials to remind Diem of the "seriously

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

complicating disadvantages" of flatly rejecting the consultations. He was concerned enough to dispatch a State Department official to Saigon for 60 days to help the embassy with smoothing over the election issue. Diem was not as concerned about world opinion as Dulles, who had repeatedly expressed a desire to present Vietnam to the world as an example of American benevolence.

At the same time, Dulles revised the policy on elections to take better advantage of the leverage from demanding specific conditions for the election. "It is important that the Free Vietnamese Government be in a position to make political capital from strong advocacy of unification through genuinely free elections," Dulles cabled the embassy on May 27.

It is also important that the Communists clearly bear the onus for any refusal to agree to conditions which would guarantee genuinely free elections or for any obstruction of the preliminary talks. If the International Supervisory Commission [a provision of the Geneva agreements] is active in the discussions its activity might tend to diffuse the political advantages which Free Vietnam might otherwise gain from the negotiations and at the same time provide the Communists with the means for avoiding full responsibility for any negative attitudes which they may adopt. The United States believes that it would be unwise to entrust any important part of the task of devising the conditions or objectives of elections in Vietnam to a commission composed of members having such conflicting views. The United States would not expect Free Vietnam to be willing to delegate authority to such a commission.⁴⁸ [The commission comprised representatives from Canada, Poland and India.]

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 422-423.

At this point, the United States was trying to subvert the entire Geneva agreements - the election, the reunification, even the benign, virtually powerless International Control Commission. But Dulles was not through. He went on to tell Saigon that no election should take place until the country had a constitution first. In the meantime, he said, Vietnam should remain separated. For Dulles, it made sense, because at the same time he was devising a strategy to bypass the election, he was also trying to build an army around Diem. In fact, in May 1955, two months before the election consultations were to begin, the United States was already planning Diem's military needs through 1958 - two and a half years after the election was to take place. Geneva's whole point was to turn a military situation - the Franco-Vietnamese war - into a political solution: reunification through free elections. The United States, while calling for election consultations, was already turning that goal on its head and was confident enough of its prospects that militarization was planned three years down the road. The obvious connection was that the United States could not achieve its political goal - the establishment of a Western-controlled outpost in Vietnam - without military means. In May 1955, the political atmosphere still heavily favoring the Vietminh, the need for military buildup was all the more crucial to empowering Diem. In a letter to the Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs, Randolph Kidder, the Saigon embassy counselor, said the South Vietnamese army would have to be enlarged because of "the continuing state of

insecurity."⁴⁹ But there was a problem: The number of available men was unknown, so conscription would be difficult. There was a convenient solution, however: A census was about to be taken for the election.

A year earlier, Ho's deputy, Pham Van Dong, had said the Americans "fear peace."⁵⁰ The effort in 1955 to not only drag out the demobilization process but plan for a South Vietnamese military buildup supported his view. The United States based its desire for a larger army on a clear analysis of Diem's situation: an "absence of political, administrative and military backing throughout the countryside. Until the national government establishes its authority with officials and security forces at the provincial and village level, Free Viet-Nam is more an expression of desire than the establishment of fact."⁵¹ With this prescient analysis, U.S. officials, as they would for the next 20 years, used valid data as the basis for insupportable action. Instead of concluding that Diem could not achieve significant backing despite U.S. support, they concluded that more military assistance was needed. The solution: more aircraft, ammunition and "possibly military advice. This may be a radical suggestion but once on a course I like to see it carried through," said Kenneth Young, director of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs.⁵² This course of logic, indeed, was carried through.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

⁵⁰ Porter, *Vietnam*, p. 572.

⁵¹ *FRUS, 1955-1957, Vol. I*, p. 427.

⁵² *Ibid.*

At this point, Diem and the United States had a problem of their own to consider. With the July 20 consultations still almost two months away, they could not yet make their election demands public. It would be obvious that it was a ploy to avoid the consultations and the election itself. Therefore, they could not yet pretend to adhere to high democratic standards in order to bypass the election. In the meantime, they had to show the world that they were establishing a free nation while at the same time increasing security behind an unpopular leader. It is important to remember that world opinion and U.S. prestige were at the root of the American effort in Vietnam. This was not one of Washington's covert coups. The United States had placed Vietnam in its showcase and it needed a public relations victory to establish itself as a supporter of independence in the Third World. Trying to silently install a friendly puppet was not enough. If Vietnam was to be made an example, by definition it had to be on the world stage. Unfortunately, the political conditions in Vietnam during the 1950s were not conducive to such an effort. Creating a regime in South Vietnam was made more difficult with others watching.

As the deadline for consultations neared, it became apparent to U.S. officials that avoiding an unwinnable election was not a simple task. Because of the lack of support for Diem and the Vietminh's popularity, the Vietminh enjoyed the upper hand as long as the consultations were yet unheld. Crawling out from under this relationship could not be solved militarily in six weeks. Diem's regime could not be made secure in that time, and even if it could it would not change the fact that negotiations between the Vietminh

and Diem, especially with French Expeditionary Forces still in the country, would be a public disaster. This was not lost on Young, who wrote to the new ambassador in Saigon, Frederick Reinhardt:

... We are running into stormy weather. The Vietnamese may become more and more allergic to talking with the Viet Minh in July or thereafter. They may fear this ipso facto acceptance of the Geneva Accord and of the Viet Minh. We foresee a lot of trouble here if the Vietnamese are stubborn in the Korean fashion. I personally have a lot of sympathy for their position and hope we will not twist their arm to talk with the Communists. On the other hand their refusal will become an international issue which might be most untimely this summer whether at the summit, on the slopes or particularly down in the foothills. A policy of discretion is probably better than an attitude of outright defiance but we may have some real diplomatic problems here.⁵³

Young went on to tell Reinhardt that they might have to make Diem understand that any Vietminh retaliation for subverting the election could end U.S. assistance.⁵⁴

On June 8, Dulles was informed that Diem had three major reasons for refusing to participate in consultations: First, he wanted to dissociate himself from the Geneva election provision; second, a National Assembly would have to be elected and consulted before he could consider participating; and third, the status of the French

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 428-429.

⁵⁴ Young went on to say that his office received a "mountain" of telegrams during Gen. Collins's mission in Saigon. "The interest in Viet-Nam is so extensive here in Washington and the stakes are so high that I have been wondering about some adequate form of periodic evaluations or situation reports."

forces would have to be reconsidered so that he and his army could enjoy complete sovereignty. Diem's reluctance represented one of his first tests of American resolve, and the answer he got helped set a precedent. Instead of ordering Diem to participate in the consultations or risk loss of the only support he had, U.S. officials gave him what he wanted. Dulles and five other State Department officials met later on June 8 to discuss the election and decided that all three of Diem's concerns were justified. They went a big step further: They decided that if the Vietminh resumed shooting after the consultations were canceled, the United States would be justified in taking military action in support of Diem even if its Manila Pact allies refused to help. But they wavered on whether they would actually do it if the occasion arose. A memorandum of conversation from the meeting illuminates Dulles's thinking on the matter and illustrates the indecision in dealing with the problem:

Our position in effect was that we were telling Diem to do everything possible to frustrate the holding of elections by insisting on conditions which the Communists could not possibly accept, and then if the Communists attack we would indicate to Diem in advance that we would intervene on his side. This did not seem to be altogether a sound position, particularly if Diem had some different views. ... If Diem does not conform to the provisions of the Geneva Accords and if the Viet Minh invades Free Viet-Nam, would we or would we not consider the Viet Minh action a breach of the accords and would come to Diem's aid or not by invoking the Manila Pact? If Diem does conform fully to the provisions of the Geneva Accords, consults with the Viet Minh, takes the desired position on the genuinely free elections and then the Viet Minh are so frustrated that they invade with force, we apparently would then

consider that a breach of the Geneva Accords, and invoke the Manila Pact. The question was left for further consideration. ...⁵⁵

The next day, the National Security Council postponed consideration of NSC 5519, the policy on Vietnam elections. Dulles wanted to learn more about Diem's feelings, and those of the British and the French. It was a year after Geneva and less than six weeks from the deadline for consultations.

The dilemma, if not the solution, was becoming clearer to U.S. officials the closer their backs came to the wall: either force Diem to negotiate, or go along with him and risk war. U.S. officials were clear in their analysis of what could happen if the Vietminh were angered. However, there is no evidence that they thought through the possible ramifications of angering Diem. Evidently, this was unthinkable. Losing their only hope in Vietnam was much worse than the prospect of war. Diem's refusal to talk to the Vietminh, as a result, became more and more attractive. The only thing left to do for the Americans was to convince themselves. The optimism expressed by one U.S. diplomat was limitless: "... Diem may be in a strong position nationally and internationally," Young wrote Reinhardt.

He is trying to save people from Communism. He does not want to be forced into complying with a document he rejected and has never recognized. He does not want to assume the position of a dictator engaging in profoundly important talks with the enemy before there is

⁵⁵ FRUS, 1955-1957, Vol. I, p. 440.

some democratic expression in the South giving him a valid and legal mandate. He is not going to be forced into this by the French. On the other hand the Viet Minh in the eyes of the Vietnamese are forcing the Geneva Accords on the country and are working closely with the French to do this. In the United States, and I suspect many other countries, there will be great sympathy and support for Diem and the Nationalists. ⁵⁶

Now that it was obvious that Diem would not only refuse to allow the election but skip the consultations as well, the United States could unload the onus for the breach of Geneva onto the Vietnamese. One Dulles aide suggesting leaving the entire matter up the Vietnamese while calling for a National Assembly to support Diem. "This position would be strictly in keeping with the fundamental doctrine of 'consent of the governed,' the aide told Dulles. "The U.S. cannot be a party to political acts or decisions which do not reflect the will of the people validly ascertained and expressed."⁵⁷ This rhetorical adherence to democratic principles was also shared by *The New York Times* at the time, which said the United States should give Vietnam more opportunities to "understand" democracy. The Vietnamese, the *Times* said, should be given "the tools they need to build their own democracy."⁵⁸

One of those tools, apparently, was a good propaganda campaign. The goal, ostensibly, was to garner widespread American and Vietnamese support for Diem's refusal to go ahead with the

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

⁵⁸ *The New York Times*, May 20, 1955, p. 6.

Geneva election provisions. The actual goal was to garner enough public support for Diem's position to make it appear that it was shared by many Vietnamese. In Vietnam it was impossible to quantify widespread support, but the United States had no intention of doing so, anyway. It had already conceded privately that Ho would win an election by a significant margin. The State Department urged Diem to take strong public stands in favor of the concept of elections, make use of the list of American electoral conditions, and move forward with the establishment of a National Assembly to reinforce his rule. The State Department called Diem's position "logically and morally correct," at least within its own channels of communication, while at the same time admitting that a subversion of the Geneva electoral provisions would anger the British, French and ICC representatives. It admitted that the military risks were quite real, and that world opinion, which Dulles courted, could turn against the United States. But it concluded that the adoption of Diem's stance toward the election would favor the West. American diplomats reasoned that China and the Soviet Union were exerting pressure on the Vietminh against resuming hostilities; that the Vietminh were militarily weak in the south; and that support for Diem could increase in Vietnam. Thus, the U.S. position not only flew in the face of democratic principle, world and Allied opinion, and basic reasoning, but it relied heavily not on concrete evidence but on hope. "... [H]is courageous resistance to Viet Minh blandishments and threats may well make him

increasingly popular and hence strong."⁵⁹ They were referring to a country in which even President Eisenhower admitted that most of the population backed the Vietminh. Diem, however, would later be elected president with 98 percent of the vote in a Stalin-style election which U.S. officials praised for its fairness.

The Americans were not totally ignorant of the lack of support for Diem in Vietnam. In fact, some U.S. officials based in Vietnam may have had a better handle on what the Vietnamese people wanted than Diem. If there was one overriding concern among the people, it was land reform. This was especially true in the south, where the bulk of the French colonial economic system was based. The French rice and rubber operations had taken over huge tracts of land in the South and transformed the area from an self-supporting agrarian society into a market-based export economy in which rice was sent out of the country and many Vietnamese would eventually starve. Diem, a Catholic who was educated in France and who wore the white suits made popular in colonial times, cared little about the land issue. He cared even less than the Americans, who at the same time were supporting the same kind of colonialist economic and social upheavals wrought by the United Fruit Co. in Central and South America. So the Americans' complaint about Diem's lack of sensibility regarding land reform was a clear indicator of why Diem lacked popular support. The Vietminh had been using the land issue for years to gain support in

⁵⁹ FRUS, 1955-1957, Vol. I, p. 453.

the country, and it was a major reason for their popularity as the United States tried to establish Diem's rule in 1955.

In June 1955, the U.S. land reform adviser to Diem, Wolf Ladejinsky, complained to Ambassador Reinhardt that Diem was not sufficiently concerned about the matter, and that Diem's lack of sympathy for the landless peasants in the south was spilling over to the fledgling government. There was, Ladejinsky said, a "political and administrative vacuum in the countryside." Diem's support structure was weak, he said. "... [T]he real difficulty with the administrators is not their lack of formal public administration training, but rather the lassitude, disinterestedness and seeming failure to sense or comprehend the critical transition period Vietnam is passing through." He went on to talk about a province chief assigned to an important area in the south as being anti-Diem. Ladejinsky suggested to Diem that his government try to establish a better relationship with the farmers to show them that he appreciated their fundamental needs, i.e., land. "But now, as in the past," Ladejinsky reported, "the President pleaded extreme pre-occupation with urgent matters."⁶⁰ This early attempt at winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese was not followed through. The United States government, which was beginning to realize that no alternative to Diem was readily available, was more and more dependent on him and could not pressure him, even if it wanted to.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 457-458. For an analysis of Diem's handling of the land reform issue, see Gabriel Kolko, Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States and the Modern Historical Experience (New York, N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp. 92-96.

Diem's "urgent matters" concerned security - specifically some uprisings by several sects, which Diem suppressed.

With the scheduled consultations now less than a month away, the United States and Diem were no closer to resolving their public relations problem than when the Geneva talks ended a year earlier. Instead of going through with the consultations, as the U.S. officials had hoped, Diem was adamant about rejecting them. Pressure from outside the Washington-Saigon axis was beginning to build. The British and French wanted to hold to Geneva, and the press was beginning to show some interest in the issue. On June 28, 1955, Dulles uttered what may have been the first outright lies from Washington about Vietnam. At a news conference, Dulles told reporters that the balking over the election was the result of concerns over the conditions and not because Diem and the United States were afraid they would lose. "... There is no serious risk that the Communists would win," Dulles said. "... [W]e are not afraid at all of elections."⁶¹

On July 5, Ambassador Reinhardt was shown a draft declaration by Diem stating his position on the consultations. Diem intended to read the statement to the Vietnamese via the radio. According to Reinhardt, four-fifths of the statement consisted of reasons Diem was not bound by the Geneva agreements, plus a statement that his government believed in unification and elections as long as they were free. Reinhardt thought the declaration too

⁶¹ Porter, Vietnam, p. 705.

negative, that it would "make a poor impression abroad." He suggested that Diem also state that he planned to hold elections for a representative assembly in the South. Neither the British nor the French were happy with the statement, either. The French, according to Reinhardt, were worried about losing face.⁶² Diem, according to Reinhardt, seemed to be in no hurry to resolve his political problems.

Young, for one, was becoming concerned about the situation in Vietnam. It was becoming a crisis, he told Walter Robertson, assistant secretary of state for Far Eastern Affairs. "The question of the Vietnamese elections is beginning to boil over," he wrote. "The Viet Minh is threatening retaliation. Diem is defiant, and with much reason. ... If the Vietnamese Government has not responded in any way to some form of consultations beginning on or after July 20, I think you should be prepared for a serious diplomatic problem."⁶³ Young feared a power play by the Soviet Union at an upcoming summit meeting. Specifically, he was afraid the Soviets would push to reconvene the Geneva principals to bring Diem and the Vietminh together to arrange the election. He also feared that the Soviets would bring up U.S. involvement in Cambodia and Laos. "If the Russians press for some action on the Vietnamese elections question," Young wrote, "it may be difficult for the French and the British to resist."⁶⁴ Young then provided a succinct summary of the American involvement in Vietnam at that point: "Meanwhile there

⁶² FRUS, 1955-1957, Vol. I, p. 476.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 477.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

is nothing but drift, indecision and confusion on our side," he wrote Robertson. "The Vietnamese are completely negative and may create an impasse. The British are worried and want something done. The Viet Minh and the Vietnamese will not talk to each other. It is a messy situation."⁶⁵

Young was worried about the public relations involved. The Communists were now making adherence to Geneva part of their party line. Ho was about to embark on a trip to Moscow and Beijing. Diem would not come out of it looking very good. Young urged that American officials continue to bolster Diem "to offset the world press" Ho would get from his trip. Faced with this impending "crisis," Dulles responded on July 6 in two ways: by sending the Saigon embassy his position on the cost of military assistance for the calendar year 1956, and by sending Diem a letter congratulating him on his first year in office. "... It is indeed gratifying that the people and Government of Free Viet-Nam have made such strides in consolidating their independence and in advancing the national reconstruction of the country," Dulles wrote. "All those from the North and the South who seek true freedom for the individual deserve the tribute of free men everywhere. ..."⁶⁶

If Diem sought freedom for his people, it was a curious sort of freedom - one lacking in self-determination. With the scheduled consultations only a week away, Diem apparently was more worried about military concerns. Diem wanted military sovereignty, Reinhardt told the State Department, and that meant transferring

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 480-481.

the High Command from the French, who still held it, to the Vietnamese. The French presence in Vietnam was a continuous source of political gain for the Vietminh, who based their long fight for independence upon self-determination and the expulsion of the French colonialists. Now Diem wanted military sovereignty in the South, but it was not because he shared the Vietminh desires, as did 80 percent of the country. Diem wanted control, but he also wanted the French to keep their air force and navy in Vietnam. Diem knew that he could not maintain power without military assistance. But he was hopelessly preoccupied with short-term security concerns. Instead of eliminating the source of his unpopularity - his dependence on the Americans and the French - he chose to increase his dependence to build a shield around himself, all the while increasing his unpopularity. (Later, after the election deadline passed, he began to terrorize suspected Vietminh sympathizers, helping to give birth to the National Liberation Front and then open warfare.) In July 1955, with political entanglements unresolved, Diem and his U.S. supporters were already using military solutions to deal with nonmilitary problems. Early in July, protesters in Saigon demonstrated in favor of holding the election. They were arrested immediately. Two weeks later, *The New York Times* called Diem a "dedicated democrat of scrupulous honesty."⁶⁷

If Dulles was in fact unafraid of the election, he did not show it. On July 15, he told the Saigon embassy that the United States would simply avoid discussing Indochina with the Soviets at the

⁶⁷ *The New York Times*, July 17, 1955, Section IV, p. 2.

summit. If the Soviets propose a five-power conference on Indochina, or a reconvening of the Geneva participants, the United States would oppose it, Dulles said. If the Soviets press the issue, he said, the United States would take the position that any discussions would have to be between the Vietnamese. Dulles asked Reinhardt to ask Diem to issue his declaration on the consultations before July 18. It would help in "heading [the] Russians off," Dulles said.⁶⁸ Diem, in fact, had revised his draft declaration, and was prepared to go on the air with it the next day, July 16. In it, Diem stated his commitment to reunification, then used the Americans' weapon: He wanted elections, but only if they were free. Then he took it one step further. Not only would the North have the burden of proving that the elections would be free, but the Vietminh would have to renounce terrorism and totalitarianism.

On July 19, Pham Van Dong said the North Vietnamese were ready to hold the consultations, and asked that they begin. No immediate response came from Diem. The July 20 deadline came and went quietly, but the issue remained. For the French, it was more of a problem than ever. They had signed the Geneva agreements and were committed to bringing about the election, but the power was with Diem and the United States, neither of whom signed the document or intended to carry it out. On July 21, French Prime Minister Edgar Faure met with President Eisenhower, Dulles and Lieutenant Colonel Vernon Walters in Geneva. Diem was "difficult," Faure complained. He said Diem should at least pretend

⁶⁸ FRUS, 1955-1957, Vol. I, p. 486.

that he was going through with the election, even if he had no intention of doing so. Eisenhower commiserated with Faure but shrugged it off. Diem was difficult, he told Faure, but he could not eliminate him because no one else was available who personified the Vietnamese' popular aspirations. If Diem was eliminated, Eisenhower said, Communism would triumph. Faure thanked Eisenhower for helicopters he sent for use in North Africa, then asked that the United States push Diem toward communicating with the Vietminh about the election. Dulles said the Americans had already tried to press Diem to be more positive about the election, without result. Faure then repeated something Anthony Eden had told him: Diem was against the Geneva agreements, but if there had not been any Geneva agreements, there would not be any Diem. Dulles said Diem was not always logical.⁶⁹

The United States tried to buy as much time as possible. U.S. officials told Diem that he should send some sort of reply to the North so he would not appear to be subverting the Geneva agreements. The United States was still worried about Vietminh retaliation on the one hand and world opinion on the other. It would be increasingly difficult for the West to appear to be a supporter of Third World independence if Western nations were thought to be guilty of blocking the democratic process in Vietnam. At the same time, Diem's hold over South Vietnam was still shaky, and Dulles tried to bolster him as much as possible. Dulles told Reinhardt to tell Diem that the United States was still behind him

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 492-493.

regarding the election. With a brief burst of overconfidence, Dulles reasoned that no Communists have ever won a "genuinely" free election, and that Diem should not seem fearful of being the first to lose to them. It was crucial that Diem establish "authority" in Vietnam before any elections were held.⁷⁰

By July 25, the Vietminh had not yet renewed hostilities, and the Americans were feeling more upbeat about the election situation. The British and the French were beginning to come around to the U.S. attitude toward the election. Some U.S. officials now felt that no direct communication with the Vietminh was necessary. Reinhardt, in the meantime, was pushing for a formula for election negotiations between the North and the South outside of the Geneva provisions. It can be reasonably presumed that such a formula would make it easier for the United States to control any election conditions to the extent that the North would not find them acceptable. An intelligence report sent to Dulles on July 27 further helped to allay any residual fears about an imminent Vietminh offensive. The report said the Vietminh would probably not take any action for at least a year for fear of Western retaliation and Communist Bloc "general considerations."⁷¹ If the intelligence report was true, the United States would have a solid year in which to work on postponing the election itself, which was scheduled for July 1956. Now that the United States had the support of the British and French, who had signed Geneva, the task seemed less daunting, at least in terms of public relations. The main concern now was

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 495.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 498.

preventing a Vietminh offensive so that Diem could consolidate his power. The situation was "a matter of tactics," Young quoted Faure as saying, "so as not to provoke the other side." Young said the operation would be "extremely delicate."⁷²

The improving political circumstances, however, gave the United States more leeway to prop up Diem militarily. The United States, nine days after the consultations were bypassed, recommended that Diem's forces be set at 150,000 men by 1956. The troops were needed because of the potential for Vietminh aggression and for putting down uprisings in South Vietnam. Diem was still dealing with sporadic uprisings by two of Vietnam's political sects, the Hoa Hao and the Binh Xuyen. The slowing down of demobilization set by Geneva was the beginning of a 20-year attempt by the United States to create a South Vietnamese army. It was more than just a lack of regard for the Geneva agreements, which were aimed at demilitarizing Vietnam. The focus on military matters made the election and hence reunification next to impossible. The stronger Diem became, the more remote the chances of an election. The more firepower he had to eliminate opposition, the less democratic support he needed to maintain power. As long as Diem had soldiers, and as long as he had powerful external support, he did not need popular support. And since Diem was no democrat, he had no intention of gaining it in a "genuinely free" manner. For the next several years, as he tightened his grip on

⁷² Ibid., pp. 501-502.

power in South Vietnam, his methods became more and more violent.

During the weeks after July 20, 1955, U.S. tactics shifted. Dulles was still concerned about giving the Vietminh a reply to their request for consultations, but the political crisis had turned out to be a false alarm, thanks to a turnaround on the part of the French and British and the Soviets' cooperation in not pressing the election. On Aug. 3, Dulles told Reinhardt that he still wanted a reply sent to Hanoi, but it did not need to be rushed. "[O]ur object is [to] prolong [the] consultations process as long as possible," he said in a telegram. He told Reinhardt not to press the issue too strongly with Diem. The reply to Hanoi was of "secondary importance in comparison [with] other imminent questions where heavy U.S. pressure may be required," Dulles said.⁷³ The electoral process in Vietnam had been of primary importance only when it had to be sidestepped. The military process was now the primary focus. The U.S. military was thinking 11 months ahead now, to July 1956, when the election was to take place. The U.S. command in Indochina wanted Washington to rush its authorization for an increase in Vietnamese troop strength. U.S. commanders operated on the assumption that there would be no electoral victory for the Vietminh in 1956, and therefore they expected Communist aggression. "Whenever conditions indicated that Jul[y] [19]56 will not see a Viet Minh victory, the para-military forces will probably be heavily augmented in preparation for extensive guerrilla

⁷³ Ibid., p. 505.

activity, and a clandestine terrorist campaign will be initiated," the Pacific commander in chief was advised.⁷⁴ Popular support for Diem, the report continued, was largely dependent upon the size and capability of the Vietnamese army. At this point, there were no U.S. troops in South Vietnam, at least not officially, but the United States was already well on its way toward militarizing what the Geneva agreements stipulated should be a political process. The Indochina command's pitch for more troops was an example of how the military distorted the facts to gain more strength. The chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Indochina told the Secretary of Defense that the troop strength needed to be increased because "to fail to do so invites Viet Minh aggression and fails to gain full value of U.S. support to Vietnam." He was more emotional with the Pacific command, however:

It is my seriously considered view that Free Vietnam is at the critical point in its fight for freedom. The foundation has been laid for a strong government and society which offers opportunity for developing the loyalty of its citizens to the point where partisan warfare or resistance against the internal as well as external invader will be accepted as every man's duty and obligation. The Vietnamese people are ripe for an active change away from the Viet Minh and toward the Free Vietnamese government. A position of military strength is basic to the attitude necessary for popular support of the Diem govt. ⁷⁵

Not a word of this was true. But it was good enough for the Pacific commander in chief. He told the Pentagon that the MAAG

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 508.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 510.

chief, Lieutenant General John "Iron Mike" O'Daniel, "perhaps more than any other individual has a keen understanding and immense appreciation of the situation in Indochina to include an intimate knowledge of Vietnam will and ability to succeed."⁷⁶ Apparently, concern for public opinion was not totally lost at this point, because Dulles rejected a simultaneous request for an increase in U.S. personnel assigned to Vietnam. The Geneva agreements set a ceiling of 342, and Dulles wanted to stick to it to avoid accusations of sabotaging the agreements. "Some flexibility may later evolve," Dulles said, "but at this time it appears desirable to pursue a policy which can accommodate the spirit of the Geneva Settlement."⁷⁷

It was a curious decision, given the fact that Dulles did not care about the spirit of the Geneva agreements. Raising the number of U.S. military personnel in Vietnam by a small amount would not have affected public opinion to any significant degree. Some believe the United States already had more than the 342 allowed. If that was true, Dulles possibly thought adding more would force the North's hand. It was more likely that Dulles had no loophole to exploit, since the number of foreign troops allowed in Vietnam was one of the few specifics the agreements mandated. It is even more likely, given the fact that Lieutenant Colonel Edward Lansdale was already in Vietnam setting up a covert operation, that more military advisers were already in Vietnam masquerading as civilians. Beyond mere speculation, however, it is safe to say that Dulles, in 1955 at least, wanted Diem, not the United States, to

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 511.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 514.

shoulder the military burden. However, creating a South Vietnamese army violated the spirit of Geneva just as much as increasing U.S. troop strength. So his deference to Geneva in rejecting the request was disingenuous.

Diem's problems remained, however. He was still fighting sectarian revolts and he was afraid of Communist subversion in the South. The embassy in Saigon, together with a team of academics from Michigan State University (and, presumably, Lansdale, Diem's close adviser, whose name is conspicuously absent from declassified U.S. documents), began to prepare a plan for an internal security force with which Diem could implement his power. The U.S. team in Saigon wanted to establish a single security force within the Ministry of the Interior. It would be a national organization comprising three major subdivisions:

- The National Police, totaling 25,000 men. They would provide law enforcement in all areas of South Vietnam, excluding the four major municipalities. Included among their duties would be counter-intelligence, countering subversive activities and forming a "nationwide police communications net."

- "Semi-autonomous" municipal police forces, totaling from 4,000 to 6,000 men. They would perform the same duties in the four major cities.

- A Vietnamese Bureau of Investigation of 4,000 men. They would act as the equivalent of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, Customs Service, CIA, and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

The plan would cost an additional \$2.5 million for fiscal year 1956, including an increase in the number of "advisers" stationed in Vietnam. Also included was \$606,000 to buy riot guns, revolvers, tear gas, ammunition, etc., beyond what was available through surplus sources. This request was granted on October 10.

The fact that a police network was needed, and the scope of the system itself, would be unremarkable under other circumstances. In Vietnam in 1955, however, it amounted to the construction of a police state in which the means of terror and repression took precedence over the establishment of the democratic process. South Vietnam, at that point, was operating in a political vacuum. Geneva had created what Hannah Arendt, discussing revolution in general, called "the space where freedom can appear." The North and the South were supposed to be regrouping, with freedom of movement between the two sides, while plans were supposed to be made for an election that would reunify the country. After that, governmental institutions were to be formed by the duly elected officials. Although it was not put in these terms, it was supposed to be a bottom-up democratic process, emanating from the people of Vietnam, a reward for their 25-year struggle against the French to overthrow colonial repression. The United States, however, was stepping into this void and setting up its own client government. And since it was an unpopular government, it needed to be a police state. It was a second line of militarization beyond the establishment of armed forces loyal to Diem, one which allowed him to put down insurrections from within as well as from without. It was why the United States was already

planning military and security needs into 1957, beyond the point the election was scheduled to be held.

The perceived need for this police state was based more upon fear than upon hard analysis. Ambassador Reinhardt told Dulles on August 31 that only the Vietminh themselves knew how strong they were in the South. They were operating "covertly and unobtrusively," leaving the actual sabotage and terrorism to the "disgruntled Nationalist elements," Reinhardt said. Diem's people often cited the perceived Communist strength in the South as the chief factor precluding National Assembly elections for the South alone. The extent to which the Vietminh would play a role in Southern elections was an unknown and cause for anxiety. At the same time, however, Diem and his supporters downplayed Communist strength to encourage the Americans and themselves, Reinhardt said. All of Diem's opponents were lumped together as "lackeys of Colonialists, Communists and Feudalists." In any event, Reinhardt admitted that Diem's forces were not able to break up the Vietminh cadres in the South.⁷⁸ Because of the Vietminh strength and the hard loyalty they enjoyed, informants were relatively scarce, and the quality of information was often suspect. As a result, any group that criticized Diem was considered a Vietminh front. Lumped together were the Buddhists, agricultural associations and pacifists. All had legitimate cause for opposing Diem. Yet, even U.S. officials, who were aware of the distortions within the agrarian system, lumped protesting farmers in with everyone else. Reinhardt

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 530-531.

blamed all of them for giving the Vietminh "appropriate channels for applying pressure" and demanding consultations and elections. It was yet another opportunity for the United States and Diem to turn Geneva on its head. Those crying for free elections were now obviously Communists, since the Communists were the ones applying pressure for the consultations. And since they were Communists, they were not in favor of freedom. Therefore, the elections were no longer a means to be free. They were a means toward Communist enslavement. It was an effective syllogism for the American effort to block the election while professing support for democracy.

Meanwhile, the U.S. shifted further toward a military solution. In early September 1955, the Defense Department asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to produce a strategy for warfare against the Vietminh. The report included the possibility of taking over North Vietnam, with nuclear weapons if needed. If North Vietnam attacked, the Joint Chiefs said, the United States would have to launch a naval and air attack and send in ground troops. They estimated it would take less than a year to repulse a Vietminh attack - longer, "should employment of atomic weapons not be authorized."⁷⁹ It was obvious that the Joint Chiefs thought atom bombs were the way to take care of the Vietminh threat. "... [N]o prohibitions should be imposed on the use of atomic weapons, or on other military operations, to the extent of precluding effective military reaction as the situation develops," they suggested. "The

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 537.

Joint Chiefs of Staff consider that if atomic weapons were not used, greater forces than the U.S. would be justified in providing would probably be needed."⁸⁰ If the election were actually held, they suggested, military maneuvers in the region just beforehand could be a psychological weapon.

The thought of attacking North Vietnam did not erase the public relations problem haunting the United States. Diem, U.S. officials claimed, was gaining in popularity and becoming even more independent-minded. This made it more difficult for the Americans to maintain the facade it had strained to erect: that the West wanted free elections. No one in the State Department believed that the elections would take place, but avoiding the consultations prevented it from implementing the high-stakes game it was playing. If there were no consultations, then the United States could not demand the kind of electoral conditions that would make Ho storm from the bargaining table. On September 20, Pham Van Dong complained to the Geneva co-chairmen, Anthony Eden of Great Britain and V.M. Molotov of the Soviet Union, about the delay in implementing the electoral consultations. The State Department, presumably Dulles himself, wanted the Saigon embassy to estimate how far the United States could press Diem into talking to the Vietminh indirectly. Diem would not make any commitment to the election during these talks but it would at least constitute a response to the Vietminh. The Americans' jealously guarded prestige was at stake within the confines of world opinion, and

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 539-540.

Diem was holding it hostage. The United States wanted to push for just enough communication with the Vietminh to appease them and the Geneva principals without angering Diem or his supporters. At the same time, Diem could not be allowed to anger the North enough to precipitate renewed warfare. It almost seemed as if Diem had the power to decide whether the United States would have to drop atomic bombs on the North. With no acceptable alternative to Diem, the United States seemed more and more dependent on him. The Saigon embassy suggested that Diem call for National Assembly elections in South Vietnam as a prerequisite for all-Vietnam elections. That would buy more time and also solidify Diem's political hold. But U.S. officials would have to be careful in dealing with Diem. They could not press too hard. "Although our ability [to] exert pressure is apparently great because of [the] government's dependency on U.S. support," the embassy told the State Department, "in actual fact, if we wish our efforts to be effective we can do little more than use ardent persuasion, basing our arguments exclusively on Vietnam's self-interest."⁸¹

Diem was planning that and much more. He told the Americans on September 28 that he planned to hold two referenda - one on whether Bao Dai should be deposed as the head of state, the second on a draft constitution - before holding National Assembly elections. Ambassador Reinhardt did not like the plan. He

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 542. The premise Dulles used was that Diem could not speak for the Vietnamese people without an electoral mandate. Therefore, he could not agree to holding elections, since his people had not yet expressed their views. He did not mention, however, that the United States was empowering Diem militarily and set him up as the South's leader without a democratic mandate, or that free speech was not high on Diem's priority list.

did not want a referendum on the constitution or on Bao Dai. He thought the assembly should take care of those issues. Diem, however, was afraid that a constitution drafted by the assembly would undercut his power. He wanted a strong-president government. Despite his concerns, Reinhardt said the plan would improve Diem's situation and could be the most democracy possible in South Vietnam. Besides, Diem seemed determined, and it was unlikely that the United States could change his mind without exerting significant pressure, something U.S. officials felt they could not do. The best they could do was to make it clear to Diem that U.S. support was riding on his commitment to hold the National Assembly elections.

Kenneth Young, the director of the Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs, disagreed with Reinhardt. He thought the assembly elections could backfire. "Democracies in newly independent Asian countries are unpredictable things," he said, "and first elections like first experiences in anything are utterly unpredictable." His reasoning was ironic: Truly free, secret elections could result in Communist gains. It was too risky. " ... [P]remature or *excessive* popular representation might submerge the still very frail structure we have been able to help Diem put together ..." ⁸²

Young was the first to come out and say that the United States could go ahead with its policy with the assumption that the 1956 election would not be held. He then accurately predicted the situation in Vietnam in the then near future:

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 550-551. Emphasis added.

Barring major hostilities, the South will remain under a non-Communist regime for some time, despite great difficulties in the South owing largely to the administrative weaknesses of the Diem government, the unknown capabilities of the Viet Minh and mounting economic deficiencies. ... I do not see any immediate prospects for an acceptable political unification. Judging only by such indications as the passing of July 20 without major incident, the rather leisurely pace which all the Communist leaders have so far followed regarding the consultation issue, and the hints from the Viet Minh on zonal 'autonomy,' one can now speculate that Communist diplomacy will not put on unbearable pressure regarding this issue of unification by Geneva, although it may be heavy. ... We got over the July 20 hurdle surprisingly well. ... ⁸³

Young suggested that U.S. officials now take a longer view of their role in Vietnam. Establishing a government in the South could take years, and evidently Ho was not in a position to push for the Geneva electoral provisions. Young had read a study of government in Southeast Asia by Harvard professor Rupert Emerson, who said no one studying governments in the region should do so with a "fixed preconception that they should conform to established Western models."⁸⁴ Young saw this as ammunition for allowing a strong central government in South Vietnam, one that could solidify power without Western-style democratic processes.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 552.

⁸⁴ Ibid. The quote is from Rupert Emerson, Representative Government in Southeast Asia (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), pp. 16, 192.

Now that the actual 1956 election was swept from the table - at least among U.S. officials - the only problems remaining were maintaining the pretense toward democracy, propping up Diem and being ready militarily in case the Vietminh attacked. The first and third problems were not really problems for the United States; there was plenty of ordnance and plenty of propaganda tools such as the aforementioned. But bolstering Diem, despite the influx of money, arms and advice, continued to be a problem. Dulles wanted Diem to go ahead with the National Assembly elections as a way of solidifying political support - as long, of course, as it did not backfire. Making sure Diem was strong took precedence over any "representative and constitutional processes," Dulles told Reinhardt.⁸⁵ The underlying message was: Make sure Diem and his followers win.

The problem was that Diem did not have the support, even in South Vietnam, something Reinhardt readily admitted. He also did not know how strong the anti-Diem groups were, since Diem smothered expressions of opposition. In fact, it was illegal for Diem's opponents to speak freely. Even with that, Reinhardt said it was "highly doubtful" that Diem supporters would constitute a majority in the assembly if the elections were completely free. He would do better, Reinhardt said, if the elections were controlled. Despite the drawbacks, Reinhardt said Diem "can be counted on ... to see to it that [the] Assembly if and when [it is] created contains [a] comfortable government majority."⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 559.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 563.

On October 23, Vietnamese in the South went to the polls to decide on who their leader should be. They were given a choice between Diem and Bao Dai, the playboy emperor who was a puppet of the French and still held a figurehead position in Vietnam. The results of the referendum: Diem, 98.2 percent; Bao Dai, 1.1 percent; invalid votes, .7 percent. Reinhardt said the balloting was done in a "democratic fashion." In fact, it was rigged, with the expert help of Lansdale. Diem officials counted the ballots, unsupervised. Some districts reported more votes for Diem than there were actual voters.⁸⁷

The referendum results were strong leverage for Diem against both his opponents and the United States. Armed with a mandate, real or imagined, Diem pressed forward with his demand for more military ordnance from the United States. Without better internal security, he reasoned, the assembly elections would be impossible. This cat-and-mouse game between Diem and the United States would continue until Diem's overthrow in 1963. A similar game devoted to the all-Vietnam elections, however, had just about played itself out. By the end of 1955, seven months before the election was to be held, it was a dead issue, for all intents and purposes. Hanoi still complained about the delay, as did Moscow and Beijing, but the United States and Diem had no intention of going through with them, and Hanoi could not force the issue. Young's analysis proved prescient. Others in the State Department began talking about long-term plans for Vietnam. Diem got himself

⁸⁷ Kahin, Intervention, p. 95.

a pliant National Assembly. Neither the consultations nor the all-Vietnam elections was ever held. There was no conference to decide the issue, no public declaration condemning the failure to hold the election. It was a political faceoff that melted away without face-to-face confrontation.

In February 1956, Dulles sent Eisenhower a memorandum stating that the election "should be deferred beyond the July date." Dulles was considering the establishment of a new International Control Commission to ensure "the necessary safeguards" for free elections. Meanwhile, he told Eisenhower, U.S. policy in Vietnam had three prongs: bolster Diem, weaken the North through "political and psychological warfare," and develop "some new arrangement which would permit gradual termination of the old Geneva Accords."⁸⁸

The new arrangement appeared as a gift dumped into the laps of Diem and Dulles. Just as Diem could not have refused to go through with the elections without U.S. backing, Ho could not force the issue without Soviet and/or Chinese backing. Diem got his backing, but Ho did not. From July 1954 to December 1955, he sent more than a dozen notes to Eden and Molotov urging that the election process begin. None of them was answered. The reason was that Moscow was not interested in committing itself to Hanoi's hard-won spoils. In the spring of 1956, Lord Reading, the British minister of state, held talks with Andrei Gromyko, the Soviet deputy foreign minister. Gromyko asked for a new conference in Geneva. The request was rejected, but the United States correctly

⁸⁸ U.S. State Department, "Memorandum for the President," February 10, 1956, No. 1982/478, DDRS.

concluded that Moscow would not take a risk on Vietnam, since the Soviets were looking for better relations with the West and its relationship with China was deteriorating. Gromyko did not press for the election, and he agreed to maintaining the status quo in Vietnam.⁸⁹

In January 1957, Khrushchev suggested the official division of Vietnam; China agreed. The Vietminh, who fought for nine years to expel the French colonialists, had been sold out by their allies. They were in no economic or military position to fight another war by themselves. The United States now had the freedom to build a nation in South Vietnam, and Diem had the freedom to consolidate his power. Between 1957 and 1959, the repression would grow so vicious that it would lead to the rise of the National Liberation Front and the eventual resumption of warfare.

⁸⁹ Kahin, Intervention, p. 91. He bases his information on State Department and CIA intelligence reports.

CONCLUSIONS

The idea of Communism triumphing by an electoral process was far worse for the future of American interests in Asia than if the Vietminh took up arms against the creation of the Saigon government and actually succeeded in winning on the battlefield.⁹⁰

The U.S. role in the subversion of the 1956 Vietnam election has been only superficially treated in the burgeoning collection of histories of the war. Although many of the documents that shed light on the issue were declassified in the 1980s, two major studies of the war have been published since and have failed to examine the election question closely. Kahin's Intervention, which is otherwise a comprehensive treatment of the U.S. role in the Vietnam War, devotes several pages to the election but fails to note the issue's significance, either as a historical turning point in itself or as a cogent example of the kind of thinking that led the United States to a deeper involvement in Vietnam.

Kolko's Anatomy of a War, which goes further in explaining North Vietnam's role, barely mentions the election at all. While surprising on its face, given the importance Ho attached to the elections, Kolko's study is largely favorable toward the North, and

⁹⁰ Gardner, Approaching Vietnam, p. 348.

Ho was not without error in his analysis of the circumstances leading up to 1956. He accepted a Geneva document that failed to spell out the precise conditions under which elections would be held. He expected the French, who waged a nine-year war to hold onto its colony, to guarantee the election. At the same time, he recognized that Vietnam needed a period of peace to rebuild itself, and the justifiable fear he had of U.S. intervention erased some of the leverage the Vietminh earned with their military victory. In Ho's defense, he could not have predicted that the Soviets and the Chinese would use Vietnam as a negotiating card during superpower negotiations. He was dependent upon China and the Soviet Union for support in bringing about the election but failed to recognize the Soviet desire for detente with the West, which led to the Soviet decision to let Ho and his election slide. For just as the election could not be subverted without U.S. approval, it could not be realized without Soviet and/or Chinese backing. What happened between 1954 and 1956 in Vietnam was a product of superpower needs and desires, not of a political boundary drawn across the 17th parallel in Vietnam.

Evidence of Vietnam's interpretation and analysis of the causes and effects of the war is difficult to find in the United States. That leaves a giant void in Americans' understanding of the war. Americans control the history of the Vietnam War through the far-reaching U.S. media and publishing industry, and they have been obsessed during the past quarter century with the questions, "Why did we get involved?" and "What went wrong?" The problem is that most historians have relegated the second question almost

exclusively to the Johnson Administration. The mistake, according to the accepted wisdom, is that American troops were sent in in increasing numbers, and that the United States had no political foundation upon which to fight a military war. While true in and of itself, it does not go back far enough. The mistake lay in the thinking and policy that gave birth to Johnson's escalation, and its genesis was in the 15 years after World War II, when the United States presided over an unfortunate marriage between a perceived need to control world events and a rabid anti-Communism.

One reason for the short shrift given the election issue by historians is the relative lack of information available. Assessing the meaning of the election subversion and placing it in a greater historical context involves an examination of available data that recognizes the information missing. The matter of the Vietnam election was a covert operation before Geneva even ended, and what was not said in the ensuing months was also significant. We know that in June 1954, before the Geneva agreements were even signed, a covert "psywar" program was set into motion by Lansdale in Vietnam. We know that it was directed by the Central Intelligence Agency, which was headed by Allen Dulles. Yet, for all the importance assigned to a victory in Vietnam over Communism, the Dulles brothers mentioned the issue only a handful of times between 1954 and 1956 during their countless telephone conversations. Most of those conversations about Vietnam were in a cryptic sort of spy language that is unintelligible to the lay reader. Many were censored. Other conversations involving John Foster Dulles mentioned Vietnam only in passing. For example, Dulles told

Walter Bedell Smith on July 19, 1954, two days before Geneva was signed, that they should not talk about the election issue over the telephone.

The press offered little or no help in shedding light on the matter for American citizens during the mid-1950s. Only one magazine article was devoted to the election in the entire decade. It was in *America*, a national Catholic periodical, and it was 100 percent behind Dulles and Diem. *The New York Times* offered occasional coverage, mostly concerning the electoral process. For the most part, it was not a critic of the Eisenhower administration's activity in Vietnam, and it did not treat the election issue as anything more than what the government said it was: a ruse by the Communists, and therefore unworthy of serious consideration.

And what of President Eisenhower? His name is conspicuously absent from nearly all of the pertinent documents thus far made available. Without deeper examination, this would seem to affirm Eisenhower's popular image as a laissez-faire president who delegated much of his authority to others. In fact, Eisenhower was a quite active but highly buffered actor on the world political stage, as demonstrated by the frequent intervention into foreign countries during the 1950s. Eisenhower knew what Dulles was doing and agreed with his goals, at the very least. Dulles, Eisenhower said, "has never made a serious pronouncement, agreement or proposal without complete and exhaustive consultations with me in advance, and, of course, my approval."⁹¹ Eisenhower has often been praised

⁹¹ Robert Griffith (ed.), Ike's Letters to a Friend: 1941 to 1958 (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1984), p. 134.

for showing restraint in Vietnam, unlike Johnson and Kennedy. He decided against sending troops, despite the hysteria of the 1950s, right after China, Korea and the development of the Soviet hydrogen bomb. Eisenhower, however, wanted to intervene in Vietnam but was not satisfied with the way the French and the British were handling the matter. Eisenhower would intervene only if there was a commitment, especially by the French, to Vietnamese independence, and only if the Franco-Vietnamese War were internationalized – i.e., transformed from a colonial war to an anti-Communist one. Without those two agreements, Eisenhower did not achieve "the conditions under which I felt the United States could properly intervene to protect its own interests."⁹²

So, Eisenhower was no less of an interventionist than Johnson. He was, however, more prudent. Maybe because of his military expertise, Eisenhower knew what was needed for intervention to work. "A proper political foundation for any military action was essential," he said.⁹³ " ... [A]ny nation that intervenes in a civil war can scarcely expect to win unless the side in whose favor it intervenes possesses a high morale based upon a war purpose or cause in which it believes."⁹⁴ Eisenhower was also quite forthright about American chances of winning a war in Vietnam. Even if Indochina were cleared of "Commies," he said, China was next door with "inexhaustible manpower."⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid., p. 11.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 135.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 125.

⁹⁵ Robert H. Ferrell (ed.), The Eisenhower Diaries (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 1981), p. 190.

As for the election itself, Eisenhower said next to nothing, despite having admitted earlier that Ho would win easily. Lansdale was not any more forthcoming. He was Diem's righthand man during the subversion process, and he states in his memoirs that he was sent to Vietnam to do whatever was necessary to head off a Communist election victory. Not suprisingly, Lansdale asserted that Diem would have won any election, and he blames the Geneva co-chairmen, Britain and the Soviet Union, for canceling the plebescite.⁹⁶

Vietnam, for Eisenhower, was not much more than a footnote in his personal history of his presidency, and by the time the election was supposed to be held, in July 1956, his government was already preoccupied with other matters, beginning with the Suez Canal crisis and continuing with other Cold War crises, such as the Hungarian revolution in 1956, Sputnik in 1957, conflicts over Quemoy and Matsu, two islands off mainland China, in 1958, and renewed tensions in Berlin in 1959. North Vietnam continued to press for consultations, to no avail. In the meantime, Diem's consolidation of power grew more violent. Thousands of political prisoners were executed because they were communists or worked with them.⁹⁷ By 1959, the Vietminh and the embryonic National Liberation Front began to answer Diem's violence with their own.

⁹⁶ Edward G. Lansdale, In the Midst of Wars (New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 344.

⁹⁷ Kolko, Anatomy of a War, p. 89.

The United States did not forget about the election, however. In 1965, as the United States was gearing up for military escalation in Vietnam, McGeorge Bundy asked for a report on the election question. According to the report,⁹⁸ the 1956 election was not held in Vietnam simply because the United States would lose. "The plain fact is that we and the South Vietnamese realized that we would lose any elections held in Viet-Nam. Elections, therefore, were not held," Salans told Bundy. While the passage of time afforded a more forthright admission than offered 10 years earlier, the conclusions were no different. Since the Communists would probably win in 1965, Salans concluded, the United States should still hold to its position that the proper conditions for elections did not exist. It is no surprise that the hindsight in Washington in 1965 was no better than the foresight there in 1955. If Johnson's men had ventured a more clearheaded second guess, they may have concluded that the United States could have pulled out of Vietnam in July 1955, after Diem had refused to proceed with the election consultations. Dulles could have blamed Diem for the undermining of democracy and thus saved American face.

Twelve days after the Salans report, however, General Maxwell Taylor, the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, reported that the Communists would lose a truly free election.⁹⁹ American officials in Saigon had not made much progress in realistic analysis.

⁹⁸ U.S. State Department, Memorandum from Carl F. Salans to McGeorge Bundy, March 6, 1965, p. 5, No. 1981/234C, DDRS.

⁹⁹ General Maxwell Taylor to the State Department, March 16, 1965, p. 1, No. 1981/237B, DDRS. Taylor based his assessment on information from a source whose name was deleted from the document - possibly Lansdale's or one of his associates.

By 1965, the apparent conflict in U.S. thinking and whether the Communists would win or lose was irrelevant. What was relevant was the fact that high-ranking U.S. officials were concerned at all about the election issue, ten years after it was timely and shortly before they would send in American troops on a large scale. It was but one example of the kind of thinking that drove U.S. policy toward Vietnam: inchoate, illusory, dogmatic. It was based upon the negation of a competing worldview, not on the establishment of positive solutions. That policy was deeply flawed in 1965, as the United States would learn much later, and it was just as flawed in 1955, and for the same reasons. America's role in the unheld Vietnamese election in 1956 was an early turning point in the U.S. struggle in Vietnam, a conflict whose existence had barely penetrated American consciousness. At the root of U.S. policy in the 1950s was a belief that the United States could be the primary architect of geopolitical structure without making a commitment to the means with which that structure was built. The result was that the United States could covertly subvert an internationally recognized election process while publicly making righteous pronouncements on democracy. The assumption was that Vietnam and other Third World nations would be the battlefield on which this Cold War struggle would be fought. U.S. officials, however, suffered from a deeply flawed perception of international relations and how the United States fit into those relationships. It was a perception based upon a self-perception: that the United States was inherently righteous, and that it was therefore responsible for spreading that righteousness throughout the

world.¹⁰⁰ An important part of this attitude was a sort of political evangelism, an American white man's burden. Since World War II, those who have held power in the United States - almost exclusively white, male, Christian and middle- to upper-class - have taken it upon themselves to proceed from this self-perception to repeated interventions into the affairs of other nations, almost exclusively to the detriment of democratic principle. As Gardner argues, the repeated disruption of liberal democracy throughout the world has served to perpetuate the Cold War. In the meantime, the United States, in its blind efforts to establish global influence, failed to recognize the changes occurring in the colonized nations, where empire was already doomed.

In the case of Vietnam during the 1950s the foreign policy that grew from that perception contained the following characteristics.

The need for prestige. This was one of the primary driving forces behind American foreign policy in the 1950s. The word "prestige" surfaces again and again in the speeches and writings of U.S. officials - in both the executive and legislative branches - as they discussed the stakes inherent in playing a significant role on the world political stage. This preternatural attention to world opinion was an outgrowth of the perceived struggle between Communism and capitalism, which most Americans saw as a clearcut dichotomy dividing the world into two camps. This made it impossible for U.S. diplomats to recognize the respect Ho Chi Minh

¹⁰⁰ Use of the past tense here is not preclusive. These assumptions have not changed, despite the American loss in Vietnam.

had for the American democratic tradition, to which he paid tribute in the Vietnamese declaration of independence from the French in 1945. It made it impossible for the United States to believe that Ho was not a puppet of Moscow or Beijing, which he was not. He was merely dependent upon outside help for the success of Vietnamese independence. But the American political evangelism was not so much a positive statement of principles as a negation of Communism, and that made it impossible for the United States to embrace a movement that was Communist in name but nationalist and, at the time, politically flexible. Among some Americans, it was not even enough for a foreign people to renounce Communism; it had to embrace the American political message. That led one American official who was helping to shape foreign policy to speak of "all-out neutralism." The choice is one or the other: Americanism or Communism. A small, disadvantaged nation, especially one the United States deemed crucial to the geopolitical balance, had no other choice. What the United States apparently failed to recognize is that such a policy automatically reduced its own alternatives:

The narrowing of choices. U.S. policy in the 1950s was one of negation and exclusion. Therefore, it was inherently narrow. If cultivating an approachable Ho Chi Minh was not one of the options U.S. officials allowed themselves, then trying to influence the course of events in foreign nations could be accomplished only by bribery, sabotage, aggression or military intervention. The United States, in that order, used all of these tactics in Vietnam, and failed at every one. Its exclusionary foreign policy, coupled with the need for international prestige, painted it into a corner. Going through with

the elections was never an option. Offering much-needed economic aid to the nation as a whole, even as a ploy to influence internal affairs, was never an option. U.S. policy had already been placed upon a very narrow track in 1950, when the United States assumed much of the cost of the French effort against the Vietnamese. Once that failed, the only path for American diplomatic logic was to declare that Vietnam was a high priority in the fight against Communism, and no Communist victory, especially an electoral one, would be tolerated. It was an intrinsically militaristic path, even though no troops would be sent for 10 years. Long before Tet, the United States had eliminated peaceful, political development as an alternative.

As a result of these narrowed choices, foreign policy was distinctly shortsighted. Longterm political goals were pushed aside as diplomats dealt with the constant brush fires Diem faced while trying to establish his power without the benefit of public backing. The United States diplomats, therefore, were preoccupied with tactics, not strategy. The available documents on their role in the unheld elections in Vietnam are more remarkable for what they do not reveal than for what they reveal. Throughout the period from the Geneva negotiations through the handwringing over the election, nothing is said at all about what would be in store for the United States and Diem three, four or five years down the road. U.S. diplomats were exclusively concerned with Diem's lack of security and with the next bump in the road. The most foresight shown was in military matters, specifically how much of an increase in troops would be needed. Bolstering Diem and putting off the election

indefinitely eclipsed any concern about what would happen next. It was a policy of tactics and no strategy.

The political catch-22. American officials realized that the 1956 election presented them with a situation in which they had to subvert the elections so "democracy" could win. It was the result of a need for political control taking priority over the ostensible export of democracy. In the American sense of political reality, the double-standard allows national independence without self-determination. All that is needed is a pro-American stand-in and an influx of American economic and military aid with which to establish this "independence."

Lack of coherent priorities. A major consequence of the American political evangelism was the belief that the United States not only should carry out everything it wanted, but *could* carry them out. The belief that nothing was beyond their grasp led U.S. officials to the conclusion that well-considered priorities were unnecessary. It did not matter which goal was at hand. All of them would be realized at some point, or all at once if need be. It was assumed that American power and influence should be global and therefore all-encompassing. Short of nuclear war, there was therefore no limit to the steps that would be taken to make the world safe for democracy, i.e., containing Communism. The result was that a small nation few people had heard of became a top priority within the United States government, even though it had little economic value, aside from being a market and source of raw materials for Japan, and its "loss" to Communism would not have upset the global balance of power. The arena in which this war of

prestige was fought did not matter. By extension, therefore, the indigenous conditions in Vietnam were irrelevant to the United States, except in some areas where they presented obstacles to the creation of puppet regimes. For the United States, no conditions existed except those that fed into its world dichotomy. American leaders therefore ignored what was left. The problem was that therein lay the root of their downfall. There was no analysis of the Vietnamese commitment to true independence and freedom, and an underestimation of their desire for self-determination. It was as if, once the Americans decided in 1954 that they would supplant the French in Vietnam, the history of Vietnam was supposed to begin once again. The Americans' belief in their omnipotence erased Dienbienphu from memory. It is one example of what Kahin calls a "short institutional memory," whereby succeeding administrations somehow forgot what went on previously. The belief in omnipotence made that possible. "I decided ... that having put our hand to the plow, we would not look back," Dean Acheson said of the Truman administration's decision to bankroll the French in Vietnam.¹⁰¹ Dulles did not look back, either, nor did Rusk, McNamara, Johnson or Lodge. U.S. officials were more concerned with carrying out their policy, not examining it. As Kolko notes: "The nature of the United States' system defined its goals and also its perceptions of reality, which in turn circumscribed its possible actions. Its consciousness was a function of needs and interests rather than of a desire to perceive facts by some objective, scientific

¹⁰¹ Kahin, Intervention, p. 33.

criterion, for the concern of the system was not truth but rather power, and this was partly the cause of its contradictions and failures."¹⁰²

Incoherent principles. Political evangelism paired with a perceived omnipotence obviated any sense of moral consistency. In 1950, when the United States committed itself to risking its prestige in Vietnam, it was moving to rearm Japan while seeking to isolate China. It was quite a change in attitude from five years before. At that time, President Roosevelt had supported struggles for independence, albeit weakly. In 1945, the Vietnamese nationalists had thrown out the Japanese, who had supplanted the French, who in turn collaborated to some extent with the Japanese occupation. Six years after the Allies forced the Germans from France, the United States was helping France reclaim its colony. This lack of moral principle is probably less surprising, however, than the lack of any protest in the West. If American officials assumed that Vietnam was French chattel in 1950, no loss of conviction is needed to assume in 1955 that the Vietnamese had no right to a fair election. The result was that, in the American black-and-white worldview, allowing the election represented a lack of democracy, while preventing the election made Vietnam "free."

Dependence upon dependents. The unheld elections of 1956 are often discussed within the context of assigning blame for their unofficial cancellation. No irrefutable evidence is available today that proves that the United States ordered Diem to refuse to

¹⁰² Kolko, Anatomy of a War, p. 153.

go along with the election process. It is a moot point, however, since none was needed. Just as Eastern Europe has distanced itself from Communism only because it is clear that the Soviet Union will no longer intervene, as it did in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in previous attempts, Diem was able to rebuff the Vietminh because he was allowed to by the nation that held power in South Vietnam: the United States. "I suppose that in the last analysis," Dulles said in 1954, "these things [the Geneva negotiations] come down to the question of who has the power to make a settlement."¹⁰³ If Eisenhower and Dulles had possessed the moral and political fortitude to force Diem to go through with the election, Diem would have had to do so, or else risk being replaced. Instead, Dulles encouraged Diem to subvert the Geneva agreements, using a crass public rhetoric defending freedom while cynically using the Vietnamese to further U.S. "interests" in the world by avoiding an election the Communists would win. They took this position because Diem was as important to them as they were to Diem. With so much already invested in Vietnam by the time Geneva concluded in 1954, the United States could not risk allowing a popular leader to emerge, especially since it was obvious that Ho would win any election. Because of the political stakes involved, the United States had to have a friendly man in power in Saigon. But since the Vietminh were so popular, finding a suitable candidate was difficult. The United States chose Diem, who lacked public support but espoused the correct political principles, i.e., a willingness to use

¹⁰³ U.S. Senate, Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Vol. VI, 1954, p. 163. Dulles made the comment on February 24, 1954.

American resources to fight Communism. The problem for the United States was that it had to fight this war on someone else's territory with foreign bodies, and therefore it was just as dependent on Diem as Diem was dependent on the United States for his power.

The relationship between Diem and the United States was different from that of a quisling to a colonial power, however. While Diem derived his power from the United States, the United States did not hold complete power over him. Because Diem was possibly the only person who was available for U.S. purposes - someone who was not forever tainted by collaborating with the French - the United States needed him in power, or else no one would be there to fight its war. Hence, the infusion of economic and military aid, the establishment of a police state, the toleration of political repression and then violence. Geneva, for all its flaws, had created Arendt's "space where freedom can appear," and into that space the United States placed the beginnings of a society based upon militarism, the only kind of society the United States could count on for support in its war.

Its dependence upon an untenable regime created circumstances that would make this war unwinnable for the United States. It consciously changed the "solution" in Vietnam from a political one to a military one. In the process, American political leaders confused institutional power for real power. They thought that Diem, if handed the tools of authority and allowed to construct his own institutions, would achieve genuine power, which only popular support, gauged by fair elections, can provide. For the

United States to achieve global influence, it needed not democracy but personalism, the kind of *caudillo* who could put down an insurrection or set up an airstrip that can accommodate B-52s with a week's notice. For what the United States wanted to accomplish in Vietnam in the 1950s, democracy was the last thing it needed.

More than anything else, the U.S. role in subverting the Vietnamese election provided an early illustration of the lengths to which the United States would go to influence events and, at the same time, the limits to its self-described political morality. Democracy has always been the ostensible aim of U.S. foreign policy, but control is the real goal. After World War II, the precepts of the Monroe Doctrine spilled into the Eastern hemisphere and the entire world its sphere of influence by unilateral determination. The driving force, publicly at least, was the moral struggle between good and evil, "democracy" and Communism. But while that global dichotomy was the language with which the United States fought its moral war, the reality was somewhat different. There was a double standard, and it depended upon the position and the people of the nation involved. For Great Britain, France, Italy and the rest of Western Europe, Socialist governments and strong Communist minorities were and have always been acceptable to the United States, as long as NATO existed and there was no perceived chance of defections to the other side. Outside of Western Europe, in the peripheries of Latin America, Africa and Asia, U.S. policy is less flexible. Communism is unacceptable; neutralism is suspect. Western democratic principles, so highly touted, are thrown out the

window. The unacceptable who win (Arbenz, Allende) or who could win (Ho) have the singular honor of being threatened by the world's moral standardbearer. Those who fall into the unacceptable category but are not subvertible, such as the Chinese after Mao, are embraced despite the murder of pro-democracy students.

U.S. postwar foreign policy is derived not from a foundation of moral principles but from power; in turn, morality has been a selective function of power. Right and wrong, as a result, depend upon maintaining that power. Choosing an arena in which to wage this moral battle is then irrelevant. With a policy based upon the negation of another power, no arena is off-limits, no matter how insignificant. If the Vietnamese are our children, as Kennedy reasoned, then they are our reflection and we are responsible for their behavior. Children who behave badly are punished. Supporting Ho Chi Minh was poor behavior in the eyes of those whose hindsight was nonexistent, and electing him was tantamount to marrying into the wrong family. Among equals or near-equals, that sort of behavior is tolerated. But when you are unfortunate enough to be born in a country beyond the American moral periphery, maintaining basic human rights, such as self-determination, is an ideal achieved at the end of a gun.

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