

France's Invisible Men

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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

PARIS—The French role in seeking to accommodate and even facilitate peace in Indochina has been consistently invisible, discreet and sometimes effective. Neither this role nor its objectives are understood by many Americans.

The principal goal is to end a savage war between France's greatest ally and the North Vietnamese, whom France respects, having both administered them and been defeated by them. The ultimate aim is to establish a neutralized area in which French influence can insure that Western interests are not wholly discarded because of a power vacuum exposed to China and Russia.

Apart from serving as host to the stalemated official peace negotiations, France has played an intermittent but occasionally important part behind the scenes. The successive chiefs of the Quai d'Orsay Asian department, Etienne Manac'h, now Ambassador to Peking, and Henri Froment-Meurice, are carefully professional diplomats and by no means anti-American although they have often disagreed with Washington policy.

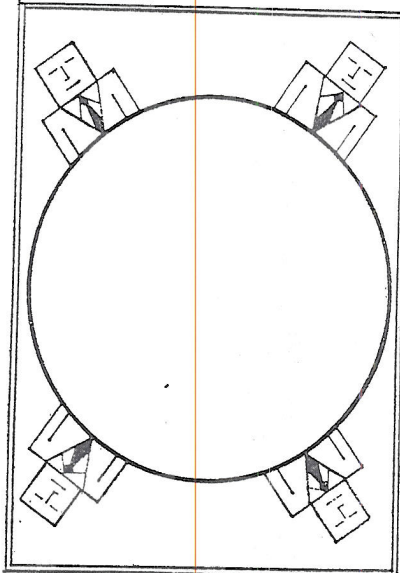
Throughout the Paris talks they gave advice to both sides, when asked, and transmitted messages with maximum objectivity. Moreover, a vital unofficial role was played by another Frenchman, Jean Sainteny, who was responsible for helping start the secret parleys between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho of the Hanoi Politburo.

Sainteny, a banker with long Asian experience, was parachuted from Kunming, China, to Vietnam as head of de Gaulle's mission there in 1945 and, incidentally, was given a bad time by hostile American officers. He has never allowed that sad experience to mar his friendship for the U.S.A.

Because Sainteny signed the first accord between France and Ho Chi Minh in 1946, many Americans including Bobby Kennedy and Ambassador Averell Harriman elicited his opinions in their search for peace. Richard Nixon came to know him before he was elected President and in 1966 asked him for advice on how to deal with North Vietnam.

The banker had also become a personal friend of Kissinger who taught Mme. Sainteny at Harvard summer school. During one of the Frenchman's frequent visits to Washington, Kissinger asked if he thought it possible to hold secret negotiations parallel to the stalemated formal talks. Sainteny agreed to transmit a letter from Nixon to Ho Chi Minh proposing contacts.

When Sainteny returned to Paris in July 1969 he discreetly passed this message to Xuan Thuy, head of the North Vietnamese delegation, for transmission to Hanoi. A positive response came back. On Aug. 4, 1969, Sainteny offered his apartment as a site for the first Kissinger meeting with the Communists. Sainteny remained only to introduce the participants then, after showing them where drinks were kept, departed.



Denny Hermanson

At that first talk those present were Kissinger, Gen. Vernon Walters, U.S. military attaché and an expert French linguist, Xuan Thuy, and his interpreter. Neither Sainteny nor his home were employed for any subsequent contacts but the French Government has helped with logistical and security support.

The French are deeply eager for peace but have no illusions that agreement will be easy. The two crucial obstacles, for Paris, are Hanoi's and Washington's military reluctance to stop fighting.

As France sees it, North Vietnam has been geared to a wartime economy for so long that it feels *installe dans la guerre* and almost afraid to face the immense problems of returning to a peacetime economy. This remains true despite Hanoi's acknowledged error in launching the 1972 offensive which, despite great cost, has failed to achieve its principal objectives.

Likewise, many French seem persuaded the Pentagon also wants to keep the war going. While civilian Washington recognizes the need of peace—perhaps even more than Hanoi does—there is a belief here that Vietnam has become for the U.S. military what Spain, during the civil war, was for the Germans: an admirable laboratory in which to test new weapons and tactics.

Some Frenchmen, indeed, suspect the recent bombing of their mission in Hanoi was deliberately mounted by American officers determined not to relinquish the "laboratory" and therefore ready to sabotage peace.

This is ugly speculation and is by no means widespread. Moreover, it is already evident that Paris is not going to permit either its pride or its official anger about the bombing to disturb relations with the United States or to block the painfully slow advance in the direction of settlement. Visible irritation at the bombing incident will not be allowed to hinder France's invisible role.