Chapter I

THE AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM FROM THE END OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR TO 1961
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The evolution of American policy regarding Indochina in general and Vietnam in particular has to be reviewed in the context of the overall objectives of American foreign policy, the priorities that were accorded to different regions of the world, perception of the nature and magnitude of "threats" in the different regions, allocation of resources to respond to "threats," and the adoption of appropriate modalities for actions in various regions geared for the attainment of objectives sought. In the immediate post-war period, American policy-makers identified the Soviet Union as the principal adversary and Communist parties in various parts of the world as accessories of the Soviet Union whose activities were inimical to the interests of the United States. Western Europe was regarded as the area of crucial importance, and collaboration, not only with Britain but with France as well, were regarded as vitally important in bringing about a state of affairs in Western Europe that could deter a possible Soviet attack. The emergence of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the subsequent Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia served to deepen the anxiety of American policy-makers to formulate measures for the "containment" of Soviet expansion. 1

1 The revisionists in the US do not accept the account of the origin of the cold war as given by the American Government. For their viewpoint, see William Appleman Williams, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (New York, 1959).

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The prospect that the Soviet Union might sooner or later attain a nuclear capability was a further stimulus for early implementation of counter-measures. The enunciation of the Truman Doctrine, the initiation of the Marshall Plan, and the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, were among the significant steps taken by the United States to respond to what was described as the challenge of "Communist expansionism." The Truman Doctrine was based on a concept to which subsequently the name "domino theory" was given. President Truman argued that unless Greece was promptly aided to frustrate attempted subversion by an armed minority of Communists, Turkey would be endangered and the Middle East would be in jeopardy. The concept was accompanied by a suggested course of action which appeared to be global in scope. The President said, "The free peoples of the world look to us for support in maintaining their freedoms." He voiced confidence that Congress would face these "great responsibilities...squarely." The "threat" that the United States and the "free world" confronted was described by Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson, the person who was mainly responsible for drafting Truman's message,


in briefing Congressional members in the White House on 26 February as:

In the past eighteen months ... Soviet pressure on the Straits, on Iran, and on northern Greece had brought the Balkans to the point where a highly possible Soviet breakthrough might open three continents to Soviet penetration. Like apples in a barrel infected by one rotten one, the corruption of Greece would infect Iran and all to the east. It would also carry infection to Africa through Asia minor and Egypt, and to Europe through Italy and France, already threatened by the strongest domestic Communist parties in Western Europe.... These were the stakes that British withdrawal from the eastern Mediterranean offered to an eager and ruthless opponent.

NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, came into existence in 1949. The US and France were partners in an alliance that American policy-makers regarded as of utmost importance in responding to the principal identified adversary. The partnership with France and the Europe-centred approach of the principal American policy-makers were factors that were to colour the thinking of the latter in regard to the struggle of the Vietnamese people for emancipation from French imperial rule. The explosion by the Soviet Union of a nuclear device in 1949 served to increase the importance that American policy-makers attached to NATO as well as to France. The establishment of the Peoples' Republic of China in October 1949 raised the spectre of a vast Sino-Soviet

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bloc which was regarded as having serious implications for American security not only in Europe but in Asia as well. Even though Europe still remained as the area of highest priority, American policy-makers devoted attention to evolving a course of action to respond to contingencies that may arise in Asia as a result of Communist moves. This was to have implications for American policy towards Indochina.

As early as 13 May 1947, the State Department, cabled certain guidelines to the American diplomats in Paris, Saigon and Hanoi,

...the key to our position is our awareness that in respect of developments affecting position Western democratic powers in southern Asia, we essentially in same boat as French also as British and Dutch. We cannot conceive setbacks to long-range interests France which would also be setbacks our own.... 4

The anti-French Viet Minh leader Ho Chi Minh was described by Dean Acheson as an agent of "international communism." In the fall of 1948, the Office of Intelligence and Research of the State Department stated that Ho was a Communist but he was not a Moscovite. It said, "If there is a Moscow-directed conspiracy in Southeast Asia, Indochina is an anomaly so far." However,

4 US House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, United States-Vietnam Relations, Prepared by the Department of Defence (Washington, D.C., 1971), Book 1, p. A-46. (Hereafter this major source would be referred to as the DOD Documents.)

with quick political developments in the Far East and Southeast Asia, Washington's appraisal of Ho also changed. On 1 February 1950 Secretary Acheson charged that Ho was not a nationalist; he was subservient to Russian control and he was the "mortal enemy" of native independence of Indochina. The next day the US, in accordance recognition to the French-controlled governments in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, said that it would be an "encouragement to national aspirations" of the peoples of the colonial areas of Southeast Asia. On 8 May 1950 the Secretary of State, while announcing the American decision to extend economic and military aid to France and the "Associated States," again charged that Ho's movement was "dominated by Soviet imperialism."

American policy of support to the French military action against the Viet Minh was based on the belief stemming from the "domino concept" that the "fall" of Indochina to Communism would lead to the spread of Communism to the other parts of Southeast Asia. NSC 64, dated 27 March 1950, stated:

> It is important to United States security interests that all practicable measures be taken to prevent further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Indochina is a key area of Southeast Asia and is under immediate threat. The neighbouring countries of Thailand and Burma could be expected to fall under Communist domination if Indochina were controlled by a Communist-dominated government. The balance of Southeast Asia would then be in grave hazard.

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7 Ibid., p. A-61.
American policy-makers believed that the valuable raw material resources of Southeast Asia should not come under the control of elements hostile to the United States and the West. Moreover, American policy-makers might have been interested in the markets of Southeast Asia for American products. However, the American economic interest in the area should not be overstressed. It was not the economic significance of the area as such but its value as an integral part of the international economic system imposing no restrictions on the access to raw materials and markets which might have led the US to support France in Indochina against the "Communists."

In April 1950 the National Security Council prepared a paper known as NSC 68 which summarized Washington's attitude towards "threats" posed by "international Communism." The paper recommended that the US must resist, with force if necessary, "Communist expansion." Six days after the President signed NSC 68, war broke out in Korea and Truman ordered American combat

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9 An NSC staff study of 13 February 1952 stressed the importance of the raw materials of Southeast Asia to the Western Powers. It said, "...Indonesia is a secondary source of petroleum whose importance would be enhanced by the denial to the Western Powers of petroleum sources in the Middle East."


troops into action to resist what the US described as North Korean aggression against South Korea. In another move that was to have far-reaching implications in future, Truman increased economic and military aid to the French in Indochina. In July the first shipments of American military material to Vietnam were air-lifted to Saigon. The next month a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was sent to Indochina with the task of transferring this material directly to the French and to avoid direct dealings with the native people. After the entry of China into the war, Washington's anti-China stance substantially intensified even though it continued to label China as "Moscow's puppet."

With the massive involvement of China in the Korean War towards the end of 1950 and with continued fighting by the Viet Minh against France in Indochina, the policy-makers in Washington increasingly tended to believe that the "enemy" operations in both Korea and Indochina were parts of the common effort made by the "Communists" for furthering their expansion in the Far East and Southeast Asia. The danger emanating from China to Southeast Asia came to be increasingly stressed. NSC 124/2, June 1952, stated that "the danger of an overt military attack against Southeast Asia is inherent in the existence of a hostile aggressive Communist China." The document carried the implication that the

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11 For Sino-American military confrontation in Korea, see Allen S. Whiting, China Crosses the Yalu (New York, 1960); and Tang Tsou, America's Failure in China 1941-50 (Chicago, 1963), pp. 555-91.

12 DOD Documents, n. 4, Book 1, V.B. 2, p. 267.
"loss" of any entity in Southeast Asia would be adverse to the security interests of both Western Europe and the United States. It held that the US should use her influence with France not to give up her military effort in Indochina.

Thus, as the Truman Administration drew to a close, the "domino" concept in respect of Southeast Asia virtually became an article of faith. The device of military alliances to meet the Communist challenge in Asia had come to be accepted and a necessity of supporting French military action against the Viet Minh fully acknowledged. While considerable public criticism had developed concerning the Administration's handling of the Korean War, the deepening involvement in Indochina did not attract significant attention.

The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam

Despite the Truman Administration's vigorous anti-Communist posture, it had come under severe attack from political critics, mostly Republicans, who alleged that it had "lost" China and that it was "soft on Communism." Republican Senator Joseph R. McCarthy had begun to loom large and the phenomenon that came to be known as McCarthyism appeared to assume significant dimensions. The State Department became a major target of McCarthy's attack and even General Marshall was not spared. The Presidential election of 1952 resulted in a landslide victory for the Republican candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower. The popular war hero had charged during the campaign that the Democratic Administration had followed
a policy of weakness in the face of Communist challenge and had bungled the war in Korea. His running mate, Senator Richard M. Nixon of California who had shot into political prominence as a fighter against Communists, was far more denunciatory than the General in his attacks on the Truman Administration's course in Asia. Indochina did not figure significantly during the campaign.

The man whom the new President chose to be his Secretary of State was John Foster Dulles who soon emerged as the strong personality of the Administration. During the campaign, he had criticized the policy of containment and had asserted that the Republican Party would strive for the "liberation" of captive nations. Dulles asserted that the Truman Administration had not acted vigorously in checking the expansion of Communism in Asia. He regarded Western colonialism as having reached a phase when it was geared to preparing native peoples for self-government, and he viewed the French course in Indochina as one of "gradually promoting self-government in Indochina." Dulles believed that the US, having decided to give recognition to the Bao Dai government that France had sponsored in Indochina, should not hesitate to give adequate backing to that regime, as against the Communists who were opposed to it. Dulles said:

Since that is so, we must help the government we back. Its defeat, coming after the reverses suffered by the National Government of China, would have further serious repercussions on the whole situation in Asia and

14 Ibid., p. 231.
the Pacific. It would make even more people in the East feel that friendship with the United States is a liability rather than an asset. 15

With the US having acquired a thermonuclear capability in 1953 and with the likelihood that the Soviet Union would acquire a similar capacity before long, the Eisenhower Administration came out with the so-called "New Look" based on the doctrine of "massive retaliation." Dulles, as the principal spokesman of the Administration, explained the concept in an address to the Council on Foreign Relations on 12 January 1954. He said, "The way to deter aggression is for the free community to be willing and able to respond vigorously at places and with means of its own choosing."

In regard to Indochina, the Eisenhower Administration continued the same course as its predecessor. NSC 5405, dated 16 January 1954, contained the usual reference to the raw material resources of Southeast Asia and reiterated that the loss of Southeast Asia to the Communists would have "serious economic consequences for many nations of the free world and conversely would add significant resources to the Soviet bloc...."

The heavy toll of war in Indochina and the economic and political difficulties it led to domestically led France to seek

15 Ibid.
a deeper commitment on her behalf by the United States. The Eisenhower Administration was committed to the promotion of an European Defence Community (EDC) which was to consist of France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and West Germany. The US attached a great deal of importance to the formation of EDC. Secretary Dulles said:

President Eisenhower is deeply convinced that there can be no long-term assurance of security and vitality for Europe, and therefore for the Western World including the United States, unless there is a unity which will include France and Germany.... Until the goals of EDC are achieved, NATO, and indeed future peace, are in jeopardy. 18

The Administration was concerned when France showed some luke-warmness towards the move. Misgivings over what West Germany might do in the future continued to influence French thinking. It became necessary for the United States to provide appropriate "sweeteners" to keep the French in line: France was finding the ongoing war in Indochina a serious economic drain. The US extended economic assistance to France and the objective probably was both to help France in her effort in Indochina and to induce France to ratify EDC.

The continued deterioration of the French military position in Indochina brought Washington face to face with the issue of possible direct US military involvement in Indochina. There was consensus in Washington about the serious repercussion that a

"Communist" victory in Vietnam would have, but major agencies in Washington differed amongst themselves on how to meet this contingency. The State Department was for American intervention with ground forces, if necessary, to avert a French collapse but some elements in the Defence Department were not prepared to accept this view. At an inter-agency meeting of 29 January 1954 General Walter Bedell Smith, the Under Secretary of State, said that the importance of winning in Indochina was so great that if the worst came to the worst he personally would favour intervention with US air and naval forces—not ground forces. Admiral Radford, the JCS Chairman, concurred with him. But Roger Keys, Deputy Secretary of Defence, expressed his reservations about the step advocated by Smith and Radford.

Chairman Radford could not carry the JCS with him. The JCS' hesitation to endorse the proposal of employing US forces in support of France in Indochina might have been due to two factors. One of them was the recent experience of American troops in Korea. The Korean experience showed that even with monopoly of the air and of the sea by the US, a substantial induction of American ground troops was necessary in Korea. In spite of all these, however, the US failed to "win" the war. The JCS said that the prospects in Vietnam might be worse. The adversary was far more formidable and tested. It had shown its fighting prowess against the Japanese and French forces. Moreover, unlike Korea, Vietnam

19 DOD Documents, n. 4, vols. 9-10, pp. 240-3.
was full of jungles. In view of this, the JCS, apart from the Chairman, could not buy the argument that American air and naval forces would be enough to save the situation at Dien Bien Phu. They feared that the US would be forced to send ground troops there. In Korea, the US had suffered heavy casualties. The military chafed under the restraints that had been placed on it in regard to operations in the field owing to various political decisions. Since then, "No more Koreas" had become ingrained in the minds of the military. Secondly, Europe was still accorded the first priority vis-a-vis Asia. The JCS feared that the deployment of US troops in Asia would render Europe vulnerable to possible Russian attack.

In January 1954 the JCS disagreed with the idea of sending US troops to Indochina, but they did not foreclose the possibility of sending them in future. At the same time, it is to be emphasized, they were not less hawkish than any other agency in Washington in relation to Indochina. In a memorandum, dated 12 March 1954, they recommended that France be advised not to accept any proposals of coalition, partition or election in Vietnam.

The Dien Bien Phu siege began on 13 March 1954. From that day to 8 May 1954, the decision-making process in Washington underwent hectic movements by its players. The overwhelming concern of Washington seemed to avert a French collapse. The two actors who were very anxious to help France were still Dulles and

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20 Ibid., pp. 266-70.
Admiral Radford, the JCS Chairman. In a memorandum to the President, dated 24 March 1954, Radford said that the fall of Indochina might lead to the loss of the whole of Southeast Asia to the Communists. He, therefore, recommended that the US be prepared "to act promptly and in force possibly to a frantic and belated request by the French for US intervention." This was the personal opinion of the Chairman. He did not have the unanimous support of the JCS for this recommendation.

General Paul Ely, French Chief of Staff, visited Washington on 20 March. Admiral Radford reportedly mentioned to him that the US Air Force and Navy had a plan for a night-time raid against the perimetre of Dien Bien Phu. Its code name was "Operation Vulture." This plan did not involve the use of US ground forces.

Dulles pressed the President hard to send US forces to Dien Bien Phu to the rescue of France. But the President insisted that he would not do so unless and until he had the approval of Congress for it. Dulles and Radford met Congressional leaders on 3 April 1954, but the latter were not receptive to Dulles' proposal for US intervention if her allies did not support her in this operation. The next day Eisenhower outlined the following three

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21 Ibid., p. 290.
23 The meeting between Congressional leaders and the representatives of the Administration on 3 April 1954 will be discussed in Chapter V.
conditions which must be fulfilled before he would consider ordering US troops to Vietnam. They were: (1) formation of a coalition force with America's allies to pursue an "united action;" (2) declaration of French intent to accelerate the independence of Associated States; and (3) Congressional approval of US intervention.

In his desperate attempt to help France at Dien Bien Phu and prevent the Viet Minh from winning a decisive battle, Dulles shuttled between London and Paris from 11 April to 14 April to get their support and cooperation. But, for different reasons, neither of them accepted Dulles' plan. Britain favoured giving the scheduled Geneva Conference a fair trial. Moreover, the personal incompatibility between Dulles and Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Minister, might have partly influenced the British decision not to go along with Dulles' plan of intervention in Indochina. France opposed Dulles' plan for two reasons. She had sought American help only as an emergency measure to save Dien Bien Phu. She was not in favour of any "united action" which would internationalize the issue. Secondly, France wanted a quick settlement. She was afraid that any military intervention in a grand scale might prolong the war and, as a result, delay the settlement. No

24 Gravel, n. 9, p. 90.

"united action" involving American forces could be undertaken and Dien Bien Phu fell to the "Communists" on 7 May. The Geneva Conference was already underway by that time.

But the US did not refrain from making efforts in the direction of intervening in Vietnam even after the start of the Geneva Conference. On 7 May, the day on which Dien Bien Phu collapsed, Eisenhower and Dulles decided that France should be informed that Washington was willing to ask for Congressional authority for intervention if the following preconditions were met. France was to proclaim her desire to grant "genuine freedom" to the Indochinese states—Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. American advisers in Vietnam should "take major responsibility for training indigenous forces" and share "responsibility for military training." It is important to note that the concurrence of London was no longer pressed as a precondition as it was on 4 April. Thus the 7 May decision indicated the increased concern of the US to avert a total victory of "Communists" in Indochina by the deployment of US forces there. It also suggested that Dulles had finally prevailed upon other agencies in Washington to accept some sort of military intervention by the US in Indochina.

In a memorandum to Charles E. Wilson, the Secretary of Defence, dated 20 May 1954, the JCS recommended that the US should limit her military involvement in Indochina only to air and naval actions. They strongly opposed the deployment of American ground

26 Gravel, n. 9, p. 503.
forces. Very bluntly they said, "From the point of view of the United States, Indochina is devoid of decisive military objectives and the allocation of more than token US armed forces to that area would be a serious diversion of limited US capabilities." 27

The above recommendation was apparently a compromise lately reached among the members of the JCS. Sometime between 3 April meeting between Congressional leaders and the Secretary of State and the JCS Chairman, and 7 May, the day on which Dien Bien Phu fell to Viet Minh, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force Nathan F. Twining and Chief of Naval Operations Robert B. Carney appear to have expressed their support for sending US bombers and aircraft carriers to Dien Bien Phu, but they could not take a strong stand on it because of the stiff opposition of General Matthew B. Ridgway, the Chief of Staff of the Army. Ridgway argued that the US could not reap a military victory in Indochina with air and naval forces alone. He further argued that even if the US used atomic weapons in Indochina, she would still need the deployment of US ground troops there which he vehemently opposed. But subsequently he seemed to have toned down his opposition to the sending of American forces to Vietnam because of the continued pressure of interventionists, especially Dulles.

and Radford. He would support an intervention if it did not involve the dispatch of US ground troops and if the air forces and navy, sent to Vietnam, would merely be a "token" contingent. However, while Washington was still grappling with the question of intervention, the French position in Indochina started to deteriorate rapidly. Paris was also determined to reach a quick settlement. On 15 June 1954 Washington informed Paris that the time for intervention was over.

The Geneva Conference

Since the beginning of the Geneva Conference, the US adopted a policy of "disassociation," so that she could have maximum freedom of action in future. She had also tried to prevent the conference itself from taking place. She put pressure upon France during the Berlin Conference of January 1954 to drop the idea of the proposed Geneva Conference, but the latter did not yield. France, on the other hand, threatened to dissociate herself from the EDC if the Geneva Conference were not held. That was enough to win the concurrence of Washington for holding the Geneva Conference.


But Washington's hostile attitude to the conference did not cease even after the conference started. On 7 May Dulles said that the US would be "greatly concerned if an armistice or ceasefire were reached at Geneva that would provide a road to a Communist take-over and further aggression." On the same day, the JCS in a memorandum to the Defence Secretary for transmittal to the State Department, recommended that the US should not associate herself with any French proposal directed toward a ceasefire in advance of a satisfactory political settlement. In that case, they felt that the US could have "maximum freedom of action" in future to tackle "Communism." The US delegation at Geneva, throughout the conference, maintained a low key posture, indicating a "hands off policy."

During the Geneva meeting, the United States undertook a few covert activities against the Viet Minh in Indochina. From June 1954 to August 1955, a team led by Colonel Edward G. Lansdale, a CIA operative who had earned a reputation for counterguerrilla warfare in the Philippines, was instructed to "undertake paramilitary operations against the enemy and to wage political psychological warfare." Lansdale's operations indicate how the US was predisposed to follow her own course irrespective of whatever the terms of settlement reached later at Geneva might require.

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33 DOD Documents, n. 4, vols. 9-10, pp. 431-4.
34 Sheehan, n. 27, p. 17.
her to do or not to do.

At the conclusion of the Geneva Conference, neither the United States nor South Vietnam signed the Geneva declaration. General Walter Bedell Smith, the chief US delegate, however, proclaimed an unilateral American declaration that the US would "refrain from the threat or the use of force to disturb" the Geneva accords. The Eisenhower Administration viewed the Geneva accords as a major "diplomatic defeat" for the United States. In meetings on 8 and 12 August, the NSC concluded that the Geneva settlement was a "disaster" that "completed a major forward stride of Communism which may lead to the loss of Southeast Asia." The foremost concern of the US thenceforward was to prevent "Communism" from spreading into other parts of Southeast Asia.

**Post-Geneva American Policy in Vietnam**

One of the first acts in the post-Geneva American policy in Vietnam was the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The treaty establishing the alliance was signed on 8 September 1954. It was in a way the brain child of Secretary Dulles. He had earlier tried, while negotiating the Japanese Peace Treaty in 1951, to promote an alliance for common defence against Chinese "expansion." He was continuing his efforts to set


36 Sheehan, n. 27, p. 14.
up a "collective security" organization for Southeast Asia even when the Geneva Conference was in progress. However, he encountered some opposition from London.

By the time the SEATO came into existence, the "united action," so often urged by Eisenhower and Dulles, had given place to "collective security" which appeared to be more passive than the former. Out of the eight members of this organization, only two--Thailand and the Philippines--belonged to Southeast Asia. All others were outsiders. Another peculiar feature of this pact was that it threw an unilateral blanket of military protection to South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia who were forbidden by the Geneva accords to join any military pact.

Soon after the Geneva Conference was over, there started a big debate in Washington on whether the US should impart military training to the South Vietnamese. It was mainly a tussle between the State Department and the Defence Department. Dulles very forcefully argued that the US should take over the responsibility of giving military training to the forces of the Saigon regime. The JCS were opposed to it. They argued that political stability in Saigon was a precondition before the US started training her forces. Dulles retorted that political stability was not possible without military security. In the end, Dulles had the last word. The JCS, in a memorandum of 19 October 1954,

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37 Cooper, n. 30, pp. 103-08.
38 DOD Documents, n. 4, vols. 9-10, pp. 701, 742.
conceded that if "political considerations" were overriding, they would agree to the training of South Vietnamese forces by the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG), Saigon. On 20 August, the President approved an NSC paper which outlined a threefold programme. Militarily, the US would work with France to build up a native force which would be able to provide internal security. Economically, the US would start giving aid directly to the Saigon Government, without sending it through France. Politically, she would work with the Ngo Dinh Diem Government in Vietnam. Thus began at a deeper level the American commitment to Saigon which had taken root with the Truman Administration extending economic and military aid to the Bao Dai regime in 1950.

Diem, a Catholic Christian, belonged to one of Vietnam's important families. A bachelor, and a highly educated person, he was an ardent nationalist. He resigned his post as the Minister of Interior in 1933 as an expression of his opposition to the continued French rule. He was equally opposed to Communism. He would not cooperate with the Viet Minh which he considered as a Communist organization. In 1946 he left Vietnam and for a few years travelled abroad. In the US he met with John Foster Dulles

39 Ibid., p. 701.
40 Sheehan, n. 27, p. 16.
41 For the life history of Diem, see Anthony T. Bouscaren, The Last of the Mandarins: Diem of Vietnam (Pittsburgh, Penn., 1965).
and other important political figures. Some commentators have alleged that Diem was handpicked by the CIA to emerge at the right time as the top man in Vietnam. In 1954 Bao Dai appointed Diem as his Prime Minister. Only a few days before the fall of Diem Bien Phu, Bao Dai who was then in Paris, invited Diem to accept the post of Prime Minister. Diem, who was given full civil and military powers, arrived in Saigon on 25 June 1954.

The Lansdale cover mission which had been launched in June 1954 continued to operate for more than a year more. In course of time Colonel Lansdale became a good friend of Diem and a source of considerable encouragement and strength to his regime. General J. Lawton Collins who had been sent to Saigon as a special representative of the President, was not happy with the Diem regime. He recommended to Washington that Diem should be replaced because his regime was weak and inefficient. Dulles first took the position that there was no alternative to Diem. However, being persuaded by Collins, Dulles later reluctantly agreed to Diem's replacement. On 27 April, he sent instructions to the Saigon Mission to that effect. However, Lansdale came to the rescue of Diem in time. He helped Diem, on 28 April, in successfully suppressing a rebellion against him. Washington seemed to be impressed by it. The US diplomatic mission in Saigon was immediately asked to ignore the 27 April message. From then onwards the US stood with the

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Diem regime till November 1963 when he was overthrown and killed.

**Elections Not Held**

According to the Geneva accords, general elections were to be held in July 1956 throughout Vietnam to form a government which would be followed by the rejoining of the two halves of Vietnam. For this, North and South Vietnam were required to begin consultation in July 1955. But, when that time came, Saigon refused to undertake any consultation with Hanoi. She argued that there was no use in holding the proposed election because it would not be free and democratic in North Vietnam. There might have been some elements of truth in this charge but the motivation of the Diem regime for balking at the election seems to have been different. The Pentagon Papers reveal that the US had a hand in it.

Before the Geneva Conference was over, the JCS had pointed out that "Communists" were likely to win if an election were held in Vietnam. In August 1954, the CIA reported that if elections were held in 1956, the Viet Minh would win. In 1954 President Eisenhower himself was reported to have said that Ho Chi Minh would win 80 per cent of the votes if elections were held that year. Thus Washington was almost convinced that the "Communists" were sure to defeat the Diem regime in election. Against this background, Dulles' instructions to the American delegation in Geneva that it should try to delay the elections and demand guarantees

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43 Ibid., vols. 9-10, pp. 522-3.
44 Eisenhower, n. 30, p. 373.
that the "Communists" were likely to reject seems to have been a deliberate ploy to prevent the holding of general elections in Vietnam. On 7 July 1954, Dulles wrote to General Walter Bedell Smith, the Chief US delegate at Geneva:

Since undoubtedly true that the elections might eventually mean unification of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh, this makes it all more important they should be only held as long after ceasefire agreement as possible and in conditions free from intimidation to give democratic elements best chance. 45

From January 1955 onwards, Diem went on indicating his firm resistance to the scheduled election on the ground that there did not prevail in North Vietnam an ideal atmosphere for free voting. He emphasized time and again that since South Vietnam had not signed the Geneva accords, she was not bound by them. The US publicly extended her support to the Saigon stand. On 1 June 1956, Walter Robertson, Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, stated, "...We support President Diem fully in his position that if elections are to be held, there must be conditions which preclude intimidation or coercion of the electorate. Unless such conditions exist, there can be no free choice. 46 In October Robertson repeated this argument. He asked, "Is it possible to obtain in North Vietnam the necessary conditions for a free expression of the national will through general elections?" In the face of this, it is difficult to agree with the

45 Sheehan, n. 27, p. 23.
46 DOD Documents, n. 4, Book 2, IV.A.5, p. 6.
Pentagon Papers analyst who says that "the US did not connive with Diem to ignore the elections." On the other hand, one may reasonably argue that the US and the Diem regime joined hands in their mutual interest to frustrate the scheduled elections of July 1956.

**Rising Tide of Insurgency**

On 3 August 1954 a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) said that even with the firm US support, the situation in South Vietnam was very likely to continue to deteriorate over the next year. An NIE, dated 26 April 1955, was similarly critical of the Diem regime for its inability to provide efficient government and to eliminate corruption. In July 1956 an NIE said: "Over a longer period, an accumulation of grievances among various groups and individuals may lead to development of a national opposition movement...." Thus, according to American intelligence sources, the potential for an insurgency already existed in South Vietnam by the middle of 1956 when Saigon did not cooperate with Hanoi for holding a general election in the whole of Vietnam. The negative attitude of Saigon towards holding the scheduled elections seems to have acted as the catalyst for dissident elements in South

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49 *DOD Documents*, n. 4, Book 2, IV.A.5, p. 32.

50 Gravel, n. 9, p. 266.
Vietnam to start the insurgency. The Pentagon Papers analyst divides the insurgency period into three phases: (i) from 1954 to 1956; (ii) from 1956 to 1958; and (iii) 1959 and thereafter. In the first phase, the "stay-behind cadres" who were very critical of the Diem regime, prepared for the scheduled election. They were confident of winning the election if it were then held. Therefore they did not want to take any military risk which might upset the diplomatic applecart of Geneva, thereby denying them an opportunity for proving their greater political support in an election. However, this is not to suggest that there was no infiltration at all from the North to the South. In fact, as American intelligence reports indicated, infiltration from North Vietnam actually started in 1955. But its level was low as not to damage the prospect of holding the scheduled election. The rejection of the election by Saigon provoked these elements to indulge in sporadic agitations against Diem in the second phase. In December 1959, the National Liberation Front (NLF) was formally constituted and Hanoi directly took over charge of directing the insurgency in the South. Thereafter, North Vietnamese began to infiltrate in large numbers into South Vietnam. But by this time the US had already been involved in Vietnam on the side of Saigon. According recognition to Saigon, sending economic and military aid to her, and giving military training to South Vietnamese had long

51 Ibid., p. 79.
52 Ibid., p. 79.
preceded the active North Vietnamese association with the insurgency in South Vietnam.

The Impact of the Sino-Soviet Rift on American Attitude towards Vietnam

The Sino-Soviet rift which began around the period 1956-1957 opened up new inducements and opportunities for the United States to take a fresh look at her policy in Southeast Asia. The territorial, ideological and personal elements that contributed to the rift between the Soviet and Chinese leaderships have been dealt with by several scholars and do not call for any discussion in the present context. When in June 1959 it became known that the Soviet Union was unwilling to share nuclear weapon technology with the Chinese, and that the Chinese were extremely unhappy about the Soviet attitude, American policy-makers were probably led to conclude that the rift between the two Communist giants was likely to become more serious. In view of the seemingly greater intransigence of the Chinese attitude, and also in view of the approaches that the Soviet Union, in her own interest, had begun to make, the United States began to demonstrate a certain willingness to be responsive to the Soviet approaches. An accommodation with the Soviet Union, the nuclear adversary, was also deemed important by American planners in order to mitigate

the threat of nuclear war with its incalculable consequences.

Khrushchev's visit to the United States in September 1959 led to considerable talk in both countries of the "spirit of Camp David." By the end of the year, agreement was reached on holding a summit conference of Big Four—the US, the USSR, the UK, and France—in the second week of May 1960. Even though the U-2 incident marred the summit meeting, the trend towards detente continued accompanied by increasingly sharp attacks on the Soviet Union by China over a number of issues.

Against this backdrop of gradually intensifying strain between Moscow and Peking, the continued inclination of the former to lay stress on "peaceful coexistence" and "reduction of tensions" might have made Washington believe that the Soviet Union was not likely to start a serious military crisis in Europe necessitating an American response nor was she likely to risk getting involved directly against the United States on behalf of a distant "client state." The assessment was that the Soviet Union might fear that any such confrontation with the US would only weaken the former in her developing conflict with China. By the same token, the Chinese also might be unwilling to risk unilateral confrontation with the United States over an external area despite their rhetoric on "armed struggle." The prospect of joint Sino-Soviet action to counter American probing in some soft-spot or the other appeared less likely than ever before to American planners. Cuba

and Vietnam appeared to be possible prospects to US planners as the Eisenhower Administration began to draw to a close. The Eisenhower Administration made ready a plan for a possible attack on Cuba by Cuban refugees trained by the United States. The training programme for the refugees was initiated. The Administration decided to launch an "Operations plan for Vietnam" which was approved by the Operations Coordinating Board of the NSC on 7 January 1959. The plan provided for preparation of contingency plans by the US Army, Navy, and Air Force and their execution "in accordance with U.S. policy" in the event of an actual or imminent Communist attempt to take control of South Vietnam from within. The plan also envisaged a whole range of American operations to prop up the South Vietnamese regime and to defeat the Vietcong and its helpers. In accordance with the order of the Secretary of Defence, the plan was launched on 26 May 1959. It seems that the implementation of this plan by the US provoked the Vietcong to intensify their offensives in South Vietnam. It is also possible, as Venkataramani has argued, that those were just the kind of developments that the "Operations Plan" was meant to evoke—thereby enabling the United States to proceed to the next stage

The thrust of policy during the latter half of the Eisenhower Administration was in the direction of intervention but in actual practice a rather low-level involvement was the course pursued even though plans were ready for significant escalation as Eisenhower handed over the reins of office to his youthful successor, John F. Kennedy. The fateful decisions were to be made by Kennedy and his band of New Frontiersmen. In the present work the role of the Pentagon, i.e., the Department of Defence consisting of civilian and military components, in policy-making on Vietnam during the period 1961-1968 will be examined.

The Pentagon

Since 1941 the Pentagon has had the largest civilian bureaucracy of any federal agency in the United States. Ever since the establishment of the Republic, the doctrine of civilian control of the military establishment and of the pre-eminence of the political authority, the President, acting in exercise of his constitutional powers, had never faced any serious challenge. But so vast had been the growth of the far-flung American military establishment since the end of the Second World War, so massive the expenditure on research development and production of a succession of high-technology weapons, and so complex the task of

holding on to an "alert" posture to respond to "threats" globally, that some commentators wondered whether the Pentagon had tended to become a state within a state, "acting on the basis of its own imperatives," and tending to take the political branches of the government increasingly for granted. Eisenhower himself highlighted the issue when in his farewell speech he cautioned against the danger to democracy that might arise out of the "military-industrial complex." With the escalation of American involvement in Vietnam commentators of the type referred to tended to view with growing alarm the role of the "Pentagon" as the most decisive element determining US foreign policy. Whether such indeed was the case calls for deeper examination.

The Pentagon, like any other agency, is not a monolith. The civilian and military components do not necessarily and always see eye to eye with each other on all issues. There may occur differences within the civilian and military elements themselves. As an agency, it has to reckon with the rivalry of other agencies of the government. It has to compete with them for the "ear" of the President. It has to run the gauntlet of Congress. It has to reckon with important interest groups, the media, and the state of public opinion. It can attempt these tasks with relatively less complications if it is able to present a more or less unified and harmonious front. By the same token, if there is internal disharmony within the Pentagon, the game assumes a very different character.

Brief reference has been made to the flurry at the time of
Dien Bien Phu when there were internal differences within the Pentagon itself. It was also shown that a rival agency, the State Department, under John Foster Dulles, generally succeeded in playing a more dominant role than the Defence Department in shaping US policy in Indochina. It also showed the President making the ultimate decision according to his own light, after weighing various aspects of the situation. The President was Dwight Eisenhower, the immensely popular military hero, the triumphant victor over the Axis forces in Western Europe, and a world-renowned figure. His successor, to whom he bequeathed his contingency plans for Indochina, could not claim similar credentials. The new President spoke stridently of his country's mission as leader of the "free world." To implement his course at home and abroad including Vietnam, he had to operate through the complex machinery of government of which the Pentagon was an important part. Kennedy did not wait long before turning his attention to the issue of American policy in Vietnam.