

AIR FORCE



VIETNAM FIFTIETH COMMEMORATION

THE U.S. AIR FORCE IN

SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE VIETNAM WAR

A NARRATIVE
CHRONOLOGY

VOLUME I:
THE EARLY YEARS
THROUGH 1959

KENNETH H. WILLIAMS

AIR
FORCE
*History
and
Museums*
PROGRAM

COVER

USAF airmen from the 483d Troop Carrier Wing repair a C-119 at Cat Bi airfield near Haiphong, Vietnam, May 1954. The aircraft, which was among those on loan to the French, had been damaged while delivering supplies to the besieged garrison at Dien Bien Phu, which fell on May 7. The USAF had hundreds of mechanics in Vietnam in 1953–54 servicing planes for the French. This photograph is a detail of the full image that appears on page 124. *USAF*.



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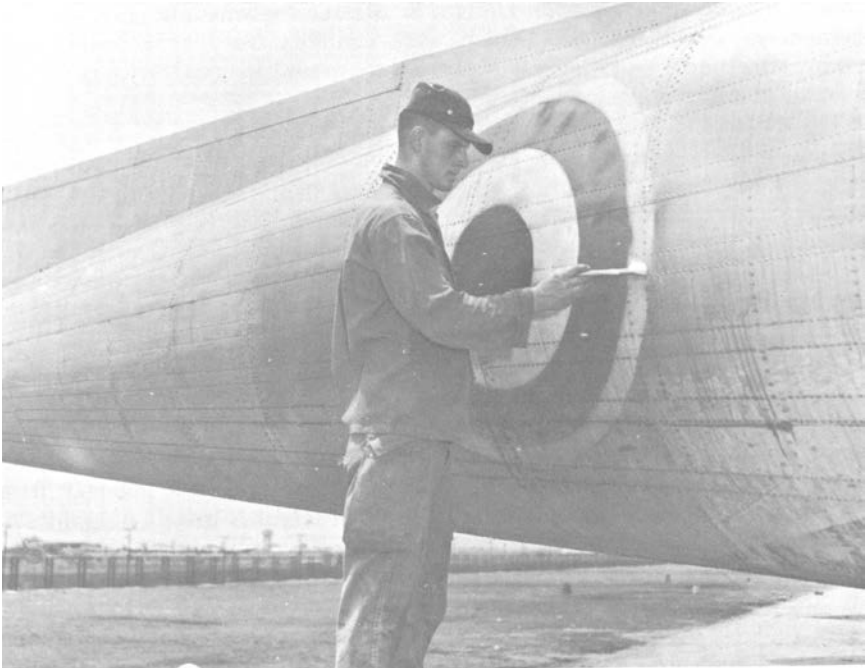
USAF C-119s taking off from Cat Bi airfield near Haiphong, Vietnam, in the spring of 1954. The United States had loaned these aircraft to the French, and they bore French markings. USAF mechanics maintained the planes, which French pilots flew, as did civilian American pilots from CIA-owned Civil Air Transport. *USAF.*

INTRODUCTION

Thunder from U.S. aircraft first rolled over Hanoi in 1942, two decades before most Americans date U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. Japanese activities in Vietnam remained bombing targets for the rest of World War II. Just after the conclusion of the conflict, in September 1945, U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF) P-38s buzzed aloft as Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence. USAAF planes had flown aid to Ho and his group of Viet Minh guerrillas and also carried French authorities who were intent on reestablishing France's colonial claim on Indochina.

The story of how the United States became entangled in Southeast Asia is a long and complicated one, and the U.S. Air Force (USAF) was a part of the equation at every step. The USAAF/USAF was flying in the region from 1942 through the collapse of the U.S.-supported government in Saigon in 1975. This chronology seeks to document, and to honor the service and sacrifice of, U.S. airmen for the full span of U.S. involvement. It ranges beyond strictly Air Force topics to provide a framework of context for why U.S. service members deployed to the region. Much of the context is not as far removed from the USAF as it might first appear, as any time senior leaders discussed potential U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia throughout the 1950s, nearly all scenarios prominently featured air assets of the USAF and/or carrier-based U.S. Navy (USN) aircraft.

Although full-scale fighting broke out between the French and the indigenous, communist-affiliated Viet Minh by the end of 1946, the United States did not begin its more extensive engagement in the region until 1950, after China had fallen to the communists under the leadership of Mao Zedong. The USAF delivered the first military aid to the French in Vietnam in June 1950 during the same week hostilities erupted on the Korean Peninsula. Over the subsequent four years, the United States loaned France what became nearly its entire fleet of aircraft in Vietnam. By 1953, USAF mechanics were deploying to Vietnam to service these planes, in numbers that grew to nearly 500 airmen by the time Dien Bien Phu fell in May 1954. USAF officers and enlisted airmen served in-country through the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) from the



A USAF technician paints the French air force insignia on a USAF C-119 in preparation for delivery of the aircraft on loan to the French in early 1954. USAF.

time of its establishment in 1950, as did air attachés assigned to the U.S. embassy in Saigon.

One USAF officer who was ostensibly the assistant air attaché in the mid-1950s became one of the most significant Americans to serve in Vietnam during the decade. Col. Edward G. Lansdale was there on assignment with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), although he continued to wear the uniform of the USAF. In addition to his clandestine activities, which have been the subject of much comment and speculation, Lansdale became the most trusted U.S. advisor to Ngo Dinh Diem, the new prime minister of fledgling South Vietnam as of July 1954. Lansdale stood by Diem in the early months of 1955 as multiple issues threatened the viability of his government and many U.S. officials, in both Saigon and Washington, called for Diem to be replaced.

In 1957, the USAF took over training the Republic of Vietnam Air Force (VNAF), which the French had established in 1950 but never fully equipped or trained. The VNAF remained a small subset of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), and the U.S. Army-dominated leadership of the MAAG saw little role for the VNAF as it prepared the ARVN in almost exclusively conventional-force strategy and tactics. A nascent communist insurgency in South Vietnam, however, portended a much different kind

of conflict. By that time, the USAF was also flying covert operations in Laos, which was receiving more U.S. attention because of the rise of the communist Pathet Lao there.

As the 1950s ended, U.S. attention had drifted from Southeast Asia to more pressing issues in Europe and the Middle East, but growing insurgencies in Vietnam and Laos would soon reclaim the focus. Decisions in this earlier period had planted the seeds for the expansive conflict in the 1960s, and for growing U.S. involvement. The story of U.S. engagement in the region in the 1940s and 1950s outlined in this book is essential to understanding U.S. escalation in the years that followed. The USAF was flying during every point of that time.

* * *

This study significantly expands the story of the USAF in Southeast Asia during the period covered and includes many details not found in previous books. It is also one of the few works that places the evolution of U.S. and French military involvement within the context of international and U.S. political affairs. The book draws heavily on documents and interviews in the Air Force archives, held by the Air Force Historical Research Agency, many of which have been recently declassified. It has also benefitted from the work of several scholars over the last couple of decades in Vietnamese, French, Chinese, and Russian archives that has greatly enlarged the international context for developments in Southeast Asia.

This book is a product of the Air Force Historical Support Division, under the direction of Dr. Richard Wolf, and owes much to the input of the staff. The depth of documentation is due in large part to the aid and research instincts of Ms. Yvonne Kinkaid, and to her extensive knowledge of Air Force research materials. Ms. Patricia Engel's systematic declassification efforts made a wider array of sources available for use in an unclassified study, while Ms. Terry Kiss tracked and retrieved inter-library books and articles with great alacrity. Dr. Priscilla Jones, Dr. Jean Mansavage, Mr. David Byrd, and Dr. John Smith, the now-retired senior historian, reviewed drafts of this work and provided feedback and encouragement, while Mr. Randy Richardson, Dr. Christopher Koontz, and Dr. Robert Oliver helped verify various details along the way.



Spector, Advice and Support.

World War to Revolution 1940–1945

As noted in the introduction, the U.S. Army Air Forces (USAAF)/U.S. Air Force (USAF) was involved in Southeast Asia from 1942 onward. This chapter briefly documents USAAF activities in the region during World War II, with particular focus on the later months of the conflict when the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) became more directly involved with Ho Chi Minh. The U.S. military in the region was well aware of Ho by this time, as his organization, the Viet Minh, had been helping Americans locate and rescue downed airmen for almost a year. Maj. Gen. Claire L. Chennault met with Ho and arranged one of these operations. USAAF C-47s dropped arms and ammunition to Ho's jungle encampment in July 1945, as well as OSS operatives who helped train the Viet Minh militia. The USAAF also inserted French officers in Vietnam in August 1945 who were intent on reestablishing colonial control of the region.

As World War II ended, Ho and the Viet Minh took advantage of the power vacuum between the stand-down of the Japanese occupying forces in mid-August 1945 and Chinese/British transitional occupation in September to launch what became known as the August Revolution. French troops began arriving weeks later, with France's leaders convinced that its prewar empire had to be reconstituted for France to remain a world power. The United States found itself caught between these competing factions from the beginning of the struggle.

1940–MID-1945

Indochina, which encompassed the areas that became known as Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, was under French colonial rule from the latter half of the nineteenth century until World War II. In 1940 as part of Japan's ongoing war with China, the Japanese sought to sever Chinese supply lines that connected Hanoi and its port, Haiphong, to Kunming, China. The

1940–1945



Fourteenth Air Force bombing the Gia Lam rail center in Hanoi during World War II. Bombing of Japanese supply targets in and around Hanoi and Haiphong began in August 1942. USAF.

Japanese also wanted to threaten China from the south. French colonialists in Indochina, by that time under charge of the rump Vichy government, offered little resistance and reached a series of accords with the Japanese between July and September 1940 in which the French capitulated to Japanese control. The Japanese attacked a few French outposts in September 1940, brief engagements that settled the issue of French cooperation. The French agreed to continue administering the Indochina provinces and to help the Japanese block Chinese supply routes. Japan did not move occupation forces of any substance into the region until 1941.¹

1. Peter M. Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution: China and the Vietnamese August Revolution of 1945* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2001), 27–30, 46; Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012), 23–43, 724 n. 16; Arthur J. Dommen, *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 47–71; Ellen J. Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1954), 14–35; Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1970), 18–22; Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941–1960* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983), 17–19; Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy* (1961, 1964; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 22–25. During the period the French considered resisting the Japanese occupation, they sought U.S. aircraft to use in the defense. Questions about U.S. aircraft began in June 1940 and continued through September. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1940* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1955), 4:92, 137 (hereafter *FRUS* [date]).

Kunming, approximately 150 miles north of the border of Vietnam, was an important location for American airmen throughout World War II, initially as the base of the 1st American Volunteer Group, the fabled “Flying Tigers.” Tenth Air Force of the USAAF and subsequently Fourteenth Air Force flew from Kunming airfield, which was a major hub for Air Transport Command for its flights over “The Hump” to and from India. USAAF aircraft flying primarily out of Kunming and Chungking (now Chongqing) bombed Japanese supply targets along the Indochina coast, beginning with strikes around Haiphong and Hanoi in August 1942. In October 1943, the USAAF laid mines in Haiphong harbor. By 1944, Fourteenth Air Force and carrier-based USN bombers had dramatically limited Japanese shipping along the northern Indochina coast. Tenth Air Force, flying B–29s from Calcutta, India, bombed Saigon for the first time in January and February 1945, followed by B–24 strikes in April by Thirteenth Air Force from Palawan in the Philippines and a B–24 mission by Fifth Air Force in June.²

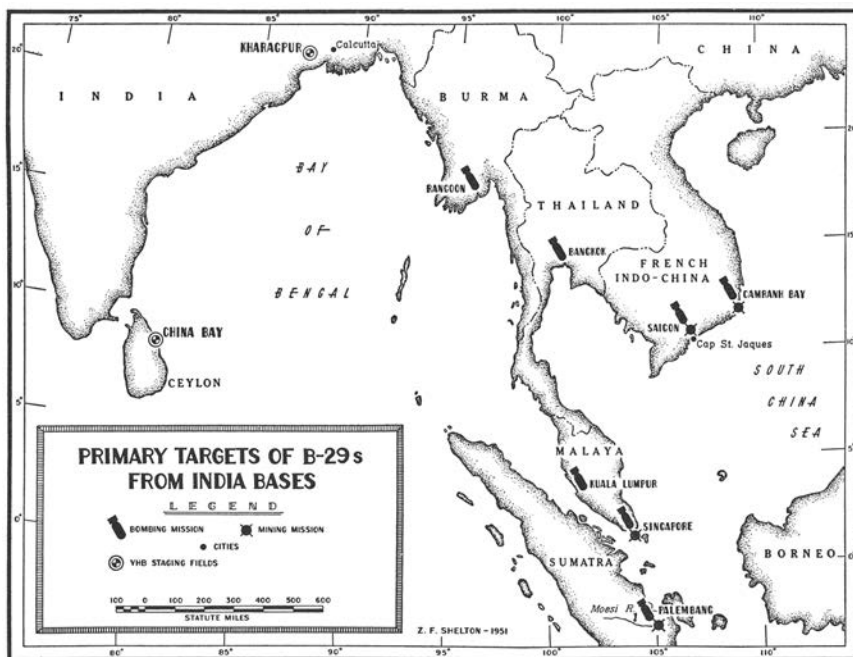
With its proximity to Indochina, Kunming was also a key intelligence base for the Americans, Free French, Chinese, Soviets, and British. A contingent of the OSS, the U.S. Army (USA) predecessor to what evolved after the war into the civilian Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), was in Kunming and in 1944 had its first indirect contacts with the group that had become known as the Viet Minh.³

The Viet Minh—officially the League for the Independence of Vietnam—was a nationalist organization with communist roots that was committed to freeing Vietnam from colonial control. The group worked in opposition to the Japanese and to the vestiges of French rule. Early in the war, the Viet Minh operated from a base in southern China, moving into the

2. U.S. Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA), Maxwell Air Force Base, AL, microfilm collection, reel B0091, frame 746; reel A0548, frame 1468; reel B0227, frame 675; reel A7759, frame 1831; reel A0579, frames 822, 828; Wesley F. Craven and James L. Cate, *The Army Air Forces in World War II*. 7 vols. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1948–58), 4:423–24, 426, 429, 431, 519–20, 522–23, 525–26, 528, 530–32, 535, 538–39; 5:246, 259, 263, 491–92, 495–96, 499–503; Martha Byrd, *Chennault: Giving Wings to the Tiger* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 154, 213; Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh, and de Gaulle in a World at War* (London: Sage, 1991), 212. The U.S. Navy led an effort in October 1945 that removed five mines from Haiphong harbor. Edwin B. Hooper, Dean C. Allard, and Oscar P. Fitzgerald, *The United States Navy and the Vietnam Conflict*. Vol. 1: *The Setting of the Stage to 1959* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, 1976), 108–9 (hereafter *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*). These apparently were not all of the mines. David G. Marr, *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945–1946)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 286–87 (hereafter Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*).

3. Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 96–97; Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 196–99; Dixee R. Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh: Unexpected Allies in the War against Japan* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 144–53; Michael Charlton and Anthony Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why: The American Involvement in Vietnam* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 5; Chester L. Cooper, *In the Shadows of History: 50 Years Behind the Scenes of Cold War Diplomacy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005), 65.

1940–1945



Tenth Air Force targets in southern Southeast Asia during World War II.
Craven and Cate, Army Air Forces in World War II.

northern Vietnam region of Tonkin in 1943 and 1944, where it established a significant network. Its leader was known by late in the war as Ho Chi Minh (the best known of his pseudonyms), with its militia component under the guidance of Vo Nguyen Giap.⁴ By late 1944, the Viet Minh was aiding with the rescue of a few downed American airmen in Indochina through middle-man operatives in the region.⁵ Any direct U.S. interaction with the Viet Minh was a controversial issue in diplomatic circles, however, as the French already recognized Ho's group as a threat to their return to colonial power.⁶ Nevertheless, in early 1945, Ho became an OSS agent.⁷

As the Allies liberated France from German occupation from mid-1944 into 1945, the Japanese became concerned whether French cooperation

4. Tonnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 114–55, 207–10; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 76–82; Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 2–11. For the range of associated groups the term “Viet Minh” came to cover, see Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, xviii.

5. Archimedes L. A. Patti, *Why Viet Nam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 45, 56; Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*, 122–23; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 82–84; Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 73–75; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 111–12.

6. Patti, *Why Vietnam*, 45–55; R. Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 330–31.

7. Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*, 123; Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 282–83; Tonnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 238, 310. Carleton B. Swift Jr., who succeeded Archimedes Patti in Hanoi in October 1945, also confirmed in an undated interview with WGBH for *Vietnam: A Television History* that Ho was an OSS agent: http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_192BA69A0BD046C48872A2C4B62AAE24 (hereafter Swift interview).

would continue in Indochina. In a coup that began on March 9, 1945, the Japanese seized control from French authorities in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, also rolling up the Free French underground in the process.⁸ The USAAF intervened on behalf of fleeing French troops in Vietnam, but to what extent remains in question. In his memoir, Maj. Gen. Claire Chennault wrote that he was “forced officially to ignore their plight.” Records show, however, that he had fighters from the 51st Fighter Group and transports from the 27th Troop Carrier Squadron provide air cover and drops of arms, ammunition, medical supplies, and food, apparently under the guise of regular operations against Japanese targets. An OSS officer in Kunming observed that such support continued for about a week before the War Department ordered Chennault to stop the air drops but allowed him to continue bombing and strafing Japanese forces. Diplomatic correspondence indicated that Chennault’s Fourteenth Air Force had transports ready by March 19, and later that the USAAF flew “an appreciable number of missions” in support of the French from March 29 to April 13.⁹ During these operations, a USAAF DC-3 flying out of Kunming rescued seven downed U.S. naval aviators at Dien Bien Phu who had fled the Hanoi area with the French. The 27th Troop Carrier Squadron flew a drop mission to French troops as late as May 4.¹⁰

With the demise of the Free French underground, the only widely established opposition group left in Indochina was the Viet Minh. Beginning in March 1945, U.S. operatives more directly engaged the Viet Minh, with USAAF transports delivering OSS liaisons and ultimately small caches of arms. One of the OSS officers in Kunming who approved U.S.-Viet Minh interaction was D. Dean Rusk, the future U.S. secretary of state, who later wrote that “we made common cause with anyone who would help shoot at the Japanese.”¹¹ By the summer of 1945, Tenth Air

8. Tonnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 220–48; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 67–71; Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 75–83; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 119–26. The only French-run government to offer any resistance to the Japanese seizure of control was the one in Laos. Seth Jacobs, *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 30–31.

9. Claire D. Chennault, *Way of a Fighter* (New York: Putnam, 1949), 342 (1st quote); Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 25; Patti, *Why Vietnam*, 64–65; Smith, *OSS*, 326–27; *FRUS 1945*, 6:301, 306 (2d quote); Tonnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 245, 253 n. 57–59. Citing an unpublished diplomatic cable to the French, another source says that Fourteenth Air Force had flown thirty-five bombing and supply missions by March 30. Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 65. Spector, citing Chennault’s report, put the number at thirty-four, most of them categorized as regular missions, with about a quarter “in response to direct request by the French.” Spector, *Advice and Support*, 31–34 (quote, 34).

10. A. R. Wichtrich, *MIS-X Top Secret* (Raleigh, NC: Pentland Press, 1997), 68–71; 27th Troop Carrier Squadron, Squadron History, May 1945, AFHRA, reel A0972, frame 888.

11. Patti, *Why Vietnam*, 57–58, 124–27; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 39–40; Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 281–85; Tonnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 306, 309; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 154–58; Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 8–9; Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: Norton, 1990), 112–13, 421 (quote, 113).



The USAAF inserted an OSS team led by Maj. Allison K. Thomas (center, standing) near Tan Trao, Vietnam, on July 16, 1945. The small unit was to work with the leadership of the Viet Minh, including Ho Chi Minh (left of Thomas) and Vo Nguyen Giap (right of Thomas), to prepare a guerrilla force to harrass Japanese troops in the region. *Library of Congress.*

Force had formalized these missions as Operation Salad, which also included prisoner of war (POW) search and rescue, supply drops to various groups, and leaflet drops to encourage Japanese surrender. Fourteenth Air Force was flying similar missions into Indochina as well.¹²

Ho Chi Minh spent time in the Kunming area and on March 29, 1945, met with General Chennault. Ho requested and received an autographed picture from the general, which he later used to gain standing among other Vietnamese nationalist/communist leaders.¹³ Chennault sent Ho to meet with Maj. A. R. Wichtrich, head of the U.S. Air Ground Aid Section (AGAS) based in Kunming. Wichtrich's orders were to find and rescue downed airmen and POWs in the theater, but he had no reliable intelligence sources in Indochina after the arrests of the Free French operatives there. The Viet Minh became the new network. Ho arranged the building of a secret airstrip, camouflaged by brush when not in use, in northern Indochina into which the Americans made twice-daily flights from Kunming in L-5s. In return, the OSS increased its support for Viet Minh guerrilla activities

12. "Operation Salad." AFHRA, Army Air Forces, India-Burma Theater, reel A8212, beginning frame 213; Wichtrich, *MIS-X Top Secret*, 100–103.

13. Patti, *Why Vietnam*, 58, 134–35; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 156–57, 169; Cooper, *In the Shadows of History*, 67; Tonnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 337; Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 282–83; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 84–85; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 43; Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*, 236 n. 52.

against the Japanese. After Ho's meetings with the OSS, Chennault, and Wichtrich, the USAAF flew Ho to the Vietnam border.¹⁴

As the war progressed toward conclusion, top U.S. officers in Kunming found themselves confronted with a difficult geopolitical situation, as did the junior OSS officers who were to enter Indochina. The chaotic next chapter in Southeast Asia found the USAAF dropping aid and advisors to the Viet Minh while also inserting French officers to reestablish colonial control. Senior U.S. officials had deep and justifiable concerns about American support for either of these entities but had little clear guidance from the top, including the presidential level, about postwar goals and alliances in the region. The French were much clearer in their aims, as they saw the reestablishment of their prewar colonial empire as an essential element for France to remain a world power. Just as clearly, Ho and the Viet Minh saw an opportunity to assert indigenous control in Vietnam, something Ho believed the United States would support, based on the rhetoric of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who died in the middle of this time frame in April 1945.¹⁵

JULY–DECEMBER 1945

July 16: The USAAF inserted a six-person OSS team, code-named Deer, under command of Maj. Allison K. Thomas, that parachuted near Tan Trao to link with Viet Minh leaders. (This encampment was in the area northwest of Hanoi near what USAF pilots would later call “Thud Ridge.”) The unit was to prepare indigenous forces to fight the Japanese, as the OSS had done on numerous missions with various rebel groups in China. Once trained, the Viet Minh troops were to strike against Japanese rail connections and communications, and the OSS operatives were to indicate targets for USAAF bombers. The squad included Thomas and two American OSS enlisted men, a French lieutenant posing as a U.S. officer, and two Vietnamese who had served with the French. The Viet Minh immediately isolated the three non-Americans, who the French had insisted be a part of

14. Wichtrich, *MIS-X Top Secret*, 72–78; Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 310; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 157–58; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 66–67; Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 8.

15. Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 7, 16–18; Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 112, 422. For detailed discussions of U.S. policy debates on these issues and diplomatic interaction with the French, as well as the postwar aims of the French and the Viet Minh, see Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 1–144; Stein Tønnesson, “Franklin Roosevelt, Trusteeship, and Indochina: A Reassessment,” in *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and the Cold War Crisis*, ed. Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 56–73; George C. Herring, “The Truman Administration and the Restoration of French Sovereignty in Indochina,” *Diplomatic History* 1 (Spring 1977): 97–117; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 86–91, 102–7.

the mission, and Ho sent them off with an AGAS party destined for China. On July 29, a USAAF transport brought four more OSS troops. One of these men, who had worked as a nurse, treated the seriously ill Ho. The USAAF flew another drop mission to the Viet Minh base on August 10.¹⁶

According to Thomas, “There were only about a hundred Viet Minh troops there. They had very primitive weapons and no military skills to speak of.” Thomas thought their leader, Giap, was “an unremarkable young man.” The OSS operatives equipped and briefly trained this force and in August accompanied it on its first operations (*see Aug. 13–17*).¹⁷

July 24: At the Potsdam Conference, President Harry S. Truman and Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill agreed to the division of Indochina, for operational purposes, at the sixteenth parallel, with the British responsible for the southern sector (including Cambodia) and the Chinese for the northern one (including Laos). The split disappointed the theater commander in Kunming, Lt. Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer, USA, as it effectively removed the area below the sixteenth parallel from U.S. operational control (Wedemeyer functioned as chief of staff for Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek) and gave it to the British-led Southeast Asia Command of Adm. Louis Mountbatten, with whom Wedemeyer had repeatedly clashed. At the time the Allies made the decision, the prospective impact was on plans for invasion of Indochina. With Japan’s sudden capitulation in August, however, the division meant that different countries would be overseeing Indochina’s postwar transition, and dealings with the French and the Viet Minh, with what turned out to be no coordination between the British and the Chinese.¹⁸

Also on July 24, Tenth Air Force planes from the India-Burma Theater made the first landings, at night by bonfire light, in what was then hostile territory in Siam (Thailand) to extract POWs freed by the Thai resistance in conjunction with OSS operatives. This and subsequent missions, which mostly involved C-47s but also included a few B-24s and B-25s, were a part of Operation Salad. The aircraft often air-dropped supplies to the resistance before the planes landed to pick up prisoners. These sorties increased rapidly after August 29 when prisoners could be more freely removed from the camps and flights into Bangkok could land without opposition. By September 4, the USAAF had extracted 267 American

16. Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 188–215; Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 286–90, 364–68; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 127–29; Smith, *OSS*, 331–35; Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 313–14; William Broyles Jr., *Brothers in Arms: A Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 101–8; Swift interview.

17. Broyles, *Brothers in Arms*, 104 (quotes); Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 208–24; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 129.

18. Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 156–70, 173–78, 270–72, 306, 324–27; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 130–31, 453–54; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 51; Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 35–37, 47; Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 276–77; Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 80–81.



Adm. Louis Mountbatten of the British Royal Navy (right), commander of Southeast Asia Command, speaking with Brig. Gen. Kenneth B. Wolfe, USAAF, commander of 20th Bomber Command in India. USAF.

POWs and 1,404 British, Dutch, and Australian ones. Most of the flights originated in Rangoon (now Yangon), Burma.¹⁹

August 6: The USAAF B-29 *Enola Gay* dropped the first wartime-use atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan.²⁰

August 8: The Soviet Union declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria the following day.²¹

August 9: The USAAF B-29 *Bock's Car* dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki, Japan.²²

19. Press Release, Headquarters, Army Air Forces, India-Burma Theater, September 4, 1945, AFHRA, reel A8220, beginning frame 286.

20. Craven and Cate, *Army Air Forces in WWII*, 5:715–17, 721–25.

21. *Ibid.*, 5:730.

22. *Ibid.*, 5:719–25.



President Harry S. Truman inherited the complex tasks of ending the war and shaping the postwar world when Franklin D. Roosevelt died in April 1945. Ho Chi Minh looked to the United States to support what he presented as a nationalist movement in Vietnam, but Truman ultimately sided with the French. USAF.

August 13–17: Acting on news of prospects for an early end to the war, which the Viet Minh learned from the OSS Deer team, Ho sent word to delegates of the nationalist/communist underground to gather in Tan Trao as soon as possible. On the 13th, the group formed the National Insurrection Committee, and on the 16th, the first People's National Congress convened, with Ho as chairman. Ho used the photograph he had received from General Chennault to convince his colleagues that he had American backing, an argument bolstered by the presence of the OSS Deer team (see July 16). Major Thomas and his men accompanied Giap and his small group of guerrillas as they left Tan Trao on August 16 and moved toward Thai Nguyen. The Viet Minh captured the Japanese garrison there a week later.²³

23. Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 366–73; Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 354, 375–78; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 216–24; Broyles, *Brothers in Arms*, 101–8; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 134–36.

August 14: President Truman announced to the American public Japan's intention to surrender, which Emperor Hirohito had declared on August 15 at noon local time in Tokyo.²⁴

Had the Japanese not surrendered, General Wedemeyer and his staff had planned an invasion to drive the Japanese out of northern Vietnam. It was to be led by Chinese units but would have included significant support from the USAAF. The training and equipping of the indigenous Viet Minh force was part of the larger invasion plan.²⁵

August 18–21: The Japanese had installed Bao Dai, the thirteenth (and ultimately last) emperor of Vietnam in the Nguyen Dynasty, as head of a puppet government in March 1945 when they forced out the French administration. In this August time period, Bao Dai, who was based in Hue, sent personal messages to President Truman, British King George VI, Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek, and French leader Charles de Gaulle seeking official recognition of himself as head of an independent Vietnam. When he received no support, he began negotiating with the Viet Minh and abdicated in favor of Ho within the week, nominally becoming “supreme adviser” to the new government. The British inserted a French commando team on August 28 that aimed to contact Bao Dai about heading a French-controlled government, but the mission ended disastrously, with four killed and two others imprisoned until June 1946.²⁶

Despite his limited interest in governing and lack of abilities to actually do so, Bao Dai became a figure of fascination for Western officials, including those from the United States, as a potential alternative leader to Ho for a noncommunist, nominally independent Vietnamese state. U.S. representatives noted favorable impressions of him beginning in the fall of 1945, and in 1949, France turned to him to head the newly created State of Vietnam (*see Mar. 8, 1949*).²⁷

August 19: Following a large public demonstration in Hanoi by between 50,000 to 200,000 people, the Viet Minh began occupying public buildings and facilities and raising its flag across the city. The movement that came to be known as the August Revolution was fully underway, aided significantly by the political and military power vacuums in Vietnam at the

24. Craven and Cate, *Army Air Forces in WWII*, 5:731.

25. Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 306–9, 312–13.

26. Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 438–53; Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 282–83, 369, 372–73, 389–90; Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 45–46; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 168–70, 185–87, 394; Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 39, 76–77, 130–31; Stein Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946: How the War Began* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 114–15; Herring, “Truman Administration,” 109–10; Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture, *End of a War: Indochina, 1954* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 6.

27. Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 55–58; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 168–70, 185–87, 394; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 90–97; Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 114–15.

end of the war. Although the Vietnamese communist party at that time was small—perhaps 5,000 members at most—what the Viet Minh had going for it in the public’s eyes was a “strong claim as the voice of anti-Japanese and anti-French nationalism,” according to historian David L. Anderson. No other group had similar visibility, cachet, or organization.²⁸

August 22: The USAAF returned French colonial authorities to Vietnam. For months, the senior French intelligence official in Kunming, Maj. Jean Sainteny, had expressed grave concerns about the Viet Minh and its intentions. He saw his mission, which was only quasi-outlined with his superiors in Paris, as reestablishing French control over Indochina when Japan surrendered. His timetable accelerated when Japan capitulated in mid-August, much sooner than expected. Sainteny wanted to fly to Hanoi immediately, but General Wedemeyer initially forbade any travel to Indochina, particularly after a USAAF reconnaissance flight over Hanoi took anti-aircraft fire. Sainteny stewed for a week over this impediment and subsequent weather delays. He charged, both at the time and for years afterward, that the Americans were working to prevent French recolonization.²⁹

Because of massive flooding in Kunming, which extended across northern Vietnam as well, the USAAF C-47 that carried Sainteny to Indochina on August 22 flew out of an auxiliary field in Chanyi (Zhanyi), China. The full group consisted of thirteen OSS officers and enlisted men under Maj. Archimedes L. A. Patti and five French officers, including Sainteny. The OSS unit was one of several “Mercy” teams that deployed during this period across the China Theater. The aircraft found the Bach Mai airfield blocked, and four OSS troops parachuted at Gia Lam airfield to check the situation before they signaled for the plane to land. According to Patti, Sainteny expected the Frenchmen to be greeted as “liberators” and had insisted that they wear their uniforms. Japanese troops met the French and Americans at the airport and escorted them into the city. (The Japanese still held administrative authority in Vietnam until the Chinese could formally accept their surrender, which did not happen in Hanoi until September 28.) The prevalence of Viet Minh flags in Hanoi surprised all in the party. Sainteny installed his contingent at the old colonial palace, which Patti believed was a “serious mistake.” The Japanese confined the

28. Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 395–401, 473; Tonnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 362–63, 380–82, 394–96; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 185; David L. Anderson, *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953–1961* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 8 (quote).

29. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 45–50; Patti, *Why Vietnam*, 141–47; Smith, *OSS*, 348; Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 5–6, 11–12; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 227–28; Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 478–79. Marr believed that General Wedemeyer initially may have been acting on orders from Gen. Douglas MacArthur. Marr also recorded that Wedemeyer turned down a French request for a fleet of USAAF aircraft to fly their troops who had retreated from Indochina in March back into the country.

French officers to the palace grounds, ostensibly to protect them from the Viet Minh, but also because Sainteny had no papers showing that he had any authority. The Japanese allowed the Americans free movement.³⁰

That same night of August 22–23, unknown to the Americans but approved by Admiral Mountbatten, Royal Air Force B–24s paraded outside the Vietnamese regional capitals of Hanoi for the Tonkin region and Saigon for the Cochinchina region. The Viet Minh detained the Tonkin group, led by future French prime minister Pierre J. A. Messmer, for weeks, with one of the three dying in captivity. Messmer was carrying the papers that gave Sainteny official standing as a governmental representative, which remained undelivered. In Cochinchina, the Japanese briefly held the team headed by Jean M. A. Cédile, who remained in Saigon and seized governmental control a month later (*see Sept. 23*).³¹

In the same time frame, apparently about a week later, the French also inserted colonial authorities in Cambodia outside of Phnom Penh and in Laos near Luang Prabang. Both groups influenced the transitional governments largely in the manner in which they hoped. Some of the French troops who had fled the Japanese in March 1945 also moved back into Laos, as did Viet Minh operatives.³²

August 26: Vo Nguyen Giap led a formal welcoming contingent, including a small band and color guard, to greet Major Patti, who for a couple of weeks was the ranking U.S. officer in Indochina. Viet Minh officials took Patti to have lunch with Ho, who Patti had met in Kunming. Ho had secretly arrived in Hanoi a day or two earlier and did not want the French or Japanese to know of his whereabouts.³³

The OSS mission in Hanoi was controversial at the time, and it has remained so in historical reconsideration. It did have a USAAF-related component, as in addition to gathering intelligence, the OSS officers in both northern and southern Vietnam were to seek information on missing

30. Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 151–58, 190 (1st quote, 152; 2d quote, 158); Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 482–84; Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 369–70; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 227–32. Patti wore the insignia of a major in Hanoi but not been officially promoted. Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 632 n. 125. One of the OSS agents who parachuted at Gia Lam was Lucien Conein, who would become part of Col. Edward G. Lansdale's CIA team in the mid-1950s and later be the CIA liaison to the coup plotters against the South Vietnamese leadership in 1963. Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters: An Eyewitness Account of Lessons Not Learned* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 20.

31. Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 481–82; Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 367–69, 390; Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The U.S. in Vietnam, 1946–1966* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 7–8.

32. Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 481–82; Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 131; David P. Chandler, "The Kingdom of Kampuchea, March–October 1945: Japanese-Sponsored Independence in Cambodia in World War II," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 17 (March 1986): 80–93.

33. Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 196–203; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 237–39; Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 8; Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 391; Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 116.



Maj. Archimedes L. A. Patti (left) led the first OSS team sent to Vietnam at the end of World War II. He is shown in Hanoi meeting with a small delegation from the Viet Minh headed by Vo Nguyen Giap (center). The OSS mission and the relationship Patti established with Ho Chi Minh have remained controversial subjects. *U.S. Army.*

or captured Americans in Indochina, many of whom were downed airmen. Patti also served as the U.S. liaison to the Japanese forces in preparation for the formal surrender. Sainteny regularly complained through channels that Patti and his colleagues were hindering the return of French authority and were too closely aligned with the Viet Minh leadership. Many Vietnamese saw strong hints of U.S. endorsement of the Viet Minh through the OSS activities, both with Major Thomas's Deer team and in Patti's involvement in Hanoi. Patti professed neutrality and tried to convince both sides that he held no diplomatic sway. Nevertheless, Ho met regularly with Patti, trying to influence him and the few other Americans in Hanoi in the hope of gaining U.S. support. While Patti and other U.S. officers who met Ho were impressed with him, most echoed Patti's opinion that the Viet Minh's provincial administration was "not politically mature" and ignorant of basic governmental operation. Thomas's OSS Deer team reached Hanoi on September 9, increasing the headaches for Patti with indiscreet anti-French activities and comments. Brig. Gen. Philip E. Gallagher, USA, arrived in Hanoi on September 16 as senior advisor for the Chinese occupation force

and soon took a dim view of Patti and the OSS activities. Patti left for Kunming on October 1, replaced by Lt. Cmdr. Carleton B. Swift Jr., USN, who Gallagher removed before the end of October.³⁴

According to historian Mark Philip Bradley, “The genuine admiration U.S. observers expressed for Ho Chi Minh did rest in part on the appeal and force of his personality. Without doubt, Ho consciously used his meetings with Americans to distance himself from his international past and frame Viet Minh nationalism and the struggle for independence within what he perceived as the broader ideals of the United States.” The Americans’ willingness to accept Ho’s “professed embrace of U.S. ideals also reflected the limitations they continued to ascribe to indigenous political thought. Few Americans believed the Vietnamese held deep political convictions or that they grasped the principles underlying either socialist or democratic values.”³⁵

August 28: In accordance with the agreement reached at Potsdam (*see July 24*), the Chinese were to accept the Japanese surrender in the northern half of Vietnam and in Laos. On this date, the first Chinese occupation troops crossed the border into Indochina, to the concern of both the French and the Viet Minh. The Chinese force proceeded along two routes and, under orders from Chiang Kai-shek, destroyed all the fortifications they encountered along the China-Vietnam border as they entered. Most senior Chinese officials believed that the occupation duties—accepting the Japanese surrender and disarming and repatriating the Japanese troops—would be relatively simple.³⁶

On the same date, acting on a tip from the AGAS, Major Patti secured the release of a U.S. flight crewman from the Japanese POW compound at the Citadel in Hanoi. The American, who had been on an aircraft shot down in 1943, had posed as a Hungarian citizen in the French Foreign Legion to avoid detection among the French prisoners.³⁷

34. The fullest accounts of the OSS mission in Hanoi are in Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 151–374, and Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 231–64, 305, 312–20. See also Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*, 127, 134–45 (quote, 136); Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 286–89, 294–95; Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 122–24; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 56–59; Smith, *OSS*, 348–60; Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 12–16; Swift interview. The summary of this period in the study that became known as the *Pentagon Papers* concluded that “American OSS representatives were present in both Hanoi and Saigon and ostensibly supported the Viet Minh” but observed that the United States “took no official position.” *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945–1967* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), v. 1, book I, A-22 (hereafter *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*). For an extremely critical assessment, not only of the OSS activities but of the U.S. approach to the issues in Southeast Asia in general during and just after World War II, see the work of British historian Peter Dunn, *The First Vietnam War* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1985).

35. Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*, 138–39.

36. Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 216–19; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 241–42; Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution*, 55–60.

37. Patti, *Why Vietnam*, 177–78. It is unclear from Patti’s description whether the crewman was USAAF or USN.

1945

Over subsequent weeks, Patti and the U.S. officer who came to oversee humanitarian operations, Col. Stephen L. Nordlinger, USA, could not get the Japanese to free the 4,450 French servicemen held at the Citadel. The Japanese had serious apprehensions about what would happen if they released such numbers of French troops with the large Viet Minh presence in the city, concerns that the U.S. officers shared. The Chinese occupation leaders who arrived in mid-September had the same thoughts. With the help of the AGAS and the USAAF, Nordlinger and his twenty-two-man team provided a temporary hospital with 400 beds for the prisoners. The USAAF airlifted medical supplies and emergency food staples from Kunming for the prisoners and, at Ho's request, for some of the famished general population.³⁸

August 30: Tenth Air Force aircraft from the India-Burma Theater airlifted ninety-four U.S. personnel from Phetburi (Phetchaburi), Thailand. These men were survivors from the USS *Houston* (CA-30) and the Army's 2d Battalion, 131st Field Artillery. The U.S., Dutch, and British Commonwealth prisoners in this camp had been part of the forced labor that built the notorious Burma Railway, depicted in somewhat fictionalized form in the movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957).³⁹

August 31: General Wedemeyer wired senior officers under his command that there should be “no intimation that U.S. personnel are in French Indo-China for any mission other than a humanitarian one.” More than a million Indochinese had died during the war as a result of famine, flooding, and wartime deprivation. Japanese and Vichy French policies had exacerbated the problems, as had, unwittingly, U.S. and British bombing, which had destroyed the railroads and ships needed to move the southern-grown rice crops to the north. For the postwar transitional period, the U.S. planned to send no troops to Indochina except advisors to the Chinese occupation force. In part because of the privation and severe food shortages that would be exacerbated by uniformed personnel, the U.S. advised the Chinese to have a small occupation footprint, a suggestion the Chinese did not heed, as their force peaked at probably close to 150,000 (estimates varied widely).⁴⁰

38. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 58–59, 357–58; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 289; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 250–51, 378 n. 130; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 239–40, 301, 358; Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution*, 72–73.

39. Press Release, Headquarters, Army Air Forces, India-Burma Theater, September 4, 1945, AFHRA, reel A8220, beginning frame 286; Van Waterford, *Prisoners of the Japanese in World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994), 236–47.

40. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 51–52 (quote, 52); Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution*, 56–58; Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, 145–46; Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 292–96, 378–79; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 79–81; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 2, 13; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 254.

September 1: Advance elements of Project Embarkment, an OSS POW evacuation team, arrived in Saigon under command of 1st Lt. Emile R. Connasse, USA. The USAAF flight carrying the team originated in Rangoon and refueled in Bangkok, Thailand. At a municipal airport in Saigon, Japanese officers welcomed the U.S. airmen and served them tea while the Japanese refueled the aircraft for the return flight. The Americans reported that “Japanese soldiers were the only persons about the airfield and seemed disinterested. They were still armed.” The USAAF missions in support of Embarkment were Tenth Air Force flights as part of Operation Salad. In Saigon, the OSS team was surprised by the level of control Viet Minh-associated Vietnamese groups had already established.⁴¹

September 2: On the same date of the formal Japanese surrender in Tokyo, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence in Hanoi in front of a crowd estimated as large as 400,000 people. As Ho began his address, quoting roughly from the U.S. Declaration of Independence, a flight of USAAF P-38s, likely from the 449th Fighter Squadron, 51st Fighter Group, stationed at Mengtsz, China, dipped low to see what had attracted such a large gathering. Many in the crowd interpreted the coincidental maneuver as a flyover and therefore a formal U.S. endorsement of the new government. Ho had invited Major Patti to be on the platform with him, but Patti had declined, not wanting to imply U.S. support. He and several of his OSS colleagues did attend the event, however, for intelligence-gathering purposes. In his speech, Ho stated that the Viet Minh sought to unite in independence the three regions of Vietnam, but not all of Indochina. Giap also spoke and praised close ties with the United States.⁴²

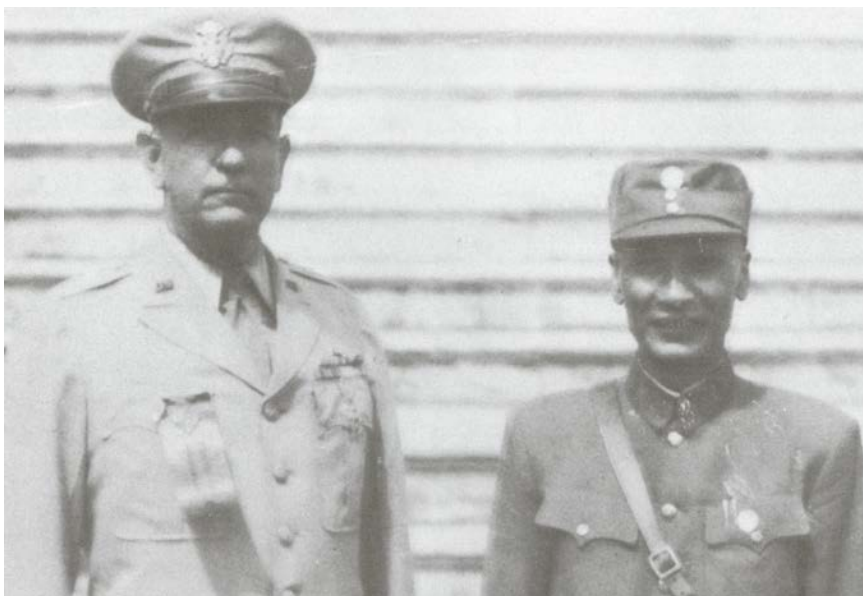
Also on September 2, a USAAF aircraft arrived in Hanoi with officers from the staff of Brig. Gen. Philip Gallagher, who would be the senior U.S. advisor for the Chinese occupation force. The advance team for Gen. Lu Han of China, also flown in on a USAAF C-47, landed in Hanoi on the same day.⁴³

September 4: Lt. Col. Albert Peter Dewey, USA, of the OSS and four other members of the Embarkment team arrived in Saigon from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) by way of refueling stops in Rangoon and Bangkok with

41. Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 269–73; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 66; “Operation Salad” (quote). The mission report stated that the aircraft landed at the “municipal airport”; Patti noted that it was “a Japanese airstrip not far from the main Saigon airport,” which presumably was Tan Son Nhut. Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 272.

42. Patti related the P-38 story in Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 13–14. See also Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 248–53; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 92–98; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 242–47. For crowd size, see Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 530 n. 239. The Ho and Giap speeches are translated in Gareth Porter, ed., *Vietnam: A History in Documents* (New York: Meridian, 1981), 28–32. For the political implications of Ho’s speech, see Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 421–22.

43. Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 260–61; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 266.



Brig. Gen. Philip E. Gallagher, USA (left), arrived in Hanoi on September 16 as senior advisor for the Chinese occupation force, which was led by Gen. Lu Han (right). Lu gave the French “damn little,” according to Gallagher. *U.S. Army.*

USAAF DC-3s to repatriate American POWs. Dewey cabled Kunming that evening that the British were giving low priority to American POWs and competing for airspace in removing their own men, prompting General Wedemeyer to send three more aircraft.⁴⁴

September 5: Seven USAAF DC-3s departed Saigon carrying 214 American POWs. The majority of these servicemen were from the Army’s 2d Battalion, 131st Field Artillery (120 men) and the USS *Houston* (86 men), along with three airmen from the 308th Bomber Group, three naval aviators from VPB-117, and two from VPB-25. More than 4,200 British, Dutch, and Australian troops from the same camps still awaited extraction.⁴⁵

Dewey and his team, augmented by three more OSS officers who arrived on this date, remained in the city, instructed to “represent American interests” and to search for aircrews that had disappeared in Indochina during the war. Unbeknownst to their British and French military colleagues who soon arrived, members of the OSS team met regularly with Viet Minh

44. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 66; Smith, *OSS*, 338; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 272, 560 n. 23. Whether the three planes General Wedemeyer sent were counted in the seven aircraft mentioned in other sources, or in addition to them, is unclear. Dewey wore the insignia of a lieutenant colonel in Saigon but had not been officially promoted. Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 382 n. 6.

45. Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 560 n. 24, 561 n. 25. Dunn, *First Vietnam War*, 214, recorded that there were eight U.S. aircraft.

officials to gather intelligence. They also sought information on whether the Japanese were arming and training the Viet Minh.⁴⁶

September 6: The advance party for the British occupation forces arrived at Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon. The main units, most of them Gurkha Indian regiments, started landing on 12th, with the British commander, Gen. Douglas D. Gracey, arriving on the 13th. Gracey evicted the Viet Minh's Southern Provisional Executive Committee from the colonial palace, where he established his headquarters. The occupation troops came in insufficient numbers, and the British continued to rely on Japanese soldiers to maintain order. Without orders from London, Gracey took it upon himself to restore French control to southern Vietnam. He declared martial law, freed and armed French prisoners, and supported Jean Cédile as he reestablished French authority (*see Sept. 23*). Lieutenant Colonel Dewey protested to both the British and the French as conditions rapidly deteriorated. Gracey, who had been wary of Dewey and the OSS activities since his arrival, declared Dewey *persona non grata* and ordered him out of Indochina. All of these events happened within two weeks after Gracey landed in Saigon, as did Dewey's murder as he waited to depart (*see Sept. 26*).⁴⁷

September 9: Chinese occupation troops began arriving in Hanoi. The Chinese force was under command of Gen. Lu Han, a Yunnan warlord with known animosity toward the French. He reached Hanoi on September 14. Lu established his headquarters at the colonial palace, from which his advance team had expelled Sainteny and his colleagues. The USAAF flew the U.S. advisory contingent, led by General Gallagher, to the city on September 16.⁴⁸

September 16: A USAAF C-47 flying out of Kunming paraded a nine-person OSS team, code-named Raven, which included an AGAS representative, near Vientiane, Laos. The aircraft had to land and evacuate a team member who broke his foot during the jump. The squad had not

46. Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 274–80; Smith, *OSS*, 338 (quote), 340–41; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 272, 560 n. 23.

47. Marr, *Vietnam 1945*, 541–42; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 291–92; Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 6–8; Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, 113–21; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 307–25; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 280–91; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 112–20. For an overview of the British occupation, see Nicholas Tarling, *Britain, Southeast Asia, and the Onset of the Cold War, 1945–1950* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 77–87. For the British official military history, see F. S. V. Donnison, *British Military Administration in the Far East, 1943–46* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1956), 401–11.

48. Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 266; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 59–60; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 213, 341; Hans Antlov and Stein Tennesson, *Imperial Policy and Southeast Asian Nationalism* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 153; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 263, 305–6; Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution*, 66–68.

been briefed about the complex political situation in the country. Its primary mission was to locate POWs, but it far exceeded those parameters and became intertwined in political jousting, clashing in particular with French officers and generally aiding groups sympathetic to the Viet Minh. The USAAF extracted the team from Udorn, Thailand, on October 7.⁴⁹

September 20: General Gallagher reported to the theater command that the Viet Minh “is definitely in the saddle.” Gallagher said he had told Ho “frankly that my job was not as a representative of the State Department nor was I interested in the political situation.” He added: “Confidentially, I wish the Annamites [Vietnamese] could be given their independence, but of course we have no voice in this matter.” As they had done with Patti, the French soon came to claim that Gallagher was working against them.⁵⁰

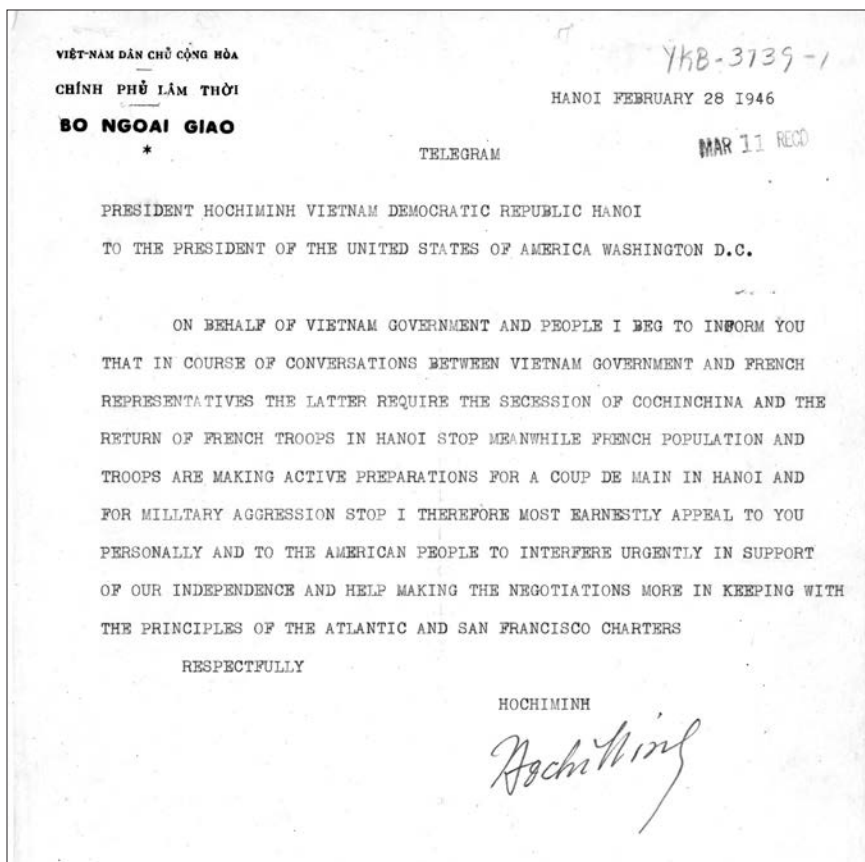
September 21: In a meeting with French representatives in Hanoi, Gen. Lu Han informed them that he would show no partiality to the French or to the Viet Minh. Lu told General Gallagher that he feared reprisals against ethnic Chinese in Indochina if he were seen as favoring the French. According to Gallagher, Lu gave the French “damn little.” The Chinese occupation leadership found Ho’s provisional government generally in control and largely deferred to it, increasing French frustration and leaving the Viet Minh latitude to consolidate the gains of the August Revolution (*see Aug. 19*). Ho’s men had made deals with minor parties in Vietnam that had association with Chiang Kai-shek’s government to help encourage the cooperation of the occupiers. Lu also authorized the sale of what one historian has called “a substantial stock of arms”—including U.S.-supplied weapons—to the Viet Minh. After October, Lu spent more time in Kunming than he did in Hanoi. The scholar who has examined the Chinese occupation most closely found that Chiang Kai-shek’s government “did not place much importance” on the mission in Indochina and “was not inclined to provide appropriate guidance” concerning Chinese mediation of relations between the French and the Viet Minh.⁵¹

September 22: The Chinese occupation advance team for Laos reached Vientiane by boat. Franco-Laotian troops moved into the capital the next

49. Arthur J. Dommen and George W. Dalley, “The OSS in Laos: The 1945 Raven Mission and American Policy,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 22 (September 1991): 327–46. For French reestablishment of authority in Laos, see Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 31–33.

50. Gallagher to Maj. Gen. Robert B. McClure, September 20, 1945, in Porter, *Vietnam*, 35–36 (quotes). See also Spector, *Advice and Support*, 61; Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution*, 73, 76–78.

51. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 63–64 (1st quote, 63); Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 260 (2d quote); Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 286; Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution*, 67–76, 95, 102–4, 107–9, 172 (3d–4th quotes); Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 8.



Ho Chi Minh gave General Gallagher a letter addressed to President Truman on September 24, 1945, and continued to send appeals to the U.S. leader at least through this telegram of February 28, 1946. Truman and the State Department decided that the president should not respond to the messages, an inaction that left several of the Viet Minh leaders believing that the United States supported colonialism in Indochina. *National Archives.*

day, apparently under an agreement with the Chinese. Chinese occupation of Laos over the following year focused much less on political stabilization than it did on control of the cross-border economy, particularly the opium poppy harvests.⁵²

September 23: With no opposition from British occupation forces, presumptive colonial administrator Jean Cédile (*see Aug. 22*) had French troops stage a coup in Saigon during which they evicted the Viet Minh-associated Committee of the South from government buildings. The British had freed

52. Dommen and Dalley, "OSS in Laos," 333; Tønnesson, *Vietnamese Revolution*, 317–18; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 52.



Capt. Joseph R. Coolidge IV of the OSS team in Saigon was critically wounded on the night of September 24–25. He is shown here being loaded onto an aeromedically equipped USAAF C-54 for transport to Ceylon. Gurkha Indian troops of the British army guarded the aircraft, a testament to the level of upheaval in southern Vietnam at the time. *USAF*.

the French soldiers from prison camps in the area and rearmed them. The French killed a number of Vietnamese in the coup, creating a charged and dangerous environment, particularly for Europeans and Americans. Historian Fredrik Logevall has argued that the events of this date could be seen as the

actual start of the First Indochina War, although full-scale warfare did not begin for another fifteen months (*see Dec. 19–20, 1946*).⁵³

September 24: Ho gave General Gallagher a letter addressed to President Truman in which Ho formally protested the activities of the British occupation forces in southern Indochina and asked Truman to intervene to get the repressive British orders rescinded. Gallagher forwarded the letter through U.S. diplomatic channels in China. Ho continued to send letters to Truman and Secretary of State James F. Byrnes through various sources until at least February 1946. The Truman administration chose not to respond to any of them.⁵⁴

On the night of September 24–25, Capt. Joseph R. Coolidge IV, part of the OSS team based in Saigon, became the first post-World War II U.S. casualty in Vietnam when he was shot and critically wounded in a Vietnamese ambush in Thu Doc, outside of Saigon. He was rescued by the Japanese, treated at a British field hospital, and airlifted out of Vietnam to Ceylon by the USAAF on an aeromedically equipped C-54. Coolidge endured thirteen operations and eight months in Army hospitals but survived.⁵⁵

September 26: Lt. Col. Peter Dewey, on the day he was due to leave the country after he had clashed with the British commander, General Gracey, while protesting the French coup (*see Sept. 6, 23*), was killed in his jeep by machine-gun fire at a roadblock in Saigon near OSS headquarters. The ambushers took his body, which the United States never recovered. Dewey became the first U.S. serviceman to die in post-World War II Vietnam. Capt. Herbert J. Bluechel, who was with Dewey, escaped to the nearby OSS villa, where he and his colleagues repelled a two-hour attack. After that assault, OSS team members assembled a group of available Americans, including Maj. Frank Rhoads, USAAF, to search for Dewey's body.⁵⁶

53. Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 7–8; Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 23; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 113–15; Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, 115–19; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 116; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 287–88.

54. Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 350, 358, 380–81; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 295–97; Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*, 127; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 14; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 1, book I, C-73–78; *FRUS 1946*, 8:27. In conversations with former North Vietnamese officials in the late 1990s, including Giap, Chester Cooper found that almost to a man, they pointed to Truman's lack of response to Ho's letters as a demonstration "that the United States, from the outset of the post-World War II period, had colonialist designs on Vietnam." Cooper, *In the Shadows of History*, 284.

55. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 67; Smith, *OSS*, 343–44; Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 291–92, 391 n. 107; Patti, 564 n. 13.

56. Bartholomew-Feis, *OSS and Ho*, 292–98; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 67; Smith, *OSS*, 344–45; Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 127–29; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 292–93; Herbert J. Bluechel, interview by WGBH for *Vietnam: A Television History*, April 23, 1981, http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_C34EEED92F3243D4B04E2FB8A9DEF799 (hereafter Bluechel interview). British historian Peter Dunn contended that Gracey had not ordered Dewey out of Vietnam and also that American journalists hindered British (Gurka) pursuit of Dewey's assassins. Dunn, *First Vietnam War*, 214–18.

Ho was highly concerned that Viet Minh-affiliated parties might have been involved in Dewey's death, or blamed for it nevertheless. He visited General Gallagher at his headquarters to express regrets about what had happened and stated that such an incident would occur in northern Vietnam only "over my dead body."⁵⁷

September 28: The Japanese formally surrendered northern Vietnam and Laos to the Chinese at a ceremony in Hanoi. Gen. Lu Han, who presided, did not allow the French flag to be flown, and the senior French official, Gen. Marcel J. M. Alessandri, boycotted the event after being placed number 106 on the guest list. Ho and his cabinet members received invitations, but Ho claimed illness and was not present. General Gallagher and his staff and Major Patti and his OSS contingent were among the official invitees and attended the event.⁵⁸

October 4: General Gallagher reported from Hanoi "a noticeable change in the attitude of the Annamites [Vietnamese] toward the Americans here . . . since they became aware of the fact that we were not going to interfere and would probably help the French." Gallagher added in a post-mission brief in December that when the French found out that the Americans intended to remain neutral, "they became more antagonistic and did everything possible to persuade United States personnel to favor the French position." The general observed that "in our neutral role we were thus a disappointment to both sides."⁵⁹

October 5: The French 2d Armored Division, under command of Gen. Jacques-Philippe Leclerc, began arriving in Saigon. Most of the troops sailed from France on Lend-Lease-purchased U.S. transports bearing U.S.-made arms. U.S. Merchant Marine vessels ferried some of these men as well. Leclerc's troops began operations in the countryside outside of Saigon on October 12. The general had visited Saigon in mid-September, during which time he had told OSS agents Dewey and Bluechel that France would never give up Indochina.⁶⁰

57. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 68 (quote); Marr, *Vietnam (45-46)*, 293.

58. Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 360-62; Marr, *Vietnam (45-46)*, 184-85; Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution*, 82-84.

59. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 64 (1st quote); *FRUS 1946*, 8:19 (2d-3d quotes).

60. Tonnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 23; George McT. Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 7-8, 434-35 n. 13-14; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 108, 118-20; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 1-2; T. O. Smith, "Resurrecting the French Empire: British Military Aid to Vietnam, September 1945-June 1947," *University of Sussex Journal of Contemporary History* 11 (2007): 2-4; Bluechel interview. Reportedly, the United States tried to bar the French from using American-made transports as of January 1946. *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:89, 93.

October 24: After meeting with Colonel Nordlinger and other officers who had been in Hanoi, the U.S. consul in Kunming wrote the State Department that if the French intended to try to reestablish control in Indochina, “it will be a mistake unless they are prepared to reenter in strength sufficient to overpower the Annamite resistance in short order. If the French attempt to return to Indochina without overwhelming forces and impressive air support, the struggle will be long and bloody.”⁶¹

October 26: The USN began transporting 23,000 Chinese troops from northern Vietnam ports to Chinwangtao (now Qinhuangdao), China. Chiang Kai-shek had requested help with the redeployment to counter the increasing communist threat in Manchuria.⁶²

November 11: Ho disbanded the Indochinese Communist Party in an attempt to ease concerns of both the nationalist Chinese occupying forces and the United States about the communist basis of his government. Many within the communist leadership never forgave Ho for this move.⁶³

December 12: The USAAF flew General Gallagher out of Vietnam, closing the American advisory mission in Hanoi. Throughout the fall, Gallagher had dealt with an extreme economic situation that had been driven by poor monetary policy decisions by both the Chinese and the French. The dire economic conditions resulted in several riots, some of which turned deadly. The financial disputes also deepened the distrust between the Chinese and the French.⁶⁴

With the end of the advisory mission, there were no U.S. military-related activities for the USAAF to support in Indochina from December 1945 until 1950. USAAF/USAF involvement in the theater focused on aiding Chiang Kai-shek’s forces in China in their fight against Mao Zedong’s communist insurgency. Its few flights in Indochina carried diplomats and supplies to diplomatic outposts. The United States opened a consulate in Saigon in early 1946 and sent a vice consul to Hanoi that March.⁶⁵

61. *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 1, book I, C-78.

62. *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:104–10.

63. Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 24–27; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 297; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 381; Shaplen, *Lost Revolution*, 45; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 23. A member of General Gallagher’s staff had predicted of the Viet Minh earlier in the fall that if the Americans “were to indicate displeasure at their communist background . . . [a] more democratic organization would probably evolve.” Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*, 139.

64. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 69–72; Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution*, 91–100. For Gallagher’s impressions from his time in Hanoi, see *FRUS 1946*, 8:19.

65. Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 298–300.



A USAF C-47 with French markings flies over Indochina during the early 1950s, part of the extensive fleet of aircraft the United States loaned the French during this period. *USAF.*

The Cold War Finds the Indochina War 1946–1952

Most American leaders abhorred colonialism, but as the early Cold War unfolded, they came to fear communist expansion more. When open warfare broke out between the French and the Viet Minh in late 1946, the United States somewhat reluctantly came to the conclusion that it had no choice but to back the French position, which it did, tepidly, through the late 1940s.

The U.S. worldview changed drastically in the autumn of 1949 with the fall of China to the communists, led by Mao Zedong, and Soviet demonstration of nuclear capability. Many U.S. policy makers believed that Southeast Asia would be the next target region for what they saw as inevitable communist expansion. They fully expected Viet Minh troops opposing the French in Vietnam to be supported and perhaps augmented by their communist comrades from across the border in China. Mao's recognition of Ho Chi Minh's government in January 1950, and Soviet recognition two weeks later, seemed to confirm fears of nefarious alliances. In February 1950 in the midst of the first salvos by Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy (R-Wisc.) and others in the wake of the "loss" of China, the Harry Truman administration recognized the French-controlled noncommunist government in Vietnam and began consideration of financial support for the French war effort in Indochina.

In the period covered in the latter portion of this chapter, U.S. backing of the French increased rapidly, even while the United States committed massive resources to the war in Korea. No U.S. military service contributed more to the effort in Indochina in the early 1950s, in terms of materiel (particularly planes) and ultimately personnel, than the U.S. Air Force. The United States had almost completely replaced the French air fleet in Vietnam by 1953 with loans of USAF and USN aircraft.

1946

1946

January: The British violated terms of Lend-Lease that prohibited the retransfer of American-made goods, turning over considerable amounts of U.S.-manufactured military equipment to the French in the southern part of Indochina. The United States voiced concern but did not attempt to block the exchanges. The retransfer began in December 1945 and became a significant program by January 1946.¹

France also sought to purchase military surplus in Asia directly from the United States. These transactions proceeded on a case-by-case basis throughout 1946, with the Americans allowing the sale of items such as vehicles but generally not munitions. According to one source, the sales included “Dakota transport aircraft,” presumably C-47s.²

A State Department official later observed that “for the first year after the war, the French were continually unloading American military equipment in Saigon plainly marked with our insignia. In fact, the widespread employment of this equipment with our insignia still on it was a troublesome issue between us and the French.”³

January 1: With approximately 30,000 French troops south of the 16th parallel, the British turned over all policing and control activities to the French except in the few sectors in which the British were still disarming Japanese troops. Gen. Douglas Gracey, the British commander, left Indochina at the end of the month.⁴

January 6: Ho’s provisional government held elections throughout Vietnam for the national assembly. Men and women age eighteen and older were eligible to vote. The French outlawed the canvass in Cochinchina, but many people in that region voted clandestinely. The Viet Minh dominated the electoral process and emerged with a significant majority.⁵

In late 1945 and 1946 as the Viet Minh gained more power, it undertook a campaign to consolidate that strength, including capture or murder of

1. *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:89–90. A British historian claims that the British military sought and received U.S. approval for the Lend-Lease retransfer, although such a decision on the U.S. end would have had to have been made at a much higher level of authority than is indicated in the article. The author’s evidence is a telegram from a British major to an unnamed U.S. contact. Smith, “Resurrecting the French Empire,” 1, 4–5, 9, 12 n. 42. Smith (pp. 6–8) documents in more detail later French and British concerns about retransfer of Lend-Lease parts and supplies for the materiel already transferred in December 1945–January 1946.

2. Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 141–43.

3. *FRUS 1950*, 6:767 (quote); Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 61–62.

4. Donnison, *British Military Administration*, 410.

5. Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, 142–45; Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution*, 109–11; Tonnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 26; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 13.

potential political rivals. One of those held for several months was Ngo Dinh Diem, future leader of South Vietnam (*see June 25, 1954*), who Ho offered a position in his government before releasing him in early 1946. The Viet Minh assassinated Ngo Dinh Khoi, Diem's eldest brother, during this period.⁶

February 5: Gen. Jacques-Philippe Leclerc, the French commander in Indochina, declared that “the pacification of Cochinchina is entirely achieved.” By this point the French, with the aid of the British, had secured nearly all the major towns and communications arteries south of the 16th parallel, but considerable instability remained in the countryside. As scholar Bernard B. Fall put it, France’s control really extended only to “100 yards on either side of all major roads.”⁷

February 28: The French and Chinese signed an agreement in Chungking for the complete withdrawal of Chinese forces from Indochina by March 31. French troops sailed from Saigon for Hanoi soon after the signing, only to be shelled when they reached Haiphong on March 6 by Chinese artillerymen who were unaware of the pact. The last Chinese units did not leave Indochina until September–October 1946 (*see Sept.–Oct.*).⁸

March 4–5: On this night, Adm. Louis Mountbatten deactivated Indochina as a territory under Southeast Asia Command, transferring all control in southern Vietnam and Cambodia to the French. Mountbatten had tired of General Leclerc planning operations without informing him, and Mountbatten’s frustration increased when he discovered Leclerc’s intent to take a force north, into the Chinese occupation zone (*see Feb. 28, Mar. 18*). Mountbatten requested that his government negotiate the deactivation. British troops remained in Vietnam to oversee repatriation of Japanese POWs, with the last British battalion leaving Saigon on March 29.⁹

March 6: French and Viet Minh representatives signed the Franco-Vietnamese Convention. The agreement, which Jean Sainteny negotiated, recognized the Vietnamese government as a “free state” (*état libre*) within the French Union, but not as independent. The Viet Minh conceded to the presence of French troops in the north, but the document stipulated

6. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 8; Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 33–34.

7. Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 114–33 (1st quote, 114); Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1963), 107 (2d quote); Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 23; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 131.

8. Worthing, *Occupation and Revolution*, 163–69; Antlov and Tønnesson, *Imperial Policy*, 162–65; Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 42; *FRUS 1946*, 8:29–32; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 381–82, 559 n. 6; *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:115.

9. Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 48–49.



Ho Chi Minh in Paris in 1946. The French and the Viet Minh negotiated two stopgap agreements during the year, but general warfare broke out in December. *National Archives.*

where the forces would be posted. The accord was tenuous from the outset and not popular with the Vietnamese general public or with the French government. The Viet Minh soon came to believe, correctly, that France had no intention of following the agreement in Cochinchina, the southernmost region of Vietnam that included Saigon. The parties reiterated much of the same substance in a stopgap modus vivendi signed in Paris on September 14, which included a few concessions on the Cochinchina issue and was even more unpopular in the north than the March agreement.¹⁰

March 18: French troops under General Leclerc entered Hanoi.¹¹

Late April: The Chinese 60th Army of the occupying force redeployed from Haiphong to Manchuria aboard twenty-seven USN LSTs.¹²

August 9: A U.S. State Department memorandum outlining the deteriorating relations between the French and the Viet Minh included the observation

10. Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 39–42, 83–89; Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, 148–74; *FRUS 1946*, 8:34–54, 59–60; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 23; Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 150–52; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 124–46; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 8–11. Translations of March 6 and September 14 documents are in Porter, *Vietnam*, 42–44, 48–50.

11. Antlov and Tønnesson, *Imperial Policy*, 165.

12. *U.S. Navy in Vietnam*, 1:116.

from the U.S. vice consul in Hanoi that if a break occurred, “the French could quickly overrun the country, [but] they could not—as they themselves admit—pacify it except through a long and bitter military operation.”¹³

September–October: Sources disagree on when the last Chinese occupation units left Indochina, sometime between mid-September and mid-October. The force had remained largely to protect Chinese investments in the opium poppy crop. Many of the troops sailed from Haiphong aboard USN transports.¹⁴

November 20–28: With Chinese occupation forces out of northern Indochina, the French began planning an armed takeover of the Tonkin region and the overthrow of Ho’s government. Independent of these preparations, a customs dispute at the port at Haiphong on November 20 escalated violently throughout the day, with the French and Vietnamese each blaming the other for instigation. The French commander for Indochina, Gen. Jean-Etienne Valluy, cabled his subordinates in the area that it was “absolutely necessary to take advantage of the incident and ameliorate our position in Haiphong.” The French commenced shelling Haiphong on November 23, and a five-day battle ensued in the area that resulted in the French conquest of the Haiphong region and perhaps 3,000 Vietnamese killed (estimates varied widely).¹⁵

The French expected a Viet Minh counterattack in the area, but one did not come, as Ho still held out hope of a negotiated avoidance of general warfare. The First Indochina War did not start at full scale until after Viet Minh aggression in and around Hanoi a month later (*see Dec. 19–20*), but many scholars see the November engagement in Haiphong as the beginning of the conflict.¹⁶

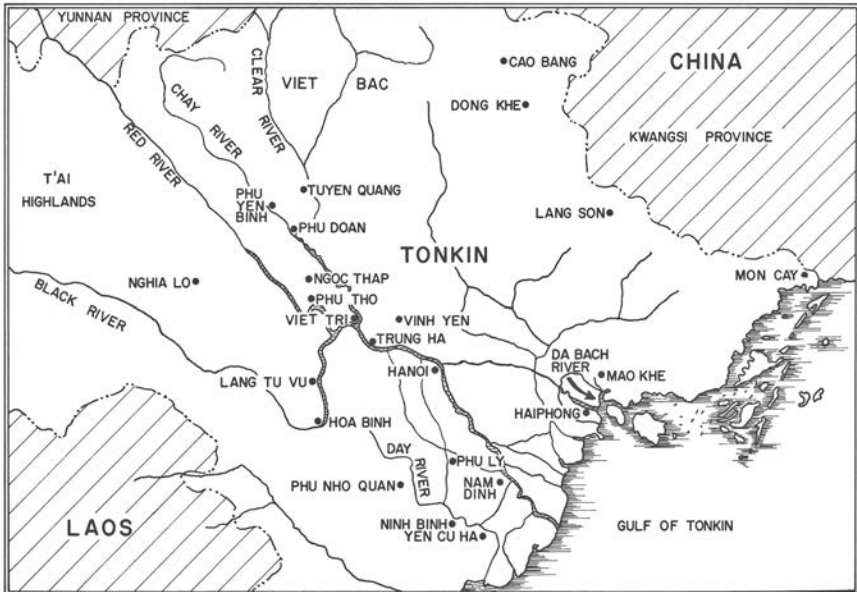
December 6–8: Abbot Low Moffat, head of the State Department’s Southeast Asian Affairs section, visited Hanoi as part of a ten-day trip to

13. *FRUS 1946*, 8:54.

14. Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 119, 156; Kahin, *Intervention*, 20; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 381–82, 559 n. 6; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 52; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 361, 649 n. 260.

15. Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 106–45 (quote, 126); Logevall, *Embers of War*, 156–58.

16. Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 128, 176, 179–80; Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 100; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 81–82; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 383. It should be noted that skirmishing between the French and the Vietnamese had been going on sporadically in southern Vietnam since September 1945, although the Vietnamese there were not all communist-aligned, unified, or necessarily following any guidance from Hanoi. The southern politico-religious groups that would come to be called the sects also fought against the French during this period, although they soon broke with the Viet Minh. Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 114–33; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 18; Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 32; Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 24; Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American’s Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 152–53.



U.S. Navy and the Vietnam Conflict.

Indochina. Moffat found Hanoi seemingly on the verge of war, with much of the population evacuating, and the French would not allow him to see the condition of Haiphong after the shelling there (*see Nov. 20–28*). Sainteny hosted a reception for Moffat with both French and Viet Minh representatives, including Vo Nguyen Giap, who did not impress the American. Giap conceded to Moffat that the Viet Minh might not be able to win a war with France but averred that the French would not be able to win, either, and would eventually give up.

Much to Sainteny's displeasure, Moffat met with the ailing Ho on December 7. Ho recounted his fondness for the Americans with whom he had engaged in 1945, who he felt had treated the Vietnamese as equals. He stressed a desire for peace but noted that his government could not countenance the recent French actions and demands. Moffat found Ho apparently more willing to work with the French than Giap seemed to be. Ho impressed Moffat as being more strongly nationalist than communist, but Moffat had concerns that the Vietnamese government itself had communist ties that were too deep to permit the United States to develop a relationship with it. French intelligence reported that Moffat broached with Ho a "desire" that the Viet Minh appeal to the United Nations (UN) for mediation, which Moffat denied.¹⁷

17. Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 177–78, 180–84; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 301–2; Porter, *Vietnam*, 55–56; *FRUS*, 1946, 8:72–73; Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*, 144; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 158–59.

December 19–20: The First Indochina War began in earnest with attacks and counterattacks in and around Hanoi. The Viet Minh, having intercepted French plans for an offensive, decided to seize the initiative, possibly with some luring to do so by local French authorities, as both sides were engaged in complex scheming. On the evening of December 19, the Viet Minh launched assaults against French targets in Hanoi and the surrounding Red River delta. The French counterattacked on the evening of the 20th and captured several public buildings, including Ho’s presidential palace. Ho and his government soon left Hanoi and set up operations in a jungle encampment, eventually in the Viet Bac hills in Bac Can Province north of Hanoi, prepared to fight a guerrilla war.¹⁸

December 23: The State Department’s Office of Far Eastern Affairs accessed the worsening situation in Vietnam: “Although the French in Indochina have made far-reaching paper-concessions to the Vietnamese desire for autonomy, French actions on the scene have been directed toward whittling down the powers and the territorial extent of the Vietnam ‘free state.’ This process the Vietnamese have continued to resist. At the same time, the French themselves admit that they lack the military strength to reconquer the country. In brief, with inadequate forces, with public opinion sharply at odds, with a government rendered largely ineffective through internal division, the French have tried to accomplish in Indochina what a strong and united Britain has found it unwise to attempt in Burma. Given the present elements in the situation, guerrilla warfare may continue indefinitely.”¹⁹

According to historian David G. Marr, “The French considered the ‘Viet Minh’ an insurgent threat to legitimate authority, rather than a functioning state. This caused them grossly to underrate their opponents, even after the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] survived attack, built up forces, and put the French Army on the defensive.”²⁰

1947

January 14: Jefferson Caffery, the U.S. ambassador to France, met with the French overseas minister in Paris and “stated with emphasis our concern over the Indo-Chinese situation and told him that obviously that situation affects other areas also and that we are frankly perturbed at the way things are going.”²¹

18. Tønnesson, *Vietnam 1946*, 173–74, 185–207; Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 383; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 82–83; Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 147; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 569–70; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 160–65.

19. *FRUS 1946*, 8:76.

20. Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 578.

21. *FRUS 1947*, 6:63.



Gen. Carl A. “Tooe” Spaatz (left), the first USAF chief of staff, shakes hands with his successor, Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, while W. Stuart Symington Jr., the initial secretary of the Air Force, looks on. USAF.

As the Defense Department study that became known as the *Pentagon Papers* summarized, “It is clear on the record that American policy-makers of the day perceived the vacuity of French policies in 1946 and 1947. The U.S., in its representations, consistently deplored the prospect of protracted war in Vietnam and urged meaningful concessions to Vietnamese nationalism.”²²

March 12: President Harry Truman delivered a speech to a joint session of Congress in which he outlined what became known as the Truman Doctrine. He declared that the United States would provide aid, and potentially military assistance, to all democratic nations threatened by authoritarian forces, external or internal. It would be under the broad outlines of this doctrine that Truman would authorize military and economic aid to bolster the fight against the communists in Vietnam, beginning in 1950 (*see Mar. 10, 1950; May 1, 1950*).²³

22. *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 1, book I, A-42.

23. Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 4, 169, 184; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 183–84; Office of the Historian, “The Truman Doctrine, 1947,” U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine>.

Spring–Summer: The Viet Minh made a series of appeals to U.S. diplomats in an attempt to arrange meetings with their representatives in Bangkok. The internal State Department debate that ensued centered on how aligned Ho and his government were with communist leaders in the Soviet Union and communist insurgents in China. Ultimately, no meetings took place.²⁴

As U.S. intelligence figure Chester L. Cooper put it, with the increasing concerns about the Viet Minh's communist ties, U.S. policy makers came to see the recolonizing French as the “lesser devil.” He observed that “adding to the hesitancy about interjecting American views in Indochina was a fear that any Washington meddling might cause the downfall of the frail Third Force Government [in France] and lead to a government headed again by the difficult and unpredictable de Gaulle or the dangerous and predictable Communists.” By September 1948, the State Department had concluded that the “immediate and vital interest” for the United States, over any concerns about French intentions in Vietnam, was maintaining a “friendly [French] government to assist in the furtherance of our aims in Europe.”²⁵

Historian Mark Atwood Lawrence has written that “the tragedy of American policymaking in the 1944–1950 period lies in the fact that the Truman administration squandered the considerable leverage it held over France to force a better outcome of the Indochina problem. That leverage was jettisoned by officials who accepted the overriding need to protect French prestige at all costs.”²⁶

July 26: President Truman signed the National Defense Act of 1947, which created the U.S. Air Force (USAF) and the Office of the Secretary of Defense and laid the groundwork for the administrative consolidation that resulted in the U.S. Department of Defense in 1949. Truman appointed Gen. Carl A. “Tooe” Spaatz as the first USAF chief of staff and W. Stuart Symington Jr. as the initial secretary of the Air Force.

24. Bradley, *Imaging Vietnam and America*, 162–73. For the debate within the U.S. policy community about the level of communist involvement by Ho and the Viet Minh, see Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 135–38, 169–70; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 21–25; George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*. 3d ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 12–13. Chinese and Russian sources from the period show no contact between the Viet Minh and the communist leadership in China or the Soviet Union. Outreach by Ho's government in 1947 proposing a meeting in Moscow did not result in an invitation. Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 12–13; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 197.

25. Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 53–55 (1st–2d quotes, 53); *FRUS 1948*, 6:48 (3d–4th quotes); *Pentagon Papers*, 1:I-A-42. For French domestic political instability, see Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 136, 157–61; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 21–22. For the ongoing debate within the State Department, see Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 422–24. Rusk also noted U.S. consternation when France diverted some of the aid it received through the Marshall Plan to Indochina. Like Rusk, Cooper had served in Kunming during World War II and would have a long association with Indochina, including as the senior CIA representative at the Geneva conferences in 1954 and 1961–62. Cooper, *In the Shadows of History*, 67, 108–9.

26. Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 286.



Bao Dai, the thirteenth emperor of Vietnam in the Nguyen Dynasty, reached agreements with the French in 1948 and 1949 that made him the titular head of Vietnam within the French Union. He is shown shaking hands with René Coty, who served as president of France for five years in the 1950s. *National Archives.*

October 7: French troops invaded Bac Can Province in an effort to capture or kill the Viet Minh leadership. Ho and Giap narrowly escaped the initial push, but Giap rallied his forces as the slow-deploying French lost the advantage. The French withdrew after two months. For the rest of the war, the Viet Bac hills remained the Viet Minh's governmental headquarters as well as the national guard command center, supply base, and training area.²⁷

Beyond this foray, neither side undertook major operations in the years 1947 to 1950. The French occupied cities and towns and seized communication lines. The Viet Minh controlled much of the countryside, particularly in the northern part of Vietnam, and resorted to guerrilla strikes and infiltration while building and training its army and officer corps. As British military journalist Edgar O'Ballance observed, "Even in the towns and areas where France claimed to be in control there was uncertainty bordering upon chaos, into which Viet Minh agents and 'suicide squads' could move at will." The most contested area in the later 1940s was the

27. Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 570–71; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 201–3; Charles R. Shrader, *A War of Logistics: Parachutes and Porters in Indochina, 1945–1954* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 197–204.

Red River delta region outside of Hanoi, where the French attempted early versions of pacification programs. These tactics further eroded French relations with the Vietnamese, with historian David Anderson noting that “France’s attempt to extinguish the Vietminh by brute force was not only ineffective but enhanced the popularity and credibility of Ho and his party as nationalist leaders.”²⁸

Lt. Col. Victor J. Croizat, USMC, attended École de Guerre, the French war college in Paris, in 1950 and became acquainted with many French officers who had served in Indochina during this period. According to Croizat, “The prevailing comment was: ‘It’s a hell of a dirty little war.’” The French were facing “a relatively unsophisticated enemy with very limited armament,” but their government “was putting its effort in reconstruction in France and was not allocating any significant funds to Indochina.” The French had “pretty sad equipment,” most of it World War II vintage and heavily used. Their “resources in Indochina were extremely limited, as was their manpower.”²⁹

1948

*Chester Cooper wrote of this period: “Preoccupied with problems of postwar Japan, European recovery, Soviet troublemaking from Iran to Germany, and reconversion of the U.S. economy, it would have been surprising if Washington had concerned itself with events in Southeast Asia. To the extent there was any interest in this area, it was confined to the Indonesian struggle against the Dutch, which broke out in 1946, and the uprisings of the Huks in the Philippines that occurred in 1948. Indochina was a forgotten area, and it would be the Chinese (under Mao Tse-tung [Zedong] this time) who were later to remind us of it.”*³⁰

February: A Viet Minh representative in Bangkok approached the assistant military attaché at the American embassy about the possibility of the United States sending observers to Ho’s jungle headquarters. The Truman administration declined.³¹

28. Edgar O’Ballance, *The Indo-China War, 1945–1954: A Study in Guerilla Warfare* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 78–103 (1st quote, 93); Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 9 (2d quote); William J. Duiker, “Ho Chi Minh and the Strategy of People’s War,” in Lawrence and Logevall, *First Vietnam War*, 152–68. For French strategy and organizing during the late 1940s, see Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 189–94. For clashes in southern Vietnam between the Viet Minh and politico-religious organizations during this period, see Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 34–39.

29. Victor J. Croizat, interview with Benis M. Frank, February 10, 1970, AFHRA, reel 34226, beginning frame 595, pp. 16–17 (hereafter Croizat interview).

30. Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 48–49. See also Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 422–24.

31. Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*, 175.

1948–1949

April 30: Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg succeeded General Spaatz as USAF chief of staff.

June: France reached a vague agreement with Bao Dai for an independent Vietnam within the French Union that it would formalize in more detail the following spring (*see Mar. 8, 1949*).³²

November 2: Truman (D) was reelected president over Thomas E. Dewey (R) and J. Strom Thurmond (Dixiecrat).

1949

March 8: With the Elysée agreement, France created the State of Vietnam (SVN), with Emperor Bao Dai as head of state. France formed similar nominally independent kingdoms in Laos that July and in Cambodia in November. The “Bao Dai solution,” as the arrangement became known in the West, gave French control of Vietnam at least some veneer of legitimacy because of the emperor’s royal lineage (*see Aug. 18–21, 1945*), while France saw Bao Dai as “a man whose material needs made him easy to manipulate,” according to French scholars Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture. Bao Dai may have hoped that he could lead his homeland toward real independence, but he had little leverage with the French and few skills as a leader. He spent most of his time in Hong Kong and Paris enjoying what was often described as a playboy lifestyle.³³

April 4: Noncommunist allies signed the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington, creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The United States and France were among the twelve initial signatories.

June 16: Prominent Vietnamese nationalist Ngo Dinh Diem published a statement in which he denounced the Elysée agreement for not moving Vietnam toward real independence. His call for a new anticolonial movement alienated him from Bao Dai and the French and also left him in public opposition to the Viet Minh, which in early 1950 ordered his assassination. Diem left Vietnam in August 1950 and remained abroad until returning as prime minister in 1954 (*see June 25, 1954*).³⁴

32. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 9; Miller, *Misalliance*, 35.

33. Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 188–90, 198; Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 221–35; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 198–213; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 14–16 (quote, 16); Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 9–10. Anderson (p. 14) noted that the French National Assembly did not ratify the Elysée accords until February 1950.

34. Miller, *Misalliance*, 34–37.

Two events occurred in the latter half of 1949 that would have a tremendous impact on U.S. foreign policy in the subsequent decades. On August 29, the Soviet Union successfully tested its first atomic bomb—with the test discovered and confirmed by the USAF in early September—increasing U.S. concerns about Soviet intentions and power and sparking the nuclear arms race. Only a few weeks later, Mao Zedong completed the communist conquest of China, which had been looking probable for nearly a year, declaring the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1.³⁵ In November and December, intelligence reports indicated that Mao was moving communist Chinese troops to the borders of Vietnam and Laos. With these developments, “Washington stirred out of its lethargy” regarding Indochina, as Chester Cooper put it.³⁶

October 6: President Truman signed legislation that created the Mutual Defense Assistance Program (MDAP), by which the United States could provide military equipment to allied countries. It was under this program that the United States aided the French in Indochina, beginning in 1950.³⁷

November: Ho ordered conscription of all male citizens age fifteen to forty-five and authorized seizure of personal property and finances to support the war effort.³⁸

December 11: David K. E. Bruce, the U.S. ambassador to France, implored Washington to have the United States and the United Kingdom recognize Bao Dai's SVN government before Mao and the PRC recognized Ho's. He added that “a view that Ho Chi Minh will inevitably take over Indochina is dangerous and defeatist. We should act courageously and speedily within the limits of the possible.”³⁹

December 16: Lt. Gen. George E. Stratemeyer, commander of Far East Air Forces (FEAF), and Maj. Gen. Charles A. Willoughby, USA, Gen. Douglas MacArthur's intelligence chief, visited Vietnam as part of a southern Asia tour that included stops in Hong Kong and Singapore. In Saigon, the U.S. generals met with the French commander in Indochina,

35. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 221–24; Andrew J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 103–4; Herring, *America's Longest War*, 14–17; Raymond P. Ojserkis, *Beginnings of the Cold War Arms Race: The Truman Administration and the U.S. Arms Build-Up* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 57–64.

36. Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 59–60 (quote, 60); *U.S. Navy in Vietnam*, 1:158–59, 169–70. For the policy shift beginning in the fall of 1949, see in particular Rotter, *Path to Vietnam*, 103–24; William J. Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy and the Conflict in Indochina* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 75–90.

37. *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 1, book I, A-52; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 569–70.

38. Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 573.

39. *FRUS 1949*, 7:109–10.

1949–1950



Lt. Gen. George E. Stratemeyer, commander of Far East Air Forces, visited Vietnam in December 1949 during an inspection tour of Southern Asia. USAF.

Gen. Marcel Alessandri, who told them that Chinese communist regulars had reached the border with Vietnam, with more believed to be moving in that direction. Alessandri also reported that the Chinese had flown 5,000 Viet Minh troops to Hainan Island. The French commander viewed the meeting with Stratemeyer and Willoughby as successful and reassuring and invited Willoughby to visit northern Vietnam to assess the situation there for himself.⁴⁰

December 23: In NSC-48/1, the National Security Council (NSC) stated that “the extension of communist authority in China represents a grievous political defeat for us; if southeast Asia also is swept by communism we shall have suffered a major political rout the repercussions of which will be felt throughout the rest of the world.”⁴¹

1950

January 15: Ho’s Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) gave official recognition to Mao’s PRC and asked that the new Chinese communist government recognize the DRV.⁴²

40. Ibid., 7:111; “U.S. Generals in Indo-China,” *Manchester Guardian*, December 17, 1949, 10; *FRUS 1950*, 6:690–91.

41. *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 1, book I, A-55 (quote); Logevall, *Embers of War*, 222–23.

42. Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*, 177; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 15.

January 18: On Mao's order, the PRC formally recognized the DRV as the legitimate government of Vietnam. Mao also had Beijing forward the DRV's request for Soviet recognition to Moscow, where Mao was at the time.⁴³

Ho at this point was in the midst of a long trek to Beijing, which began with him and his companions walking for seventeen days from his jungle headquarters in northern Vietnam to the Chinese border. Upon reaching the capital, Ho found that Mao and Premier Zhou Enlai were in Moscow, so Ho proceeded there. Ho met with Soviet premier Joseph Stalin, who promised little and told Ho to look to the Chinese for aid. Stalin had previously questioned Ho's communist credentials. Ho rode the train with Mao and Zhou from Moscow to Beijing in mid-February.⁴⁴

Despite considerable U.S. intelligence and diplomatic speculation to the contrary through the later 1940s, these contacts in February 1950 were Ho's first interaction and direct coordination with Mao and Stalin. The Chinese began arms and food shipments to the DRV in April 1950.⁴⁵

January 30: The Soviet Union formally recognized the DRV as the government of Vietnam, forcing the United States to accelerate its timetable for consideration of recognition of the SVN (*see Feb. 7*).⁴⁶

February: Giap led Viet Minh forces in the capture of the small French garrison at Lai Khe (Lao Kai), along the Red River near the Chinese border. This foray was the first move of what became a spring-fall offensive against French forts in the border region as the Viet Minh transitioned from solely guerrilla activities to larger-scale attacks, which Giap called the "general counteroffensive" (*see May 25; Mid-Sept.–Mid-Oct.*).⁴⁷

February 1: The State Department released a public statement by Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson in which he observed that Soviet recognition of the DRV "should remove any illusions as to the 'nationalist' nature of Ho Chi Minh's aims and reveals Ho in his true colors as the mortal

43. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 13, 15.

44. *Ibid.*, 13, 15–18; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 574; Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954–1963* (Washington, DC, and Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 2003), 1–6; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 224–29.

45. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 12–13, 19–20. The Viet Minh had provided supplies for Chinese communist units based in Vietnam in exchange for training, beginning in 1946, and the Chinese communists had given sporadic, very limited funding to the Viet Minh in the late 1940s. Ho did not send emissaries to Mao's government until late 1949. *Ibid.*, 11–13. See also Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 165–67. Dean Rusk, who was in the Far Eastern Affairs section of the State Department at the time, observed that neither State nor President Truman paid much attention to Indochina until Mao began sending aid to the Viet Minh. Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 424.

46. Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*, 177.

47. O'Ballance, *Indo-China War*, 109–11; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 24; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 207–8. For Giap's preparations to shift to the offensive, see Logevall, *Embers of War*, 239–46.



Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson (*left*) shown with British foreign secretary R. Anthony Eden, who succeeded Winston Churchill as prime minister in 1955. *National Archives.*

enemy of native independence in Indochina.” A secret State Department working paper of the same date on “Military Aid for Indochina” concluded that “failure of the French Bao Dai ‘experiment’ would mean the communization of Indochina. . . . The choice confronting the United States is to support the French in Indochina or face the extension of Communism over the remainder of the continental area of Southeast Asia and, possibly, farther westward. . . . It would seem a case of ‘Penny wise, Pound foolish’ to deny support to the French in Indochina.”⁴⁸

February 7: The United States and the United Kingdom gave formal diplomatic recognition to the State of Vietnam and the kingdoms of Laos and Cambodia. During consideration of this step, the State Department’s

48. *FRUS 1950*, 6:711 (1st quote), 714 (2d quote). Acheson sent a memo to Truman the next day recommending recognition. *Ibid.*, 6:716–17.

Far Eastern Affairs section pointed out that such a move would necessitate “strengthening Bao Dai,” whose indigenous support was “probably small.” The U.S. consul general in Saigon telegraphed a week before recognition that he found Bao Dai’s “actual and potential authority somewhat dubious.” At the time of recognition, there were only around 120 Americans in Indochina, the majority of whom were missionaries.⁴⁹

February 9: Sen. Joseph McCarthy made the first of his accusatory speeches about communists in government, declaring that there were more than 200 members of the Communist Party in the U.S. Department of State. “McCarthyism” ran its course concurrently with increased U.S. involvement with the French in Indochina, through the end of the Army-McCarthy hearings in June 1954.⁵⁰

February 16: France requested U.S. military aid for its fight in Indochina. An internal State Department memo of the same date recorded that Secretary Acheson “emphasized that our bargaining position disappears the moment we agree to give them aid.” Acheson observed in a 1969 interview that the United States “came to the aid of the French in Indochina, not because we approved of what they were doing, but because we needed their support for our policies in regard to NATO and Germany.” He felt that “the French blackmailed us. At every meeting when we asked them for greater effort in Europe they brought up Indochina and later North Africa. . . . They asked for our aid for Indochina but refused to tell me what they hoped to accomplish or how. Perhaps they didn’t know. They were obsessed with the idea of what you have you hold. But they had no idea how to hold it.” The focus on what the French wanted led diplomat Frederick E. Nolting Jr., who became U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam in 1961, to question in a March 1950 memo “whether any attention is to be paid to the views of the Vietnamese themselves” regarding U.S. aid.⁵¹

February 27: The NSC presented a top-secret draft document for consideration, “The Position of the United States with Respect to Indochina” (NSC-64). The paper stated that “the threat of communist aggression against Indochina is only one phase of anticipated communist plans to seize all of Southeast Asia.” Its authors argued that Indochina was “under immediate threat” and that the French could, with their existing capabilities, “do

49. *FRUS 1950*, 6:690 (1st–2d quotes), 703 (3d quote), 707–9, 722, 726, 748; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 229–30, 233.

50. David M. Oshinsky, *A Conspiracy So Immense: The World of Joe McCarthy* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 108–14.

51. *FRUS 1950*, 6:730–33 (1st quote, 733); *New York Times Book Review*, October 12, 1969, 30 (2d–3d quotes); Miller, *Misalliance*, 225 (4th quote).

1950

little more than maintain the status quo.” The document, which President Truman approved on April 24, made it “a matter of priority” that the State and Defense Departments develop programs “of all practicable measures designed to protect United States security interests in Indochina.”⁵²

March 10: President Truman approved the earmarking of \$15 million for military equipment for the French in Indochina.⁵³

March 13: The State and Defense Departments and the Joint Chiefs of Staff all concurred on the CIA’s proposal to purchase Civil Air Transport (CAT), an Asia-based airline founded by Lt. Gen. Claire Chennault and other fellow USAAF/Flying Tiger associates after World War II. With CIA backing, the airline and its pilots, many of whom had USAAF/USAF backgrounds, played integral roles in aiding the French in Indochina. The company reorganized as Air America in 1959.⁵⁴

April 7: NSC-68 was completed. This top-secret paper, titled “United States Objectives and Programs for National Security” and drafted by the State Department’s Policy Planning staff under the leadership of Paul H. Nitze, became one of the formative documents shaping U.S. response to the spread of communism. Many historians point to NSC-68 as broadening the regions of the world where the United States sought to “contain” communism and influencing decisions to fight communist aggressors in Korea and ultimately in Vietnam. As far as specific context, however, the document mentioned “Indochina” only twice in passing.⁵⁵

May 1: President Truman approved \$10 million in aid for the French for military items in Indochina, to be drawn from Mutual Defense Assistance Program (MDAP) funds, half the amount the State Department had requested. This funding was the beginning of aid to the French that would total nearly \$3 billion by the end of the war in 1954 (approximately \$32 billion in 2019 dollars).⁵⁶

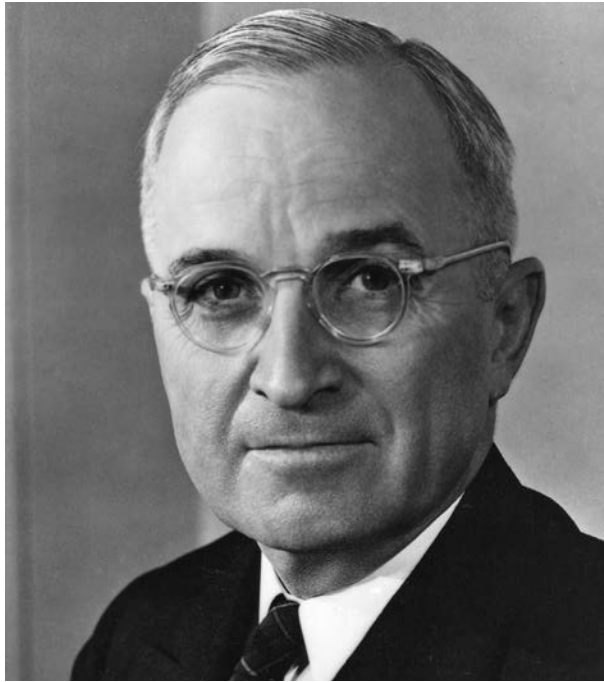
52. *FRUS 1950*, 6:745–47.

53. *Ibid.*, 6:751.

54. William M. Leary, *Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and CIA Covert Operations in Asia* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1984), 104, 212.

55. Office of the Historian, “NSC-68, 1950,” U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/NSC68>; Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 15–16; Young, *Vietnam Wars*, 25–28. For the document itself, as well as an array of commentaries on it, see Ernest R. May, ed., *American Cold War Strategy: Interpreting NSC 68* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993).

56. *FRUS 1950*, 6:791–92; Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 277; Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 78–79.



President Harry Truman faced difficult decisions on whether to begin sending aid to the French in Indochina at the same time the United States was considering intervention in Korea. *National Archives.*

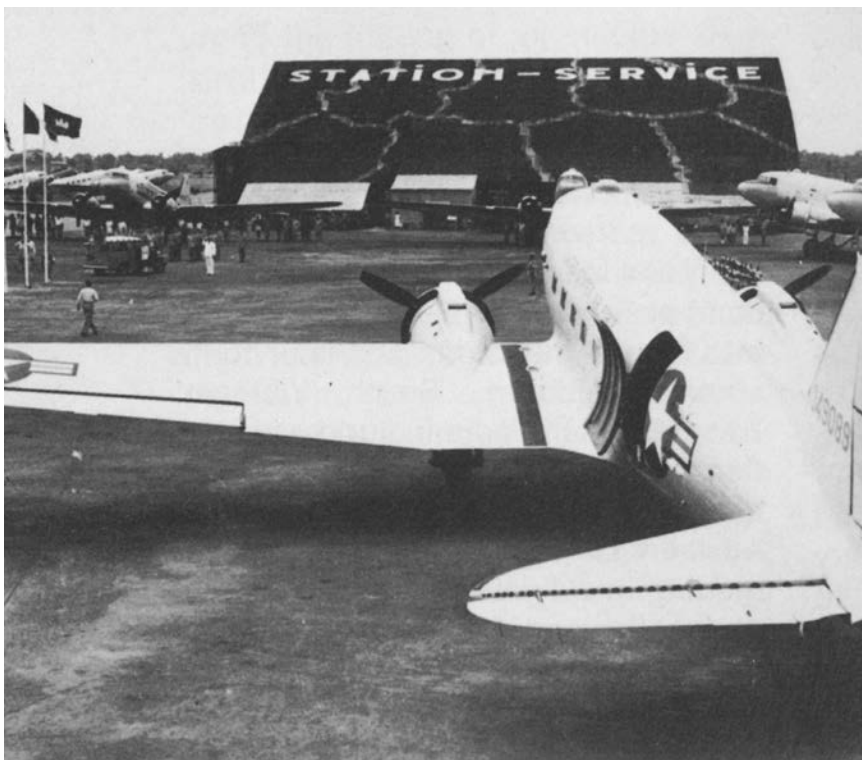
May 11: The State Department announced technical and economic development aid to the State of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia through the Economic Cooperation Association that would total “in the neighborhood of 60 million dollars.”⁵⁷

May 25: In an effort that was part of Giap’s gradual shift to the “general counteroffensive” (*see Feb. 1950*), four Viet Minh battalions attacked the French garrison at Dong Khe, along the Vietnam-China border. It fell briefly to the Vietnamese, but with paratroop reinforcements, the French retook the fort two days later. The Viet Minh retreated to regroup during the monsoon season.⁵⁸

June 25: North Korea invaded South Korea, beginning the Korean War and intensifying U.S. concerns of communist threats in other parts of the region, including Southeast Asia. U.S. confrontation of North Korea and subsequently China on the Korean peninsula led Stalin and the Soviets to

57. *Department of State Bulletin*, May 22, 1950, 791 (quote); *FRUS 1950*, 6:794–98, 801–2.

58. O’Ballance, *Indo-China War*, 110; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 238; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 208.



The United States began delivering USAF C-47s to the French in June 1950 in the same week hostilities erupted on the Korean Peninsula. They would remain omnipresent in the French and South Vietnamese air fleets in Vietnam throughout the decade. USAF.

consider the war in Indochina as part of a broader fight against the United States and its western allies.⁵⁹

June 29: The first U.S. supplies for the French war effort arrived in Saigon.⁶⁰

June 30: USAF pilots flew eight C-47s to Saigon and turned them over to the French. These aircraft were the first aviation aid the United States furnished to France for use in Indochina. The aircraft cargo was spare parts and maintenance equipment.⁶¹

59. Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 45–50; *FRUS 1950*, 6:831; Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 62–63; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 6. As Russian scholar Ilya V. Gaiduk put it, the Korean War “opened Stalin’s eyes to the importance of the war in Indochina, which had now become a part of a common struggle against U.S. imperialism and U.S. satellites. Moscow regarded the U.S. attack on North Korea as the realization of the plan of a three-pronged invasion of mainland China, with the other two prongs directed from Taiwan and Vietnam.”

60. Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 31; *FRUS 1950*, 6:832.

61. Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Southeast Asia: The Advisory Years to 1965* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1981), 6 (hereafter *Advisory Years*); Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden*, 276.

This chronology records all mentions of U.S. aircraft loaned or provided to the French through MDAP for use in Indochina in the period from 1950 through 1954 that have been found in the books and documents consulted. It is not a comprehensive accounting, but it concurs almost exactly with a mid-1953 inventory (*see June 4, 1953*). By that point, newer U.S. aircraft had basically replaced the French aviation fleet as it stood in 1950.⁶²

July 8: President Truman authorized an additional \$16 million in MDAP funds for military aid for Indochina.⁶³

July 15: A joint State-Defense survey mission arrived in Saigon, headed by John F. Melby of the State Department and Maj. Gen. Graves B. Erskine, USMC. The team concluded that the Viet Minh held the upper hand and that “for all practical purposes have the French pinned to their occupied areas.” Nevertheless, after a three-week tour, the U.S. group determined that the French could succeed with U.S. help, in the form of a military assistance command (*see Sept.*).⁶⁴

Mid-August: Prince Souphanouvong, leftist nephew of the Laotian king, organized the Pathet Lao at Viet Minh headquarters in the Viet Bac hills.⁶⁵

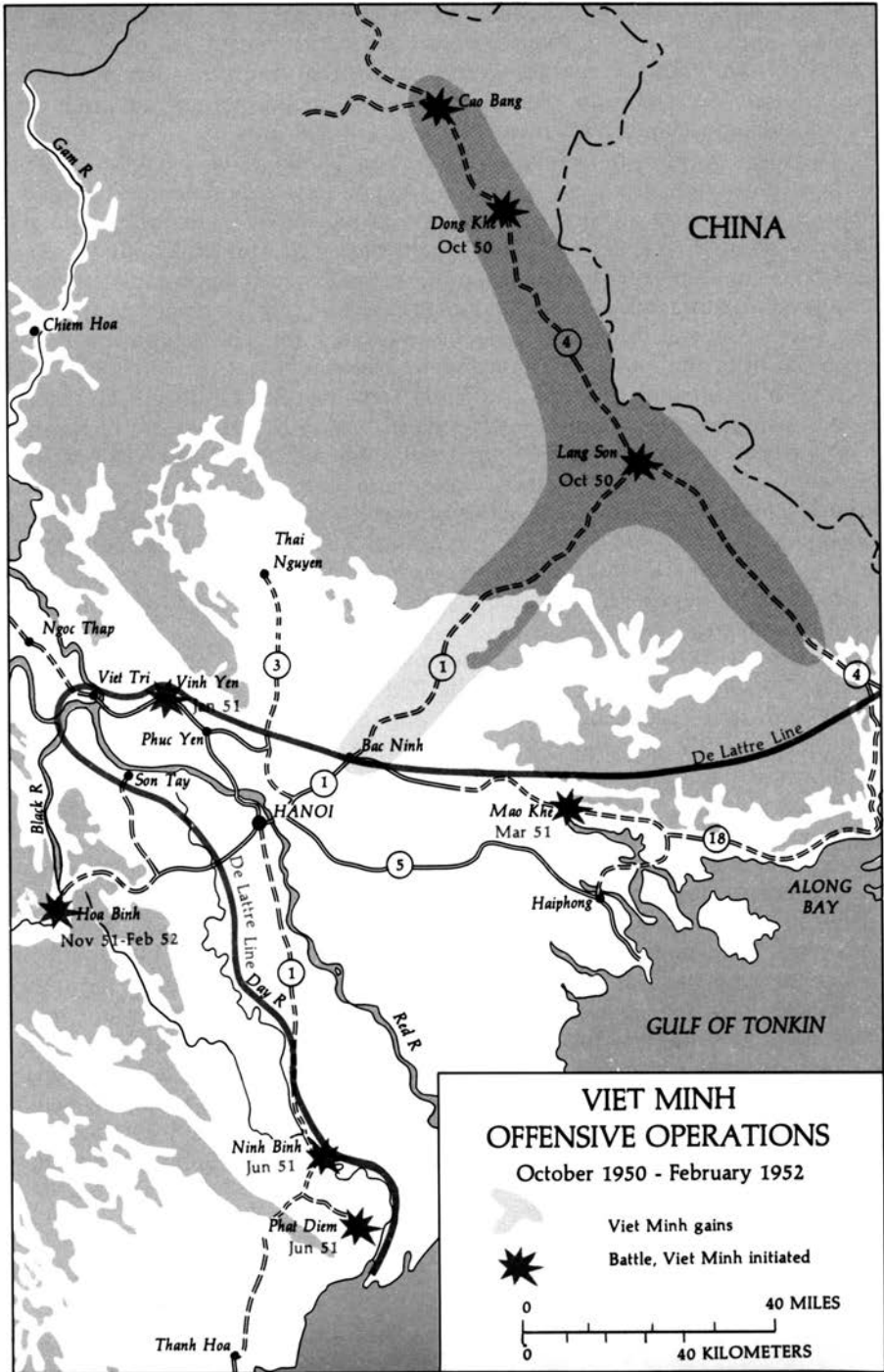
September: The first elements of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) arrived in Saigon. Lt. Col. Edmund F. Freeman, USAF, the air attaché at the embassy in Saigon, initially covered air assistance duties until the full Air Force section could be established (*see Nov. 8*). The first permanent commander for the MAAG, Brig. Gen. Francis G. Brink, USA, reached Saigon on October 9. According to Lt. Col. Victor Croizat, who served with the MAAG in the mid-1950s, in its early years,

62. The chronology does not record loans of helicopters or smaller liaison-type aircraft. For the French aircraft inventory as of 1950, see Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 6n. The French fighter fleet of World War II-vintage P-63s was replaced by F-8Fs in February and March 1951. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 9. Bowers (p. 8) also noted that the French had obtained twenty-nine of their C-47s from the Belgian Air Force. Others had come from the British. For a detailed look at the types of aircraft the French had, see J.M.C., “U.S. Aircraft in the French/Indo-China War,” *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*, Spring 1959, 2–11; for the transports, see Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 116–19.

63. *FRUS 1950*, 6:835.

64. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 111–15 (quote, 114); Logevall, *Embers of War*, 257. Lt. Col. Victor Croizat met with General Erskine in Paris after he had been in Vietnam. The general “was concerned about the French being holed up in forts,” according to Croizat, “and comments were made about them using single artillery pieces rather than batteries. But when you look back on what the French had in the way of military resources for the period, and the kind of problems they had, it wasn’t a question of going out on search-and-destroy missions. It was a question of trying to hold onto the Tonkin delta.” Croizat interview, 29.

65. Timothy N. Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955–1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 7; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 32–33.



Spector, *Advice and Support*.

the MAAG “was essentially a logistics support facility.” The French did not allow the Americans to become involved in training until after the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1954.⁶⁶

Mid-September–Mid-October: The Viet Minh had briefly occupied Dong Khe in May (*see May 25*). On September 16, with considerable materiel aid from the Chinese, Giap’s forces launched another assault on Dong Khe, capturing the border outpost in two days of fighting. This capitulation isolated the garrison at Cao Bang. In early October, French troops marched toward Dong Khe from Cao Bang and from a larger fort at Lang Son. The Viet Minh rolled up both of these columns over October 8–10, with 6,000 French casualties, including 4,800 dead, captured, or missing. It was the most devastating defeat for the French to that point in the conflict. The French abandoned all of their positions along the Chinese border except for the fort on the coast at Mong Cai, and their troops fled toward Hanoi. They left behind 11,000 tons of ammunition that the Viet Minh collected. The French departure left the Viet Minh unobstructed access to Chinese aid and gave Ho and Giap a tremendous propaganda victory. According to Bernard Fall, “For the French, the Indochina War was lost then and there.”⁶⁷

October: Forty USN F-6F fighters on loan to France arrived in Saigon on a French carrier.⁶⁸

November 8: Col. Joseph B. Wells formally established the Air Force section of MAAG-Indochina.⁶⁹

December 23: The United States, France, the State of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos signed the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement. Among its provisions was a stipulation that all U.S. supplies for Indochina would pass through French hands. At the conclusion of hostilities, title to the equipment was to revert to the United States.⁷⁰

December 29: A U.S. national intelligence estimate concluded that the “French position in Indochina is precarious” and gave the French only a “slight chance” to “maintain their military position long enough to build

66. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 111–17; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 7; Croizat interview, 30 (quote).

67. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 243–52, 259; Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, 110–11 (quote, 111); Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 29–32; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 575; O’Ballance, *Indo-China War*, 111–19; Sharder, *War of Logistics*, 211–13; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 6–7.

68. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 7.

69. *Ibid.*; Air Force Section, Military Assistance Advisory Group, Indo China, June 30, 1952, AFHRA, reel N0889, frames 478–80.

70. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 7; *FRUS 1950*, 954; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 257.

1950–1951



The United States delivered ninety USN F-8F fighters to the French in Vietnam in February and March of 1951. A shipment is shown arriving on a carrier. U.S. Navy.

up an independent Vietnamese government and an effective national army.” The CIA also believed that 185,000 Chinese communist troops were on the border with Vietnam.⁷¹

1951

The United States provided the following aircraft to the French during 1951: ninety F-8F fighters, ferried to Vietnam in February and March; five RB-26 reconnaissance aircraft, sent in July; and thirty-three renovated B-26 bombers, delivered in December. The French requested C-119s but did not receive them because of U.S. needs in Korea. In 1951, the French experienced combat losses of seven aircraft furnished under MDAP: four B-26s, two F-8Fs, and one RB-26.⁷²

January 13–17: The newly appointed French commander in Indochina, Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, stopped the progress of the Viet Minh at Vinh Yen, only twenty miles northwest of Hanoi. The French owed much of their success to U.S.-supplied materiel, including aircraft, napalm, and

71. *FRUS 1950*, 6:958–63 (1st quote, 960; 2d quote, 959).

72. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 7; Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 9; Maynard O. Edwards, “Far East Air Forces Support of French Indochina Operations, Vol. 1: 1 July 1952–30 September 1954,” AFHRA, reel K7333, beginning frame 948, p. 70 (hereafter “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations”).

105mm howitzers. The level of support and reinforcements de Lattre requested from Paris in February and March to counter Viet Minh gains, however, deeply concerned the French government. Giap advanced again, twice in March and once in May, turned back each time by de Lattre's napalm and artillery. The reversals convinced the Chinese advisors with Giap's forces that the Viet Minh was not yet capable of succeeding in a major offensive, and Giap vowed to return to guerrilla operations.⁷³

De Lattre was an officer of considerable energy and ego who reenergized the French effort in Vietnam during his year there and also sought at every turn to increase U.S. involvement and support (*see Mar. 17, Sept. 14–24*). More than other French commanders, de Lattre understood the need to develop indigenous forces, particularly for pacification efforts in the countryside, but according to historian Fredrik Logevall, his “dictatorial methods alienated many Vietnamese,” as did his narrow definition of prospective Vietnamese independence. De Lattre conceded on his deathbed in early 1952 that he “never completely understood Indochina.”⁷⁴

March 17: Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, in Paris organizing NATO Allied Command Europe, met with General de Lattre, who wanted Eisenhower's endorsement of his request to the French government for more troops (*see Jan. 13–17*). Eisenhower observed in his diary that the “French have a knotty problem,” one that “is a draining sore in their side.” Presaging what became known as the “domino theory” (*see Apr. 7, 1954*), Eisenhower noted his concern that if Indochina fell to the communists, he saw it as “easily possible that the entire Southeast Asia and Indonesia will go, soon to be followed by India.” However, he was “convinced that no military victory is possible in that kind of theater,” all the more so with China and its “inexhaustible manpower” just across the border.⁷⁵

June: In its monthly report, the Air Force section of MAAG-Indochina commented on the “bad operational habits” of French aircraft mechanics, noting the “lack of appreciation of safety precautions,” the “lack of respect

73. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 267–74; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 215–26; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 27–30; Arthur W. Radford, *From Pearl Harbor to Vietnam: The Memoirs of Admiral Arthur W. Radford*, ed. Stephen Jurika Jr. (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1980), 342–43; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 33–34; Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, 116–17; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 27–28.

74. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 260–92 (quotes, 290); Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 23. Daddis quoted de Lattre observing that in “pacification work especially,” Vietnamese troops could “fill the gap between the people and the leaders, to be a human link between the rural masses and the central government.” For de Lattre's role in establishing training for Vietnamese forces, see also G. Frederick Reinhardt, interview with Maj. Richard B. Clement, June 30, 1970, transcript, AFHRA, 3–4 (hereafter Reinhardt interview).

75. Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *The Eisenhower Diaries* (New York: Norton, 1981), 190.



Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower and Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny during World War II. De Lattre revitalized French efforts in Indochina but died in January 1952. USAF.

for preventive maintenance,” and the “standard French procedure of drinking while working.” As the war continued and the USAF deployed advisors and ultimately its own mechanics, these issues with French practices remained common themes.⁷⁶

September 7: The United States signed an economic assistance agreement with the State of Vietnam, concluding similar accords with the French-sponsored governments in Cambodia on the 8th and Laos on the 9th.⁷⁷

The Mutual Security Agency administered multiple assistance projects, with CAT flying most of the missions to support them, carrying materials and advisors in the fields of disease control, agriculture, forestry, fisheries, transportation, power, and public works. CAT ferried U.S. diplomatic personnel at times as well. Under CIA guidance, CAT pilots also took still photographs and video across Indochina of potential landing sites and other areas of interest.⁷⁸

September 14–24: At the invitation of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General de Lattre visited Washington to give briefings about the situation

76. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 117.

77. *FRUS 1951*, 6:490–91.

78. Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 157, 159, 162–63.

in Indochina. The general pressed for increased U.S. military aid and mentioned several potential worst-case scenarios. With President Truman, de Lattre raised the possibility of a Chinese invasion of Vietnam, with the memorandum of conversation recording that Truman “said something to the effect that if that happened, we would have to see what could be done.” On *Meet the Press*, de Lattre stated that the fall of Vietnam to communist forces would ultimately mean the loss of Indochina. He added that “in Korea, you are fighting against communists. In Indochina, we are fighting against communists. Korea War, Indochina War, it is the same war, the war of Asia.” At the Pentagon, de Lattre carried the scenarios further, declaring that India would “burn like a match” if Indochina fell, with the Middle East and North Africa inevitable next steps for the communists. With senior U.S. officials, de Lattre argued that U.S. aid to the French in Indochina should be placed on the same priority level with the war effort in Korea. Specific to the USAF, de Lattre requested B-26s, which the USAF delivered in December, and more C-47s, which did not arrive until the spring of 1952.⁷⁹

October 15–25: Rep. John F. Kennedy (D-Mass.), accompanied by siblings Robert and Patricia, visited Vietnam as part of a tour of Asia and the Middle East. He found little support among the Vietnamese for the French-sponsored government. The thirty-four-year-old congressman noted at the time that “in Indochina we have allied ourselves to the desperate effort of a French regime to hang onto the remnants of an empire.” Kennedy’s anticolonial stance led to what Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. described as an “animated argument” with General de Lattre, who wrote a formal letter of complaint about the young representative.⁸⁰

November 16: Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. (R-Mass.) recorded in his diary: “General Eisenhower attaches the greatest importance to Indo China—to an extent to which I did not realize at all” (*see Mar. 17*). Lodge later served two stints as U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam in the 1960s.⁸¹

79. *FRUS 1951*, 6:494–526 (1st quote, 499; 4th quote, 517); Barnett Singer and John W. Langdon, *Cultured Force: Makers and Defenders of the French Colonial Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 410 n. 36 (2d–3d quotes); Logevall, *Embers of War*, 278–84, 291; Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 9; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 10; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 53–54; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 346–47.

80. Geoffrey Perret, *Jack: A Life Like No Other* (New York: Random House, 2001), 169–71; Logevall, *Embers of War*, ix–xv (quote, xiv), 286–87; Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 300. See also Kennedy’s comments about Vietnam on *Meet the Press*, December 3, 1951, transcript, National Archives, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/193106>.

81. Quoted in Logevall, *Embers of War*, 340–41.



Rep. John F. Kennedy (D-Mass.) in a passport photo from August 1951 as he prepared for a tour of Asia and the Middle East. In Vietnam, he clashed with General de Lattre over the French mission. *Kennedy Library*.

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*The United States provided the French with ten C-47s in March and April 1952, ten more in September and October, and an additional twenty-one at the end of the year. Because of aircraft attrition in Korea, the United States was unable to deliver promised shipments of F-8Fs and B-26s. During 1952, the French experienced combat losses of nineteen aircraft furnished under MDAP: eighteen F-8Fs and one C-47.*⁸²

January 11: General de Lattre died of cancer, ending the brief period of revitalization of the French war effort that he had been able to generate (see *Jan. 13–17, 1951*). Debates in France about whether the French could or should sustain the costly effort in Indochina intensified soon thereafter.⁸³

February 22–24: The French withdrew from their garrison at Hoa Binh, forty-five miles south-southwest of Hanoi. They had paraded three infantry battalions there in mid-November 1951, which they reinforced

82. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 10–11; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:70. Of the twenty-one C-47s that the USAF sent at the end of the year, eight returned to Clark Air Base at the end of March 1953, nine returned between the end of July and August 14, 1953, and the USAF transferred four to the French. “History of Project Sea Dog,” AFHRA, reel P0280, frame 693.

83. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 290–91, 312–14; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 149.

to total five, but as the Viet Minh pushed 40,000 troops into the area, cut supply lines, and threatened siege, the French had little choice but to pull out. The French retreat from Hoa Binh led to increasing speculation in France, and by its U.S. allies, that the French might lack the resolve to win in Indochina. According to military historian Charles R. Shrader, the fighting around Hoa Binh also “demonstrated the severe logistical problems faced by the French Union forces in trying to operate at a distance from their bases,” lessons French military leaders “chose to ignore.”⁸⁴

May 12: During a policy planning meeting with high-level representatives of the State and Defense Departments to discuss the potential U.S. response if Chinese communist forces moved into Vietnam, Secretary Acheson declared that “the French should put out of their minds the possibility of U.S. ground forces participating in Indochina. We are prepared to give naval and air support.” A formal paper on May 21 spelled out the policy in these terms. Acheson communicated these guidelines to the French during talks in June after President Truman had approved them.⁸⁵

June 16–18: Jean Letourneau, French minister for the Associated States and high commissioner in Indochina, visited Washington for three days of conferences with representatives of the State, Defense, and Treasury Departments. Despite American concerns, U.S. officials agreed to increase the aid limit for the French for Indochina by \$150 million for fiscal-year 1953. Letourneau also outlined the need for more transport aircraft, resulting in the deliveries of C-47s later in the year. Letourneau mortified his hosts when he mentioned to the media the possibility of France seeking a negotiated armistice in Indochina. The Truman administration feared that French capitulation or withdrawal would leave all of Vietnam in communist hands.⁸⁶

June 22: USAF headquarters assigned 6410th Materiel Control Group to FEAF to coordinate MDAP in southern Asia. FEAF delegated oversight of the 6410th and its operations to Far East Asia Logistics Force.⁸⁷

June 24: Brig. Gen. Francis Brink, the MAAG-Indochina commander, who had traveled to Washington to be a part of Letourneau’s meetings with senior officials, committed suicide at the Pentagon. The Army named Brig. Gen. Thomas J. H. Trapnell to replace him in Saigon.⁸⁸

84. Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 269–74 (quote, 273); Spector, *Advice and Support*, 149–52.

85. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:117, 125, 143 (quote), 153–54, 163, 205.

86. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:183–208, 230; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 318–19.

87. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:52–53.

88. “General in Pentagon Found Fatally Shot,” *Washington Post*, June 25, 1952, 1, 15; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 157.



Spector, *Advice and Support*.

June 25: The United States raised its legations in Saigon and Phnom Penh to embassy status. The U.S. minister in Saigon, Donald R. Heath, who historian Fredrik Logevall described as “a Francophile of the first order,” became ambassador to the State of Vietnam and Cambodia and remained minister to Laos. Vietnam established an embassy in Washington, with its new ambassador presenting his credentials to President Truman on July 1.⁸⁹

August 24: A field maintenance team of two officers and six enlisted from the USAF 6410th Materiel Control Group deployed for a thirty-day tour during which it surveyed all French air force bases in Indochina. The airmen found shortages of personnel, supplies, equipment, repair space, and basic technical publications at all facilities. The same team deployed on October 6 for forty-five days to work with the MAAG to establish a MAAG maintenance section and to find ways to address the French needs.⁹⁰

August 28: The United States initiated Project Garcon, formalizing the loans of C-47s to the French and the support for those aircraft. On this date, the Defense Department directed FEAF to provide the French air force with twenty-one C-47s for 120 days. At the end of the loan, the United States permanently transferred four of the aircraft to the French, with three others sent to Thailand and fourteen returned to FEAF.⁹¹

September–November: Ho traveled to Beijing in late September, where he sought support for the Viet Minh’s upcoming campaign in northwestern Vietnam. From Beijing, Ho went to Moscow and reviewed his plans with Stalin and other Soviet leaders. The situation in Korea, however, left Stalin disinclined for the Soviet Union to become more deeply involved in another Asian conflict.⁹²

Mid-October–December: The Viet Minh launched its Northwest Campaign on October 15 with Nghia Lo, about seventy miles northwest of Hanoi, as the first main target. The French garrison there capitulated on October 17. The French initiated Operation Lorraine on October 29, their

89. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:219 n. 1; *Department of State Bulletin*, July 14, 1952, 43, 53; Logevall, *Embers of War*, viii (quote).

90. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:54–55, 60–62. The same report (p. 154) stated that FEAF airmen were in Indochina as early as July 1952 but did not describe any projects earlier than the one recorded here. The report included references to several TDY deployments of small numbers of personnel that are not included in this chronology. Nearly all were related to efforts to help improve French maintenance on U.S.-loaned aircraft.

91. *Ibid.*, 1:42, 210–11, 312.

92. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 37–38; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 321–22; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 10–11. According to Gaiduk, Stalin met with Ho once while he was in Moscow but turned down Ho’s request for a second conversation.

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largest offensive in Vietnam, as a counter move to divert the Viet Minh advance. The French soon found themselves overextended, however, halting Lorraine on November 14 and abandoning Son Lo on November 22, which opened a corridor for the Viet Minh toward Laos. The French defeated Giap's force at Na San on November 30 in a set-piece battle in large part because of U.S.-supplied aircraft and napalm. Undeterred, the Viet Minh continued to advance, and by mid-December, Giap's troops controlled much of northwestern Vietnam.⁹³

Howard R. Simpson, who had arrived in Vietnam in 1952 to work with the U.S. Information Service (USIS), observed that while large-scale Viet Minh advances were tactically important, they were only the "tip of the iceberg" in a "revolutionary war." The Viet Minh "political cadres, agents, and clandestine guerrillas" were also at work in areas the French claimed were secure. They were "maintaining old networks, building new ones, recruiting members, eliminating or terrorizing individuals who posed a threat, collecting taxes, and building their own infrastructure in the villages and hamlets nominally under Franco-Vietnamese control." Simpson wrote that "this, in effect, was the 'real war,' the continuous, meticulously planned sapping of a shaky society."⁹⁴

Concurrent with the increased military and guerrilla activity in the latter part of 1952, the U.S. government and media began to pay more attention to what was happening in Vietnam. Adm. Arthur W. Radford, the commander in chief of Pacific Command (CINCPAC), traveled to Saigon to consult with the French High Command there, as did Anna M. Rosenberg, the assistant secretary of defense. Chester B. Bowles, the U.S. ambassador to India, surveyed the political and diplomatic situations on a fact-finding mission. Senior media figures also visited, including Time-Life publisher Henry R. Luce and columnist Joseph W. Alsop V.⁹⁵

October 20: Ten USAF-loaned C-47s at Nha Trang suffered significant damage from a tropical storm. Parts for repair had to be airlifted from Clark Air Base in the Philippines.⁹⁶

November 4: Dwight Eisenhower (R) was elected president over Adlai E. Stevenson II (D). Eisenhower had campaigned on a platform of a muscular foreign policy to combat the spread of communism. He had shown a

93. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 322–29; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 226–38, 275–78; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 36, 38; O'Ballance, *Indo-China War*, 177–86; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 350–51.

94. Howard R. Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire: An American in Vietnam, 1952–1991* (1992; repr., New York: Kodansha, 1994), 30 (quotes), 34.

95. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

96. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 8–9.

particular concern about the situation in Indochina even before he entered the presidential race (*see Mar. 17, 1951; Nov. 16, 1951*).⁹⁷

December 4: French officials in Vietnam asked for 150 USAF mechanics for one month to service loaned C-47s. Ambassador Heath called for “immediately favorable action” on this request. According to Heath, the French wanted the mechanics deployed to Nha Trang, “presumably because [the] presence [of the] mechanics would be less conspicuous than if [they were] detailed to a Tonkin base or to Saigon.” The State and Defense Departments took two weeks to consider the request (*see Dec. 20*).⁹⁸

December 20: With State and Defense Department approval, USAF headquarters directed FEAF to send a maintenance team to Vietnam “adequate for the balance of the loan time of USAF C-47 aircraft” (*see Dec. 4*). The unit deployed two weeks later (*see Jan. 4–Aug. 14, 1953*).⁹⁹

97. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 333–35.

98. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:308–9.

99. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 9; “History of Project Sea Dog,” frames 690–93 (quote); *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:313–16.

NORTHERN INDOCHINA



CHINA

VIETNAM

LAI CHAU



DIEN BIEN
PHU



NA SAN



GIA LAM AF
HANOI
BAC MAI
AF



CAT BI AF



HAIPHONG
DO SON AF

HONG
AF

LUANG PRABANG

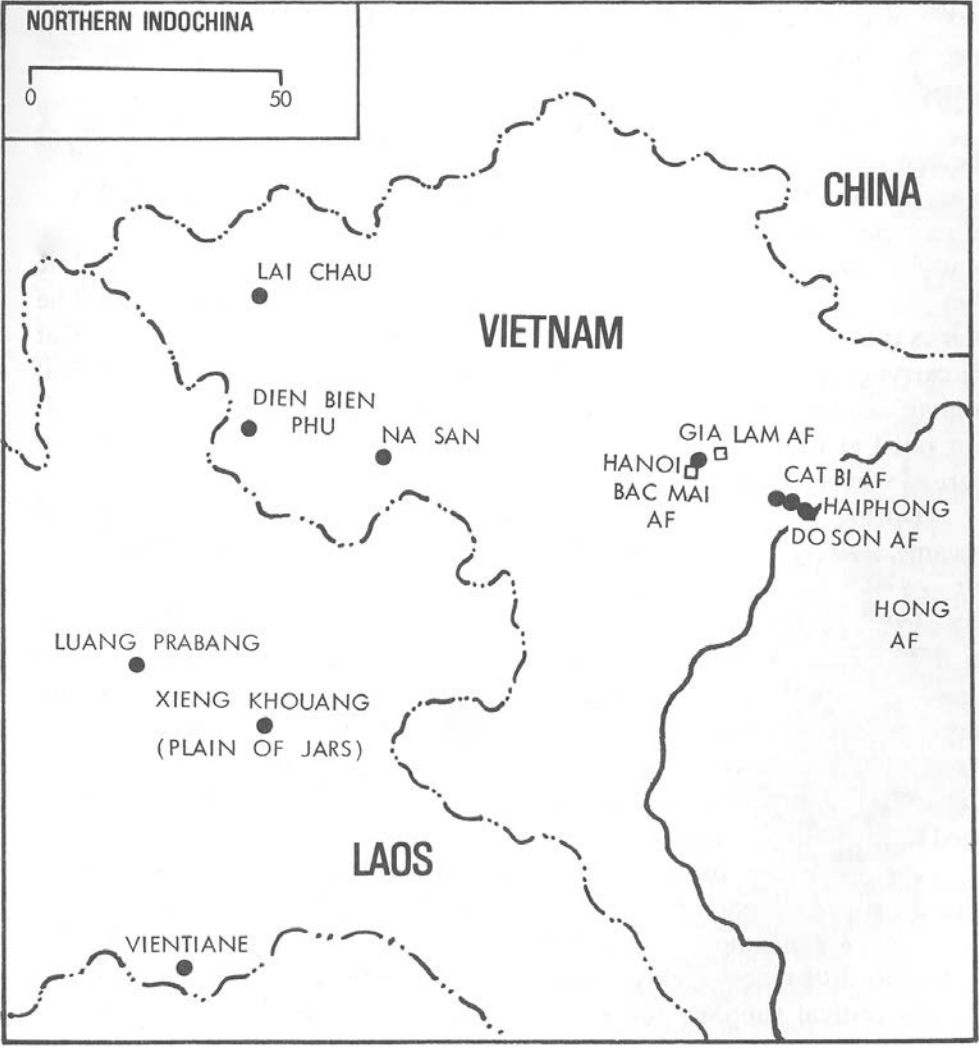


XIENG KHOUANG
(PLAIN OF JARS)



LAOS

VIENTIANE



U.S. and U.S. Air Force Involvement Deepens 1953

The inauguration of Dwight Eisenhower as president in January 1953 brought a new administration with its own views on how and where communism should be confronted, how wars should be fought, and how militaries should be structured. Eisenhower had expressed concern about the worsening situation in Indochina even before he decided to run, and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, believed the United States had to forcefully oppose communism all over the globe. Dulles would become a significant figure in increasing the U.S. commitment in Southeast Asia.

The year 1953 set the stage for much of what followed in Vietnam, for both the French and the Americans. A new French commander in chief for the region, Gen. Henri E. Navarre, arrived in Indochina in May and put forward a plan for winning the war by 1955. In November, without consulting U.S. military leaders, Navarre made the fateful decision to take and substantially augment the small garrison in northwestern Vietnam at Dien Bien Phu. Materiel and supplies for that fortress arrived on USAF-loaned aircraft, with USAF mechanics deploying throughout the year and into 1954 to help maintain them. CIA-owned Civil Air Transport (CAT) began contract flights for the French during 1953 as well, supporting operations in Laos and in Vietnam. The USAF provided the planes and the pilot training.

A USAF officer detailed to the CIA, Col. Edward G. Lansdale, had his first experience in Vietnam in 1953 as part of a U.S. review team. He would deploy there for a full tour a year later.

1953

1953

Aircraft loaned to the French during the year are detailed in the narrative. See entries for “June 4” and “November” for French air force strength. According to a February 1953 inventory for the MAAG, by that point, the United States had provided the French in Indochina with a total of 160 fighters (F-6Fs and F-8Fs), forty-one B-26s, twenty-eight C-47s (which did not include the additional twenty-one delivered in late 1952), 155 aircraft engines, and 93,000 bombs. During 1953, the French experienced combat losses of fifteen aircraft furnished under MDAP: ten F-8Fs, four B-26s, and one C-47.¹

January 4–August 14: In an operation known as Project Sea Dog, technicians from the 24th Air Depot Wing from Clark Air Base in the Philippines deployed on temporary duty to Nha Trang to maintain C-47s provided to the French (*see Dec. 4, 20, 1952*). The French had requested 150 USAF technicians but received only twenty-five—one officer and twenty-four enlisted men. The airmen remained in Nha Trang until relieved by French technicians on August 14. The detachment commander was Lt. Col. Richard F. Nai, succeeded by Maj. Jack A. Grimm, who was replaced by Maj. Howell T. Walker. The project was of low visibility even within FEAF, as its commander, Lt. Gen. Otto P. Weyland, made no references to it in his detailed record books.²

Although in several instances French personnel on the ground resented the USAF maintenance crews that deployed in 1953–54, the French desperately needed their expertise. The in-commission rate for French-serviced C-47s was often below 50 percent, with the monthly utilization rate at half the number of hours the USAF was averaging for its C-47s in Korea. As Maj. Robert K. Scudder observed in 1954, the “aircraft were in terrible shape” when the USAF mechanics received them. “It is apparent the French do little preventive maintenance,” he noted, “just service them with gas and oil and fly them until something goes wrong.” Scudder added that “our concept of preventive maintenance baffles them.” The U.S. airmen also found ground and air safety “non-existent” with the French. The poor French record led senior USAF officials to recommend against multiple French requests for additional C-47s, particularly if USAF ground crews were not part of the deal.³

1. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:70; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 168.

2. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 11; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:308; “History of Project Sea Dog”; Lt. Gen. Otto P. Weyland, memorandum books, AFHRA, reel 33805.

3. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 7–8; Robert K. Scudder, “Tonkin Taxi: Hanoi to Saigon and All the Stops in Between,” Part Two, *Friends Journal* 30 (Spring 2007): 42 (1st–3d quotes); “History of Project Sea Dog,” frame 691 (4th quote).



In his first address to a joint session of Congress in February 1953, President Dwight Eisenhower declared that the war in Korea was “part of the same calculated assault that the aggressor is simultaneously pressing in Indochina and Malaya.” *National Archives.*

Project Sea Dog was the first larger-scale deployment of USAF personnel to Indochina. There had been a USAF presence with the MAAG since 1950 (*see Aug. 3, 1950; Nov. 8, 1950*), and FEAF had sent small groups of men, including a few Department of the Air Force civilians (mostly engineers), to consult with the French on maintenance issues beginning in July 1952 (*see Aug. 24, 1952*).

It is impossible to determine precisely the total USAF presence in Indochina up through 1954, but the number of men who spent time in Vietnam likely exceeded 2,000. The FEAF statistical services section did not keep separate figures on personnel deployed until the end of April 1954, when it recorded 399 uniformed airmen (officers and enlisted) in Vietnam. That total grew to 462 by the end of May and counted two civilians. The tours were short, sometimes as brief as thirty days and no more than 120, so there was considerable turnover for each operation noted below. The figures did not include pilots who were ferrying aircraft and flying regular supply routes to support the French materiel needs and the deployed USAF troops; senior officers and their staffs who regularly visited the deployed units; or the small contingent of fourteen or fifteen men assigned to the MAAG in Saigon, most of whom were on annual tours (*see Feb. 6*). In addition to the troops who deployed to Indochina, FEAF also devoted considerable

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personnel at Clark Air Base specifically to the support of maintenance and supply of Indochina operations, with their number peaking in May 1954 at 785, including 95 civilians. Hundreds of airmen at Ashiya Air Base, Japan, mentioned but not counted in the report cited, completed major overhauls on U.S.-provided aircraft throughout this period.⁴

January 28: At a meeting of high-level State Department officials from the incoming Eisenhower administration and military leaders, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, newly confirmed Secretary of State John Foster Dulles said that the French “have no desire to hold Indochina except for the effect that the loss of Indochina would have in North Africa.” During discussion of what would happen if the French lost or withdrew, Gen. Omar N. Bradley, USA, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, said that “it would lead to the loss of all Southeast Asia.” Dulles responded that “if Southeast Asia were lost, this would lead to the loss of Japan.” Bradley conceded that the United States did not have a contingency plan in case the French left Indochina.⁵

February 2: In his first address to Congress, President Eisenhower declared that the war in Korea was “part of the same calculated assault that the aggressor is simultaneously pressing in Indochina and Malaya.”⁶

February 6: Donald Heath, the U.S. ambassador in Saigon, complained to the new administration at the State Department that the Air Force section of MAAG-Indochina tended to “take a rather narrow attitude toward French requests” for more aircraft and maintenance support. As Maj. Donald E. Miller, who joined the Air Force section in March, later noted, however, most French requests were “actually handled through the State Department.” He said Heath, who as chief of mission outranked the commanding general of the MAAG, “made an awful lot of decisions over there,” and “political considerations” often overrode Air Force section recommendations. When the Air Force section requested more justification from the French, the French bypassed the MAAG and went to Heath. As Miller put it, “the name of the game was don’t challenge the French request, just see that it gets filled.” He observed that the French generals were “closer to the ambassador than they were to anybody in the MAAG because they realized that the ambassador held the purse strings. . . . The State Department was running this war, not the military.”

4. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:151–55.

5. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:362. For the worldview Dulles brought to the office and his concerns about Indochina, see Logevall, *Embers of War*, 336–42.

6. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960, 16 (hereafter *Public Papers* [date])).

According to Miller, the MAAG often did not find out about new aircraft loans that the State Department had arranged until “someone said, ‘hey, you’re going to get X number of C-119s in the country.’”⁷

Although the Air Force section of the MAAG was billeted for fifteen positions—seven officers and eight enlisted—Miller recalled only fourteen being filled during his tour. The chief of section was a colonel. According to Miller, one of the primary duties for the director of operations was to arrange air travel for the commanding general of the MAAG and his staff. The enlisted airmen with the MAAG served as the maintenance crew for the C-47s used for transport, which the USAF staff officers, including Miller, flew. The communications and electronics, logistics, and armaments staff officers in the Air Force section reviewed the French requests and attempted to maintain tallies of the materiel provided. The Air Force section had very little coordination with FEAF and the maintenance teams it deployed to Vietnam.⁸

February 8–19: A team from the USAF 6410th Materiel Control Group conducted a survey of aircraft maintenance facilities in Indochina. The detachment found that the French had plans to prepare facilities at Bien Hoa to handle F-8F overhauls and to use Cat Bi as a field maintenance facility. The airmen made recommendations for improving the proposed operations and arranged for the USN to undertake the overhaul of forty F-8Fs to reduce the significant backlog.⁹

March 5: Soviet leader Joseph Stalin died. Senior Russian officials began calling soon thereafter for an easing of Cold War tensions.¹⁰

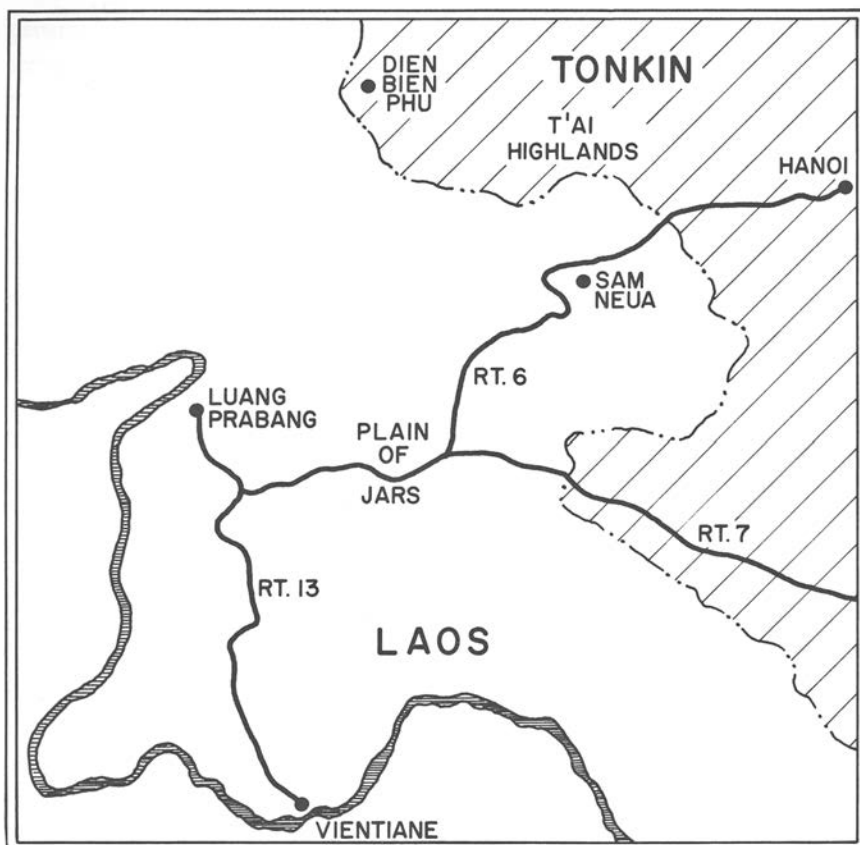
March/April: USAF colonels Maurice F. Casey and James B. Henson, the respective wing commander and tactical group commander of the 483d Troop Carrier Wing at Ashiya Air Base, visited bases at Saigon, Da Nang, and Haiphong and also in Thailand while conducting a staff study on the feasibility of deploying C-119s to Indochina. The colonels advised the French about improvements that would be needed at the airfields and noted the language difficulties that would have to be overcome to work with the

7. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:388 (1st quote); Donald E. Miller, interview with Samuel E. Riddlebarger, January 30, 1969, transcript, AFHRA, 3–4, 14–16 (2d–6th quotes) (hereafter Miller interview). A FEAF report observed that, “as the MAAG in Indochina was told many times, the French were not interested in keeping consumption figures, utilization rates, etc., as it did not, in their opinion, have a bearing on the fighting front.” The report also noted that, when working through the MAAG, “the French could not understand why justification was needed.” “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:45–46.

8. Miller interview, 1–3, 13–14.

9. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:55–56.

10. Statler, *Replacing France*, 60–63; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 11.



U.S. Navy and the Vietnam Conflict.

French. Although the colonels did not recommend it in a written report, Casey told senior officers that if C-119s did deploy, it would be better if U.S. pilots flew them.¹¹

April 2: Fifteen airmen and USAF civilians from the 6410th Materiel Control Group arrived in Saigon to help the French set up their F-8F overhaul shop (*see Feb. 8-19*). They found that the French had not progressed toward having the overhaul program ready, and the USAF reassigned team members to other French maintenance areas at Bien Hoa to help improve standards and workflow.¹²

11. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 9-10; Maj. Robert L. Lovelace and Evelyn B. Simonson, "Historical Report of the 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo), 1 January-30 June 1954," 1-2, AFHRA, reel P0709, frames 847-900 (hereafter 315th Historical Report); Maurice F. Casey, interview with Ray L. Bowers, May 24, 1971, AFHRA, reel 30213, frames 1045-56 (hereafter Casey interview).

12. "FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations," 1:56-57.

Early April: Following a successful offensive in western Tonkin, Vo Nguyen Giap marched 40,000 Viet Minh soldiers into Laos along with 2,000 loosely organized Pathet Lao troops under Prince Souphanouvong. The force captured the Laotian border province of Sam Neua on April 19, where Souphanouvong established his headquarters in the town of the same name, and subsequently Phong Saly Province. The two-pronged communist advance targeted the royal city of Luang Prabang and the Plain of Jars, which put Vientiane, the administrative capital, at risk. The Viet Minh surrounded the French force on the Plain of Jars, necessitating aerial resupply from Hanoi and prompting a French request for American C-119s (*see Later April*). Seasonal monsoon rains and French resistance, fortified by airlifted troops and materiel, slowed the march toward Luang Prabang, and the Viet Minh withdrew its main force in May and June. Some scholars have speculated that the Viet Minh's intent was to inflict damage that was more psychological than strategic on the French, and to control the opium poppy harvest, which the Viet Minh found the French had peremptorily collected.¹³

Although this invasion did not significantly affect the overall conflict, it had a direct impact on increased U.S. military and USAF involvement in Indochina. It also established the Pathet Lao in Laos in the area in the northeastern part of the country from which it carried out antigovernment activities for the rest of the decade.

April 15: Maj. Gen. Thomas Trapnell, commander of MAAG-Indochina, reported that the French had rejected, with “completely fallacious arguments,” nearly all U.S. suggestions for modernization of their military training methods.¹⁴

Later April: In response to the Viet Minh invasion of Laos, the French sought a loan of USAF C-119s to carry tanks and other heavy equipment into Laos. The origin of the request is unclear, but it came through diplomatic channels. When the Joint Chiefs discussed the overall French plans on April 24, the most vocal critic was Gen. Hoyt Vandenberg, USAF chief of staff, who declared that “the whole French position seems to be a defensive one and one of not wanting to fight the war to a conclusion.” He said that “if the French keep on in this manner, we will be pouring money down a rat hole.” He noted that the French request for the C-119s had not been made

13. Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, 292–94; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 33; Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 9–11; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 33–34; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 278–82; Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 163, 166; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 112–13; Kenneth Conboy with James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1995), 5; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 360.

14. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:474.

through the MAAG in Saigon and that advice from MAAG officers was “neither wanted nor accepted” (*see Feb. 6*). Vandenberg listed situations in other parts of the world where the French had not been cooperative with the U.S. military and the USAF, particularly in North Africa.¹⁵

Upon his return to Washington from a NATO conference in Paris, Secretary of State Dulles met with President Eisenhower on April 27 and informed him that the French, who did not have pilots trained on C-119s, envisioned USAF air crews flying them during the loan. Dulles, according to the memorandum of conversation, acknowledged that “sending U.S. personnel on combat missions in Indochina . . . would have repercussions and would raise many problems.” Dulles’s suggestion, likely after consultation with his brother, Allen, the CIA director, was to have civilian pilots of CIA-owned Civil Air Transport fly the planes.¹⁶

At an NSC meeting on April 28, President Eisenhower asked why the French could not provide pilots. General Vandenberg replied that the French “thought it would take several weeks to train their own pilots” and wanted American civilians to fly the aircraft. He said that the USAF had the planes needed to fulfill the request available in Japan and that “there would be no difficulty” painting over the insignias.¹⁷

The NSC approved the loan of six C-119s at this meeting, albeit with considerable skepticism about the French situation. Vandenberg repeated his “money down a rat hole” observation and noted his “fear that no hopeful results would be achieved in Indochina until the French changed their whole attitude.” Eisenhower, according to the memorandum of discussion, “expressed great disappointment over the developments in Laos.” Until that point, he had believed that “in due course, however slowly, the French would succeed in overcoming their enemies. This confidence had now been shattered.”¹⁸

May 4–July 16: FEAF deployed six C-119s to support the French in Indochina in Operation Swivel Chair (dubbed Operation Squaw by CAT). FEAF took the aircraft from the flight line at Ashiya Air Base and flew them to Clark Air Base, where USAF airmen repainted them with French

15. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:497 (quotes), 501, 513. The French may have made the C-119 request directly to Secretary Dulles during a NATO meeting in Paris that began on April 22, but it is not mentioned in the minutes of the discussion (*ibid.*, 483–86). As noted here, it was on the Joint Chiefs’ agenda by April 24. The Joint Chiefs had discussed and rejected another proposal at least two days earlier, one that would have sent two C-119s with USAF pilots, crews, and mechanics. See the April 23 entry in Weyland memorandum books, frame 348.

16. *FRUS 1952–54* 13:513–14 (quote, 513).

17. *Ibid.*, 13:518–19. The French believed that their pilots would need six weeks of training, but the CAT pilots who ended up flying the aircraft trained on them for only three days. *Ibid.*, 13:512; Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 164.

18. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:517–19 (1st quote, 517; other quotes, 519). In an effort to reassert the influence of the MAAG, the Pentagon had the MAAG deliver the news of the C-119 loan approval to the French. *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 9:39.



As the Joint Chiefs and the Eisenhower administration considered a French request for more aid for their fight in Indochina in April 1953, including the loan of C-119s, Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the USAF chief of staff, was one of the most outspoken skeptics. USAF.

markings. At the same time and location, the USAF gave a three-day course to twelve CAT pilots on flying the aircraft. Col. Maurice Casey of the 483d Troop Carrier Wing found the CAT pilots “exceptionally well qualified.”¹⁹

USAF crews flew the C-119s to Nha Trang. CAT pilots, with French aircrews, then ferried them to Gia Lam airfield, near Hanoi. The runway there did not prove strong enough to support regular flights for fully loaded C-119s, so after a month, the operation shifted to Cat Bi airfield, near Haiphong. Mechanics from the 483d accompanied the aircraft, with twenty stationed at Clark and eighteen deployed to Vietnam, where they wore civilian clothing. According to Colonel Casey, this was a volunteer mission for which he and his staff picked the most professional troops.

19. According to the 315th Air Division’s history, three CAT pilots flew the sorties during the operation. Historian William Leary, however, names twelve CAT pilots who received training. Leary also dates the actual deployment to Indochina as May 5 and the first flights on the 6th, while the division history lists the operation as starting on the 4th. 315th Historical Report, 2-3; Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 164; Casey interview (quote); “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:12-13.

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The maintenance airmen found that their French counterparts worked only in the mornings and drank heavily thereafter. Although the French had requested the larger aircraft specifically to move heavy equipment (*see Later April*), the USAF officer who filed the report on the operation noted that to his knowledge, during the full deployment, the C-119s delivered only one larger piece of gear, a jeep conveyed on a test drop. According to this officer, supplies transported included “barbed wire, wires, rations, ammunitions, and even champagne and ice.” The USAF withdrew the maintenance detachment and the planes in July. Technicians at Clark repainted the aircraft with USAF markings and returned them to Ashiya.²⁰

May: Far East Air Logistics Force negotiated a contract for Mitsubishi Aircraft Company in Japan to overhaul B-26s the French had used in Indochina. The same company also subsequently began overhauling F-8F engines.²¹

May 6: As France prepared to appoint a new commander for Indochina (*see May 19*), President Eisenhower wrote the U.S. ambassador in Paris, C. Douglas Dillon, that the choice needed to be a “forceful and inspirational leader” in the mold of Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny (*see Jan. 13–17, 1951*). Eisenhower also wanted Dillon to convey to French officials his desire that the French government make a “clear and unequivocal public announcement” that “France seeks self-rule for Indo-China and that practical political freedom will be an accomplished fact as soon as victory against the Communists is won.” The president hoped that “such a declaration would place this tragic conflict in an appealing perspective and win millions of friends for France, not only in Indo-China but throughout the world.” The French did not follow any of Eisenhower’s advice.²²

May 19: Gen. Henri Navarre, the new French commander in chief for Indochina, arrived in Saigon. USIS official Howard Simpson observed that “somehow he seemed out of place, a military figure from another age in search of the wrong war,” far from the “forceful and inspirational leader” President Eisenhower had urged the French to appoint (*see May 6*).²³

20. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 15; Casey interview; 315th Air Division Historical Report, 2–3, 6; “History of Project Swivel Chair,” AFHRA, reel P0290, frames 694–97 (quote, frame 694); Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam*, 10; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:211. When the FEAF commander, Lt. Gen. Otto Weyland, visited Cat Bi in early 1954 (*see Feb. 8–11, 1954*), he found it to be “the best airfield in the [Red River] delta area.” It had a 7,900-foot runway and “good storage and housing facilities.” Weyland memorandum books, frame 649.

21. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:58–59.

22. Dwight D. Eisenhower to C. Douglas Dillon, May 6, 1953, Eisenhower Diary, 1953–1961, National Archives, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/186515>.

23. Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 82.



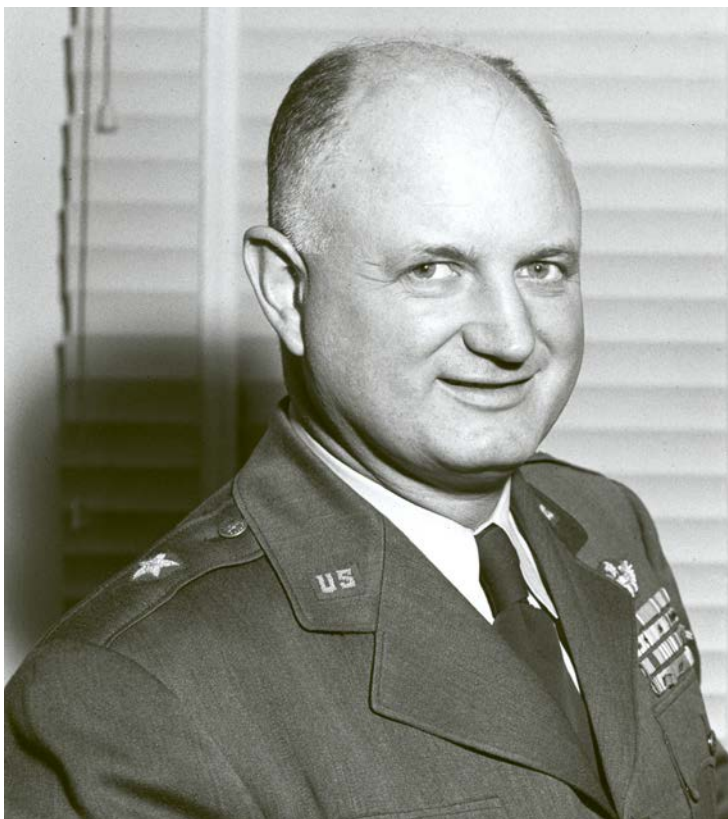
A USAF C-119 undergoing repairs in Vietnam during the Indochina War, likely at Cat Bi airfield near Haiphong. The first loaned C-119s arrived in Vietnam in May 1953, accompanied by mechanics from the 483d Troop Carrier Wing. USAF.

June 4: A French air order of battle attached to a report of this date showed the preponderance of U.S. aircraft deployed by the French in Vietnam: eighty-three F-8Fs, forty-nine C-47s, thirty-four B-26s, thirty F-6Fs (twenty-two on carriers), twelve SB2C-5s (all on carriers), and four RB-26s. The only non-American larger planes the French had were fifteen Ju-52s.²⁴

June 20: A U.S. joint military mission arrived in Saigon, charged with reviewing General Navarre's plans for winning the war in Vietnam. Lt. Gen. John W. "Iron Mike" O'Daniel, USA, led the U.S. delegation. The senior USAF officer was Brig. Gen. Chester E. McCarty, commander of 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo). The thrust of the Navarre Plan, as it became known, was to build up French and SVN forces and attempt to draw the Viet Minh into open battle, where its army could be destroyed or dispersed in a major offensive by 1955. There was considerable U.S. input at this point and over time that urged Navarre and the French to be more aggressive and to accelerate the timetable.²⁵

24. *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 9:56. For the French aircraft inventory as of 1950 when the United States more directly began providing planes, see Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 6n. None of those aircraft were still in service in 1953 except for about half of the Ju-52s, which were French-built versions (AAC-1 Toucan) of the German Junker. The French had done no conversion on the Ju-52s; they just rolled bombs out of the side door of the aircraft. Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 265. For the poor condition of these planes, and an indication that some may have been captured German aircraft from World War II, see Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 32-33.

25. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 355-57; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 15; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 9:61-67; *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:616-18; Statler, *Replacing France*, 75-76; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 56-58; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 363-64.



Brig. Gen. Chester E. McCarty, commander of 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo), was the senior Air Force officer on a team sent to Vietnam in June 1953 to review the plans of the new French commander in Indochina, Gen. Henri Navarre. USAF.

In reviewing French plans and status, McCarty and his colleagues found that the French preferred C-47s and tried to point out the advantages of C-119s for drop missions. McCarty ultimately recommended that the French have enough crews trained to operate twenty-two C-119s. His plan became the outline for the Ironage operations that began in December 1953 (*see Dec. 5-22*). The USAF officers also determined that the French were extremely short on qualified aircraft maintenance personnel and that their maintenance and supply system needed reorganization. The Americans advised that the French structure their airlift capability in the manner of the 315th Air Division and prioritize air traffic. A 315th Air Division report in the wake of the fall of Dien Bien Phu observed that “these recommendations were never completely accomplished by the French.”²⁶

26. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 5-7; Weyland memorandum books, frames 408, 441-42; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:207-10.



Col. Edward G. Lansdale in Hanoi in 1953 during the O’Daniel review mission. He returned to Vietnam for a full tour in June 1954. USAF.

In briefing his report from the mission to the Joint Chiefs and senior State Department personnel, General O’Daniel noted that his team felt the French had enough aircraft for their requirements but were short on pilots and mechanics. O’Daniel viewed French issues in Indochina as ones that could be overcome with a more aggressive attitude. For Navarre to carry out the operations they discussed, O’Daniel advised that the French create seven new divisions. Ultimately, they added just seven battalions.²⁷

A junior member of the reviewing entourage, Col. Edward Lansdale, USAF, took a dim view of French plans and filed a pessimistic report with his supervisors at the CIA. He found that many French officers were quite skeptical of him because of his counterinsurgency work in the Philippines, although Navarre seemed to welcome him. Lansdale wrote family members that the French did not understand the emerging rules of insurgent warfare, which he believed were “as different as the difference between [World] Wars I and II.” From his experience, he did not think the French and their allies had nearly the ratio of conventional troops to “have any realistic hope of defeating guerrilla forces.” Lansdale found in touring various parts of Vietnam and Laos that the French were enamored with forts and that “most of the countryside had been left to the enemy.”²⁸

27. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:688; Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright, 2018), 181–82, 184.

28. Cecil B. Currey, *Edward Lansdale: The Unquiet American* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 135 (1st quote); Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 109–13 (2d quote, 112; 3d quote, 111); Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 180–83; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 76, 88; Edward G. Lansdale, interview with Maj. Kenneth J. Alnwick, April 25, 1971, transcript, AFHRA, 53–58 (hereafter Lansdale interview [1971]). See also Bernard Fall’s comparison of French tactics to those used a hundred years earlier in Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, 107.

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Maj. Donald Miller, who was serving with the Air Force section of the MAAG at the time and likely briefed Lansdale and McCarty, described similar conditions, observing that the “whole country was just a nest of guerrilla activity.” He noted that the French “wouldn’t dare travel on the road. Every time they hit a road with their trucks and convoys, they were ambushed.” Miller added that “they didn’t have much stomach for plowing through the jungles, either, so as a result, . . . they’d hole up in a fort.” He said the French battle plan for Vietnam appeared to be “to hole up and let the enemy come to you.” As Lansdale put it, the French were “positional warfare in their thinking against an enemy who wasn’t thinking positional warfare at all.”²⁹

June 30: Gen. Nathan F. Twining succeeded General Vandenberg as USAF chief of staff.

July: USAF Air Materiel Command sent a detachment of fifty-six men from its headquarters for a six-month tour in Vietnam to help the French establish maintenance supply and inventory control at their primary depot at Bien Hoa.³⁰

July 17: The French mounted a successful airborne raid against the Viet Minh supply depots at Lang Son, eighty miles northeast of Hanoi, near the border with China. According to Howard Simpson, the French military and media celebrated the Lang Son operation as “an example of how the war should be fought, with a mix of élan, subterfuge, and surprise. It was cited as a practical lesson in taking the war to the enemy, hurting him, and not attempting to hold on to useless real estate.”³¹

July 24: The Comité de la Défense Nationale de France concluded that France should give the highest priority to defending the French-controlled government in Laos. This decision led directly to the fortification of Dien Bien Phu four months later (*see Nov. 2, 20*).³²

July 27: The parties involved signed an armistice agreement suspending armed conflict in Korea. This development freed resources and advisors

29. Miller interview, 8 (1st quote), 12 (2d–4th quotes); Lansdale interview (1971), 57 (5th quote); Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 20–21.

30. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:60; Miller interview; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 373.

31. Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 238–47; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 92–93 (quote).

32. Pierre Asselin, “New Perspectives on Dien Bien Phu,” *Explorations in Southeast Asian Studies* 1 (Fall 1997), <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/10125/2286/1/New%20Perspectives%20on%20Dien%20Bien%20Phu.pdf>; Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy* (1961; repr., New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 314–15; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 291.

that the Chinese could redirect to help the Viet Minh, which benefitted considerably from increased shipments of materiel that included heavy artillery and antiaircraft guns. The Korean experience had made Mao Zedong wary of the costs associated with provoking U.S. intervention, however, and he turned more of China's attention toward implementing the first Five-Year Plan. The Korean armistice also encouraged the French government about the prospects of a negotiated settlement in Indochina, an idea U.S. leaders opposed because of fears it would result, ultimately, in a communist takeover of the country.³³

As it did for the Chinese, the end of armed conflict in Korea allowed the United States to increase military aid in Indochina. USAF Air Materiel Command immediately diverted to the French a shipment of 16,000 500-pound general-purpose bombs.³⁴

August 3: The cover of the *Life* magazine issue of this date declared "Indochina, All But Lost." In the wake of criticism of the cover and related article, *Time* magazine ran a positive cover story on General Navarre on September 28.³⁵

August 8–13: On orders from General Navarre, the French conducted an aerial withdrawal from their outpost at Na San. The French had held this air-supplied base, approximately 150 miles west of Hanoi, since the Operation Lorraine campaign of the previous fall (*see Mid-Oct.–Dec. 1952*). The relative success of supporting an air-land base (*base aero-terrestre*) for nine months deep in Viet Minh-held territory gave several in the French high command a positive view of what could be accomplished with such a garrison. The French established a base farther to the west at Dien Bien Phu just three months later (*see Nov. 20*).³⁶

September: Following the guidance of Chinese advisors, Ho Chi Minh vetoed Giap's plan for a campaign in the Red River delta in favor of Chinese advice to concentrate on northwestern Vietnam and Laos in an attempt to draw French forces into areas more favorable for the Viet Minh.³⁷

September 3: Acting on the urging of General Trapnell, chief of MAAG-Indonesia, FEAF notified General McCarty that the French had requested twenty-five additional C-47s and equipment to activate another C-47

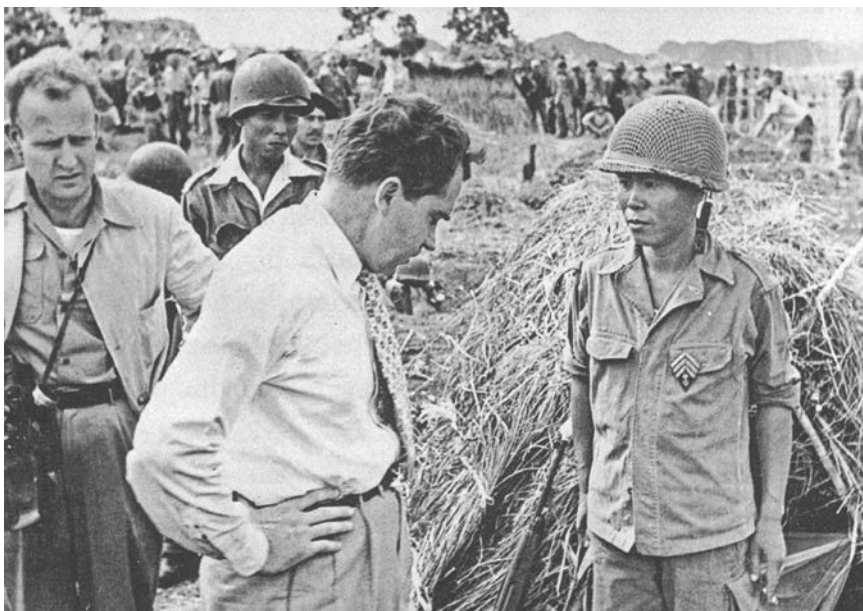
33. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 50; Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 180; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 168, 175; Statler, *Replacing France*, 70–74; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 395–96.

34. "FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations," 1:71.

35. Discussed in Logevall, *Embers of War*, 362–64; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 83–86.

36. Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 289–91.

37. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 43–45.



Vice President Richard M. Nixon visited Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in October–November 1953 as part of a tour of Asia. *Nixon Library*.

squadron. Trapnell advised that the USAF have available up to 100 C-47s for French use if they requested them to avoid potential “adverse criticism from diplomatic and political sources, especially if the French suffer reverses similar to the Laotian invasion.” McCarty expressed considerable concern about what the French would do with the C-47s and outlined a counterproposal built around short-term loans of C-119s that became the basis for the Ironage operations (*see Dec. 5–22*).³⁸

September 23–October 4: In Saigon and at Clark Air Base, pilots and aircrews from the 483d Troop Carrier Wing conducted training with French crews on C-119s. Eleven French crews completed the course. Both officer and enlisted pilots participated, many of whom had received their flight training in the United States. USAF instructors found that the enlisted pilots generally had more flying time than the officers, but the French air force mandated that enlisted men could be copilots only. Colonel Casey of the 483d thought the French airmen they trained were “quite good pilots” but expressed concern that they insisted on wine with their lunches before flying.³⁹

38. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 7–11 (quote, 8); Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 373–74.

39. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 3–4; Casey interview (quote). According to the division report, at this time, the French had 356 pilots in Indochina, 227 of whom were officers, with 129 enlisted.

September 28: The Soviets sent a proposal to the United States, France, and the United Kingdom for a five-power conference, to include China, to discuss reducing international tensions. The resulting summit in January–February 1954, which did not include the Chinese, engineered the Geneva conference, which convened in April 1954 and included negotiation of the final accords for Korea as well as an armistice in Indochina (*see May 8, 1954; July 21–22, 1954*). The United States begrudgingly acceded to Chinese participation in the Geneva conference (*see Feb. 18, 1954*).⁴⁰

September 30: The United States approved \$385 million in additional funding for the French military effort to underwrite the Navarre Plan (*see June 20*).⁴¹

October 9: FEAF notified 315th Air Division that the Department of Defense had approved a loan of C-119s to the French not to exceed twenty-two aircraft. The directive ordered the 483d Troop Carrier Wing at Ashiya to stand ready to deliver these planes, which would be considered on loan, on seventy-two hours' notice.⁴²

October 11: The French requested training for fourteen more C-119 crews, seven by FEAF and seven in Europe by U.S. Air Forces Europe.⁴³

October 22: France signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with Laos. According to Bernard Fall, “While the treaty did not contain a hard-and-fast clause making it mandatory for France to come to the defense of Laos, the commitment was clearly implied. Indeed, there was no other reason for Laos to sign the treaty.” General Navarre also believed that France was committed to the defense of Laos, prompting the reinforcement of Dien Bien Phu a month later (*see Nov. 2, 20*).⁴⁴

October 31–November 4: Vice President Richard M. Nixon visited Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia as part of a tour of Asia. A FEAF report later observed that such visits by “high United States officials,” both civilian and military, “conveyed the impression that all support would be furnished,” which in the French interpretation “meant that their desires alone established a requirement.”⁴⁵

40. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 46, 48; Statler, *Replacing France*, 67; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 395–99; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 13–14.

41. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:810–19; Statler, *Replacing France*, 76; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 364–66.

42. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 13.

43. *Ibid.*, 5.

44. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 34–35; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:844–45.

45. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13: 855–60, 930–31; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 373–77; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 58; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 97–99; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:46 (quotes).

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November: A National Opinion Research Corporation poll found that 55 percent of Americans favored USAF intervention in Vietnam “if it looks like the Communists might take over all of Indochina.” The story was different in France, where an autumn 1953 poll showed that only 15 percent of the French population still favored a military solution in Southeast Asia. Another 15 percent wanted French troops completely withdrawn, while 58 percent preferred negotiations or lacked interest in the issue.⁴⁶

In figures for November 1953, the French had 120 F-8Fs, sixty-seven C-47s, forty-two B-26s, and four RB-26s. Indicative of overall French air force under-resourcing issues, the French listed 356 pilots in Indochina as of this date, down 20 percent from the 445 pilots they had in November 1951.⁴⁷

November 2: Acting on what he said was intelligence that the Viet Minh was moving a force toward Laos, General Navarre drafted a directive for the airborne reoccupation of Dien Bien Phu, which became known as Operation Castor (*see Nov. 20*). What French intelligence actually observed is unclear, however, as Ho, Giap, and their Chinese advisors were still finalizing their campaign plans at the time, and the Viet Minh did not begin marching a division toward northwestern Vietnam until mid-November.⁴⁸

Early November: General McCarty accompanied General O’Daniel and other senior members of their review team (*see June 20*) on a follow-up visit to Vietnam, at the insistence of the U.S. administration. The French “were not too cooperative,” according to General Weyland’s notes from his debriefing with McCarty, but they “appear[ed] to give lip service in order to get all of the equipment possible.” McCarty was left with the impression that the French had no intention of granting Vietnamese independence and intended to remain in Indochina indefinitely. The French indicated no long-range plans for operations, meaning that they did not share information with the Americans about Operation Castor, which they launched just days later (*see Nov. 20*). McCarty reported that the French wanted twenty-five more C-47s to activate another squadron but had not mustered the maintenance personnel to service the ones they already had. He recommended against the additional C-47s and was furious when he learned a few weeks later that O’Daniel had advocated for the loan in his mission report.⁴⁹

46. Prados, *Sky Must Fall*, 69 (quote); Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 95.

47. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:11.

48. Ted Morgan, *Valley of Death: The Tragedy at Dien Bien Phu that Led America into the Vietnam War* (New York: Random House, 2010), 185–88; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 45; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 390; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 101–2.

49. Weyland memorandum books, frames 552, 575–76, 583, 590–91. The exact dates of the trip are unknown, but McCarty was preparing to leave for Indochina on November 3 and was back in Tokyo by November 18.



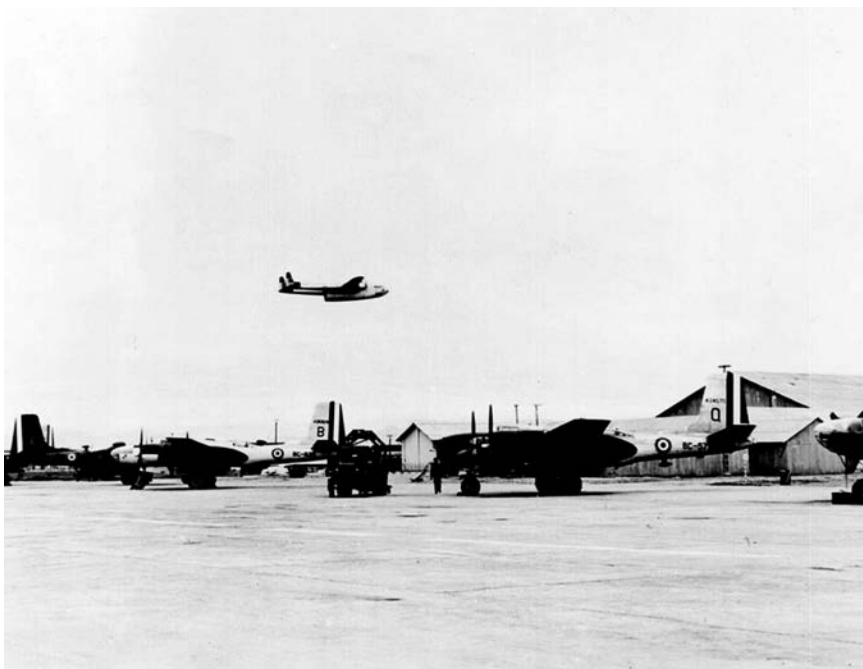
French paratroopers in Vietnam, August 1953. On November 20, the French dropped three battalions of paratroopers to capture Dien Bien Phu. USAF.

November 12–July 30, 1954: The 24th Air Depot Wing (which was redesignated the 6424th in February 1954) provided a team of supply technicians during this period as augmentees to MAAG-Indochina for an operation known as Project Bugle Boy. The detachment consisted of eight officers, eighteen enlisted men, and two Department of the Air Force civilians. Its mission, according to the wing report, was to “furnish technical assistance and evaluate the unsatisfactory supply situation reported by the MAAG to Headquarters USAF.” As of June 1954, the team leader was Maj. Glenn R. Collins.⁵⁰

November 14–December 6: The 483d Troop Carrier Wing flew five C-119s from Clark Air Base to Cat Bi to qualify French crews on them for the French to begin operating the aircraft. There is little documentation on this project, which rolled into the first, more formalized Ironage operation on December 5 (*see Dec. 5–22*). It included the first C-119 flights to Dien Bien Phu, with a few flown by USAF pilots (*see Nov. 25*). French crews made four drops at Dien Bien Phu on December 3.⁵¹

50. “Support in French Indo-China,” 6424th Air Depot Wing, AFHRA, reel P0303, frames 832–34; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:115–16.

51. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 3, 5; Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 16.



A USAF C-119 on loan to the French takes off from Cat Bi airfield near Haiphong on a flight bound for Dien Bien Phu, which had to be supplied entirely by air. USAF.

November 18: Through diplomatic channels, the French requested a loan of twenty-five additional C-47s, formalizing the solicitation they had just made to General O'Daniel's team (*see Early Nov.*).⁵²

November 20: The French launched Operation Castor, the capture and fortification of Dien Bien Phu. More than sixty C-47s carried three battalions of French paratroopers to a mountain-surrounded valley in the T'ai highlands nearly 200 miles west of Hanoi, only twelve miles from Laos. The remote outpost was at a key intersection of roads into Laos.⁵³

French reasoning for the Dien Bien Phu mission was hazy. Navarre variously said it was to defend Laos or to gain a base for limited offensive operations. Many of the officers on his senior staff expressed doubts during the planning stages. Navarre did not consult U.S. military leaders in the MAAG before launching Castor, and they immediately voiced serious concerns after it began about the placement of a large force at an isolated position that was difficult to supply. Navarre also did not inform superiors in Paris of his plans, believing he was justified to undertake the operation

52. *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:874-76.

53. John R. Nordell, *The Undetected Enemy: French and American Miscalculations at Dien Bien Phu, 1953* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 4; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 302.

because of his orders to defend Laos (*see Oct. 22*). Navarre's staff did not have a completed operations plan until December 3, two weeks after deployment was already underway.⁵⁴

The heavy equipment the French brought in to build the Dien Bien Phu garrison over the subsequent weeks came on USAF-loaned C-47s and C-119s. According to a 315th Air Division report, "the French accepted the C-119s only after being flatly informed that additional C-47s were not available." The USAF did deliver the twenty-five French-requested C-47s on November 18, right before the Castor operation. The USAF deployed airmen to Vietnam to maintain, load, and ferry the C-119s (*see Dec. 5-22*).⁵⁵

C-47s were reliable aircraft but could carry only 2.5 short tons. Cargo had to be discharged out of side doors, necessitating as many as twelve passes over a drop zone to push out an entire load. C-119s could carry about six short tons of supplies or equipment, which could be discharged in one pass by way of rear clamshell doors.⁵⁶

According to Charles Shrader's reading of French records, between November 20, 1953, and January 25, 1954, "aerial cargo deliveries to Dien Bien Phu averaged 157 tons per day, for a total of almost 10,517 tons during the period, of which 4,383 tons were airdropped, 2,043 tons were airdropped, and 4,091 tons were parachuted." Materials delivered included steel planking for the main airfield, ammunition, and rations.⁵⁷

November 25: USAF pilots successfully air-dropped a 17,000-pound bulldozer for the French at Dien Bien Phu. The aircrews delivered it in two sections, from two USAF-loaned C-119s. These drops were among the few cases where USAF pilots flew supply missions. An earlier bulldozer drop on the 23d had failed when the heavy cargo broke loose from the parachutes. With the new equipment, the French were able to repair and reopen the main airstrip so aircraft could begin landing with supplies.⁵⁸

54. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 182-84; Morgan, *Valley of Death*, 188-91; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 381-86, 543; *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1063-64; Fall, *Street Without Joy*, 314-17; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 292-95; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 94-95, 101-3; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 377; Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 421-22. Edward Lansdale later observed that "Dien Bien Phu was intended to prove the theory that if you could ever get guerrilla forces lured onto a killing ground where you'd have enough firepower to liquidate the guerrillas, you'd win the war against guerrillas. . . . The enemy also looked at the French putting up positions there and were saying to themselves, 'Gee, these guys are getting onto our killing ground.' . . . The guerrillas made better use of this theory than the French did." Lansdale interview (1971), 58-59.

55. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 16; 315th Air Division Historical Report, 11; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 377.

56. Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 298.

57. *Ibid.*, 306-7.

58. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 5; Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 16; Casey interview; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 302; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 105-6. Colonel Casey of the 483d confirmed in his interview that USAF crews flew these sorties, as well as another bulldozer drop.

1953

November 27–December 2: Seven French air crews flew to Clark Air Base for C-119 training by the 483d Troop Carrier Wing. These crews brought the total trained to eighteen, but Colonel Casey of the 483d found that only twelve of the pilots were available for service.⁵⁹

November 29: Through an exchange with a Swedish newspaper, Ho publicly indicated willingness to “bring about an armistice and solve the Vietnam problem through negotiations,” if the French were interested. Otherwise, the Viet Minh remained determined to win the conflict on the battlefield.⁶⁰

December: The USAF delivered twenty-five additional C-47s to Vietnam on loan to the French (*see Nov. 18*).⁶¹

Also in December, despite the wartime footing, the Viet Minh began the first elements of what became its land reform program. The goals were to attempt to break the influence of landlords in what was essentially a feudal economy and to ease widespread food shortages. Land reform efforts accelerated in the fall of 1954 after the Geneva settlement (*see July 21–22, 1954*) as the communist government consolidated its hold on newly created North Vietnam. While the process, which ran through the summer of 1956, did end the control of the large landowners, it also led to considerable conflict in the countryside as well as some leadership turnover at the national level (*see Apr. 1955; Aug. 1955*).⁶²

December 4–8: President Eisenhower met in Bermuda with the prime ministers of France and the United Kingdom, Joseph Laniel and Winston Churchill. The United States had hoped that it could use the summit to strengthen western unity on several issues, but it did not accomplish this purpose. Laniel, who was ill for most of the summit, indicated that he still planned to push for a conference to consider a negotiated settlement in Indochina (*see Sept. 28, 1953; Feb. 18, 1954*), although he wanted to undertake it from a position of military strength.⁶³

December 5–22: Although C-119s had flown missions in Vietnam before this date (*see Nov. 14–Dec. 6*), the secret operation the USAF named Ironage I began on December 5. It involved twelve C-119s, plus three more

59. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 5.

60. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 14.

61. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 7–8, 10; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 16; Ronald B. Frankum Jr., *Like Rolling Thunder: The Air War in Vietnam, 1964–1975* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 4.

62. Edwin E. Moise, “Land Reform and Land Reform Errors in North Vietnam,” *Pacific Affairs* 49 (Spring 1976): 70–92.

63. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 399–402; Statler, *Replacing France*, 77; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 377–78.

for ferrying purposes, that the French flew on 187 sorties, dropping 1,084 tons of equipment, ammunition, and supplies. Barbed wire, tent stakes, and 105mm ammunition were the primary cargos during this period. All of the C-119s used in the six Ironage phases were reported as “on loan.” The phases followed consecutively, with USAF C-119s in continuous service with the French until September 1954. Although the drop missions flown by these aircraft are remembered because of Dien Bien Phu, the French were supplying at least fifteen large garrisons in northern Vietnam during this period and many other smaller ones, as well as troops in Laos.⁶⁴

To support the C-119s, the USAF deployed to Cat Bi detachments of the 483d Troop Carrier Wing, the 8081st Aerial Resupply Unit, and a provisional maintenance squadron of the Far East Air Logistics Force in what was known as Operation Cat Paw. Col. Maurice Casey, commander of the 483d, had oversight of these troops and personally assigned them, but he did not deploy other than for inspections. Senior officers on site at Cat Bi included Lt. Col. Hollis B. Tara and subsequently Maj. Thomas E. Yarbrough. After the USAF personnel relocated to Da Nang (which the French called Tourane) in May 1954, Lt. Col. Donald C. Pricer became commander of the 483d detachment. According to Pricer, “We were volunteered,” as “no one liked to be there.” USAF airmen remained in Vietnam until the French returned the last U.S. planes in September 1954 (see *Sept. 7, 1954*).⁶⁵

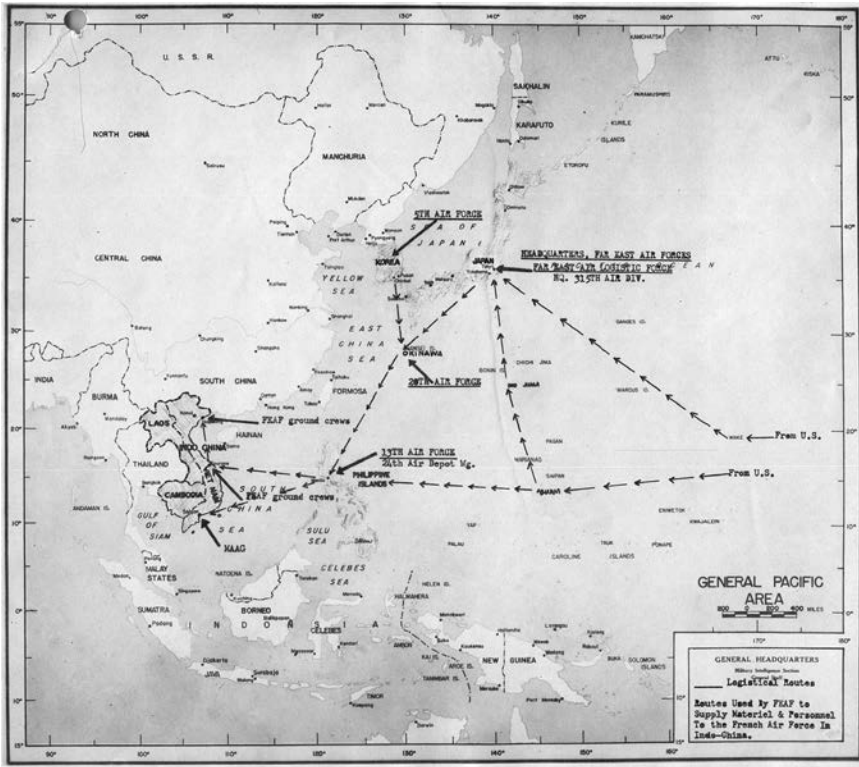
The 483d detachment stood at 121 men at the peak of operations in April 1954. Initially, tours were only for thirty days, increasing to sixty days in mid-1954, so a considerable number of airmen rotated through Cat Bi and Da Nang.⁶⁶

For major maintenance of the C-119s throughout the Ironage operations, aircraft had to be flown all the way to Ashiya Air Base. Only in the

64. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 11-13, 19-20. According to a FEAF report, “In late 1953, approximately 80 drops zones were being used [by the French air force] every month. Many of the outposts were entirely dependent upon parachute supply.” “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:12. For more Ironage coverage in this report, see 1:75-77, 211-29. The report noted (p. 213) that since the C-119s were often in transit for maintenance or repair, the number reported in official use was generally half the number of aircraft in the actual rotation.

65. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 16; Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 16-17; Casey interview; Thomas A. Julian, interview with Ray L. Bowers, June 8, 1971, AFHRA, K239.0512-776, reel 30223, frames 270-80 (hereafter Julian interview); Donald C. Pricer, interview with Ray L. Bowers, October 20, 1970, AFHRA, reel 30213, frames 1042-44 (hereafter Pricer interview); John D. Plating, “Failure in the Margins: Aerial Resupply at Dien Bien Phu” (MA thesis, Ohio State University, 2000), 62, 93, https://archive.org/details/DTIC_ADA384883; 315th Air Division Historical Report, 11-12, 17-18. According to the FEAF report, the initial volunteer rate was 30 percent, but that declined to 5 percent over the course of the operation. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:148. For more Cat Paw coverage in this report, see 1:162-73.

66. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 16-17; Pricer interview; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:151-52. In contrast, deployments for USAF mechanics sent in February 1954 to work on B-26s and C-47s were for ninety days, with the period subsequently extended to 120 days.



A contemporary FEAF map shows the supply routes for USAF aircraft as they carried materiel destined for the French in Indochina in 1953–54. *USAF*.

spring of 1954, when operational tempo increased significantly, did Clark Air Base begin stocking larger parts and rebuilding engines.⁶⁷

December 6: The Vietnamese politburo approved Giap’s plan to lay siege to Dien Bien Phu. Ho’s government and Chinese advisors felt that a significant military victory would dramatically improve the Vietnamese communist position at prospective peace talks in 1954. General Navarre did not believe that the Viet Minh, without aerial resupply, could sustain a force in the remote hills of northwestern Vietnam large enough to seriously threaten the garrison and on December 3 had issued orders to hold Dien Bien Phu at all costs. It was to be the main French base for operations against whatever troops Giap sent in that direction, or into Laos.⁶⁸

December 7: The French ordered the abandonment of their garrison at Lai Chau, the provincial capital of their T’ai allies in northwestern Vietnam,

67. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 25–26.
 68. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 390–94.

about sixty miles north of Dien Bien Phu. With a Viet Minh division rapidly approaching, the French evacuated most of their troops by air but left the T'ai partisans to march through Viet Minh-infested roadless jungle to Dien Bien Phu, with disastrous results. The withdrawal from Lai Chau left Dien Bien Phu as the only substantial French outpost in the region.⁶⁹

Mid-December: Giap bypassed Dien Bien Phu and other smaller French garrisons and marched two regiments into Laos, one moving west, the other south. On December 26, the Viet Minh occupied Thakhek, on the Mekong River nearly 300 miles south of Dien Bien Phu, and subsequently threatened the major air base south of there at Seno (now Xeno). The western push was in the direction of Luang Prabang. Meanwhile, by the end of the month, Giap had encircled Dien Bien Phu with enough troops to throttle French operations from the series of fortifications there. The move into Laos befuddled the French and forced General Navarre to spread more of his thin resources to bases across Laos. As with the previous Viet Minh invasion of Laos in the spring (*see early April*), this one also lost thrust. In mid-January, Giap began focusing on an assault on Dien Bien Phu (*see Jan. 20, 1954*), but he also sent another force into Laos later that month (*see Jan. 27, 1954*) as he continued to build up supplies around Dien Bien Phu.⁷⁰

December 18: A “special estimate” by the U.S. intelligence community, in considering possible U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, raised the concern that “the military and political nature of the Indochina war is such that even if the U.S. defeated the Viet Minh field forces, guerrilla action could probably be continued indefinitely and preclude the establishment of complete non-Communist control over the area.” The document noted that “under such circumstances, the U.S. might have to maintain a military commitment in Indochina for years to come.”⁷¹

On the same date, the French landed at Dien Bien Phu with parts for the first of ten M24 tanks that they broke down, transported, and reassembled over the course of a month. They used specially modified Bristol 170s to carry the five-ton hulls of the tanks. It took two 170s and five C-47s to transport the parts for one M24. The French had commandeered the 170s from commercial airlines operating in Indochina. They had the first tank reassembled at Dien Bien Phu by December 25. Paratroop officers who

69. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 63–68.

70. Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 50–52; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 309–10; Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, 125–26; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 413; Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, 8–9; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 118–20.

71. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:924–29 (quotes, 928).



U.S. ambassador Donald R. Heath (*left*) in Saigon in 1954. Heath was a “Francophile of the first order” according to historian Fredrick Logevall, and he strongly advocated for ever-increasing U.S. aid for the French as their situation in Indochina worsened in 1953–54. *USN*.

remained there from the initial occupation (*see Nov. 20*) wondered what the new commander of the garrison, Col. Christian de Castries, a tank commander, would be able to do with an armored unit in jungles they struggled to penetrate on foot.⁷²

December 18–19: USAF technicians and a ferry crew under Lt. Col. Hollis Tara deployed from Cat Bi to Dien Bien Phu to replace the engine on a C-119 that had been forced to land at Dien Bien Phu on December 13. The airmen slept in their plane under French guard and flew out the next day with both aircraft after completing the repairs.⁷³

Colonel Casey accompanied a crew to Dien Bien Phu for an engine repair at an unspecified date, before the siege. He recalled thinking that it looked like a “dumb place” for a garrison and an airstrip. Casey said that the French base commander, Colonel de Castries, “laughed at the possibility of [Viet Minh] artillery.” Casey subsequently asked Maj.

72. Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 117, 336; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 112–15.

73. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 17–18; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:216–17.



A B-26 flies overhead at Na San airfield in northwestern Vietnam. A C-47 with French markings is in the foreground. The USAF-loaned B-26s were the primary bombers the French had during the conflict. *USAF*.

Gen. Henri C. Lauzin, commanding general of the French Far Eastern Air Force, about potential evacuation plans for the fortress. Lauzin had the most concern about the vulnerability of the position of all senior French commanders.⁷⁴

December 23–January 7, 1954: Ironage II, which ran during this period, involved twelve loaned C-119s, with eighteen total in the rotation, that the French flew on 156 sorties, dropping 936 tons of equipment and supplies. During this phase, deliveries expanded to more of the isolated French garrisons. Because of the heavy C-119 traffic at Cat Bi airfield, the French reported in late December that runways were deteriorating and requested U.S. assistance in repairing them, which the Americans provided.⁷⁵

December 31: General Navarre admitted to Ambassador Heath the possibility that the Viet Minh might be able to take Dien Bien Phu, although he “expressed entire confidence in [the] ultimate success of his military plan,” according to the ambassador. To that point, the French had, according to Howard Simpson, been doing “a good job of selling Dien Bien Phu to many in the American Mission as a favorable turning point in the war.”⁷⁶

74. Casey interview (quotes); Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 106–7.

75. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 11–12, 20, 31; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:218.

76. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:937 (1st quote); Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 116 (2d quote).



A USAF airman in the background supervises the unloading of supplies from a USAF C-124 on the steel plank runway at Cat Bi in 1954, under guard from a member of the French Foreign Legion. *USAF.*

The Siege of Dien Bien Phu January–March 1954

The year 1954 began with Gen. Henri Navarre requesting USAF aircraft, pilots, and mechanics to bolster French defense and supply of Dien Bien Phu. Within two and a half months, the Viet Minh laid siege to the garrison, surprising the French with the artillery its troops and porters had hauled up the hills surrounding the fortress. By the end of March, Viet Minh guns commanded the airstrips at Dien Bien Phu, to the point that aircraft were no longer able to land. All supply had to be airdropped, with the USAF providing the planes, the rigging, and the technicians to load and service the aircraft.

Hundreds of USAF airmen, primarily mechanics, deployed to Vietnam in the first half of 1954 to support the largely American air fleet that the French were flying. Hundreds of others serviced aircraft at Clark Air Base in the Philippines and Ashiya Air Base in Japan and prepared shipments of supplies for Vietnam. USAF pilots flew shuttle flights to Indochina and from base to base in-country.

As the situation at Dien Bien Phu worsened and prospects of the French losing the war and perhaps withdrawing from Southeast Asia became a possibility, discussion began at the highest levels of what the United States might be able to do to try to relieve the situation. All scenarios involved USAF and/or carrier-based USN aircraft, flying conventional or nuclear raids against the Viet Minh. By the end of March, there was also discussion of the deployment of U.S. ground forces as well.

1954

January 2: As Gen. Henri Navarre started to realize the level of threat to the garrison at Dien Bien Phu and to various points in Laos (*see Dec. 31, 1953*), he and his staff began considering the assets they needed for expanded defense and resupply. On this date, Maj. Gen. Pierre-Louis Bodet, the



A French crew at Cat Bi airfield returning from a mission in a USAF-loaned C-119. The steel plank runway required significant repair during this period. USAF.

French air force commander in Indochina, met with Ambassador Donald Heath and Maj. Gen. Thomas Trapnell, the MAAG-Indochina commander, and made extensive requests for U.S. aircraft and airmen. These included ten B-26s to be delivered immediately and twenty-five more after the French trained pilots for them (formally requested on January 13), as well as maintenance airmen for these planes; ground crews to support two C-47 squadrons; and USAF pilots for the twelve C-119s of Ironage II (*see Dec. 23, 1953–Jan. 7, 1954*) for supply missions in noncombat areas. Trapnell advised the French to consider employing Civil Air Transport (CAT) aviators instead of USAF ones, as neither he nor the ambassador could predict whether Washington would agree to the deployment of USAF pilots. When CAT learned that its services might be needed, it sent twenty-one pilots to Ashiya Air Base for training on C-119s.¹

The French had provided only limited support for the B-26s they had already received on loan, with thirty crews for the thirty-five aircraft they had at this point. For 1953, their B-26 utilization rate had been only 22.8 hours per month per plane, which Far East Air Forces (FEAF) described as “wastefully low.” According to that command’s report, when

1. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:938–39, 942, 943–44, 959–60, 983–85; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 381–82; Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 181.

Lt. Gen. Otto P. Weyland was informed of the new requests, he asserted that “providing the French air force with additional B-26 aircraft could in no way increase the utilization rate and seemed like an attempt to solve a problem by aggravating it.”²

January 8: According to the memorandum of conversation at the NSC meeting, as discussion turned to French requests for aircraft and technicians (*see Jan. 2*), President Dwight Eisenhower “commented that even if we did not send pilots, we could certainly send planes and men to take over the maintenance of the planes.” The president asked Harold E. Talbott, the secretary of the Air Force, if the USAF had the B-26s to support the request and received an affirmative reply. Adm. Arthur Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, suggested that a U.S. air strike, by either the Navy or the Air Force, might ease the threat to Dien Bien Phu. Eisenhower wondered whether U.S. pilots could fly aircraft from which the insignias had been removed from a U.S. carrier to make such a strike.³

On the same date, General Trapnell and the Air Force and Army section heads from MAAG-Indochina visited Tokyo and briefed General Weyland and his FEAF staff. According to Weyland’s notes, “Trapnell stated that the French are presumably adopting a change in tactics from one of static defense to one of mobility and increased offensive action.” However, “recent offensive action by the Communist forces has thrown the French into a spin, and we have had some ‘panic button’ type messages requesting help.” Weyland recorded that he stated that “we would help the French all that we could, but I did not expect to be sucked in while doing so.”⁴

January 8–16: The next phase of the overlapping Ironage operations (*see Dec. 5–22, 1953*), Ironage III, involved seventeen loaned C-119s that the French flew on 146 sorties, delivering 864 tons of equipment and supplies. During this phase, four of the C-119s returned to Japan for major maintenance.⁵

January 14: The French reported that they were supplying Dien Bien Phu with an average of sixty C-47 and twenty C-119 flights per day.⁶

2. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:77. As of January 1954, the French had fifty-eight maintenance crews for sixty-nine C-47s. *Ibid.*, 1:78. General Weyland had written General Trapnell just five days before this meeting, asking, according to Weyland’s notes, that Trapnell “keep pressure on the French to provide proper support for [the] aircraft and proper utilization and maintenance of the aircraft.” Weyland memorandum books, frame 602.

3. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:952–53; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 383.

4. Weyland memorandum books, frames 609–11.

5. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 11–12, 20; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:218.

6. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:965; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 418.

1954

January 15: The French established the number of USAF mechanics they needed to support their expanded air fleet at 400 and reiterated the request for B-26s (*see Jan. 2, 8*).⁷

On the same date, the U.S. Joint Chiefs circulated a document with several thoughts for the French to help revitalize the Navarre Plan (*see June 20, 1953*). One proposal was to suggest to the French the possibility of organizing “a volunteer air group of personnel from various anti-communist nations or groups to serve with the French Union forces in Indochina.” By the NSC meeting on January 21, Admiral Radford was referring to this suggestion as “a ‘Flying Tiger’ operation.” He believed such an organization could be created but that it would be “a very expensive undertaking.”⁸

January 16: President Eisenhower formed a special committee on Indochina that included senior representatives from the Defense and State Departments, the Joint Chiefs, and the CIA. The group took an interest in the possibility of advising the French on irregular warfare and to that end added to its ranks Col. Edward Lansdale, USAF, fresh from his work for the CIA in the Philippines (*see June 20, 1953*).⁹

On the same date, Eisenhower approved NCS-177 (later NSC-5405), “United States Objectives and Courses of Action with Respect to Southeast Asia.” The document opened with the observation that a communist victory in Vietnam, in addition to its impact in Asia, would also “have the most serious repercussions on U.S. and free world interests in Europe and elsewhere.” The authors concluded, however, that “with continued U.S. economic and material assistance, the Franco-Vietnamese forces are not in danger of being militarily defeated by the Viet Minh unless there is large-scale Chinese Communist intervention.”¹⁰

January 17–31: In Ironage IV, the French flew loaned C-119s on 190 sorties, delivering 1,132 tons of equipment and supplies, including 700 tons of barbed wire and stakes. The operation began with fifteen aircraft and ended with twelve, with seventeen total planes involved in the rotation.¹¹

January 20: The French intercepted and decoded messages that indicated that the Viet Minh would attack at Dien Bien Phu on January 25. When Viet Minh counterintelligence learned that the French had the date, the Viet Minh pushed the assault back a day. Given time to reevaluate, Vo Nguyen

7. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:966–67.

8. *Ibid.*, 13:969 (1st quote), 988 (2d–3d quotes).

9. *Ibid.*, 13:1002–6, 1041; Currey, *Lansdale*, 136–37.

10. *FRUS 1952–54*, 12:366–81 (1st quote, 367; 2d quote, 370), 13:971–76.

11. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 11–12, 21; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:218–19.



Lt. Gen. Otto P. "Opie" Weyland commanded Far East Air Forces through March 1954 and played a central role in coordinating USAF support as the French situation worsened in Indochina. USAF.

Giap called off the advance, stressing the need for more preparations, to the consternation of his senior Chinese advisor, Wei Guoqing. Time proved Giap right to wait and reinforce (*see Mar. 13, 14*). He also began developing a diversionary move into Laos (*see Jan. 27*).¹²

January 23: The French government agreed to contract with CAT to fly the C-119s and withdrew the request for USAF pilots (*see Jan. 2*). France reiterated the need for 400 U.S. maintenance personnel (*see Jan. 15*).¹³

January 25: General Weyland met in Washington with Admiral Radford and Gen. Nathan Twining, the USAF chief of staff. According to Weyland's notes, Twining reported that President Eisenhower was "vitaly and personally interested" in the situation in Indochina and had "clearly indicated that he would go to any extremes necessary to back up the French."

12. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 418–26.

13. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:996–97, 1004.

1954

Weyland “re-emphasized the danger involved by the active participation of USAF personnel” and pointed out that if it happened, it would “almost surely result in progressively greater involvement.” Twining was “in complete agreement” but indicated that it “might be necessary for USAF personnel to participate ‘by order.’” A FEAF report stated that Weyland believed that if the United States did intervene, that “it should be done openly” and that the USAF should “assume the responsibilities of a combatant.” As things stood, the document indicated Weyland’s concern over possible “inadvertent intrusion on national policy” while endeavoring to respond to French requests.¹⁴

January 27: Giap sent a Viet Minh division into northern Laos, marching in four columns from the Dien Bien Phu area toward Luang Prabang. It took the French time to figure out what the Viet Minh was doing and react (*see Feb. 9*). On February 13, General Navarre sent five battalions by air to Luang Prabang and began pushing more materiel to French encampments in the region, further stretching the already overextended aerial supply efforts and significantly slowing the pace of buildup at Dien Bien Phu.¹⁵

January 29: At a meeting of the president’s special committee on Indochina (*see Jan. 16*), Admiral Radford reported that he had told his French counterpart that the United States “does not believe the French have exhausted all efforts to get French civilian maintenance crews” and had suggested they consider mobilizing civilian mechanics from Air France. Undersecretary of State Walter Bedell Smith recommended that the United States send 200 USAF technicians and tell the French to provide the rest. According to the memorandum of conversation, Radford “said this could be done and that the Air Force is, somewhat reluctantly, making plans to this end.” He added that “we had let the French know that if American mechanics were sent, they must be used only on air bases which were entirely secure from capture.” Discussion followed concerning whether deployment of the technicians might be considered a step toward U.S. intervention. Smith, who had served as Eisenhower’s chief of staff during World War II, said he did not believe that it did but added that he thought that “the importance of winning in Indochina was so great that if worst came to worst he personally would favor intervention with U.S. air and naval forces—not ground forces.” Radford agreed.¹⁶

14. Weyland memorandum books, frame 628 (1st–6th quotes); “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:74–75 (7th–9th quotes).

15. Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 310–11.

16. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1003 (quotes); Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 385–86. For safety and capture concerns, see “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:80–82.



In his State of the Union address in January 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower said that “communist aggression, halted in Korea, continues to meet in Indochina the vigorous resistance of France and the Associated States, assisted by timely aid from our country.” The level of aid the French were requesting was increasing precipitiously at the time and focused on USAF aircraft and mechanics. *National Archives*.

As for the B-26s, by this point, the French had increased their request to forty-seven total aircraft, including ten that were in the process of being delivered, twelve to cover attrition with existing squadrons, and twenty-five with which to form a new squadron. Filling the request for just the first twenty-two meant taking planes from U.S. operational squadrons in Asia. The committee members decided to authorize delivery of the twenty-two aircraft (*see Feb. 8*) but to withhold a decision on the additional twenty-five until they received further reports from U.S. officers in the theater. The USAF was to be alerted that these planes “may have to be furnished on short notice.”¹⁷

President Eisenhower approved the committee’s recommendations on the same date, and the secretary of the Air Force received a directive to prepare the mechanics and the aircraft for service in Indochina (*see Feb. 5*). Headquarters had advised FEAF on January 20 of the possibility of technician deployment, which General Weyland discussed in Washington during his visit the same week (*see Jan. 25*). Brig. Gen. Albert G. Hewitt

17. *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1002 (quote), 1037.

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of Far East Air Logistics Force flew to Saigon on February 2 to lay the groundwork with the MAAG for the operation.¹⁸

“Don’t think I like to send them there,” Eisenhower commented about the technicians a few days later. “But we can’t get anywhere in Asia by just sitting here in Washington doing nothing. My God, we must not lose Asia. We’ve got to look this thing in the face.”¹⁹

At the same January 29 meeting of the special committee on Indochina, CIA director Allen Dulles asked whether Colonel Lansdale, because of his experience as an “unconventional warfare officer,” could be sent as part of a group of five liaison officers to work with General Navarre and his staff. Admiral Radford thought this suggestion was a good idea but said that Lansdale, who was at the meeting, should wait until Lt. Gen. John O’Daniel took over as chief of the MAAG, a decision the committee had just made (*see Mar. 31*). Lansdale ultimately did not deploy until four months later (*see June 1*).²⁰

February 1–March 14: Ironage V began with four loaned C–119s and peaked at twelve, which the French flew on 286 sorties, dropping 1,703 tons of equipment and supplies. In addition to continued drops at Dien Bien Phu, this operation also entailed flights into Laos in February to support French troops near Luang Prabang countering the Viet Minh advance (*see Jan. 27, Feb. 9*).²¹

February 3: In a raid on Do Son airfield near Haiphong, the Viet Minh destroyed three loaned C–47s and significantly damaged a fourth.²²

On the same date, General O’Daniel, who was on another inspection tour in Indochina, visited Dien Bien Phu. He wrote in his report that “I feel that it can withstand any kind of an attack that the Viet Minh are capable

18. *Ibid.*, 13:1007; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 9:245; “Support in French Indo-China,” frames 789–91; Weyland memorandum books, frames 632–33; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:141–43. Admiral Radford noted in his memoir that “the contribution of these planes and trained men made a distinct and serious reduction in the combat effectiveness of the Far Eastern Air Force. They were *not* surplus planes or *additional* mechanics.” Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 386. For some of the limitations, see “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:234.

19. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 429.

20. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1004–6 (quote). Lansdale told several variations of the story of his appointment, generally crediting the idea to John Foster Dulles, who was not at this meeting. He also claimed to have protested against the idea that he would help the French, calming only when he was told that his primary mission would be with the Vietnamese. There is no indication of such a mission in the meeting notes cited, although with the French looking to extricate themselves by the time Lansdale actually arrived in June, he was able to operate with such an agenda. Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 190–91; Currey, *Lansdale*, 136–37.

21. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 11–12, 21–22. According to this report (p. 23), “During the month of March, the Troop Carrier Wing had approximately 50 of its best aircraft involved in the Indo-China war. This included aircraft returning for maintenance and en route as replacements. A number suffered battle damage.” See also “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:219–20.

22. Weyland memorandum books, frame 642.

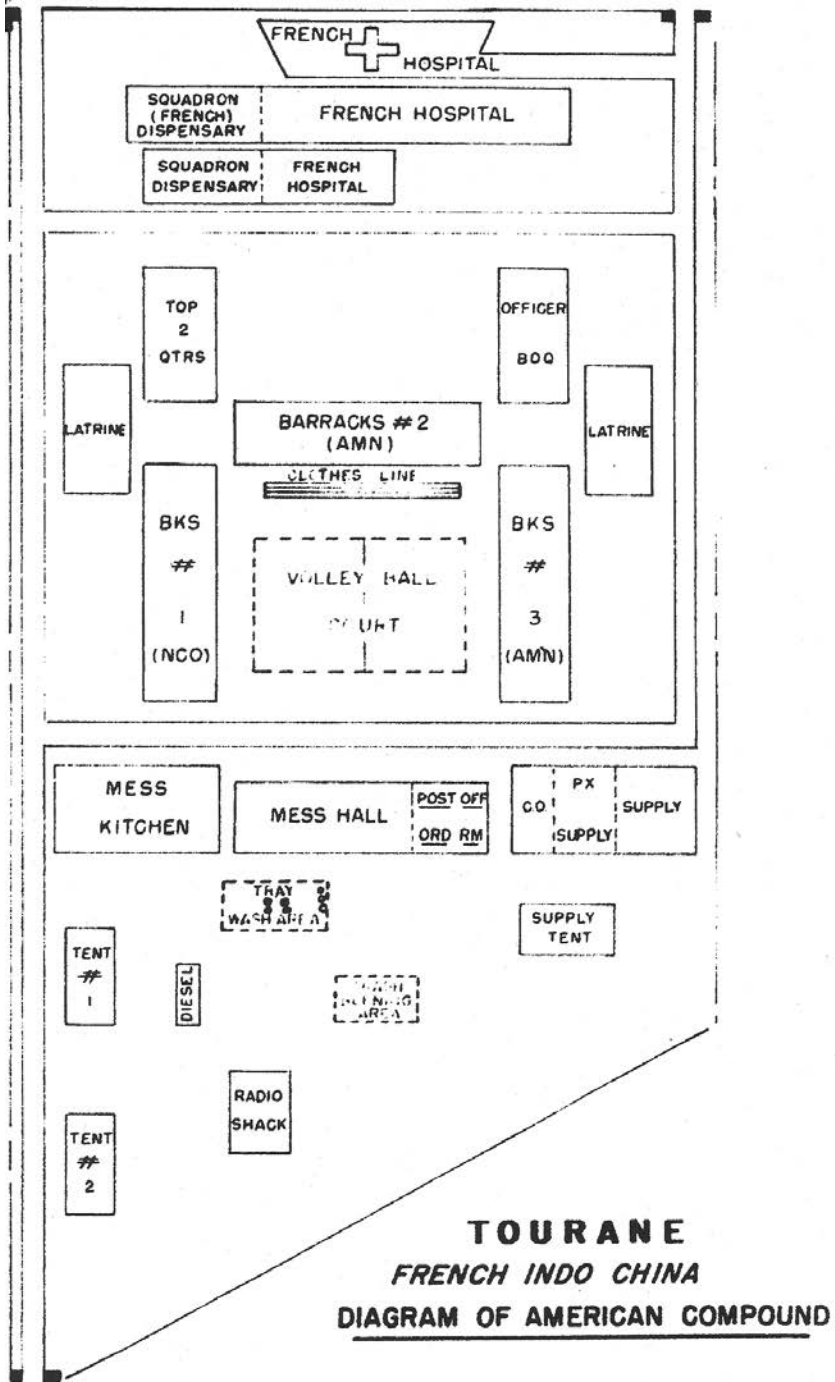


Gen. Nathan F. Twining, USAF chief of staff, presented the first oak leaf cluster to the Legion of Merit to Brig. Gen. Albert G. Hewitt in December 1954 for Hewitt's service as commander of Far East Air Logistics Force. Hewitt coordinated the deployment of increasing numbers of USAF mechanics to Vietnam in 1953–54 to service aircraft loaned to the French. USAF.

of launching. However, a force with two or three battalions of medium artillery with air observation could make the area untenable. The enemy does not seem to have this capability at present.” O’Daniel’s overall impression was positive, as he wrote that the French “are in no danger of suffering a major military reverse. On the contrary, they are gaining strength and confidence in their ability to fight the war to a successful conclusion.” General Trapnell did not agree with O’Daniel’s optimistic assessment and sent a staff officer to Dien Bien Phu for a more critical accounting, which he forwarded to Washington. Trapnell informed the Pentagon later in February that “the current campaign season has been dominated by the Viet Minh.”²³

February 5: In an operation initially known as Project Revere (subsequently Open House, then Dukes Mixture), 6424th Air Depot Wing of Far East Air Logistics Force deployed two maintenance and supply detachments to Vietnam to support U.S. aircraft loaned to the French (*see Jan. 29*). One, established at Da Nang (Tourane), maintained B–26s and was inactivated

23. Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 343 (1st quote); Spector, *Advice and Support*, 187 (2d quote), 189 (3d quote).



The report of the 6424th Air Depot Wing included a sketch of the U.S. compound at the base at Da Nang, which the French called Tourane.

on July 19. It was composed mostly of airmen from a depot at Iwakuni Air Base, Japan. Its site commander was Capt. Charles B. Woodward, succeeded by Maj. Chester H. Reubner. The other, at Do Son, near Haiphong, supported C-47s and closed on June 29. Its men came primarily from a unit at Clark Air Base. This detachment's site commander was Maj. Kenneth F. Knox, replaced on April 12 by Maj. Harry J. Schiele. The officer in charge of both field maintenance locations was Lt. Col. Walter A. Miller, succeeded on April 1 by Col. Norman T. Kincade. Col. William C. Sams, commander of the 6424th, supervised operations and made regular visits to each site. Daily C-54 flights from Clark Air Base carried food, equipment, and supplies to the two locations. Most of the men did not learn of their deployment until two days before departure.²⁴

Although the military deemed the program classified, the government did not keep the operation a secret. The Defense Department announced the deployment of men and aircraft on February 5, but news about the technicians had leaked to the press a week earlier. A Pentagon press release on February 6 described the USAF personnel as noncombatants assigned to the MAAG who would act solely as mechanics and technical advisors.²⁵

President Eisenhower immediately found his administration on the defensive for sending USAF personnel to Vietnam. Sen. Leverett A. Saltonstall (R-Mass.), chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, told the president on February 8 that the committee was not convinced of the need for deploying the mechanics and was threatening to cut appropriations for Indochina. Eisenhower recorded in a memorandum of the same date that Saltonstall "believes this opposition would diminish if there were an unequivocal statement . . . that the technicians will be removed from Indo China by June 15th, regardless of French capacity to meet the requirement." The president wrote Secretary of State John

24. "Support in French Indo-China," frames 789-844; "FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations," 1:173-78; Weyland memorandum books, frame 641; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 17; Frederick D. Sundloff, "Dien Bien Phu Remembered: A Chapter in United States Air Force History, Classified and Forgotten, February 5-July 19, 1954" (unpublished paper, 2003, Air Force Historical Support Division Library, Washington, DC), i, 7, 12, 18; 315th Air Division Historical Report, iv; Kenneth F. Knox diary, enclosed in Knox letter to Ray L. Bowers, October 25, 1970, AFHRA, reel 25421, beginning frame 460, pp. 2, 3 (hereafter Knox diary); Robert K. Scudder, "Tonkin Taxi: Hanoi to Saigon and All the Stops in Between," Part One, *Friends Journal* 29 (Winter 2006-7): 8-9. For visa problems for USAF personnel in the Philippines when French officials in Manila said it would take two weeks to process the documents for them into Indochina, see *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1046. According to General Weyland, "Highly qualified people were insisted upon, and there was to be no pending court-martial cases or anything of that sort to interfere with the rapid organization, movement, and operational capacity of the unit." He related that he informed General Twining that "due to the time limitations and urgency placed on Project Revere, no attempt was made at securing volunteers—the selection of personnel sent down was based purely on military requirements." Weyland memorandum books, frames 641 (1st quote), 657 (2d quote).

25. *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1019; *Washington Post*, February 6, 1954, 1; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 386.



Loaned C-47s at Do Son airfield near Haiphong in 1954. The USAF deployed a detachment of mechanics from Clark Air Base in February 1954 to help the French service these planes. USAF.

Foster Dulles on February 10 that the administration would have to make the June 15 concession to Congress, “even if we have to recruit civilian technicians” to replace USAF mechanics. On the same day, Eisenhower fielded a press conference question concerning whether the airmen “could be considered in any way combatant troops.” He replied that they were only “maintenance troops” and that he saw “no opportunity of them even getting touched by combat.”²⁶

The U.S. chargé in Paris cabled the State Department on February 13 that based on public and congressional reaction to the deployment of the U.S. airmen, it was becoming “increasingly evident” to the French that “the possibility of U.S. personnel being sent [to] Indochina to participate [in] combat missions under present circumstances [is] remote.”²⁷

Although the Pentagon acknowledged that around 200 USAF personnel were already in Vietnam—primarily those at Cat Bi supporting the C-119s (*see Dec. 5–22, 1953*)—all of the higher-level administration and congressional focus was on the 200 airmen who deployed in February. The USAF actually sent more than 200 men in this group, as the initial

26. Louis Galambos and Daun Van Ee, eds., *The Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, Vol. 15 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 886–87, 892–93 (1st quote, 886; 2d quote, 892); *Public Papers, 1954*, 247 (3d–4th quotes); *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1019, 1023–25, 1031–32, 1034–35, 1042; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 9:239; George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: ‘The Day We Didn’t Go to War’ Revisited,” *Journal of American History* 71 (September 1984): 351–52; Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 70–71; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 53–54.

27. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1045.

deployment included 204 officers and enlisted for aircraft maintenance and 42 additional airmen as support personnel.²⁸

February 8: By this date, the USAF had delivered seventeen of the twenty-two B-26s to Vietnam (*see Jan. 29*). Ambassador Heath also noted that the USAF mechanics had arrived, adding that “this additional maintenance force [is] believed will be sufficient to maintain [the] French air fleet as [it] at present [is] constituted.” On the same day, 315th Air Division began scheduled flights from Clark Air Base to Cat Bi and Da Nang to support the work of the deployed airmen.²⁹

February 8–11: General Weyland, the FEAF commander, toured facilities in Indochina as part of a previously scheduled trip to meet with the French high command in Vietnam. He was pleased with the situations for the USAF airmen just deployed at Da Nang and Do Son (*see Feb. 5*) and found that the French had given U.S. personnel the best hangar at each location. Weyland told the airmen, according to his account, that they had done a “magnificent job” executing the “blitz move,” a deployment about which he said he was just as surprised as they were. He announced that tours would be no longer than 120 days, preferably only ninety. When the local USAF commander at Da Nang asked whether more airmen could be sent for cooking and housekeeping duties, Weyland responded that he did not want to put more personnel in the country than was “absolutely necessary.” He conceded to a French general later in the trip that he had opposed providing the USAF mechanics and believed that the “American people would view this [deployment] with alarm.” Weyland found that security at the air bases was “fairly good” but that the Viet Minh was on the outskirts of most of the airfields.³⁰

Weyland received extensive situational briefings in Saigon and at bases across the region. He reported that General Navarre “did not impress me very deeply,” adding that “I have doubts as to any outstanding capability on his part to conduct active operations.” Weyland found it “a bunch of stuff and nonsense” and a “snow job” when French commanders tried to

28. *Washington Post*, February 6, 1954, 1. There were initially four officers and eighty-one enlisted at Do Son and five officers and 114 enlisted at Da Nang. “Support in French Indo-China,” frame 793; Weyland memorandum books, frame 643.

29. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1019n (quote); 315th Air Division Historical Report, iv.

30. Weyland memorandum books, frames 643–57 (1st–2d quotes, 650; 3d quote, 649; 4th quote, 655; 5th quote, 646). Although Weyland’s trip coincided with the deployment of the USAF mechanics, it had been planned for several weeks. *Ibid.*, frames 601, 622–23. Weyland was generally impressed with the airfield at Da Nang, but the one at Do Son had “a very poor strip,” only 2,640 feet, covered with steel planking. Weyland found during his tour that there was a new airfield at Kien An, near Cat Bi, with a 7,200-foot runway, but the French were not using it due to its close proximity to a French army ordnance depot. *Ibid.*, frames 648–50.

convince him that “their operations were conducted in such a manner that the French retained the initiative.” Indeed, he determined in the course of the trip that “the initiative is almost completely in the hands of the Viet Minh.” French officials also told him that the Viet Minh were “very unpopular” throughout Indochina, which Weyland doubted at the time and found to be “completely inaccurate” as he traveled in the region and spoke with U.S. diplomats.³¹

The general observed in his notes, which he used to address his findings in a memorandum for General Twining, that the French “simply do not know very much about photo recon and photo interpretation.” He commented extensively on these shortcomings, prescient observations considering the vast siege preparations the Viet Minh had underway in the vicinity of Dien Bien Phu at the time, with only limited French knowledge. Weyland did not understand why the French had placed such a large force there, “in an isolated area subject to attack or by-pass,” or why they were resupplying the garrison by air drop, which he deemed “a most expensive method.” A French general in Hanoi assured him that the situation at Dien Bien Phu had been “greatly alleviated in the past few days and was no longer critical.”³²

Weyland also expressed concern about the “extreme condescension” the French showed toward their Vietnamese allies, writing that the French would never gain the “respect, confidence, or support” of the Vietnamese without a significant change in attitude.³³

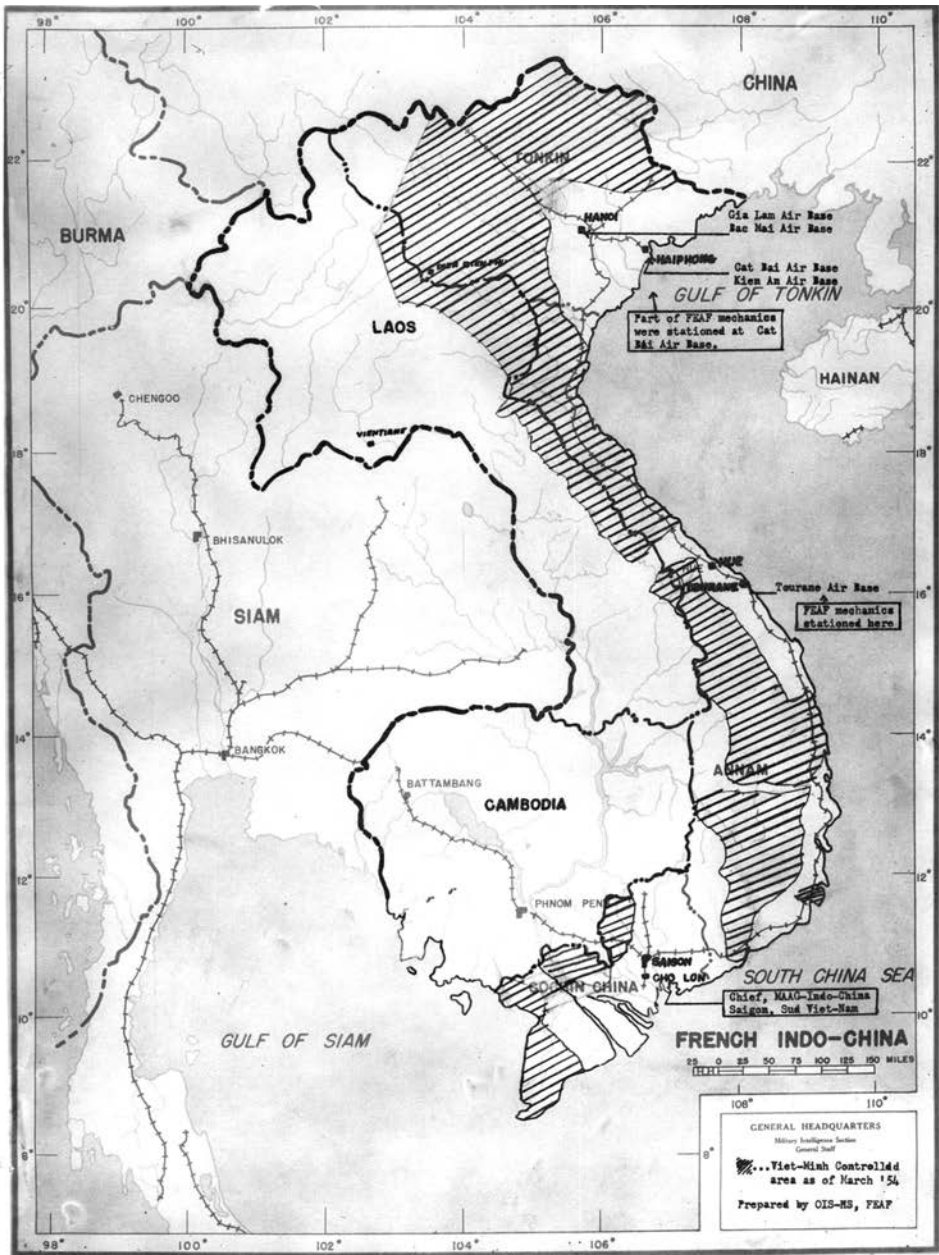
February 9: Ambassador Heath reported to Washington that in conversation with General Navarre the previous day, the French commander had observed that he “regretted that [the] Viet Minh had given up [on the] idea of attacking Dien Bien Phu, where he had [the] possibility of inflicting [a] substantial if not decisive defeat.” The belief that the Viet Minh had bypassed Dien Bien Phu for a move into Laos gained traction in Paris and with the CIA (*see Jan. 27*). After the Viet Minh advance in Laos stalled, however, by February 20, Navarre was back predicting that the Viet Minh might resume plans to attack Dien Bien Phu. If so, he expected the assault within the next two months, before the seasonal monsoons. A visiting U.S. administration official noted that Navarre had described the garrison as “a veritable jungle Verdun,” leaving the writer convinced that “there is no real danger in Indochina of [a] major reverse during this fighting season.”³⁴

31. *Ibid.* (1st–2d quotes, 644; 3d–5th, 7th–8th quotes, 645; 6th quote, 653).

32. *Ibid.* (1st–2d, 4th–5th quotes, 652; 3d quote, 653).

33. *Ibid.*, 648.

34. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1026, 1033, 1036, 1040, 1064–67 (1st quote, 1026; 2d quote, 1065; 3d quote, 1067); Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 386. For other accounts of French confidence at Dien Bien Phu, see Logevall, *Embers of War*, 442–45. For French intelligence underestimation of Viet Minh capabilities, see Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 343–44.



A map from a contemporary FEAF report shows the locations some of the air bases to which USAF mechanics deployed in 1953–54 to service aircraft loaned to the French. The French were not using the Kien An airfield, while Do Son, which was close to Kien An, is not indicated. A remarkable feature of this map is the estimate of widespread Viet Minh control throughout Vietnam, and into Laos, as of March 1954, although there was more actual presence of the Viet Minh in the Red River delta area around Hanoi/Haiphong than is shown.

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February 11: According to the memorandum of discussion at the NSC meeting, “With respect to the efficiency of our military missions in Indochina, Secretary [Bedell] Smith commented that the Air Force had done by far the best job, the Navy had run a very poor second, and the Army was far behind the Navy.”³⁵

February 17: A 500-pound bomb detonated at Da Nang, destroying a USAF-loaned C-47, killing at least five Frenchmen, and sending three USAF crewmen who had just secured the aircraft diving for cover. The Americans were only about 200 yards from the plane at the time of the explosion and had to dodge large chunks of debris. A USAF maintenance crew had been working in the area but had just left for lunch. Initially, the French reported that the blast was an act of sabotage, triggered by a timer, but by the time the news reached General Weyland, the story was that the explosion was an accident due to French negligence. Maj. Robert Scudder, who was at Da Nang at the time, observed even after the incident that “the Frenchmen are still handling bombs like bowling pins. They load them loose on the flat beds of ordinary trucks and trailers and then drive with the bombs bouncing all around.”³⁶

February 18: As a result of negotiations that had begun as part of the Berlin Conference (January 25–February 2), which included the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union, France and the Viet Minh government agreed on this date to have peace talks on Indochina placed on the agenda for an international conference at Geneva, Switzerland, scheduled to begin on April 26 (*see May 8*). China would also be a participant in the gathering, as the first part of the talks were to finalize issues related to the Korea settlement. The entire arrangement was problematic for the United States, which did not recognize the Chinese communist government, and for President Eisenhower, who had campaigned vigorously on the issue of a tougher stance against communism. Worse still, the Eisenhower administration saw few good options for a negotiated settlement in Vietnam, which inevitably would include communist occupation of a significant part of the country; a weak government in the noncommunist sector; and diminished French involvement, if not complete withdrawal. Concurrently, Sen. Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisc.) was still on his anticommunist crusade, with his

35. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1039.

36. Robert K. Scudder, “Tonkin Taxi: Hanoi to Saigon and All the Stops in Between,” Part Two, *Friends Journal* 30 (Spring 2007): 38–39 (quote); Weyland memorandum books, frame 666. The report Weyland received had five Frenchmen killed, while Scudder recorded eight fatalities and two critically injured.

sights turned toward the U.S. military, climaxing with what became known as the Army-McCarthy hearings in April–June 1954 in the same time frame as the Geneva Conference. Meanwhile Ho and Giap, sensing an opportunity to improve their bargaining position after the Geneva date was set, redoubled efforts to prepare for a major assault on Dien Bien Phu in the spring, before the conference began.³⁷

February 20: Because of “public utterances,” namely U.S. congressional concerns (*see Feb. 5*), USAF headquarters deemed that FEAF personnel in Indochina would be considered attached to the MAAG or there to augment the MAAG and would not be listed as combat support. This decision meant, among other things, that the airmen were not exempt from income tax. The men were considered on temporary duty (TDY) status, and the service records for most did not reflect that they were stationed in Indochina.³⁸

February 24: Ambassador Heath reported that the French had approached the MAAG about the United States paying \$100,000 per month to employ CAT pilots to fly the C-119s. Heath observed that FEAF had already trained CAT pilots at the request of the French and declared that “we see no reason for [the] U.S. to pick up this check, and [we] regret [the] niggling attitude displayed by French authorities here and in Paris” (*see Mar. 3*).³⁹

General Weyland noted on the same date that he had been informed that the Joint Chiefs had under consideration a proposal to deploy a division of South Korean troops to Vietnam, with U.S. support. Weyland, who had just met with the French commanders, thought it “doubtful” they would accept such assistance even if offered.⁴⁰

March: Gen. Thomas D. White, USAF vice chief of staff, ordered a study on how the Air Force, if called upon, could best be employed in Vietnam.⁴¹

According to a FEAF report, as of March, the French air force in Indochina had 127 F-8Fs, 101 C-47s, fifty-nine B-26s, eight C-45s, and four RB-26s.⁴²

37. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 426–42, 454, 460; Statler, *Replacing France*, 79–85; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 54–59; Asselin, “New Perspectives on Dien Bien Phu”; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1057–58, 1080–81; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 383–84; Cooper, *In the Shadows of History*, 108; Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 50; Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 189. For the ongoing debate about China’s participation at Geneva, see Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 20–21.

38. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:155–56; Sundloff, “Dien Bien Phu Remembered,” i.

39. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1074.

40. Weyland memorandum books, frame 667.

41. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 19.

42. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:87.



Vietnamese workers load a USAF-loaned C-119 at Cat Bi airfield for a supply flight to Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954. France contracted with Civil Air Transport in March to provide additional pilots for these missions. *USAF*.

March 3: France concluded a contract with CAT for twenty-four pilots to fly twelve C-119s. The document stipulated that CAT pilots would not fly bombing or napalm missions. The aviators made between \$800 and \$1,000 a month for sixty flying hours, plus a combat bonus of \$10 an hour. The first CAT pilots reached Cat Bi on March 9 and flew their initial mission three days later.⁴³

March 3-4: The Viet Minh sabotaged eleven aircraft, including seven C-47s, at Gia Lam airfield outside of Hanoi during a nighttime raid.⁴⁴

March 6: At Cat Bi, a Viet Minh guerrilla squad blew up three B-26s and damaged a C-119. CIA director Allen Dulles believed the airfield attacks were an attempt to create incidents involving the USAF mechanics; in reality, they were part of Giap's plan to reduce French air capabilities in advance of the Viet Minh assault on Dien Bien Phu (*see Mar. 13*). On the same date, because of increased Viet Minh activity in the area, the French

43. Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 181-83, 192; Julian interview; "FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations," 1:222-23.

44. *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1099; Weyland memorandum books, reel 33805, frame 675; Scudder, "Tonkin Taxi," pt. 2, 42; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 311.

ordered the evacuation of the entire civilian population of Do Son, which was approximately 23,000 people.⁴⁵

March 8: The U.S. consul in Hanoi reported that Gen. René Cogy thought the Viet Minh were preparing to attack Dien Bien Phu, although the consul noted that the French general admitted that “there may be some degree of wishful thinking in his analysis, since he continues to believe that such [an] attack would be highly advantageous to his own forces.” The French actually had good intelligence from radio intercepts about Viet Minh attack plans, but they had a limited grasp of the extent of the force and artillery confronting them. Colleagues asked a French captain from Dien Bien Phu who was in Hanoi in early March about Viet Minh artillery. “They must have a gun or two,” he replied, “but most of the time the shells don’t even explode. It’s a farce.”⁴⁶

March 10: At a press conference, a reporter asked President Eisenhower what the United States would do if any of the USAF airmen deployed to Indochina were killed or captured. Eisenhower replied that “there is going to be no involvement of America in war unless it is a result of the constitutional process that is placed upon Congress to declare it.”⁴⁷

On the same date, Eisenhower’s special committee on Indochina submitted its report. Among its recommendations was the formation of a volunteer American air group, based on the Flying Tigers model (*see Jan. 15*), to support the State of Vietnam. Other suggestions included expanding the MAAG role in advising the French, and for the MAAG to assume training duties with Vietnamese forces. The French were extremely resistant to the latter two suggestions and to U.S. offers to help develop a counterinsurgency strategy, while the Flying Tigers idea never gained traction in U.S. policy circles. The committee believed that the United States had sufficiently aided the French in preparing for an engagement at Dien Bien Phu.⁴⁸

Concerning French reluctance to accept U.S. advisors and trainers, General Weyland reported during the same period that he had been told that

45. Knox diary, 4; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1108; Scudder, “Tonkin Taxi,” pt. 2, 42–43; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 447–48; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 311, 430 n. 96.

46. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1099 (1st quote); Jules Roy, *The Battle of Dienbienphu* (1963; repr., New York: Carroll & Graf, 1984), 154 (2d quote); Logevall, *Embers of War*, 446–49; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 343–46.

47. *Public Papers, 1954*, 306.

48. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 184–85; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:981–82; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 388–90. The Operations Coordinating Board did continue to study the feasibility of what became known as an International Volunteer Air Group, presenting a full report on May 6, the day before the fall of Dien Bien Phu. Discussion of the concept continued in July and August. *FRUS 1952–54*, 12:603–5, 14:538.

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the MAAG had sent a USAF lieutenant colonel to the French air staff in Saigon, where he found that he was “obviously not wanted by the French.”⁴⁹

March 11: The French lost one of the loaned USAF C-119s at Dien Bien Phu. The pilot had to make an emergency landing on March 10, and on the 11th, Viet Minh artillery found the range on the aircraft. It tipped up on its nose and put out smoke “like ten locomotives,” according to an observer. A French repair crew from Cat Bi was already en route at the time of the destruction, accompanied by Maj. Thomas Yarbrough, USAF. The garrison came under fire that night, and the base commander impressed the French aircrew into duty, leaving Yarbrough to fend for himself. He took the C-47 on which they had arrived and flew solo back to Cat Bi.⁵⁰

March 12: At a meeting of the Joint Chiefs and representatives of the State Department, Admiral Radford indicated that the French had requested more U.S. planes. According to the memorandum of discussion, he stated that “our position was that the French were not maintaining the aircraft they already had in the way that they should, nor were they using these aircraft to the full extent possible.” As for comments from the French about the possibility of the Chinese providing jet aircraft for the Viet Minh, Radford observed that there were no jet-compatible airfields in Viet Minh-held territory, and none of which he was aware in southern China.⁵¹

On the same date, the Viet Minh blew up parts of the road and railroad connections between Hanoi and Haiphong. That night at Dien Bien Phu, Viet Minh commandos set off charges that damaged the landing strip at the main French airfield.⁵²

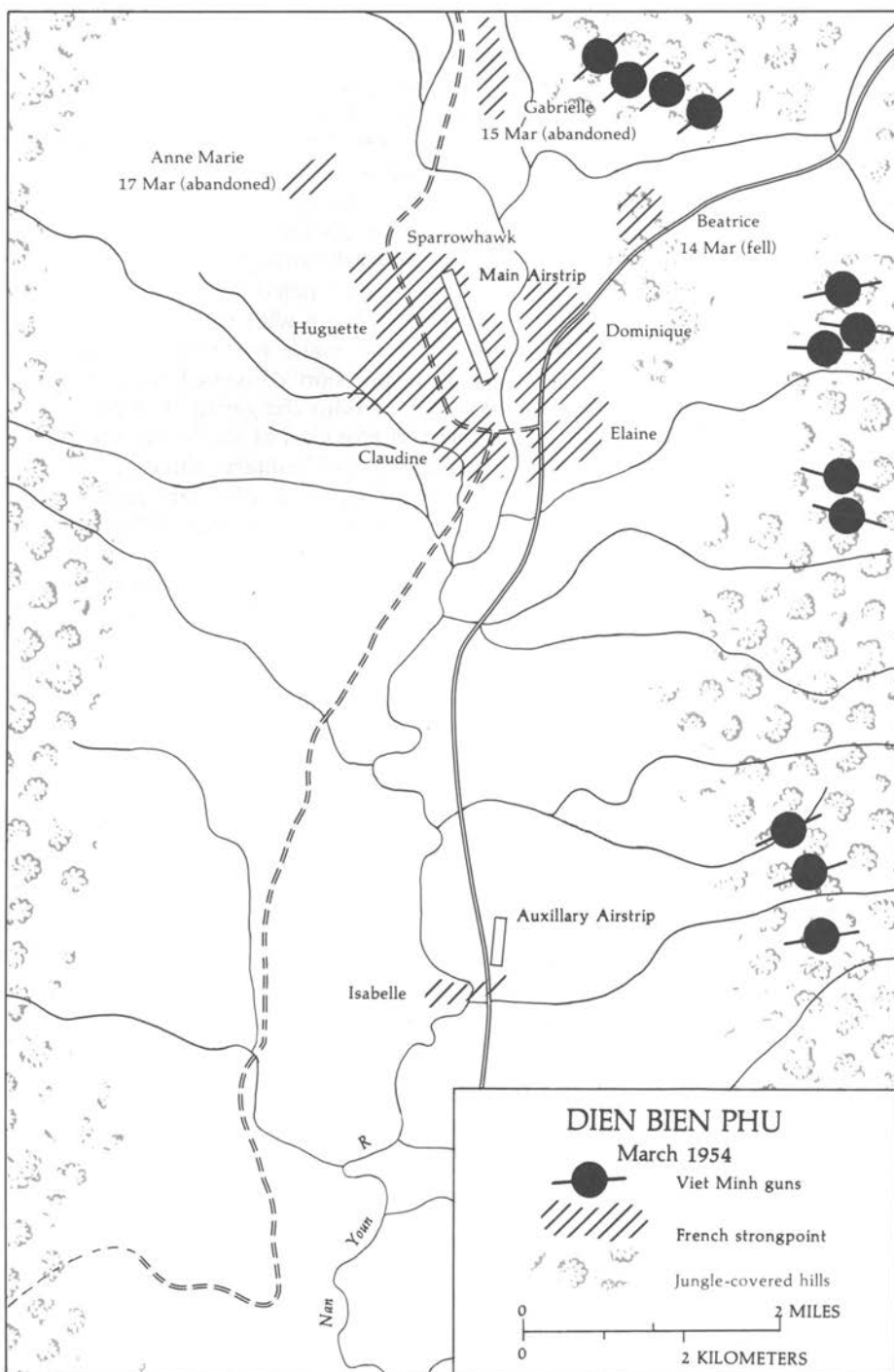
March 13: After a withering artillery barrage, the Viet Minh launched the long-expected assault against Dien Bien Phu. One French firebase fell on the first day, another on the 16th, and a third on the 17th, wiping out the French northern defensive perimeter. Both sides suffered staggering losses in four days of battle, and the Viet Minh ran low on ammunition. A lull in the fighting followed for the next two weeks as the Viet Minh advanced toward the cluster of firebases at the center of

49. Weyland memorandum books, reel 33805, frame 676. Weyland did not give the name of the USAF officer.

50. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 16-18; Morgan, *Valley of Death*, 255 (quote); Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 134; Plating, “Failure in the Margins,” 93; Roy, *Battle of Dien Bien Phu*, 155. The division report did not mention Yarbrough’s flight and made clear that the division believed that authorization for any such missions would have to come from FEAF headquarters.

51. *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1118.

52. Knox diary, 5; Roy, *Battle of Dien Bien Phu*, 161.



Spector, *Advice and Support*.



A captured photo shows Viet Minh porters hauling supplies and artillery through jungle trails to provide Giap with the capacity to besiege Dien Bien Phu. The French severely underestimated the capabilities of the Viet Minh to mount such an effort.

the garrison by way of trenches and tunnels and surrounded the other outpost farther south.⁵³

March 14: In areas captured from the French the previous day (*see Mar. 13*), Viet Minh artillery moved into position to command the main airstrip at Dien Bien Phu and destroyed a number of U.S.-supplied French aircraft on the ground, including two C-47s, one C-119, and seven F-8Fs. C-47s and other smaller planes managed night landings for two more weeks to evacuate casualties, with the last successful flight out on March 26. The final incoming aircraft was an aeromedical C-47 that landed in the early hours of March 28, but Viet Minh artillery destroyed it by midday. That plane's crew included Geneviève de Galard, a medevac nurse who became the only woman among those besieged at Dien Bien Phu (*see July 26–27*).⁵⁴

53. Asselin, "New Perspectives on Dien Bien Phu"; Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 125–67; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 68–69; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 445–53; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1119–20. For the monumental logistical achievements of the Viet Minh to be able to mount such an attack on such an isolated garrison, see Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 341–66. Colonel Lansdale later stated his belief that Giap was under considerable political pressure to gain a victory at Dien Bien Phu and that he sacrificed thousands of men to achieve that result before the Geneva conference convened. Lansdale interview (1971), 61–62; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 151.

54. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 19; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 69; Roy, *Battle of Dien Bien Phu*, 168–70; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 315–17. According to Shrader, the French also used helicopters to evacuate casualties, a practice they had to abandon as of March 23.



USN-loaned F-8Fs at the airfield at Dien Bien Phu before the siege. Viet Minh artillery began destroying these and other aircraft after moving to the high ground commanding the strip on March 14. *USAF*.

March 15: Around 10:30 p.m., a Viet Minh force estimated at 400 cut the road from Do Son to Haiphong and Cat Bi airfield. The USAF site commander at Do Son, Maj. Kenneth Knox, armed the USAF mechanics there and had them stand guard at the airfield and along the beach. General Trapnell, the MAAG commander, flew to Do Son the following day to assess the safety of the airmen. According to Knox, the general was “not pleased with the lack of French ground forces.” Trapnell requested that General Navarre send an additional company to reinforce the Do Son garrison and indicated that he would move the airmen to Da Nang if the French could not protect them.⁵⁵

March 15–September 5: Ironage VI (known by CAT as Squaw II), which proved to be the last of the Ironage phases, began with twelve loaned C-119s and peaked at twenty-two by early April, the maximum number allowable under the U.S. agreement with the French. Twenty-seven aircraft were at Cat Bi during that period, including ones that were being serviced. The French returned ten C-119s in May after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. During Ironage VI, the French flew 1,786 sorties totaling 5,343 hours, dropping 9,099 tons of equipment and supplies. The French also used the C-119s for napalm drops (*see Mar. 23*). The last sorties to Dien Bien Phu occurred on May 6, a day before the garrison surrendered.

55. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1125–26; Knox diary, 6 (quote); Scudder, “Tonkin Taxi,” pt. 3, 7.

Combat-related drops ended as of July 23, with evacuation and cleanup continuing for the duration of the phase.⁵⁶

With no runway access (*see Mar. 14*), Dien Bien Phu had to be resupplied from the air. Through the end of March, aircraft were able to maintain normal drop altitudes, and the French did not lose much of the cargo to the Viet Minh. As the Viet Minh brought in more anti-aircraft guns and also gained commanding positions over the drop zones, however, the equation changed. French and CAT pilots had to make drops from as high as 8,000 to 10,000 feet during daylight sorties because of pervasive anti-aircraft fire. With higher drops and the shrinking French footprint, as much as half of the supplies fell into Viet Minh hands. The French requested that the cargo be delivered in smaller packages, as larger crates were more difficult to retrieve under fire. Heavy ground fog also complicated the supply missions, as it did aerial targeting of Viet Minh positions.⁵⁷

Col. Maurice Casey of the 483d Troop Transport Wing thought high-altitude drops were “ridiculous” and believed that the French should have carried out air strikes against Viet Minh anti-aircraft batteries. He described it as “unthinkable” that the French were sending unarmed transports with no support. As ground fire increased, CAT pilots became less willing to fly the missions, and the French eventually provided some carrier-based F-6F cover. Casey noted that in addition to regular resupply of war materiel and food, including what he said seemed like more barbed wire than in all of Korea, the drops at Dien Bien Phu also included champagne and ice, wrapped in straw.⁵⁸

During much of the siege, French and CAT pilots flew two daylight C-119 missions a day, three hours round trip from Cat Bi to Dien Bien Phu. Because French forward air controllers spoke no English and most of the CAT pilots understood only limited French, the CAT pilots, not

56. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 11–12, 22–24, 26; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:220–23.

57. Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 316–21; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 19, 289 n. 23; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1124; Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 185, 187; Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 1; 315th Air Division Historical Report, 26–27; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:222; Miller interview, 12; Scudder, “Tonkin Taxi,” pt. 3, 7. For a thorough examination of the aerial supply efforts, see Plating, “Failure in the Margins.” For the increasing challenges the French had in retrieving the supplies on the ground, see Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 323–26. Along with the losses in supplies, the missed drops also severely depleted the USAF-supplied parachutes and other drop equipment. Emergency stocks had to be sent from the United States. Even with the successful drops, the equipment used could only be retrieved while C-47s were still able to fly out of the main Dien Bien Phu airstrip, with the last flight out on March 26. Shrader (pp. 317, 335) noted that between March 14 and 30, drops delivered about 1,900 tons of supplies, an average of 112 tons per day. About 25 percent of this cargo came on C-119s. The French also successfully parachuted three 105mm artillery pieces during the month.

58. Casey interview (quotes); Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 187, 189. See also Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 327, 333. For French efforts at aerial interdiction, see Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 264–69, 352–54. For later criticism of General de Castries by his own troops over the champagne deliveries, see Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 15.

clear on the guidance, released their cargo prematurely on a number of occasions.⁵⁹

USAF personnel were supposed to stay away from combat areas, and one officer at Cat Bi stated that Maj. Thomas Yarbrough “did not permit deadhead rides” to Dien Bien Phu. Nevertheless, one of the USAF pilots who ferried aircraft and supplies to Cat Bi recalled that he and many of the others went along on “at least one run” on CAT drop missions. Yarbrough flew on several himself and was the copilot of a C-119 on May 6 when the Viet Minh shot down one of the other CAT-flown aircraft (*see May 6*).⁶⁰

Mid-March: Brig. Gen. Joseph D. Caldara, head of FEAF Bomber Command, ordered a staff study of what would be required to prepare for direct USAF bombardment of Indochina, if called upon to carry out such operations. His staff completed an outline plan in a month (*see Apr. 13*).⁶¹

March 18: According to the memorandum of discussion at the NSC meeting, the first one after Dien Bien Phu came under attack (*see Mar. 13*), President Eisenhower’s opening question was about aircraft: “The President inquired whether the French were making good use of the planes which were available to them, and whether they were using napalm against the enemy artillery battalions which were shelling the airfields.” The transcript did not record any answers to Eisenhower’s questions. The president also commented that “in the present circumstances it was difficult for him to understand General Navarre’s earlier statements hoping that he would be attacked by the enemy at Dien Bien Phu since he was sure of defeating him” (*see Feb. 9*). Nevertheless, Eisenhower did not seem overly concerned about the French situation since they were “fighting from prepared and heavily fortified positions,” even though the briefers at the beginning of the meeting had placed the odds of the French being able to hold the garrison at only fifty-fifty.⁶²

March 19: Because of significant communications issues, particularly with supply flight operations, some due to the language barrier, FEAF deployed the 1808th Airways and Air Communications Service (AACS) squadron to Indochina. As of the end of May 1954, this unit had three officers, fifty-seven enlisted, and one civilian at Da Nang and seven enlisted at Do San.⁶³

59. Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 185, 187, 189; Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 241–42.

60. Julian interview (1st quote); Benjamin Kraljev, interview with Ray L. Bowers, January 29, 1971, AFHRA, reel 30015, frame 1389 (2d quote); Plating, “Failure in the Margins,” 93.

61. Brig. Gen. Joseph D. Caldara to Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, May 3, 1954, AFHRA, reel 35953, frames 876–77.

62. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1133.

63. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:144–45, 148–49, 152.



President Eisenhower and Adm. Arthur W. Radford (*right*), chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, welcomed Gen. Paul Ely (*center*), chief of the French Defence Staff, to Washington in March 1954 as the situation worsened at Dien Bien Phu. *USAF*.

March 20–26: Gen. Paul Ely, chief of the French Defence Staff, visited Washington for previously scheduled high-level talks that coincided with the increasingly dire straits for the French in Indochina. In a memorandum of conversation between Admiral Radford and Secretary of State Dulles on March 24, Radford confided that “the last few days have been frustrating. Ely requests material and gives no assurances of improved performance or willingness to accept training activities.” Nevertheless, Radford reported that he had spoken with General Twining, and they had agreed to grant the long-standing French request for twenty-five additional B-26s to outfit a new bomber squadron (*see Jan. 2, 29*). As part of the agreement, in what Radford described as a quid pro quo, the USAF would send senior officers to investigate why the French were not using the aircraft they already had more efficiently (*see Mar. 26*).⁶⁴

Ely also asked for fourteen more C-47s and for authorization to use borrowed C-119s for napalm drops (*see Mar. 23*). To grant the napalm capability, the United States insisted that no American crews (CAT pilots) be involved in those sorties. The United States turned down French requests for eighty more maintenance airmen and for twenty helicopters, which would have been difficult to deliver and maintain.⁶⁵

64. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1151 (quote), 1158–59, 1168–73; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 454–59; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 72–74; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 9:277–90; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 391–92.

65. *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 9:277–79; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1159, 1170, 1177; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 391–92. The French had already made the napalm request through the MAAAG on March 18. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 19.

In the early days of Ely's visit, discussion of any direct U.S. aerial action came with the stipulation that it could happen only in response to direct Chinese communist intervention. Radford floated with State Department officials the possibility of deploying a squadron of F-86s, flown by USAF pilots, to counter Chinese MiGs. In the course of Ely's trip, an alternative prospect began to emerge, one that became known as Operation Vulture. Ely and Radford later disagreed over who first proposed the idea of a massive air strike, but Radford, a naval aviator, helped develop the concept. Vulture apparently originated as a carrier-based USN mission but evolved into a plan for a single strike by the entire B-29 fleet of FEAF Bomber Command, with ninety-eight USAF B-29s flying from Clark Air Base to make a raid against Viet Minh targets around Dien Bien Phu. USN fighters from two carriers already positioned near the Gulf of Tonkin would have provided escort and cover. The USAF prepared for the Operation Vulture contingency, and this and other modified raid concepts remained under discussion for the subsequent six weeks until Dien Bien Phu fell (*see ca. Apr. 19-22*).⁶⁶

Ely apparently left Washington under the impression that the French could request that the Americans make such a strike, an understanding that created a delicate diplomatic situation when they did, less than two weeks later (*see Apr. 4*).⁶⁷

March 21: Maj. Robert Scudder, a USAF pilot based at Da Nang, recorded in his diary the scuttlebutt about General Ely's visit to Washington. He wrote that "there was much talk about American intervention in the conflict, especially if China should intervene. No one wanted to answer this possibility." After a flight to Do Son on this date, Scudder and the other USAF personnel scrambled to defensive positions on the beach late that night under threat of a Viet Minh attack (*see Mar. 15*). He noted in

66. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 457-59; Herring and Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu," 346-50; Prados, *Sky Would Fall*, 70-82, 147; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 74-75; Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 297-305; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 393-95; *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1150, 1160, 1165-66, 1171, 1204, 1237, 1247; *U.S. Navy in Vietnam*, 247-55. The U.S. Navy task force returned to the Philippines during the second week of April. According to Logevall (p. 457), the initial concept for Vulture had been "conceived by U.S. and French officers in Saigon."

67. For the controversy over what Ely believed and whether Radford had been indiscreet, see Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 156-57, 407 n. 68; Herring and Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu," 347-50; Statler, *Replacing France*, 88-89; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 393-95. According to William Duiker, Radford later told a senior U.S. official that "his real aim in urging intervention in Indochina was to find a pretext to strike at mainland China." Duiker, *U.S. Containment Policy*, 407 n. 68. The British also had concerns about what Foreign Minister Anthony Eden called "Radford's war against China." *FRUS 1952-54*, 16:629. In another article, historian Richard H. Immerman concluded that "Ely received the impression that Radford intended." Immerman, "Between the Unattainable and the Unacceptable: Eisenhower and Dienbienphu," in *Reevaluating Eisenhower: American Foreign Policy in the 1950s*, ed. Richard A. Melanson and David Meyers (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 131.



Viet Minh prisoners at Cat Bi help load parachute-rigged supplies onto a C-119 for a drop mission over Dien Bien Phu. *USAF*.

his journal that the MAAG was considering removal of USAF personnel from Do Son and Cat Bi because of instability in the area. The next day, the USAF officers and noncommissioned officers at Do Son went out for target practice.⁶⁸

March 23: A French-borrowed USAF C-119 with 4,000 gallons of drummed napalm crashed during takeoff at Cat Bi when the French copilot raised the gear prematurely. The aircraft did not explode, but it suffered damage as crews moved it off the runway, and the technicians cannibalized it for parts.⁶⁹

The use of C-119s for napalm drops became a controversial issue among U.S. commands. When the French first proposed such missions on March 18, MAAG-Indochina contacted FEAF for its opinion and advised that the USAF place restrictions on the sorties, such as limiting flights to moon-lit nights when risks could be reduced. With agreement at the highest levels between the French and American governments on

68. Scudder, "Tonkin Taxi," pt. 3, 9.

69. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 19; Julian interview; 315th Air Division Historical Report, 15-16; "FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations," 1:215.

C-119 usage (*see Mar. 20–26*), however, FEAF did not believe it could put restrictions on how aircraft could be employed. It did note that MAAG officers could tell the French that the USAF had found in Korea that using C-119s for napalm “did not show returns that warranted the risk and effort.” The command recommended that the French use B-26s instead.⁷⁰

The French reported good results with the napalm drops, and FEAF supplied them with more than two million gallons of the incendiary liquid between January and June 1954. MAAG personnel heard that the French used napalm as a defoliant around Dien Bien Phu in attempts to expose Viet Minh positions.⁷¹

March 24: Viet Minh antiaircraft fire at Dien Bien Phu brought down a French C-47 on this date, another on the 26th, and two more on the 27th. As a result of these losses, the French increased the altitude of resupply drops (*see Mar. 15–Sept. 5*). Major Scudder, who flew regularly among all three USAF maintenance sites, noted extensive damage after the French missions, observing that many of the aircraft were “riddled with bullet holes, [with] big tears in the aluminum skin, oil splattered over the engine nacelles, and even blood on the cabin floors.”⁷²

Also on the 24th, one officer and five enlisted men from FEAF deployed to Bien Hoa for sixty days to supervise the overhaul program for American-loaned F-8Fs.⁷³

March 25: During an NSC meeting while General Ely was still in Washington (*see Mar. 20–26*), Secretary Dulles observed that they were witnessing “the collapse or evaporation of France as a great power in most areas of the world.” The “great question,” according to Dulles, was “who should fill the void left by the collapse of French power,” particularly in its colonial areas. He feared communists would step forward to do so if the United States did not. Dulles expressed his belief that the French “had actually reached a point where they would rather abandon Indochina than save it through United States intervention and assumption of French responsibilities.” He did not think that Dien Bien Phu would fall before “the end of the fighting season in May,” however, so the issue as he saw it at that point was “primarily a political rather than a military problem.”⁷⁴

70. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:214; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 19.

71. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:73, 214–15. Whether the French were also getting napalm from other sources is unclear. Charles Shrader, citing French records, showed the French dropping 258.8 tons of napalm around Dien Bien Phu, which would have been more than twice the amount listed in the FEAF records cited here. Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 322.

72. Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 185; Scudder, “Tonkin Taxi,” pt. 3, 9 (quote).

73. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:57.

74. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1166.



A French pilot in the cockpit of a USAF-loaned C-119 at Cat Bi, preparing for a drop mission to Dien Bien Phu. USAF.

In a remarkable statement considering the circumstances, Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson asked whether it would be “sensible to forget about Indochina for a while and concentrate on the effort to get the remaining free nations of Southeast Asia in some sort of condition to resist communist aggression.” According to the memorandum of discussion, President Eisenhower “expressed great doubt as to the feasibility of such a proposal, since he believed that the collapse of Indochina would produce a chain reaction which would result in the fall of all of Southeast Asia to the communists” (*see Apr. 7*).⁷⁵

While the meeting included much discussion of whether to consider direct military action, Eisenhower made “clear that the Congress would have to be in on any move by the United States to intervene in Indochina. It was simply academic to imagine otherwise” (*see Apr. 3*).⁷⁶

March 26: Following up on the requirement involved in the loan of additional B-26s, as stipulated during General Ely’s Washington visit (*see Mar. 20–26*), Brig. Gen. Albert Hewitt of Far East Air Logistics Force and four officers from FEAF flew to Indochina to conduct a survey of French maintenance and utilization of aircraft already on loan. Among its many findings, the team determined that additional USAF maintenance technicians were not required. The officers also concluded that activation

75. *Ibid.*, 1167–68.

76. *Ibid.*, 1165.

of the third French B-26 squadron was feasible when crews and mechanics were available to support the aircraft. Lt. Gen. Earle E. “Pat” Partridge, the incoming FEAF commander, disagreed with this point.⁷⁷

March 27: Major Scudder encountered antiaircraft fire on his C-47 courier flight into Hanoi. In the city, he found that “you could see the signs of defeat on the faces of the French as you walked down the street. The people appeared restless and sad. The merchants know their days are numbered and are unloading their wares.”⁷⁸

March 30: The Viet Minh launched a new offensive at Dien Bien Phu. On the same date, General Twining briefed President Eisenhower on the capabilities of the B-29.⁷⁹

March 31: General O’Daniel succeeded General Trapnell as commander of MAAG-Indochina. Although he was a lieutenant general, O’Daniel temporarily surrendered a star to take over a two-star command.⁸⁰

Back in Washington, discussion intensified among the Joint Chiefs of Staff about whether to recommend U.S. military intervention at Dien Bien Phu, particularly in the form of USAF or USN bombardment. At a meeting to examine the issue, all four chiefs voted against proposing such an action. Despite this unanimity, Admiral Radford informed Secretary of Defense Wilson that he believed the military should offer President Eisenhower this option. Debate of U.S. intervention scenarios continued, with the chiefs asked on April 2 to put their thoughts in writing (*see Apr. 1, 2*).⁸¹

77. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:82–86. For the report, see vol. 2 of this study, AFHRA, reel K7334, frames 252–68.

78. Scudder, “Tonkin Taxi,” pt. 3, 10.

79. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 191–207; Prados, *Sky Would Fall*, 88.

80. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 211.

81. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1198–99; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 464–66; Robert Buzzanco, *Masters of War: Military Dissent and Politics in the Vietnam Era* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 42.



USAF mechanics from the 483d Troop Carrier Wing repair a C-119 at Cat Bi in May 1954 that had been damaged over Dien Bien Phu during the final days of the siege. By this point, there were more than 500 USAF airmen in Vietnam. A Senegalese member of the French Foreign Legion is guarding the aircraft, indicative of the security concerns about sabotage by that time. As the threat level increased, FEAF moved the USAF detachment from Cat Bi to Da Nang on May 22. *USAF.*

The Fall of Dien Bien Phu

April–May 1954

The First Indochina War reached its climax in April and May 1954, with the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu ultimately falling just hours before an international conference on Indochina convened in Geneva, Switzerland. For six weeks leading up to the surrender, U.S. leaders contemplated direct intervention in the form of USAF and USN bombing raids, some possibly including nuclear weapons. But with allies, principally the British, unwilling to participate in what became known as “united action,” with the U.S. Congress reluctant to endorse intervention without British involvement, and with senior military officials unconvinced that bombing raids could relieve the garrison, the United States ultimately did not intervene, at least not directly.

As noted in the introduction to the last chapter, though, the United States played a major role, providing financial aid, military hardware, ammunition, and USAF support personnel. No uniformed troops died in the action, but two Americans did, former USAAF/USAF officers flying for Civil Air Transport (CAT). They perished in a crash landing after their USAF C-119 was hit by Viet Minh artillery fire during the last drop mission over Dien Bien Phu the day before it fell.

1954

April 1: At an NSC meeting, Adm. Arthur Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, informed the assemblage that most of the materials from airdrops at Dien Bien Phu over the last two days had fallen into Viet Minh hands. The meeting included a briefing on the worsening situation since the Viet Minh had resumed the offensive at Dien Bien Phu on March 30. According to the memorandum of conversation, Radford “saw no way to save the situation” if the garrison could not be reinforced.¹

1. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1201.

President Dwight Eisenhower said that he “still couldn’t understand this military action. Why had the French ever committed forces to a remote area where these forces could not be reinforced?” Eisenhower said that he had been informed that all the Joint Chiefs except the chairman opposed a U.S. airstrike (*see Mar. 31*). Nevertheless, he believed it an issue that “statesmen” would have to consider.²

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles asked Radford “whether there was anything we could do in time to save the French at Dien Bien Phu.” Radford replied that “some help could be got to them by U.S. forces” as early as the next day if the NSC decided on a course of action. The president said that he “would let the subject drop for the moment” but would follow up on it in his office with senior leaders. At an off-the-record lunch with a few journalists after this follow-up meeting, Eisenhower told his companions that he might have to launch squadrons from two aircraft carriers to bomb the Viet Minh forces besieging Dien Bien Phu. “Of course if we did it,” he added, “we’d have to deny it forever.”³

According to historian David Anderson, during the period between April and June 1954 when there were calls for U.S. action, “Eisenhower never decided not to intervene militarily in Vietnam. Rather he chose to define very specific criteria for intervention that simply allowed a momentary escape from what historian Bernard Fall called ‘the cul-de-sac of military intervention.’” Anderson observed that “Eisenhower’s interest in Radford’s air strike plan suggests that the president was prepared to commit U.S. air power to Indochina, provided that his preconditions were met.”⁴

April 2: Admiral Radford met with the president and the secretaries of defense and state during the morning to review a draft resolution for Congress for the use of U.S. forces in Indochina (*see Apr. 3*). A few hours later, Radford convened the Joint Chiefs and asked, at the instigation of Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson, what their positions would be if the French government requested assistance from the United States to relieve Dien Bien Phu. Each chief submitted a memorandum in reply.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 1202 (1st–3d quotes); Logevall, *Embers of War*, 466 (4th quote); Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 30. Ambassador Donald Heath reported in July 1954 that Radford told him that “one afternoon last spring the government was almost decided to intervene with aviation and save Dien Bien Phu.” This point around April 1 or 2 seems the most likely time frame Radford could have been referencing, although consideration of various bombing options continued for several more weeks. According to Heath, “Radford said he was convinced that throwing in our aviation would have saved Dien Bien Phu and our whole position in Southeast Asia would have been much stronger. His idea is that after intervening to save that fortress we could have withdrawn our aviation. He said unfortunately, however, the attitude of Washington toward our intervention was ‘conventional.’” *FRUS 1952–54*, 16:1282.

4. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 38.



The Joint Chiefs of Staff meeting in January 1954: Gen. Nathan F. Twining, USAF; Adm. Arthur W. Radford, USN (chairman); Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, USA; Gen. Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr., USMC; and Adm. Robert B. Carney, USN. *Joint Chiefs of Staff.*

The only one to offer what he described as “a qualified ‘Yes’” was Gen. Nathan Twining, USAF chief of staff, but only if the French would meet several stringent and unlikely conditions, including U.S. command of air and naval elements, U.S. training of indigenous forces, and agreement that France grant “true sovereignty” to the Associated States (Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). The most unequivocal response came from Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, USA chief of staff, who submitted “an emphatic and immediate ‘No.’” Ridgway wrote in his memoir that “to military men familiar with maps of Indo-China, the outcome of that siege was a foregone conclusion.”⁵

Although not recorded in the meeting memoranda, at some point in this time frame, U.S. leadership apparently began discussion of potential use of nuclear weapons at Dien Bien Phu. According to Vice President Richard Nixon, the plan to drop “three small tactical atomic bombs to destroy Vietminh positions and relieve the garrison” originated with Admiral Radford and the Joint Chiefs. Without allied support or congressional authorization for any direct U.S. action, however, the idea receded from discussion until later in April when the situation at Dien Bien Phu worsened (*see Apr. 29*).⁶

5. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1210–11, 1220–23 (quotes, 1220, 1222); Matthew B. Ridgway with Harold H. Martin, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 275 (3d quote).

6. Richard M. Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 150.



Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (*second from left*), shown here at a NATO conference in 1953, spent much of April 1954 trying to generate international backing for what came to be called “united action” to provide direct military support for the French in Indochina. *National Archives.*

April 3: Admiral Radford, Secretary Dulles, and a few senior State and Defense Department officials including Bedell Smith met with congressional leaders. The feedback Dulles and Radford received, from members of both parties, was that Congress would not consider authorization of direct U.S. intervention in Indochina, primarily in the form of air and sea power, unless and until Dulles secured commitments for engagement from other allies, particularly the British. The senators and congressmen also expressed concern for the need for indigenous support, which they feared the French did not have. In response to a question about whether U.S. air power could save Dien Bien Phu, Admiral Radford stated his belief, in the wake of significant Viet Minh gains, that it was “too late.” Dulles may have had with him at the meeting a draft resolution for Congress to grant the president broad authorization, “in the event he determines that such action is required to protect and defend the safety and security of the United States, to employ the Naval and Air Forces of the United States to assist the forces which are resisting aggression in Southeast Asia, to prevent the extension and expansion of that aggression, and to protect and defend the safety and security of the United States.” Finding congressional leaders unwilling to act at that stage, however,

Dulles did not produce the document. Lyndon B. Johnson (D-Texas), the Senate minority leader, was among those at the meeting and was emphatic about the need for allied engagement.⁷

As historian Fredrik Logevall observed, the congressional response left Dulles “caught in a catch-22. He could not secure foreign commitments to join a coalition without proof that his own government was fully on board. But the legislators were now telling him that a precondition for congressional backing was gaining allied support in advance.”⁸

April 4: Gen. Paul Ely, chief of the French Defence Staff, cabled Gen. Jean-Etienne Valluy, head of the French military mission in Washington, to communicate to Admiral Radford the French government’s request that the United States execute the air strike that Radford and Ely had discussed to relieve Viet Minh pressure on Dien Bien Phu (*see Mar. 20–26*). French foreign minister Georges Bidault delivered the same message to Douglas Dillon, the U.S. ambassador to France. When informed of the request, President Eisenhower feared that Admiral Radford might have intimated too much in discussions with General Ely. Radford noted that he had indicated that U.S. forces could not participate unless they had been directly requested by the French government. He also stated in a memorandum that he “had explained to General Ely the problems which were involved in rendering such support in the light of U.S. constitutional processes.” Secretary Dulles wired Ambassador Dillon on April 5 that he had expounded on the constitutional and congressional issues with Ely in Radford’s presence. He told Dillon to tell the French that “such action is impossible except on [a] coalition basis with active British Commonwealth participation. Meanwhile, [the] U.S. [is] prepared, as has been demonstrated, to do everything short of belligerency.” Dillon relayed on April 6 that Bidault informed him that the French cabinet had taken this message from Dulles “better than he expected.”⁹

April 6: In response to U.S. communication that the United States would not unilaterally bomb Viet Minh forces surrounding Dien Bien Phu (*see Apr. 4*), the French requested ten to twenty B–29s to carry out larger raids themselves. With runways in Indochina likely too short to handle the

7. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1202, 1210–12, 1224–25, 1230 (1st quote, 1225; 2d quote, 1212); Herring and Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu,” 351–54, 363; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 467–70; John Prados, “Assessing Dien Bien Phu,” in Lawrence and Logevall, *First Vietnam War*, 228, 233–35; Statler, *Replacing France*, 92–94; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 398.

8. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 469.

9. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1237, 1241–43, 1247–48 (1st quote, 1247; 2d quote, 1242; 3d quote, 1248); Herring and Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu,” 354; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 399–403; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 75–82; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 473–76.

larger bombers, the French wanted to fly them out of Clark Air Base in the Philippines, with the USAF arming and servicing the aircraft.¹⁰

At the NSC meeting on the same date, Secretary of Defense Wilson raised the issue of the French B-29 request and stated that the Pentagon regarded this proposal as “pretty fantastic.” General Twining had told Admiral Radford he did not believe there were viable targets for heavy bombers with Viet Minh troops in such close proximity to the French lines, and both voiced their concern that the French did not have pilots with the experience to fly the larger aircraft. Radford said he did not think the French could get the B-29s in operation in time to change the situation at Dien Bien Phu. The admiral also focused on the inefficiency with which the French were using B-26s the USAF had already loaned them, with more on the way. He said that the French were averaging only a quarter of the flying hours that the Americans achieved with these aircraft. President Eisenhower called the French inefficiency “heartbreaking.”¹¹

Vice President Nixon noted in his diary that “it was quite apparent that the President had backed down considerably from the strong position he had taken on Indochina the latter part of the previous week (*see Apr. 1*). He seemed resigned to doing nothing at all unless we could get the allies and the country to go along with whatever was suggested, and he did not seem inclined to put much pressure on to get them to come along.”¹²

Also on April 6, the USAF delivered eleven B-26s to Da Nang for loan to the French, part of an overall loan of twenty-five (*see Mar. 20–26*). General Twining had told Admiral Radford that he did not believe the French would make the best use of these aircraft.¹³

On the same date, the USAF flew William J. Donovan, the former head of the OSS who at the time was U.S. ambassador to Thailand, from Saigon to Hanoi, reportedly to check on clandestine activities in northern Vietnam.¹⁴

April 7: At a press conference, in one of his most remembered statements, President Eisenhower described became known as the “domino theory,” or the “falling domino principle,” as Eisenhower actually called it, noting that “the possible consequences of the loss [of Indochina] are just incalculable

10. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1248.

11. *Ibid.*, 13:1262 (quotes); Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 23–24; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 401–2. Instead of the larger bombers, the NSC decided to offer much smaller, more maneuverable F4U Corsairs. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1264. For multiple USAF studies that noted the lack of targets, see Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 23–24; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 200–201. Radford said in his memoir that the French had only thirty-four flight crews to fly forty-three operational aircraft. Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 402.

12. Nixon, *RN*, 151.

13. Sundloff, “Dien Bien Phu Remembered,” 12; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 24; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1151.

14. Scudder, “Tonkin Taxi,” pt. 3, 11.



On April 7 during a press conference similar to the undated one shown here, President Dwight Eisenhower described what became known as the “domino theory,” or the “falling domino principle,” as he actually called it, stating that the loss of Indochina to communism would endanger much of southern Asia. *USAF*.

to the free world.” The president declared that the fall of the three Indochina nations to communism would endanger Thailand, Indonesia, Burma, and potentially Japan. Although public and private records show that the “domino theory” reflected Eisenhower’s general concerns about the spread of communism, it is interesting to note that at the NSC meeting the previous day, the president, according to the memorandum of conversation, “expressed his hostility to the notion that because we might lose Indochina we would necessarily have to lose all the rest of Southeast Asia.”¹⁵

April 9: The USAF delivered eighteen C-47s from Japan to Da Nang for loan to the French. During this period, FEAF also provided L-20 liaison aircraft as well as large air shipments of munitions, paraflares, and white-phosphorus bombs. The USN sent twelve replacement F-8Fs and delivered twenty-five F-4Us to Da Nang on the USS *Saipan* (CVL-48). As operational tempo and maintenance supply needs increased, FEAF sent the 816th Troop Carrier Squadron and subsequently a detachment of the 50th Troop Carrier Wing to Clark Air Base to augment resupply flights to the bases at Haiphong and Da Nang.¹⁶

15. *Public Papers, 1954*, 73 (1st quote); *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1257 (2d quote).

16. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 24; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:112-13, 234-35.



Brig. Gen. Chester McCarty (center), commander of 315th Air Division (Air Cargo), conferred with French and U.S. officers during an inspection tour at Tourane (Da Nang) airfield. McCarty was one of many U.S. officers who grew frustrated with poor French air force performance in Indochina. USAF.

April 13: The French air force accidentally bombed French firebases at Dien Bien Phu three times in one day, underlining the challenges that a larger-scale tactical mission would face with the Viet Minh so close to the French lines.¹⁷

Col. Edward Lansdale recounted that the overall French bombing effort “was very poor. It certainly didn’t drive the enemy off the high ground. If anybody ever said it was effective, it wasn’t effective enough to change that part of the situation.” He said in another interview that he heard “some very devastating critiques of French use of air power” from CAT pilots. Lansdale added that “I know that the bombing I saw the French do, it seemed to me that they were lucky to even hit Indochina, let alone anything more pinpointed than that. It was quite inaccurate, and it really wasn’t effective.”¹⁸

A FEAF staff study dated April 13 concluded that the French “have not fully exploited the military power available in the airplane. Their *air force* in Indochina is too small to be decisive as a weapon in itself, and has been mostly used to provide close support to ground force operations.” If the United States did enter the conflict on the side of the French, the officers writing the report stated that “all types of weapons and devices, including atomic bombs, should be made available and used whenever a militarily

17. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 242.

18. Lansdale interview (1971), 59 (1st quote); Lansdale, interview with Capt. Richard B. Clement, September 9–10, 1969, transcript, AFHSO, 2 (2d–3d quotes) (hereafter Lansdale interview [1969]).

profitable target is discovered.” The report also recommended that “any weapons, including atomic,” should be used “as insurance against overwhelming attack against friendly units,” mentioning the situation at Dien Bien Phu at that time. Assets FEAF could make available for service in Vietnam included two fighter bomber wings, two light bomber wings, three medium bomber wings, one tactical reconnaissance wing, and one medium troop carrier wing, in addition to “atomic carriers,” helicopters, and surveillance aircraft. The study spoke only in general terms of the types of missions the USAF might undertake if called upon and did not include anything along the lines of the proposed Operation Vulture (*see Mar. 20–26; ca. Apr. 19–22*), as FEAF had not been told much about this prospective mission (*see Apr. 14–18*).¹⁹

April 14: In a newsletter to Texas voters, Sen. Lyndon Johnson stated that the fall of Vietnam to the communists would mean “the loss of all Southeast Asia and probably all of Asia. Ultimately we might be driven out of the Pacific itself!” In Johnson’s constituent mail during the period, however, 90 percent of the Texans who addressed the subject of U.S. intervention were against it.²⁰

At some point in mid-April, two other future presidents discussed Vietnam, as Sen. John Kennedy (D-Mass.) recorded his thoughts on a conversation with Vice President Nixon. Nixon blamed British unwillingness to join the United States in united action for squelching the idea of U.S. air strikes at Dien Bien Phu, which Nixon believed would have been successful and would have provided a “terrific morale factor” for the French. Kennedy said that “Nixon is very bitter against the British.” In response to a question from Kennedy about the prospects of direct military intervention, Kennedy noted that Nixon “admits that there wouldn’t be any use in sending troops in there, as the Chinese would come in,” adding that “he finally admitted that the only thing that could be done would be to support the French and the Vietnamese and hope that they were going to be successful.” Nixon did not think a partition of Vietnam would work, and he believed that “pushing this independence thing is liable to push the French out, and there’s no solution there.”²¹

19. FEAF Headquarters, “Staff Study on Indochina,” April 13, 1954, AFHRA, reel 47210, frames 460–66 (quotes, 463).

20. Prados, “Assessing Dien Bien Phu,” 234–35.

21. Dictated Memorandum on Conversation with Richard Nixon about Vietnam, April 1954, in Ted Widmer, ed., *Listening In: The Secret White House Recordings of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Hyperion, 2012), 235–36. In response to a hypothetical question from the press on April 16, Nixon did mention the possibility of deploying U.S. troops if the French completely collapsed, a comment that complicated Dulles’s efforts to build a coalition with the British and others for some type of united action. Herring and Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu,” 356–57; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 406; Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 73; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 491–94.

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On the Senate floor on April 6, Kennedy had declared that “to pour money, materiel, and men into the jungles of Indochina without at least a remote prospect of victory would be dangerously futile and self-destructive.” He stated in an interview published on May 10 that “the lack of popular support for the war among the people of the Associated States of Indochina and, consequently, the lack of a crusading and reliable native army with an effective officer corps, prevents the wholehearted nationalistic drive against the Communists which is essential for military success.”²²

April 14–18: Lt. Gen. Earle “Pat” Partridge, the newly installed FEAF commander, visited Indochina to review details of various scenarios for U.S. air involvement and to meet with the French military leadership. He stopped first in Saigon, then went to Hanoi, and he reportedly made a reconnaissance flight over Dien Bien Phu. Back in Saigon on the 17th, Partridge shared his findings with Maj. Gen. John “Iron Mike” O’Daniel, the new MAAG commander, and with Ambassador Donald Heath, stating that “it would be possible to establish modern airfields at critical points capable of taking jet aircraft in a period of six months.” If U.S. personnel deployed to Vietnam for a joint operation with the French, Partridge emphasized that “command should remain in U.S. hands and not under a French air general.”

At some point during the trip, Gen. Henri Navarre, the French commander in Indochina, told Partridge that USAF B–29 missions had been cleared through diplomatic channels. According to Brig. Gen. Joseph Caldara, “General Partridge made it plain that he had no such directive.” Navarre cabled General Ely that Partridge “had heard nothing regarding [Operation] Vulture, other than one vague wire authorizing him to study it with us. He had no idea it was an urgent matter until I told him.” On Ely’s direction, Gen. Jean Valluy pressed the issue in Washington with U.S. military leaders. They told him that the decision rested with the president, who had not made up his mind.

Upon leaving Vietnam, Partridge radioed Caldara to meet him at the airport in Tokyo, where he briefed Caldara and sent him to Indochina to prepare for possible B–29 missions.²³

22. John F. Kennedy, speech on Indochina, April 6, 1954, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/FL38JKmwpkSmBvR0t9y1PA.aspx> (1st quote); *Washington Star*, May 10, 1954, quoted in Prados, “Assessing Dien Bien Phu,” 232 (2d quote). See also Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 301.

23. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1348–49 (Partridge quotes); Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 92; Caldara to LeMay, May 3, 1954 (Caldara quote); Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 25; Morgan, *Valley of Death*, 450–51 (Navarre quote); Logevall, *Embers of War*, 496. For more on the French side of the discussion, see Laurent Cesari and Jacques de Folin, “Military Necessity, Political Impossibility: The French Viewpoint on Operation *Vautour*,” in *Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954–1955*, ed. Lawrence S. Kaplan, Denise Artaud, and Mark R. Rubin (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1990), 105–20.



Lt. Gen. Earle E. "Pat" Partridge, who had taken command of FEAF at the end of March, was surprised by the French request for a massive air strike to relieve Dien Bien Phu when he toured Vietnam in April. USAF.

circa April 19–22: General Caldara, commander of FEAF Bomber Command, deployed to Indochina with eight staff officers to prepare for the possibility of B–29s strikes in Vietnam. One plan envisioned a variant of the original Operation Vulture concept (*see Mar. 20–26*), with raids against Viet Minh targets at Dien Bien Phu on three or four consecutive nights with seventy-five to eighty USAF B–29s. Caldara reportedly flew three reconnaissance missions over Dien Bien Phu himself and also surveyed Viet Minh supply routes to the Chinese border. He and his staff determined that Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon and the airfield at Da Nang had runways that could accommodate B–29s but that they “would fall apart” if operations extended beyond the initial raids. The USAF also would have had to transport all ground crews and support materials to be able to fly from the in-country bases. General Partridge believed that the prospective missions should be flown out of Clark Air Base.

Caldara reported to Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, head of Strategic Air Command, that “there are no true B–29 targets in the area. However, if B–29s

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are the only aircraft that can put the required tonnage on the roads and supply areas, we can do the job if directed.” General Navarre suggested a USAF strike against the Viet Minh supply base at Tuan Giao, about fifty miles northeast of Dien Bien Phu. At the battle site itself, Caldara was concerned by the close proximity of the Viet Minh to the French lines and by the lack of short-range navigational radar (SHORAN) available, in part because the French held no ground positions from which to guide it. The suggested workaround was to have French pilots who were experienced with the area fly with USAF crews to act as pathfinders. Guidance by landmarks would be problematic, however, as the moon was waning in the latter part of the month, with the new moon on May 2, so there was going to be little moonlight until the first quarter moon on May 9. Caldara also noted to LeMay that with the monsoon season starting, “visual bombing will be limited,” even if the USAF flew daylight raids. Another issue with unstable weather conditions was a seven-hour lag from the time the USAF would begin mission preparations at Clark until the bombers would be over target.²⁴

Brig. Gen. Jean Dechaux, commander of French air assets for northern Indochina, expressed concern about the impact if a B-29 crashed in Viet Minh-held territory or in China. He feared that the established presence of U.S. personnel in combat might prompt a military response from the Chinese. Dechaux recalled that he came to the conclusion that the USAF strike would be “militarily useless and politically dangerous,” which he told Navarre.²⁵

In reference to the potential loss of U.S. airmen in prospective missions over Vietnam, members of the intelligence branch of the 581st Aerial Resupply Group, as part of responsibilities to ensure survival of USAF aircrews, made “numerous trips” to Indochina and Thailand during the first part of 1954 to “gather evasion and escape information.” The branch produced manuals for each area covered.²⁶

24. Caldara to LeMay, May 3, 1954 (quotes); Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 25; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 92 n. 3; Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 305–6, 310; Prados, *Sky Would Fall*, 145–49; Morgan, *Valley of Death*, 450–52; Roy, *Battle of Dienbienphu*, 248. There are discrepancies about when General Caldara was in Indochina. Fall had him (and General Partridge) there “at the beginning of April” and then back as of April 26. Fall gave no sources for his account, which other books have repeated, but there is no evidence in USAF records that have been found that Caldara deployed until this later-April period. Futrell, writing from USAF sources, did not seem to have the dates that Caldara was in Vietnam but had him leaving for Saigon right after meeting with Partridge around April 18–19. Prados put the time frame that Caldara was in-country as April 20–29, while Devillers and Lacouture recorded him arriving on April 22. Morgan had the dates as April 19–29.

None of the historical accounts mention the potential diplomatic issues of staging raids from the Philippines. The Filipino government already had concerns about Clark Air Base being used for maintenance and supply of the war against the Viet Minh. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:79.

25. Morgan, *Valley of Death*, 450–52.

26. “Semi-Annual History of the 581st Air Resupply Group,” January 1–June 30, 1954, AFHRA, reel K3646, frames 490–525, p. 17.



Brig. Gen. Joseph D. Caldara, head of FEAF Bomber Command, deployed to Indochina in the latter part of April to prepare for the possibility of B-29s strikes to relieve Dien Bien Phu. USAF.

Partridge directed Caldara to be on seventy-two-hour notice to begin operations, and it was clear in his May 3 letter to LeMay that he believed bombing missions were still a possibility at that time.²⁷

April 19–May 5: Three officers from FEAF deployed to Vietnam to assist the French in the use of “Lazy Dog” finned antipersonnel missiles. The missiles had been shipped to FEAF during the Korean War but not used, and many were corroded when uncrated in Indochina. Targeting Viet Minh antiaircraft positions, the French dropped 360 of the missiles from April 26 through May 2.²⁸

April 20: In a secret operation dubbed Bali Hai, U.S. Air Forces Europe launched the first flight of seven C-124s to transport more than 1,000 French paratroopers from Paris to Vietnam for possible insertion at Dien Bien Phu.

27. Caldara to LeMay, May 3, 1954.

28. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:88–93.

The United States had no overflight rights for China, the Soviet Union, or any of the Soviet-aligned countries, necessitating a southern route that was complicated when India, vowing neutrality in the Indochina fight, also denied overflight. The aircraft, drawn from the 62d Airlift Wing at Larson Air Force Base, Washington, flew from Rhein-Main Air Base, West Germany, to Paris, where they picked up the paratroopers. The planes flew from France via stops in Tripoli, Libya; Suez, Egypt; Dhahran, Saudi Arabia; Karachi, Pakistan; and Negombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), separating there to distribute the troops to Bangkok, Thailand, and to Da Nang and Saigon, Vietnam. The roundtrip flight was approximately 17,500 miles. The French were able to insert small numbers of these paratroopers at Dien Bien Phu on the nights of May 3, 4, and 5. A second phase of the operation commenced on May 5, with USAF aircraft picking up French paratroops in Marseille. The Saudis had backed out of the overflight agreement by that point, necessitating a direct connection between Egypt and Pakistan. Dien Bien Phu fell while this mission was en route (*see May 6–7*).²⁹

April 23: Secretary Dulles, who had been in Europe since April 11 negotiating potential allied action in Indochina and preparing for the Geneva conference, was meeting with French foreign minister Georges Bidault in Paris on this date when the latter received a message from General Navarre to Prime Minister Joseph Laniel that noted the rapidly worsening circumstances at Dien Bien Phu. Dulles cabled the State Department to inform President Eisenhower and Admiral Radford that the situation was “desperate.” Navarre presented the only options as the proposed massive USAF B–29 bombing raid (*see Mar. 20–26*) or request for a cease-fire. Dulles said he told Bidault that “B–29 intervention as proposed seemed to me out of the question under existing circumstances,” but that he would inform the president. Radford arrived in Paris the next day. After consulting with Radford, Dulles wrote Bidault that “I have taken military advice, and the information which I received is that even the massive air attack which you proposed could not at this juncture assure the lifting of the siege at Dien Bien Phu.” Nevertheless, the USAF continued to prepare for such a raid (*see ca. Apr. 19–22*). Dulles also did not rule out the possibility of a “collective defense” even if Dien Bien Phu fell.³⁰ Although historians disagree on the

29. “Operation ‘Bali Hai,’” AFHRA, reel P0772, frames 1742–49; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:87–88; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 26.

30. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1374 (1st quote), 1399 (2d–3d quotes); Logevall, *Embers of War*, 495–503. After Dulles delivered the U.S. verdict on the aerial attack, French leaders sent General Ely to meet with Admiral Radford to plead for U.S. intervention, for the “psychological effect,” since both doubted by that point that Dien Bien Phu could be saved. Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 407. Leaked news of the French request for U.S. aerial intervention appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* on April 25.



French paratroopers boarding a C-124 at Orly airport in Paris as part of Operation Bali Hai. Under the coordination of U.S. Air Forces Europe, seven aircraft from the 62d Airlift Wing carried French paratroopers to Indochina via a circuitous route for possible insertion at Dien Bien Phu. USAF.

plausibility of the story, both Bidault and one of his associates later claimed that Dulles asked Bidault privately on the evening of April 23 if two tactical nuclear weapons might make a difference in the situation.³¹

April 24: Paul R. Holden became the first CAT pilot critically wounded in a drop mission over Dien Bien Phu. His copilot, Wallace A. Buford, who would perish in a crash two weeks later (*see May 6*), got the damaged C-119 back to Cat Bi. French physicians there wanted to amputate Holden's right arm, but he insisted on evacuation to Clark Air Base, where USAF surgeons managed to save it.³²

During April, CAT pilots completed 428 missions over Dien Bien Phu, with their C-119s taking sixty direct anti-aircraft hits. According to Bernard Fall, it became "common knowledge among the troops at Dien

31. Georges Bidault, *Resistance: The Political Autobiography of Georges Bidault* (New York: Praeger, 1967), 196; *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1927-28; Herring and Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu," 357-58; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 498-500; Prados, *Sky Would Fall*, 152-53; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 27; Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 34. Chester Cooper later wrote that among senior administration officials, Dulles "deserves the number one spot" as an advocate for the use of nuclear weapons in Indochina, although Cooper did not believe the discussions progressed to a critical level. Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 72-73. Winston Churchill also mentioned the atomic bomb possibility to Admiral Radford on April 26 but did not think Indochina was worth using "that horrible thing" to save. Herring and Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu," 360. Churchill had come under attack in the House of Commons in the previous weeks in the wake of the U.S. hydrogen bomb test at Bikini atoll on March 1. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 482-83.

32. Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 189; 315th Air Division Historical Report, 18-19.

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Bien Phu that the American civilian pilots were in many cases taking greater chances” than their French air force counterparts.³³

Also on the 24th, James C. Hagerty, President Eisenhower’s press secretary, noted in his diary that the option of a bombing mission over Dien Bien Phu launched from two U.S. aircraft carriers was still under consideration (*see Apr. 1*).³⁴

April 25: Throughout April, and particularly after U.S. congressional leaders made British participation in what Secretary Dulles and others called “united action” a prerequisite for any chance of congressional authorization for direct American involvement (*see Apr. 3*), the United Kingdom became a vital but extremely reluctant component for any multinational intervention in Indochina on behalf of the French. On this date, R. Anthony Eden, the British foreign secretary, informed Dulles, according to a memorandum of conversation, that the British chiefs of staff “were certain that air intervention at Dien Bien Phu would have no decisive effect on that battle.” Since they believed it would be “ineffective,” the British had concluded that it would be “a great mistake” to undertake it. The United Kingdom would commit only to working with the United States to prepare to defend the rest of Southeast Asia if the French capitulated at the approaching Geneva conference (*see May 8*). Dulles conceded to Eden that he had his own reservations about aerial intervention at Dien Bien Phu, as he did not think the garrison could be saved by it. President Eisenhower recorded in his diary that the British had a “woeful unawareness” of the risks in the region.³⁵

April 26: The French lost two U.S.-loaned B-26s and a C-47 over Dien Bien Phu, shot down by Viet Minh anti-aircraft fire. For the month, the French lost eight aircraft and sustained major damage on forty-seven others. The French exacerbated their problems considerably by continuing to radio their positions in French instead of in code, making it easy for the Viet Minh to track approaching flights. President Eisenhower was furious that the French had not changed this practice.³⁶

April 27: The French continued to request direct U.S. participation, in whatever form, in attack or in flying C-119 supply missions. The Joint Chiefs responded on this date to one inquiry with the opinion that “the

33. Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 190; Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 327.

34. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 34.

35. *FRUS 1952-54*, 16:553-57 (1st-3d quotes, 553-54); Herring and Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu,” 358-61 (4th quote, 360); Logevall, *Embers of War*, 480-509; Ferrell, *Eisenhower Diaries*, 279-80.

36. Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 189; *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1429.



Vietnamese laborers, including Viet Minh prisoners, assist airmen in unloading supplies from a FEAF C-54 at Cat Bi in 1954. In addition to the materiel and food the USAF brought in to be airdropped to the French at Dien Bien Phu, these supply flights also supported the USAF personnel at Cat Bi and other bases. *USAF*.

proposal offers little insofar as relief of Dien Bien Phu is concerned.” The only site in Indochina they could identify capable of supporting larger aircraft was Seno airfield outside of Savannahkhet, Laos, on the Thai border, more than 400 miles from Dien Bien Phu. The Joint Chiefs recommended that if “for other than military reasons” the United States felt required to contribute, the direct participation of U.S. personnel should be limited to preparing and expanding Seno airfield.³⁷

April 29: The grave situation at Dien Bien Phu was the central focus of a four-hour NSC meeting. Vice President Nixon recorded in his diary that “the President was extremely serious and seemed to be greatly concerned about what was the right course to take.” The topic of nuclear weapons arose in earnest. One suggestion was that an atomic bomb could be “loaned” to the French, but others questioned whether French pilots could “make a proper drop.” Eisenhower stated that he did not believe the

37. *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 9:392-94 (1st quote, 392; 2d quote, 394); Herring and Immerman, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu,” 361. C-119s did fly supply drops to Seno in June and July. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 24.

Americans should use an atomic device unilaterally, but he agreed with Nixon that the United States did not need to mention a potential nuclear strike when seeking allied support for a multinational response. Nixon advocated for conventional air strikes, either unilaterally or by “an Air Force contingent representing a unified alliance,” perhaps one that would not include the reluctant British. The idea of deploying U.S. ground troops gained no traction, with the memorandum of conversation recording that Eisenhower said he was “frightened to death at the prospect of American divisions scattered all over the world.”³⁸

April 30: Following on the discussion at the NSC meeting the previous day, President Eisenhower and Vice President Nixon reviewed the options with Robert Cutler, the president’s special assistant for national security affairs, including the potential use of atomic bombs to relieve Dien Bien Phu. According to Nixon, Eisenhower did not think the United States should use a bomb unilaterally; rather, there would need to be “some agreement on united action.” The president also questioned the potential effectiveness of a nuclear device in the jungle, with Cutler recording that the final group consensus was that “well piloted Corsair strikes with HE [high explosive] bombs and Napalm bombs would be more effective.” Nevertheless, the trio did not rule out the possibility of offering to give the French what Cutler described as “a few” nuclear weapons.³⁹

Nuclear weapons were also part of the discussion in military planning for a potential U.S. intervention, with a FEAF report noting that “Strategic Air Command would be prepared to deliver atomic or conventional attacks as directed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.” Planning for intervention continued even after the fall of Dien Bien Phu (*see June 7*).⁴⁰

May 1: The Viet Minh launched what proved to be the final push at Dien Bien Phu. After an artillery barrage, Giap’s troops attacked French positions all around the perimeter of the central compound. The Viet Minh overran three outposts on the first night, with French losses of nearly 500 killed, wounded, or missing. Heavy rains slowed fighting on May 2 and 3 and turned the entrenchments into mud pits, but the Viet Minh resumed the advance through the French firebases on May 4 and 5. Giap ordered channels cut in nearby streams, leaving parts of the French encampment completely under water by later in the month, but the fort did not hold out that long.

38. Nixon, *RN*, 153–55 (1st quote, 153; 4th quote, 154); *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1431–47 (2d–3d quotes, 1447; 5th quote, 1442).

39. Nixon, *RN*, 154 (1st quote); *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1447–48 (2d–3d quotes, 1447).

40. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:281. This report (pp. 259–67, 274–85) contained extensive discussion of U.S. operational planning for invasion.



Technicians of the 6127th Air Terminal Group at Clark Air Base in the Philippines inspect a C-119 engine being readied for shipment to Indochina. All substantial engine repairs required transport to Clark or to Ashiya Air Base in Japan. USAF.

Colonel Lansdale, who visited the area in June (*see June 1*), believed that “thousands of lives would have been saved if the Vietminh had only awaited the coming of the rain. Evidently the political need for a quick victory made the Vietminh forgo waiting for a victory through hydraulics.”⁴¹

May 6: Six CAT-piloted C-119s from Cat Bi flew the last supply mission for the two remaining French positions still holding out at Dien Bien Phu. The larger of the two French outposts was only the size of a baseball field, so the aircraft had to make lower-level approaches to reach both. Two of the C-119s suffered major damage from anti-aircraft fire, with one able to make it back to Cat Bi. The other, hit in both engines, limped across the border to Laos but crash-landed, killing four of the six aboard, including the American pilot and first officer, and mortally wounding another of the French crewmen. Both Americans were decorated former officers in the USAAF/USAF. The pilot was James B. McGovern Jr., an enormous, gregarious man known as “Earthquake McGoon,” on his forty-fifth mission over Dien Bien Phu; the first officer was Wallace Buford. Smaller

41. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 349–71; Morgan, *Valley of Death*, 522–27, 531–37; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 524–25; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 151 (quote); Lansdale interview (1971), 61–62.



A captured photograph shows Viet Minh troops celebrating the capitulation of Dien Bien Phu atop the remains of a USAF B-26 at the airstrip there. The French lost quite a number of U.S.-loaned aircraft when the garrison fell.

aircraft flew to the suspected crash site on May 7 but had to leave the area after taking ground fire. McGovern apparently tried to follow the Mekong River to the airfield at Seno, as the crash site was at Ban Sot, Laos, about seventy-five miles upriver from Seno. A U.S. team recovered McGovern's remains in 2002 but could not locate Buford's. In 2005, France awarded the Legion of Honor to thirty-seven CAT pilots, including McGovern and Buford, who flew in support of French operations in Indochina.⁴²

During the siege period from March 13 to May 7, French and American pilots dropped nearly 7,000 tons of supplies at Dien Bien Phu, nearly two-thirds of which was ammunition. CAT pilots flew more than 1,300 sorties. The Viet Minh shot down forty-eight aircraft and severely damaged 167, significant losses for the largely U.S.-supplied French fleet.⁴³

For the total period from French occupation of Dien Bien Phu (*see Nov. 20, 1953*) until the garrison's fall, crews flew approximately 10,400

42. "A Look Back . . . Earthquake McGoons' Final Flight," CIA News & Information, July 16, 2009, <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/earthquake-mcgoons-final-flight.html>; "U.S. Pilots Honored for Indochina Service," *News from France*, March 2, 2005, 3, <http://ambafrance-us.org/IMG/pdf/nff/NFF0502.pdf>; 315th Air Division Historical Report, 16, 24; "FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations," 1:215-16; Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 191; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 774 n. 34. Col. Maurice Casey had told McGovern that if at all possible, a C-119 should not be crash-landed, as its aluminum frame would not withstand impact well. Casey recounted that McGovern had declared himself too big for a parachute and had said that he would never use one. Casey interview. Lt. Col. Donald Pricer, who commanded the 483d detachment, remembered McGovern as "a hell of a pilot." Pricer interview.

43. Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 191, 217; Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 322-23.

missions—6,700 supply and transport, 3,700 combat—of which the French navy flew 1,267. Aircraft delivered 20,859.6 tons of supplies to Dien Bien Phu, with 11,952.7 of those parachuted, 2,323.3 air-dropped, and 6,583.6 landed.⁴⁴

May 6–7: The Viet Minh began the final assault on Dien Bien Phu late in the afternoon of May 6 with heavy bombardment and a large mine blast under part of the French garrison. An infantry advance followed, with the French holding through the night but in dire straits by mid-morning of the 7th. The Viet Minh pushed reinforcements forward in the afternoon, and the French lines broke, with the main command post falling before 6 p.m. An isolated firebase to the south held out until just before 2 a.m. on the 8th.⁴⁵

The French defeat was much more damaging psychologically and politically than it was militarily. As French scholars Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture put it, “the fall of Dien Bien Phu was amplified out of all proportion by the French press and government, in political circles, and in the emotions of the French people.” Despite the losses at Dien Bien Phu, the forces of the French and the Associated States (State of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) collectively numbered approximately 605,000. The highest estimates for the Viet Minh were 291,000, with only 185,000 regulars, nearly a third of whom were at Dien Bien Phu, a month’s march from Hanoi. General O’Daniel, commander of MAAG-Indochina, believed that the war still could be won, and he and his staff spent the early part of May outlining a plan for a Franco-Vietnamese general offensive.⁴⁶

According to Vice President Nixon, among the senior U.S. leadership, “the almost universal reaction was relief that the crisis had ended without precipitating a major war. But while attempting to put the best face on it publicly, we knew that the defeat at Dien Bien Phu would probably lead to French withdrawal from Vietnam, and that America would either have to take over the burden of stopping Communist aggression in Indochina or abandon the entire region.”⁴⁷

May 8: The Indochina phase of the Geneva conference began. It included representatives from the United States, the Soviet Union, France, the United Kingdom, China, Laos, Cambodia, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Viet Minh), and the State of Vietnam. The conference dragged on, with some breaks, for two and a half months, with the French government falling in mid-June due largely to the delays (*see June 18, July 21–22*).

44. Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 339.

45. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 371–415; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 529–35.

46. Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 171 (quote); Prados, “Assessing Dien Bien Phu,” 221; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 171; Herring, *American’s Longest War*, 45; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 221–22; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 423.

47. Nixon, *RN*, 154–55.

As the United States was not a combatant, U.S. representatives remained aloof from the direct negotiations, and Secretary Dulles forbade any contact by the U.S. contingent with the Chinese, even in social settings. The Americans and the British had serious concerns about whether an agreement could be reached with parameters that would allow any hope for maintaining a noncommunist government in Vietnam, while the British feared that the Americans were encouraging the French to hold firm and not settle. According to Admiral Radford, “There were few illusions in Washington about the nature of any agreement that would come out of Geneva.” Indicative of U.S. detachment from the proceedings, Dulles returned to Washington on May 3, before the Indochina phase began. As for France, Chester Cooper, who was part of the U.S. delegation, later observed that “with the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the French bargaining position tumbled from minuscule to virtually nonexistent.”⁴⁸

Also on May 8, USAF Headquarters ordered the 6400th Air Depot Wing to send two radar sets to Vietnam. By the end of June, in an operation known as Project Tropical Fish, the wing deployed two AN/MPN-1 ground-controlled approach mobile radar units, along with a sixty-day supply of parts.⁴⁹

May 10: A secret CIA brief of this date that the Pentagon forwarded to FEAF reported that the Chinese leadership seemed to want the Indochina conflict “localized, if not actually terminated.” The CIA’s source indicated that China was “anxious to avoid conflict with the United States,” desiring time to build up its industry (*see July 27, 1953*). Therefore, speculation was that China wanted to “maintain Indochina as a buffer state, but not as a springboard for new advances into Southeast Asia.” CIA analysts gave some credence to the report but added that despite what “China stands to gain by avoiding war with the U.S., Sino-Soviet long-range aims and past success in dealing with the West may encourage further trials of strength in the Far East.”⁵⁰

On the same date, MAAG-Indochina informed FEAF of a French request for twenty-five additional B-26s with which to form a fourth bomber squadron. At that point, the French had not provided personnel to maintain the prospective third B-26 squadron (*see Jan. 2, 29, Mar. 20–26*). Between USAF resistance and evolving requirements after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, FEAF did not end up having to provide the aircraft for either squadron.⁵¹

48. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 549–64; Statler, *Replacing France*, 95–99; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 151–70; Schulzinger, *Time for War*, 71–74; Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 39–41; Radford, *Pearl Harbor to Vietnam*, 417 (1st quote); Cooper, *In the Shadows of History*, 124 (2d quote). According to Cooper (p. 113), the total U.S. contingent at Geneva was more than 200.

49. History of 6400th Air Depot Wing, 1 January 1954–30 June 1954, AFHRA, reel P0303, frame 157.

50. FEAF Selected Intelligence Briefs and Reports, May 1954, AFHRA, reel K7317, frames 668–69.

51. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:107–8.



The French employed Viet Minh prisoners to lay concrete for an expanded apron at Tourane (Da Nang). A C-54 from the 374th Troop Carrier Wing is in the background. *USAF*.

May 13: The main Viet Minh force at Dien Bien Phu began its march toward the Red River delta area around Hanoi. The French air force attacked Viet Minh convoys and lines of communication, to little avail.⁵²

May 14: In discussions at FEAF headquarters in Tokyo, Secretary of Defense Wilson told General Partridge that he expected the USAF personnel committed in February to be out of Indochina by June 15, as he and the president had promised Congress (*see Feb. 5*). Partridge was unaware of this requirement, and FEAF had made no such plans. Although Wilson was insistent, the command had no way to expedite the withdrawal because the French were not providing the necessary replacement mechanics. It was also unclear to FEAF whether Wilson's concern was only with the detachments deployed in February, or with all USAF personnel in Vietnam, including the C-119 maintenance crews and the 1808th AACS squadron. FEAF managed to pull out half of the February-committed men by the end of June, the rest by July 19 (*see June 29, July 19*).⁵³

May 17: CIA director Allen Dulles sent Colonel Lansdale orders to deploy to Saigon (*see June 1*). Lansdale's potential involvement in Vietnam had been under discussion for months (*see Jan. 29*).⁵⁴

52. Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 174.

53. "FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations," 1:150-51.

54. Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 194.



CIA director Allen W. Dulles (*left*) sent Col. Edward G. Lansdale (*second from left*), a USAF officer detailed to the CIA, to Vietnam in mid-1954. The photograph shows Lansdale receiving the Distinguished Service Medal in January 1957 for his efforts in Indochina. Gen. Nathan Twining (*right*), USAF chief of staff, and Lt. Gen. Charles P. Cabell, USAF, CIA deputy directory, also participated in the ceremony. *USAF*.

May 19: The 315th Troop Carrier Wing sent four C-46s and crews to Do Son to be on standby in case of emergency evacuation. On May 27, the planes began daily courier flights to Da Nang.⁵⁵

May 20: At an NSC meeting, senior leaders discussed the possibility of keeping USAF mechanics deployed in Vietnam beyond June (*see May 14*). According to Vice President Nixon, President Eisenhower “dismissed the idea. First, he said, the French were already going back on their word to keep up the fighting. Second, he said that such an extension would make our future relations with Congress very difficult, because he had given a solemn pledge that the mechanics would come out by June 15, and he intended to honor his pledge” (*see Feb. 5*). The meeting notes recorded that Eisenhower said he would allow a short extension only if it was needed to prepare for the repossession of the U.S.-loaned aircraft.⁵⁶

55. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:236–38.

56. Nixon, *RN*, 155 (quote); *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1587.

May 22: The 483d Troop Carrier Wing maintenance detachment at Cat Bi relocated to Da Nang. Viet Minh activities in the Red River delta had increased the threat level for the U.S. airmen at Cat Bi, plus deteriorating runway conditions made access for larger aircraft increasingly difficult. The runways were already cracked and chopped from heavy use during the siege at Dien Bien Phu, worsening rapidly due to heavy rains, and buckling from the heat. Because of these issues, the French also used USAF C-119s to move Viet Minh prisoners from Cat Bi to Da Nang.⁵⁷

Viet Minh guerrillas increased their activity near the Da Nang base, and on June 19, 315th Air Division headquarters ordered a review and updating of evacuation plans. Subsequently, the 483d detachment had a USAF pilot and crew chief for each aircraft on emergency standby at the base. In late June, the detachment commander, Lt. Col. Donald Pricer, ordered an evacuation when the Viet Minh breached the base perimeter. Twenty-five of the twenty-eight C-119s were operational, with some flying to Tan Son Nhut airfield in Saigon and others all the way to Clark Air Base. They returned the following day.⁵⁸

According to Pricer, the French were “constantly” pushing for “more missions than I was directed to provide.” The authorized number was forty per day, which decreased to sixteen per day in July, then twelve. Many of these were supply drops for French troops in Laos. On at least three or four occasions, C-119s had to land in Laos because of mechanical difficulties. Pricer sent USAF crews to repair the aircraft in the field, piloting some of the flights himself, although that was “not the sort of thing we were supposed to do.”⁵⁹

57. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 24–25, 37; Sundloff, “Dien Bien Phu Remembered,” 20; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 31. A FEAF intelligence brief that was in preparation at the time of the relocation concluded that the “Viet Minh will probably launch attacks against airfields in the delta, increasing the tempo of the attacks in proportion to the success of the FAF [French air force] in operations against the Viet Minh.” The report speculated that the French might have to withdraw from these bases in the Hanoi-Haiphong area as well. “Estimate of Situation in the Tonkin Delta,” June 3, 1954, AFHRA, reel K7318, frame 1055. The base at Da Nang was not much safer, as the FEAF report described the post there as “an island in an enemy sea” and noted that the French had to airdrop supplies to troops as close as ten miles to the base because overland transport could not safely reach them. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:163.

58. 315th Air Division Historical Report, 37; Pricer interview.

59. Pricer interview (quotes); “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:164.



A French Foreign Legionnaire arrives at Tachikawa Air Base, Japan, as part of Operation Wounded Warrior. In June–July 1954, the USAF evacuated more than 500 wounded French troops from Vietnam. Five C-124s of the 315th Air Division and 6481st Medical Air Evacuation Group carried patients from Saigon to Clark Air Base in the Philippines and subsequently to Tachikawa. *USAF.*

Armistice, Division, and Diem June–December 1954

By the time the Indochina phase of the Geneva conference concluded on July 22, 1954, fundamental shifts were underway in Vietnam, and in Western involvement there. As the Dwight Eisenhower administration had feared, France began looking for ways to leave Southeast Asia, even more so after being informed that U.S. aid would diminish rapidly with the end of the war. The onus for keeping the newly created nation of South Vietnam out of communist hands fell increasingly on the United States, which faced momentous questions about the level of commitment it should assume. The U.S. partner in this endeavor became South Vietnam's implacable and often embattled new prime minister, Ngo Dinh Diem. The American who established the closest relationship with Diem was a USAF officer, Col. Edward Lansdale, who was on assignment with the CIA.

The USAF still had hundreds of airmen in Vietnam as this period began, but Washington withdrew them as the Indochina War ended and the USAF reclaimed the aircraft that had been loaned to the French. The USAF transported wounded French troops out of the country and brought supplies for the refugees streaming from north to south, but it ended up with a limited role in the relocation effort. MAAG-Indochina expanded its staffing after Geneva, but without aircraft loans to oversee, the airmen departing, and no role in training, the Air Force section had little to supervise.

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June 1: Col. Edward Lansdale arrived in Saigon (*see Jan. 27, May 17*). Officially, he was serving with the U.S. embassy as assistant air attaché. He wore his USAF uniform while in Vietnam and continued to be paid by the USAF, which eventually ordered his reassignment (*see Dec. 1956*). His primary assignment was a covert one, however, as he was there to be the chief of the CIA's military mission in Vietnam, reporting directly to



Figures who would play significant roles in shaping the new country of South Vietnam included Prime Minister Ngo Diem Diem (*right, seated*), new MAAG commander Maj. Gen. John W. “Iron Mike” O’Daniel, USA (*left*), and Col. Edward G. Lansdale, USAF (*doffing hat*), who was detailed to the CIA. Also present at the ceremony pictured was G. Frederick Reinhardt (*center, seated*), who became U.S. ambassador in Saigon in 1955. USAF.

CIA director Allen Dulles (*see Jan. 29, May 17*). Lansdale became the most influential USAF officer to serve in Vietnam prior to the 1960s.¹

According to Lansdale, “I had been told that I was to help the Vietnamese help themselves. As far as I knew, this still was almost impossible for an American to do.” The air attaché, Col. William L. Tudor, did not appreciate Lansdale’s presence, and neither did the station chief of the CIA’s civilian mission in Saigon, so Lansdale found himself working more closely with the U.S. Information Service. He also had the blessing of Maj. Gen. John “Iron Mike” O’Daniel, the MAAG commander, who introduced Lansdale to State of Vietnam military and political leaders as a liaison officer for the MAAG. O’Daniel subsequently gave MAAG cover to other members of Lansdale’s small team.²

Lansdale made reconnaissance trips throughout Vietnam during June, including into the north, and participated in an aborted attempt to rescue

1. Currey, *Lansdale*, 140–42; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 128–29; Thomas L. Ahern Jr., *CIA and the House of Ngo: Covert Action in South Vietnam, 1954–63* (Washington, DC: CIA, 2000), 15–16. As historian Andrew Miller put it while observing that Lansdale remained in the USAF while on assignment with, but not employed by, the CIA, “Lansdale was therefore in the CIA without being of it—a status that reinforced his sense of himself as a maverick and a bureaucratic outsider.” Miller identified Lansdale as “the most famous U.S. intelligence operative of the Vietnam War era.” Miller, *Misalliance*, 81.

2. Currey, *Lansdale*, 140–42, 147, 186; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 129 (quote), 131, 135–36; Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 197–98; Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 15–16. It was O’Daniel who had actually suggested that Lansdale be sent “under guise Assistant Air Attache.” Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 50.

captured USAF airmen while near Da Nang (*see June 14*). When the incoming prime minister, Ngo Diem Dinh, arrived later in the month (*see June 25*), Lansdale established a relationship with the new leader and became one of his closest advisors over the subsequent two years, certainly the American most effective at gaining any cooperation from the notoriously recalcitrant Diem (*see June 26*). Lansdale shared Diem's disdain for French colonialism and often clashed with French leadership in Vietnam, to the point that Gen. Paul Ely requested his removal.³

While Lansdale's efforts in Vietnam have been mythologized, sometimes vilified, and at times overstated, he played a significant role in helping Diem establish a viable government and in advocating for him in U.S. leadership circles while Diem struggled to survive politically during his first year in office (*see Apr. 28, 1955*). As historian Fredrik Logevall put it, "Lansdale matters in historical terms because he gave momentum and conceptual clarity to a policy that was already emerging"—the Eisenhower administration's decision to attempt to build a noncommunist nation in South Vietnam.⁴

June 2: The French Committee for National Defense replaced Gen. Henri Navarre with Gen. Paul Ely as commander in chief in Indochina. Ely, who had made a fact-finding trip to Vietnam in mid-May, had not sought the assignment and told a friend that "this is the worst mishap of my career." He left Paris for Saigon on June 6.⁵

June 4: France and the State of Vietnam signed treaties of independence and association.⁶

June 7: As part of ongoing planning for potential U.S. military operations in Vietnam (*see Apr. 30*), Lt. Gen. Earle "Pat" Partridge, FEAF commander, cabled Gen. Nathan Twining, USAF chief of staff, that "B-29 aircraft

3. Currey, *Lansdale*, 142–55; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 145–50, 154–63, 326; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 635–38; Statler, *Replacing France*, 192, 242–43; Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 201–5. Lansdale later said that the French somehow came to blame him for turning the Vietnamese people against them. "It baffled me," he said. "Even when it was demonstrably untrue, the stories continued." Lansdale interview (1971), 62–66 (quote, 66). See also Lansdale, interview by Stanley Karnow, 1979, pt. 1, http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_76FF42FB387043579AAE7F39B43D2D1C (hereafter Lansdale interview, [1979], pt. 1).

4. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 635–38, 657–59, 707–8 (quote, 658). For a view that somewhat downplays the level of Lansdale's influence on Diem, see Miller, *Misalliance*, 3–5, 81–86. For mythologizing of Lansdale, see Jonathan Nashel, *Edward Lansdale's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005); Boot, *Road Not Taken*, xli–l. Boot and Currey, *Lansdale*, take a more positive view of Lansdale's efforts during this period than does the CIA official history, Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, which relies more heavily on the accounts of members of the regular CIA station in Saigon. This CIA team was often at odds with Lansdale's group. The most detailed accounting of the work of Lansdale's military mission is a memoir by one of its members, Rufus Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*.

5. Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 178–85; Morgan, *Valley of Death*, 582 (quote).

6. Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 239–40.



Generals Matthew Ridgway and Earle “Pat” Partridge in Korea in 1951. By June 1954, they were both involved in contingency planning in case the United States had to intervene militarily in Vietnam. USAF.

using conventional weapons cannot produce decisive results in Indochina operations and should not be employed.” He recommended missions by carrier-based USN aircraft if air strikes became necessary.⁷

Discussion of direct U.S. intervention continued at the highest levels into June, with service chiefs Twining of the Air Force and Gen. Matthew Ridgway of the Army the most outspoken against U.S. involvement. According to one source, Twining “did not wish to commit the U.S. Air Force to operations in which it might be prevented from striking at the centers of enemy power, as it had been in Korea.” Ridgway sent a logistics team to Vietnam to investigate the challenges of deploying and supporting a large ground force. He estimated that to win there, the U.S. would need to commit seven or eight divisions. Ridgway’s experts found numerous impediments for U.S. forces, and he forwarded their report to President Eisenhower. “To a man of his military experience,” Ridgway wrote in his memoir, “its implications were immediately clear.” Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson also opposed intervention.⁸

7. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” vol. 2, frames 599–600.

8. Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 217–19 (1st quote); Ridgway, *Soldier*, 275–78 (2d quote, 277); Spector, *Advice and Support*, 213–14, 221–24. The FEAF report documents the extensive U.S. military operational planning for an advance into Indochina that took place before the agreements at Geneva ended the conflict. For the ongoing debate at the presidential and cabinet level, see Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 35–39.

In a passage in a draft of his memoirs that he edited out, Eisenhower wrote that “the jungles of Indochina would have swallowed up division after division of U.S. troops, who, being unaccustomed to this kind of warfare, would have sustained heavy casualties until they learned to live in the new environment.” He also concluded that even if U.S. forces had occupied all of Indochina, “their eventual removal would have resulted only in a reversion to the situation which had existed before.”⁹

June 8: President Eisenhower wrote Gen. Alfred M. Gruenther, USA, the supreme allied commander in Europe, of his frustration with French efforts to blame the United States for the failing situation in Indochina. Gruenther had reported that René Pleven, the French defense minister, had said that the loss of the Red River delta region would “start a wave of anti-allied outbursts in France with great bitterness because the Allies let us down.” In his reply, Eisenhower traced how the United States had tried for three years to get France to “put the Indochina war on an international footing” and declare its intention to make Indochina independent. France had refused on both counts, mainly because of the country’s “terrible fear of the effect” on its position in Tunisia and Morocco, as well as France’s “seemingly hysterical desire to be thought such a ‘great power’ that it was beneath” the country’s “dignity to accept help in the conflict.” Even as France had begun to ask for more assistance in 1954, all of the requests were “for help on France’s own terms,” according to Eisenhower. He added that “even at this moment, France wants nothing except commitments from us,” with no willingness to take steps that the United States and other allies advised. The president nevertheless reiterated that “I do not minimize the great blow it would be to the United States if we should lose Southeast Asia. To the contrary, I think it would be a calamity of the most terrible immediate and eventual consequences.” For these reasons, the United States had continued to help the French in Indochina, but it provided the aid “in spite of, and not because of, the French attitude.”¹⁰

June 9: Soon after General Ely arrived in Saigon (*see June 2*), he cabled Adm. Arthur Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, that “it seems to me that the decision I will have to take regarding the operations will rest on U.S. intentions.” He requested that Radford provide a “qualified representative” who could inform him about “what I can expect on the part of the U.S.” Although the U.S. military had continued contingency planning (*see June 7*), Radford told the senior French military official in Washington that

9. Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, “What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception,” *Journal of American History* 79 (September 1992): 581.

10. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1667–68.

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he was not in a position to have the types of conversations that Ely had indicated. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles conveyed a similar message to the French ambassador. In discussions between the Joint Chiefs and State Department representatives on June 10, the general consensus was that the French “were practicing a form of blackmail,” looking to place blame on the United States for any negative developments in Indochina if the United States did not send troops, at least a Marine division (*see June 8*).¹¹

During the same time frame, the French requested U.S. help with training Vietnamese forces. The State Department informed the embassy in Paris on June 9 that the United States believed the situation in Vietnam “has degenerated to [the] point where any commitment at this time to send over U.S. instructors in [the] near future might expose us to being faced with [a] situation in which it would be contrary to our interests to have to fulfill such [a] commitment.” Such a training mission could be considered only as part of an “overall operational plan.” Ely broached the question of the U.S. military taking over training responsibilities directly with General O’Daniel on June 10.¹²

June 14: Viet Minh troops captured five USAF airmen of the 315th Air Division stationed at Da Nang while they were on an unauthorized beach outing: A3C Jerry Schuller, A3C Giacomo Appice, A2C Ciro Salas Jr., PFC Donald E. Morgan, and PFC Leonard R. Sroufek. The Viet Minh held them prisoner at a small camp about sixty miles south of Da Nang that was ringed by mines and pits with bamboo stakes. The Americans were allowed to cook for themselves. They bathed under guard in a nearby stream. The airmen reported that the Viet Minh generally treated them better than they did the French prisoners and that they were not made to stand for reveille or roll call like the French troops were. One American contracted malaria and lost fifty pounds. The airmen remained in captivity until August 31, when they were released to the French as part of a prisoner exchange.¹³

On the same date, a C-46 flown by USAF personnel crashed after its landing gear struck the seawall on the approach at Do Son. The crew sustained no significant injuries, but the accident destroyed the aircraft.¹⁴

June 16: A message from FEAF headquarters to deployed units expressed concern for the safety of USAF personnel serving in Indochina and directed

11. *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1676 (4th quote), 1678 (1st-3d quotes).

12. *Ibid.*, 1952-54, 13:1678 (quote), 1674-75, 1677.

13. Sundloff, “Dien Bien Phu Remembered,” 21; 315th Air Division Historical Report, 39-45; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 146; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:165-71, 294-96, 298. This report (pp. 294-302) included an extensive account of life in captivity, based on debriefing of the prisoners after their release. *Time* carried news of the capture in its issue of June 28, 1954 (p. 32).

14. “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:238.

United States Personnel Internment Home

This was a one-story structure, 20 x 10 x 7 feet to the eaves, with a straw-covered gabled roof and a dirt floor. This house was partitioned by a bamboo wall into two rooms. In one room a native woman and her two children were housed. The five FEAF personnel were housed in the other and larger room. Three of the FEAF men slept on a bed of wooden planks supported by two wooden horses. The other two men slept on straw mats laid on the dirt floor. They cooked their meals over a stone fireplace in this room but they ate their meals outside.

Living Conditions of the FEAF Personnel in the Prisoner Camp

One blanket was issued to each man. They were also issued mosquito bars. They were issued two small bars of soap each month and they were given enough tobacco to roll six cigarettes a day. They did not have to stand reveille or roll call like the French Union prisoners. The FEAF men went to a water well once each day for their water supply. At about 1800 hours everyday the American prisoners went bathing in a river near the camp. They were escorted to the river by a Viet-Minh guard.

For recreation, one of the men made two decks of pinochle cards from cigarette paper. A checker board was also made. When the men tired of playing checkers and cards, they conducted games to see who killed the most ants, spiders, rats and other insects. They did not have any organized sports like the French Union prisoners

This section of the FEAF report (p. 296) includes information from the USAF airmen captured on June 14 about their experiences as prisoners of war.

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withdrawal at the earliest practical time. MAAG leadership recommended a target date of August 1.¹⁵

June 17: According to the memorandum of conversation at an NSC meeting, President Eisenhower commented on reports of low morale and extensive desertion among noncommunist Vietnamese forces, saying that these circumstances proved that the “native populations” of Southeast Asia countries “regarded this whole business as a colonial war.” Secretary Dulles stated that “from time to time he thought it best to let the French get out of Indochina entirely and then to try to rebuild from the foundations.” Eisenhower said the current state of affairs showed that it was “impossible for the United States to intervene in Indochina and accomplish anything until the native peoples agreed on a political objective for which they were willing to fight. There was certainly no sign of this at present.”¹⁶

June 18: Pierre Mendès-France became prime minister of France after the resignation of Joseph Laniel, whose government failed due largely to the deteriorating situation in Indochina and the floundering talks at Geneva (*see May 8*). Mendès-France was one of the most outspoken advocates for a peace agreement in Vietnam and staked his government on reaching a settlement within a month (*see July 21–22*).¹⁷

June 24: At Mang Yang Pass, the Viet Minh cut off and virtually destroyed French Mobile Group 100, a force of 3,600 troops that was withdrawing from An Khe toward Pleiku. French losses in this engagement were the third worst they suffered during the war, behind only Dien Bien Phu and the fighting near the forts at Cao Bang and Lang Son in 1950 (*see Mid-Sept.–Mid-Oct. 1950*). A State Department official noted that the Mang Yang Pass engagement did “not augur well for building a strong South Vietnam. It shows Viet Minh regulars in strength and an *irregular* strength greater than supposed and still growing.”¹⁸

On the same date, a report from the full civilian/military country team in Saigon observed that “whatever form the Vietnamese state may take, it is unanimously agreed here that such a state must depend for its survival upon a well-trained, cohesive national army capable of sustained operations in mass. This force will be required regardless of the ultimate political

15. “Support in French Indo-China,” frame 833.

16. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1716.

17. Jean Lacouture, *Pierre Mendès-France*, trans. George Holloch (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984), 211–14; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 243–48; Statler, *Replacing France*, 102–4; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 575–76.

18. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 30; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 145–47; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1769–70 (quote, italics in original).

and military solution in Indochina.” The authors wrote that development of such a force “constitutes, in our judgment, the number-one military objective toward which U.S. policy must be oriented. Political and psychological rewards will follow in the wake of strong visible indigenous armed strength, particularly if this strength is known to be supported by U.S. experience and wherewithal.” Among the report’s recommendations were an “immediate inauguration” of MAAG military training programs in Vietnam and Cambodia and that the air base at Da Nang (Tourane)—described as having the only airfield in Indochina “built according to NATO specifications”—be made “an international base.”¹⁹

June 25: Ngo Dinh Diem, who Bao Dai had appointed as prime minister of the State of Vietnam on June 16, received a triumphal welcome in Saigon. His government formally took office on July 7. Diem had several influential acquaintances in the United States from the two years he had lived in a monastery there, and the Americans placed greater hopes in the prospects of his success than did the French. Although Diem had well-established nationalist and anticommunist credentials, he was also a devout Catholic who was coming to lead a country that was 90 percent Buddhist.²⁰

On the same date, in a meeting of the Joint Chiefs with State Department officials, the memorandum of conversation recorded that Admiral Radford stated “that in his opinion, all of Viet Nam would eventually be lost, regardless of any terms of settlement.”²¹

June 26: On this date, the first Operation Wounded Warrior flight left Saigon. Over two weeks, the USAF transported more than 500 critically wounded French and Foreign Legion troops in five flights out of Vietnam. Five C-124s of the 315th Air Division and 6481st Medical Air Evacuation Group carried patients from Saigon to Clark Air Base in the Philippines and subsequently to Tachikawa Air Base, Japan, with the last flight reaching Tachikawa on July 11. From there, Military Air Transport Service flew the soldiers to the United States and then on to France and North Africa. Brig. Gen. Chester McCarty, commander of the 315th Air Division, piloted the first connection between Clark and Tachikawa on June 28, accompanied by the senior French medical officer. Gen. Jean Valluy, Maj. Gen. Paul

19. *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1737-38 (1st-2d quotes), 1739 (3d quote), 1740 (4th-5th quotes).

20. Statler, *Replacing France*, 117-21; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 588-91; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 154; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 224. For Diem’s background and appointment, see Miller, *Misalliance*, 19-53; Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950-1957* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 26-59; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 45-58; for the CIA’s very limited involvement, see Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 21-25.

21. *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1745.



Brig. Gen. Chester McCarty, commander of 315th Air Division (Combat Cargo), salutes after piloting the first Operation Wounded Warrior connection flight from Clark Air Base to Tachikawa Air Base. He was accompanied by Maj. Gen. Henri Jacobs, surge general of the French air force. *USAF*

Stehlin of the French air force, and the French ambassador to the United States met the first Military Air Transport flight to reach Westover Field, Massachusetts, and praised USAF handling of the mission.²²

22. "FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations," 1:239–48; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1779–80. In September, USN hospital ship *Haven* (AH-12) carried 721 sick or wounded French troops, many of whom were recently released prisoners of war, on a voyage to Marseille via the Suez Canal. *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:282. An estimated 70 percent of French troops taken prisoner at Dien Bien Phu died in captivity. Shrader, *War of Logistics*, 364.



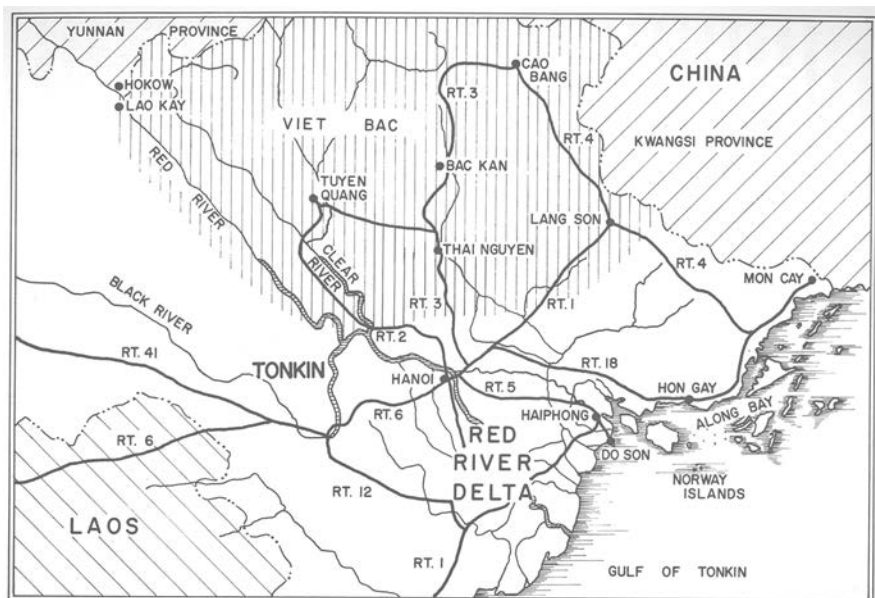
General Partridge visiting with a French Foreign Legionnaire on an Operation Wounded Warrior flight. USAF.

Also on June 26, Colonel Lansdale paid his first visit to Diem. He offered the new prime minister a list of suggestions that Diem cheerfully received but never really implemented. Lansdale soon became a regular at the palace, conversing with Diem for hours at a time. According to historian Andrew Miller, while Diem “was happy to accept the assistance proffered by Lansdale and other sympathetic U.S. officials,” he was “careful to do so only on his own terms, in ways that furthered his designs.”²³

June 28: After discussions in Paris with new Prime Minister Mendès-France, General Ely ordered evacuation from positions in the southern part of the Red River delta, leaving the French with only a narrow corridor between Hanoi and Haiphong. Even in this area, the French had limited control. The Viet Minh had for months mined the Hanoi-Haiphong road nearly every night, leaving it impassable until after noon each day while the French cleared the explosives. French military officials in Washington communicated to Admiral Radford that Ely “hoped that he would be able to hold Hanoi but was not certain of this in the event that the Viet Minh elected to launch a major attack.” Diem was furious about the withdrawal from what was a heavily Catholic area and protested to French officials, to no avail.²⁴

23. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 157–60; Miller, *Misalliance*, 86 (quote).

24. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, 460; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 586; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 173, 256–57; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1765–66, 1772–73, 1776–77, 1778 (quote), 1782–83; Miller, *Misalliance*, 97. Ely had not informed General O’Daniel of his plans. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1776–77. According to Miller (p. 97), Diem had hoped that the State of Vietnam would be able to keep Hanoi, Haiphong, and the corridor connecting them in the peace settlement. For U.S. concerns about the significant amount of U.S.-provided materiel the French stood to lose in northern Vietnam, see *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1743–45, 1755.



U.S. Navy and the Vietnam Conflict.

As Ely's order took effect in July, refugees flooded French reception centers in Hanoi and Haiphong. The U.S. Operations Mission (USOM) provided tents for these camps, while French troops assembled the compounds. With the aid of U.S. aircraft and ships, the French began air and sea relocation of refugees to the Saigon area in July, before the armistice and the better-known Operation Passage to Freedom (*see Aug. 17*). A U.S. officer who was in Hanoi at the time described this effort as "an orderly, systematic evacuation."²⁵

June 29: The USAF 6424th Air Depot Wing detachment that had supported French C-47 operations departed from Do Son. During May and June, the operation report observed that "morale of the USAF technicians seemed to increase to the point where it was considered excellent. This was attributed to the first large shipment of beer, . . . the establishment of a sports program, and better facilities to furnish hot water in the showers." Closing out the detachment's operations required airlifting 100,000 pounds of supplies to Clark Air Base and 18,500 pounds to Da Nang to support the continuing USAF maintenance operations there (*see July 19*). The detachment turned the balance of the equipment over to the French air force.²⁶

While General Ely was in Paris, he met with Douglas Dillon, the U.S. ambassador to France, on the 29th and continued to lobby for U.S. troops to begin training Vietnamese forces (*see June 9*). According to Dillon, Ely

25. Croizat interview, 47-49.

26. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 31; "Support in French Indo-China," frames 819, 834.

told him that “he considers the war in Indochina to be a civil war which must be fought on the political as well as the military front.” Ely believed that “nothing would give the people of Vietnam more of a feeling of independence than an army of their own which was substantially trained by the U.S.” Ely expressed frustration at American unwillingness to intervene militarily (*see June 9*) and stated that negotiations had become “much more difficult because of the Viet Minh belief that the menace of U.S. intervention no longer existed.”²⁷

July 1: The USAF activated Pacific Air Force (PACAF), under command of Maj. Gen. Sory Smith.²⁸

On the same date, Secretary Dulles wired the embassy in Saigon instructions if Diem’s government inquired whether the United States could aid in evacuating civilians from the areas in the Red River delta from which French troops were withdrawing (*see June 28*). He stated that embassy personnel should tell the Vietnamese that “we assume evacuation would have to be by sea or air” and that it would be unlikely the U.S. military would be able to send enough ships and aircraft to carry “any sizable number” of people. Priority would be given to troops and French citizens.²⁹

July 2: Admiral Radford met with senior members of the French military delegation in Washington, one of whom had just returned from conferring with General Ely in Paris. According to a memorandum of the conversation, the French conveyed that Ely was eager for the United States to take over military training in Vietnam (*see June 9, 29*). Radford replied that he “did not feel that he was justified in making any recommendation for the United States to assume such responsibilities in the present obscure situation.” Radford said that the United States was “unaware of what the future might hold,” and therefore, he “could not justify any expansion of U.S. activities in Indochina for the present.”³⁰

July 4: The U.S. chargé d’affaires in Saigon, Robert M. McClintock, reported to the State Department that “Diem is a messiah without a message. His only formulated policy is to ask [for] immediate American assistance in every form, including refugee relief, training of troops, and armed military intervention. His only present emotion, other than a lively appreciation of himself, is a blind hatred for the French.”³¹

27. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1761–62.

28. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 41.

29. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1770.

30. *Ibid.*, 13:1779.

31. *Ibid.*, 13:1783–84.



Ngo Dinh Diem became prime minister of the State of Vietnam on July 7, just two weeks before the conclusion of the Geneva conference that formally divided the country. He led South Vietnam as prime minister and subsequently as president until his assassination in November 1963. *National Archives.*

July 11: Colonel Lansdale cabled Allen Dulles that his goal was to build a “political base” for Diem. He believed the CIA would have considerable influence with the new government if he succeeded. Lansdale described Diem as an “unworldly dreamer but seeking help.” Lansdale outlined his plan for the new South Vietnamese leader on July 12.³²

July 12: CIA operatives in Hanoi appealed to their superiors in Saigon and Washington to support a noncommunist resistance movement in the north if Vietnam was divided. Colonel Lansdale echoed the idea after the results of the Geneva conference (*see July 21–22*), but another CIA agent reported that Diem believed an attempted defense of Hanoi would be “suicidal.”³³

July 15: In a speech to the party central committee, Ho Chi Minh declared that “the U.S. is not only the enemy of the people of the world, it has now become the principal, direct enemy of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.” Ho stated that the policy of his government would be to “concentrate our forces to oppose the American imperialists.”³⁴

32. Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 28.

33. *Ibid.*, 29–30.

34. Military History Institute of Vietnam, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954–1975*, trans. Merle L. Pribbenow (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 4 (hereafter *Victory in Vietnam*).

July 19: The USAF 6424th Air Depot Wing detachment that had supported French B-26 operations at Da Nang completed its closeout and was inactivated. It airlifted approximately 100,000 pounds of supplies to Clark Air Base and turned over 34,000 pounds to the detachment remaining at Da Nang to support the C-119s.³⁵

July 21–22: At the Geneva conference, France, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and the State of Vietnam agreed to a permanent cease-fire and a temporary division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel, with unification elections set for July 1956. The Viet Minh's overriding concern was to keep the United States from intervening militarily, which made it eventually willing to accept significant concessions that the Soviets and the Chinese urged on them. These included agreeing to elections eighteen months later than Ho's government desired and to a more northern partition line than the 15th parallel it had sought. With the division at the 17th parallel, the State of Vietnam kept Hue, Da Nang, and Road #9 into Laos, as well as the major areas of food production. The Democratic Republic retained the industrial and mining sectors and Vietnam's only university, in Hanoi. The State of Vietnam and the United States did not formally accept the Final Declaration but agreed to abide by it. Admiral Radford thought the accord would turn out to be a "great mistake," while Vice President Nixon called it "a black day for us." President Eisenhower later conceded that "by and large, the settlement obtained by the French Union . . . was the best it could get under the circumstances."³⁶

The United States undertook "a gradual, piece-by-piece construction of policy" in Vietnam after the Geneva agreement, Colonel Lansdale later said. It was "shaped, initially, largely by one person. That was John Foster Dulles, who had some very definite ideas that communists needed a line to be stopped at, somehow. The concept was tempered by the actual situation in Vietnam, which was a very delicate one of relations with the French." Lansdale described the U.S. approach as "a step-by-step evolvement of policy."³⁷

35. "Support in French Indo-China," frames 834–35.

36. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 599–613; Pierre Asselin, "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique," *Cold War History* 11 (May 2011): 155–95; Statler, *Replacing France*, 104–7; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 260–313; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 28–56; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 220 (1st–2d quotes); Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change, 1953–1956: The White House Years* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 374 (3d quote); Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 163; Lansdale interview (1979), pt. 1; Kenneth H. Williams, "Peaceful Unification Denied: The Failure to Hold All-Vietnam Elections in 1956" (MA thesis, University of Kentucky, 1988), 18–22.

37. Lansdale interview (1969), 49. Recent works with extensive documentation of Dulles's influence in shaping Indochina policy include Statler, *Replacing France*, and Logevall, *Embers of War*. Lansdale (p. 49) did not believe that the United States began formulating "hard policies" in Vietnam until around May 1955, after Diem firmly established his authority (*see April 28, 1955*), and after General Ely and Gen. J. Lawton Collins left Vietnam (*see May 14, 1955*).

According to historian Kathryn C. Statler, “Until the Geneva Conference, Washington was desperate to keep France in Vietnam. Thereafter, the Eisenhower administration began to consider how to get them out.” Dulles was chief among those who held this opinion (*see June 17, July 22, 27*). Historian Arthur Combs observed that “to Dulles and Eisenhower, American plans were ipso facto superior to French and British plans because they were not tainted by colonialism. By their way of thinking, the French had colonized Vietnam for their own enrichment and glory, while the Americans were trying to build a free society for the Vietnamese. French guidance was thus corrupt and condescending.” As Fredrik Logevall put it, American leaders viewed the French as “a decadent people trying vainly to prop up a colonial empire. . . . They had fought badly in Indochina and deserved to lose. Americans, on the other hand, were the good guys, militarily invincible, who selflessly had come to help the Vietnamese in their hour of need and would then go home.”³⁸

A significant problem for the United States as it attempted to formulate policy in such areas, however, was that “America’s top policy makers were at a loss to deal with any situation outside of overt Soviet or Chinese action,” according to historian David Anderson. “Trapped between the distasteful options of risking war or accepting local successes by ‘godless communists,’ stopgap measures emerged with little relevance to the historical upheaval in Asia and throughout the Third World.”³⁹

July 22: Upon receiving news of the peace settlement, 315th Air Division terminated its scheduled flights to Indochina. It withdrew eight C-119s from Da Nang the next day. All U.S. services issued instructions to stop the transport of military materiel into Indochina, and General O’Daniel ordered that no more supplies be delivered to the French, even equipment and materials already in port.⁴⁰

At an NSC meeting on the 22d, there was much uncertainty about what the Geneva agreement would mean for U.S. involvement and for hopes of maintaining a noncommunist state. Admiral Radford said he did not think the United States would be able to provide military materiel under the accords and that the MAAG might have to be withdrawn. He noted, however, that General Ely had contacted him “respecting U.S.

38. Statler, *Replacing France*, 123 (1st quote); Arthur Combs, “The Path Not Taken: The British Alternative to U.S. Policy in Vietnam, 1954–1956,” *Diplomatic History* 19 (Winter 1995): 38–39 (2d quote); Logevall, *Embers of War*, xxi (3d quote). Logevall (p. 707) included Lansdale among those who thought along these lines, writing that “for Lansdale and others of like mind, the French experience was largely irrelevant to America’s concerns.”

39. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 69. For Anderson’s discussion of development of U.S. policy during the immediate post-Geneva period, see pp. 65–75.

40. 315th Air Division Report, July–December 1954; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1868; Croizat interview, 75.



Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, shown here arriving in Paris in 1953, became the key person in the Eisenhower administration shaping U.S. strategy for Vietnam after its division in 1954. Dulles increasingly distrusted the French and wanted the Americans to assume more of the oversight. *National Archives*.

plans to continue the training of the native armed forces.” According to Radford, Ely suggested “that somehow or other it would be necessary to ‘get around’ the armistice prohibitions.”⁴¹

CIA director Allen Dulles wondered how order could be maintained in southern Vietnam with the French so unpopular. He also reported unconfirmed rumors that Diem might resign. The director’s brother, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, said that “the great problem from now on out” would be whether the United States “could salvage what the communists had ostensibly left out of their grasp” in the Geneva settlement. In the immediate future, the secretary believed “the real danger” was “not primarily from overt communist military aggression but from subversion and disintegration.” Considering the situation, he said that he “would almost rather see the French get completely out of the rest of Indochina” and allow the United States to “work directly with the native leadership in these states.”⁴²

41. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1869.

42. *Ibid.*, 1868–69.



A USAF airman unloads a crate from a USAF C-124 in Saigon in August 1954. With the official end of the hostilities in July, the airlift shifted to providing supplies for refugees from the north who began streaming into South Vietnam in unexpectedly large numbers. *USAF*.

On a promising note, Secretary Dulles said the British seemed willing to work with the United States on “plans for the defense of the rest of Southeast Asia” (*see Sept. 8*). President Eisenhower expressed “strong support” for such a concept (*see Aug. 17*). Robert Cutler, the president’s special assistant for national security affairs, suggested that “free Asian states” be included in any pact so it “would not appear to be just another white man’s group.”⁴³

July 26: Paul D. Harwood, station chief of the CIA mission in Saigon (which was separate from Colonel Lansdale’s military mission), cabled Washington that the task of creating a viable government for South

43. *Ibid.*, 1869–70.

Vietnam under Diem appeared “hopeless, but [the] effort must be made.” Elbridge Durbrow, who became U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam in 1957 (*see Apr. 29, 1957*), later stated that at this point in 1954, Diem “had control of practically nothing except the main cities and Route #1 up the coast *most* of the way—not all the way.”⁴⁴

July 26–27: Geneviève de Galard, a French medevac nurse who had been the only woman at Dien Bien Phu (*see Mar. 14*) and was captured there by the Viet Minh, arrived in New York on July 26, where a crowd estimated at 250,000 turned out for a ticker-tape parade in her honor. The USAF flew Galard to Washington on the 27th, where President Eisenhower presented the woman hailed as “the angel of Dien Bien Phu” with the Medal of Freedom. Galard subsequently embarked on a cross-country tour, which the French ambassador called “an exceptional success.”⁴⁵

July 27: In a telephone conversation between the Dulles brothers, Foster blamed the French for historically not allowing competent native leadership in Vietnam and said he doubted that “this leadership could be developed unless the French get out completely.” Allen Dulles agreed that South Vietnam would need “a pretty good strong nationalist government” to have any chance of success, but he reminded the secretary of state that until one could be developed, the French military was the only organization in a position to maintain order and security.⁴⁶

Late July–August 6: USAF C-124s from the 315th Air Division delivered 106 tons of tents from supply depots in Japan to Indochina for use by refugees moving into newly created South Vietnam (*see June 28, Aug. 17*).⁴⁷

August 3: A National Intelligence Estimate titled “A Post-Geneva Outlook in Indochina” concluded that “a favorable development of the situation in South Vietnam is unlikely.”⁴⁸

August 8: Ten U.S. servicemen who were detailed to the CIA arrived in Saigon to form the core of Colonel Lansdale’s military mission team. According to one of these men, 2d Lt. Rufus Phillips III, USA, Lansdale was “puzzled by what to do with us. We all had paramilitary

44. Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 33 (1st quote); Elbridge Durbrow, interview with Maj. Richard B. Clement and Maj. Samuel E. Riddlebarger, April 27, 1970, transcript, AFHRA, 13 (2d quote) (hereafter Durbrow interview).

45. Morgan, *Valley of Death*, 628–30.

46. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 67.

47. Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 22; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:233–34.

48. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1905–14 (quote, 1912).

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or counterintelligence backgrounds, which didn't fit into what he saw as the most urgent needs—for political action, military civic action, and psychological warfare support.”⁴⁹

August 11: Article 16 of the Geneva agreements, which prohibited the introduction of additional foreign troops into Vietnam, became binding. General O'Daniel had lobbied in May for an expansion of the 128-person MAAG in anticipation of what might happen at Geneva. According to Colonel Lansdale, at some point in early July, around fifty MAAG augmentees arrived in Saigon. On July 27, after the August 11 deadline had been established, O'Daniel sent another appeal to the Pentagon. Without approval from Washington, but with the concurrence of Ambassador Donald Heath and higher-level State Department officials, O'Daniel expanded the MAAG roster, largely by including nearly 200 USAF technicians still in the country, reaching a total of 342 uniformed advisors. Officially, the United States abided by the Article 16 restriction until 1960; unofficially, under the guise of equipment recovery efforts, the U.S. military more than doubled that number in 1956 (*see June 1, 1956*).⁵⁰

The Geneva-negotiated cease-fire ending the fighting between the Viet Minh and the French also did not officially take effect until August 11. The Viet Minh attacked and overran five French outposts south of Saigon on August 7.⁵¹

August 12: Secretary Wilson forwarded to Secretary Dulles a statement from the Joint Chiefs of Staff on issues related to a possible training mission with the Vietnamese army. The service chiefs asserted that “from the military point of view, it is absolutely essential that there be a reasonably strong, stable civil government in control.” The document declared that it was “hopeless to expect a U.S. military training mission” to succeed without support of a government that could adequately raise, equip, and support a force. Secretary Dulles replied on August 18 that the Joints Chiefs had raised “the familiar hen-and-egg argument as to which comes first.” He wrote that he believed the United States could in fact “bolster” the government “by strengthening

49. Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 7, 14 (quote).

50. George S. Eckhardt, *Command and Control, 1950–1969* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1974), 10; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 221, 229; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 2, book IV.A.4, sect. 1, 1.1–5.1, sect. 3, 3; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 160–61; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1760–61; Robert H. Whitlow, “The United States Military in South Vietnam, 1954–1960” (MA thesis, University of Kentucky, 1972), 34–35; Statler, *Replacing France*, 122. The figure of 342 Americans was actually the highest total allowable, as Article 16 restricted the number of foreign advisors to 888. The French already had 546 troops in an advisory capacity, so O'Daniel maximized the U.S. force as best he could, declaring 214 non-advisors, including the USAF mechanics, to be in an advisory capacity. Eckhardt, *Command and Control*, 9–10. For differing opinions that arose between the State and Defense Departments over whether the size of the MAAG could be increased, see *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:2156.

51. Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 12.



The crush of Vietnamese who flooded into relocation processing centers, like this one in Haiphong, overwhelmed the available facilities. *USAF*.

the army which supports it.” Dulles approved a training mission on that same date (*see Aug. 18*). Wilson and the Joint Chiefs remained skeptical of such an effort (*see Sept. 22, Oct. 19*).⁵²

August 17: On this date, the *USS Menard* (APA-201) left Haiphong for the three-day voyage to Saigon with 1,924 refugees on board, launching what became known as Operation Passage to Freedom or Operation Exodus.⁵³

The Geneva settlement allowed for free movement within Vietnam for 300 days, through May 1955. Diem told Ambassador Heath right after the Geneva conference concluded that he believed one to two million northerners might take refuge in the south. General Ely doubted this claim and put the number at no more than 200,000. Diem and Colonel Lansdale,

52. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1939 (1st–2d quotes), 1954 (3d–5th quotes); Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 70–71.

53. Ronald B. Frankum Jr., *Operation Passage to Freedom: The United States Navy in Vietnam, 1954–1955* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007), 69; *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:276–77.

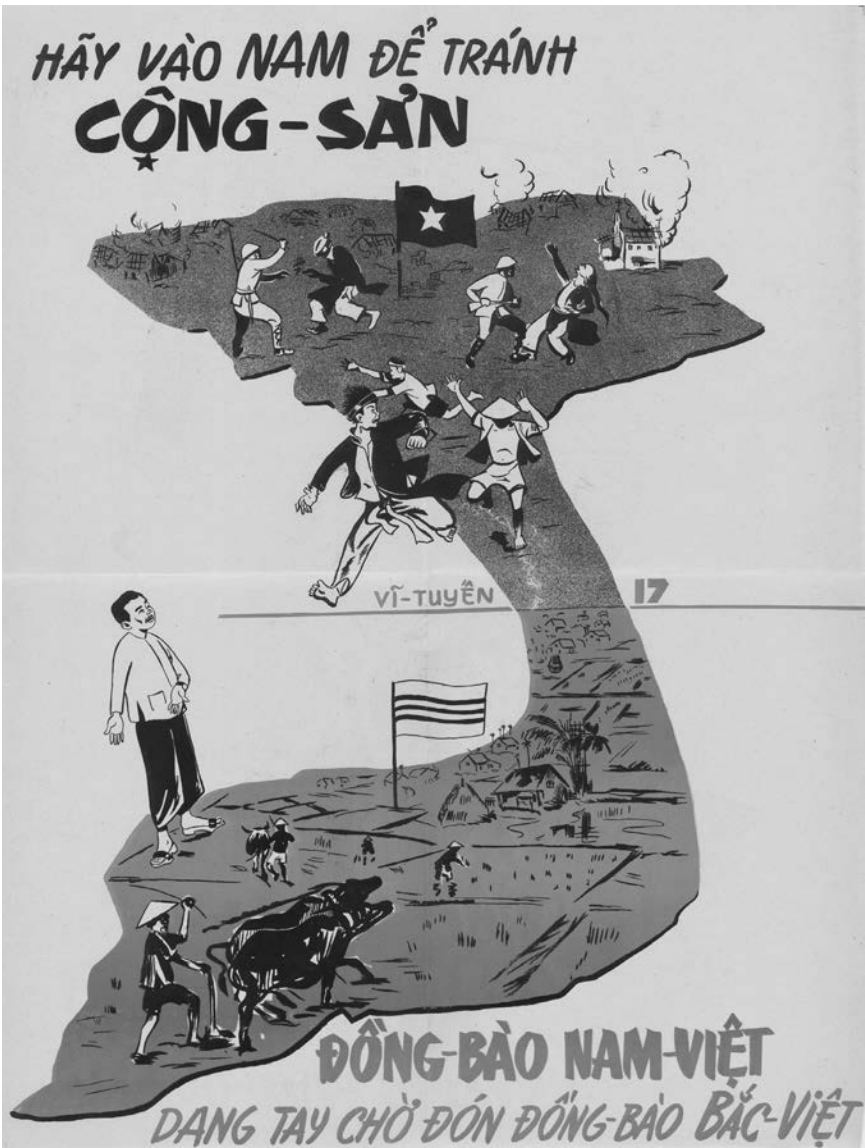
however, saw an opportunity to encourage a major population and cultural shift within Vietnam. Diem flew to Hanoi on August 2, where he addressed a large crowd, and Lansdale orchestrated a propaganda campaign to promote relocation, primarily recruiting the northern Catholic population to join devout Catholic Diem in the south. Many people who relocated did not need convincing, as they feared reprisals from the Viet Minh, which was already driving Catholics out of parts of the Tonkin region. Others believed economic opportunities would be better in the south than in the communist north.⁵⁴

While there were claims that more than a million refugees moved from the north to the south during the free movement period, the actual number was probably closer to 800,000. USN Task Force 90 transported 311,000 people, as well as thousands of tons of U.S.-provided French military equipment and supplies. Although the South Vietnamese government technically supervised the operation, the French oversaw the handling of the refugees once they arrived in the south, with U.S. coordination and supplies, but the numbers of people overwhelmed the available support. Some refugee camps grew to as large as 100,000 people.⁵⁵

French air and sea transport operations had begun in July (*see June 28*) and became a more formalized, larger-scale effort by August 5, but as the USAF ended its ground support and recalled its loaned aircraft, the French withdrew the majority of their air transports after September and even more by the end of the year. French-trained Vietnamese pilots made a few of the runs, with future prime minister Nguyen Cao Ky claiming to have piloted the last flight out of Haiphong. Civil Air Transport (CAT) participated, particularly in extracting Chinese natives, flying nearly 20,000 refugees out of North Vietnam between August 22 and October 4. Lansdale used CAT return flights to insert arms and CIA-sponsored personnel in the north to augment a group of stay-behind Vietnamese noncommunists he was organizing. Although FEAF outlined air transport plans to execute if

54. *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:1873; Miller, *Misalliance*, 97-100; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 26; Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man*, 129-38.

55. The number of those who moved to South Vietnam has often been reported at more than a million, but attempts by two scholars at closer accounting both yielded a figure of around 800,000: Frankum, *Operation Passage to Freedom*, 205; John Prados, "The Numbers Game: How Many Vietnamese Fled South in 1954?" *VVA Veteran*, January/February 2005. The official USN history arrived at the same number. *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:299. For the operation itself, and the politics and machinations associated with it, see Statler, *Replacing France*, 147-52; Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 333-37; Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 18-21; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 165-68; Currey, *Lansdale*, 155-61; Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 221-32; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 637-38; Nashel, *Edward Lansdale's Cold War*, 60-62; Lansdale interview (1979), pt. 3, http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/V_46C619EEE59D4E5AB5701423B11C2B4A; *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:2154-55; *FRUS 1955-57*, 1:101-2; *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:270-99. For the U.S. role in coordinating refugee relief and organization, particularly the part played by the Michigan State University Group, see John Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998), 21-36.



Col. Edward Lansdale, who had worked in advertising before joining the service during World War II, coordinated with Ngo Dinh Diem's government in a massive propaganda campaign to encourage northern Vietnamese to relocate to the south. This poster juxtaposed brutality in the north under the communist government with peaceful existence in the south. *National Archives.*

called upon, on a scale of what it called "a Berlin Airlift type operation," its direct participation in the relocation effort ended up being minimal. Both USAF headquarters and the air attaché at the U.S. embassy in Saigon expressed concern about increasing Viet Minh artillery near Hanoi and



Hundreds of Vietnamese refugees waiting to board the *USS Montague* at Haiphong in August 1954. In all, around 800,000 moved from north to south in 1954–55. *USN*.

the potential need for U.S. bombing of those sites in the event of a major airlift. Ultimately, USAF aircraft made only a few flights out of Gia Lam airfield carrying diplomatic personnel from Hanoi to Da Nang, with a total of seventy-five U.S. civilians transported on to Clark Air Base.⁵⁶

56. *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:272; Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 44, 47; Prados, “Numbers Game”; Statler, *Replacing France*, 147–52; Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 192–93; “FEAF Support of French Indochina Operations,” 1:248–51, 270–74 (quote, 250); Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 31; Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 22. For the efforts and lack of success of the network that Lansdale and his CIA cohorts established in the north, see Kenneth Conboy and Dale Andradé, *Spies and Commandos: How America Lost the Secret War in North Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 3–12; Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 227–32.



USAF airmen and Vietnamese unloading a USAF C-124 in Saigon in August 1954. The USAF's greatest contribution to the relocation effort was the delivery of supplies to support the refugees arriving in the south. USAF.

Estimates of the Vietnamese who moved from the south to the north range from around 150,000 to 250,000, including withdrawing Viet Minh troops. The French navy provided transport for some of the former enemy combatants, while others sailed on Soviet and Polish vessels.⁵⁷

Also on August 17, Secretary Dulles dictated a memorandum of his conversation with President Eisenhower on that date concerning a prospective regional security pact covering Southeast Asia (*see Sept. 8*). The secretary said he expressed his concern about such an agreement “on the ground that it involved committing the prestige of the United States in an area where we had little control and where the situation was by no means promising.” Conversely, Dulles said that “failure to go ahead would mark a total abandonment of the area without a struggle. I thought that to make the treaty include the area of Cambodia, Laos, and Southern Vietnam was the lesser of two evils, but would involve a real risk of results which would hurt the prestige of the United States in this area. The President agreed that we should go ahead.”⁵⁸

57. Frankum, *Operation Passage to Freedom*, 205; Prados, “Numbers Game”; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 18–19; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 72; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 59; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 2, book IV.A.5, tab 1, p. 17.

58. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1953.

1954

August 18: The State Department notified the French that the United States intended to assign a training mission to MAAG-Indochina.⁵⁹

On the same date, the Senate confirmed Robert McClintock as ambassador to Cambodia and Charles W. Yost as minister to Laos. To that point, Ambassador Heath had headed the missions to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, but President Eisenhower had expressed his intention after the Geneva agreement to appoint separate mission heads.⁶⁰

August 20: President Eisenhower approved an NSC document that concluded that the United States should be working with the French in Indochina “only to the extent necessary” (*see July 21–22*).⁶¹

August 23: A CIA report indicated that “the French are believed to be actively undermining Diem despite their denials.” The document stated that the French “do not and will not trust any Vietnamese government which is not headed by individuals under French influence or control.”⁶²

August 27: Ambassador Heath cabled Secretary Dulles that Diem had a “gift for alienating even those who wish to assist him” and was “scarcely capable of influencing people, making friends, or undertaking determined action.” He added, however, that “no successor government that we can envisage at this time would have any real appeal to nationalist or anti-Communist sentiment.”⁶³

September 3: The People’s Republic of China (PRC) began coastal battery bombardment of Chiang Kai-shek’s nationalist Chinese troops on Quemoy (Jinmen) Island in the Taiwan Strait. The crisis prompted a standoff between the United States and the PRC that continued into the spring of 1955 and kept U.S. attention on southern Asia (*see Mar. 1955; Apr. 23, 1955*).⁶⁴

September 5: The North Vietnamese politburo released a lengthy document that outlined the positions of the newly established government. It noted that while the north had been “liberated,” the south could not remain under the “yoke” of Diem. The memorandum stressed the use of political channels and propaganda to achieve reunification, not armed struggle. Ho in particular wanted to avoid U.S. intervention, while Vo Nguyen Giap

59. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 228; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1938–39, 1954–59.

60. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1937, 1960.

61. Statler, *Replacing France*, 123.

62. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1979–80 (quotes); Statler, *Replacing France*, 121–25.

63. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:1990–91.

64. Gordon H. Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948–1972* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 116–37; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 631.



French troops and Vietnamese laborers unloading a USAF C-119 at a French base in Indochina in August 1954. The USAF reclaimed the C-119s in September. USAF.

sought time for his forces to recover and modernize after eight years of war. Not all of the senior figures agreed with the policy, most significantly Le Duan, secretary of the Central Office for Southern Vietnam, whose power in the North Vietnamese leadership was increasing. Other southern-based party officials also voiced their displeasure about renouncing violence.⁶⁵

In violation of the Geneva accords, the politburo did order an estimated 10,000 Viet Minh troops to remain in South Vietnam, not to fight, but to aid the cadre and party leaders who also stayed. Many southern natives who had fought for the communists did not want to leave, and significantly more than 10,000 may have remained south of the 17th parallel. Diem and the United States were aware that what they estimated as 8,000 to 10,000 men had stayed behind. They were concerned about the political disruption that the former Viet Minh troops might be able to cause by spreading propaganda and influencing elections in rural areas.⁶⁶

North Vietnam at that time had a standing army of 330,000 full-time troops, all infantry. Nearly 70 percent of its weapons were guns and artillery pieces it had captured, while 20 percent had come from communist allies.⁶⁷

65. Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 15–23, 26–27 (quotes, 17); *Victory in Vietnam*, 4–5.

66. Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 26–27; Whitlow, “U.S. Military in South Vietnam,” 38–39.

67. *Victory in Vietnam*, 8–10.

1954

September 7: The USAF flew the last of its C-119s recovered from loan to the French from Da Nang to Clark Air Base. A technical representative from Fairchild Aircraft who examined the returning aircraft observed that every one of them was “marked with battle damage, some not as bad as others, but they show that they have gone through hell.” Across the six Ironage operations that began in December 1953, the French lost three C-119s, and five sustained major damage. The 315th Air Division listed thirty aircraft with “minor damage.”⁶⁸

September 8: Representatives of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand signed the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty, known as the Manila Pact, the agreement that these nations formalized as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in February 1955 (*see Feb. 19, 1955*). According to French scholars Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture, the Manila Pact “represented a resumption of the cold war in Asia and was therefore in direct conflict with the very aims that the Geneva conference had tried to achieve.” The Geneva accords prohibited the Indochina states from joining military alliances, but the Manila Pact declared South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia within its sphere. Future Secretary of State Dean Rusk later observed that “I was amazed, even dismayed, by the casual way the Senate ratified the SEATO Treaty [in February 1955]. . . . No one really stopped to think what an American commitment to collective security on the Asian mainland might mean.” For the Eisenhower administration, the SEATO Treaty was “the master political stroke,” according to David Anderson, “for with it Eisenhower and Dulles would largely neutralize congressional concerns about the unilateral burden of America’s last war [in Korea]. In their jockeying with Congress, however, they were creating a legal rationale for America’s next war.”⁶⁹

September 22: The Joint Chiefs issued their opinion that provisions of the Geneva agreements would make it difficult for the United States to have the troops, arms, and equipment necessary to take over the training mission from the French in South Vietnam (*see Aug. 12, 18, Oct. 19*).⁷⁰

On the same date, Charles Yost arrived in Vientiane as the first U.S. minister to Laos. He recalled that it was “the most primitive and ill-

68. 315th Air Division Report, July–December 1954; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 31; Leary, *Perilous Missions*, 191 (1st quote); 315th Air Division Historical Report, 13 (2d quote).

69. Devillers and Lacouture, *End of a War*, 317–30 (1st quote, 329); Statler, *Replacing France*, 112; Cooper, *In the Shadows of History*, 112, 129–31; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 624–25; Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 427 (2d quote); Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 39 (3d quote), 71–74.

70. *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 10:773; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 229; Eckhardt, *Command and Control*, 10.



General O'Daniel (left), the MAAG commander, at a ceremony in Saigon in September 1954 commemorating the arrival of the 100,000th refugee from the north, with RAdm. Lorenzo S. Sabin Jr., who oversaw the USN operation, and Ambassador Heath. USN.

equipped diplomatic post I have ever encountered.” One of his first assignments was to find ways for the United States to assist the Laotian government in retaking Sam Neua and Phong Saly Provinces from the communist Pathet Lao.⁷¹

September 24: At an NSC meeting, Secretary Dulles said, according to the memorandum of conversation, that the “heart of the problem in South Vietnam” was that “we really don’t yet know Mendès-France’s game. Is he actually collaborating in some fashion with the Viet Minh, as some intelligence reports suggest?” There was much speculation that the French were working with groups that were threatening to undermine Diem’s government. In response to a question of whether the State Department was considering replacing Ambassador Heath, Dulles conceded that there was an impression that Heath “had been too long in this position and was too close to the French” (see Oct. 18, Nov. 7, 8). He reported, however, that Heath was “now standing up to them.”⁷²

CIA director Dulles said that the U.S. and French governments had to find a leader in South Vietnam behind whom they could unite. Secretary

71. William J. Rust, *Before the Quagmire: American Intervention in Laos, 1954–1961* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 14 (quote), 16–17; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 54–55.

72. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:2059.

1954

Wilson countered that he thought “an even more desirable course of action was for the United States to get completely out of the area. The chances of saving any part of Southeast Asia were, in his opinion, nothing.”⁷³

September 27: Ambassador Heath wired Secretary Dulles that while Diem was the “only man now in sight with character enough to form and head an enduring government,” the United States should be “looking around urgently” for “a relief pitcher and get him warming up in [the] bullpen.” Heath reported that “Diem’s intrinsic faults may yet create a situation making his replacement necessary.”⁷⁴

October 2: The British minister in Saigon reported to the Foreign Office in London that Diem was a “dismal failure,” adding that “by all normal rules of the game,” Diem “should have been out two or three weeks ago.” A few weeks earlier, the same official had labeled Diem an “incapable ditherer.”⁷⁵

October 9: The last French troops left Hanoi. Ho’s government formally took control in the city on the subsequent two days. U.S. liaisons in Hanoi departed along with the French, although a small U.S. consulate remained.⁷⁶

Devastating economic issues arose for North Vietnam in the fall of 1954. Nearly all the factories closed, as did many shops, restaurants, and other businesses in Hanoi and Haiphong. Much of the largely Catholic business class moved to the south. Fuel for vehicles was in extremely short supply, and the railroads barely ran. South Vietnam, which controlled most of the rice production, cut off shipments to the north, and the majority of the rice grown in the north got wiped away in December flooding. The Soviets had to fund emergency rice shipments from Burma to North Vietnam to stave off widespread famine.⁷⁷

October 15: Sen. Michael J. “Mike” Mansfield (D-Mont.), who had taught college courses on the Far East before he won election to Congress and was seen in Washington as an expert on Asian affairs, submitted a report on his recent trip to Vietnam. Most significantly, he emphasized that Diem was the only leader in the region capable of establishing a noncommunist government in South Vietnam. Mansfield advised that Congress should suspend all aid to South Vietnam if Diem were removed. Historian Seth Jacobs has written that Mansfield “was probably Diem’s most important

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid., 13:2093.

75. Combs, “Path Not Taken,” 40 (4th quote), 43 (1st–3d quotes).

76. Patti, *Why Viet Nam*, 462; Marr, *Vietnam (45–46)*, 576; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 617–18; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 134–43; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 2, book IV.A.4, sect. 1, 1.1.

77. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 631–32.

advocate in the United States during the 1950s.” Columnist Joseph Alsop later called Mansfield’s unflinching support for Diem the “deciding factor” in U.S. commitment to the South Vietnamese leader.⁷⁸

October 18: Diem gave Colonel Lansdale a long message for Washington in which he asked that Ambassador Heath be removed because he was too pro-French. Although Lansdale had found Heath to be a “very likeable person,” he sent Diem’s cable to Allen Dulles, who coordinated with his brother, John Foster Dulles, to begin the process of having Heath replaced. There already had been questions in Washington for several weeks about whether Heath was the right man to oversee transition to a South Vietnamese leadership that was increasingly independent of the French (*see Sept. 24, Nov. 7, 8*).⁷⁹

October 19: In a memorandum for Secretary Wilson, the Joint Chiefs stated, “from a military point of view,” their opinion that “the United States should not participate in the training of Vietnamese forces in Indochina. However, if it is considered that political considerations are overriding, the Joint Chiefs of Staff would agree to the assignment of a training mission to MAAG, Saigon, with safeguards against French interference with the U.S. training effort” (*see Aug. 12, 18, Sept. 22*). The service chiefs did not think the Geneva-limited MAAG force of 342 men would be adequate for a full-scale training mission, even if civilian personnel assumed most of the existing MAAG functions to free the uniformed billets for instructors.⁸⁰

On the same date, Wilson indicated his belief that “further expenditures in South Vietnam are a waste of money since it is hopeless to try to save it.” Secretary Dulles agreed that a \$500 million program would be “silly,” but that a lesser investment, which he estimated at no more than \$100 million, would be “reasonable and wise.”⁸¹

October 22: At an NSC meeting, President Eisenhower made his often-quoted remark that “in the lands of the blind, one-eyed men are kings.” Without any apparent better options, the United States would back Diem. Eisenhower said that the United States needed to “get rough with

78. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 235; Statler, *Replacing France*, 125–26; Hammer, *Struggle for Indochina*, 357; Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man*, 248 (quotes). Mansfield and Sen. H. Alexander Smith (R-N.J.) actually signed the Manila Pact in September as representatives of the United States, part of Dulles’s effort to build support for the plan in Congress. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 72–73, 79.

79. Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 236–37 (quote); Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 84–87.

80. *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 10:773–74 (quote); Spector, *Advice and Support*, 229–30; *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:308–10. For more on the U.S. decision to undertake training of the South Vietnamese military, see *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 2, book IV.A.4, sect. 1, 1.1–5.1, sect. 3, 1–3. Admiral Radford restated the JCS position at the NSC meeting on October 22. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:2156–57.

81. Quoted in Statler, *Replacing France*, 126–27.



Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson (*second from right*) during General Paul Ely's visit to Washington in March 1954, along with Gen. Matthew Ridgway and Adm. Arthur Radford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Wilson was one of the few in the administration to openly express skepticism of continued U.S. involvement in Vietnam, calling the situation there "utterly hopeless" and stating at an October 26 NSC meeting that "these people should be left to stew in their own juice." *Department of Defense*.

the French" to gain their cooperation in bolstering the teetering Diem government and the South Vietnamese military.⁸²

Following this meeting, the State Department directed Ambassador Heath and General O'Daniel to formulate and implement "a crash program designed to bring about an improvement in the loyalty and the effectiveness of the Free Vietnamese forces." The dispatch conceded that as conditions stood, with trustworthiness issues all the way up to the chief of staff of the army, who had openly been threatening a coup, aid and training for the South Vietnamese military would have "no appreciable effect." Colonel Lansdale was involved in helping outmaneuver the plotters against Diem's government, and he made clear to all that U.S. aid would cease immediately if Diem were deposed. Diem and his associates lobbied Bao Dai to remove the chief of staff, which he finally did on November 29.⁸³

October 23: Ambassador Heath delivered a letter to Diem from President Eisenhower that promised aid to South Vietnam to help it build a "strong, viable state." From this point through 1960, the United States provided more than \$2 billion in aid, the third-most given to a non-NATO country

82. *FRUS 1952-54*, 13:2157.

83. *Ibid.*, 13:2161-62 (quotes), 2184; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 231; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 636-37; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 171-76; Miller, *Misalliance*, 100-108; Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 234-36.

during that period and seventh-most overall. On the same date in Paris, Secretary Dulles threatened U.S. withdrawal from Indochina if the Diem government fell, prompting Prime Minister Mendès-France to concede that the French would support Diem, even though they doubted he could succeed. The French had, however, already begun planning an accelerated military withdrawal from South Vietnam after being told that U.S. aid would be declining precipitously.⁸⁴

Historian David Anderson wrote that while the Eisenhower administration largely achieved its goal of “buying time” in Vietnam, “staving off disaster” for the rest of the decade with military and economic aid to support Diem, it was also “buying trouble” because “the longer the Diem regime depended on U.S. assistance for its survival, the higher became the U.S. investment in South Vietnam in both dollars and credibility.” Indeed, Diem built “the form, not the substance, of a nation,” according to Anderson, but leaders in Washington “chose to believe that the progress was real and lasting.” Ultimately, the administration’s policies “simply postponed the day of reckoning,” all while “the stakes were getting higher and a tough problem was getting even more difficult.”⁸⁵

October 26: At an NSC meeting, Secretary Wilson stated his belief, according to the memorandum of conversation, that the “only sensible course of action” was for the United States to get out of Indochina completely, “as soon as possible.” He thought the situation there was “utterly hopeless” and that “these people should be left to stew in their own juice.” As matters stood, he “could see nothing but grief in store for us if we remained in this area.” President Eisenhower replied that if the United States “continued to retreat in this area, the process would lead to a grave situation from the point of view of our national security.” Eisenhower “expressed a preference for Admiral Radford’s earlier view that we should try to get the French out of Indochina.” When pressed by others about whether he was proposing that the NSC reverse its decisions of the previous week (*see Oct. 22*), Wilson replied that he was not, but he pointed out that the NSC had adopted its policy “on the assumption that the United States would have French and British support which, in point of fact, we did not now appear to have.”⁸⁶

84. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:2166–67 (quote); *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 2, book IV.A.4, sect. 1, 1.1; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 630; Statler, *Replacing France*, 126; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 235–36; Whitlow, “U.S. Military in South Vietnam,” 37. The aid was approximately \$1.5 billion in economic assistance and \$500 million for the military. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 174.

85. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, xiii (7th–8th quotes), 157 (5th–6th quotes), 172 (1st–4th quotes).

86. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:2185–86. Historian Arthur Combs points to Wilson’s comments at this meeting as the last “serious internal dissent” within the administration on the emerging Vietnam policy. Combs, “Path Not Taken,” 44–45.



Gen. J. Lawton “Lightning Joe” Collins, USA (Ret.), who had served as Army chief of staff, 1949–53, arrived in Saigon in November 1954 in a civilian capacity, sent by President Eisenhower with the personal rank of ambassador to assess the level of commitment the United States should make in Vietnam, particularly militarily, and to organize the U.S. training mission. *U.S. Army.*

October 28: Douglas Dillon, the U.S. ambassador to France, indicated that General Ely had requested through MAAG-Indochina that the United States provide six L–20s (DHC–2 bush planes) and six helicopters for the International Control Commission (ICC), the organization charged with overseeing the implementation of the Geneva accords, for use in carrying out its functions, primarily in Laos.⁸⁷

November 7: With his successor already en route (*see Oct. 18, Nov. 8*), Ambassador Heath raised his “reservation” that Diem “may not be up to the job.” Heath told the State Department that Diem’s “lack of personality, his stubbornness, his narrowness, and [his] dislike of bold action may be greater than all [the] support and guidance we give him.” Unlike others who believed that Diem was the only option, Heath felt that an “acceptable successor can be found given a little time.” According to Heath, the French thought of Diem as a “political dodo.” The ambassador also protested against the anti-French sentiment of many U.S. civilian and military personnel in South Vietnam.⁸⁸

87. *Ibid.*, 13:2192.

88. *Ibid.*, 13:2221–22.

November 8: Gen. J. Lawton “Lightening Joe” Collins, USA (Ret.), arrived in Vietnam as the special envoy of President Eisenhower, with the personal rank of ambassador, essentially replacing Ambassador Heath, who departed a week later. Secretary Dulles had proposed sending a senior military officer to Saigon because of the precarious situation there. Collins’s primary assignment was to determine the scope of the U.S. advisory and training mission. The U.S. administration wanted Collins to be firmer with the French than Heath had been and to provide an unvarnished opinion of Diem and his chances for success.⁸⁹

General Ely was extremely skeptical of Collins’s mission and did not meet his counterpart at the airport. He found Collins more open to his ideas than he suspected, however, and the two forged an agreement on U.S. training and aid (*see Dec. 13*).⁹⁰

Collins came to share Heath and Ely’s concerns about Diem, cabling Secretary Dulles early in his tenure that “I am by no means certain he has [the] inherent capacity to manage [the] country during this critical period.” Collins held this opinion through December, at one point even suggesting that the United States consider withdrawing from Vietnam. Collins received pushback on these views from the State Department, Colonel Lansdale, and Senator Mansfield. He had moderated his message by January, as the situation in South Vietnam showed signs of improvement. Nevertheless, Collins continued to raise serious questions with Washington into March and April 1955 about Diem’s viability as a leader (*see Mar. 31, 1955; Apr. 7, 1955*).⁹¹

By Lansdale’s own admission, he “got off on the wrong foot” with Collins. The new ambassador delivered the edict from Washington on what needed to be done, with many policies that conflicted with the actual situation in South Vietnam, as Lansdale bluntly informed him. Although Lansdale continued to see the Collins mission as the administration’s “attempt at a quick and simplistic fix of Vietnam’s complex problems,” he managed to repair relations with the ambassador somewhat and attempted to advise him on the local realities (*see Jan. 3, 1955*).⁹²

Collins stated in an interview several decades later that there were two people in South Vietnam “supposedly representing the United States government. I [was] getting instructions from the president of the United

89. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 231–33; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 638–40; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 87–94; *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:2232; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 204.

90. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 639; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 236–40; Miller, *Misalliance*, 108–10; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 94–95.

91. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 639–41, 643–45 (quote, 640); Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man*, 180–99; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 236–43.

92. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 202–7, 313 (1st quote, 202; 2d quote, 313); Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 237–39. Lansdale wrote that he walked out of Collins’s first meeting with the country team, an account that Collins disputed in an interview several decades later. “If he had walked out on me,” Collins said, “he wouldn’t have come back again.” Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 92.



Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France of France (center, seated) with President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles during Mendès-France's visit to Washington in November 1954. Dulles spent the fall and winter seeking ways to keep Mendès-France from completely pulling his support for Diem. *National Archives.*

States, and this guy Lansdale, who had no authority so far as I was concerned, [was] getting instructions from the CIA. It was a mistake. That's all there was to it."⁹³

November 17–19: Prime Minister Mendès-France visited Washington for three days of talks with Secretary Dulles and other senior U.S. officials. According to the memorandum of conversation from the meeting on November 17, Mendès-France said that “he had only limited faith that Diem had the capacity to succeed. Nevertheless, he stated that the French “were continuing to support Diem and [that] they intended loyally to cooperate with the United States on our agreed policy” (*see Oct. 23*). The prime minister emphasized “the importance of giving the Viet Minh no pretext for reopening hostilities,” in large part because of the vulnerability of the French and South Vietnamese militaries. Dulles agreed.⁹⁴

Specific to the USAF, Mendès-France asked for spare parts for “American planes in French hands but now grounded in South Vietnam.”

93. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 112.

94. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:2264–66 (quotes 2265–66).

Dulles said he would “look into the status” of the request. Mendès-France also reiterated the need for helicopters for the ICC (*see Oct. 28*), noting that the situation in northern Laos was “extremely disturbing.”⁹⁵

November 23: A National Intelligence Estimate observed that the situation in South Vietnam had “steadily deteriorated since the conclusion of the armistice. On the basis of present trends, it is highly unlikely that South Vietnam will develop the strength necessary to counter the growing Communist subversion within its borders.”⁹⁶

December: China sent more than 2,000 railroad workers to North Vietnam to help with repair of rails, bridges, and roads (*see Oct. 9*).⁹⁷

December 6: Ambassador Collins cabled Secretary Dulles that “Diem still presents our chief problem. My initial impression of his weaknesses has worsened rather than improved.” Collins wrote that the “time may be approaching rapidly” when the United States might need to start considering “possible alternatives to Diem.” He observed that “there is no one in sight to take Diem’s place at the moment, but time is running out, and it will take a lot of doing to make him into an effective leader.” Collins began actively searching for men of substance who could be considered potential replacements for Diem.⁹⁸

December 13: Ambassador Collins and General Ely reached an “understanding on development and training of autonomous Viet-Nam forces.” Under the agreement, the MAAG would assume full responsibility for organizing and training the South Vietnamese military while still recognizing the overall French military authority. The French were to grant “full autonomy” to the South Vietnamese armed forces by July 1, 1955. The Americans and French did not consult with the Vietnamese while setting up the agreement.⁹⁹

To organize the training structure, the MAAG assigned five U.S. military officers to the South Vietnamese headquarters, three from the

95. *Ibid.*, 13:2267.

96. *Ibid.*, 13:2286.

97. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 72.

98. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:2342 (1st quote), 2343 (2d–4th quotes); Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man*, 183–85; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 95–97.

99. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:2366–68 (quotes), 1955–57, 1:9; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 239; Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man*, 180–81. According to Jacobs (p. 181), Collins and Ely also did not consult with the South Vietnamese while mapping out the future of their educational system. Ely believed that France and the United States should develop an educational program that would be “open to Occidental influence.” French language and culture should be maintained because the “Vietnamese language and culture offer little chance to fulfill a modern nation’s requirements.”



The Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) staff in Saigon in the latter part of 1954, after the staffing had been expanded from 128 to 342 uniformed personnel. General O'Daniel, the MAAG commander, is seated in the front row just right of center, with his legs apart. *USAF*.

Army and one each from the Air Force and the Navy. The French also assigned five officers from their corresponding services.¹⁰⁰

December 18: Secretary Dulles discussed Indochina in Paris with Prime Minister Mendès-France, General Ely, and Anthony Eden, the British foreign secretary. According to a recounting of the meeting by Ambassador Dillon, Mendès-France “described Diem’s approach as wholly negative.” He stated that the French had followed through on his October pledge to Dulles to “do our maximum” to help the Diem government succeed (*see Oct. 23*), but the situation had reached the point where “he was no longer sure that even the maximum would help.” Dulles countered that Diem was the “best man available in spite of [his] failings,” and that “we must get along with something less good than [the] best.”

Dulles asked Ely whether he and Ambassador Collins had applied “maximum pressures” to Diem. Ely replied that they had and that both “were now virtually convinced that it was hopeless to expect anything of Diem.” Ely added that Diem was an “extremely pig-headed man who became more so under pressure” and would not respond well to ultimatums. He also noted that Diem had been trying to play Collins and him against each other.

The French pressed the idea of turning to Bao Dai to appoint a viceroy to replace Diem but agreed, for the time being, to continue supporting Diem. Mendès-France believed that Ely and Collins should collaborate to set a deadline for how long they thought the interested parties could afford to give Diem before moving on to another leader. Dulles observed that if the United States “should decide that there is no good alternative

100. *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:315.

to Diem, we will have to consider how much more investment we will be prepared to make in Indochina,” subtly threatening U.S. withdrawal, as he had done in his October meeting with Mendès-France. He added that while the French “had an investment of lives and property in Vietnam,” the concern of the United States was much more about the fate of the rest of Southeast Asia.

Admiral Radford was also at this tripartite meeting and continued from Paris to Saigon to share its conclusions with Collins and General O’Daniel. The points of agreement remained unclear, however, as Mendès-France thought he had convinced Dulles to consider moving on from Diem if the situation did not improve. According to Kathryn Statler, “Dulles appeared willing to allow Mendès-France to leave with this assumption, knowing that it would undoubtedly result in at least short-term French cooperation.”¹⁰¹

December 31: Diem issued a memorandum on “National Security Action (Pacification)” that Colonel Lansdale and his team had drafted. It outlined a plan for the South Vietnamese army to begin delivering government services in areas of the country that had been under Viet Minh control.¹⁰²

101. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:2402–4 (all quotes except last); Statler, *Replacing France*, 131 (final quote); Combs, “Path Not Taken,” 46–47.

102. Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 244–45; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 242–43; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 32–33, 36.



Divisions Solidify, U.S. Commitment Grows 1955–1956

As 1955 dawned, the United States was still trying to determine the level of commitment it would make to South Vietnam and to its leader, Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem. After Diem's forces overwhelmed those challenging his government in April 1955, U.S. backing for him solidified. The United States stood behind Diem as he refused to participate in the Geneva-mandated elections to reunify the country in 1956. As election-preparation deadlines passed, however, Diem found that the Eisenhower administration's attention was shifting to other parts of the world.

Even as U.S. focus strayed from Southeast Asia, its commitment deepened. Most significantly, the United States gradually assumed training responsibilities for the fledgling South Vietnamese military as the French withdrew. The USAF and USN did not formally start training their corresponding services until 1957, however, so their roles in Vietnam during this period were sublimated in the Army-led MAAG.

Col. Edward Lansdale remained in Vietnam through late 1956 and continued to play a significant role in helping Diem bolster his standing, particularly through the spring of 1955. Lansdale grew frustrated with Diem's autocratic tendencies, though, as the South Vietnamese leader consolidated his power through rigged elections and repression of opposition groups.

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January: Planning for the Republic of Vietnam Air Force (VNAF) began, building on the Vietnamese air force that the French had established in 1950. As of January 1955, the VNAF consisted of 3,434 men, with



Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem meeting with Maj. Gen. John “Iron Mike” O’Daniel, the MAAG commander, at the palace in Saigon. Diem was notoriously long-winded, and sessions with him often lasted for hours. *U.S. Army.*

plans to organize them into two liaison squadrons and one air transport squadron. France retained a contract to train the VNAF until 1957 (*see June 1, 1957*).¹

When Lt. Gen. Otto Weyland had visited Vietnam a year earlier while he was still FEAF commander (*see Feb. 8–11, 1954*), he observed that the French really only gave “lip service” to the concept of a Vietnamese air force. Instruction was “extremely rudimentary” and given “on liaison aircraft to a limited number of cadets.” He added that “some mechanics are given alleged instruction; however, the instructional aids are rudimentary and cannot be considered in any way adequate.” The French exhibited an attitude of “extreme condescension” toward the Vietnamese they were teaching, according to Weyland, a relationship that did not improve as the French continued training the VNAF for its first two and a half years of existence (*see Feb. 12*).²

1. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 49–50; Willard J. Webb, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam, 1954–1959* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2007), 145, http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Vietnam/Vietnam_1954-1959.pdf.

2. Weyland memorandum books, frame 648. Weyland added that it “became increasingly obvious” to him that the French would “never instill respect, confidence, or support from any of the Vietnam troops as long as they pursue their present attitude and tactics.”

January 1: France relinquished command authority of the organization that on this date became known as the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). At Col. Edward Lansdale's urging, the ARVN began focusing part of its efforts on establishing reoccupation zones in areas in the south where Viet Minh troops had withdrawn (*see Dec. 31, 1954; Feb. 8, 1955*).³

On the same date, the United States began providing direct aid to South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia instead of having to pass the funds and materials through the French (*see Dec. 23, 1950*). The South Vietnamese established the National Bank of Vietnam, and the French closed their Bank of Indochina.⁴

January 3: In a long memorandum to Ambassador J. Lawton Collins that addressed ways to strengthen South Vietnam, Colonel Lansdale declared that “we have no other choice but to win here or face an increasingly grim future, a heritage which none of us wants to pass along to our offspring.” As a result of this document, Collins appointed Lansdale, under the direction of MAAG commander Maj. Gen. John “Iron Mike” O’Daniel, to oversee what were essentially counterinsurgency programs in Vietnam, although the term “counterinsurgency” did not yet exist.⁵

As part of this duty, in early 1955, Lansdale began encouraging Prime Minister Diem to organize a paramilitary force for the purpose of providing, as Lansdale later described it, “popular resistance south of the seventeenth [parallel].” Lansdale envisioned a counterinsurgency organization, oriented toward the countryside and communist cadres there, but Diem was much more concerned about the threat of the politico-religious sects in Saigon and surrounding areas (*see Mar. 31, Apr. 28*). The MAAG supported Lansdale’s concept but was overruled by the State Department, which decreed that the new organization had to be a civilian one. It evolved into what became known as the Civil Guard. Against Lansdale’s advice, Diem had trainers from the Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group instruct the Civil Guard in urban police tactics, not counter-guerrilla ones. The existence of this force outside the Defense Ministry—it was under the Interior Ministry, although Diem wanted the Civil Guard reporting directly to him—also created problems of coordination with the regular military organizations and frustration for the MAAG.⁶

3. Statler, *Replacing France*, 195–96; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 181.

4. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 641; Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 21; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 181.

5. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:4 (quote), 8 n. 4; Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 244–46.

6. Whitlow, “U.S. Military in South Vietnam,” 46–50, 75–80 (quote, 46); Miller, *Misalliance*, 191–92; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 101; Reinhardt interview, 6–9. Whitlow’s sources included correspondence with Lansdale. Lansdale had been saying since he arrived in Vietnam that military and paramilitary forces should be part of the same organization. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 157. For the Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group’s police administration training, see Ernst, *Forging a Fateful Alliance*, 63–84.

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Diem had a similar view of the functions of the ARVN. G. Frederick Reinhardt, who became U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam in May (*see May 14*), said in a later interview that “Diem and his associates looked upon the army as much more of an internal security force than a national defense force in the sense we think of one.” He added that the South Vietnamese leader saw the ARVN as “an element perhaps of political control.” According to Reinhardt, “we thought of army in terms of our own Army” and did not fully appreciate Diem’s overriding concern with internal subversion. What the Americans did come to understand was Diem’s grip on the entire security apparatus. “The military didn’t have a damn thing to say about anything, including their own troops,” said Reinhardt’s successor, Elbridge Durbrow. “Diem was running the whole show.”⁷

January 22: Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, two of the most prominent communist leaders in the south, boarded a Hanoi-bound ship with great fanfare in front of international observers. Their departure was part of the post-Geneva relocation during the period of free movement between south and north (*see Aug. 17, 1954*). Le Duan secretly slipped off the vessel, however, and he remained in the Mekong delta area. By the end of the decade, he emerged as one of the most important figures in the Vietnamese communist leadership, as well as the most influential voice for revolution (*see July 20, 1956; Jan. 22, 1959*).⁸

January 27: Ambassador Collins presented an extensive status report in person to the NSC in Washington. He stated that while he “certainly did not wish to appear to be too optimistic,” he believed that if Diem and his government followed through with all of the American recommendations, “there was at least a 50–50 chance of saving South Vietnam from the communists.”⁹

February 8: The ARVN launched its first larger-scale pacification program in Ca Mau, the southernmost province in Vietnam (*see Dec. 31, 1954; Jan. 1, 1955*). Colonel Lansdale had overseen planning of the operation and had two of his men advising the ARVN commander. The program ran smoothly but had insignificant long-term impact, as the Viet Minh was able to maintain a substantial presence in the area.¹⁰

7. Reinhardt interview, 6–8; Durbrow interview, 102.

8. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 17, 30–31.

9. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:66. While Collins was in Washington, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles offered to make Collins’s appointment as ambassador permanent, but Collins declined. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 98.

10. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 242–43; Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 248–50; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 40–50.

February 12: As part of the U.S.-French agreement two months earlier (*see Dec. 13, 1954*), the MAAG formally assumed responsibility for training the South Vietnamese military, under what became known as the Training Relations Instruction Mission (TRIM). At that point, French advisors outnumbered U.S. ones by three to one. TRIM set up army, navy, air force and “National Security” divisions, with Colonel Lansdale heading the latter group. As the ARVN grew but the MAAG did not, by 1956, the U.S. command was relying on the South Vietnamese to conduct training at echelons lower than the regimental level.¹¹

The U.S. Army “swiftly dismissed the French experience in Southeast Asia,” according to military historian Gregory A. Daddis. While the French learned from their setback in Vietnam and modified their own training to better counter insurgencies in places like Algeria, the U.S. Army did not and focused almost exclusively throughout the 1950s on building the ARVN as a conventional force (*see June 1, 1957*).¹²

In Vietnam, the French did not “seem to really have the heart to get seriously into this business of creating a new Vietnamese army,” according to Frederick Reinhardt. Since the French had “undertaken to evacuate the country militarily,” from the onset “it was apparent that not much active help could be expected” from them in the instruction. Reinhardt later stated that “by the end of ’55, the French to all intents and purposes turned over the training of the new army to us.” “They didn’t help us, and, by and large, they probably hindered us,” said Lt. Gen. Samuel T. Williams, who became MAAG commander in November (*see Nov. 15*). He thought, in retrospect, that it was a mistake to keep the French involved in the training through mid-1957, observing that “large elements among the French . . . wanted us to fail. Few made any secret of it. Their often-used expression was, ‘First us, then you.’”¹³

February 19: South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia became a part of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which the member nations formally implemented on this date (*see Sept. 8, 1954*). These countries were

11. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 240–42, 252; Whitlow, “U.S. Military in South Vietnam,” 50–54, 83; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 2, book IV.A.4, sect. 1, 1.1–5.1, sect. 3, 18–19. The initial name for the organization was Advisory Training and Operations Mission, but the acronym ATOM was “frightening to the Vietnamese” because of its nuclear connotations, according to one of the U.S. officers who was part of the team. Croizat interview, 77.

12. Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 24. As Ambassador Reinhardt put it, “I think there were many lessons to have been learned by the French experience that, as far as I am aware, we didn’t take the trouble to get into. What effect a more flexible, a more open-eyed approach might have had on subsequent developments, one of course cannot say.” Reinhardt interview, 50–51.

13. Reinhardt interview, 9–10; Samuel T. Williams, interview by Capt. Ralph G. Swenston, August 19, 1970, transcript, AFHRA, 60–61 (quotes), 88–90 (hereafter Williams interview). Williams added that “a senior French officer cautioned me saying, ‘Remember, all you’re doing here is for the benefit of the communists as they will eventually take over.’ He didn’t say this sadly.”



Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, seen here in 1953, visited the Southeast Asian capitals at the end of February 1955 and met Diem for the first time. Dulles was “favorably impressed” by the South Vietnamese leader and reported to Washington that Diem’s “merits seemed greater than I had thought.” *National Archives*.

not signatory members, but they were included among the nations whose sovereignty the pact protected. According to historian Pierre Asselin, U.S. ratification of the SEATO treaty, “in Hanoi’s eyes, formalized America’s commitment to preserving a noncommunist South Vietnam and constituted proof of Washington’s intent to replace the French in Indochina and ignore the Geneva accords.”¹⁴

With the advent of SEATO, the United States began pouring money into Southeast Asia to improve military facilities. In addition to South Vietnam, Thailand particularly benefitted, as the United States provided \$97 million to the Thai government between 1954 and 1962 for expansion of seven air bases, ten army bases, and two naval bases, as well as military hospitals and ammunition storage facilities. All would become critical to U.S. operations in Vietnam and Laos in the 1960s.¹⁵

February 27–March 1: Secretary of State John Foster Dulles made brief visits to the capitals of Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. In Vientiane, he informed senior Laotian officials that if the Pathet Lao attacked in the provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly, the United States would be

14. Statler, *Replacing France*, 112; Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War*, 25 (quote); Reinhardt interview, 43–44.

15. Castle, *At War in the Shadows of Vietnam*, 13.

prepared to use air and naval power to deter intervention by the North Vietnamese or Chinese. SEATO troops would be available in case of invasion by communist neighbors. Dulles advocated for Laotian forces to move against the Pathet Lao, as the “danger increased as the situation dragged along.” In subsequent weeks, however, the British and French ambassadors in Vientiane told Laotian leaders not to expect involvement of any SEATO forces.¹⁶

In Phnom Penh, Dulles found King Norodom Sihanouk to be “vigorous and full of ideas” and a “healthy influence.” After arriving in Saigon on the 28th, the secretary was “favorably impressed” by Diem, who he said was “much more of a personality than I had anticipated.” Dulles cabled Washington that Diem “is not without defects, but his merits seemed greater than I had thought.” Much of their discussion concerned the increasing threat from the politico-religious sects (*see Mar. 31*). Diem stated his belief that “French elements in lower echelons” were “encouraging sect leaders into anti-government action,” but Ambassador Collins doubted the validity of this accusation. Dulles told Diem that he, President Dwight Eisenhower, and the U.S. government as a whole had a “great stake in him and in Vietnam.”¹⁷

March: Senior Chinese military advisor Wei Guoqing accompanied Vo Nguyen Giap on an inspection tour of the North Vietnam coastline and offered thoughts on construction of defenses and troop deployment. Giap led North Vietnamese military delegations to China for consultation and inspection tours in June–July and October–December 1955.¹⁸

In the same month, the North Vietnamese central committee concluded that the United States had become the “primary and most dangerous enemy.”¹⁹

Meanwhile, tensions in the Taiwan Strait crisis escalated in March and April, with the Eisenhower administration contemplating war with China, and possible nuclear intervention, during the same period it was considering Diem’s fate in South Vietnam (*see Sept. 3, 1954; Apr. 23, 1955*).²⁰

March 31: Ambassador Collins cabled Washington that Diem’s government was on the verge of collapse and that it was “essential to consider possible alternatives.”²¹

16. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 25, 28–32 (quote, 30); *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:96; Jacobs, *Unraveling*, 57.

17. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:96–97, 99–104 (1st–2d quotes, 96; 3d–5th quotes, 97; 6th–7th quotes, 101; 8th quote, 102).

18. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 73–74.

19. Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War*, 25.

20. Chang, *Friends and Enemies*, 131–37; Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man*, 197–98.

21. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:169–71 (quote, 170).



Gen. Nathan Twining, USAF chief of staff, presents the Distinguished Service Medal to Col. Edward Lansdale for his work in Vietnam. Lansdale's most significant efforts during this tour, for which he was detailed to the CIA, came in the first half of 1955 as he helped Ngo Dinh Diem establish the viability of his government. *USAF*.

Since he became prime minister in July 1954, Diem had faced ever-increasing pressure from politico-religious groups that became known as the sects—a largely derisive term. The most prominent of these were the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, both of which were religious-oriented, and the Binh Xuyen, which was a mafia-type syndicate. All three of these organizations had their own militias, and the Binh Xuyen controlled the Saigon police force, a concession that Bao Dai had sold to its leader in 1953 for \$1.2 million. Historian Jessica Chapman has argued that Diem “constructed his government and developed its most unpopular institutions and practices largely in an effort to neutralize the politico-religious threat that plagued him during his first two years in office.” His government nearly fell more than once from confrontations with the sects.²²

Through 1954, all three of the major sects had received subsidies from the French to keep them placated. In December 1954, the French informed sect leaders that they would be cutting off the payments,

22. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, is the most detailed work on Diem and the politico-religious groups (quote, 6; \$1.2 million deal, 74).

but Diem took over the payoffs using U.S. money, with at least some involvement by Colonel Lansdale in this operation. There were still confrontations, most notably after Diem closed the Binh Xuyen's casinos in Saigon in January 1955, causing that sect's leader to declare that it would form a "united front" with the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao. Some Americans, including Lansdale, thought the French had a hand in fomenting some of the anti-Diem sentiment, particularly in the Binh Xuyen (*see Feb. 27–Mar. 1*). By the spring, threats of governmental undermining and open warfare were so great that few believed Diem could survive, prompting Collins's telegram of this date.²³

Collins elaborated in numerous dispatches about the extensive external and internal challenges that Diem faced, but the problematic reports did not present the message that Secretary Dulles wanted to hear. When consulted, Sen. Mike Mansfield told Dulles that any alternatives would be worse than Diem and that the likely civil war in the event of his departure would leave the Viet Minh free rein to take over the south. Opinions began evolving as April progressed, however (*see Apr. 7, 11*), and Collins flew to Washington for consultation. On April 27, the administration made the decision to move on from Diem, just before Diem launched an advance against the sects that reestablished his viability (*see Apr. 28*).²⁴

April: The North Vietnamese government reduced the household rice ration for its people. Its land reform efforts had been problematic, and South Vietnam had suspended all economic exchanges with the north, including rice shipments (*see Oct. 9, 1954*). North Vietnam had forcefully and at times brutally imposed its land reform program (*see Dec. 1953*), and outside observers began to question whether support for Ho's government was declining (*see Aug. 1955*). In the same month, due in part to concerns that the United States might try to exploit the perceived weakness, Hanoi ordered the formation of local militias across North Vietnam.²⁵

April 4: In the midst of the growing debate about Diem's future (*see Mar. 31, Apr. 11*), *Time* magazine published a positive cover story on him.²⁶

April 7: Ambassador Collins wrote Secretary Dulles directly, stating that "my judgment is that Diem does not have the capacity to achieve the necessary unity of purpose and action from his people which is essential to

23. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 86–110; Miller, *Misalliance*, 100, 110–19; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 642–44; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 157–66; Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 258–63; Ahern, *CIA and the House of Ngo*, 41–43; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 99–103.

24. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:159–99; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 643–45; Miller, *Misalliance*, 116–19.

25. Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 24; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 631–34.

26. Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man*, 197–98.

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prevent this country from falling under Communist control. I say this with great regret, but with firm conviction.” Earlier the same evening, Collins had sent the State Department the unvarnished opinion of Gen. Paul Ely, the senior French commander in Indochina, which was that South Vietnam probably could not be saved if Diem remained as its leader.²⁷

April 11: After several days of debate within the administration, and more immediately after consulting with President Eisenhower and CIA director Allen Dulles, John Foster Dulles wired Ambassador Collins that he was “authorized in your discretion to acquiesce in the idea of Diem’s replacement.” The secretary of state said officials in Washington had based this decision on Collins’s “reiterated conviction that Diem cannot gain adequate Vietnam support to establish an effective government” (*see Mar. 31, Apr. 7*). Dulles stipulated that any potential replacement not be a “tool of French colonialism” and also a strong enough leader to control the politico-religious organizations and avoid civil war. On April 16, Dulles summoned Collins to Washington to consult on the next steps, and for further discussion on whether Diem would indeed be replaced (*see Apr. 28*).²⁸

April 23: Zhou Enlai stated at an international conference that China did not want war with the United States and was willing to negotiate. This development effectively diffused the first Taiwan Strait crisis (*see Sept. 3, 1954; Mar. 1955*). U.S. nuclear threats during this standoff, however, apparently convinced China to launch its own atomic weapons program.²⁹

April 28: The so-called Battle of Saigon began, with Diem beating back the sects, principally the Binh Xuyen, and saving his government.

On April 27, with Ambassador Collins in Washington for consultations after recommending Diem’s removal (*see Mar. 31, Apr. 7, 11*), the Eisenhower administration made the decision to replace Diem, based heavily on Collins’s account of the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam. Secretary Dulles cabled the details to the embassies in Saigon and Paris. Collins and General Ely were to consult about Diem’s successor with Bao Dai, who had already indicated his desire to find a new prime minister. Before any moves could be made, however, the situation changed drastically. On the 28th, Diem, who had been tipped off about U.S. intentions, had his troops launch mortars near Binh Xuyen command posts. If Diem was trying to provoke the sects, the plan worked,

27. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:217–18, 220 (quote); Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man*, 198–99.

28. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:235, 237 (quotes), 250; Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man*, 200–203; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 105–8.

29. Chang, *Friends and Enemies*, 137, 141.



ARVN troops advancing against the Binh Xuyen militia during the Battle of Saigon. Diem more firmly established his control in South Vietnam during this week-long conflict, then subsequently launched raids against other opposition groups. USAF.

as the Binh Xuyen began shelling Diem's palace, giving him a pretext to attack the sect forces with the ARVN. The fighting was almost completely with the Binh Xuyen, as the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao militias stayed on the sidelines. As Diem's troops advanced with brutal effectiveness through the 29th, Colonel Lansdale led the political counteroffensive, unleashing what one official described as "a flood of reports and recommendations" to convince Washington to forestall Diem's removal. Dulles commented at an NSC meeting during the engagement that the developments "could either lead to Diem's utter overthrow or to his emergence from the disaster as a major hero." By the beginning of May, the ARVN had driven the Binh Xuyen out of Saigon, and the U.S. press and congressional leaders were praising Diem as a "miracle man." The Eisenhower administration issued a public statement of support on May 6. As historian Seth Jacob observed, "Diem's victory in the battle for Saigon was less important for what it revealed about his popularity in Vietnam than for the manner in which it was interpreted in the United States."³⁰

30. *FRUS 1955-57*, 1:291-319 (1st quote, 305; 2d quote, 309); Miller, *Misalliance*, 119-25; Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 107-16; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 645-48; Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 265-75; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 162-72; Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 142-44; Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man*, 172 (3d quote), 202-16; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 108-19. Diem helped coordinate the military maneuvers by way of a radio transmitter in the presidential palace that Lansdale had gotten installed for him. Diem had a very limited understanding of military concepts, however. Lansdale remembered Diem asking, "What does chain of command mean? What is it?" Lansdale interview (1969), 6-8 (quote, 7).



This stately villa in Saigon housed the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) headquarters. As the French pulled out more and more of their troops, the MAAG's role in training and organizing the South Vietnamese military increased. *U.S. Army.*

With his hold on the government secured, Diem launched a campaign in May to repress the sects and their armies. According to Lansdale, VNAF liaison aircraft flew a few bombing missions against the Binh Xuyen militia in the Rung Sat area during this period, “none of which was very successful.” Although the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao in particular had been anti-Viet Minh before these spring engagements, many men who had fought in the sect armies started finding their way into Viet Minh cadres after this series of attacks, with the communists beginning intentional outreach to the sects during this period.³¹

Since the Binh Xuyen had controlled the Saigon police force (*see Mar. 31*), its defeat by the ARVN created even more of a void in internal security and increased Diem's emphasis on the Civil Guard and the ARVN as security forces more so than military ones (*see Jan. 3*).³²

May: The MAAG outlined plans to shape the existing South Vietnamese military into a 150,000-man force, including a 4,000-man air force. The

31. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 114–16; Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 172–73; *Victory in Vietnam*, 16–17; Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man*, 182–83; Richard H. Immerman, *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 188; Lansdale interview (1969), 3 (quote).

32. Durbrow interview, 60.

U.S. military believed it could train and support a force of only 100,000, but it acceded to Diem's desire for significantly more men in the face of a reported North Vietnamese buildup (*see Sept. 5, 1954*).³³

Even with the larger force, the MAAG understood that it had a significant task to turn the ARVN into an effective military. Lt. Gen. Samuel Williams, who became MAAG commander later in the year (*see Nov. 15*), later stated that the "MAAG knew without a doubt that the country could not become self-sufficient in less than six to eight years, and only with extensive help. It was also the opinion of MAAG that U.S. combat participation was possible and in fact necessary for the survival of the country in the event of an early war with North Vietnam." Williams said that during discussions in the later 1950s of expanding the ARVN to 170,000 to 200,000 men, a "senior military official from Washington" told him that such a force was not needed because "in the event of war, the United States Air Force and Navy will take care of any invasion." However, during Williams's tenure in Saigon (through August 1960), the MAAG did no planning for the deployment of U.S. forces in case of a North Vietnamese advance.³⁴

May 14: Ambassador Collins left Saigon, replaced by Frederick Reinhardt. General Ely's tour in Vietnam ended two weeks later. Colonel Lansdale, who had clashed repeatedly with Collins (*see Nov. 8, 1954*), saw the Eisenhower administration's move from a special envoy to a career diplomat as a shift from a "quick fix" to "a more conventional approach through professional diplomacy." General Williams described Reinhardt as "intelligent, efficient, experienced, and a gentleman in every respect."³⁵

A week before he departed, Collins wrote Dulles that despite Diem's success in subduing the sects (*see Apr. 28*), he was still concerned about the Vietnamese leader's "basic incapacity to manage the affairs of government. His present successes may even make it harder for us to persuade Diem to take competent men into government, to decentralize authority to his ministers, and to establish sound procedures for the implementation of reform programs." Collins added that "I am still convinced Diem does not have [the] knack of handling men nor the executive capacity truly to unify the country and establish an effective government. If this should become

33. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 262–64. At the time, the French had been paying somewhere close to 250,000 Vietnamese in either regular or auxiliary military service. Incoming Ambassador Frederick Reinhardt noted that it was actually "quite a radical act" to set the total force at 150,000 and leave perhaps 100,000 men unemployed. Reinhardt interview, 5–6. See also Croizat interview, 76–77, 89, 99–100.

34. Williams interview, 6–8 (quotes), 17. Williams (pp. 14–15) thought the strength of the Vietnamese force at the end of the war was even higher than Reinhardt indicated, estimating the number at 290,000 men.

35. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 254; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 313 (1st–2d quotes); Williams interview, 43 (3d quote).

evident, we should either withdraw from Vietnam because our money will be wasted, or we should take such steps as can legitimately be taken to secure an effective new premier.”³⁶

Collins concluded by reminding Dulles that “we must keep our eyes clearly on our main objective in Vietnam, i.e., to assist in saving this country from communism. No matter who heads the government here, free Vietnam will not be saved unless sound political, economic, and military programs are promptly and effectively put into action.” Such an effort would require “wholehearted agreement and coordination between Vietnamese, Americans, and French. Difficult as this may be to achieve, it is possible, in my judgment. If this tripartite approach is not secure, we should withdraw from Vietnam.”³⁷

Reinhardt later echoed Collins’s memo, stating in a 1970 interview that when he reached Saigon in 1955, “there were really two principal issues in the Vietnam scene.” One was whether Diem’s government would survive, while the other variable was the French, particularly their tenuous relationship to Diem’s government and their role in, and lack of enthusiasm for, training the South Vietnamese military (*see Feb. 12*).³⁸

Reinhardt recalled that at the time he arrived, Diem “was by no means anti-French” and in fact hoped that Vietnam could remain in the French Union, albeit with “complete local autonomy.” Reinhardt found, however, that the French thought Diem had “served his purpose” and wanted him replaced. Reinhardt said that “the confusion of French policy” regarding Vietnam “eventually turned Diem more and more to an anti-French position.”³⁹

The new ambassador thought the French had the possibility to build a relationship with South Vietnam similar to what the United States had with the Philippines but that the French “really spoiled it.” Reinhardt recounted that “they destroyed this opportunity by the lack of wisdom, lack of clear-cut organization,” and the way they carried out their withdrawal. Ely’s replacement, Henri Hoppenot, the first civilian high commissioner for Indochina, “acted as though nothing had happened in the last ten years in the area,” according to Reinhardt. In turn, Hoppenot complained to his superiors in Paris that Reinhardt and the Americans “evicted” the French from Indochina and “tried to eliminate them from all areas.”⁴⁰

Also on May 14, the Soviet Union and seven other Eastern European communist nations formed the Warsaw Pact as a counterbalance to NATO, and directly in response to West Germany joining NATO.⁴¹

36. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:368.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Reinhardt interview, 8–9, 47–49.

39. *Ibid.*, 11–12.

40. *Ibid.*, 49 (1st–3d quotes); Statler, *Replacing France*, 215 (4th–5th quotes).

41. Vojtech Mastny and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *A Cardboard Castle? An Inside History of the Warsaw Pact, 1955–1991* (New York: Central European University Press, 2005), 2–4, 77.

May 16: The United States signed an agreement to provide direct military aid to Cambodia.⁴²

May 19: In a memorandum for the Soviet central committee, the Foreign Ministry observed that “the activity of the Americans has increased in South Vietnam.” The Soviets believed that the Americans were trying to push the French out of the country: “They are working actively to oust the French from the army, trying to assign their advisers to the most important posts. They strengthen their political influence by bribing not only political leaders but whole organizations.”⁴³

May 20: French forces withdrew from the Saigon area.⁴⁴

June: The United States organized Military Assistance Advisory Group, Cambodia, based in Phnom Penh. The Air Force section of MAAG-Indochina continued to oversee the air advisory roles in Cambodia and Laos until October 1956.⁴⁵

June 25–July 8: Ho Chi Minh visited Beijing and negotiated a grant equivalent to \$200 million for major infrastructure and industrial projects.⁴⁶

July 1: France granted “full autonomy” to the South Vietnamese military.⁴⁷

July 3: The Pathet Lao attacked Laotian government forces in northwestern Laos. The U.S. Army attaché in Vientiane cabled Washington that the noncommunist troops could be facing a “small Dien Bien Phu.” Adm. Arthur Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, floated the prospect of an aerial response by the United States and perhaps even the insertion of Marines, but U.S. officials soon discovered that the Pathet Lao engagement was not a full-scale advance.⁴⁸

July 7: France formally transferred control of Nha Trang air base to the South Vietnamese government. In February 1954, General Weyland had described the facility as “a fairly good one” in a “beautiful location” on the coast. It had a 5,900-foot blacktop runway that could be extended,

42. Eckhardt, *Command and Control*, 12.

43. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 63.

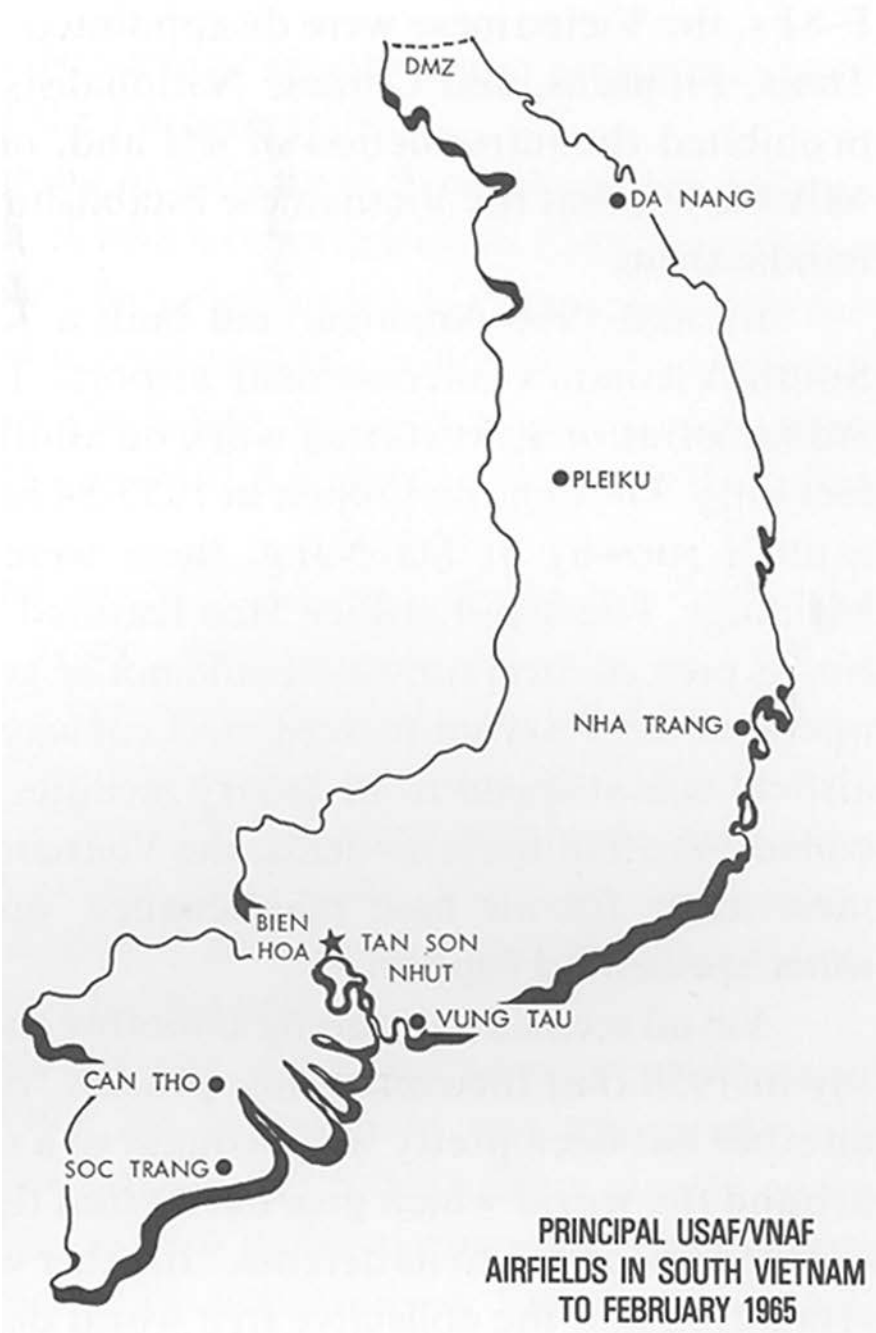
44. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 650.

45. Eckhardt, *Command and Control*, 13. The British had protested initial U.S. plans to place a MAAG in Cambodia. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:2185.

46. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 71.

47. *FRUS 1952–54*, 13:2367.

48. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 34–36 (quote, 35).



“but apparently only to a limited degree,” according to Weyland. Supplies for the installation arrived primarily by ship, but there were road and rail connections to Saigon.⁴⁹

Nha Trang was not the most secure location, however. According to what Diem told General Williams after Williams became MAAG commander, as the communists withdrew their forces from the south after the Geneva agreement, a Viet Minh division stayed in the Nha Trang region for several months. Some of the troops married local women and fathered children, but the Viet Minh did not allow the soldiers to take their families with them when the unit moved north. Because of these family ties to North Vietnam, Diem told Williams that Nha Trang “will always be, until we get it straightened out, a very dangerous area.”⁵⁰

July 12–18: Ho visited Moscow and secured a Soviet grant equivalent to \$100 million for industrial building and development to exploit natural resources. Ho also raised the issue of Soviet military support, but after considering the question, the Soviets remained evasive and told Ho to continue to look to China as North Vietnam’s primary source of military aid.⁵¹

July 16: Diem announced in a radio broadcast that since his government had not formally accepted the Geneva accords, it was not bound by them. He vowed that South Vietnam would not participate in the reunification process “if we are not given proof” that the North Vietnamese leadership places “the higher interests of the national community above those of communism.” The Geneva agreement had mandated reunification elections in July 1956, with consultations to begin between North and South Vietnam by July 20, 1955 (*see July 21–22, 1954; July 20, 1956*). The United States had encouraged Diem to participate in the consultations, regardless of whether he intended to go through with the election, to keep South Vietnam in the good graces of the international community (*see July 26*). The United States maintained this position as the deadlines passed but also continued to declare its support for Diem’s government. In response to Diem’s obstinacy, the North Vietnamese politburo authorized limited, indirect support to factions in the south that were opposing Diem.⁵²

49. Robert F. Futrell, “Chronology of Significant Airpower Events in Southeast Asia, 1954–1967,” (Corona Harvest report, December 15, 1967), 2 (hereafter Futrell Chron.); Weyland memorandum books, frames 647–48 (quotes).

50. Williams interview, 110–11.

51. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 72–73; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 60–61, 63–68. A Soviet review team had visited North Vietnam earlier in the year to estimate the economic needs.

52. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:490–91 (quotes); Williams, “Peaceful Unification Denied,” 34–44; Statler, *Replacing France*, 176–81; Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War*, 29–30; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 651–55; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 122–27; Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 48–50; Combs, “Path Not Taken,” 51–53.

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July 20: Diem had his military and security forces launch a large-scale “Denounce the Communists” campaign, which evolved into an effort to jail or kill all known or suspected communist sympathizers across South Vietnam. Historian Pierre Asselin wrote that the operations “dealt a crushing blow to the southern communist movement,” although the harshness of the campaign “alienated many nationalists from Diem’s government and produced a pool of new recruits” for revolutionary cells.⁵³

July 26: Following a summit in Geneva, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom all had their ambassadors deliver oral messages to Diem encouraging him to participate in consultations, even if he did not plan for South Vietnam to take part in reunification elections (*see July 16*). Despite the prodding, Diem reiterated his July 16 position on August 9 by way of a radio broadcast by one of his representatives.⁵⁴

In a 1970 interview, Ambassador Reinhardt discussed the unlikelihood that North Vietnam would have allowed truly free elections, which probably would have necessitated outside supervision by an agency such as the UN, and concluded that “the position Diem took at the time was the correct one.” He also thought the United States had taken the right tack in encouraging Diem to “take a position in favor of *eventual* elections at such time as the conditions existed to make them realistic.”⁵⁵

August: Under the Mutual Defense Assistance Program (MDAP), the United States equipped the fledgling VNAF with aircraft turned over by the French: twenty-eight F-8Fs, thirty-five C-47s, and sixty L-19s.⁵⁶

During the same month, General O’Daniel moved Colonel Lansdale and his team from the multinational posting with TRIM to work directly under the MAAG.⁵⁷

Mid-September: CIA-sponsored Civil Air Transport (CAT) began aerial supply flights in northern Laos, dropping food (primarily rice), supplies, and anticommunist leaflets during more than 200 missions in the fall.⁵⁸

September 19: France formally transferred control of Tourane (Da Nang) air base to the South Vietnamese government. The runway there was 7,850 feet long, with potential extension of at least 1,000 feet, which General Weyland thought could make it into “an excellent operational field.” He

53. Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War*, 31 (quotes); Logevall, *Embers of War*, 655.

54. Williams, “Peaceful Unification Denied,” 44–45, 49; *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:495–96.

55. Reinhardt interview, 21–24 (1st quote, 22; 2d quote, 21).

56. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 49–50.

57. Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 285.

58. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 37.

also noted “considerable permanent barracks, office space, and hangars of a semi-permanent nature on this base.”⁵⁹

September 25: Cambodia declared itself a free and independent state.⁶⁰

October 11: The U.S. Intelligence Advisory Committee approved an estimate on probable developments in Vietnam. The document concluded that Diem “almost certainly” would not agree to hold reunification elections in July 1956 (*see July 16*) and would “probably seek to bind the U.S. more specifically to the defense of Vietnam.” The intelligence officials believed that North Vietnam probably would concentrate on the “political struggle” of advocating elections through July 1956, but that it was possible that the North Vietnamese might “decide to initiate guerrilla warfare in the south.”⁶¹

October 23: Even though Bao Dai had technically ceded the title of emperor for that of chief of state and had lived in France for several years, he was still recognized internationally as the titular head of South Vietnam. Diem, who Bao Dai had appointed as prime minister (*see June 25, 1954*), increasingly resented the emperor’s influence and status and suspected that Bao Dai had colluded against him with the French, particularly during the sect crisis in the spring. Under the guise of establishing democratic governance in South Vietnam, Diem conceived the idea of a referendum between himself and Bao Dai for the position of head of state. The State Department strongly opposed the canvass, believing it was a ploy for Diem to seize greater power, but Colonel Lansdale supported the idea. The machinations of the campaign, orchestrated by Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and his political network, went far beyond what the United States expected, however. U.S. officials encouraged Diem to be satisfied with 60 percent of the vote in the October 23 election, but in the official tabulations, he received 98.2 percent, dispelling Western illusions about the possibility of free elections in any part of Vietnam. Diem’s rigged plebiscite also stunned moderates in the North Vietnamese leadership, who had maintained to this point that Vietnam could be unified peacefully.⁶²

October 26: Diem proclaimed that the State of Vietnam was now the Republic of Vietnam and that he, as the newly elected head of the

59. Futrell Chron., 2; Weyland memorandum books, frame 648 (quotes).

60. Eckhardt, *Command and Control*, 12–13.

61. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:564.

62. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 148–72; Miller, *Misalliance*, 140–42; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 333–34; Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War*, 31–32; Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 298; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 655–56; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 127–29; *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:565–68; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 327 n. 4.

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government, would hold the title of president. Diem also said that he was appointing a commission to draft a constitution for the new nation.⁶³

November 1: The Pentagon redesignated Military Assistance Advisory Group, Indochina, as Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam.⁶⁴

November 15: Lt. Gen. Samuel Williams, USA, assumed command of MAAG-Vietnam from General O'Daniel. Williams, a hard-driving officer known as "Hanging Sam" because of a verdict rendered in a court-martial, remained with the MAAG until 1960, extended three times at the insistence of Diem, with whom he became very close (*see Apr. 29, 1957*). Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, the Army chief of staff, said he picked Williams for the command because he had related well to Korean officers and "had something about him the Oriental military men would appreciate." According to a USAF officer who served as the air attaché in Saigon, Williams was "an autocrat" and a "pretty dogmatic individual." He wanted things done his way, "that's it; let's get it done this way."⁶⁵

Williams stated in a 1970 interview that during briefings at the Pentagon before he deployed, staff officers told him there was a "high probability" that the North Vietnamese would start a war if Diem did not allow the Geneva-stipulated elections in July 1956 (*see July 16*). The men briefing him thought the elections would not be held. Williams said he arrived in Saigon with a mandate "to prepare to the best of our ability the armed forces of South Vietnam to resist an all-out attack by the superior forces of North Vietnam." Ambassador Reinhardt and U.S. embassy personnel did not share the view of an imminent invasion from the north (*see June 7, 1956*) and questioned Williams's commitment to building the ARVN almost completely as a conventional force (*see June 1, 1957*). Williams later claimed that by mid-1957, he "came to the conclusion that there was not going to be any all-out across-the-[17th]-parallel attack by the North Vietnamese." Nevertheless, "I knew that the North Vietnamese had the capability of doing it, so I had to plan on their capabilities, not what they might do or what they might not do." He added that "I knew that if those attacks came, they probably would be successful" (*see Nov.*

63. Miller, *Misalliance*, 142–43; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 333–34; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 31–32; Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 298; Williams, "Peaceful Unification Denied," 53.

64. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 256.

65. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 39; Mack D. Secord, "The Viet Nam Air Force," *Air University Review* 15 (November–December 1963): 61; Eckhardt, *Command and Control*, 14; Williams interview, 2, 104–8; Durbrow interview, 31–33; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 335–37; Maxwell D. Taylor, interview by Ted Gittinger, September 14, 1981, transcript, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, 12 (1st quote) (hereafter Taylor interview); Butler B. Toland Jr., interview with Robert G. Zimmerman, November 18, 1974, transcript, AFHRA, 88 (2d quote) (hereafter Toland interview).



Lt. Gen. Samuel T. Williams, USA, became MAAG commander in November 1955 and held the post for five years. He became a close confidant of Diem's and oversaw the training of the ARVN largely as a conventional force. *U.S. Army.*

1957). Reinhardt and his successor, Elbridge Durbrow, both believed that Williams trained and equipped the ARVN as if it was being prepared to fight a European ground campaign in World War II.⁶⁶

November–December: Maj. Gen. Sory Smith, commander of Pacific Air Force, sent an inspection team to Southeast Asia to examine the situation with the MAAGs there. In Vietnam, the MAAG Air Force section staff felt “relegated to a minor role and treated as junior partners,” according to the inspection report. The Air Force section reported to the chief of the MAAG, not directly to an Air Force command. The Pacific Air Force officers also found little MAAG coordination with the indigenous air forces that U.S. assistance was supporting. As a result of these findings, in February 1956, General Smith ordered Thirteenth Air Force to work with the national air forces and align them with U.S. strategic aims. The undermanned staff of Thirteenth Air Force, however, did not have the personnel for the task.⁶⁷

66. Williams interview, 3–4 (1st–2d quotes), 73–74 (3d–5th quotes), 86–87; Reinhardt interview, 25–26; Durbrow interview, 7–8, 15–16, 40, 94–95; Croizat interview, 94–97, 121–29.

67. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 42 (quote); Miller interview, 13–14. Despite statements to the contrary from numerous USAF officers, General Williams maintained that there were “no inter-service disagreements at MAAG” during his tenure (1955–60). Williams interview, 36, 42 (quote), 94–95.

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The MAAG Air Force section's difficulties were not only with its Army commanders. Since the French were still in charge of training the VNAF, and as there were no more French aircraft and supply requests to vet, the USAF officers and enlisted men in the MAAG had little to do. They did participate some in the training and consulted on matters related to the development of the VNAF when asked, and they replaced the supply advisors at Bien Hoa when the French suddenly withdrew theirs. But not until mid-1957 did the MAAG Air Force section assume responsibility for training the VNAF (*see June 1, 1957*).⁶⁸

At some point in autumn 1955, Pacific Air Force also undertook an extensive Vietnam planning study, preparing contingencies "in the event of attack by North Vietnam." The report outlined operations on a large scale, necessitating construction of more airfields in South Vietnam to support the deployment. In addition to air operations against the Viet Minh, the study noted the need to prepare for attacks against air bases in China, as the authors considered Chinese intervention "probable," based on recent experience in Korea.⁶⁹

Those actually in Vietnam were not as focused on China as military planners in Honolulu and Washington were (*see June 1, 1957*). Ambassador Reinhardt said that "the communist Chinese were viewed as an eventual source of supply and backup for the North Vietnamese at some future date, but as far as I can recall, in our thinking in 1955 and 1956, the communist Chinese did not have any effect on our policy making or on our activities in the area."⁷⁰

December 12: The United States closed its consulate in Hanoi.⁷¹

December 13: Due to Geneva limitations, which prohibited the introduction of any troops into Laos, the United States could not establish a MAAG there. In place of an assistance group, it opened a Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) on this date, staffed by twelve "civilians," all of whom were out-of-uniform U.S. military personnel. Washington replaced eight of the twelve in short order due to drunkenness or affairs with local women that compromised security. Staffing had increased to twenty-two by mid-1956.⁷²

68. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 50.

69. The Vietnam planning study has not been found. It is mentioned and quoted in notes taken on "History of Pacific Air Force," Part II, July–December 1955, pp. 49–50, AFHRA, reel 47210, frame 471.

70. Reinhardt interview, 42–43.

71. Dommen, *Indochinese Experience*, 343; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 26.

72. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 61–63; Castle, *At War in the Shadows of Vietnam*, 16; Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, 17; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 44–45, 55.

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January: Diem issued Presidential Ordinance No. 6, which allowed the South Vietnamese government to detain any person “dangerous to national defense and public security” for up to two years. Another order made it a capital offense for a person to associate with any “foreign nation or communist organization.” Local authorities detained tens of thousands of South Vietnamese under these orders over subsequent years and often subjected prisoners to harsh treatment and interrogation.⁷³

As Diem’s grip on the country solidified, so did U.S. commitment to him. In the January issue of *Harper’s* magazine, Sen. Mike Mansfield, one of Diem’s most prominent supporters (*see Oct. 15, 1954; Mar. 31, 1955*), published an article titled “Reprieve in Viet-Nam” in which he praised the South Vietnamese leader profusely. “If Viet Nam has not set in the communist mold,” Mansfield wrote, “it is due in large part to Ngo Dinh Diem.” The mainstream U.S. media did not begin reporting on the repressive practices of Diem’s government until the early 1960s.⁷⁴

January 19: Diem informed the French that he would not negotiate an extension for the French troops in the country, as the presence of a foreign force was “incompatible with Vietnam’s concept of full independence.” The French military began preparations for withdrawal (*see Apr. 23*).⁷⁵

January 26: Results of a USAF study presented at the NSC meeting on this date showed the poor condition of the Vietnamese military. The majority of the officers were “not fully trained or qualified,” and only 30 percent of field-grade officers and a scant 10 percent of senior officers were judged as qualified for their positions. Diem had not helped the officer situation by giving commissions based more on political connections than on merit. General Williams observed that Diem was prone to make senior command assignments in the same way. A U.S. Army study from the same period found that the Vietnamese officers were often insubordinate and more concerned with politics than with learning the military arts.⁷⁶

Lt. Col. Victor Croziat, USMC, who translated for Generals O’Daniel and Williams when they met with Diem, recalled that the South Vietnamese leader “kept a very tight hold on the appointments of officers of regimental

73. Miller, *Misalliance*, 197–200 (quotes, 197).

74. Mike Mansfield, “Reprieve in Viet-Nam,” *Harper’s*, January 1956, 45; Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man*, 246–48, 267.

75. Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, 319.

76. Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 59–60 (quote); Whitlow, “U.S. Military in South Vietnam,” 85–87; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 278–82.

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command and above. He personally appointed them all.” When O’Daniel had advocated for the promotion of a particular ARVN colonel, Diem replied that “he’s too much French, too Francofile.” The fundamental problem, according to Croizat, was that the only men the ARVN had who had the background to oversee the management of a 150,000-man military establishment “were the people who’d gone to the French staff school,” but the “competent, qualified people who had gained this experience under the French were precisely the individuals whose loyalties Diem questioned.”⁷⁷

As of January, the VNAF listed a strength of 3,336 men, 103 of whom were pilots. The VNAF was still being trained by the French at this time.⁷⁸

February 10: In a memorandum for President Eisenhower, Secretary Dulles wrote that U.S. policy for Vietnam should focus on “strengthening the position of Free Vietnam under President Diem,” finding ways to preserve “peace and security under some new arrangement which would permit gradual termination of the old Geneva Accords,” and attempting to weaken North Vietnam “by political and psychological warfare.”⁷⁹

March: Because of considerable logistical issues, poor airfields, and the lack of available, capable recruits, among other issues, Pacific Air Force recommended that no attempt be made to develop the Laotian air force beyond liaison and transport capabilities. By mid-1958, only one C-47 crew was combat-ready.⁸⁰

In the same month, China withdrew the last of its military advisors from North Vietnam.⁸¹

March 4: South Vietnam held elections for a national assembly. Candidates affiliated with pro-Diem parties won 109 of the 123 seats. Indicative of his increasing frustration with Diem’s autocratic tendencies, Colonel Lansdale wrote family members that “such rigging is just as bad as what the Commies do.”⁸²

March 14–15: Secretary Dulles met with Diem and other senior South Vietnamese leaders in Saigon. Dulles cabled President Eisenhower that he was “greatly impressed by the immense improvement which has occurred over the past year.” He added, however, that “considerable problems

77. Croizat interview, 107 (1st–2d quotes), 116–17 (3d–4th quotes).

78. Webb, *JCS and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam*, 145.

79. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:641–42.

80. Victor B. Anthony and Richard R. Sexton, *The War in Northern Laos, 1954–1973* (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1993), 16 (all references are to the redacted, declassified version).

81. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 74.

82. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 175–82; Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 289 (quote).

remain as the French complete their withdrawal” (*see Apr. 23*). Dulles demurred when Diem and his ministers asked for an increase of U.S. aid by as much as \$100 million. The meetings also included discussion of how to deal with the question of the all-Vietnam elections (*see July 16, 26, 1955; July 20, 1956*), with Dulles encouraging Diem to stand on the principle of free and open elections, to which Dulles did not believe the communists would agree.⁸³

As for the increasing autocracy in Diem’s government, Ambassador Reinhardt stated in a later interview that Dulles took “a pretty philosophic view of the question,” saying that “a truly representative government was certainly our objective in the long run, but one shouldn’t be unrealistic in thinking it was something to be achieved in a matter of weeks or days.”⁸⁴

March 21: After a cabinet crisis in Laos toppled the government, Prince Souvanna Phouma emerged as the new prime minister, winning approval from the national assembly on this date. He soon sought to ease tensions with his half-brother, Prince Souphanouvong, one of the leaders of the Pathet Lao. By the end of the year, the government had declared that the Pathet Lao would be treated like one of the country’s political parties. Souvanna Phouma raised Western concerns again mid-year when he accepted an invitation from Zhou Enlai to visit Beijing. Admiral Radford made a stop in Vientiane a few weeks later to reiterate the U.S. commitment to Laos.⁸⁵

April: The Soviets sent a deputy premier to Hanoi to impress on the North Vietnamese government that it needed to show “patience and prudence” in its quest for reunification. Both the Soviets and the Chinese strongly encouraged North Vietnamese leaders during this period to avoid warfare, particularly at a level that might provoke a U.S. response. Ho declared at a meeting of the party central committee during the same month that “we must always raise high the flag of peace, but we must at the same time also raise high our defenses and our vigilance.” He stated his belief that the “American imperialists and their lackeys” in the south “are now preparing for war.”⁸⁶

On the international front, the first fissures of what would become the Sino-Soviet split were emerging in 1956 and would continue to grow for the rest of the decade. More so than most other communist countries, North Vietnam found itself precariously perched between the Chinese, whose aid had bolstered the war effort and postwar development, and the Soviets,

83. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:658–61 (quotes, 658).

84. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 133.

85. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 39, 46–47; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 58–69; Castle, *At War in the Shadows of Vietnam*, 15; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 124–25.

86. Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War*, 33–36 (1st quote, 35); *Victory in Vietnam*, 18 (2d–3d quotes).

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whose ideology Ho and the old guard of the North Vietnamese politburo had more generally followed. As the split deepened, so did fraying of allegiances in the North Vietnamese leadership, as the emerging, more revolutionary figures in the government tended to side with the Chinese.⁸⁷

April 23: The last French commander in chief in Indochina closed his headquarters and departed. The French officially deactivated their high command in Indochina on April 26. The MAAG assumed full responsibility for training the South Vietnamese army, but the French continued training the air force and navy. By the summer, the French had a total force of only about 5,000 men left in Vietnam.⁸⁸

May: The MAAG developed a reorganization plan for the ARVN. Corps areas were numbered one through four, north to south, with I Corps' area of responsibility starting at the 17th parallel and IV Corps in the Mekong delta in the southernmost part of the country. These corps area designations remained throughout the conflict in the 1960s and 1970s. Even though the reorganization took years to implement (*see Nov. 1957; Apr. 1958*), as soon as the ARVN had a significant number of men in the I Corps region, Diem wanted the fledgling units to conduct maneuvers near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that divided Vietnam. Ambassador Reinhardt talked the South Vietnamese leader out of this idea. He pointed out that the North Vietnamese had no organized forces within sixty miles of the DMZ, so the south needed to avoid provoking a buildup in the area. I Corps conducted its exercises south of Da Nang.⁸⁹

June: Through MDAP, the United States provided thirty-two C-47s and twenty-five F-8Fs to the VNAF.⁹⁰

June 1: After much debate, the United States established the Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission (TERM) in Vietnam. The French had refused to support this endeavor, fearing that additional U.S. servicemen beyond the frozen limit for the MAAG of 342 would put the French and South Vietnam in violation of the Geneva agreements (*see Aug. 11, 1954*). The U.S. State Department generally had sided with the French on this issue, but the military was insistent that it was losing control of materiel with the rapid pace of French withdrawal (*see Apr. 23*), and that it could not carry

87. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 41–43; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 98–104.

88. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 254; *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:336–37; Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 40; Eckhardt, *Command and Control*, 12; *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:734.

89. Williams interview, 17–20; Reinhardt interview, 41–42.

90. Second, "Viet Nam Air Force," 61.

out its expanding training mission in Vietnam without more personnel. The Joint Chiefs and the secretary of defense made the argument that the Geneva accords had specified only that there should be no increase in foreign troops, so the U.S. military would just be filling billets of the departing French.

The compromise was 350 TERM personnel plus forty-eight slots for troops in transit or on leave, bringing the overall table of organization to 740. The U.S. Army held 535 of these billets. TERM maintained a command structure quite similar to, but separate from, the MAAG and included an Air Force branch. Although the State Department was adamant that TERM not become primarily training augmentation, by the end of 1957, only seven of the 350 TERM personnel were assigned full time to equipment recovery. TERM troops assumed nearly all the logistical duties from the MAAG and launched an extensive logistical training program. The MAAG absorbed TERM in 1960.⁹¹

Also on June 1, a high-profile organization known as the American Friends of Vietnam held a conference in Washington on “America’s Stake in Vietnam.” When Senator Mansfield had to cancel as the keynote speaker, the committee turned to Sen. John F. Kennedy (D-Mass.). In words that would be widely quoted during his presidency, Kennedy said that “Vietnam represents the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone in the arch, the finger in the dike.” The senator stated that “if we were 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 shape its future.” Kennedy continued the analogy, concluding that “this is our offspring. We cannot abandon it.”⁹²

June 7: At an NSC meeting, Admiral Radford presented the “Broad Outline Plan for U.S. Military Participation in the Event of Viet Minh Aggression in Vietnam.” In 1955, General O’Daniel and the MAAG staff had sketched a prospective ground effort for such a contingency that was similar in scope to the level of U.S. commitment in the Korean War. In keeping

91. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 258–62; Eckhardt, *Command and Control*, 14–18; *U.S. Navy and Vietnam*, 1:333–35; Statler, *Replacing France*, 196–99; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 135–36; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 2, book IV.A.4, sect. 1, 1.1–5.1, sect. 3, 19–20; Durbrow interview, 25–26; Williams interview, 11–14. According to *U.S. Navy and Vietnam* (1:373), the Navy’s allocation of the 740 MAAG/TERM billets was 78. That would mean there were 127 billets left for USAF personnel, but the author has been unable to confirm this figure in USAF sources. Tours with MAAG/TERM were for two years for around forty of the personnel who were allowed to have their families accompany them. For the other 700 or so troops, the tours officially were for one year, although in practice they rarely exceeded eleven months. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 291. Ambassador Reinhardt later questioned “whether the great effort that went into the collecting, sorting, and outshipping of this materiel was worth it,” particularly since it was all “war-weary equipment.” Reinhardt interview, 26–27 (quotes), 30–31.

92. Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man*, 241–42.

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with the Eisenhower administration's "New Look" defense policy that deemphasized large deployments, however, as well as his background as a naval aviator, Radford envisioned intensive USAF and USN support for ARVN operations, with the introduction of only very limited U.S. ground forces. Radford added that "if concentration of Viet Minh troops provide atomic targets, the use of such weapons might end the aggression very rapidly." The NSC approved Radford's general strategic approach. The Army was upset about the reduced role it was assigned, and General Williams and the MAAG pushed back against the plan to such a degree that Radford privately expressed "grave doubts" about whether Williams was the right person for the MAAG command because he was so committed to conventional operations (*see Nov. 15, 1955; June 1, 1957*).⁹³

During discussion of Radford's proposal at the NSC meeting, multiple participants mentioned that Diem had expressed concern that the United States might not intervene on behalf of South Vietnam if there was no Chinese participation and the Viet Minh aggression was "simply a civil war," as Radford described it. Reuben B. Robertson Jr., the acting secretary of defense, said that in his recent meeting with Diem, the South Vietnamese president seemed "very uncertain" about U.S. willingness to intervene. Robertson also reported that Diem had "shown no concern" about the prospect of the United States using nuclear weapons to blunt a communist advance, prompting President Eisenhower to suggest that the U.S. military might send some Nike missiles equipped with atomic warheads to Southeast Asia. At some later date when Diem asked Radford what the United States would do if North Vietnam invaded, the admiral "went into a soft-shoe dance over the beautiful Chinese carpet in [Diem's] office and never came up with a direct answer," according to the MAAG officer who was translating for them.⁹⁴

Ambassador Reinhardt recalled in a later interview that "those of us engaged in the area were pretty convinced that the north would at some

93. *FRUS 1955-57*, 1:692-93, 695-713 (1st quote, 708; 2d quote, 713); Spector, *Advice and Support*, 268-73, 359; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 138-40. Radford's suggestion of the potential use of atomic force was consistent with a finding of the Joint Chiefs in September 1955 that unless nuclear weapons could be used in Vietnam, the United States would have to provide "greater forces than . . . would be justified." "U.S. Policy in the Event of a Renewal of Aggression in Vietnam," September 9, 1955, quoted in Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 57. According to Buzzanco (p. 58), quoting the same document, USAF planners "saw an opportunity to boost their service role and so maintained that successful intervention would depend on the 'swift intervention of U.S. forces' and the use of atomic bombs. Without nuclear weapons, the Air Force believed, Vietnam would be overrun by the Communists 'before sufficient U.S. strength could be brought to bear.'" For USN planning during the same period, see *FRUS 1955-57*, 1:687-91. For an overview of the military's resentment of the "New Look" policy, see Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 75-79. Dulles had already observed in April 1956 that North Vietnam did not have enough important targets to make massive retaliation a significant threat. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 160.

94. *FRUS 1955-57*, 1:695-703 (1st quote, 698; 2d-3d quotes, 699); Croizat interview, 112 (4th quote).



Adm. Arthur Radford served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 1953 through 1957. The plan he presented in June 1956 for the defense of South Vietnam relied heavily on USAF and USN aerial support for the ARVN. *USN*.

future time resume its efforts to take over the south,” but the “exact nature and methodology they would employ perhaps was not too clear.” Reinhardt said he prepared a report at some point in 1956 in which he predicted that “it would probably take the North Vietnamese about five years to build up their local cadres in the south, train the young men that they had evacuated with their forces at the time of the Geneva armistice, and recommence a campaign against the southern government” (*see Dec. 1959*). He also believed that it would be in the communists’ interests to “wait until such time as a certain amount of opposition had developed against the government in the south.” According to Reinhardt, U.S.-ARVN intelligence in 1955–56 indicated that communist resistance in the south was not particularly organized at that time.⁹⁵

As for the potential use of nuclear weapons, Williams said he did not believe the United States would use them in Vietnam because they had not been used in support of U.S. operations in Korea. When the Pentagon had

95. Reinhardt interview, 36–37 (quotes), 38–42.

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the MAAG submit a list of potential bombing targets in North Vietnam, it did so with the notation that all sites indicated could be destroyed with conventional ordnance. “Sometime later,” according to Williams, “a senior Air Force officer from Washington” brought up this subject at MAAG headquarters and “stated that as long as he had anything to do with the United States Air Force, no plane would go into North Vietnam to bomb unless it carried atomic bombs.” Williams replied that in his opinion, “it would not be necessary to use atomic bombs in North Vietnam, and it would not be done as long as conventional bombs could do the job.”⁹⁶

June 8: SSgt. Edward C. Clarke, USAF, shot and killed TSgt. Richard B. Fitzgibbon Jr., USAF, in Saigon. The men served together as flight crewmen assigned to the MAAG. Reportedly, Fitzgibbon had reprimanded Clarke for an incident on a flight that day. Clarke fled the shooting scene and exchanged fire with Vietnamese policemen who were chasing him. During the pursuit, Clarke jumped or fell to his death from a second-story balcony. In 1998, the Defense Department recognized Fitzgibbon as the first U.S. service member killed “in the line of duty” in Vietnam and added his name to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. His son, LCpl. Richard B. Fitzgibbon III, USMC, died in action in Vietnam in 1965. Clarke’s name does not appear on the wall.⁹⁷

June 21: In conversation with the Soviet ambassador to North Vietnam, Ho conceded that his government had not anticipated that “the French would kneel to the Americans so early.” He said that the “situation has become more complicated” and would require an “intensification of the struggle for the unification of the country.” Ho told the ambassador that North Vietnam would be increasing its support for the communist underground movement in South Vietnam.⁹⁸

At a press conference on the same date, Secretary Dulles said that “we aren’t worried anymore, as we did so critically about Indochina.” He declared Vietnam “salvaged from almost, what many people thought was certain disaster,” stating that the United States was undertaking the “building up of a bulwark there so that the defeat of the French in Dien Bien Phu did not open the gates so that the whole flood of communism poured through into the Pacific.”⁹⁹

96. Williams interview, 9–10.

97. “U.S. Reveals Identity of Men Killed in Saigon Dispute,” *New York Times*, June 21, 1956; U.S. Department of Defense, “Name of Technical Sergeant Richard B. Fitzgibbon to be Added to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” November 6, 1998.

98. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 84.

99. Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu* (New York: Norton, 1988), 341.



TSgt. Richard B. Fitzgibbon Jr. became the first member of the USAF to die in Vietnam when he was killed by another airman on June 8, 1956. The Defense Department recognizes Fitzgibbon as the first American to die “in the line of duty” in Vietnam. USAF.

Mid-1956: Contractors completed a U.S.-aid-built 7,200-foot runway at Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon and began work on a 10,000-foot concrete one. Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa, seventeen miles to the northeast, became the main airfields for the VNAF. The VNAF based its 1st Fighter Squadron and its air depot at Bien Hoa. The United States also funded a highway between Bien Hoa and Saigon built to withstand heavy military traffic. This road cost more than what the United States contributed to South Vietnam for community development and social welfare combined across the years 1954 to 1961.¹⁰⁰

July 1: The USAF consolidated Far East Air Forces and Pacific Air Force as Pacific Air Forces (PACAF), based in Hawaii (technically PACAF/FEAF [Rear]). In reorganization approved in early 1957, the Defense Department made PACAF directly responsible to the Joint Chiefs, with the

100. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 52; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 134–35.



Tan Son Nhut airport, on the outskirts of Saigon, pictured in 1962 with the runways the United States expanded and built in the 1950s. The VNAF moved its headquarters there in 1956. Tan Son Nhut continued to serve as South Vietnam's principal international airport while also growing into a major military air base in the 1960s. USAF.

Navy as executive agent, with PACAF under the commander in chief, U.S. Pacific Command (CINCPAC).¹⁰¹

In the same month, President Eisenhower, the NSC, and the Joint Chiefs directed Adm. Felix B. Stump, the CINCPAC, to prepare a contingency plan to defend South Vietnam against an external attack.¹⁰²

July 20: The date set by the Geneva accords for unification elections in Vietnam passed (*see July 21–22, 1954; July 16, 26, 1955*). The North Vietnamese had continued to press for consultations to prepare for elections, but with only lukewarm support for their position by the Soviets and the Chinese, they had little leverage. The Soviets gave what amounted to formal recognition of the permanence of the division in January 1957 when they recommended UN membership for both North and South Vietnam. North Vietnam continued to send messages to Diem through 1960 that called for the consultations to be held.¹⁰³

General Williams traveled to Hue just before this date in case the North Vietnamese made a cross-border advance in retaliation for the elections not being held. What he could have organized in response was unclear since the ARVN had only light divisions in the I Corps region that Williams described as “nothing but groups of riflemen” (*see May*).¹⁰⁴

101. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 43–44.

102. *Ibid.*, 43.

103. Statler, *Replacing France*, 170–81; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 81–86; Williams, “Peaceful Unification Denied,” 52–60.

104. Williams interview, 73.

August: In the wake of rebellions in the northern countryside, Ho publicly acknowledged that “errors have been committed” in the draconian implementation of the North Vietnamese land reform program (*see Dec. 1953; Apr. 1955*) and vowed resolution to the problems. The resulting leadership shakeup enabled the rise of more radical figures like Le Duan and Le Duc Tho. Colonel Lansdale maintained that the popularity of the North Vietnamese government had waned so much because of the land reform problems that the communists might not have been able to win the unification elections had they been held, despite a North Vietnamese population advantage of around two million. Diem’s repression of opposition groups in the south had also damaged his reputation, so neither leader could count on unqualified support.¹⁰⁵

Also in mid-1956, Le Duan wrote a manifesto titled “The Path to Revolution in the South.” By the end of the decade, he had risen to a leadership level that allowed him to begin implementing his plans.¹⁰⁶

August 30: With the apparent permanence of the division in Vietnam as the election deadline passed (*see July 20*), the NSC approved NSC-5612/1, “U.S. Policy in Mainland Southeast Asia,” which was dated and implemented on September 5. The document emphasized that the United States was “the only major outside source of power to counteract the Russian-Chinese Communist thrust into Southeast Asia.” It concluded that “for the foreseeable future, local will to resist aggression will depend on a conviction in Southeast Asia that the United States will continue its support and will maintain striking forces adequate to counter aggression.” For “Free Viet Nam,” the focus would be to “build up indigenous armed forces, including independent logistical and administrative services, which will be capable of assuring internal security and of providing limited initial resistance to attack by the Viet Minh.” The stated dual mission of defending against invasion as well as against indigenous threats effectively doubled the training responsibilities of the MAAG.¹⁰⁷

October 26: MAAG-Vietnam ceased oversight of the air force and naval advisory efforts in Cambodia and Laos, with the MAAG in Cambodia and the PEO in Laos assuming the respective responsibilities.¹⁰⁸

105. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 633–34 (quote); Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 34–35; Chapman, 177–89; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 345–47; *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:775–76.

106. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 33.

107. *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 10:1082–95 (1st quote, 1084; 2d quote, 1085; 3d quote, 1093); Whitlow, “U.S. Military in South Vietnam,” 41. For the increasing U.S. focus on military resources to support and sustain the South Vietnamese government, see Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 133–34.

108. Eckhardt, *Command and Control*, 13.



Vice President Nixon presenting Col. Edward Lansdale a medal in January 1957 for Lansdale's service in Vietnam while Lansdale's wife, Helen, watches in the background. *National Archives*.

On the same date, the new constitution went into effect in South Vietnam, and the constituent assembly that had adopted it became the country's first national assembly (*see Mar. 4*).¹⁰⁹

November 6: Eisenhower (R) was reelected president over Adlai E. Stevenson II (D) in a rematch of the 1952 canvass.

November 18–22: Chinese premier Zhou Enlai visited Hanoi and met with the North Vietnamese leadership.¹¹⁰

December: Diem requested that Colonel Lansdale remain in Vietnam for two more years, but the USAF refused, reassigning him to the Pentagon. Lansdale vacationed with Diem before his departure. The two had grown apart since later 1955 due to Diem's increasing intransigence, particularly concerning the repressive practices of the Can Lao, the political/intelligence organization Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, had created. Lansdale had requested but had not received CIA and State Department

109. Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 94.

110. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 79.

assistance in pressuring Diem to make his government more inclusive and open, leading him to later remark that “I cannot truly sympathize with Americans who help promote a fascistic state and then get angry when it doesn’t act like a democracy.” For his efforts in Vietnam during this period, the Department of Defense honored Lansdale with the Distinguished Service Medal. Lansdale remained on staff duties with the USAF at the Pentagon until he retired in 1963 as a major general. He reengaged on the Vietnam situation in 1960–61 when the incoming Kennedy administration made a significant commitment to counterinsurgency. Lansdale returned to Vietnam in a civilian capacity in 1965.¹¹¹

Rufus Phillips, who was part of Lansdale’s military station in Saigon, observed that “no one on the American side in a leadership role,” from the MAAG, the embassy, or the regular CIA station, “enjoyed either the confidence and trust of the Vietnamese (and thus the influence with them) that Lansdale possessed or had any depth of understanding of the basic political and security challenges the Vietnamese still faced. A chasm would begin to develop between the Americans and the Vietnamese [after Lansdale’s departure], which would become critical in what would follow.”¹¹²

111. Currey, *Lansdale*, 182–87 (quote, 182); Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 294–301. For Lansdale’s frustration with CIA involvement in the creation and support of the Can Lao, see Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 83, 88–89; Miller, *Misalliance*, 81, 83.

112. Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 93. Phillips did note (p. 328 n. 9) that “General Williams was something of an exception in that he had Diem’s full confidence but unfortunately was charged with converting the Vietnamese army into regular divisions to oppose an overt North Vietnamese invasion across the seventeenth parallel, ignoring the more likely alternative of renewed guerrilla warfare.”



President Dwight D. Eisenhower shakes hands with President Ngo Dinh Diem upon Diem's arrival at National Airport in Washington on May 8, 1957. Eisenhower's personal aircraft, the USAF VC-121E known as the *Columbine III*, carried Diem on this leg of his trip, his first visit to the United States as leader of South Vietnam. USAF.

U.S. Training, Seeds of Revolt 1957–1959

In mid-1957, the USAF and USN finally took control from the French of training their sister South Vietnamese services, both with extremely small forces that the U.S. Army-dominated MAAG saw as ancillary to the South Vietnamese army. The USAF transferred to the Vietnamese many of the more antiquated aircraft that had been on loan to the French.

Although this period was technically one of peace between the wars in Indochina, shifts across Southeast Asia portended more conflict. In North Vietnam, radicals who favored revolution to reunite the country gradually gained more influence in the politburo; in the south, with tacit support from Hanoi, communist cadres and eventually militias began forming to oppose the Ngo Dinh Diem government. Diem responded harshly, driving more of the groups that disagreed with him into the communist camp. Meanwhile in Laos, the communist Pathet Lao, with increasing backing from North Vietnam, built its following and began limited military action against the government. The USAF flew aid missions in Laos in 1958, and U.S. Special Forces arrived a year later. They had been in Vietnam since 1957.

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February 22: A would-be assassin, who was a member of the communist Vietnam Workers' Party, shot at but missed President Ngo Dinh Diem after he spoke at an agricultural fair in Ban Me Thuot in the Central Highlands. The attack had been planned in the south without Hanoi's approval.¹

1. Miller, *Misalliance*, 185.

April 29: The new U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam, Elbridge Durbrow, cabled his assessment of Diem and his government in advance of Diem's trip to the United States (*see May 5–19*). Durbrow began by writing that Diem was the “undisputed leader of [the] country.” He noted that Diem was “obviously respected” but “does not enjoy nationwide popularity.” The South Vietnamese president had “become more intolerant of dissenting opinions” and relied “heavily on [a] small circle of advisers, including members of his family.” According to Durbrow, “Diem’s rigidity in pursuing goals and brooking no opposition has alienated many able persons.”²

Durbrow stated in a 1970 interview that he was “a great admirer of Diem . . . except for one thing: he just could not delegate authority.” Durbrow pushed Diem hard to make reforms in his government and at times antagonized the South Vietnamese leader in the process. CIA official Chester Cooper wrote of Durbrow that “although his blunt and insistent style was what the situation probably required, Diem and his brother [Ngo Dinh Nhu] found it offensive.” So did Lt. Gen. Samuel Williams, the MAAG commander, who had developed a close relationship with Diem and thought that a good working relationship with the South Vietnamese president was the best avenue by which to encourage reforms. Williams believed that Durbrow “became more and more anti-government of Vietnam” as he remained in the post in Saigon into 1961. The general accused Durbrow of conducting a “one man campaign to smear Diem.” Col. Edward Lansdale described it as “a very nasty, emotional conflict” between Durbrow and Diem, one that “caused the Vietnamese government to not pay attention to American advice.” Relations between Durbrow and Williams were not much better, with Durbrow recalling that they “fought like dogs.” Each came to see the other as a significant impediment to the U.S. mission in Vietnam.³

In the same April 29 telegram, in a section devoted to the military, Durbrow noted the “steadily improving Vietnamese military posture” but listed several areas of ongoing concern. Overall with the ARVN, Durbrow stated that the “low education level, lack of command and planning

2. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:787–88.

3. Durbrow interview, 3 (7th quote), 18 (1st quote), 103, 110; Cooper, *Lost Crusade*, 175 (2d quote); Williams interview, 45–49 (3d quote, 48); Michael R. Adamson, “Ambassadorial Roles and Foreign Policy: Elbridge Durbrow, Frederick Nolting, and the U.S. Commitment to Diem’s Vietnam, 1957–61,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 32 (June 2002): 233–38 (4th quote, 236); Lansdale interview (1969), 8, 78 (5th–6th quotes); Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 185–90; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 101. Lansdale (p. 78) added that the MAAG was “very partisan toward Diem, and our military leaders were close friends of his.” The officer who translated for Williams when he met with Diem recalled that “we would be at the [presidential] palace at least once or twice a week.” Croizat interview, 104. Durbrow said that when he arrived in Saigon, Ambassador Reinhardt, who was a lifelong friend, told him that he should try to get Williams replaced, although he said it would be difficult because Williams had Diem’s confidence. Durbrow interview, 103.



President Ngo Dinh Diem and President Dwight Eisenhower salute during ceremonies upon Diem's arrival in Washington on May 8, 1957. Behind them are an unidentified ARVN officer, Gen. Nathan Twining, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and Col. William G. Draper, USAF, Eisenhower's pilot and aide. *National Archives.*

experience, paucity of technical know-how, and long acceptance of low standards cannot be quickly overcome" (see *Jan. 26, 1956*). The military suffered from "deficiencies in administration, ill-drawn command lines, and inadequate documentation." Durbrow indicated that the "expected early departure [of] French air and naval training missions will add to [the] MAAG burden and require [a] limited increase in personnel" (see *June 1*). Specific to the VNAF, the ambassador said there were no replacements programmed for the F-8s and L-19s that the USAF had scheduled for retirement in 1958 and 1959, respectively. He wrote that requirements to improve airfields were "only partially met" by the U.S. Operations Mission (USOM) budgets for fiscal 1958 and 1959.⁴

May 2: Diem instituted a draft, with conscription beginning on August 1. The new law required compulsory twelve-month military service for males ages twenty and twenty-one. The South Vietnamese government extended the period of service to eighteen months in 1959.⁵

May 5–19: Diem visited the United States, transported for at least part of the trip by the USAF on the *Columbine III*, the VC-121E that was

4. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:790–91.

5. Webb, *JCS and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam*, 146–47.



President Eisenhower, President Diem, and Secretary Dulles meeting at the White House during Diem's visit to Washington. The South Vietnamese leader found that while the Americans appreciated what he had been able to achieve in developing a viable government, their attention seemed to have shifted from his country to other areas of the world. *National Archives.*

President Dwight Eisenhower's private aircraft. After stops in Honolulu and San Francisco, Diem arrived in Washington on May 8, where Eisenhower greeted him at National Airport. The South Vietnamese president spent four days in the capital, involved in ceremonial functions and in meetings with senior leaders from across the government (*see June 1*). He also addressed a joint session of Congress. Diem found that while Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles were pleased with the progress he had made, they were reluctant to increase financial and military aid and seemed to have turned their attention to other areas of the world. According to historian Jessica Chapman, Diem returned to Vietnam "deeply concerned that Washington's perception of him as a miracle worker had made it complacent about the very real challenges that his government still faced."⁶

6. *FRUS 1955-57*, 1:792-817, 820-23; Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man*, 217-18, 254-62; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 160-64; Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 183 (quote). Sen. John F. Kennedy met Diem during one of the functions arranged for Diem in Washington, a luncheon hosted by Supreme Court justice William O. Douglas. *FRUS 1961-63*, 1:172. Assistant Secretary of State Walter S. Robertson recalled that at one of the meetings with senior leaders, Diem talked and talked and then got up and left, prompting Dulles to comment, "Wouldn't you think that here in Washington, he might be interested in what our secretary of state had to say?" Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam*, 341.

June 1: The United States assumed full responsibility for training and equipping the South Vietnamese air force and navy as the French withdrew their training missions to those services, which they had been threatening to do for a year. At this time, the VNAF had eighty-five aircraft and four squadrons: one of F-8Fs, one of C-47s, and two of L-19s. No squadron was combat-ready. Total VNAF personnel numbered just over 4,000.⁷

The MAAG Air Force section had challenging tasks with limited personnel and few residual maintenance facilities and supplies. From the USAF viewpoint, the French had always been substandard in their approach to maintenance, and they had given inadequate training to the Vietnamese in this field. As for officers and pilots, French officers had commanded the Vietnamese air units during the war and had done little to develop the Vietnamese officer corps since its conclusion (*see Jan. 1955; Jan. 26, 1956*). Some of the VNAF pilot training in the later 1950s took place in the United States due to the limited number of trainers allowed in Vietnam by the Geneva-restricted MAAG billets. By this point, Diem was refusing to let officers of any branch of service be trained in France. The main training facilities in Vietnam were at Nha Trang, Bien Hoa, and Tan Son Nhut.⁸

Another constraint on the MAAG Air Force section was that the U.S. Army officers in charge of the MAAG supervised its training mission. This structure meant that the USAF had to develop the VNAF to support the ARVN in the manner that the U.S. Army saw fit, not according to USAF requirements. As one USAF officer observed, “it was all Army from A to Z, and the Air Force had absolutely very little say-so” (*see Nov.–Dec. 1955*). Nearly all the training was geared toward counter-invasion operations, not counterinsurgency. The same officer stated that “they built that Vietnamese army like they were going to fight on the plains of Europe, and you see what it got them.” “Air was not even in the picture,” according to Ambassador Durbrow. Some scholars have argued that this approach was an institutional decision, driven by Diem and the U.S. State

7. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 50; *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:792; Jacob Van Staaveren, “USAF Plans and Policies in South Vietnam, 1961–1963” (USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, June 1965), AFHRA, reel 38059, beginning frame 788, p. 4; Webb, *JCS and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam*, 145.

8. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 50; Statler, *Replacing France*, 193–94; Webb, *JCS and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam*, 148; Miller interview, 6, 18–35; *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, v. 2, book IV.A.4, sect. 1, 1.1–5.1, sect. 3, 1–6, 14, 25, 30; *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:810–11; Whitlow, “U.S. Military in South Vietnam,” 85–87. According to Whitlow, 3,296 Vietnamese servicemen, most of them officers, had been trained in the United States by 1960, with 747 trained in other countries. Ambassador Reinhardt noted that Vietnamese pilots began going to the United States for training “well before the end of ’56.” Reinhardt interview, 25. According to General Williams, the VNAF had “well over 900” officers who had been trained in France. Williams also mentioned that French trainers had questioned the loyalty of the VNAF officers who were natives of northern Vietnam. Williams interview, 30 (quote), 92. Colonel Lansdale observed during his time in Vietnam that VNAF lieutenants just back from training in France “were very eager for association with U.S. Air Force people. . . . I don’t know whether they were treated as second-rate citizens in France, but something apparently had gone on emotionally between the Vietnamese and their French trainers.” Lansdale interview (1969), 4.

Department as much as by Army leadership of the MAAG, although Ambassadors Reinhardt and Durbrow both thought General Williams was much too focused on conventional operations (*see Nov. 15, 1955*).⁹

According to Gen. Maxwell Taylor, who was then the Army chief of staff, the Joint Chiefs “viewed Vietnam always within the context of the defense of Southeast Asia” during this period. Their main concern was a large-scale advance that included the Chinese, as the United States had faced in Korea. The service chiefs “wanted the [South] Vietnamese forces to be able to participate in the defense of Southeast Asia against a heavy conventional attack from the north.” As military theorist Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr. put it, however, “The problem was that North Vietnam had no intention of conducting an overt invasion or of waging war according to the preferences of the American generals.” He added that “while the men running MAAG were not incompetent, the conflict environment of insurgency warfare was alien to them.”¹⁰

Williams stated that during his tenure, the role of the VNAF “was basically to support the ground forces.” How the small, ill-equipped air force was supposed to provide the large-scale air transport and air cover necessary for the large-unit ground operations for which the ARVN was preparing was unclear. The VNAF was part of the ARVN, not a separate

9. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 273–74, 378; Miller, *Misalliance*, 191; Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars*, 337–38; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 670–71; Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 60–62, 67, 69–71; Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 19–26; Toland interview, 41 (1st–2d quotes); Durbrow interview, 6–11 (3d quote, 8); Miller interview, 18–35; Taylor interview, 13–14; Croizat interview, 94–97, 121–29; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 84–85, 87–88; Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 136–38. General Williams seemed to have had at least some understanding of the need for developing counterinsurgency forces, but according to Miller in *Misalliance* (p. 191), Williams expected these to be the purview of Vietnamese paramilitary forces, leaving the South Vietnamese army to concentrate on conventional-force external threats. Buzzanco (p. 62) noted that Williams did not want counterinsurgency units in the ARVN. Lansdale also believed that Williams’s focus was on “a conventional type of aggression from the north.” Lansdale interview (1969), 56, 58 (quote). For Williams’s own outline of how to deal with guerrillas as of the end of 1955, and why he believed guerrilla activities might be a diversion in advance of a conventional invasion, see *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:606–10; for Williams’s defense of his approach and methods, see Williams interview. For the USAF’s lingering frustration with the MAAG’s “classic ground-force thinking,” see Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 54 (quote), and Miller and Toland interviews. Ambassador Reinhardt also questioned the MAAG’s intentions, stating in 1970 that during his time in Saigon, “I became increasingly concerned myself that our military policy seemed to be designed to create in South Vietnam a rather classic type of military establishment, I might say one, if you will, designed to fight World War II. I felt that the circumstances of the environment and the probable nature of a renewed communist aggression in that country probably called for a different type of military establishment. But I must be frank to say that my convictions were not strong enough to have had any visible effect on the policy at that time.” Reinhardt did note that he arranged through the British ambassador for British staff officers from Malaya to come speak to the MAAG about their counter-guerrilla experience. Reinhardt interview, 15–16 (quotes), 25–26.

10. Taylor interview, 13 (1st–2d quotes); Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam*, 26 (3d–4th quotes). William E. Colby, who deployed to Vietnam with the CIA in 1959, later stated that the U.S. military in Vietnam during this period “clearly thought in terms of Korea. And consequently, our whole military assistance program was basically aimed at strengthening the South Vietnamese army to meet an army attack.” Charlton and Moncrieff, *Many Reasons Why*, 53. See also Croizat interview, 94–97.

service, and Williams recalled that the ARVN senior officers “didn’t seem to have too much confidence in the Vietnamese Air Force and, probably through ignorance, paid little attention to their training and equipment.” Williams did come to believe that the VNAF should have been involved in the later 1950s in operations against guerrilla forces, for target search and “close-in support” of ground units, but VNAF pilots were not trained for these types of missions and likely did not have the necessary communications equipment to support them.¹¹

Diem gave his reasons for deemphasizing the VNAF during his May 1957 visit to Washington (*see May 5–19*). “In Diem’s opinion,” the memorandum of his conversation with President Eisenhower and Secretary Dulles noted, “his main military requirement is ground forces. Diem is convinced that because of the poor visibility of low cloud cover prevailing through most of the year, it would be difficult if not impossible to give adequate air support to the ground forces.” He did observe that “naval and air support would help to diminish enemy potential and permit naval landings in the North in a drive toward Hanoi,” but he added that “most of the military operations”—which he outlined completely in conventional terms—“would have to be done by ground troops.” During a briefing at the Pentagon for a group of leaders that included Gen. Nathan Twining, the USAF chief of staff, Diem explained that the South Vietnamese believed that the Indochina war had shown that “it was difficult to use air [power] effectively in this country.”¹²

June 24: U.S. Special Forces activated 1st Special Forces Group, which deployed a sixteen-man mobile training team to Vietnam. The squad, which was attached to the MAAG, was the first Special Forces unit in Vietnam, where it trained groups of ARVN troops in irregular warfare. The

11. Williams interview, 5–6 (1st–2d quotes), 30 (3d quote), 94–95. Williams added (pp. 23–24) that “I considered it a waste of good and precious time for an Air Force advisor in Vietnam in the time period of 1955 to 1960 to concentrate on teaching individual aerial combat. I could not foresee the small Vietnamese Air Force, with their old F–8Fs, engaging in a great air battle over Vietnam with North Vietnamese or Chinese flyers in Russian MiGs. On the other hand, there was a crying need for advisors to advise in maintenance, navigation, low-level bombing, aerial observation, close support of ground troops, and other such basic subjects.” Williams (pp. 37–39) quoted a memorandum he issued to the MAAG Air Force section concerning for what purposes he wanted the VNAF 1st Fighter Squadron trained in its F–8Fs.

12. *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:796 (1st quote), 798 (2d quote), 809 (3d quote). Colonel Lansdale recounted that Diem’s “notion was of an air force that would support the ground forces. But I recall remarks of his—he was laughing about it—that the air force had ideas of their own. I imagine they wanted their own separate role in things.” Lansdale interview (1969), 5. As for fundamental difficulties with aerial operations, Lieutenant Colonel Croizat used the example of when Ambassador Reinhardt and General Williams “went hunting using Bao Dai’s elephants out of Ban Me Thout. There were thirteen or fourteen elephants involved. We knew where they were, how long they were to be operating, what they were embarked on, and they also had smoke grenades. We went up there looking for them in light observation aircraft to establish liaison, but we never found them, even though no one was shooting at us. No, it is not easy country.” Croizat interview, 124.



U.S. Special Forces training South Vietnamese troops on the obstacle course at the commando school at Nha Trang. *U.S. Army.*

unit's first commander, Capt. Harry G. Cramer Jr., died during a training accident on October 21, which the Army lists as its first Vietnam casualty.¹³

July 1: Gen. Thomas White succeeded General Twining as USAF chief of staff, with Twining appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Mid-1957: With U.S. approval, the ARVN began reorganizing into seven 10,500-man divisions. The United States rejected Diem's request to increase the force level. In the same period, Diem sought U.S. funds to militarize the 52,000-man Civil Guard but was turned down.¹⁴

The South Vietnamese also had roughly 50,000 troops in the Self-Defense Corps, which were essentially militia units in rural areas. "Impressive in size only," wrote historian Ronald Spector, "these forces generally were poorly equipped, ill-trained, and poorly disciplined." A review of the Self-Defense Corps in October 1957 concluded that the capability of these troops "to withstand assaults by armed and organized Viet-Cong units is virtually nil." General Williams said later that the insurgents' success "whipping those paramilitary forces" of the Self-

13. Francis J. Kelly, *U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961–1971* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1973), 4, http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/090/90-23-1/CMH_Pub_90-23-1.pdf; Roger Jones, "Army Marks 50 Years Since First Vietnam Casualty," October 27, 2007, <https://www.army.mil/article/5692/army-marks-50-years-since-first-vietnam-casualty>.

14. Whitlow, "U.S. Military in South Vietnam," 75–80.

Defense Corps and the Civil Guard “gave them encouragement and also made the populace think that the Government of Vietnam was helpless.”¹⁵

In the same mid-1957 time frame, with sanction from the North Vietnamese central committee to eliminate “traitors,” southern communists began a campaign against local South Vietnamese officials, most of them village chiefs. By the end of the year, more than 400 had been killed or kidnapped. The Diem government labeled these incidents as last-ditch efforts by Viet Minh remnants; in actuality, they were the first semi-coordinated, wider-spread acts of violence of a new conflict.¹⁶

By this point, Diem had begun referring to communists in the south as “Viet Cong,” a derisive contraction of “Vietnam communist.” He did not limit the terminology to actual party supporters, however, as he tended to lump all opposition groups, including the sects, in with the communists. As Jessica Chapman observed, this labeling “isolated discontented politico-religious figures and other anti-Diem nationalists and encouraged them to collaborate with communists in the coming years. Indeed, by excluding them from the political process and targeting them as enemies of the state,” Diem “left them with little choice.”¹⁷

August: As an experiment, the North Vietnamese government introduced compulsory military service in one province. It extended the requirement to the whole country by the end of the year.¹⁸

October: Revolutionaries allied with the North Vietnamese government began to form armed units in South Vietnam, with thirty-seven created by the end of the year. By mid-1958, these men were engaging in limited

15. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 320–21 (1st–3d quotes); Williams interview, 79 (4th–5th quotes). Although the Self-Defense Corps and the Civil Guard showed a collective force strength of around 100,000 on paper, historian David Anderson observed that their actual composition “was almost unknowable because they were so poorly organized and lacking in arms.” Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 134. Williams (p. 51) claimed that he “attempted repeatedly to get the Civil Guard under MAAG supervision,” but Ambassador Durbrow remembered the situation quite differently, stating that Williams “would have nothing to do with” training the Civil Guard. Durbrow interview, 100–101. Williams wrote Durbrow in December 1957 that he did not want military units “diverted” to the “police-type task” of countering insurgents, “depriving them of the opportunity of continuing orthodox military training.” Spector, *Advice and Support*, 320.

16. Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War*, 47 (quote); Whitlow, “U.S. Military in South Vietnam,” 88–89; Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 184–85. After a visit to Vietnam in 1958, Bernard Fall observed that the “incidents in South Viet-Nam during 1957 and 1958 no longer represent a last-ditch fight of dispersed sect or communist remnants.” Fall, “South Viet-Nam’s Internal Problems,” *Pacific Affairs* 31 (September 1958): 257. Diem was telling a different story, informing U.S. visitors in December 1957 that “terrorism that the communists are now waging is essentially directed against the Army’s training program. . . . They want to get the Army dispersed on security missions to prevent training.” General Williams believed the same thing. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 320.

17. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 175 (quote), 182–89; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 101–2, 330 n. 2.

18. Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War*, 47.

1957

actions against the South Vietnamese military. Historians disagree over whether Hanoi sanctioned these skirmishes.¹⁹

October 1: Ambassador Durbrow met with Diem and informed him that Congress probably was going to cut assistance to South Vietnam by 20 percent for fiscal year 1958 as part of an overall restructuring of international aid programs. Diem adamantly insisted that his military budget could not be reduced, adding that he needed additional U.S. money to expand the Self-Defense Corps (*see Mid-1957*). Durbrow attempted to steer the conversation to economic development, but Diem remained focused on the military, leading Durbrow to wonder in a cable to Washington whether the ARVN was South Vietnam's only real development program.²⁰

November: A new coalition in Laos brought the two Pathet Lao-controlled provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua formally back under government auspices and Prince Souphanouvong and a fellow Pathet Lao leader into prominent leadership positions, much to U.S. concern.²¹

In the same month, I Corps of the newly reorganized ARVN, based at Da Nang, became operational.²²

Also in November, at a conference at PACAF headquarters in Hawaii, Lt. Col. Harold G. McNeese, the air attaché in Saigon, said that the MAAG believed that North Vietnam could overrun South Vietnam “within thirty days” if the south received no reinforcements. McNeese conceded, however, that intelligence gathering about North Vietnam was “very slight,” with few good sources of information. From what little the Americans in Saigon could learn, they thought that economic conditions in the north were “bad.” McNeese described Diem as a “strong man” and the key to both the strengths and the weaknesses of South Vietnam. He also said that relations between South Vietnam and Cambodia were “bad and have worsened in the past six to eight months.” The embassy saw Cambodia as “one-hundred percent neutral” because it had accepted aid from both the “Soviet orbit” and the “Free World.” As for Laos, it was “divided into two entities—the Kingdom of Laos and the northern area controlled by the Communist-led Pathet Lao.”²³

19. *Ibid.*, 47; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 32–34.

20. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 164–65, 168; *FRUS 1955–57*, 1:845.

21. Castle, *At War in the Shadows of Vietnam*, 15; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 70–73; Gaiduk, *Confronting Communism*, 127–28.

22. Whitlow, “U.S. Military in South Vietnam,” 82.

23. Lt. Col. Harold G. McNeese, “Viet Nam, Cambodia, and Laos,” Final Report, Air Attache-MAAG Conference, November 4–8, 1957, AFHRA, reel K7241, frame 1436. According to Ambassador Durbrow, the military attachés attached to the embassy had much better intelligence sources than the MAAG did. General Williams would say “we’re not in the intelligence business,” leaving the MAAG almost entirely dependent on the ARVN for information. Durbrow interview, 105–6. See also Williams interview, 75–76.



President Ngo Dinh Diem boarding a C-47 at Bien Hoa airfield in 1958. *USAF*.

1958

January 1: VNAF force strength was 4,025, of whom 136 were pilots. The total South Vietnamese military had 140,238 men.²⁴

January 13–15: Prince Souvanna Phouma, prime minister of Laos, visited Washington and met with senior U.S. officials, including a largely ceremonial event with President Eisenhower. Secretary Dulles pressed the prince about why he had included Pathet Lao representatives in his government (see *Mar. 21, 1956; Nov. 1957*). In reply, Souvanna downplayed the Pathet Lao's association with communism.²⁵

According to Ambassador Durbrow, who had visited with Souvanna Phouma in December 1957, the Laotian leader had said at that time of Prince Souphanouvong that “‘he’s not a communist. Of course there are some communists in the Pathet Lao, but my half-brother is not a communist at all. He’s just a Lao.’” Durbrow said in 1970 that Souvanna Phouma “‘was just set on not believing the facts of life, [and] he damn near lost his country in the process.’”²⁶

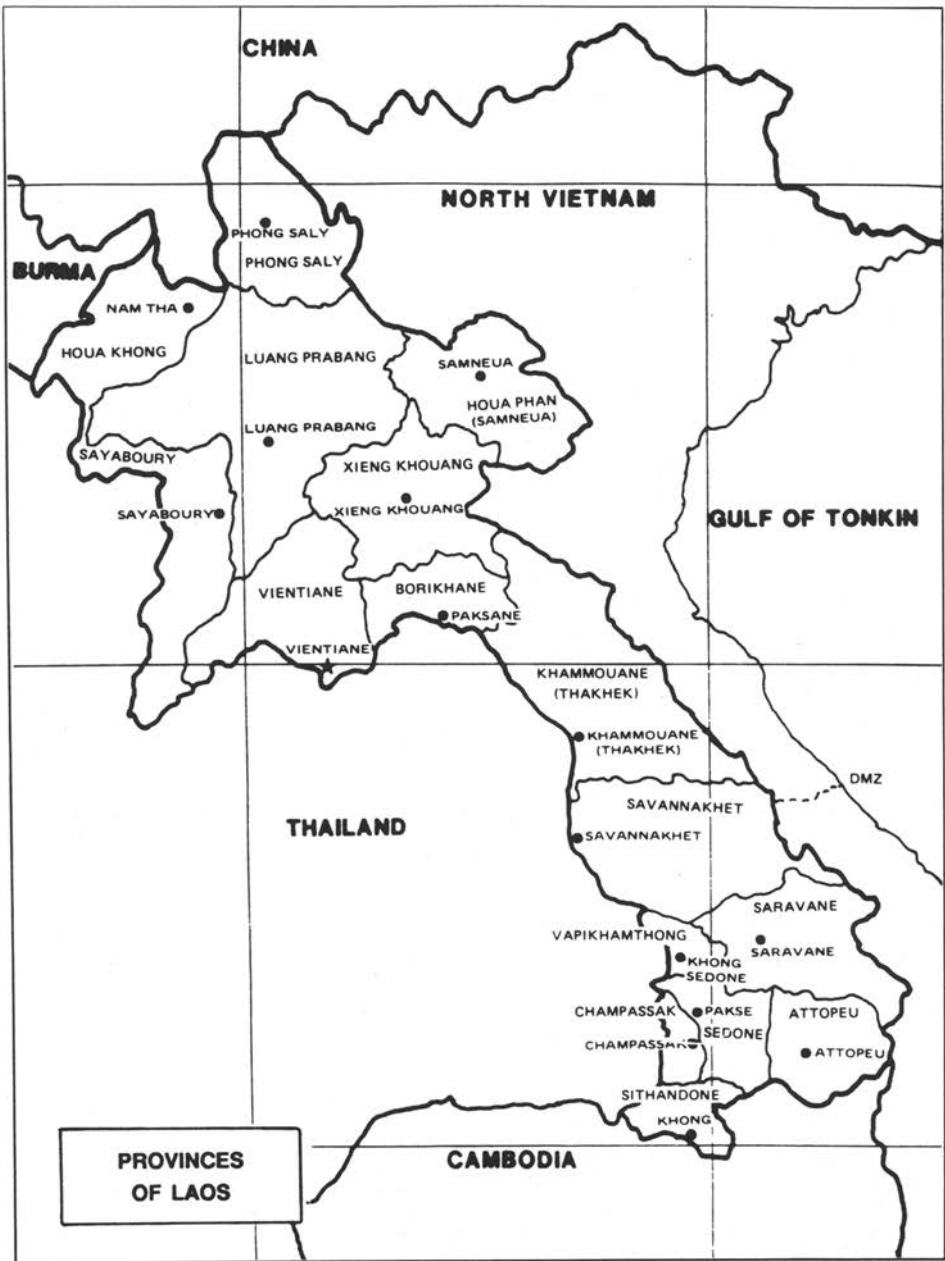
February: Ho Chi Minh publicly reiterated North Vietnamese interest in talks with the South Vietnamese government to discuss reunification elections.²⁷

24. Webb, *JCS and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam*, 145.

25. *FRUS 1958–60*, 16:411–23; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 73–77.

26. Durbrow interview, 96–97.

27. Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 47.



March 31–April 27: The State Department and the CIA conceived a plan that became known as Operation Booster Shot to support anticommunist parties in the approaching Laotian national assembly elections in May. The premise was to increase rural backing for anticommunist candidates

by providing aid to isolated areas, airlifted and airdropped by USAF and CAT cargo aircraft and distributed by small teams of CIA operatives. Beginning on March 31, three C-119s from the 483d Troop Carrier Wing and two C-124s from the 1503d Air Transport Wing airdropped and air-landed supplies to villages. Cargo included sheet roofing material, and there were problems with some of the initial drops. According to a CIA official on the ground, “some of the roofing bundles came loose, sending sheets spinning like large snowflakes through the air then slicing into the ground, while errant cement bags burst, dusting the landside.” C-130s delivered six bulldozers, including one each in Phong Saly Province and Sam Neua Province in the most heavily communist region.²⁸

The USAF aircrews completed their missions in four days and were preparing to return to Japan when they received new orders. At the request of the embassy in Vientiane, the USAF extended the operation. The crews, aircraft, and support had all been tailored for the original week-long mission, however, and all but two of the planes had exhausted their flying time. To conserve the hours on those aircraft, the USAF moved the base for Booster Shot from Bangkok, Thailand, to Wattay airfield in Vientiane. This development put U.S. personnel in violation of the Geneva accords, which prohibited the introduction of any foreign troops into Laos, so the pilots and crews dressed as civilians. They made no attempt to hide USAF markings on the planes, however. The newly arrived ambassador, Horace H. Smith, claimed that the branding from U.S. aircraft providing the supplies was improving the opinion of the United States with the Laotian population. The 483d unit history observed that during the period of the extension, “at no time was there any evidence of a specific plan on the part of the requesting agencies.” Indeed, the “requirements continued to change from day to day.”²⁹

Flying conditions in Laos were extremely primitive and often hazardous. The airfield at Vientiane had a 3,900-foot steel plank runway just barely long enough for the requirements of these missions, a small control tower, and a twenty-five-watt nondirectional beacon. Nearly all the other fields in Laos were dirt landing strips that the Japanese had cleared during World War II. Clouds and thunderstorms provided constant impediments, particularly since the drop areas were all in mountainous regions. There were no aeronautical charts for Laos, so CAT pilots had

28. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 16–17; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 96 (quote); Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 82–83, 87, 89; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 77–80; *FRUS 1958–60*, 16:423–35; Bowers, *Tactical Airlift*, 38, 440; History of the 315th Air Division (Air Cargo), 1 January 1958–30 June 1958, AFHRA, reel P0712, frame 1590.

29. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 16–17; Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 89–90; *FRUS 1958–60*, 16:437; History of the 483d Troop Carrier Wing, 1 January 1958–30 June 1958, AFHRA, reel P0712, frames 378–94 (quote, 378).



Maj. Gen. Matthew K. Deichelmann, deputy chief of staff for Pacific Air Forces, visited President Ngo Dinh Diem on June 28, 1958, as part of Air Force Day ceremonies in Saigon. USAF.

been flying by French topographical maps, which had many gaps. CAT pilots had scribbled “unreliable” over several areas on these maps.³⁰

The two remaining USAF C-119s used up their flight time in Booster Shot missions through April 15 and returned to Japan. Ambassador Smith gained approval for more airlifts, however, so three C-119s arrived in Vientiane on April 19 to resume Booster Shot. Two C-124s from the 1503d Air Transport Wing flew missions from Bangkok as part of this phase of the operation, as did three other transports that had been participating in a SEATO exercise. CAT also flew throughout the operation, with smaller drops from its C-46s. CAT pilots, who had been flying in Laos for nearly a year, provided invaluable guidance for their USAF counterparts.³¹

Booster Shot flights airlifted 1,135 tons of supplies and equipment and airdropped 300 tons into more than fifty locations. Larger deliveries included six bulldozers, an earth roller, nine jeeps, and two prefabricated hospitals. Despite the infusion of aid, however, candidates of the

30. William M. Leary, “CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955–1974: Supporting the ‘Secret War,’” *Studies in Intelligence*, Winter 1999–2000, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/winter99-00/art7.html>; History of the 483d Troop Carrier Wing, frames 291–94; Toland interview, 16 (quote); Lawrence R. Bailey Jr., *Solitary Survivor: The First POW in Southeast Asia* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1995), 64–66.

31. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 17–18; Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 89–91.

communist Pathet Lao did well in the May elections, increasing U.S. concern about Laos (*see July 1*).³²

April: The second corps of the reorganizing ARVN, based at Pleiku and designated II Corps, became operational.³³

April 3: In a special message to Congress on the reorganization of the defense establishment, President Eisenhower declared that “separate ground, sea, and air warfare is gone forever. If ever again we should be involved in war, we will fight it in all elements, with all services as one single concentrated effort” (*see Aug. 6*).³⁴

July 1: Because of the increasingly leftward tilt of the Laotian government (*see Mar. 31–Apr. 27*), the United States suspended all economic aid to Laos. The Pathet Lao, which already held some of the senior cabinet positions, had won nine out of twenty-one contested national assembly seats in an election in May. Although the conservatives received more votes, the communists had been more disciplined in their slate of candidates. The loss of U.S. support, both monetary and diplomatic, contributed to the difficulties Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma had in trying to form a government, and by August 6, he concluded that he could not.³⁵

July 31: Adm. Harry D. Felt became commander in chief, Pacific Command. With Southeast Asia in his theater of operations, Felt played a significant role as the United States expanded its involvement in Vietnam and Laos over the six years he served as CINCPAC.³⁶

August 6: Congress passed the Defense Reorganization Act, which streamlined the chains of command at the highest echelons. Significant authority shifted from the individual services to the secretary of defense and the Joint Chiefs, with combatant commanders reporting directly to the Joint Chiefs.³⁷

32. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 17–19; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 80–81; Phillips, *Why Vietnam Matters*, 96–97.

33. Whitlow, “U.S. Military in South Vietnam,” 82.

34. *Public Papers, 1958*, 274.

35. Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 136–41; Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 91–98; Castle, *At War in the Shadows of Vietnam*, 17; Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War*, 120. For a detailed look at U.S. aid to Laos and the misperceptions driving it, see Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 82–128.

36. Jack Shulimson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the War in Vietnam, 1960–1968*, Part 1 (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 2011), 404, http://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Vietnam/Vietnam_1960-1968_P001.pdf.

37. James E. Hewes Jr., *From Root to McNamara: Army Organization and Administration* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1975), 297; Lindsey Eilon and Jack Lyon, “Functions of the Department of Defense and Its Major Components,” White Paper: Evolution of Department of Defense Directive 5100.1 (Department of Defense, April 2010), 14, https://cno.defense.gov/Portals/47/Documents/PDSD/DoDD5100.01_WhitePaper.pdf.

1958

August 23: China began bombardment of Quemoy (Jinmen) and Matsu (Mazu) Islands, prompting a second Taiwan Strait crisis, which lasted for six weeks. Mao Zedong had not consulted with Moscow in advance of this operation, a perceived slight that deepened distrust between the Soviets and the Chinese (*see Apr. 1956*).³⁸

September: North Vietnam proposed to South Vietnam that the two countries discuss an understanding on peaceful relations. Diem rejected the offer.³⁹

October: South Vietnamese leaders were disappointed when they learned that T-28 trainers would replace their fleet of F-8Fs. They had wanted jets, which were prohibited under the Geneva accords. U.S. officials also did not believe the Vietnamese, with their limited training, could handle maintenance on the more sophisticated aircraft. The VNAF listed 4,590 men as of October, an increase of more than 500 since the beginning of the year.⁴⁰

In the same month, the United States resumed aid to Laos after the new prime minister, Phoui Sananikone, a pro-Western career bureaucrat, replaced Pathet Lao members of the cabinet with representatives of a right-wing anticommunist organization. In response to these developments, North Vietnam increased its support for the Pathet Lao.⁴¹

October 16: The PEO in Laos gained approval for a six-person Air Force branch under the air section chief. Operation Booster Shot (*see Mar. 31–Apr. 27*) had shown all parties how vital air transport would be in virtually any type of involvement in Laos, civilian or military.⁴²

December 1: South Vietnamese officials poisoned to death an estimated 1,000 dissidents, including communists, at a detention camp in Phu Loi. When the incident came to public attention in January 1959, the news prompted violent protests against the Diem government and likely contributed to the vote of the North Vietnamese central committee in favor of armed resistance in South Vietnam (*see Jan. 22, 1959*).⁴³

December 13: At the urging of the U.S. Army chief of staff, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, the Joint Chiefs had sent a senior Army officer, Brig. Gen. John

38. Chang, *Friends and Enemies*, 184–94; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 58; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 102.

39. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 52.

40. *Ibid.*, 50, 52; Webb, *JCS and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam*, 145.

41. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 97–102; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 141–43; Castle, *At War in the Shadows of Vietnam*, 17; Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 120; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 130–31.

42. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 18.

43. Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 57.



Diem and the ARVN wanted jet aircraft to replace their F-8Fs. The introduction of jets in Indochina was prohibited by the Geneva agreement, however, plus U.S. officials did not believe the VNAF could handle maintenance on more sophisticated planes. What the VNAF received, beginning in the fall of 1958, was T-28 trainers, which they modified as fighter-bombers. The one shown here at Nha Trang in 1962 had underwing pylons and gun pods. *U.S. Army.*

A. Heintges, to Laos in November in civilian guise to review the state of military training and aid there. On this date, Heintges submitted his plan for reorganizing U.S. military efforts in Laos. It called for deployment of 128 U.S. servicemen, primarily U.S. Army Special Forces, in Laos on six-month rotations as part of mobile training teams assigned to each of the Royal Lao Army battalions. The U.S. troops would dress as civilians, and their training teams would include French officers and NCOs. The French, who had the primary responsibility for training the Lao, were still heavily involved with the Laotian military, although the war in Algeria was draining their resources. Col. Edward Lansdale, by this time back at the Pentagon and serving as deputy assistant to the secretary of defense for special operations, strenuously objected to the Heintges proposal, writing that a “combined U.S.-French effort will have unfortunate, Communist-exploitable political features.” Despite Lansdale’s warnings about linking with a colonial power, the United States and France approved the plan, although the process moved slowly, with the formal proposal not presented to the Laotian prime minister until June 30, 1959 (*see July 18, 1959*).⁴⁴

In the same time period, Western intelligence sources determined that North Vietnam had begun moving troops into Laos, with these units digging in just west of the border that divided North and South Vietnam.⁴⁵

44. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 105–12 (quote, 109); *FRUS 1958–60*, 16:491–95, 543–45; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 20, 22.

45. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 131.

1959



Spector, *Advice and Support*.

1959

January 1: The VNAF had a total strength of 4,590 men, including 324 officers. It had 128 aircraft and was organized with one transport group, two liaison squadrons, a composite squadron, a training squadron, and a VIP squadron.⁴⁶

During the same month, North Vietnam established a general staff for its fledgling air force. That service had 2,000 men as of 1959, organized into an air transport regiment that was equipped with thirty-nine Soviet IL-14s and fourteen AN-2s.⁴⁷

January 22: At the urging of Le Duan and southern-based leaders, the North Vietnamese central committee adopted Resolution 15, which

46. Webb, *JCS and the Prelude to the War in Vietnam*, 148. The aircraft were twenty-five F-8Fs/RF-8Fs; thirty-five C-47s; ten H-19s; fifty-six L-19s; eighteen AT-6s; one Morane-Saulnier 500; two C-45s; and one Aero Commander.

47. *Victory in Vietnam*, 30.

called for the organization of a communist-led insurgency in South Vietnam. Fearing the reactions of their Soviet and Chinese allies as well as the United States, the old-guard leadership ordered that the effort be restrained and ultimately provided limited direct support, to the consternation of Le Duan and others who were more radical. Although months passed before the southern revolutionaries learned of the resolution, they were already increasing their activities, assassinating an estimated 1,700 South Vietnamese officials in 1959–60 and kidnapping around 2,000 others. More general uprisings and actions remained quite limited, however.⁴⁸

Military hero Vo Nguyen Giap had begun drafting Resolution 15 in early 1957, but Le Duan had gotten Ho's blessing a year later to take over work on the document and shaped it in a more radical direction. Despite his military background, Giap resisted endorsing armed conflict at this stage. He and Le Duan, who would become Ho's successor, would remain rivals for the rest of the war.⁴⁹

February: In November 1958, President Eisenhower had created a committee, chaired by Maj. Gen. William H. Draper Jr., USA (Ret.), to review U.S. foreign military aid. The Draper Committee had regional subcommittees, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense appointed Colonel Lansdale to the Southeast Asia subcommittee. His specific charge was to review military civic action programs in the area. In February 1959, Lansdale and other subcommittee members, including J. Lawton Collins, traveled to Southeast Asia and made brief stops in the Philippines, South Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Burma, and Indonesia. Cambodian leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk charged that Lansdale and Collins met with officers who were plotting a coup against him while they were in his country. After visiting Saigon, Collins questioned the need for Diem to maintain a 150,000-man military, believing it would be a drain on economic resources that could be put to better uses if the force was reduced.⁵⁰

February 11: Prime Minister Phoui Sananikone declared that Laos had accomplished all that the Geneva accords required and was no longer bound by them.⁵¹

48. Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 51–69; Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 44–47; *Victory in Vietnam*, 54–58; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 110–11.

49. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*, 39–40, 43.

50. Currey, *Lansdale*, 199–206; Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 67–68; Boot, *Road Not Taken*, 327–30. Diem at first refused to meet with the group in Saigon, citing Collins's criticism when he served in Vietnam in 1954–55, but Lansdale managed to broker a compromise. Anderson, *Trapped by Success*, 178.

51. Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 148–49.

1959

March 26: Civil Air Transport became known as Air America.⁵²

April 4: During a speech at Gettysburg College, President Eisenhower spoke at length about the importance of foreign aid and used Vietnam as his primary example. He declared that the “loss of South Vietnam would set in motion a crumbling process that could, as it progressed, have grave consequences for us and for freedom.”⁵³

April 15: John Foster Dulles, who had been diagnosed with colon cancer in February, resigned as secretary of state. He died on May 24. His influence in having the United States confront communism in Southeast Asia was immense (see *July 21–22, 1954*). Christian A. Herter succeeded Dulles as secretary of state.⁵⁴

April 17: Maj. Gen. Samuel L. Myers, USAF, deputy commander of MAAG-Vietnam, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that communist guerrillas in South Vietnam had been “gradually nibbled away until they ceased to be a major menace to the government.”⁵⁵

May: Diem’s government answered North Vietnam’s Resolution 15 (see *Jan. 22*) with Law 10/59, which authorized retaliation against anyone suspected of sympathy for the communist movement. Under its auspices, authorities detained an estimated 500,000 people within a matter of months, killing tens of thousands. The crackdown did not have the intended psychological effect, however, as it enraged villagers and drove scores of them into the revolutionary camp, to the point that North Vietnamese leaders began to fear that they might not be able to control the potential uprising.⁵⁶

In the same month, a battalion of the Pathet Lao refused previously agreed-upon integration into the Royal Lao Army and fled. Laotian troops tried to block the escape, but the Pathet Lao battalion made it into sanctuary in North Vietnam in June. In response, the Laotian government briefly placed Prince Souphanouvong and other Pathet Lao leaders under house arrest. The Laotian cabinet also appealed to the United States for more financial support to expand its military.⁵⁷

52. Leary, “CIA Air Operations in Laos.”

53. *Public Papers, 1959*, 311–13 (quote, 313).

54. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 113.

55. Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam*, 26.

56. Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War*, 69–70; Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 43–44; Miller, *Misalliance*, 200–202; Spector, *Advice and Support*, 332.

57. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 116–17; Castle, *At War in the Shadows of Vietnam*, 17. The Soviets believed that North Vietnam had authorized, if not coordinated, the Second Battalion’s desertion. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 133.

May 18: The North Vietnamese military activated Military Transportation Group 559, which began planning for the movement of men and supplies into South Vietnam. The group consisted of a land battalion, which began work that summer on what would become the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and a sea battalion, which started attempting water-borne infiltration by the end of the year.⁵⁸

May 25: With authorization from the White House, Adm. Harry Felt, the CINCPAC, told General Williams that U.S. advisors with the ARVN could accompany Vietnamese troops on operations, “provided they do not become involved in actual combat.” Historian Fredrik Logevall called this new order “highly significant.” To this point, U.S. troops had been “confined to corps and division headquarters, training commands, and logistic agencies and had been obligated to remain behind whenever their units were on patrol. Now they would be in the field, in harm’s way, their ‘advising’ duties greatly expanded.” U.S. personnel had been participating in patrols before this time, unofficially, including Williams himself “on occasion.”⁵⁹

May 28: The Soviet embassy in Hanoi reported to Moscow the increasing concerns that the United States would attempt to use Laos as “an important strategic springboard” for “staging armed provocations” against North Vietnam and China. At the time, the North Vietnamese were seeking Soviet approval to support armed insurrection in Laos. China had endorsed “armed struggle” in February.⁶⁰

July: The South Vietnamese government launched its agrovillage program. The idea was to regroup thousands of people in the Mekong delta into agricultural collectives that would boost development and also be more secure from communist infiltration. Ambassador Durbrow called the concept a “beautiful idea” but said it was “awfully expensive and too elaborate.” Vietnamese officials managed to establish only around twenty agrovillages, while the threat of forced relocation increased animosity in the countryside against the Diem government. It returned to a similar concept, in a much-expanded form, with the strategic hamlet program in 1961–62.⁶¹

58. *Victory in Vietnam*, 52–53.

59. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 332 (1st quote); Logevall, *Embers of War*, 698 (2d–3d quotes); Williams interview, 113 (4th quote).

60. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 132–34 (quotes, 133).

61. Philip E. Catton, “Counter-Insurgency and Nation Building: The Strategic Hamlet Programme in South Vietnam, 1961–1963,” *International History Review* 21 (December 1999): 921; Nguyen Cao Ky with Marvin J. Wolf, *Buddha’s Child: My Fight to Save Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2002), 44–45; Miller, *Misalliance*, 178–83; Durbrow interview, 23–24 (quotes).

1959

A fundamental problem with the agrovillage concept was the strong connection that rural Vietnamese had to their land and their local villages. According to Lt. Col. Victor Croizat, USMC, who served with the MAAG in the 1950s, “The political horizon of the villager in Vietnam, who was the strength of the country, was the bamboo hedge that he could see. Beyond his village or his hamlet was a Never-Never Land.” The village was “an economic self-sufficient and self-reliant entity.”⁶²

July 8: Six Vietnamese communist guerrillas attacked the quarters of the thirteen-man U.S. advisory detachment at Bien Hoa. Two U.S. soldiers, Maj. Dale R. Buis and MSgt. Chester M. Ovnand, died in the assault, the first U.S. servicemen killed in action in Vietnam since Lt. Col. Peter Dewey in 1945 (*see Sept. 26, 1945*). Buis and Ovnard are the first two names that appear on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington.⁶³

July 14: In a document titled “U.S. Policy in the Far East,” the Joint Chiefs described the problems in the region as indigenous, “characterized by inter- and intra-national stresses and strains that almost defy solution by orderly process.”⁶⁴

July 18: Pathet Lao units launched the first of what became a series of attacks against small Royal Lao Army outposts in Sam Neua and Phong Saly Provinces. The Lao government asserted that North Vietnamese troops participated in the engagements, but officials from Western embassies were unable to substantiate the claims (*see Aug. 30, Sept. 15*). On July 23, the U.S. State Department announced the deployment of U.S. technicians to aid in training the Laotian military, implementing the plan General Heintges had proposed in December (*see Dec. 13, 1958*). U.S. Special Forces, dressed as civilians, began arriving in Laos the next day. Even though the Lao air force only had nine qualified pilots (none with instrument qualification), it began shuttle supply flights between the Plain of Jars and Sam Neua, an effort made more challenging since it was the monsoon season.⁶⁵

General Heintges, out of uniform, became commander of the PEO in Vientiane. The headquarters of this civilianized version of a MAAG was part of the CIA compound, several miles from the U.S. embassy. Although

62. Croizat interview, 105–6.

63. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 329; Logevall, *Embers of War*, 699–701.

64. Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 69 (quote); full report in *U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, 10:1211–35.

65. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 118–19; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 22–23; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 148–49. In March 1961, when President John F. Kennedy asked Adm. Harry D. Felt, the CINCPAC, what had driven the communists to intervene more heavily in Laos in 1960–61, Felt posited that it was the success of the Heintges plan. *FRUS 1961–63*, 24:73.

the original plan called for 128 members of the Special Forces to deploy, the number nearly doubled to 239 by the end of 1959, plus thirty-three additional U.S. civilians with the PEO. That command assigned seventeen civilian-dressed military personnel as advisors to the army aviation branch of the Lao air force.⁶⁶

Winthrop G. Brown, who became U.S. ambassador to Laos in 1960, thought Heintges was a “first-class fellow” who “understood the political situation very well” and gave “unstinting support” to Brown’s efforts on the diplomatic side. However, Brown believed that Heintges had “too great a faith” in the capability of the Laotian troops and was “too much preoccupied with the conventional training and the conventional equipment in a country that has no roads.”⁶⁷

August: Diem terminated contracts with French air crews and technicians who operated the commercial Air Vietnam airline. He replaced them with Vietnamese military crews and mechanics, increasing the personnel strain on the VNAF.⁶⁸

In the same month, North Vietnam began sending rifles, bayonets, and explosives to communist insurgents in South Vietnam. Work on what became the Ho Chi Minh Trail had just begun, though (*see May 18*), so the quantities of materiel transported at this time were not great.⁶⁹

August 30: The Pathet Lao resumed the offensive in Sam Neua Province. As with the July attacks, the Royal Lao government claimed that the North Vietnamese were directly participating and were arming the Pathet Lao (*see July 18, Sept. 15*). The government appealed to the UN on September 4 to send an emergency force to counter North Vietnamese aggression.⁷⁰

September 8: Gen. Thomas White, USAF chief of staff, asked the Joint Chiefs for approval to move a Strategic Air Command B-47 squadron to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. His plan, presented in a memorandum titled “Preparation for Decisive Termination of Hostilities in Laos,” was

66. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 108–9; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 20, 22; Bailey, *Solitary Survivor*, 55–56; “The Royal Laotian Air Force, 1954–1970,” CHECO Report, September 15, 1970, xv; Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, 20–21. One of the few airmen in Laos, SSgt. Maurice W. Flourney, died in a nonmilitary-related drowning accident on February 21, 1960. His name is listed third on the first panel of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington.

67. Winthrop G. Brown, interview by Larry J. Hackman, February 1, 1968, transcript, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, 22, <https://archive1.jfklibrary.org/JFKOH/Brown,%20Winthrop%20G/JFKOH-WGB-01/JFKOH-WGB-01-TR.pdf> (hereafter Brown interview)

68. Futrell, *Advisory Years*, 54.

69. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 112.

70. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 120–21; Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, 22; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 135–36.



Gen. Thomas D. White, USAF chief of staff, brought a document to the Joint Chiefs in September 1959 titled “Preparation for Decisive Termination of Hostilities in Laos.” The plan, which the service chiefs eventually tabled, envisioned B-47 strikes against targets in North Vietnam to discourage North Vietnamese involvement in Laos. USAF.

to strike North Vietnamese targets and supply lines with conventional or nuclear weapons. The paper called for a preattack warning to the North Vietnamese. While White’s proposal was under consideration, Gen. Matthew Ridgway, who had retired as Army chief of staff in 1955, stated in a newspaper interview on September 9 that any war in Indochina would have to be fought across rugged terrain where “air power in a combat role would be almost useless.” The Joint Chiefs tabled White’s plan, and the USAF withdrew it seven months later.⁷¹

USAF historians Victor B. Anthony and Richard R. Sexton wrote that White’s proposal was “a valid reflection of the long-standing USAF belief that Asian communists would be less likely to cause trouble if they knew U.S. counteraction would not be confined to Laos or conventional weapons.” Those who were actually flying in the region, like Maj. Harry C. “Heinie” Aderholt, who was detailed to the CIA, were perplexed by the plan. “We were going to drop nuclear bombs in the jungles of Laos and North Vietnam . . . and hit what?” he later asked.⁷²

71. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 25; George F. Lemmer, *The Laos Crisis of 1959* (Washington, DC: USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, 1961), 52–53, 61; Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 68 (quote).

72. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 25 (1st quote); Warren A. Trest, *Air Commando One: Heinie Aderholt and America’s Secret Wars* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 101 (2d quote).

Also on September 8, PACAF began delivery of two C-47s and three L-20s to Laos for use by the Lao air force, aircraft the U.S. ambassador in Vientiane had requested the previous October. All the planes had arrived by September 10.⁷³

September 15: A UN fact-finding mission arrived in Laos to probe government claims that North Vietnamese troops had been involved in the fighting there (*see July 18, Aug. 30*). After a month of investigation, the team was unable to substantiate direct North Vietnamese participation, but it did document significant arms and materiel supply. The Lao prime minister was not pleased with this finding (*see Oct. 22*), but Laos directly benefited from the UN inquiry, as fighting almost completely stopped during the time it was being conducted.⁷⁴

September 26: A Vietnamese communist group identified as the 2d Liberation Battalion ambushed six ARVN companies and a company of Civil Guard troops west of Saigon near the Cambodian border. The South Vietnamese were traveling on boats through the Plain of Reeds, a wooded Mekong delta marshland in Kien Tuong Province. They suffered losses of twelve killed, fourteen wounded, and nine missing or captured. This incident is sometimes cited as the first larger-unit action of the conflict, although perhaps only 100 loosely organized guerrillas were involved in the attack against slightly more than 400 South Vietnamese troops.⁷⁵

Just how widespread such pockets of insurgents were was an issue of increasing concern. An intelligence agent told Sen. Mike Mansfield during this period that “if you drew a paint brush across the South, every hair of the brush would touch a Viet Minh.”⁷⁶

October: North Vietnamese prime minister Pham Van Dong visited Beijing, where he requested military aid from Premier Zhou Enlai and asked that the Chinese send a military technical team to advise the DRV. Chinese advisors arrived in Hanoi on November 10.⁷⁷

October 2: Speaking of the increasing activities in Laos, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev told Mao Zedong that “I have not the slightest interest in this affair, because this affair itself is small, but there is much noise around it.” Khrushchev did not favor the communists intensifying the

73. Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 22–23.

74. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 127–28; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 149; Anthony and Sexton, *War in Northern Laos*, 25; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 135–36.

75. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 331.

76. Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 280.

77. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 82.

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conflict because he feared greater U.S. involvement. If the United States chose to strike North Vietnam from Laos, the Soviets would be in no position to help the North Vietnamese. Khrushchev encouraged Mao to join him in urging the North Vietnamese to restrain support for Pathet Lao aggression.⁷⁸

October 5: The North Vietnamese army activated its first armored regiment, equipped with thirty-five T-34 tanks and sixteen CAY-76 76mm self-propelled guns provided by the Soviet Union.⁷⁹

October 22: Laotian prime minister Phoui Sananikone arrived in Washington on an unofficial visit. He wanted to fly to New York to protest the UN's inconclusive report about North Vietnamese participation in the fighting in Laos (*see Sept. 15*), but the State Department dissuaded him. A heart condition landed Phoui at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where mid-level State Department officials visited him. The Lao secretary of state for defense, Col. Phoumi Nosavan, who would seize power two months later (*see Dec. 24*), made a favorable impression at the Pentagon during a briefing for senior leaders there. The Lao delegation stayed only a week before the death of King Sisavang Vong on October 29 prompted its departure.⁸⁰

November: MAAG-Vietnam issued an internal report on the lack of preparedness of the South Vietnamese military. In a public statement during the same month, however, the MAAG contended that ARVN operations were going well and rolling up “remnants of dissidents and Viet Cong guerrillas.” The success of these efforts had “facilitated the release of the majority of Vietnamese military units from pacification missions and has permitted increased emphasis on unit training.”⁸¹

December: The North Vietnamese central committee approved sending twenty-five cadres into South Vietnam to begin training anti-government forces. These insurgents were natives of the south who had come north during the free movement period in 1954–55 (*see Aug. 17, 1954*). Ambassador Durbrow stated in a 1970 interview that “our best estimates were that by 1960, there were at least 10,000” infiltrators from the north. Vietnamese and communist sources show only limited infiltration by this period, however, as efforts to develop what became the Ho Chi Minh Trail

78. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 122 (quote), 134.

79. *Victory in Vietnam*, 29–30.

80. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 128–30; *FRUS 1958–60*, 16:644.

81. Buzzanco, *Masters of War*, 69–70; Krepinevich, *Army and Vietnam*, 26 (quotes).

had just begun (*see May 18; Aug. 1959*). Most of the guerrillas who were opposing Diem's government during this period were indigenous.⁸²

December 24: In the midst of a cabinet crisis in Laos, Phoumi Nosavan, who had been promoted to general, used rumors of a Pathet Lao attack as a pretext to move troops and tanks into Vientiane. In reality, a bloodless coup was underway. Over the following two weeks, the prime minister, Phoui Sananikone, resigned and Savang Vatthana, the new king, appointed a caretaker to the position until a government could be formed. Phoumi, who had CIA backing, emerged as the country's most powerful figure and played a central role in Laos over the chaotic next six years. The State Department was more leery of Phoumi, however, and the U.S. ambassador joined his British, French, and Australian counterparts in urging the king to name someone other than a military officer as prime minister.⁸³

Senior CIA official Richard M. Bissell Jr. later observed that "it is clear with hindsight" that the United States should have supported Phoui, "who advocated pro-Western neutrality; our failure to support him reflected Washington's inability to understand the ground situation in Laos. Instead, we ended up supporting Phoumi Nosavan because of his staunch anti-Communism and pro-Western stance."⁸⁴

* * *

As the 1950s ended, U.S. leadership was paying limited attention to Southeast Asia. Diem had established a government in South Vietnam far more viable than anyone had expected, although the repressive tactics he used to solidify control were driving increasing numbers of people into opposition camps. Plotters would launch a coup attempt against him in 1960. Meanwhile, communist forces in the south grew stronger and bolder, attacks increased in size and number, and North Vietnam began to push more men and supplies down the expanding Ho Chi Minh Trail. In late 1961, President John F. Kennedy deployed 10,000 troops to Vietnam.

In Laos, the turmoil from the latter part of 1959 continued to grow. Within months, the country was engulfed in a three-party civil war, one that brought increased U.S., Soviet, and North Vietnamese participation and left the Eisenhower administration contemplating direct military intervention by the end of 1960. Kennedy inherited a substantial crisis there as well.

82. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 112; Durbrow interview, 14–15 (quote).

83. Rust, *Before the Quagmire*, 151–57; Dommen, *Indochina Experience*, 382–86; Conboy and Morrison, *Shadow War*, 25; Jacobs, *Universe Unraveling*, 149–52; Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam*, 137. Ambassador Durbrow had been a classmate of the new king at École Libre des Sciences Politiques in Paris in the 1930s. Durbrow interview, 96.

84. Richard M. Bissell Jr., with Jonathan E. Lewis and Frances T. Pudlo, *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 146–47.



Acronyms and Abbreviations

AACS	Airways and Communications Service
AGAS	U.S. Air Ground Aid Section
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CAT	Civil Air Transport
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CINCPAC	Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command (USN)
D	Democrat
DMZ	Demilitarized Zone
DRV	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
FEAF	Far East Air Forces (USAF)
GVN	Government of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)
ICC	International Control Commission
LST	Landing Ship, Tank
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MDAP	Mutual Defense Assistance Program
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSC	National Security Council

OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PACAF	Pacific Air Force(s) (USAF)*
PAVN	People's Army of Vietnam
PEO	Programs Evaluation Office
POW	Prisoner of War
PRC	People's Republic of China
R	Republican
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SHORAN	short-range navigational radar
TDY	temporary duty
TERM	Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission
TRIM	Training Relations Instruction Mission
UN	United Nations
USA	U.S. Army
USAAF	U.S. Army Air Forces
USAF	U.S. Air Force
USIS	U.S. Information Service
USMC	U.S. Marine Corps
USN	U.S. Navy
USOM	U.S. Operations Mission
VNAF	Republic of Vietnam Air Force

* Pacific Air Force became Pacific Air Forces when it transitioned into a higher-level command in 1956–57.

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