

Chapter 2

Communism, Guerrillas and Falling Dominoes

World War II had a profound effect on French Indochina. What the French called their civilizing mission ended in the summer of 1941 with the Japanese invasion and occupation of Vietnam. The French could not do anything to stop this incursion because World War II had started in Europe, and Germany had smashed through France's defenses in May, 1940 in its successful drive to destroy its European rival.

Many Vietnamese initially welcomed the Japanese invaders. They believed they would suffer less under domination by Asian rather than by European rulers. But others saw no reason for trading the Japanese wolf for the French tiger. Vietnamese nationalists, who had struggled for years against French occupation, redirected their energies to throw the Japanese out of Vietnam. Although well versed in the language and culture of France, their fiery leader, Ho Chi Minh, maintained a revolutionary and ideological commitment to rid his country of foreign rule. Minh had joined the French communist party in the 1920's, maintained a commitment to socialism, and fought valiantly against Japanese occupation of his country during World War II. He cooperated with American forces in Vietnam against the common enemy. During that period, Ho played down his communist leanings and emphasized his love for his native country. The organization he started (originally the Vietnam Independence League) was called the Vietminh. It was dedicated to (1) freeing all of Vietnam, north and south from foreign rule; and, (2) establishing a socialist government in Vietnam.

This chapter explains how the French tried to regain control of Vietnam after World War II and how the Vietnamese fought for their independence. Readers will be asked to decide if the U.S. should enter the war to help the French keep Vietnam and prevent the spread of communism.

The Second War for Vietnam

During the waning months of World War II, U.S. officials asked their British counterparts to occupy South Vietnam and disarm the Japanese. The British took over the southern part of Vietnam, including the city of Saigon. They disarmed the Japanese, put down a Vietnamese rebellion, and turned South Vietnam over to the French. But in the North, in August 1945, the Japanese surrendered to Vietminh troops under the command of Ho Chi Minh.

When the French made an agreement with Ho Chi Minh in March of 1946, it seemed that fighting over the control of Vietnam might be avoided. Under this agreement, France promised to leave Vietnam with the Vietminh in charge. But fighting broke out in November, 1946 before the last French troops left. This began what will be referred to in these pages as the second war for Indochina. It would last longer than World War II.

Fish, Oceans, and Guerrilla Tactics

In choosing to fight their war against superior French forces guerrilla style, Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh entourage followed the strategy developed by Mao Zedong, communist leader of China. This Chinese rebel leader had fought a guerrilla war for more than 20 years against his Nationalist opponents, and the war continued in neighboring China. Mao believed that the guerrilla is to the people, like a fish is

to the ocean. Just as the fish swims in the ocean — the guerrilla can only fight if the people in the country he wants to free support him. Mao outlined three distinctly different but interrelated stages of guerrilla warfare which were applied simultaneously:

1. Gain the support of the people — specifically, the peasants in the countryside. This stage required guerrillas to help the poor farmers with their problems. Guerrillas were instructed never to take anything from local people, not even a needle or thread; they were expected to take part in the harvest, feed the people, provide them with responsible jobs, give land to the landless peasants, and/or under certain conditions kill landlords and unpopular government officials. Guerrillas taught the people to read and write, and the more educated cadres taught the peasants Marxist ideology. The guerrilla army would do anything to gain the people's support, respect and trust, in order to eventually recruit them to fight in their organization.
2. Fight in small units using hit and run tactics. This strategy included blowing up the barracks where the enemy eats and sleeps, killing unpopular officials, attacking policemen, and ambushing enemy soldiers as they march to the defense of local installations. Guerrillas were taught to immobilize their opponents by interrupting travel by road or rail in order to drive the enemy out of the countryside and confine him to urban centers.
3. Obtain help from other Communist countries and use captured weapons to build a credible conventional military force. When the enemy is sufficiently weakened, mount full-scale attacks with conventional weapons. By this time, opposing forces will be so demoralized that the sight of a hostile army will cause them to throw away their weapons and run.

Ho Chi Minh modeled his strategy according to the stages of guerrilla warfare. The basic strength of his movement lay in support from the dispossessed who hated the French for what they had done to them. Many Vietnamese peasants, it should be remembered, lost their lands for non-payment of taxes and were forced to work for the French and rich Vietnamese. Educated Vietnamese had to take demeaning jobs at low pay working for the French. The Vietminh knew what the people wanted, nursed their grievances, and exploited the many mistakes made by colonial rulers.

U.S. Views of the Indochina Conflict

When the Vietnam War started in 1946 the U.S. opposed France's efforts to re-impose colonial rule. The U.S. had freed the Philippines in 1946 and England would leave India in 1947. It seemed that the age of western colonialism was over and the U.S., remembering its own Revolution, sided with the struggles of third world people that were seeking their independence.

However, after the French fought the Vietnamese for four years, the United States changed its mind and began to help France. Why did the U.S. change its mind?

The Domino Theory

In 1949, Mao Zedong and the Communist Party beat the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek. As a result, all of mainland China came under Communist rule, raising American fears that communism would soon spread throughout Asia. This fear was heightened in 1950 when communist North Korea attacked an unsuspecting non-communist South Korea. Soon U.S. soldiers were fighting North Korean as well as Chinese Communist troops in the hills of Korea. American leaders began to think differently about Ho Chi Minh, their collaborator against Japan during World War II. After all, Ho Chi Minh, like Mao Zedong and the North Korean leader, Kim Il Sung, was a Communist. Just as North Korea, with the

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support of the Soviet Union's, was trying to take South Korea, it seemed, Ho Chi Minh, with communist China's help, was seeking to control North Vietnam. After that, people believed, communism could spread to the rest of French Indochina, i.e. South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, followed by Thailand, Burma, and maybe even India, the Philippines and so on.

President Dwight Eisenhower (1953-61) compared the spread of communism to the fall of a row of dominoes, with the first knocking down the second all the way to the end of the line. This explanation, known as the 'domino theory', provided many Americans with a clear and understandable image that gave them a reason to support France against China and the Soviet backed forces in Southeast Asia.

Another Theory About Communism

Not all people believe that countries capitulate to communism like falling dominoes. Some believed that communism is like a disease that strikes the weak but not the strong. According to this theory, abject poverty, an extremely uneven distribution of wealth and the lack of hope, attracts people to Communism. If poor farmers can get land of their own, they won't be persuaded to become Communists. If their government treats them decently they would not want to live under a totalitarian regime. The most effective way to defeat Communism, according to this theory, would be to help the common people in foreign countries in their struggle against poverty, disease, and despair. To use Mao's metaphor, such aid would dry up the 'ocean' in which the guerrillas swam and halt the spread of communism.

The Ink Blot Plan and Dienbienphu

Even with a several billion dollars of American aid that began in 1950, the French kept losing their war against Ho's Vietminh. The French were able to hold the cities but kept losing in the countryside to an enemy employing stages one and two of guerrilla warfare.

Hard pressed to reverse his string of loses, French general Henri Navarre, came up with a new strategy to combat guerrilla warfare. It was called the 'inkblot plan.' French troops would set up land-air bases deep in Vietminh territory and expand outward from these bases like a drop of ink spreading over a blotter. In this way, the French hoped to deny the Vietminh control of the countryside.



Dienbeinphu in a futile

When the French applied their inkblot strategy deep in North Vietnam at a narrow valley called Dienbeinphu the Vietminh were ready to employ stage 3 of guerrilla warfare. After taking apart captured U.S. artillery that the Chinese communists had taken from the Nationalists in China, the Vietminh mounted the parts on bicycles and laboriously pushed them up steep mountain trails overlooking the French base. Every night they moved in a little closer to the French encampment. Every morning they were able to fire more artillery shells into the French base, gradually closing down the adjoining airport.

With no places to land their planes the French had to parachute supplies down to their base camp. As the Vietminh crept closer even the airdrops failed. The Vietminh and not the French were able to pick up the supplies that came in by parachute. When one French colonel was given a battlefield promotion, the champagne to help him celebrate as well as his general's insignia landed among the Vietminh.

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By the Spring of 1954 the situation faced by the French was becoming more desperate every day. Unless they received direct American military support, the French feared, it would only be a matter of weeks before they would have to surrender 13,000 soldiers or lose them in an uneven battle. Following such a devastating defeat on the heels of eight fruitless years of war in Southeast Asia France would be forced to abandon all of Indochina. Rather than face a humiliating defeat in the hands of communist forces the French made a dramatic request for more American aid.

When the French asked the United States for more help, America's implacable foe of communism, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, thought it would be a good idea. Vice-President Richard Nixon agreed with the Secretary. Admiral Radford, the top U.S. military commander, thought 60 B-29's stationed in the Philippines could break the siege at Dienbienphu. General Matthew Ridgeway, who had commanded U.S. forces in Korea, disagreed with his boss. He did not think the war could be won from the air and predicted it would take 7 American divisions to help the French win in Vietnam – 12 if the Chinese entered the war. The final decision of course, was not Dulles's, Nixon's, or Radford's, but President Eisenhower's.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Explain the three stages of guerrilla warfare, and explain the domino theory, the 'sick man' theory, and the inkblot strategy.
2. Describe the battle of Dienbeinphu.
3. Do you think the U.S. should enter the war in Vietnam to help France prevent the spread of communism before the French would be forced to surrender at Dienbeinphu? Why or why not? Your answer should consider Ho Chi Minh's politics, the price of American involvement, and the threat to the U.S. if Ho Chi Minh succeeds.