

7 January 1972

HW:

If Howard is still with you, I'd like to draw his attention to a phase of the Indochina question which has been forgotten and which he might like to follow up. If he's already returned to Philadelphia, you might like to forward this to him.

American mistakes there did not begin with Ngo Dinh Diem, but the minute the Japanese surrendered. The French colonialists who appointed themselves to return to power were all Vichyites, so it would have been easy for the United States to hang tough and say hold it until we see what the Indochinese want to do. No such thought apparently entered any American head, and we were all of the side of returning European imperialism there as we were in Malaysia and Indonesia. De Gaulle of course was strapped, and the Americans actually paid for British ships to ~~carry~~ carry British troops to reoccupy ~~Indochina~~ Indochina until the French could return later. In the north, Ho Chi Minh had carried on the only native resistance to the Japanese, weathered a famine in the Red River delta, and had a provisional government ready, but in spite of the fact he had cooperated fully with the OSS during the war, rescuing many American fliers from Japanese capture, we ignored him and approved the return of a French regime to Saigon.

A fairly useful history of this period is "No Peace for Asia," by Harold Isaacs, now of MIT. My copy is missing, apparently lent to someone who didn't return it.

Ho's provisional government was anything but communist, a coalition of independence parties and he put out a draft declaration of independence and constitution in French which read amazingly like ~~those~~ those of the United States 200 years ago. We studiously ignored the whole thing, recognized one French attempt after another which degenerated eventually into the rise of the Viet Minh and France's "dirty war" which ended with debacle at Dien Bien Phu.

Although the French promoted a scheme called the French Union in which all three Indochinese states were to have full autonomy, it never worked out that way and French policy remained the same traditional colonialism which also led to disaster in Algeria. The French high commissioner, I think they called him, in Saigon, was Adm. Thierry d'Argenlieu, a provincial French prelate in the Roman Catholic church who had served in the navy. He was a Jesuit, the last in a long line of Jesuit wheels who collaborated for many years with the secular French government in imperialistic projects. I remember that in 1947 or so Foster Hailey of the New York Times came through here and told me that d'Argenlieu was living in the Saigon palace with a Mme. Galsworthy, said to be of the British literary family. Hailey was certainly not a leftist and not even particularly liberal, but he was thoroughly disgusted with the way the French were bungling everything in Saigon and heading straight toward disaster.

At any time, with our enormous power and prestige, we could have blown the whistle on this miserable degeneration, but we never did. Europe, the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine, became our preoccupations, and we studiously turned our backs on problems like China and Indochina when even a little firmness and economic aid to somebody besides the entrenched crooks could have made all the difference.

jdw