

U.S. Policy in 'Disarray'

The Pentagon study, which begins its account of American involvement in Vietnam with World War II, says that American policy from 1940 to 1950 has been a subject of "significant misunderstanding."

American policy toward Vietnam during these years, the study says, was "less purposeful" than most people have assumed, and more characterized by "ambivalence and indecision."

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the writer relates, never made up his mind whether to support the French desire to reclaim their Indochina colonies from the Japanese at the end of the war.

And at his death, American policy toward Indochina was in "disarray," the writer says.

He recounts that at first the Truman Administration had no clear-cut reaction to the conflict that broke out in 1945 and 1946 between the French and the Vietminh and eventually led to full-scale war. American policy, he adds, remained "ambivalent."

In a cablegram still kept secret in State Department files, Secretary of State George C. Marshall described the Government's quandary to the embassy in Paris:

"We have fully recognized France's sovereign position and we do not wish to have it appear that we are in any way endeavoring to undermine that position.

"At same time we cannot shut our eyes to fact there are two sides this problem and that our reports indicate both a lack of French understanding other side and continued existence dangerously outmoded colonial outlook and method in areas.

Dual Rejection of Plans

"On other hand we do not lose sight fact that Ho Chi Minh has direct Communist connections and it should be obvious that we are not interested in seeing colonial empire administrations supplanted by philosophy and political organization directed from and controlled by Kremlin.

"Frankly we have no solution of problem to suggest."

On this reasoning, the Truman Government refused French requests for American planes and ships to transport French troops to Indochina and similarly turned down appeals for American arms to help fight the Vietminh.

But the Truman Administration also rebuffed the appeals from Ho Chi Minh. In August and September, 1945, the

account relates, while his forces were in control of Hanoi, he sent a request to President Truman through the Office of Strategic Services, precursor of the C.I.A., asking that Vietnam be accorded "the same status as the Philippines" for a period of tutelage pending independence.

From October, 1945, until the following February, the account continues, Ho Chi Minh wrote at last eight letters to President Truman or to the Secretary of State, formally appealing for United States and United Nations intervention against French colonialism.

There is no record, the analyst says, that any of the appeals were answered.

"Nonintervention by the United States on behalf of the Vietnamese was tantamount to acceptance of the French," the Pentagon account declares.

In 1948 and 1949, as concern about the Soviet Union's expansion in Eastern Europe grew in the United States, Washington became increasingly anxious about Ho Chi Minh's Communist affiliations. Nevertheless, the account discloses, a survey by the State Department's Office of Intelligence and Research in the fall of 1948 concluded that it could not find any hard evidence that Ho Chi Minh actually took his orders from Moscow.

'An Anomaly So Far'

"If there is a Moscow-directed conspiracy in Southeast Asia, Indochina is an anomaly so far," the study reported in its evaluation section.

With its growing concern about Communism, Washington began to press Paris harder to give more independence to the Indochina states. The American Government thus hoped to encourage Vietnamese popular support for Bao Dai as a non-Communist alternative to Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh.

Yet, the narrative relates, even when in March, 1949, France did agree with Emperor Bao Dai to grant Vietnam independence within the French Union, the Truman Administration continued to withhold its backing, fearful that Bao Dai was still weak and tainted with French colonialism.

In a cablegram to the Paris embassy, the State Department outlined its concern:

"We cannot at this time irretrievably commit the U. S. to support of a native government which by failing to develop appeal among Vietnamese might become virtually a puppet government separated from the people and existing only

by the presence of French military forces."

But when Mao Tse-tung's armies drove Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek out of China in late 1949, Washington's ambivalence ended dramatically.

On Dec. 30 President Truman approved a key National Security Council study on Asia, designated N.S.C. 48/2. With it, the Pentagon study says, "The course of U. S. policy was set to block further Communist expansion in Asia."

Varied Forms of Assistance

"The United States on its own initiative," the document declared, should now scrutinize closely the development of threats from Communist aggression, direct or indirect, and be prepared to help within our means to meet such threats by providing political, economic and military assistance and advice where clearly needed to supplement the resistance of other governments in and out of the area which are more directly concerned."

The Council document concluded that "particular attention should be given to the problem of French Indochina."

The basic policy decisions having

been made, the Pentagon account relates, developments followed swiftly.

When Peking and Moscow recognized Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam in January, 1950, Washington followed by recognizing Bao Dai that Feb. 7.

Nine days later, the French requested military aid for the war in Indochina. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, in recommending a favorable reply, wrote in a memorandum to President Truman:

"The choice confronting the U. S. is to support the legal governments in Indochina or to face the extension of Communism over the remainder of the continental area of Southeast Asia and possibly westward."

On May 8, Washington announced that it would provide economic and military aid to the French in Indochina, beginning with a grant of \$10-million.

The first step had been taken. "The U. S. thereafter was directly involved in the developing tragedy in Vietnam," the account says.

Ultimately, the American military aid program reached \$1.1-billion in 1954, paying for 78 per cent of the French war burden.