SYMPTOMS OF A WORLD MALAISE

BY

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It would be easy to blame the French for Vietnam. For the hundred years or so preceding 1940, it was their country, part along with Cambodia and Laos -- of their colony of Indochina. The gend of the present situation were loosed by them; they have thrived beautifully under our care.

We became involved in Vietnam during World War II. The Japanese had occupied the country with little resistance from the French. Though they were unable to exploit the vast wealth of raw materials, these resources were denied the West. In the early years of the war, we could only harass the Japanese. When our OSS infiltrated Vietminh to develop guerrilla forces capable of operating behind Japanese lines, they found an already well-developed resistance group calling themselves nationalists. Their Vietnamese title was Viet Minh, abbreviations for League for the Independence and Freedom of Vietnam. Their leader was one Ho Chi Minh, who had been trained as a Communist in his youth. The Vietnamese hoped with their organization and determination to defeat the Japanese; we supplied them and worked with them for the duration of the war.

With Japanese defeat imminent, President Roosevelt made plans for the future of Indochina. He recognized the strength of nationalist forces at work and proposed, at the Cairo and Teheran Conferences in December 1943 and January 1944, that Indochina be placed under an international trusteeship as a final step towards complete independence. But Roosevelt's hopes for a trusteeship over Indochina died with him. Key policy-making personnel in the Truman administration were concerned with what they saw as the more pressing problems of Europe. In 1946, France reasserted its claim over her former colonies with scarcely a protest from us.

The Viet Minh, however, had other ideas. They had rallied the support of the peasants to fight the Japanese and now had their backing to demand independence from the French. France appeared at first to meet the Viet Minh demands. In return for political, military, and economic concessions, she agreed to recognize the Republic of Vietnam as a free state, having its own government, parliament, army, and treasury, belonging to the Indochinese Federation and the French Union. However, a few months later, she reneged on her promises and prepared to reconquer the country.

The Viet Minh turned to us, as their allies of the war, for support. We were unwilling and unprepared to anger France -- we refused. They then turned to Russia. She, too, was more concerned with events in Europe, and also turned them down. Ho Chi Minh asked France for further negotiations -- his plea was ignored. French forces reentered Vietnam as a free state, having its own government, parliament, army, and treasury, belonging to the Indochinese Federation and the French Union. The Viet Minh went underground, pledging guerrilla warfare until their demands were met.

At the end of the war in 1946, the Viet Minh had been relatively moderate and friendly to the West. French military recognition of the country produced a Viet Minh thoroughly hostile to the West and completely Communist oriented. Although Russia had been unwilling to aid them, by 1949 a newly Communist China recognized a way to fulfill both her ideological convictions and her ancient imperial designs on Southeast Asia. Vietnam had once been under Chinese rule for a period of 1,000 years, and China offered her support to the Viet Minh with a long eye to the future.

The ensuing Indochinese War was a shock to the French. Chinese training and supplies for the Viet Minh were seemingly endless. Prepared for pitched battles, the French were ill-equipped for guerrilla warfare. Their tanks índice in the rice fields, and their slow moving convoys were easily ambushed along jungle roads. They received no support from the Vietnamese peasants, whose appetite for independence had been well developed by Ho Chi Minh.

U.S. SUPPLIES FRANCE

As an ally, we supplied the French with equipment and supplies. Our aid averaged $500 million annually through 1953. This proved a little help, for the French were fast losing. In the spring of 1954, the battle of Dien Bien Phu intervened. A strategic French fortress in the northern plains fell to the Communists -- this was the final crushing blow. France called for a truce, Russia, China, the U.S., Britain, and France sat down at the conference table in Geneva. Vietnam was divided at the 17th parallel; Vietnamese troops were to withdraw to the north, French troops to the south. The accord prohibited the introduction of full military equipment or personnel into either sector, except as replacements for existing equipment and personnel. Neither side was to join any military alliance or permit the establishment of foreign bases. The country was to be reunified through general elections scheduled for July 1956. The U.S. refused to sign the accord, but stated that we would respect the agreements and "would refrain from the threat of the use of force to disturb them."

For this interim period, Ho Chi Minh headed a Democratic Republic of North Vietnam. The French supported a South Vietnamese government headed by the former Emperor Bao Dai. Although they were sources of weakness, South Vietnam as an independent state was the Bao Dai government's little more than a thin facade for continued French presence. The French controlled the army, the administration, and much of the economy.

DIEM TAKES POWER

This French-sponsored government lasted a little over a year. We had had our Korea, and the cornerstone of our foreign policy was now containing. We decided that continuing our presence in South Vietnam would be a difficult obstacle to our plans for checking further Communist advances in Asia. We set about taking over the role of the active role in the future of South Vietnam. An ardent anti-Communist Vietnamese nationalist by the name of Ngo Dinh Diem had been invited back from exile to serve as Premier of the Bao Dai government. He soon caught our eye as a possible alternative to Bao Dai himself. With a promise of massive American aid, he successfully persuaded the Emperor to hold a popular referendum on the future form of government of South Vietnam. This referendum, held in October 1955, produced an announced 99% majority in favor of a Republic headed by Ngo Dinh Diem. Bao Dai left in exile for the French Riviera -- the French had been pushed aside.

Begun developing South Vietnam into what we called "a bastion of the Free World."

Considering the conditions that existed in South Vietnam in 1955, it is a wonder that we even thought we could succeed. This country had left roads and railroads destroyed, communications disrupted, Vietnamese industry and most natural resources were located in the north. Many Viet Minh had not withdrawn to the north, but had gone underground in the south, retaining the loyalty of peasants. The population of 1954 Vietnam was 18,000,000 and that of the south only 10,000. Even had Presi-
dent Diem been as genuinely popular as he claimed to be, it was clear that just by weight of numbers the Communists would win the nationwide elections scheduled for 1956 by the Geneva accords.

**U.S. DIEM OPPOSE ELECTIONS**

Therefore we backed Diem's refusal to follow the accords. We agreed with him that genuinely free elections could not be held in a Communist North Vietnam, but said nothing about whether genuinely free elections could be held in the south.

There were no nationwide elections. Our aid poured in. Diem had quashed dissenting Buddhist sects challenging his authority to speak for the country, and he now re-built the army. Within a few years he extended the power of his government into rural areas, and the French, even at the height of their power, had never reached. He made beginnings in land reform and redeveloped large areas of swamp lands in which to settle the nearly one million refugees who had fled the North.

But for a government supported by the greatest democracy in the world, the Republic of South Vietnam was proving to be amazingly undemocratic. Ngo Dinh Diem called himself a President. He was an autocrat ruling from a palace, refused to share powers of decision outside his own family. He tolerated no opposition. No one unfriendly to Diem managed to hold a seat in his Chamber of Deputies. The country's population was 70% Buddhist, but positions of responsibility were given only to members of the Roman Catholic Church, to which the Ngo family had belonged for over three centuries.

None of this bothered us too much. We made it clear by word and action that as long as Diem continued to be anti-Communist, we would back him in whatever he did. The tragedy, however, was that Americans in positions of responsibility never knew exactly what he did. Of the more than five hundred American diplomatic, military, and aid personnel in South Vietnam, no more than thirty lived in the capital city. They gathered our information. through the political and military situation from Saigon sources, who carefully filtered out disquieting news from the provinces. At lower-level American officials in the field submitted reports of growing unrest among the peasants of South Vietnam, the reports never managed to reach Washington.

**TROUBLE HITS THE NEWS**

In 1960, the American people were suddenly told that there was trouble in Vietnam again. The news may have been sudden, the trouble was not. Guerrillas had started reappearing in 1956, capitalizing on a feeling of political and social impotence among the peasants. They urged the peasants to resist the authority of their government and demand recognition from their brethren in the north. They promised the peasants a voice in a government that gave equal consideration to all citizens and gave no preference to one group over another. Many of these so-called Viet Cong were former Viet Minh who had never left the south. Others had infiltrated along the celebrated Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos. Many were new recruits. They were all well received by the peasants.

Diem's reaction to the increasing subversion was a further tightening of the reins of government. As the guerrillas won more peasants, Diem became more authoritarian. Any Vietnamese who spoke in public against the increasing repressive acts of his government was jailed. Any Americans who felt our mission in Vietnam might be jeopardized by a blind allegiance to a government that was violating what we considered to be the basic rights of all individuals everywhere were called deserters - ignored, or sometimes transferred.

**NEW POLICY ALSO FAILS**

I was in South Vietnam for fourteen months. Within six months it was obvious to those of us in the field that, for all of the talk of "cautious optimism" and "qualified success" among Americanists in Saigon and the State Department, our "new policy" was working no better than the old.

Both Americans and Vietnamese were taking the strategic hamlet program seriously and were hailing it as the turning point in the struggle against the Viet Cong. I visited strategic hamlets in the Mekong Delta every day and saw differently. Fortified villages in Malaya probably did win the war. The British, through means never revealed to Parliament, managed to separate the Communist from the non-Communist before enclosing the village with a wall. The Vietnamese did not. Any- one could live in the strategic hamlet if he said he wanted to or could be forced to. In Malaya the walls were twelve feet high, the gates were closed at sundown, and anyone found outside the walls was shot on the spot, no questions asked. In