

"Ho's Letters Were Never Answered..."

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If Roosevelt Had Lived, Would Vietnam Have Happened?

By Flora Lewis

THE DISTRICT attorneys of history are now going all the way back to President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his eagerness to intervene in World War II in their effort to draw up an indictment for the Vietnamese war. The Pentagon Papers do not include the Roosevelt documents on Indochina. But there is no need to guess or draw assumptions about Roosevelt's "philosophy of interventionism." The once top-secret documents are available — without need for indiscretion though at a cost of ten cents a copied page — from the Roosevelt Library at Hyde Park.

They show the wartime President struggling to keep the French from retaking Indochina, and being undercut by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff working behind his back with the British. Roosevelt was informed by Acting Secretary of State Edward Stettinius on Nov. 2, 1944, that with "American approval" the French had sent a military mission to Southeast Asia Command headquarters in Colombo, Ceylon, for the obvious purpose of preparing a return to Indochina upon the defeat of Japan.

The British, insisting that Indochina should come under their Southeast Asia headquarters and not the American command in China, were already operating secretly behind the lines in Indochina. Stettinius said they had orders to "have nothing to do" with native resistance movements but were "to devote their efforts to the French." Roosevelt reacted immediately and sternly.

He issued orders the next day that "we must not give American approval to any French military mission." Further, he said American officials in the Far East must be told "they can make no decisions on political questions with the French or anyone else."

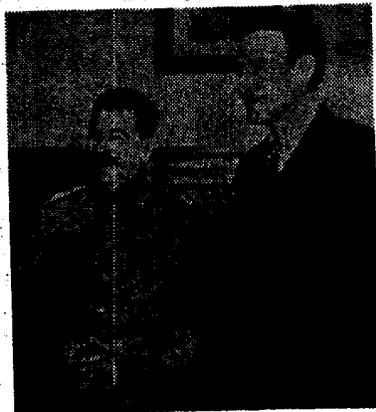
The United States had made "no final decisions on Indochina," the President said, and "expects to be consulted" before its future could be determined.

Top-level officials in Washington assured the President they would obey instructions. But on November 24, 1944, Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote the President that it wasn't going to be so easy. He said he had discovered that the joint chiefs had indeed

approved the French mission in direct communication with the British, bypassing Stimson.

Though he chafed, Stimson pointed out that "any withdrawal of such approval at this time, I imagine, would produce substantial repercussions." He concluded with a sharp prophetic warning, insisting that all future communications to the chiefs be obliged to go through him and the secretary of navy.

"Otherwise," Stimson wrote, "I foresee



Harriman with Stalin in 1944: "Roosevelt suggested (to Stalin) a U.N. trusteeship for Indochina and for Korea as well."

that the reasons of our ancestors for having civilian heads to our military establishments will be eventually frustrated, with results not in accord with our national traditions or interests."

Roosevelt's last recorded note on the subject is dated Jan. 1, 1945, and adamantly rejects further British efforts to get his approval of a French return to Indochina.

There is a tantalizing report that on the day he died, Roosevelt had on his desk at

Warm Springs, Ga., a recommendation that the United States recognize native pro-Communist insurgents in Indochina rather than help restore the old regime, as the United States had switched to Tito in Yugoslavia against the royalist Gen. Draja Mikhailovich. But the document, if it existed, cannot be found.

In any event, Averell Harriman who was then ambassador to Moscow now recalls that at his last meeting with Stalin, Roosevelt suggested a U.N. trusteeship for Indochina and for Korea as well. No action was taken because the defeat of Japan still seemed a long way off. The A-bomb had not yet been tested at Los Alamos.

But Harriman says the President was determined not to let the French return and adds now, "If he had lived, they never would." The war went faster than foreseen and it was only a few months later that Ho Chi Minh began writing letters to President Truman asking for American support against restoration of the French colonial regime. "He was very friendly to Americans then," Harriman recalls.

Ho's letters were never answered; the French did return; fighting broke out; and President Truman decided to support the French, no doubt more for reasons involving Europe than Asia.

Had Ho been answered sympathetically, and the French recolonization effort balked without an Indochinese war, "we would have had a friendly Nationalist Communist regime there now, and none of what has happened," Harriman says. Further, since Ho would have been the first Asian Communist to reach power, without support from Moscow or Peking, there would have been far less reason to fear his succumbing to the big Communist powers.

It might have been. It turned on very little. And it should be remembered by those who try to turn the swinging pendulum of history into a sweeping finger of blame. It wasn't the idea of interventionism that got the United States into trouble in Vietnam. It was bad judgments on where and how the United States should intervene, and to what purpose.