Chapter VI

THE CONTROVERSY OVER AMERICAN INTERVENTION IN VIETNAM
The American debate over the question whether the United States should intervene in the Vietnamese crisis with its troops had started as early as Korean armistice. This controversy had been aggravated by the 2 September warning of Dulles to Communist China. However, it was not before the beginning of 1954 that the question of direct intervention assumed crucial importance. The renewed Viet Minh offensive in Laos and the capture of Thakhek on 28 December by the Viet Minh caused deep concern in the United States. On 29 December Secretary Dulles told a Press Conference that in the event of an invasion of Indo-China by the Chinese, the American reaction "would not necessarily be confined to the particular theatre chosen by the Communists for their operations". This warning, repeated in the course of his address of 12 January, coupled with the new offensive strategy of Massive Retaliation revived the debate, but this time in a more serious form.

These anxieties were increased by another incident. In the first week of February, the Administration announced that in response to French appeals for urgent aid, the United States had dispatched 200 technicians to assist the French in servicing aircraft. These technicians were to remain there till the middle of June. The United States also sent a number of B-26s. These actions which might not have normally attracted much attention, now were interpreted as the first step towards a direct intervention by the United States. This appeared to be further confirmed by the formation of an ad hoc Committee consisting of Under Secretary Bedell Smith, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roger Keyes, the Joint
Chiefs of Staff and the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency Allen Dulles, to study further steps for supporting the Navarre Plan. The President also had ordered that Lieut.-General John W. O'Daniel be designated as Chief of the American MAAG in Viet Nam, since the United States "needed military information and judgement from sources in which he [the President] had the utmost confidence". (1) These arrangements were interpreted as indicative of a stepping up of American involvement in Viet Nam.

Rumours began appearing that the United States was contemplating sending its ground troops. That increased American intervention was virtually imminent was the tenor of reports in two journals representing business interests as well as a news service of "leftist" orientation. The Wall Street Journal reported on 9 February 1954 that Admiral Arthur W. Radford had urged that serious consideration be given to sending a US military training mission to Indo-China. The mission would train and coach native troops and would not engage in actual fighting. The Journal report stated that while at first the American soldiers might not be in the front lines, they would be bearing the brunt of the war sooner or later. (2) In the Magazine of Wall Street Harold Du Bois wrote that although "vast new heavy contracts as were incident to the Korean adventure are not to be expected, the item of maintenance of other arms alone [in Indo-China] will mean no small volume of business." The Federated Press, the news agency, interpreted


2. Federated Press (Special Collection, Columbia University, New York), 12 February 1954.
the statement to mean that the Administration might resort to an Indo-Chinese intervention, as a miracle drug for Eisenhower's "rolling adjustment" of the economy just as the Korean war helped to maintain the "Truman prosperity". (3) The Federated Press also believed that the Republican Administration was making quiet preparations for military deployment in Viet Nam on the Korean model as a formula for solving the mounting distress at home. This explained in its view the confidence of President Eisenhower that full time employment and continuing prosperity were right around the corner. (4)

The New York Times feared such a dispatch of technicians might be the first step to the commitment of American forces in Viet Nam. (5) Bill Costello of CBS believed the Department of State thinking to be one where the choice was between a total military victory and the loss of all Southeast Asia. (6)

Debate Over US Intervention

These rumours led to a minor flurry among the public and caused alarm in the Congress. Several influential Senators opposed the dispatch of American technicians to Viet Nam. Senator Mike Mansfield (Democrat, Montana) who was the first to bring up the issue before the Congress, asked whether it meant that the United States would send in naval and air support to be followed at a later stage by combat troops. In his view, the United States

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
should confine itself to supplying essential equipment and material. (7) Senator John C. Stennis (Democrat, Mississippi) too criticized the American action. In his view this was the beginning of American involvement. He said, "... step by step, we are moving into this war in Indo-China and I am afraid we will move to a point from which there will be no return." (8) Representative Clare E. Hoffman (Republican, Michigan) agreed with this view and called the war in Viet Nam as one that did not vitally concern the United States. (9)

These Congressmen also criticized the Administration for taking serious steps without prior consultation with the Congress. The assurance of Senator Knowland (Republican, California) that there was no intention to send American combat forces or of the Department of Defence that these technicians would be withdrawn by 12 June and would not go near the combat areas, did not very much remove the Congressional apprehensions.

Apart from these pressures at home against American intervention, such a course was opposed by its Allies too. Sir Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, believed there was no need for any American intervention or even threats of intervention. In his view there was no possibility of any imminent Chinese intervention. (10) The French too opposed any direct intervention by the United States. They feared such an intervention might bring in the Chinese forces which were too near at hand and

7. Ibid., 8 February 1954, p. 1445.
thereby prolong the war. (11) The French discounted any possibility of Chinese intervention, even though they were steadily building up their forces across the Indo-Chinese frontiers. In fact General Henri Navarre refused the American offer to train the Vietnamese troops or direct the military operations. (12)

It is however, doubtful whether the offer to train the Vietnamese troops, was interpreted in the American official circles as leading to direct intervention. Eisenhower in his memoirs records that the prospects of American military intervention in early 1954 were bleak. If the United States had to "properly and effectively render real help in winning the war" (by this long clause, Eisenhower seemed to have meant simple military action), Eisenhower viewed it could be done in three ways: 1) By a legal right through a Franco-Vietnamese invitation which was not forthcoming for obvious reasons; 2) by winning world opinion through an UN action even if the main burden of the operations were to fall on the United States - this was not possible in the face of the French reluctance; 3) by a declaration of war by the Congress in keeping with the various threats of intervention by the United States. This possibility also was remote as the Congress was strongly opposed to vote for another Asian war. Further there was as yet "no incontrovertible evidence" as Eisenhower himself had pointed out, "of overt Red Chinese participation" in the conflict. (13)

Even if the Administration had contemplated any steps in this direction as the various reports conveyed, such a course was


abandoned in the face of the Congressional and public criticism and above all by France's firm stand against letting American troops in. Hence the Administration soon retraced its steps. President Eisenhower went out of his way to allay such fears of intervention. He stated he was very much opposed to ever getting the United States involved in a hot war in that region, and that he could not conceive of a great tragedy for America than to become involved in an all-out war in Indo-China. (14) He repeated this in a subsequent press conference too. (15) Secretary Dulles himself soon renounced the application of the "New Look" policy to the Indo-Chinese crisis. (16)

The American decision not to intervene at this time was also based on its hopes that the Navarre Plan could be still successful and that it would be enough if the United States continued to help implement the Navarre Plan. Navarre himself said on 19 February that the Viet Minh offensive efforts had reached their peak and should be decisively defeated in 1955. (17) The Administration was encouraged by the reports it was receiving from General O'Daniel. (18) Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson too expressed this hope when he said on 9 February that military victory of the Franco-Vietnamese forces was possible and probable. (19) "Victory",

17. Stebbins, n. 12.
he continued, "would be more difficult should the Chinese intervene but there was no reason to assume that America would have to increase its participation in the campaign." (20) Admiral Radford and Bedell Smith too presented a similar point of view in their testimony before a House Foreign Relations sub-committee. The Navarre Plan, Radford said, was "a broad strategic concept which within a few months should insure a favorable turn in the course of the war." (21)

Hence the United States continued to press the French to act comprehensively and vigorously in prosecuting the war. (22) The United States also made it known to the French that "their commitment in this regard is as binding as is ours America's in providing additional money and equipment". (23) It kept reminding France that "the so-called Navarre Plan visualized substantial victory by summer of 1955". (24)

These assurances helped to allay the fears and anxieties of the public to a great extent. The controversy over direct intervention passed, only to be revived very soon, as it became increasingly clear that the Navarre Plan might not lead to the expected results.

Berliner Conference Decision and their impact on the War in Viet Nam

As the United States was debating the question of extending

20. Ibid., 24 March 1954.
22. Eisenhower, n. 1, p. 344.
23. Ibid.
24. Eisenhower in a cable to Dulles on 10 February. Ibid.
the war by its direct participation, its Foreign Minister, along with those of Britain, France and the Soviet Union was holding a discussion in Berlin and was arriving at a decision to negotiate the issue. The chief result of the Conference (25 January - 18 February) which was held primarily to discuss the German and Austrian questions, was an agreement to hold another and wider conference in Geneva on 26 April on the Far Eastern problems of Korea and Indo-China. It was also agreed to include Communist China as a participant in the Conference.

The US agreement to negotiate the Vietnamese crisis as well as to allow participation to Communist China were decisions which were contrary to the positions that it had been adopting all along. The explanation for this retraction in its Far Eastern policy could be traced to essentially European considerations.

The proposal to include Indo-China in the agenda of the Conference came from the French Foreign Minister Bidault who in the face of the mounting domestic pressure for negotiations, had to take back something tangible from the Berlin Conference. Politically, the Laniel Government was in danger of being toppled and replaced by a government which would commit itself to negotiation. Militarily, the Navarre Plan had not come up to the French expectations and there were pressures to negotiate the issue honourably before the French position would become hopeless.

The United States was however initially reluctant and tried to dissuade the French from any proposal for negotiations as, it believed, even such talks would lead to further deterioration in the morale in Viet Nam and France. However, under the persistent pressure of the French the United States yielded.
The reasons for this yielding were many. The most important consideration was the American keenness for securing the French ratification for the EDC. The United States continued with its confidence in the Laniel Government to get this ratification and was convinced "that no succeeding government would take a stronger position than his on the defence of Indo-China or in support of the European Defense Community". (25) The United States also felt that if it persisted in not allowing any discussions on Indo-China, it might be held responsible for blocking the Conference. This would aggravate the French opposition to the United States and hence to the EDC. This would also mean that "moral obligation to carry on the war in Indo-China might be shifted from French shoulders to the Americans". (26) The United States was also eager to preserve the appearance of Western unity and agreed to negotiations, since Britain as well as France were eager for a Far Eastern Conference.

It is, however, doubtful whether these were the real reasons behind the shift in the American stand. The American authorities were only too well aware of the intense opposition to the EDC in France and that in the prevailing atmosphere no government which supported EDC unconditionally could ever have survived. The US assumption that the Laniel Government had either committed itself to the ratification or would do so in the future, was also not based on a correct study of the situation. In fact Bidault, less of an "European" than his predecessor Schuman was, had warned the American delegation that if the latter did not acquiesce on

25. Ibid., p. 343.
26. Ibid.
this point, the EDC would be certainly scuttled. (27) Nor could it have been unaware of the unpopularity of the Laniel Government. Just to get the negotiations started would not have made it any more popular, as was proved by the fall of his ministry right in the middle of the Geneva Conference.

Hence these factors could have accounted for American concessions only partially. The change should be attributed to other reasons. The United States needed to offset the increasing solicitude which the Russian Foreign Minister was bestowing on Bidault. In fact the Soviet propaganda had all along tried to persuade the French on the hopelessness of their present policies in Viet Nam and on the unreliability of the United States to intervene in their favour in an extreme emergency. In Berlin itself, as one report maintained, Molotov in his private talks had offered to Bidault to mediate and arrange talks between France and the Viet Minh, in return for the French not ratifying the EDC. (28)

The other important reason for the American agreement for negotiations seemed to be the deteriorating situation in the war and the possibility that France might leave the baby at the American door. The United States which was reluctant to take up the responsibility for the war, believed it would be better to negotiate before the French will and military positions weakened further. The Berlin decisions showed that the US Government, whatever its public posture might be, was committed to non-intervention and hence was equally keen to bring the war to early negotiations.

The United States sought to minimise the impact of these concessions by certain reservations to the Berlin agreements viz., that "neither the invitation to nor the holding of the above-mentioned conference shall be deemed to imply diplomatic recognition in any case where it has not already been accorded". (29) In spite of this American contention, this could not be called a real diplomatic face-saver as both the Soviet Union and Communist China hailed the Big Five Conference with Indo-China on its agenda, as a virtual recognition of Communist China as a great power. The nature of the Conference too was not of one between the belligerent sides as the United States had hitherto been insisting upon. It was a round table conference in which the Soviet Union, far from appearing as a member of the "aggressor side" was actually one of the two sponsors. Nor did the Berlin decisions and their defence by Dulles, convince many in the United States. It was criticized by many Senators of both the Parties, Senator Knowland being the most vehement. He called it "appeasement" under a "Far Eastern Munich" and warned against the consequences of an agreement with the Communists. (30)

The Berlin decisions had an immediate impact on the military situation too. They provided a deadline before which the two parties would naturally seek to improve their military positions and thereby strengthen their bargaining position at Geneva. The increased military activities of the Viet Minh and their limited but important successes in surrounding Dien Bien Phu perturbed


Washington. To these French military setbacks was also added the apparent lack of enthusiasm in France for bringing the war to a military victory. The American Administration was disturbed to find that "the French were aiming not to win the war, but to get into a position from which they could negotiate". (31)

In fact the United States had a foreboding of this even during the Conference. It had warned the French then that they might have to meet this increased threat with "corresponding determination". (32) This pessimism was also shared by General Navarre who believed that it was prudent and thoughtless to enter into negotiations with Ho Chi Minh at a time when he had already made plans for a major battle at Dien Bien Phu. "The fate of Dienbienphu", he wrote, "became sealed on the day when the decision in regard to the Conference at Geneva was made." (33) Hence the United States believed that the French should seek to increase the scale of the fighting and put the maximum efforts in order to force a military decision. It sought to inspire and encourage the French by making formal its commitment to maintain American material aid at the highest level that the French forces could usefully apply. (34) The United States, in turn, had secured a French assurance that the latter would cope up with the

34. Eisenhower, n. 1, p. 343.
situation and hold Dien Bien Phu. (35) In spite of this assurance Washington continued to be apprehensive of the French aims as well as the final outcome of the Dien Bien Phu battle. The battle itself assumed a political importance out of all proportion to its military significance and both Paris and Washington staked all their prestige on to this battle. On the part of the Viet Minh, Dien Bien Phu became a potent instrument of psychological pressure on the adversary.

**General Ely's Visit and the American Position on Intervention**

As February came to a close, the military situation only deteriorated from the French point of view. Though the United States continued to hope against hope that the Navarre Plan would bring victory, France itself seemed to be losing its nerve. French opinion became so concerned that it was feared the fall of the fortress might entail complete withdrawal from Viet Nam. The French found the need to dispel any unfounded optimism on the part of the United States. Towards this purpose on 11 March the French cabinet decided to send General Paul Ely to Washington. General Ely's mission had many purposes. He had to inform the United States of the actual military situation which had become so serious that the whole country might be lost soon, that no military victory could be expected and that the conference strategy in Geneva should be based on this realization. General Ely was also to seek from the United States a formal, publicised obligation to intervene directly should China decide to send in "volunteers".

35. Dulles, n. 32.
The French also were keen to know what exact steps would the United States take if the Chinese ignored the threat and actually intervened. Finally the French requested increased American assistance to build up the Vietnamese army. (36)

However even before Ely's mission could materialize, events in Viet Nam had taken a turn to the worse, thereby making the mission still more urgent. On 13 March the Viet Minh made their first large scale attack on Dien Bien Phu and reduced it almost to an indefensible state. This assault followed by heavy losses to both the sides, made the situation serious. The reports reaching the United States estimated that the French had only about a fifty-fifty chance of holding out. (37) The French themselves lost all hopes of saving the situation unless overwhelming forces from outside would come to their rescue. General Navarre sent an urgent appeal to Paris for massive American air support and all possible equipment for transportation by parachute of supplies, as also bombardment of the besieging Viet Minh by American aircraft.

These events modified the aims of Ely's mission to some extent. While drawing a true picture of the hopeless situation in Viet Nam which precluded any outright victory, he had to keep alive the American optimism in the war so that the French could secure increased military supplies as well as further auxiliary military personnel. He had to reiterate the French stand that negotiations at Geneva were the only possibility before the French; at the same time he sought a public statement from the

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37. Eisenhower, n. 1, p. 344.
United States on the possibility of an intervention. (38)

General Ely on his arrival found the United States most concerned with the outcome of the Dien Bien Phu battle. He found the American Administration only too eager to help the French. In fact immediately after his arrival, Ely could secure from Admiral Radford, orders for the immediate shipment from the bases in the Philippines of "everything" that might be useful in the Vietnamese campaign. At a meeting with President Eisenhower he noticed the extraordinary importance attached by the United States to the battle. Ely recorded that in his very presence the American President gave orders to Radford to save the besieged fortress by satisfying all the requests of the French on a priority basis. On 25 March, General Ely signed an agreement with Admiral Radford providing for US airpower to counter Chinese air intervention. (39)

The United States also proposed to the French General far-reaching plans for night-time raids by American navy and army, called "Operation Vulture". The venture was regarded as another phase of the American aid programme and an answer to the increased Chinese assistance, without a direct American intervention. Thereby it would not cause a direct intervention by the massive Chinese troops. The offer however, Radford made it clear, was subject to French approval after which it would be further examined by the United States as it would constitute an entry

38. For these and the following details, the writer had to depend on secondary sources, as no primary source like Eisenhower's memoirs report on Ely's visit. Both Victor Bator's and Melvin Gurtov's books agree on these details which they have taken from French sources like Paul Ely, L'Indochine Dans la Tourmente, Lacourture-Devillers, La Fin d'une Guerre and Joseph Laniel, Le Drama Indochnois.

into the war. (40) Ely was able to secure from Washington more than what he had asked for. Besides the American guarantee against a Chinese air attack and the promise to dispatch twenty-five B-26s, he also succeeded in getting the US offer to send 25 officers to train the Vietnamese forces, to be transferred to Paris.

Ely's visit revived the American optimism over the situation in Viet Nam. (This was the only point on which perhaps General Ely did not succeed viz., in presenting a true picture of the battle and preparing the United States for a defeat there). These talks with Ely gave a sharp turn to the American policy in Viet Nam. President Eisenhower even thought that the French were unduly pessimistic. He thought "odds of two to one favoring an attacker against a position well dug in and determinedly defended should not be regarded with alarm." (41) Following this, the National Security Council reviewed the American policy towards the Vietnamese issue. The remark by President Eisenhower on 24 March

40. Ibid., pp. 79-80. Victor Bator, however, gives a slightly different version. According to him on the last day of Ely's stay in Washington Radford told him "that if the French Government requested direct military intervention, the President's unrestricted instruction opened the possibility of such direct intervention of American airforce for the saving of Dien Bien Phu. According to Radford this would not appear as a direct act of war, but would be a one run, one hit aid act by aerial forces based in Manila." (Italics by Bator) Bator believes that the Admiral gave Ely to understand that such an intervention was not only a probability but a certain possibility. Bator, n. 33, pp. 32-33. See also for this view, Chalmers M. Roberts, "The Day We didn't go to War", The Reporter (New York), 14 September 1954, p. 32. On the other hand Eisenhower has penned that Dulles had clearly told Ely that such an intervention would not be possible on account of the American prestige that might come to be involved in it. Eisenhower, n. 1, p. 345.

41. Eisenhower, n. 1, p. 344.
that Indo-China and the South Pacific were "of the utmost transcendent importance" to the United States was indicative of such a review. (42)

Such a review however, brought out a sharp division of views within the National Security Council. Vice President Richard Nixon, Dulles and Radford reportedly believed that Indo-China must not be allowed to fall into the Communist hands as this would set in motion a series of attacks on other areas. On the other hand Army Chief of Staff Ridgway opposed this approach. In his view such a war would be a "tragic adventure" for the United States. Maxwell Taylor who succeeded General Ridgway as the Army Chief of Staff in 1955, credited the latter for having averted an intervention in Viet Nam. He believed that it was "largely through General Ridgway's efforts the fact was eventually accepted that any intervention by that time would be either too late, too little, or of the wrong kind." (43) Taylor himself found the reasons for this argument against intervention in the lack of ready military forces with conventional weapons which alone could cope with this kind of limited war situation. (44)

The President too was strongly opposed to any such war with Communist China in Viet Nam. He was determined not to go alone in any such military action without the British and other Western allies; nor was he prepared to become involved militarily in any foreign conflict without the prior approval of the Congress. As

42. Referred by Dulles in a speech, Bulletin, 12 April 1954, p. 540.
44. Ibid.
Sherman Adams who was the Assistant to the President at this time, had put it, "he had enough trouble convincing some Senators" in the case of the dispatch of even air force technicians. (45) Hence somewhere at this time the National Security Council arrived at a compromise decision that the United States should prevent the loss of Viet Nam at all costs, if necessary even by a direct intervention. But such an action should be an allied venture and should be accompanied by the French granting complete independence so as to eliminate the issue of colonialism. (46) Following this decision the United States rejected another French appeal, this time through the American Ambassador to France Douglas C. Dillion, for an American air attack to relieve Dien Bien Phu. (47) On 29 March in an address before the Overseas Press Club, Dulles made this latest decision of the NSC public. He said the United States should not "passively" accept Red Chinese control of Southeast Asia but should meet this aggression with "united action". He warned that this course might involve "serious risks". (48)

The 29 March speech of Dulles represented the latest position of United States which marked a distinct departure from the past. Coming within a week after his statement of 23 March wherein he defended the Navarre Plan, this address indicated the new American thinking that the plan might not save the situation. It also showed that the United States for the first time, had

46. Roberts, n. 40, pp. 33-34.
decided to work actively for pulling Viet Nam out of the fire, opening thereby the possibility of direct intervention. Finally the speech indicated a new strategy of "united action" primarily by parties which were under direct threat of attack. President Eisenhower, in a Press Conference on 31 March, confirmed and expanded on this theme. He clarified that such an "united action" in Viet Nam would go beyond the local threat posed at Dien Bien Phu and deal directly with the general threat of Chinese aid, the local situation being taken care of by the French. (49)

THE POLITICS OF THE "UNITED ACTION" APPROACH

The Dulles' speech of 29 March created a widespread reaction within the United States. The American Congress and the public were deeply divided about its implications and expressed a variety of opinions on whether the United States should intervene or not. It revived once again the debate on direct intervention in the Vietnamese war - this time on a still higher gear. With a view to mollify the Congressional opinion and to seek wider prior support, the President convened a secret meeting on 3 April of eight Congressmen (3 Republicans and 5 Democrats, of whom five were senators). Dulles described the aim of the meeting as that of seeking a joint resolution by Congress to permit the President to use air and naval power in Viet Nam. (50) The Administration presented the viewpoint that the United States might not use the land forces (though it did not commit itself on this point) but


50. Chalmers M. Roberts' article deals at length with this Conference. Roberts, n. 40.
would confine itself to "Operation Vulture" using mainly the air force. Dulles hinted that such ground forces as needed would be supplied by the Allies. (51) He believed that such an airstrike might not be resorted to actually as even a mere joint resolution by the Congress authorizing its use might deter the Chinese Communists. The Congressional leaders, however, were not convinced that the United States should intervene directly. Instead they laid down three conditions for any American action, as being preliminary to any Congressional support.

1) It should be part of a coalition to include the other free nations of Southeast Asia, the Philippines, and the British Commonwealth;

2) The French must agree to accelerate their independence program for the Associated States so there could be no interpretation that United States assistance meant support of French colonialism;

3) The French must agree not to pull their forces out of the war if we put our forces in. (52)

Following this conditional support by the Congress leaders, the Administration proceeded to take the necessary steps to prepare the public opinion both at home and abroad in favor of such an intervention. On 5 April, in a statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Dulles said that the Chinese support of the Viet Minh effort had reached new heights. For the first time, he acknowledged not merely that the Chinese personnel were at the war fronts but were active participants in the war. At the

51. President Eisenhower, however, on the very next day wrote in a letter to Churchill that "the United States would expect to play its full part in such a coalition" and that he did "not envisage the need of any appreciable ground forces on your (British) or our part." Eisenhower, n. 1, p. 347.

52. Ibid.
same time, he presented a hopeful picture of both the Navarre Plan as well as French military strength thereby justifying the usefulness of a possible American action. (53) This American confidence and its decision on conditional intervention were reiterated by the President himself in a Press Conference two days after this. He referred in this to the "falling domino" concept and called Indo-China as the first domino. If the Communists knocked it out, it would be followed by the collapse of Burma, Thailand, Malaya, and Indonesia. It might even topple America's island defense chain of Japan, Formosa and the Philippines and pose a threat to the entire Pacific. The fall of Indo-China hence would mean "the beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influence". (54) Though this view of Indo-China's importance was not new to the Department of State, it was for the first time officially described as the philosophical basis of a possible American intervention. It was also a public expression of the American strategic planning as worked out by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Pentagon.

The American President also took steps to seek the co-operation of its allies in this venture. On 4 April in a letter to the British Prime Minister, he spelt out the American thinking on this and appealed to him to join in an "ad hoc grouping" consisting of United States, United Kingdom, France, the Associated States, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and the Philippines. (56)

56. For the text of the letter, Eisenhower, n. 1, p. 347.
The United States also informed the French on the necessity to form a coalition of states in order to prevent the Communist hope for a victory before the Geneva Conference. Dulles made it clear to the French Ambassador that such a coalition should be capable of swift action and should issue a joint warning to the Chinese similar to the one issued after the Korean truce agreement by the sixteen nations. (57)

However, the American Government found it difficult to bring around the American public to support an intervention. This was evidenced by the adverse reaction to a supposedly off-the-record remark by Vice-President Nixon on 16 April at the convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. "If in order to avoid further Communist expansion in Asia and particularly in Indo-China", he said in answering a question, "if in order to avoid it we must take the risk now by putting American boys in, I believe that the Executive Branch has to take the politically unpopular position of facing up to it and doing it, and I personally would support such a decision." (58) The statement was interpreted as an expression of the American decision for unilateral intervention in Indo-China. Nixon was damned in Congress for whooping it up for war. This brought forth a denial by Dulles that the use of American soldiers in Southeast Asia was "unlikely". (59) Nixon himself was forced to withdraw his remarks; he said later that the aim of the United States was to avoid involvement if possible and seek an "honourable and peaceful

59. Ibid., 20 April 1954.
settlement" of the crisis at Geneva. (60)

The reactions from the allies too were cool. Churchill in his brief reply showed that he was not enthusiastic about joining the United States in taking a firm position. (61) The British viewed that such a policy was "unrealistic" as the conditions for a favourable situation in Viet Nam no longer existed. (62) The British Foreign Secretary felt "to form and proclaim a defensive coalition before we went to the Conference table would be unlikely to help us militarily and would harm us politically, by frightening off important political allies." (63) He also was of the view that a warning would not have any effect as China was already engaged in the war. (64)

60. Ibid., 21 April 1954. Various interpretations have been given to Nixon's "off-the-record" remarks. Secretary Dulles, in his denial of any intervention by the United States brushed it aside as "a perfectly legitimate and personal" opinion. Sherman Adams confirms this when he reports of a telephonic conversation between Nixon and Eisenhower who was then in Augusta. Adams, n. 43. On the other hand the statement has been read, as a trial balloon by Nixon to test the public opinion in the changed circumstances. Sherman Adams himself supports this when he wrote, that "in that uncomfortable April 1954, the U.S. had to make some kind of threat of armed intervention, whether the American people wanted it or not. The Defense Department and the National Security Council were worried about the possibilities of French surrender or pull out." Ibid., pp. 121-2. A third interpretation calls the statement as evidence of the difference of opinion in the higher echelons on unilateral intervention. While Nixon was a supporter of it Dulles opposed unilateral intervention and favoured united action. Bator, n. 33, pp. 41-42. The State Department's rejoinder issued on the same day, confirms this. It read; "he was stating a course of possible action which he was personally prepared to support under a highly unlikely hypothesis." New York Times, 18 April 1954.

63. Ibid., p. 93.
64. Ibid.
As for the French, the proposal of united action meant a change in the mode of "Operation Vulture". From being a joint Franco-American venture, it would now move into a multi-national operation. This in turn meant a certain delay in its implementation at a time when the French were keen to bring a quick blow before the Geneva Conference began. The French also believed any "united action" or declaration of a multi-national warning would prejudice the chances of concluding an acceptable armistice at Geneva. (65) The French continued to believe the war should be essentially under their control and direction and this would not be possible with a coalition of forces. The French also viewed this proposal as born out of an underestimation of the French people's desire for peace and an exploitation of the French backing for a joint air action. (66) The strong public resentment against American pressure was evidenced by the flurry of activities in the French National Assembly. It led to frequent interpellations of the Government on their intentions and future moves. In his statements made in response to these questionings, the Prime Minister reiterated that France stood by its pledge to seek peace through negotiations at Geneva. The French could accept a limited US air attack in Dien Bien Phu, he said, but rejected "united action" as incompatible with a total effort at obtaining a negotiated settlement. (67)

These differences with the Allies necessitated a quick trip by Secretary Dulles to London and Paris in order to persuade the

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65. In a reply handed over to Dulles on 8 April. Gurtov, n. 39, p. 100.
66. Le Monde, 10 April 1954.
latter to see the American viewpoint, "a mission of peace through strength", (68) as Dulles called it. The proposal which Dulles carried in his packet was much milder than what he had advocated earlier. The Secretary had dropped the proposal for a declaration warning Communist China with the threat to the use of force and had returned to the bare essentials of 4 April decisions. (69) Dulles found the British adamant in their stand against intervention. The British put forward three objections for a united action: 1) The issue of Indo-China could not be solved by military means alone and the West should wait and see what proposals the Communists had to make at Geneva; 2) If an intervention were to take place, the British Chiefs of Staff did not believe it would be confined to air and naval operations; 3) If an intervention were to take place, the projected coalition should include India. (70) On the other hand the British gave their conditional support to the plans for a South East Asia collective defence organization. (71) The British believed such an arrangement should include India and the other Asian Commonwealth countries. This was, however, unpalatable to Dulles who believed the inclusion of India would give rise to demands in the United States to include Formosa and Japan as well. (72) The Communique which was finally issued on 13 April


69. Ibid. Eden also refers to this modification of American stand. Eden, n. 10, p. 95.

70. Eden, n. 10, p. 95.

71. There is no prior reference to this plan for collective security organization, which later took the shape of SEATO. It is believable that Dulles came out with the proposal as an alternate to the "united action". This is confirmed by Roberts' account. Roberts, n. 40, p. 34.

72. Ibid., pp. 95-98.
reflected these Anglo-American differences of opinion. While avoiding any reference to India, it was silent on the issue of "united action" and expressed agreement for "an examination of the possibility of collective defence". (73) Dulles' "united action" proposal did not fare much better in Paris. The French also practically followed the British line of thinking, preferred limited American assistance to a total entanglement in "united action". (74)

This British opposition and French reluctance to agree for united action have been, however, contradicted by accounts originating from other American sources. Eisenhower, in his *Mandate for Change*, has stated that Dulles thought that the Communiqué on his talks with Eden had "indicated a large measure of acceptance of our view of the danger and necessity for united action". (75) Eisenhower also called Dulles' trip as one which achieved "apparent progress in Paris and London", though he went ahead and described the areas of disagreement. Sherman Adams thought that Dulles returned to Washington with confidence that the British "seemed well disposed to joining the Americans in an effort to stop Communist aggression". (76) Adams added that Bidault too gave him "a reluctant agreement".

Dulles himself expressed a similar view of British willingness to join the "united action". In an address to the Los Angeles

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74. Ibid., pp. 258-9.
75. Eisenhower, n. 1, p. 348.
76. Adams, n. 45, pp. 122-3; as also Donovan, n. 47, p. 235.
World Affairs Council on 11 June 1954, Dulles said, "I went to Europe on this mission and it seemed that there was agreement on our proposal. But when we moved to translate that proposal into reality, some of the parties held back because they had concluded that any steps to create a united defense should await the results of the Geneva Conference." (77) Dulles repeated this belief of his in a later interview to *Life* on 11 January 1956. He stated then that he obtained in London and Paris what he "thought was an agreement on united action" which he "had hoped to get ... into force promptly and before the Geneva Conference was held". (78)

These two contrary interpretations point to a possible misunderstanding between Washington and London. This misunderstanding of the British position was confirmed by the convening of a meeting of the ambassadors of nine nations in Washington by the Department of State on 20 April to discuss unified action. However due to British opposition (79) this conference turned into a briefing session on the Geneva Conference. Chalmers Roberts mentions a misunderstanding in the Department of State on the British agreement to the collective defence organization. "Dulles felt this was the 'united front' he wanted", views Roberts, "and that it would lead to 'united action'." (80) Such a misunderstanding might also have been due to a lack of clarity on the


79. Dulles attributed this British "change of mind" to "the pressure from Nehru who had very little sympathy with any efforts to assist the French". *Eisenhower*, n. 1, p. 349.

80. Roberts, n. 40, p. 34.
part of the British Government itself. Roberts believes that "just what the British did agree to is not clear, apparently, not even to them." It looked, Dulles' trip had not yielded anything more than a setback for the Administration and a personal rebuff to Dulles.

However what looked like a collapse of the American proposal of "united action", was averted by the events in Dien Bien Phu which steadily deteriorated. On 22 April, when the Foreign Ministers of Western European countries had assembled for a NATO Council meeting in Paris, the French Government received a cable from General Navarre to the effect that only a massive air attack within the next seventy two hours could save Dien Bien Phu, the alternative being a ceasefire. Such an air strike which would be on the basis of Operation Vulture would mean massive B-29 bombing, from US bases outside Indo-China. The French, in passing on the request to the United States, expressed readiness to even internationalise the war if America would act to save the fortress.

What exactly was the immediate reaction of Dulles and the US Administration to this third appeal from France, is a matter of controversy and borders on utter vagueness. According to the American sources like Eisenhower's account and Donovan's narration, the United States decided not to intervene. Its decision was due to more than one reason: 1) The reluctance of Britain to join in any such action which would mean a Congressional disapproval. 2) The United States thought the situation was too gloomy to be saved by a mere airstrike. Even Admiral Radford who had initially favoured intervention, now opposed it as in his view, the battle lines were becoming so indistinguishable as to make an air attack
ineffective. (81) It was also felt that 72 hours was too short a period for the President to reach the Congress and ask for a declaration of war. The United States also came round to believe that the fall of Dien Bien Phu did not necessarily mean the loss of Indo-China. It viewed the French were magnifying its importance beyond reality and was worried about a defeat at Dien Bien Phu might mean a French withdrawal from entire Indo-China. (82) While the French were keen to save Dien Bien Phu, the United States had already given it up as a lost battle and had begun to look beyond it to the future of Indo-China. Its repeated efforts to get the British consent and participation even at this late hour, could be explained only in this way.

British sources, however, presented a contrary account of the American intentions and policy during this crucial period. According to Sir Anthony Eden's account, both Secretary Dulles and Admiral Radford were keen to exploit the French offer for an intervention, the only hitch being the President's insistence that Britain should agree to go along. Eden did not agree with the American version that the French morale was at a low ebb, that the military situation was so desperate that the French would withdraw if Dien Bien Phu fell. According to Eden's account, again, the United States was fully prepared with a plan for Presidential action so as to bring about the strike on 23 April and also with a letter of intentions to be signed by the Washington ambassadors of the eight nations for such a joint venture. (83)

81. Eisenhower, n. 1, p. 251; as also Donovan, n. 47, p. 234.
83. Most of Anthony Eden's account is corroborated by Roberts' article.
He has recorded that even the French Foreign Minister was not convinced about the need for American intervention and that it was only the intense American pressure brought upon the French that made them consent to American intervention and seek the British consent for the same. Hence according to Eden's account, the credit for having prevented an expansion of the war on the day the Geneva Conference opened, went squarely to Britain. (84)

DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE ADMINISTRATION ON INTERVENTION

These two contradictory accounts present a confusing picture of the American stand on intervention. The confusion could be mainly traced to the fact that most of the accounts like those of Eisenhower, Eden, Adams, Donovan, were written many years after the events and hence were attempts to defend and justify one individual or the other. Eisenhower's account attempts to stress the view that basically he was opposed to intervention and that he would not have let the United States intervene, unless it could carry both the allies and the American Congress. His book, however, does not indicate any difference of opinion between himself and his Secretary of State. Eden's memoirs too do not refer to any such difference in the approach but only in favour of

84. Here, however, Roberts' account differs slightly. While agreeing with the basic proposition that the United States was willing to act provided it had the British support, Roberts does not talk of any reluctance on the part of the French. Nor does he believe the content of the letter which Dulles delivered to Bidault on 25 April, to be one of asking the French to persuade the British. Instead he mentions that in that letter Dulles expressed the American inability to intervene in the war as such. Roberts' account is, however, based only on information he had collected.
intervention. However there are other accounts like those of Adams and Donovan, which maintain that such a difference did exist between the two. Sherman Adams contends that "the hard and uncompromising line that the United States Government took toward Soviet Russia and Red China between 1953 and the early months of 1954 was more a Dulles line than an Eisenhower one." (85) Eisenhower deferred to the tougher stand of Dulles in foreign policy, he says in another place, "because he agreed with his Secretary of State that the United States had to be more positive in its dealings with the Communists." (86) As an illustration to this difference in approach, Adams cites the Indo-Chinese developments of April 1954.

Secretary Dulles, referring to these critical days, had said in his interview with James Shepley on 11 January 1956, that the United States was on the brink of war and that it was only the strong and courageous action of the President and Department of State which helped in averting the American involvement in the Indo-Chinese war. (87) Sherman Adams, however, does not agree with this version. He wrote:

There is no clear evidence to show that we were teetering on the brink at Geneva in the bold front that Dulles contended saved half of Indo-China from the Communists. The President knew that the American people had no appetite for another prolonged war in Southeast Asia. He was determined not to become involved without the participation of the British, and neither Congress nor the British wanted to fight in Indo-China. (88)

If Adams is to be believed, the Dulles policy of deterrence was not even put to a crucial test in Indo-China, as the latter had claimed.

85. Adams, n. 45, p. 87.
86. Ibid., p. 88.
87. Shepley, n. 78.
He however added that had the Communists "pushed on with an aggressive offensive after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, instead of stopping and agreeing to stay out of Southern Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, there was a strong possibility that the United States would have moved against them." "A complete Communist conquest of Indo-China", Sherman Adams reflected, "would have had far graver consequence for the West than a Red victory in Korea". (89) Robert Donovan too agrees with this interpretation. In his view in the circumstances in April 1954 "the sum of his President’s influence ... tended away from rather than toward military intervention of any kind". (90)

On the other hand, there are other accounts which hold that the confusion was caused by the differences within the National Security Council. According to most accounts, Admiral Radford, Vice-President Nixon and Under Secretary Bedell Smith supported intervention, in unison with allies if possible, but unilateral if necessary. In contrast, to this all the Chiefs of Staff were completely opposed to any sort of military involvement. The position of Dulles himself was not very clear and has led to conflicting accounts. Victor Bator in his book logically argues that Dulles was opposed to unilateral intervention, was indifferent to Operation Vulture and most unresponsive to Ely’s requests during the latter’s visit in March. The rejection of the second French request for intervention on 4 April is also credited by Bator to Dulles (though according to Donovan, Dulles refused it because he knew very well that "Eisenhower was dead set against intervention

89. Ibid., p. 120.
90. Donovan, n. 47, p. 257.
of any kind without Congressional approval") Bator also develops the idea that Dulles was the sole author of the proposal of "united action". In this context he calls the 29 March speech of Dulles as "the occasion to kill the Ely-Radford plan of intervention and introduce his own general foreign policy line". (91) The concept of "united action", Bator adds, was "the vehicle on which Dulles' opposition against Radford-Ely plan rode to success." However, the main basis of difference between the two approaches was not the aggressive or bellicose nature of unilateral intervention as against the more conciliatory form of collective action. The Radford plan talked in terms of a small scale, short term military operation, while the Dulles' united action aimed at a military victory and would have internationalised the war. Whereas the Radford Plan would have meant supporting French colonialism, Dulles' united action would have made it into a respectable anti-Communist war and made Viet Nam a part and parcel of America's overall foreign policy. Bator also believes that initially President Eisenhower supported the Radford plan for aerial intervention. It was Dulles' political arguments plus the strong disapproval by the Congressmen that made Eisenhower change his mind and approve Dulles' policy which aimed at a "far-sighted comprehensive, long-range operation". (92)

Joseph Buttinger, a close observer of the Indo-Chinese affairs, reaches a different conclusion. He is of the view that the Secretary of State along with Vice-President and Joint Chiefs

91. Bator, n. 33, p. 38.
92. Ibid., pp. 35-50.
of Staff, supported intervention. (93)

In the Leftist circles in the United States, Dulles was considered to be virulent interventionist. According to Federated Press, Dulles' 29 March speech was nothing but "the war cry" of "a premier Wall Street Corporation lawyer", acting for the big business and all reactionary forces in the United States. (94)

THE DOMESTIC REACTION TO A POSSIBLE AMERICAN INTERVENTION

There is, however, another aspect to the question of intervention; even if the President had adopted a clear-cut decision in favour of intervention, would he have been in a position to implement it? Would the Congress have approved intervention if the President had asked for its support? Chalmers Roberts is of the view, the Congress would have, in the end, done what Eisenhower asked, provided he had asked for it forcefully and explained the facts and their relation to the national interests of the United States. (95)

The New York Times too believed that although there was "profound resistance in the Senate" to intervention, this might weaken given certain conditions, including the actual or imminent collapse of resistance, an indication of support from the allies and a good measure of success for the Administration's efforts to make the country see the danger. (96)

95. Roberts, n. 40, p. 35.
However there is much evidence to point the other way. Influential Congressmen belonging to both the parties looked with disfavour on the prospects of a new Korea. According to Christian Science Monitor there were not more than five men in the Capitol Hill who supported unequivocally a decisive intervention. (97)

This was evidenced by the various proposals like the Bricker Amendment and an attempt by the Representative Frederick R. Conder, the Jr., on 15 April to add a rider to defence appropriation bill which, if accepted, would have limited the powers of the President to send troops anywhere in the world without the consent of the Congress. The debate in the Congress on 6 April also proved the intense opposition by the Congress.

As for the public opinion, a Gallup poll in March showed 85 per cent as being against American involvement in Indo-China. (98) The Congressional mail before and after Nixon's address of 16 April and the furore it caused indicated the public disapproval of another war, with all that it implied.

American business and labour circles too were divided on the issue of intervention. In general the business and financial press predicted an early intervention by the United States. Both Wall Street Journal and New York Times reported that buying of tin, copper, lead, zinc and rubber bordered on the panicky, based on fears that the war in Viet Nam might develop into another Korea.

97. Christian Science Monitor, 29 April 1954. This would have included Senator Style Bridges (Democrat, New Hampshire) who even suggested bringing pressure on America's allies by withholding appropriations for the programmes, Senator Knowland and other conservative Republicans.

The speculative circles which stood to gain, naturally approved intervention. The *Magazine of Wall Street* approved the "tough talking" of Dulles. The *Federated Press* hinted darkly that Wall Street had voted for an unilateral intervention even if the Allies refused to go along. According to it, the motives behind this plea for intervention were not only the increase in the speculative trade, but also the need for raw material and the increasing dependence for important metals. (99)

A reexamination of the "New Look policy" was suggested by A.F.L. President, George Meany. On 12 April he called for sending more American troops to Europe and Asia, for substantially increasing military aid for Indo-China and to end economies in military expenditure. He opposed the Geneva Conference as appeasement of aggression and a blow to the camp of peace. (100)

On the other hand some of the local labour unions opposed the interventionist policies of the Administration. The Ford Local 600 of the United Auto Workers believed that the Republican Administration was talking of an Indo-Chinese intervention in order to create artificial prosperity. (101) There were other local unions like the Annual International Union of Mine Mill and Smelters Workers Wage Policy Conference in Denver, the Armour, Swift and Wilson Co. Packinghouse Workers of Chicago, the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers in Louisville, Ky., and the local 758 of the International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers which opposed an American intervention in the Vietnamese

100. As reported by *Federated Press*, ibid., 9 April 1954.
101. Ibid., 12 April 1954.
war. They even sought assurances that no American would be sent to the war. Hence on the whole, but for a few business and financial circles and a section within the military as represented by Radford, any direct military intervention was generally opposed in the United States. In the face of this, the American idea of "united action" collapsed on 25 April. On 26 April, the day the Geneva Conference was inaugurated, the American President traced the future policy of the Government. In a meeting with the Congressional leaders the President said the United States was not going to carry the rest of the world on its back. He also said the United States would not send its ground troops independently nor was it going to be involved alone in a power move against the Russians. (102) As for the American attitude to the Conference itself, the President said in a press conference, the aim was "to arrive at some situation that at least we could call a modus vivendi". (103) This modus vivendi, he explained in a subsequent press conference (29 April), was a middle path as between the unacceptable (Communist conquest of the entire region) and the unattainable (a firm, stable relationship with the Communists). At the same time the United States kept the door open for an American entry into the war, if the need arose in the future. The President told the legislative leaders when he met them on 26 April, that there might be some possibility in the future that some US units might become involved.

It was with this perspective that the United States entered into the Geneva Conference, reconciled to an arrangement across the table.