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# How Close To War In '54?

By Chalmers M. Roberts



*The writer, who retired last summer as senior diplomatic correspondent of The Washington Post, covered the 1954 Geneva conference on Indochina.*

**J**UST HOW SERIOUSLY did the United States consider military intervention in Indochina in 1954? The publication of the Pentagon Papers—first in the newspapers and more recently in the 43-volume official edition published as 12 books by the House Armed Services Committee—has made the historian's task in answering that question both easier and more difficult.

It is easier because there is now available a mass of new material on the key year 1954, as well as for many other years. Much of it is confirmatory, of course, but there are new bits and pieces, and above all a sense of the urgency with which events were perceived at the time.

It is more difficult because the new documents do not resolve all the outstanding questions that have been raised in the many books and articles written about the period. And while the possibility that a key piece of the puzzle may still be withheld through censorship cannot be ruled out, a close reading of Books 9 and 10 of the House edition which cover this period leaves the impression that the censors were wholly capricious.

From the 859 pages dealing with 1953 and 1954 (and these are pages of documents, not the analyst's summation) the censors cut out seven items covering 18 pages. In Book 9, however, the censor did not cut out the summaries of the five documents excised but in Book 10 the summaries were cut out for the two documents omitted. It so happens that among the Pentagon Papers made available to The Washington Post are copies of the five documents from Book 9.

The Pentagon's explanation of the "declassified review" (printed in each book) states that "some of the material has been declassified solely on the basis of prior disclosures." Yet one of the excised documents was printed in full in the New York Times. Furthermore, it was simply an advance report from Under Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith in Geneva to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in Washington on an important Associated Press dispatch written by Seymour Topping, now a New York Times editor. The more significant telegram from Smith to Dulles on the following day revealing Topping's Chinese Communist source is included in the book! (The informant, incidentally, was Huang Hua who is the new Peking ambassador to Canada and who may be the first envoy to Washington.)

Another censored document recounts a Dulles conversation at Geneva with Britain's Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. This cable reflects Dulles' unhappiness with Eden and British policy but far less so than some of the printed telegrams. Still another excised message, from Dulles in Paris to Washington, in July of 1954, details the agreed U.S.-French position just before the end of the Geneva conference but there is nothing in it that has not long ago been known and widely printed.

Finally, the other two excised documents of which The Post has copies deal with American conversations with two French generals, Paul Ely and Jean Valluy. Both were Pentagon conversations, both were pessimistic but neither is remarkable.

A note should be added here about the issue of codes. At the time the Nixon administration went to court to pre-censor publication of the Pentagon Papers there was much talk that their use in toto would compromise cryptographic codes because the messages gave exact dates and times and cable control numbers. But the censors excised none of this information from the hundreds of messages printed.

Nor did the censors eliminate American officials' assessments of Chou En-lai's performance at Geneva, though Chou soon is to be President Nixon's host in Peking.

## An Offer By Ike

**O**N THE CENTRAL question of how close the Eisenhower administration came to military intervention in 1954, Book 10 includes a then-Top Secret summary by Dulles on "French Requests Involving Possible United States Belligerency in Indochina." In it he listed, and detailed, April 4, 23 and 24 as "the three occasions when French officials suggested United States armed intervention in Indochina." Dulles' summary, drafted on Aug. 3, just after Geneva had produced a cease-fire, states American "conditions" for intervention (never fulfilled) but does not go beyond that—perhaps because the draft was intended for publication although it never was published in this form.

This summary, however, does add

something. Dulles stated that on May 11, four days after the fall of Dienbienphu and three days after the Geneva conference opened, the French were "advised" that President Eisenhower "would be disposed to ask Congress for authority to use the armed forces of the United States" under certain conditions. This "possibility," said Dulles on Aug. 3, "lapsed" on June 20 when France decided to accept the cease-fire that took another month to negotiate.

Numerous French writers, most notably Philippe Devillers and Jean Lacouture in "End of a War," have detailed the French pleas for intervention. American writers such as John Robinson Beal in "John Foster Dulles" have told it from the American side. Most recently Robert F. Randle, a Columbia University professor, in "Geneva 1954," has taken something of a revisionist line. Randle concluded that Dulles in fact was vetoing the intervention plans of Adm. Arthur Radford, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and he wrote that "my analysis and conclusions differ substantially from those of Mr. Roberts" in The Post and in a widely reprinted Reporter magazine piece titled "The Day We Didn't Go to War."

In reading the Dulles telegrams against my own accounts and memories of many conversations with Dulles and others at the time I still have no doubt that he wanted to intervene to "save" Indochina from communism. He was stopped, essentially, by two



## Atomic Bombs

ONE OTHER facet is worth noting: the dispute over atomic bombs. In his autobiography, "Resistance," for-

mer French Premier and Foreign Minister Georges Bidault claimed that in the last agony of Dienbienphu Dulles did "ask me if we would like the United States to give us two atomic bombs" but that he refused the offer.

The Pentagon Papers include a telegram of Aug. 9, 1954, to Dulles from the American ambassador in Paris, Douglas Dillon, (whose diplomatic skill, incidentally comes through bright and clear in a mass of cables). Dillon reported that Bidault had told other French officials about the purported bomb offer and indicated he would make it public. Dillon characterized Bidault then as "ill, nervous, hypersensitive and bitter," which others confirmed.

Dulles' anguished response the same day was that he had "no recollection" of such an offer, that his notes of conversation did not mention it and that "the law categorically forbids it." He added that he had said at a NATO meeting in Bidault's presence on April 23 that "such weapons must now be treated as in fact having become conventional." Dulles commented that he wondered whether Bidault was referring to that statement.

Thus, as of today, with the publication of the Pentagon Papers, we have a

great deal of the 1954 record. Incidentally, the Pentagon Papers, which lack White House and State Department documents in large measure for the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, include them from the Eisenhower years because State gave them, on request, to the men compiling the Vietnam history. Some additional material may be locked up in the Eisenhower and Dulles libraries, but if so it will not be available for some years.

The only high participant who has not yet spoken out is Adm. Radford, who was strongly for intervention as then was well known. In retirement he now has put on paper some 300,000 words of memoirs, but he is only up to the Korean war. How frank Radford will be, if he does publish his story of Indochina, remains to be seen. Not long ago a high government official told me of a conversation he had had with Radford some years after the 1954 intervention discussions. He asked the admiral if it were true, as had been widely reported, that Radford's real aim in urging intervention in Indochina was to find a reason to strike at mainland China. Radford's response, the official said, was that this indeed had been his aim.

factors: the Democratic congressional leaders who insisted (as did the Republicans as well) on allies, and by Eden, who refused, with Prime Minister Churchill's full backing, to let Britain be the key ally in any "united action." ("United action" would come only after Geneva in the form of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization which President Johnson—who himself, as Senate minority leader, had been among those calling on Dulles to line up allies—would in turn use as a justification for intervention along with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.)

In a way the Dulles account of the May 11 American proffer of intervention with President Eisenhower's concurrence adds to the conviction that the United States really was very serious about entering the war. (Eisenhower himself in his memoirs is not very precise beyond the matter of allies being necessary because of Congress.)

What Dulles was clearly up to in May, the new documents show, was to force the French to hold out for a better deal than the Communists then were offering at Geneva. Yet Dulles, by June 7, was cabling that the French "themselves have never yet really decided on whether they want the war to be 'internationalized'" and that "I have long felt and still feel that the French are not treating our proposal seriously but toying with it just enough to use it as a talking point at Geneva." Some of the evidence from French writers indicates that was true.

Nonetheless the Pentagon Papers show that in the wake of the May 11 American proffer of conditional help the Eisenhower administration went through a full-dress effort. Pentagon, CIA, State all poured out hundreds of pages of papers on this and that eventuality and on preparation in case of American intervention.

That Dulles, with Eisenhower's concurrence, really would have intervened even in May had the French met his conditions (chiefly revolving around true independence for Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) may be divined from the change in Dulles' list of conditions from those in April. In April, Britain had to be a full participant; by May 11, Dulles said that only Thailand and the Philippines had to be in and that Australia and New Zealand might be involved through an American invocation of the ANZUS pact but that "U.K. would either participate or be acquiescent." He knew by then that the latter would be the maximum from Churchill and Eden.





*Western diplomats at Geneva, 1954: From left, Under Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith, French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault, Britain*

*delegate Lord Reading, French ambassador Jean Chauvel and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, after a working lunch at Bidault's residence.*

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