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Pentagon Papers: Eisenhower Decisions Undercut the Geneva Accords, Study Says

By FOX BUTTERFIELD

The secret Pentagon study of the Vietnam war discloses that a few days after the Geneva accords of 1954, the Eisenhower Administration's National Security Council decided that the accords were a "disaster" and the President approved actions to prevent further Communist expansion in Vietnam.

These White House decisions, the Pentagon account concludes, meant that the United States had "a direct role in the ultimate breakdown of the Geneva settlement."

That judgment contradicts the repeated assertion of several American administrations that North Vietnam alone was to blame for the undermining of the Geneva accords.

According to the Pentagon writer, the National Security Council, at a meeting on Aug. 3, 1954, just after the Geneva accords, ordered an urgent program of economic and military aid to the new South Vietnamese Government of Ngo Dinh Diem.

The program was set by the Council to "maintain a friendly non-Communist Vietnam" and "to prevent Communist victory through all-Vietnam elections."

Under the Geneva settlement, Viet-

nam was to be temporarily divided into two zones pending reunification through elections scheduled for 1956. The introduction of foreign troops or bases and the use of Vietnamese territory for military purposes were forbidden. The United States, which did not join with the nations that endorsed the accords, issued a declaration taking note of the provisions and promising not to disturb them.

But a lengthy report, accompanying the Pentagon study, describes in detail how the Eisenhower Administration sent a team of agents to carry out clandestine warfare against North Vietnam

from the minute the Geneva conference closed.

The team, headed by the legendary intelligence operative Col. Edward G. Lansdale, gave a graphic account of the actions it took just before evacuating Hanoi in October 1954. [See text, Lansdale team's report, Page 11.]

The report says the team "spent the last days of Hanoi in contaminating the oil supply of the bus company for a gradual wreckage of engines in the buses, in taking actions for delayed sabotage of the railroad (which required teamwork with a C.I.A. special technical team in Japan who performed their part brilliantly), and in writing detailed notes of potential targets for future para-military operations."

"U. S. adherence to the Geneva agreement," the authors of the report said, "prevented [the American team] from carrying out the active sabotage it desired to do against the power plant, water facilities, harbor and bridge."

"The team had a bad moment when contaminating the oil. They had to work quickly at night, in an enclosed storage room. Fumes from the contaminant came close to knocking them out. Dizzy and weak-kneed, they masked their

This is the ninth and last in a series of articles on the Pentagon's secret study of American participation in the Vietnam war. The study was obtained by The New York Times through the investigative reporting of Neil Sheehan. The series was researched and written over three months by Mr. Sheehan and other staff members. Three pages of documentary material begin on Page 9, and an accompanying article, on the study's analysis of the Vietcong insurgency, will be found on Page 12.

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faces with handkerchiefs and completed the job."

The report is attributed to a hastily assembled group identified as the Saigon Military Mission. Its authors do not explain why they believed sabotage of buses and the railroad was allowed under the Geneva accords if sabotage of the power plant and harbor was forbidden.

The Pentagon study, which was commissioned by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara to determine how the United States became involved in the Vietnam war, devotes nine lengthy sections to the nineteen-forties and fifties.

At key points during these years, the Pentagon study says, the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations made far-reaching decisions on Vietnam policy that the public knew little about or misunderstood. And by the time John F. Kennedy became President in 1961, the writers recount, the American Government already felt itself heavily committed to the defense of South Vietnam.

One of the earliest disclosures in the account is that in late 1945 and early 1946, Ho Chi Minh wrote at least eight letters to President Truman and the State Department requesting American help in winning Vietnam's independence from France. [See text, report of Ho's appeals, Feb. 2, 1946, Page 9.]

No Record of an Answer

The analyst says he could find no record that the United States ever answered Ho Chi Minh's letters. Nor has Washington ever revealed that it received the letters.

A key point came in the winter of 1949-50 when the United States made what the account describes as a watershed decision affecting American policy in Vietnam for the next two decades: After the fall of mainland China to the Chinese Communists, the Truman Administration moved to support Emperor Bao Dai and provide military aid to the French against the Communist-led Vietminh.

This decision, which was made amid growing concern in the United States over the expansion of Communism in Eastern Europe and Asia, reversed Washington's long-standing reluctance to become involved with French colonialism in Indochina.

With this action, the account says, "the course of U. S. policy was set to block further Communist expansion in Asia." And "the United States thereafter was directly involved in the developing tragedy in Vietnam."

Another key point came in the spring of 1954, the writer discloses, when the Eisenhower Administration twice strongly hinted to France that it was willing to intervene with American military forces to prevent French defeat in Indochina.

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While some information has been made public about these proposals, the Pentagon study says that the public has not understood how seriously the Eisenhower Administration debated intervention.

Move for a Resolution

It adds that during the second episode, which occurred in May and June, 1954, while the Geneva conference was in session, President Dwight D. Eisenhower had aides draft a resolution requesting Congressional authority to commit American troops in Indochina.

The National Security Council was so opposed to France's negotiating an end to the war, the analyst relates, that "the President was urged to inform Paris that French acquiescence in a Communist take-over of Indochina would bear on its status as one of the Big Three" and that

"U.S. aid to France would automatically cease."

Then in August, 1954, came the decision that the Pentagon account says determined United States policy toward Vietnam for the rest of the decade: The National Security Council launched its program of economic and military aid to Mr. Diem, then Premier and later President, though its action was not made public for months. [See text, report by special committee, April 5, 1954.]

The Pentagon account discloses that most of these major decisions from 1950 on were made against the advice of the American intelligence community.

Intelligence analysts in the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department and sometimes the Pentagon repeatedly warned that the French, Emperor Bao Dai and Premier Diem were weak and unpopular and that the Communists were strong.

In early August, 1954, for example, just before the National Security Council decided to commit the United States to propping up Premier Diem, a national intelligence estimate warned:

"Although it is possible that the French and Vietnamese, even with firm support from the U.S. and other powers, may be able to establish a strong regime in South Vietnam, we believe that the chances for this development are poor and moreover, that the situation is more likely to continue to deteriorate progressively over the next year."

"Given the generally bleak appraisals of Diem's prospects, they who made U.S. policy could only have done so by assuming a significant measure of risk," the study says of the Eisenhower commitments.

The Pentagon study does not deal at length with a major question: Why did the policy-makers go ahead despite the intelligence estimates prepared by their most senior intelligence officials?

The most important reason advanced by the Pentagon study is that after the fall of China to the Communists in 1949 and the hardening of American anti-Communist attitudes, "Indochina's importance to U.S. security interests in the Far East was taken for granted."

The basic rationale for American involvement—what later came to be called the domino theory—was first clearly enunciated by the National Security Council in February, 1950, when it decided to extend military aid to the French in Indochina.

'Indochina is a Key Area'

"It is important to U.S. security interests," the Council said, "that all practicable measures be taken to prevent further Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. Indochina is a key area and is under immediate threat."

"The neighboring countries of Thailand and Burma could be expected to fall under Communist domination if Indochina is controlled by a Communist government. The balance of Southeast Asia would then be in grave hazard."

Subsequent Council decision papers throughout the nineteen-fifties repeated this formulation with ever-increasing sweep.

A Council paper approved by President Eisenhower in January, 1954, predicted that the "loss of any single country" in Southeast Asia would ultimately lead to the loss of all Southeast Asia, then India and Japan, and finally "endanger the stability and security of Europe."

"The domino theory and the assumptions behind it were never questioned," the Pentagon account says of the Eisenhower years. The result was that the Government's internal debate usually centered more on matters of military feasibility than on questions of basic national interests.