

Eisenhower's Role In Viet Involvement

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Washington

The issue of the use of American military force in Indochina came up during the Eisenhower administration but the President insisted on Allied support if he were to ask Congress for authority to commit U. S. troops or Naval powers into the conflict.

The U.S. did not get that Allied support and military action was withheld in 1954.

The Eisenhower administration, fearful that elections throughout North and South Vietnam would bring victory to Ho Chi Minh, fought hard but in vain at the 1954 Geneva conference to reduce the possibility that the conference would call for such elections.

The following year, however, it was South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, far more than the U. S. government, who was responsible for the elections not taking place. Diem flatly refused even to discuss the elections with the Communist regime in Hanoi.

These are among the facts emerging from sections of the Pentagon study on the origins of the Vietnam war, made available to the Washington Post.

The chief architect of the American policy of opposition to elections, as was well known at the time was President Eisenhower's secretary of state, John Foster Dulles.

The origin of the idea of holding an election in divided Vietnam, called for in the Geneva Accords of 1954, remains obscure. But there is nothing obscure about Dulles' attitude.



MR. EISENHOWER WITH JOHN FOSTER DULLES
No. U.S. military action without allied support

In July, 1954, he sent a cable to various American diplomats then struggling with the problem. It said in part:

"... Thus since undoubtedly true that election might eventually mean unification Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh this makes it all more important they should be only held as long after cease-fire agreement as possible and in conditions free from intimidation to give democratic elements best chance. We believe important that no date should be set now and especially that no conditions should be accepted by French which would have direct or indirect effect of preventing effective interna-

tional supervision of agreement ensuring political as well as military guarantees."

Dulles went on to call attention to a joint statement by President Eisenhower and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in June, especially that part which spoke of achieving "unity through free elections supervised by the UN."

Later in July, shortly before issuance in Geneva of the "final declaration" of the long conference, a declaration that included the statement that "general elections shall be held in July, 1956," Dulles cabled his unhappiness at the impending outcome.

Walter Bedell Smith, the undersecretary of state, was sent back to the Geneva conference to limit as much as possible what Dulles foresaw as the disastrous outcome.

In the end the election was called for, but not without considerable argument at Geneva, where the United States worked through the French. But others had the important say.

Chief among these important people were Chou En-lai, then as now Chinese premier, and V. M. Molotov, the Soviet Union's redoubtable foreign minister.

In June, 1954, the American ambassador to France,

Douglas Dillon, cabled Dulles to report conversations with Jean Chauvel, a key diplomat at the conference. Chauvel reported that Chou had "said that he recognized that there were now two governments in the territory of Vietnam, the Viet Minh government and the Vietnamese government. According to Chauvel, this was the first time that Chou had recognized the valid existence of the Vietnamese government."

As to elections, Dillon reported:

"Regarding the final political settlement, Chou said this should be reached by direct negotiations between the two governments in Vietnam. . . Mendes (French Premier Pierre Mendes-France) at this point said that since the war had been going on for eight years and passions were high, it would take a long time before elections could be held as the people must be given a full opportunity to cool off and calm down. Chou made no objection to this statement by Mendes and did not press for early elections."

In late June, Smith called on Molotov in Geneva and told him that the "appearance of 'partition' was repugnant to U.S." and he reported that "in regard to U.S. aversion to partition, he (Molotov) said that this problem could easily be solved by holding elections at once,

which would decide 'one way or the other.'"

When Molotov indicated Smith might encourage the French to agree, "I replied," Smith reported, "that U.S. was not one of principals to Indochinese dispute and did not cast deciding vote, to which Molotov remarked 'maybe so, but you have veto, that word I hear you use so often.'"

A March memorandum from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Arthur Radford, to Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson on the JCS views about the then-impending negotiations said this about "establishment of a coalition government (in Indochina).

"The acceptance of a settlement based upon the establishment of a coalition government in one or more of the Associated States (Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia) would open the way for the ultimate seizure of control by the Communists under conditions which might preclude timely and effective external assistance in the prevention of such seizure."

In a paragraph about "self-determination through free elections," the JCS said in part:

"The Communists, by virtue of their superior capability in the field of propaganda,

could readily prevent the issue as being a choice between national independence and French colonial rule. Furthermore, it would be militarily infeasible to prevent widespread intimidation of voters by Communist partisans. While it is obviously impossible to make a dependable forecast as to the outcome of a free election, current intelligence leads the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the belief that a settlement based upon free elections would be attended by almost certain loss of the Associated States to Communist control."

"Longer term" results of such a loss, said the JCS "involving the gravest threats to fundamental United States security interests in the Far East and even to the stability and security of Europe could be expected to ensue."

By the time the Geneva conference opened, as has been known for many years, the United States had actively considered the idea of military intervention. The documents made available to the Washington Post reflect this consideration at many points.

In January, 1954, President Eisenhower approved the policy statement set at the National Security Council table two days earlier on "United States objectives and courses of action with respect to Southeast Asia." It began with a sweeping statement of "general considerations," one foreshadowed in the Truman administration and to be continued in one form or another, as the documents show, into the Johnson administration.

"1. Communist domination, by whatever means, of all Southeast Asia would seriously endanger in the short term, and critically endanger in the longer term, UNITED STATES security interests.

"A. In the conflict in Indochina, the Communist and non-Communist worlds clearly confront one another on the field of battle. The

loss of the struggle in Indochina, in addition to its impact in Southeast Asia and in South Asia, would therefore have the most serious repercussions on U.S. and Free World interests in Europe and elsewhere.

"B. Such is the interrelation of the countries of the area that effective counteraction would be immediately necessary to prevent the loss of any single country from leading to submission to or an alignment with Communism by the remaining countries of Southeast Asia and Indonesia. Furthermore, in the event of all Southeast Asia falls under Communism, an alignment with Communism of India, and in the longer term, of the Middle East (with the probable exceptions of at least Pakistan and Turkey) could follow progressively. Such widespread alignment would seriously endanger the stability and security of Europe.

"C. Communist control of all of Southeast Asia and Indonesia would threaten the U.S. position in the Pacific offshore island chain and would seriously jeopardize fundamental U.S. security interests in the Far East.

"D. The loss of Southeast Asia would have serious economic consequences for many nations of the Free World and conversely would add significant resources to the Soviet bloc. Southeast Asia, especially Malaya and Indonesia, is the principal world source of natural rubber and tin, and a producer of petroleum and other strategically important commodities. The rice exports of Burma, Indochina and Thailand are critically important to Malaya, Ceylon and Hong Kong and are of considerable significance to Japan and India, all important areas of Free Asia. Furthermore, this area has an important potential as a market for the industrialized countries of the free world.