

*Revising of Chpts 4 in
Bureau titled U.S. & France
in Indochina, '50-56*

TOP SECRET - Sensitive

IV. A. 2.

AID FOR FRANCE IN INDOCHINA, 1950-1954

SUMMARY

The United States decision to provide military assistance to France and the Associated States of Indochina was reached informally in February/March 1950, funded by the President on May 1, 1950, and was announced on May 8 of that year. The decision was taken in spite of the U.S. desire to avoid direct involvement in a colonial war, and in spite of a sensing that France's political-military situation in Indochina was bad and was deteriorating. Moreover, predictions that U.S. aid would achieve a marked difference in the course of the Indochina War were heavily qualified.

The situation in which the decision was made was completely dominated by the take-over of and consolidation of power in China by the communists. Nationalist Chinese forces had been withdrawn from mainland China and Communist Chinese troops had arrived on the border of Indochina in late 1949. This period was the high water mark of U.S. fears of direct Chinese Communist intervention in Indochina. NIE 5 of 29 December 1950 stated: "Direct intervention by Chinese Communist troops may occur at any time... it is almost certain to occur in strength whenever there is danger either that the Viet Minh will fail to maintain its military objective of driving the French out of Indochina, or that the Bao Dai Government is succeeding in undermining the support of the Viet Minh."

The rationale of the decision was provided by the U.S. view that the Soviet-controlled expansion of communism both in Asia and in Europe required, in the interests of U.S. national security, a counter in Indochina. The domino thesis was quite prominent. On 6 March 1950, the Secretary of Defense wrote the President as follows: "The choice confronting the United States is to support the legal government in Indochina or to face the extension of communism over the remainder of the continental area of Southeast Asia and possibly westward..." Despite this statement, it was a generally accepted proposition that "regardless of current U.S. commitments for certain military assistance to China, the U.S. will not commit any of its armed forces to the defense of Indochina against overt, foreign aggression, under present circumstances."

The decision to begin military assistance to France and the Associated States of Indochina was not made under the illusion of great expectations. In April 1950, the Joint Chiefs would go no further than to say that prompt delivery of the aid would do no more than create the "possibility of success." In July 1950, General Erskine, after completing his Presidential mission to Indochina, reported that "the amount of aid and the scope of the assistance thus far requested by the French were inadequate to the needs of the situation." All U.S. expectations seemed to have been underpinned by the

TOP SECRET - Sensitive

Joint Chiefs' belief that "attainment of United States objectives in Asia can only be achieved by ultimate success in China."

Results of the decision were mixed. Although implementation of the decision was partially successful in that it enabled the French to continue the military campaign in Indochina to the time of the Geneva Accords, military assistance was by and large a failure as an instrument of U.S. policy: the U.S. neither assured the French a military success, influenced the political situation to advantage, nor prevented the loss of North Vietnam to the communists at Geneva.

The U.S. MAAG Indochina was unable to perform even the limited functions assigned it. The French, never eager for U.S. advice, succeeded in limiting the function of MAAG to order-taking in the commercial sense.

Contributing to the initial U.S. decision to aid the French, and to limiting the effectiveness of the U.S. program of assistance, were (1) setting impracticable preconditions for assistance upon the French, (2) the U.S. proclivity to accept a slender chance of success without weighing alternatives, (3) the suppression of alternatives leading to decisional circularity and reinforcement of existing policies, (4) repeated failures of the U.S. to bargain effectively with the French, and (5) the vulnerability of the U.S. policy-making machinery to spoofing, particularly as regards U.S. credulity in accepting French information at face value and in being susceptible to "red" scares.

The decision to provide assistance to France and the Associated States is the focus of this discussion; it was but one issue among hundreds pre-occupying the United States Government in the time period under consideration -- the fall of China and the Korean War -- and it was probably not regarded by those who made policy as among their critical decisions. There is no evidence of any high U.S. official arguing that any significant commitment threshold was being crossed. There were, however, those who maintained that the important anti-colonial stand of the U.S. was being undermined. These voices (and they were basically from the public domain) were drowned out by those who advocated immediate security needs. The importance of the decision was that when the U.S. was faced with an unambiguous choice between a policy of anti-colonialism and a policy of anti-communism, it chose the latter. And, although the decision was not perceived as getting the U.S. more deeply "involved" in Indochina, it did mark a tangible first step in that direction.

Additional material missing from

Screen.