Chapter VIII

CONCLUSION
The period 1945 to 1954 has been a decade of vital importance to the Vietnamese; it began for them with a dawning of hopes for freedom and liberation from colonial rule. But soon it was drowned in incessant bloody warfare and unlimited sacrifices, with their own terrible economic, social and psychological consequences. The end of the decade brought a temporary respite to the war, but only after dividing the thirty million Vietnamese into two separate nations - an artificial political and military division that had no bearing on the historical, economic and social factors of Viet Nam.

The first Viet Nam War had all the makings of a Greek tragedy. The general Vietnamese population was the greatest loser in the war but the French, the Americans, the "nationalist" Vietnamese and the Viet Minh were not any less.

The first Viet Nam War was essentially a struggle for freedom from alien domination. It truly represented the legitimate aspirations of a people that was keen to develop its own resources. The Western countries like France and the United States, however, instead of recognizing it for what it was, pictured the war as simply a part of the world-wide Communist effort to gain more and more areas under their control. To them the Communist leanings of the leaders of this movement looked more important than the predominantly nationalistic platforms of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam (DRVN). However, to the Vietnamese themselves, this consideration was very much irrelevant. In their view there was only one enemy and that was the colonial ruler. Any one or group
that resisted the French rule and strove to bring it to an end, was accepted as the national leader and readily obeyed. This explained the popularity and willing co-operation that the Viet Minh received among the villagers in their guerilla warfare. This explained how and why Bao Dai and his supporters, however nationalistic they might have been and whatever might have been their efforts to extract more concessions from the French, were looked upon as French collaborators and their puppets. Even a staunch nationalist like Ngo Dinh Diem, who had preferred to spend the major part of this period in self-imposed exile to collaborating with the French, could not ever capture the imagination of the Vietnamese as Ho had. Ho had come to be viewed as an ardent and active nationalist leader who guided the nation's course during the most painful years of its history. The trickling in of concessions from the French only helped to sharpen the nationalist fervour and heighten the stature of Ho among the people.

The American involvement in this war was truly parabolical. From the small beginnings it had in 1950, the involvement had become more and more deep and an end to it is, as yet, out of sight. Before 1950, the United States, though aware of the freedom struggle in Viet Nam, scrupulously avoided getting itself involved in it. Much against the hopes of the Asians and particularly Vietnamese, it had merely confined itself to the general platitudes of being a sympathiser and supporter of freedom and self-determination without at the same time, doing anything in this regard. It viewed Viet Nam as an area of no vital American interests. The two important events which impelled the United States to pay a greater attention to the Vietnamese question
were the success of Communists in China and the outbreak of the Korean war. As it came to be interested in the Vietnamese affairs, the outlook which the American authorities adopted was not one of the oft-proclaimed Jeffersonian equality and Wilsonian self-determination, but a vision that was considerably blurred by the exigencies of the cold war.

Hence the United States came to accept the French view that the latter's presence in Viet Nam was necessary at least till such time as Viet Nam was "saved" from a Communist takeover. It accepted the French version of the war as a part of the free world's fight against International Communism rather than an attempt to reinstate itself by force. The American Administration was persuaded by the necessities of its containment policy, to recognize Bao Dai as the legitimate ruler of Viet Nam and the true representative of the nationalist aspirations of the non-Communist Vietnamese. Thereby the United States became a willing partner in and financier of the "Bao Dai experiment". Inevitably the American sponsorship of the regime meant a progressive military involvement in the war against the Viet Minh. Between May 1950 when it initiated a programme of economic and military assistance to Viet Nam, to July 1954 when the latter was partitioned, the United States had extended aid to the tune of $1535.2 millions. By the time the war was over in July 1954, the United States was financing practically almost the entire cost of the war.

With the recognition of the French claims, the United States lost any opportunity to come to terms with the nationalists. The years immediately after the Second World War offered a propitious chance when the United States could have
guided the nationalists and avoided the emergence of a Communist leadership in the DRVN. It could have stepped into the issue even a little later and helped the Vietnamese by bringing pressure on the French to conduct meaningful negotiations. This would have helped in reaching some sort of an independent solution and averted ten years of bloodshed and frustration. This was a period when the United States enjoyed vast prestige in Asia and in particular with the Viet Minh. The United States, even during the period 1948-52, could have adopted a firm position on the issue of independence and applied pressure on the French to yield substantially. It could have threatened the French with a withdrawal of its financial support, without which the French could not have continued the fighting in Viet Nam.

Instead the United States came to view the Viet Minh and its activities through the coloured vision of an ideological war. It was, however, a considered opinion of many Indo-Chinese as well as others that Ho Chi Minh was primarily a nationalist who was motivated, more than anything else, by the independence of his motherland. Moscow was too far off; nor was his standing with Stalin so high, as to make him rely on unflinching help from Russia.

A Bolshevik that he was, Ho Chi Minh was more than just a follower of Kremlin dictates. He had all the makings of a Tito even before Titoism made its appearance. Even a left-wing government led by Ho Chi Minh might have adopted an independent, nationalist approach to the Vietnamese affairs. In view of the later relationship of Ho Chi Minh with the Communists, especially after the Sino-Soviet split, this view that Ho might have led the
Vietnamese on a moderate, neutralist path, does not seem to be too far-fetched. However the French rebuttal of Viet Minh offers and the American keenness not to entangle itself in the Vietnamese affairs, made the Viet Minh seek the friendship and support of the Communist camp. As Robert Shaplen puts it, for the United States, Ho represented an "untried gamble", and the period 1945-50 marked a turning point "when the 'lost revolution' was really lost."(1)

This, however, did not not mean the United States was unaware of the Vietnamese dissatisfaction with the French or of the unpopularity of the Bao Dai regime. The United States had time and again expressed its differences with the French on this score and its dissatisfaction with the progress towards independence as well as the building up of a native army. However, its view, in this regard, came to be involved in a vicious circle. Its arguments remain, once the French granted independence, the Bao Dai regime would become more popular, the war would evoke more support and loyalty from the population, and thereby would lead to a Communist defeat. On the other hand, the French argued, once the war against Communism was won the need for French presence would come to an end and the Vietnamese could assume control of all their affairs, including the military and financial ones.

To this mutually conflicting views of the situation, was added the complications of the Western European situation which necessitated a close and amicable Franco-American relations. The United States had come to rely on the formation of the European Defence Community as the shield against a Russian expansion towards

Western Europe and chose to put all its stakes on it, until it was finally rejected by the French Assembly in August 1954. The need for the French parliamentary ratification to the same, compelled the United States to soft-pedal the issue of independence of Vietnam. The distrust of the Gaullists towards the United States and the opposition of the French Communist Party which was the second strongest Communist movement outside the Soviet Union made it more difficult for the United States. Thus its policy towards the Vietnamese issue hinged on metropolitan Europe.

While finding itself unable to urge the French in much stronger terms to fulfil the Vietnamese aspirations, the United States also came to rely on certain assumptions which were proved to be untrue ultimately by the fall of Dien Bien Phu. It believed till as late as March 1954 that the French military position, reinforced by increased American aid, was growing stronger. Fed on illusions and half-truths by the French Government which was keen to get increased American aid, the United States was convinced that but for the contingency of a direct Chinese participation, the war could be won by the French. This explained the various statements by the high officials in the United States, warning the Chinese against intervention.

This unrealistic view of the French military strength could also be traced to the existence of an intelligence gap and an over optimism in certain sections of the Department of State. The French desk in the Department of State, as well as its representatives in Paris urged a policy of restraint and caution towards France. The State Department also came to be considerably influenced by the Francophilism of its Ambassador in Saigon,
Donald Heath who believed that the United States "ought not to rock the boat". Doubts had also been raised on the competence of the American diplomatic and military personnel in Saigon, to make independent, on-the-spot evaluation. There were also evidences to show a lack of co-operation between the Embassy and the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), and within the Embassy itself between the Ambassador and the Minister Counsellor, Edmund Gullion.

The other erroneous assumption of the United States was that its extension of huge economic and military assistance to the Bao Dai regime would increase the latter's stature in the eyes of the people and rally the nationalist leaders to his fold. This assumption failed not only because Bao Dai proved to be a wrong horse to bet on, but also that an American aid, without a corresponding freedom to utilise it, was practically of no avail to the Vietnamese, except a few racketeers who benefited out of it. As a result, even the American economic aid which reached the Vietnamese directly, failed to achieve its purpose of winning the goodwill of the people for the United States. The Americans came to share with the French, the suspicions of the Vietnamese people and this led to grievous political and military consequences to the American policy not only during the Bao Dai period but even later during the regime of his successor, Diem.

These wrong assessments of the military as well as political situation were responsible for the widening gap between the French public opinion which clamoured for negotiations to bring the war to a close, and the American Government's insistence that the French should continue to fight till the war was won. The French officials found themselves caught between these two extremes.
This, to a great extent, was responsible for the lack of direction in the French military efforts and the sapping of the French morale at the battle fronts.

The American assumptions failed mainly because the United States sought to apply a military solution to a political problem. At a time when the forces of nationalism were riding high in Asia in general and in Viet Nam in particular, the United States tried to slow it down because it was profoundly concerned with its own diplomatic objectives both in Europe and Asia. It ignored the fact that in a guerilla warfare, success lies on that side which holds the support of the masses.

The American policy, however, brought in the end, considerable setbacks even for those diplomatic objectives. This could be traced to the half-hearted, indecisive and haphazard approach of the politico-military circles in Washington, to the war in Viet Nam especially during its critical stage in March-April 1954. It was a confused mixture of unclear proposals and mutually contradictory policy directives. Public pronouncements on proposals like "united action", direct intervention and collective defence without prior discussions within the Administration and consultations with the Allies, not only led to their abortive ending but also were the cause of an unwholesome debate both within and outside the Administration. It also led to a series of accusations and counter-accusations among the three big Western Powers which were closely involved in this.

This debate which gave the appearance that an American involvement in a "tragic adventure" was imminent, cost the United States tremendously in terms of its diplomatic relations. The
Dulles policy of "carrying a small stick and speaking loudly" left a lasting impact not only on US relations with Britain and France, but also on the uncommitted world of Asia. It strengthened the Communists' propaganda against the United States as an imperialist and war-monger, even while the American statements did not lead to or were not meant to lead to any direct intervention.

The present writer does not hold, for a minute, the view that even a massive American assistance would have held Dien Bien Phu. Nor can it be said with any degree of conviction that even a direct American intervention by its ground troops might have brought about a quick victory. (The present situation in Viet Nam has denied such an American victory even after a prolonged warfare). Nor does this writer believe that the political situation in 1954 justified any direct American intervention, as it had been threatening all along.

This fruitless controversy within the United States and the preoccupation of the Administration in facing domestic and foreign criticism, also distracted it from the significance of the main events in and around the Geneva Conference. The proceedings of the Geneva Conference and the relatively flexible attitude of the two leading Communist Powers, the Soviet Union and Communist China, offered a good opportunity for the United States to get out of its past commitments and formulate a clear-cut policy for the future towards Viet Nam.

It is beyond doubt that the very same terms of the Geneva Agreement, which the United States had grudgingly accepted as the best available under the prevailing circumstances, could have been made more concrete and inviolable, if the United States had not refused to endorse them. Even a reluctant endorsement by the
United States would have brought forth a guarantee from the other parties and thereby added to the sanctity and permanence of the Geneva decisions.

As it was, in its refusal to accept the Geneva decision to partition Viet Nam, the United States found itself isolated from its European allies. Such refusal also made unavoidable an unilateral American commitment to preserve South Viet Nam politically and militarily. By a strange coincidence of events, the United States found itself in later years committed, both politically and militarily, to preserving the partition of Viet Nam. It also came to oppose Viet Nam's unification either by political or military means, as it would undoubtedly result in an overwhelming victory for the Communists. The Geneva Agreements, instead of enabling the United States to disentangle itself from Viet Nam with as little loss as possible (as it had then believed) led it to a wider and ever deepening involvement to guarantee the same.

The Geneva Conference and the agreements arrived, also offered an opportunity for the United States to break with the past and formulate an entirely new approach to the Vietnamese question. The Geneva agreement which provided for consultation among the participating nations in order to ensure the cessation of hostilities kept the door open for further contacts between the West and the Communist countries. But by its non-acceptance of the agreement, the United States denied itself of this opportunity. France had modified its approach, by establishing some sort of semi-diplomatic contacts with North Viet Nam and even signed a treaty with the latter for the protection of its economic interests in the North. On the other hand, the United States motivated by
its flexible anti-Communist fervour, took immediate steps to provide all out aid to and collaboration with the South Vietnamese Government.

As the French started a process of gradual withdrawal from Viet Nam, the United States moved forward to occupy a front seat in the latter's policy-making process. Very soon it completely replaced France and started having a directing influence in South Viet Nam. The French who had their obligations to North Viet Nam under the Geneva agreement were at the end of their presence in Viet Nam; the United States, properly speaking, at the threshold of it.

While it is doubtful whether an American recognition of North Viet Nam at this stage would have yielded any tangible results towards terminating the Vietnamese crisis, it is undeniably true that the rigid opposition which the United States adopted towards North Viet Nam and the Geneva accords, did not prove conducive to this. After a brief interval of few years, the Viet Nam question got revived into an issue of primary importance and became the cause of renewed tension in the world. Meanwhile, in the eyes of the US policy-makers, Viet Nam issue had gone through one cycle with the second one about to begin.