

... And A Warning 25 Years Ago

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By Murrey Marder

"Vietnam cause proving rallying cry for all anti-Western forces and playing in hands Communists all areas. We fear continuation conflict may jeopardize position all Western democratic powers in southern Asia and lead to very eventualities of which we most apprehensive."

Those uneasy words are from a secret cablegram sent by the Secretary of State. The date was May 13, 1947. The Secretary was George C. Marshall, and this additional evidence of the premonition inside the American bureaucracy of the 1940s that Vietnam might plague U.S. foreign policy for years to come, comes in 25-year-old documents which are among the latest declassifications of U.S. foreign relations by the State Department.

A small portion of the cable traffic about American policy—or lack of it—in French Indochina was contained in the Pentagon Papers made public last summer. Then, last April, a staff study for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee examined "The United States and Vietnam: 1944-47."

In an accompanying commentary, Chairman J. William Fulbright said that the study seemed to confirm his belief that "the present conflict in Southeast Asia might have been avoided had the United States not disregarded Ho Chi Minh's friendly overtures during and immediately after World War II. What prevented us from even answering Ho's friendly letters to President Truman and Secretary of State Byrnes in 1945 and 1946 was a myopia that made us see all events in Asia from a European perspective. We assumed that people like Ho and Mao Tse-tung were part of a monolithic Communist conspiracy directed from Moscow . . ."

The more-fully documented 1947 diplomatic record, now published in the official U.S. foreign relations series, carries forward the discomfitting history.

History no more reveals its alternatives in Indochina than elsewhere. No one can say exactly what might have resulted from a more responsive U.S. policy toward Ho Chi Minh—although almost any alternative now seems preferable. Is there any point, herefore, in reexamining the painful record? The answer is yes, because the record shows quite clearly that the United States had no great difficulty discerning the mote in an ally's eyes even though it was unable to act on its own convictions and suspicions.

In retrospect, there are many poignantly painful observations in the American perception of perverse French behavior in Indochina. The American Consul in Saigon in 1947, Charles S. Reed II, for example, reported to Washington, that the French were seriously miscalculating the North Vietnamese "will to fight," and the ability of France to cut off "arms and munitions."

"It is possible," remarked Reed, "that the French, while in France, are more liberal minded, but something seems to happen to them when they get into Indochina . . ."

As the Pentagon Papers showed, one of the more discerning appraisals of the situation in Indochina was in the May 13, 1947, cable to Paris from Secretary of State Marshall. It went on to say, in cablese:

"We confident French fully aware dangers inherent in situation and therefore venture express renewed hope they will be most generous attempt find early solution which, by recognizing legitimate desires Vietnamese, will restore peace and deprive anti-democratic forces of powerful weapon . . ."

"Dept much concerned lest French efforts find 'true representatives Vietnam' with whom negotiate result creation impotent puppet Govt along lines Cochinchina regime, or that restoration Baodai may be attempted, implying democracies reduced resort monarchy as weapon against Communism."

Marshall's confidence in the wisdom of the French government of the day was misplaced. A reply telegram from Paris "reported that Foreign Minister Bidault assured (U.S.) Ambassador Caffery that the French Government understood perfectly the American point of view and added that they did not contemplate any sort of puppet government under Bao Dai." But Former Emperor Bao Dai, of course, was exactly what was in store for Vietnam.

Secretary Marshall had told the American embassy in Paris, in his May, 1947 cable, "French will understand we not attempting to come forward with any solution of our own or intervene in the situation."

This was the recurring U.S. theme. With American policy centered squarely on supporting France in a reconstructed Western Europe strong to help sustain a wall of anti-Soviet containment, the United States at that stage was mainly wringing its hands over Indochina: later it would dip heavily into its pockets for billions of aid for the losing French cause.

" . . . We cannot shut our eyes," Marshall said in a Feb. 13, 1947, cable to Paris, "to fact that there are two sides this problem and that our reports indicate both a lack French understanding of other side (more in Saigon than in Paris) and continued existence dangerously outmoded colonial outlook and methods in area . . . Frankly we have no solution of problem to suggest . . . We appreciate fact that Vietnam started present fighting in Indochina on December 19 and that this action has made it more difficult for French to adopt a position of generosity and conciliation. Nevertheless we hope that French will find it possible to be more than generous in trying to find a solution."

Familiar words? We are hearing them now from many quarters including the French, twenty-five years later, the setting, and even the situation to some degree, is tragically the same—with, of course, and ironic—not to say agonizing—reversal of the roles now being played by Paris and Washington.

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