

Brink of Intervention

In the spring of 1954, as the French military position in Indochina deteriorated rapidly and the date for the Geneva conference approached, the Eisenhower Administration twice hinted to France that it was ready to intervene with American forces.

The Pentagon study contends that while some information about these two episodes has become public, the American people have never been told how seriously the Eisenhower inner circle debated intervening.

"The record shows plainly," the analyst says, "that the U. S. did seriously consider intervention and advocated it to the U. K. and other allies."

The first of these episodes, during March and April before the fall of the French fortress at Dienbienphu, was disclosed not long afterward by American journalists. But the story of the second, in May and early June while the Geneva conference was in session, has never been fully revealed. Mr. Eisenhower himself, in his 1963 book "Mandate for Change," mentioned the second debate over intervention but gave only a sketchy account and did not report asking Secretary of State John Foster Dulles to draft a Congressional resolution.

The Eisenhower Administration felt intervention might be necessary, the study says, because without American help the French were likely to negotiate a "sellout" at Geneva to escape an unpopular war.

The Loss 'Would Be Critical'

As early as August, 1953, the National Security Council decided that American policy should be that "under present conditions any negotiated settlement would mean the eventual loss to Communism not only of Indochina but of the whole of Southeast Asia. The loss of Indochina would be critical to the security of the U.S."

The Eisenhower Administration stated its opposition to a negotiated settlement most fully in an N.S.C. paper, "United States Position on Indochina to be Taken at Geneva," late in April in the week the conference opened.

It was at this point, according to the study, that the Council urged President Eisenhower "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."

In addition, the Council's policy paper said that the United States should consider continuing the war itself, with the Indochina states, if France negotiated an unsatisfactory settlement. America's goal should be nothing short of a "military victory," the Council said.

The President Decides

The Government's internal record shows, the study says, that while Secretary Dulles and Adm. Arthur W. Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, pushed hard for intervention, other service chiefs, particularly Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway of the Army, were more cautious. They remembered the bitter and protracted experience in Korea and were not eager to repeat it.

President Eisenhower finally reached

a decision against intervention on April 4 after a meeting of Mr. Dulles and Admiral Radford with Congressional leaders the previous day showed that the Congress would not support American action without allied help.

As journalists wrote, at the time, the President felt he must have Congressional approval before he committed American troops, and the Congressional leaders insisted on allied participation, especially by Britain.

At the very time the President was reaching this conclusion, Ambassador Douglas Dillon in Paris was cabling that the French had requested the "immediate armed intervention of U.S. carrier aircraft at Dienbienphu." [See text, Dillon cable, April 5, 1954.]

Mr. Dillon noted that the French had been prompted to make the request because they had been told by Admiral Radford that "he would do his best to obtain such help from the U.S. Government."

Moreover, the President's decision of April 4, contrary to what was written at the time, was only tentative. The debate on intervention was still very much alive, the Pentagon account says.

In fact, the following day, April 5, the National Security Council, in an action paper, concluded:

"On balance, it appears that the U.S. should now reach a decision whether or not to intervene with combat forces if that is necessary to save Indochina from Communist control, and tentatively the form and conditions of any such intervention."

On May 7, with the news that Dienbienphu had just fallen and with the delegates already in Geneva, President Eisenhower met with Mr. Dulles in the White House to again consider intervention.

'U.S. Will Go to Congress'

According to a memorandum by Robert Cutler, the President's executive assistant, they discussed how "the U.S. should (as a last act to save Indochina) propose to France" that if certain conditions were met "the U.S. will go to Congress for authority to intervene with combat forces." The words in parentheses appeared in the memorandum. [See text, memo of talk, April 7, 1954.]

Mr. Cutler noted that he explained to the President that some members of the Council's Planning Board "felt that it had never been made clear to the French that the United States was willing to ask for Congressional authority" if the preconditions were met.

Mr. Dulles said he would mention the subject to the French Ambassador, Henry Bonnet, that afternoon, "perhaps making a more broad hint than heretofore."

The preconditions included a call for the French to grant "genuine freedom" to the Indochina states—Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

They also stipulated that American advisers in Vietnam should "take major responsibility for training indigenous forces" and "share responsibility for military planning." American officers in Vietnam had long chafed under the limits on the role the French allowed them, the study says.

Participation by the British, who had shown themselves extremely reluctant to get involved, was no longer cited as a condition.

The French picked up Mr. Dulles's hint, and on May 10 Premier Joseph Laniel told Ambassador Dillon that France needed American intervention to save Indochina. That evening the President again met with Mr. Dulles, along with Admiral Radford and Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson, to discuss the French appeal.

Instructions For Dulles

During the meeting President Eisenhower directed Secretary Dulles to prepare a resolution that he could take before a joint meeting of Congress, requesting authority to commit American troops in Indochina.

From a document included in the Pentagon chronicle—the partial text of a legal commentary by a Pentagon official on the draft Congressional resolution—it is clear that such a Congressional resolution was prepared and circulated in the State Department, the Justice Department and the Defense Department.

Although some historians have speculated that Vice President Richard M. Nixon strongly advocated American intervention in Indochina during these debates, the Pentagon study does not describe his views. Moreover, the account does not mention Mr. Nixon as a participant in any of the critical meetings at which intervention was discussed by the President, Secretary Dulles or Admiral Radford.

Both the State Department and the Defense Department then undertook what the account describes as "contingency planning" for possible intervention—the State Department drawing up a hypothetical timetable of

diplomatic moves and the Defense Department preparing a memorandum on the U.S. forces that would be required.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a memorandum to Secretary of Defense Wilson on May 20, recommended that the United States limit its involvement to "air and naval support directed from outside Indochina."

"From the point of view of the United States," the Joint Chiefs said, "Indochina is devoid of decisive military objectives and the allocation of more than token U.S. armed forces to that area would be a serious diversion of limited U.S. capabilities."

In the debates over intervention, the study says, advocates of American action advanced several novel ideas. Admiral Radford proposed to the French, for example, that the United

States help create an "International Volunteer Air Corps" for Indochina. The French in April had suggested an American air strike with the planes painted with French markings. And late in May the French suggested that the President might be able to get around Congress if he sent just a division of marines—some 15,000 men.

But all the arguments in favor of intervention came to naught. The French Cabinet felt that the war-weary National Assembly would balk at any further military action.

And the military situation in the Red River Delta near Hanoi deteriorated so badly in late May and early June that Washington felt intervention would now be useless. On June 15 Secretary Dulles informed Ambassador Bonnet that the time for intervention had run out.