

Week 12 (Vietnam)

Extra Credit Assignment:

DUE in
dropbox by
Nov. 19, 12pm
(Wed.)

- Read the following excerpts from two essays:

1) Michael Lind, "Vietnam: A Necessary War" (p. 439-448)

and

2) Mark Atwood Lawrence, "A Mistake of the Western Alliance" (p. 448-460)

- Then write a one-page response, in which you briefly summarize the argument in each essay, and then make your own argument for which essay is more persuasive, and why.

Vietnam: A Necessary War

MICHAEL LIND

In the winter of 1950, Moscow was as cold as hell. On the evening of February 14, 1950, in a banquet hall in the Kremlin, three men whose plans would subject Indochina to a half century of warfare, tyranny, and economic stagnation, and inspire political turmoil in the United States and Europe, stood side by side: Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh.

Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War* (New York: Free Press, 1999), p. 1, 4-5, 31-35, 38-41, 52, 54, 60-62, 64-65, 254, 256-257. Reprinted by permission.

In the 1960s, when the United States committed its own troops to battle in an effort to prevent clients of the Soviet Union and China from conquering Indochina, many opponents of the American intervention claimed that the North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh's communism was superficial, compared to his nationalism. In reality, there was an international communist conspiracy, and Ho Chi Minh was a charter member of it. Beginning in the 1920s, Ho, a founding member of the French Communist party, had been an agent of the Communist International (Comintern), a global network of agents and spies controlled with iron discipline by the Soviet dictatorship. In the 1930s, Ho had lived in the USSR, slavishly approving every twist and turn of Stalin's policy; in the 1940s, he had been a member of the Chinese Communist party, then subordinated to Moscow. Ho Chin Minh owed not merely his prominence but his life to his career in the communist network outside of his homeland. Because he had been out of the country for so many years, he had survived when many other Vietnamese nationalists, noncommunist and communist alike, had been imprisoned or executed by the French or by the Japanese during World War II....

The Cold War was the third world war of the twentieth century. It was a contest for global military and diplomatic primacy between the United States and the Soviet Union, which had emerged as the two strongest military powers after World War II. Because the threat of nuclear escalation prevented all-out conventional war between the two superpowers, the Soviet-American contest was fought in the form of arms races, covert action, ideological campaigns, economic embargoes, and proxy wars in peripheral areas. In three of these—Korea, Indochina, and Afghanistan—one of the two superpowers sent hundreds of thousands of its own troops into battle against clients of the other side.

In the third world war, Indochina was the most fought over territory on earth. The region owed this undesirable honor not to its intrinsic importance but to the fact that in other places where the two superpowers confronted one another they were frozen in a stalemate that could not be broken without the risk of general war. The Soviet Union and the United States fought proxy wars in Indochina because they dared not engage in major tests of strength in Central Europe or Northeast Asia (after 1953) or even the Middle East. Indochina was strategic because it was peripheral.

Throughout the Cold War, the bloody military struggles in the Indochina theater were shaped indirectly by the tense but bloodless diplomatic struggles in the European theater. By going to war in Korea and simultaneously extending an American military protectorate over Taiwan and French Indochina, the Truman administration signaled its resolve to defend its European allies. American officials swallowed their misgivings about French colonialism and paid for France's effort in its on-going war in Indochina from 1950 until 1954, in the hope of winning French support for the rearmament of Germany. Khrushchev's humiliation of the United States in the Berlin crisis of 1961 persuaded the Kennedy administration that a show of American resolve on the Indochina front was all the more important. In 1968, concern by members of the U.S. foreign policy elite that further escalation in Indochina would endanger America's other commitments, particularly in the European theater, was one of the factors that led the Johnson

administrat
Eastern Eu
Union itsel
and ideolog

The Vietna
Taiwan cris
war and pro
and it matte

Examir
justify it. In
wage the C
to establish
that was m:
conflict and
internationa
struggles in
thinkers—di
Hans Morge
in some cas
response to
revolutionar
William Ful
Undersecret
ential foreig
they consid

The real
mits aging ve
Chi Minh's
as war crimin
oppose the
some of the
of State Rob
ning has app
makers, such
argue that the

In light o
case in favor
realists such as
America's coi
such as Walt
were convinc
States was def
that inspired t
their Southeas
may have resu

troops to battle in
from conquering
claimed that the
perfidious, compared
communist conspiracy,
in the 1920s, Ho, a
en an agent of the
of agents and spies
the 1930s, Ho had
of Stalin's policy; in
t party, then subor-
minence but his life
nd. Because he had
when many other
e, had been impris-
World War II....

The Vietnam War, like the Korean War, the Afghan War, the Greek Civil War, the Taiwan crises, and a number of other conflicts was at one and the same time a civil war and proxy battle in the Cold War. During the Cold War, Indochina mattered—and it mattered to the Soviet Union and China as well as to the United States.

Examining the Vietnam War in its Cold War context does not necessarily justify it. Indeed, some argue that while it was necessary for the United States to wage the Cold War, success in the Cold War did not require the United States to establish or defend a protectorate over most of Indochina. This is the claim that was made by a number of American "realists" at the time of the Vietnam conflict and in the succeeding decades. Realism, or realpolitik, is the theory of international relations that emphasizes the primacy and legitimacy of power struggles in world politics. Several of the most prominent American realist thinkers—diplomat George Kennan, journalist Walter Lippmann, and scholar Hans Morgenthau, among others—criticized the Vietnam War in particular and in some cases the Cold War as a whole, as an unnecessary or disproportionate response to the threats posed by Soviet expansionism and communist Chinese revolutionary radicalism. Within the U.S. government in the 1960s, Senator William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Undersecretary of State George Ball, one of the Democratic party's most influential foreign policy experts, also used the language of realism to criticize what they considered to be an overly ambitious U.S. grand strategy.

The realist critique of the Vietnam War remains very popular today. It permits aging veterans of the sixties left, embarrassed by their former support for Ho Chi Minh's vicious dictatorship and their denunciations of American presidents as war criminals or their avoidance of the draft, to claim that they were right to oppose the war, even if their rationale was mistaken.... Finally, the fact that some of the policymakers who played a role in the war, like former Secretary of State Robert McNamara, have claimed that it was a mistake from the beginning has appeared to strengthen the realist critique (even though other policymakers, such as former national security adviser Walt Rostow, continue to argue that the war made sense in terms of U.S. strategy).

In light of all this, it is important to recall that there was, and is, a realist case in favor of the Vietnam War, as well as one against it. If some American realists such as Lippmann, Kennan, and Morgenthau doubted the importance of America's commitment to denying Indochina to the communist bloc, others, such as Walt and Eugene Rostow, Samuel P. Huntington, and John P. Roche, were convinced of the significance of that commitment. The fact that the United States was defeated in Vietnam does not necessarily discredit the strategic logic that inspired the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and their Southeast Asian neighbors. The failure of American policy in Indochina may have resulted from inappropriate military tactics, or the characteristics of the

North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese societies and governments, or the support provided Hanoi by the Soviet Union and China, or the peculiarities of American political culture—or some combinations of all of these factors. The case that Indochina was worth a limited American war of some kind, particularly in the circumstances of the Cold War in the 1960s, is compelling in light of what we now know about the pattern and result of the Cold War as a whole.

Contemporary critics of the Johnson administration spoke of its “credibility gap” in connection with the Vietnam War. In addition to having exaggerated the progress of the United States and its South Vietnamese allies in the war, Johnson and his aides were accused of a failure to clearly explain the goal of the war to the American public and the world. Typical of this line of criticism is a comment in 1968 by William R. Corson, a former marine colonel in Vietnam, in his critique of the war, *The Betrayal*: “The emergence of the credibility gap came from the ill-fated attempts of Secretary [of State Dean] Rusk to justify the war successively as, first, a defense of Vietnamese freedom, then a defense of our national interest, and finally the defense of the world from the yellow peril.”

Indeed, Johnson and officials of his administration provided several rationales for the escalation of the U.S. effort in Vietnam. Johnson cited “the deepening shadow of China. The rulers in Hanoi are urged on by Peking.” On another occasion he stressed the need to thwart guerrilla warfare as an instrument of communist expansion: “Our strength imposes on us an obligation to assure that this type of aggression does not succeed.” Secretary of State Dean Rusk stressed the potential effects of a defeat of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia on America’s global alliance system, including “our guarantees to Berlin.”

From today’s perspective, the Johnson administration does not appear to have been more inconsistent or disingenuous in describing the aims of U.S. foreign policy than other U.S. wartime administrations. During World War II, the Roosevelt administration sometimes justified the U.S. effort in terms of the security of the United States and at other times claimed that the defeat of the Axis powers would help promote a utopian world characterized by the “Four Freedoms.” In the run-up to the Gulf War, the [first] Bush administration provided a number of rationales, including the atrocities committed by Saddam Hussein’s regime (some of which were exaggerated) and the importance of Middle Eastern oil for American jobs. President Clinton and members of his administration explained the U.S.-led NATO war against Serbia in terms of a number of different rationales: the moral imperative of preventing or reversing the ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo by the Serbs, the need to demonstrate the military credibility of NATO and the United States, the economic importance of a stable Europe, and the danger that the conflict would expand and draw in Greece and Turkey. Government officials addressing different audiences on different occasions for different purposes may emphasize different goals of foreign policy. The apparent inconsistencies that result are not necessarily evidence of official duplicity or official confusion. Nor does the fact that some official goals were misguided or overemphasized mean that others were not sound.

What is more, the notion of the “credibility gap” ignores the possibility that in escalating the Vietnam War the Johnson administration had several purposes,

not just one
North Vietn
deter the Sc
Vietnamese
developing c
of South Vie

While t
tary purpose
Kennedy, Je
intellectuals
place assigne
sidents and
to demonstr
enemies and
States were
both, the Sc
sively, whil
West Germ
powers. It v
inoes”—wh
from Vietna
intervening
South Vietn
by North V
tion of the
democracy.
ately incide
politics, wh
strategy in t

Credibi
combined v
concern of
resolve is as

The na
something
world war i
the third g
century sieg
other theat
Japan, and S
to maintain
the Cold W
United Stat
industrial b
first conditi
ance of the

nments, or the peculiarities of these factors. The third, particularly in light of what a whole.

of its "credibility ring exaggerated allies in the war, slain the goal of line of criticism arine colonel in e of the credibil- n] Rusk to justify hen a defense of ie yellow peril." several rationales l "the deepening ng." On another an instrument of ion to assure thatean Rusk stressed Asia on America's

es not appear to aims of U.S. for-World War II, the i terms of the se- defeat of the Axis d by the "Four iministration pro- mitted by Saddam ipartance of Mid- bers of his admin- terms of a number versing the ethnic nonstrate the mil- ic importance of a and and draw in audiences on dif- t goals of foreign ssarily evidence of some official goals t sound.

the possibility that d several purposes,

not just one. By successfully defending South Vietnam against subversion from North Vietnam, a client of the Soviet Union and China, the United States could deter the Soviets, reassure its allies, discourage the adoption of the Chinese and Vietnamese model of revolutionary "people's war" by antiwestern insurgents in developing countries, and encourage the economic development and liberalization of South Vietnam as well as of South Korea and Taiwan, all at the same time.

While the U.S. intervention in Vietnam served a number of complementary purposes, there was a hierarchy among U.S. goals. The administrations of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon may not have made the hierarchy as clear as intellectuals would like. Nevertheless, in hindsight it is possible to identify the place assigned to different goals in the hierarchy of purposes by these three presidents and their aides. The chief purpose of the United States in Vietnam was to demonstrate America's credibility as a military power and a reliable ally to its enemies and its allies around the world. The danger was that if the United States were perceived to be lacking in military capacity, political resolve, or both, the Soviet Union and/or China and their proxies would act more aggressively, while U.S. allies, including important industrial democracies such as West Germany and Japan, would be inclined to appease the communist great powers. It was in this global geopolitical context that preventing "falling dominoes"—whether in Southeast Asia proper, or in Third World countries far from Vietnam—was important. Least important of all the U.S. purposes in intervening in Vietnam was promoting liberty, democracy, and prosperity in South Vietnam itself. The defeat of the attempted takeover of South Vietnam by North Vietnam was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the evolution of the authoritarian government of South Vietnam toward liberalism and democracy. But American's political goals in South Vietnam were appropriately incidental and subordinate to American's goals in Southeast Asian power politics, which, in turn, were incidental and subordinate to American's global strategy in the third world war....

Credibility, in power politics, is a country's reputation for military capability combined with the political resolve to use it in order to promote its goals. The concern of statesmen with the reputation of their states for military ability and resolve is as old as interstate politics....

The natural concern of U.S. leaders with credibility was heightened into something like an obsession by the peculiar dynamics of the Cold War—a world war fought by means of sieges and duels. Unlike World Wars I and II, the third global conflict of the twentieth century took the form of a half-century siege on the European front and duels or proxy wars in a number of other theaters. The forward deployment of U.S. troops in Central Europe, Japan, and South Korea following the Korean War, together with U.S. efforts to maintain conventional and nuclear superiority, made up the siege aspect of the Cold War. In the long run, the superior military-industrial capability of the United States and its affluent allies was bound to wear down the military-industrial base of the Soviet empire, as long as two conditions were met. The first condition for western success in the Cold War was alliance unity; the alliance of the United States, West Germany, Japan, Britain, French, and the other

major democracies could not be split by a Soviet diplomatic strategy of divide-and-rule. Meeting this condition required periodic reaffirmations of alliance unity, like the development of the Euromissiles by NATO in the early 1980s in response to Soviet intimidation. In addition, the American bloc was required to match and surpass the Soviet imperium in the arms race. Because the goal was to spend the Soviet Union into bankruptcy, not merely to defend the western allies against an implausible threat of invasion, the American bloc could not accumulate a sufficiency of nuclear missiles and other weapons and then quit. The arms race was an auction that had to be continued until one side dropped out.

The military-industrial siege of the Soviet empire took far longer than early Cold War leaders such as Truman and Eisenhower and their advisers had expected. In the 1950s, Eisenhower hoped that U.S. troops might be withdrawn from Europe in the next decade. Instead, the siege lasted almost half a century. While manning the siegeworks in Europe and northeast Asia, the United States also had to demonstrate its determination by threatening war, or, if the threat failed, by waging limited war, with the Soviet Union and/or China and their proxies in regions on the periphery of the main theaters of Cold War competition. Sometimes the United States had to fight where it was challenged by its enemies, not where it would have preferred to fight. Because perceived power is power (except in times of war, when actual power is tested), the danger that a strategic retreat will be misinterpreted as evidence of a loss of will or capability is quite real. To refuse to duel is to lose the duel.

Thus defined, credibility became the central strategic concern of the United States in the Cold War. Henry Kissinger described the American interest in Indochina in terms of U.S. credibility in global power politics: "With respect to Indo-China, we are not equating the intrinsic importance of each part of the world, and we are not saying that every part of the world is strategically as important to the United States as any other part of the world.... [The question of aid to allies in Indochina] is a fundamental question of how we are viewed by all other people." John Foster Dulles made a similar point in calling on the United States to protect the anticommunist remnant of the Chinese Nationalist regime on Taiwan in spring 1950: "If we do not act, it will be everywhere interpreted that we are making another retreat because we dare not risk war."

Who was the intended audience for American displays of credibility? Makers and defenders of U.S. Cold War strategy reasoned that the United States had to deter its enemies and reassure its allies at the same time. In a speech at Johns Hopkins University on April 7, 1965, President Johnson invoked these two reasons for demonstrations of credibility in the context of the war in Indochina. First, he cited the need to reassure America's allies: "Around the globe, from Berlin to Thailand, are people whose well-being rests, in part, on the belief that they can count on us if they are attacked. To leave Vietnam to its fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of American's commitment, the value of America's word." Second, President Johnson sought to discourage America's enemies: "The central lesson of our time is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied. To withdraw from

one battlefield in Asia, as we did come, but no fi

Using less o
of March 25, 19
policy in Indoch

70%—To a

20%—To k
hands

10%—To p
of life....

In the mind associated with r
global struggle n
tions involving I
contested areas the first major d
row, confidence would have coll
market would ha
perhaps even a
have unraveled, :
can states hurric
ing, the United aligned around t
with global reac
have had to fire :
munist revolution same capitals aro
the U.S.-Japan al
moribund. But N
global military hi

The bandwa
Soviet empire w:
tional arena is re
means of militar
Western Europe,
and appeasement
world's leading
expenditures on
challenge permitte
world politics in
troop deploymen

The Cold W
bloodless global

ic strategy of divide-and-conquer. In the early 1980s, an alliance was required. Because the goal merely to defend the American bloc could never weapons and then inued until one side

far longer than early advisers had ex-
pected might be withdrawn almost half a century.
Asia, the United States war, or, if the threat
of China and their Cold War competition
was challenged by its perceived power
(ed), the danger that a of will or capability is

oncern of the United American interest in tics: "With respect to e of each part of the is strategically as im-
.... [The question of we are viewed by all calling on the United ese Nationalist regime verywhere interpreted sk war."

ys of credibility? Ma-
hat the United States e time. In a speech at Johnson invoked these context of the war in 's allies: "Around the being rests, in part, on d. To leave Vietnam ople in the value of l." Second, President central lesson of our 1. To withdraw from

one battlefield means only to prepare for the next. We must say in Southeast Asia, as we did in Europe, in the words of the Bible: 'Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further.'

Using less orotund language, Johnson adviser John McNaughton, in a memo of March 25, 1965, emphasized American credibility in listing the aims of U.S. policy in Indochina:

- 70%:—To avoid a humiliating defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor)
- 20%:—To keep South Vietnam (and the adjacent territory) from Chinese hands
- 10%:—To permit the people of South Vietnam to enjoy a better, freer way of life....

In the mind of the western public, the idea of defeat in the Cold War was associated with nuclear armageddon. But the defeat of the United States in the global struggle might have resulted from America's backing down in confrontations involving Berlin, or Korea, or Taiwan, or Indochina, or Cuba, or similar contested areas charged with significance by the superpower rivalry. After the first major defeat or retreat, or perhaps the second or third or fourth in a row, confidence in America's military capability, or its determination to use it, would have collapsed. At that point, something akin to a panic in the stock market would have ensued. In a remarkably short period of time—a few years, perhaps even a few months—the worldwide American alliance system would have unraveled, as European, Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and Latin American states hurriedly made deals with Moscow. Thanks to runaway bandwagoning, the United States would have found itself marginalized in a world now aligned around the Soviet Union (there having been no other military power with global reach and global ambitions at the time). The Soviets might not have had to fire a shot in anger. There need not have been any additional communist revolutions. The same elites might even have remained in power in the same capitals around the world. Indeed, America's alliances such as NATO and the U.S.-Japan alliance might have lasted formally for a few more years, though moribund. But Moscow would have displaced Washington at the apex of the global military hierarchy, and everybody would have known it.

The bandwagon effect is the reason why it was a mistake to argue that the Soviet empire was bound to collapse of overextension. Power in the international arena is relative, not absolute. If the Soviet Union had managed, by means of military intimidation, to divide the alliance of the United States, Western Europe, and Japan, or to frighten the United States into isolationism and appeasement, then it might have achieved and maintained a position as the world's leading military power in relative terms even while it reduced its expenditures on the military. In the same way, the abatement of the Soviet challenge permitted the United States to become relatively more powerful in world politics in the 1990s, even as it slashed its defense spending and overseas troop deployments....

The Cold War, then, was most likely to end with a rapid and more or less bloodless global diplomatic realignment in favor of the superpower that was

perceived to be the most militarily powerful and the most politically determined. We know that this is how the Cold War would have ended if the United States had lost, because this is how the Cold War ended when the Soviet Union lost....

It is possible to argue that even if the Soviet Union and China considered the fate of Indochina to be important, the United States could have ceded the region to one or both of the communist great powers with little or no damage to its foreign policy. During the cold war, minimal realists such as George Ball, George Kennan, and Walter Lippmann advocated a strategy of finite containment limited to the North Atlantic and North Pacific as an alternative to the policy of global containment that the United States actually pursued. Ball wrote that U.S. strategy should focus on "the principal Atlantic nations." The only area of the non-European world of any importance, apart from Japan, was the Middle East, because of its oil reserves. The Vietnam War (and presumably the Korean War) was based on the mistaken equation of a commitment "in the jungles and rice paddies of a small country on the edge of nowhere with our most important treaty commitments to defend our Western allies in the heart of Europe—the centre of world power and hence the centre of danger." Like other minimal realists, Ball saw little reason for the United States to oppose Soviet imperial gains anywhere outside of an imaginary border that encircled North America, Western Europe, and the Middle East. Even the nearby nations of the Caribbean and Central America should be "free to create their own versions of chaos."...

... It might be argued that the "three fronts" of Korea, Taiwan, and Indochina were not as important in Cold War power politics as American presidents from Truman to Nixon believed. The question of whether a given country or region is strategic or not can be approached by means of a simple question: Do the great powers of a given era consider it worth fighting for?...

... [B]etween 1946 and 1989, every major military power of the Cold War era—the United States, China, France, the Soviet Union, and the British Commonwealth—sent at least some troops into combat in Indochina or nearby countries in Southeast Asia. If Indochina was a peripheral region of no strategic importance in world politics, it is curious that this fact escaped the attention of policymakers in Washington, Moscow, Beijing, Paris, and London.

If Indochina was a key strategic region during the Cold War for which the two superpowers were willing to fight, directly or indirectly, why was it of strategic importance? The answer has less to do with sea-lanes than with symbolism. The symbolic significance of Indochina in the global rivalry for world primacy between the American bloc and the communist bloc, and in the simultaneous competition within the communist bloc between the Soviet Union and China, arose from the fact that the Cold War was an ideological war as well as a power struggle....

Even the relatively moderate Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev emphasized that Moscow's support for communist revolutionaries in Asia was inspired not by the "national interest" of "Russia" but by the Soviet regime's ideology. "No real Communist would have tried to dissuade Kim Il-Sung from his

compelling des
tionary Americ
Communist vie
but the headqu
adherents in dc
and economic :
viewed suppor
Marxism-Lenin
to support the
revolution." Th
tion of Shiite I
guardian of Shi
under pressure
[in Afghanistan]

The globa
far more dive
military dictat
common fear
Americans who
revolution," U
strategy to the
military hegemon
whole. The d
Cold War vict
policy had to
policy would h
of Western E
were found du

What conc
by the United
McNaughton,
tant it was that
taint from metl
was wrong for
of attrition in S
ture of an insu
defensible duri
from 1969–75

The moral
disproportionat
proportionate
of both the p
condemn man
condemning th
of civilians in C
war against the

politically determinative ended if the ended when the

China considered it would have ceded the or no damage to itself as George Ball, of finite containment alternative to the pursued. Ball wrote us." The only area in, was the Middle mably the Korean in the jungles and our most important part of Europe—the like other minimal se Soviet imperial d North America, y nations of the heir own versions

Taiwan, and Indo-merican presidents given country or ample question: Do ...

r of the Cold War, and the British Indochina or nearby position of no strategic led the attention of London.

War for which the why was it of stricken with symbolism. for world primacy in the simultaneous Union and China, as well as a power

shchev emphasized a was inspired not regime's ideology. Il-Sung from his

compelling desire to liberate South Korea from Syngman Rhee and from reactionary American influence. To have done so would have contradicted the Communist view of the world." The Soviet Union was not only a superpower but the headquarters of the global religion of Marxism-Leninism, with zealous adherents in dozens of countries who looked to Moscow not only for military and economic support but for ideological guidance. Mao and his colleagues also viewed support for foreign communists as a test of their commitment to Marxism-Leninism. Zhou Enlai told North Vietnamese leaders in 1971, "Not to support the revolution of the Vietnamese people is like betraying the revolution." This viewpoint can be compared instructively with a recent description of Shiite Iran's foreign policy: "Because Iran sometimes portrays itself as a guardian of Shiites worldwide, experts in the region said today that it may feel under pressure to respond with military force if it can be proven that the Shiites [in Afghanistan] were attacked for reasons of religious faith."

The global alliance that the United States led in the Cold War was far more diverse than the communist bloc; it included liberal democracies, military dictatorships, and Muslim theocracies that shared little more than a common fear of Soviet power and influence. To the disappointment of Americans who wanted the United States to crusade for a "global democratic revolution," U.S. policymakers properly limited the goal of American grand strategy to the negative one of preventing hostile great powers from winning military hegemony over Europe, Asia, or the Eurasian Supercontinent as a whole. The democratic wave of the 1990s was a byproduct of America's Cold War victory, not the goal of America's Cold War strategy. U.S. foreign policy had to be narrowly anticommunist because a pro-democratic foreign policy would have prevented the United States from having many allies outside of Western Europe, where most of the world's outnumbered democracies were found during the Cold War....

What conclusions are to be drawn about the morality of the methods used by the United States in the Vietnam War? Johnson administration adviser John McNaughton, in a 1964 memo about U.S. Vietnam policy, stressed how important it was that the United States "emerge from the crisis without unacceptable taint from methods used." A compelling case can be made that the United States was wrong for moral as well as for practical reasons to rely heavily on a strategy of attrition in South Vietnam between 1965 and 1968, when the war was a mixture of an insurgency and a conventional war. The attrition strategy was more defensible during the predominantly conventional stage of the Vietnam conflict from 1969–75.

The moral alternative to waging the Vietnam War by indiscriminate and disproportionate means, however, was waging it by more discriminate and proportionate means—not abandoning Indochina to Stalinism, to the detriment of both the peoples of Indochina and the U.S.-led alliance system. One can condemn many of the tactics used by the United States in Vietnam without condemning the war as a whole, just as one can condemn the terror bombing of civilians in Germany and Japan during World War II without arguing that the war against the Axis powers was unjust....

Once the Vietnam War is viewed in the context of the Cold War, it looks less like a tragic error than like a battle that could hardly be avoided. The Cold War was fought as a siege in Europe and as a series of duels elsewhere in the world—chiefly, in Korea and Indochina. Both the siege and the duels were necessary. Power in world politics is perceived power, and perceived power is a vector that results from perceived military capability and perceived political will. The U.S. forces stationed in West Germany and Japan demonstrated the capability of the United States to defend its most important allies. U.S. efforts on behalf of minor allies in peripheral regions such as South Korea and South Vietnam and Laos proved that the United States possessed the will to be a reliable ally. Had the United States repeatedly refused to take part in proxy-war duels with the Soviet Union, and with China during its anti-American phase, it seems likely that there would have been a dramatic pro-Soviet realignment in world politics, no matter how many missiles rusted in their silos in the American West and no matter how many U.S. troops remained stationed in West Germany.

Vietnam: A Mistake of the Western Alliance

MARK ATWOOD LAWRENCE

... Western policies during the Cold War have too often been described as uniquely American in origin, as if U.S. policymakers could sit safely behind impermeable national boundaries, survey the world, and pronounce their decisions. In fact, as this book demonstrates, the United States, in the Cold War era as much as in the period since the fall of the Berlin Wall, should be seen as one participant, albeit an inordinately powerful one, in an international web in which influence flowed in multiple directions. Other actors sometimes set the international agenda by advancing self-serving ideas, constraining choices, and practicing coercion. The ideas that underpinned Western policy for forty years during the Cold War were constructions crafted through constant interaction of decision makers from many nations....

The decision to throw American aid behind the French war marked the first definitive American step toward deep embroilment in Indochina affairs, the start of a long series of moves that would lead the administration of Lyndon Johnson to commit U.S. ground forces to Vietnam fifteen years later. But if 1950 signaled the beginning of that process, it marked the end of another. As U.S. officials began shipping weapons, aircraft, and other military supplies to Vietnam and as they set up the first U.S. military mission in Saigon, many had already embraced the set of fundamental assumptions about Vietnam that would guide American involvement over the following twenty-five years. They now believed that the fate of Vietnam carried heavy implications for the destiny of Asia. They saw Vietnamese insurgents as the agents of

From Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam*, p. ix–x, 3–5, 7–8, 11–14, 19, 21, 23–27, 41, 46–49, 51–54, 204, 234, 240–241, 276–280, 287. Copyright © 2005. Reprinted by permission of the University California Press.

international co
ests of Moscow
States, through
could play a ke
ing the nationa
Western securi

To be sure
ways in the 19
course in those
established in t
Yet the patter
remarkable stay
reckon seriousl
in most Amer
experience in S

How did I
those years? Ho
icance that Am
were other roa
nected to Vietn
years. The resu
histories of the
have offered th
gic calculations
cusing on the i

The first li
can minds in th
form to a global

A second
stresses Americ
it is important
Vietnam's natu
several historia
Many U.S. off
and markets n
Britain and Ja
contribution t
industrialized
establishment

A third ex
emphasizes do
attention on S
the region to i
tention that H
Republican pa
administration'

e Cold War, it looks
e avoided. The Cold
uels elsewhere in the
l the duels were nec-
perceived power is a
ceived political will.
onstrated the capabil-
U.S. efforts on behalf
d South Vietnam and
reliable ally. Had the
duels with the Soviet
eems likely that there
ld politics, no matter
st and no matter how

Alliance

en been described as
l sit safely behind im-
bounce their decisions.
the Cold War era as
should be seen as one
national web in which
etimes set the interna-
choices, and practicing
forty years during the
nteraction of decision

ench war marked the
: in Indochina affairs,
ministration of Lyndon
een years later. But if
he end of another. As
er military supplies to
sion in Saigon, many
is about Vietnam that
ng twenty-five years.
heavy implications for
ts as the agents of

international communism and assumed that their success would serve the interests of Moscow and Beijing. And they embraced the idea that the United States, through the proper application of material aid and political guidance, could play a key role in establishing a new Vietnamese political order reconciling the nationalist aspirations of the local population with the requirements of Western security.

To be sure, U.S. thinking about Vietnam continued to evolve in significant ways in the 1950s and 1960s, and policymakers had opportunities to change course in those years. It would be going too far to argue that patterns of thinking established in the early Cold War years made a U.S.-Vietnamese war inevitable. Yet the pattern is unmistakable: basic ideas conceived in the late 1940s had remarkable staying power. To understand America's war in Vietnam, one must reckon seriously with the years before 1950, a period that figures only marginally in most Americans'—and even in many historians'—perceptions of the U.S. experience in Southeast Asia.

How did U.S. policymakers come to think of Vietnam as they did during those years? How did a faraway corner of the French empire acquire such significance that Americans saw fit to intervene with economic and military aid? Why were other roads not taken? Unsurprisingly, these questions, like so many connected to Vietnam, have drawn a good deal of interest from historians over the years. The resulting body of scholarship, although little accounted for in general histories of the war, is large, complex, and contentious. Fundamentally, historians have offered three explanations for American behavior—one stressing geostrategic calculations, another highlighting U.S. economic objectives, and a third focusing on the imperatives of domestic politics.

The first line of argument emphasizes that Vietnam acquired urgency in American minds in the late 1940s because the situation there increasingly seemed to conform to a global pattern of communist aggression against the West and its interests....

A second explanation for Vietnam's emergence as a major U.S. concern stresses American calculations about the region's economic value. Few scholars, it is important to note, contend that Americans were guided by a belief that Vietnam's natural resources and markets were critical to U.S. prosperity.... Still, several historians have argued that economic considerations drove U.S. policy. Many U.S. officials, they argue, concluded by 1950 that Indochinese resources and markets mattered to the economic health of crucial U.S. allies, especially Britain and Japan. Vietnam's economic significance lay not in the territory's contribution to the American economy but in its potential contribution to industrialized nations that American policymakers regarded as crucial to the establishment of a new global order....

A third explanation for Vietnam's emergence as a major U.S. preoccupation emphasizes domestic politics. In this view the Truman administration fixed its attention on Southeast Asia and began pumping U.S. material assistance into the region to fend off critics at home. Central to this interpretation is the contention that Harry S. Truman's narrow reelection victory in 1948 left a frustrated Republican party searching for an issue it could use against the president. The administration's failure, despite years of effort and vast expenditures, to prevent

a communist victory in China provided the cudgel the president's enemies sought. As Mao Zedong triumphed in 1949, Republicans assaulted Truman and the Democrats as weak willed and demanded vigorous action to prevent the further spread of communism in Asia. Truman, the argument runs, had little choice but to go along.

All three arguments hold merit, and none excludes the others. Taken together, this body of work leaves little doubt that several reciprocally reinforcing considerations helped propel the Truman administration toward supporting the French in Indochina. Nonetheless, this scholarship falls short of offering a satisfactory explanation of American behavior. Above all, it fails to reckon with the fact that Washington, as it crafted policy toward Vietnam, was merely one participant in a complicated, decidedly international dynamic in which other governments usually held the initiative and set the agenda....

Taking an approach that is both global and national, I argue that the transformation of American thinking about Vietnam occurred as part of a grand, transnational debate about Vietnam in particular and the fate of colonial territories in general following the Second World War. As the book's first half demonstrates, each capital [Washington, London, and Paris] became deeply divided over Vietnam during the war or in its early aftermath, torn between contradictory impulses to reestablish French colonial rule and to acknowledge the legitimacy of Vietnamese nationalism and permit at least a degree of self-determination. Although the precise dynamics of the debate differed among the three countries in question, the basic contours were the same. Each policymaking establishment wrestled with the same set of fundamental problems that faced Western nations as they confronted colonialism in the mid-twentieth century: Should they attach higher value to the stability of their own political and economic interests or to the desires and grievances of colonized peoples? Should they seek the near-term benefits of continued Western domination or the potential long-term advantages of harmonious relationships with Asian peoples?...

The solution to this conundrum, an awkward compromise that paid lip service to America's anticolonial principles while leaning toward the interests of France, established a pattern that would play out repeatedly in the Third World over the course of the Cold War. From Vietnam to Indonesia, Guatemala to the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia to South Africa, American policymakers would invoke dedication to liberal, democratic solutions and sometimes would take concrete steps in that direction by sponsoring elections, pushing the pace of reform, or attempting to build popular bases of power for the regimes that they preferred. Almost always, however, Americans set the highest priority on the protection of short-term U.S. economic and geostrategic interests and embraced policies geared to limit the scope of social reform and the expression of genuine nationalism if those developments seemed to threaten American objectives, as they often did. The United States, then, often invoked liberal principles and sometimes even insisted on concessions to those principles while carrying out illiberal policies. Vietnam provides a telling case study of the pressures that helped establish this pattern in the aftermath of the Second World War, a period of unique fluidity in the history of U.S. foreign relations that might have yielded a different outcome.

This book...
between the
tence over th
strates that
relationship
Washington.
the work of
of U.S. prefe
After ca
Vietnam, I a
turmoil in In
mon cause v
policy prefer
dissenters ag
presented a s
nist war in
another at c
bold Cold V
braced by t
triumph of c
lacked subtle
ety. This vic
democratic c
twenty-five

Free France

As Allied vic
General Cha
sure, the ma
lishment of
Germany. C
media, and
territory on
with recover
not lag far b
politicians, a
term prospe
François de
chief delega
in early 19^c
power."

While c
precisely ho

To the
that it was :

resident's enemies assaulted Truman action to prevent imminent runs, had little

others. Taken together, they were reinforcing the ward supporting the : of offering a satis- to reckon with the was merely one par- n which other gov-

gue that the transfor- : of a grand, transna- colonial territories in first half demonstrates, deeply divided over between contradictory pledge the legitimacy of self-determination. g the three countries making establishment faced Western nations y: Should they attach mic interests or to the y seek the near-term long-term advantages

mise that paid lip ser- toward the interests of ly in the Third World iasia, Guatemala to the policymakers would in- times would take con- ning the pace of reform, nes that they preferred. ty on the protection of mbraced policies geared genuine nationalism if ives, as they often did. es and sometimes even g out illiberal policies. helped establish this pat- of unique fluidity in the different outcome.

This book also offers insight into the nature of the transatlantic partnership between the United States and Western European countries that came into existence over the five years following the Second World War. Above all, it demonstrates that European governments sometimes held the initiative in their relationship with the United States and dictated policies ultimately embraced in Washington. The Western economic and security system was, in other words, the work of government officials in multiple nations, not a unilateral imposition of U.S. preferences for remaking the world....

After carefully examining intragovernmental disputes over policy toward Vietnam, I argue that hawkish factions in each country—those who viewed the turmoil in Indochina as an expression of binary Cold War tensions—made common cause with one another to recast Vietnam, to assure the triumph of their policy preferences, and to marginalize those with different ideas. In each country, dissenters against the extension of Cold War thinking to the colonial world represented a serious threat to those who wished to pursue a vigorous anticommunist war in Vietnam. By working together and drawing strength from one another at critical moments of decision, factions in each country favoring a bold Cold War posture were able to have their way by 1950. The policy embraced by the three leading Western powers in that year represented not the triumph of democratic principles or processes but the victory of thinking that lacked subtlety and sensitivity to the peculiarities of Vietnamese history and society. This victory, achieved more through maneuvering and manipulation than democratic deliberation, marked a moment of great tragedy. Over the following twenty-five years, the Western powers would reap what they sowed in 1950.

Free France and the Recovery of Indochina

As Allied victory grew more certain in 1944, the Free French organization under General Charles de Gaulle became increasingly anxious about Indochina. To be sure, the matter ranked below the most pressing national concerns—the reestablishment of the French state, economic rehabilitation, and the war against Germany. Consumed by these challenges, ordinary citizens, the Free French media, and the renascent political parties showed little interest in the fate of a territory on the other side of the world. For the small leadership group concerned with recovering France's traditional role as a global power, however, the issue did not lag far behind the nation's top priorities. These men—bureaucrats, diplomats, politicians, and military officers—shared a conviction that their country's long-term prospects rested on its ability to preserve the empire, not least Indochina. François de Langlade, a one-time rubber planter who became one of de Gaulle's chief delegates for Indochinese affairs, succinctly stated the group's thinking in early 1945. "Without Indochina," he wrote, "France is no longer a world power."

While officials agreed on the need to recover Indochina, they differed over precisely how French rule should be reconstituted after the war....

To the conservatives, talk of "*le* self-government"—a phrase so alien that it was always rendered in English, as historian Martin Shipway has pointed

out—flew in the face of the hallowed Jacobin principle of “France One and Indivisible.” The conference’s final declaration, though only an advisory document, left no doubt where the conservatives stood. The French “civilizing mission” in the colonies excluded “any idea of autonomy [and] all possibility of evolution outside the French bloc,” the statement asserted. “Also excluded,” it added, “is the eventual establishment of self-government in the colonies, even in a distant future.”...

Of the two nations most likely to challenge French sovereignty in Indochina, China represented the lesser threat. French officials were keenly aware of long-standing Chinese designs on Indochinese territory and worried that any Chinese incursion into Tonkin might prove impossible to dislodge. They also feared that Chinese patronage of various Vietnamese political organizations during the war would lead to dangerous cross-border meddling in Indochinese politics after the fighting ended. Nevertheless, these dangers seemed manageable. Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek repeatedly assured Ambassador Pechkoff that his government had no territorial ambitions in Indochina and even suggested that he was willing to help restore French rule....

The United States represented a much more serious threat. For years, both Vichy and Gaullist leaders had watched anxiously as Franklin Roosevelt had grown increasingly vocal about his desire to grant independence to colonial territories after the war. In August 1941 Roosevelt and British prime minister Winston Churchill had proclaimed the Atlantic Charter, whose third article, pledging to “respect the rights of all people to choose the form of government under which they will live,” seemed to promise postwar independence to any nation seeking freedom from foreign rule....

To make matters worse, Americans of all political persuasions appeared to share the president’s agenda. “The colonial problem is one of the few issues on which American opinion is not divided,” Foreign Ministry analysts wrote in a survey of U.S. attitudes in early 1945. “For different reasons, emancipation of European colonies is desired as much by Republicans as by Democrats, by conservative industrialists and radical intellectuals, by the *Chicago Tribune* as much as the *New Republic*.” Both ideology and self-interest seemed to propel U.S. anticolonialism. French views on this matter echoed widely held stereotypes of Americans as simultaneously naive and materialistic. In its analysis of U.S. ideology the Foreign Ministry despaired of changing American minds. “The American people, born of an anticolonial revolution, are hostile to colonies by tradition,” asserted the report, adding, with questionable historical insight, that the United States had always sought to avoid acquiring colonies of its own and had secured those it had merely “by accident.” The American “penchant for crusades” compounded the problem. “Of the two wars that [the United States] fought before 1914, one was carried out to achieve its own emancipation, the other for that of black slaves,” wrote the ministry, adding that in their latest war Americans naturally sought a new ideological aim to endow their sacrifices with ennobling purpose. Liberal internationalists, Europhobes, and Protestant moralizers, the study added, were filling the void by reviving Wilsonianism and promoting decolonization as the latest variation on the American commitment to self-determination for oppressed peoples.

Much as it de...
about a narrower s...
study contended th...
and military establi...
of less lofty objecti...
influences,” the rep...
nization partly out...
At the same time, o...
open new markets w...
would help mainta...
minimize postwar i...
for merchandise as...
doubt as to who w...
open door would f...

French official...
mask its plans to e...
that the American...
only in order to ga...
planning committe...
were determined, i...
eign governments, ...
and strategic intere...
military, bristling v...
peace after the wa...
sphere but also to ...
lonial principle we...
Pacific islands and ...
that Washington p...
cynical plans and l...
“satisfy the public”

All these antic...
converge on Indoc...
the war has excite...
defense of America...
ology determined...
tude strongly unf...
[French] Ambassac...

For all this an...
American anticol...
example, judged t...
U.S. position on ...
policy seemed vag...
Who would take ...
self, perhaps even ...
pendence? On th...
appeared to have

"France One and an advisory document "civilizing mission" all possibility of 'Also excluded,' it is colonies, even in

ignity in Indochina, only aware of longed that any Chinese they also feared that sons during the war were politics after the Chinese Nationalist Pechkoff that his son suggested that he

eat. For years, both Franklin Roosevelt had once to colonial territories prime minister whose third article, form of government independence to any

sussions appeared to be of the few issues on which analysts wrote in a sense, emancipation of democrats, by conservative as much as the real U.S. anticolonial types of Americans as ideology the Foreign American people, born of," asserted the report, United States had always said those it had merely founded the problem. "One was carried out like slaves," wrote the ought a new ideologically liberal internationalists, were filling the void by latest variation on the peoples.

Much as it decried such zealotry, the Foreign Ministry worried even more about a narrower segment of U.S. society allegedly motivated by avarice. The study contended that American businessmen, backed by a compliant political and military establishment, were cleverly exploiting anticolonialism in pursuit of less lofty objectives. "The people of the United States barely perceive these influences," the report stated. American businessmen seemed to support decolonization partly out of eagerness to exploit previously inaccessible raw materials. At the same time, the study asserted, American entrepreneurs were anxious to open new markets in the hope that new overseas customers for their goods would help maintain the pace of wartime production in the United States and minimize postwar unemployment. The overall aim seemed to be "an open door for merchandise as well as capital," contended the report, whose authors had no doubt as to who would win once colonial areas were opened to all comers: "The open door would favor powerful Americans over European competitors."...

French officials also suspected Washington of exploiting anticolonialism to mask its plans to extend U.S. military power around the globe. "It is possible that the American government favors independence in certain colonial territories only in order to gain possession of bases," asserted the Foreign Ministry's postwar planning committee. This theory rested on a widely held belief that U.S. leaders were determined, no matter what the objections of their own people or of foreign governments, to establish a new global order tailored to U.S. commercial and strategic interests. The postwar planning committee suspected that the U.S. military, bristling with power and convinced of its unique ability to keep the peace after the war, desired the means not only to defend the Western Hemisphere but also to project power into the Far East. Zealous assertions of anticolonial principle were, in this view, mere cover for illiberal designs on various Pacific islands and possibly even on the Asian mainland. The committee alleged that Washington policymakers suffered from a "guilty conscience" over these cynical plans and hoped to conceal them within idealistic language that would "satisfy the public's appetite for progress and new ideas."

All these anticolonial motives—ideological, economic, strategic—seemed to converge on Indochina. "The appetite for power that the dominant U.S. role in the war has excited in Washington, concern about security in the Pacific, the defense of American commercial interests in the Far East, and the Methodist ideology determined to liberate oppressed peoples have combined to create an attitude strongly unfavorable to the maintenance of our position in Indochina," [French] Ambassador Pechkoff wrote from Chungking....

For all this anxiety, however, some French officials detected cracks in the American anticolonial facade. The Foreign Ministry's office for Asian affairs, for example, judged that behind routine expressions of hostility to French rule the U.S. position on Indochina in fact remained "extremely fluid." Washington's policy seemed vague and contradictory. Exactly how would a trusteeship work? Who would take supervisory responsibility? Would China, the United States itself, perhaps even France take the leading role in preparing Indochina for independence? On these questions, French observers noted, U.S. policymakers appeared to have few answers. Imprecision in the U.S. position became

especially obvious in February 1945, when Roosevelt, meeting with his Soviet and British counterparts at Yalta, seemed to backtrack on earlier pronouncements, agreeing that trusteeships would be established only with the consent of the imperial powers concerned.

Three further considerations inspired confidence that Washington would back down. First, as Foreign Ministry officials repeatedly emphasized in internal correspondence, U.S. diplomats had offered several assurances early in the war that the French empire would be fully restored following Germany's defeat. Ministry personnel acknowledged that those promises may have been desperate bids to maintain French fighting spirit, but they nevertheless expected that Washington would honor explicit commitments. Second, French officials speculated that Americans would ultimately back away from policies predicated on the inherent rights of colonized peoples—a principle that, if generally accepted in international affairs, might expose the United States to criticism for its treatment of its own minority populations. "Above all," asserted the Foreign Ministry's study of American anticolonialism, "the condition of blacks in the United States leaves the Americans open to easy counterarguments from their European interlocutors." Third, French officials doubted that Washington would push its anticolonial agenda at the risk of alienating France and Britain, countries whose cooperation the United States would obviously need in constructing a postwar order. "The American government," the ministry report insisted, "cannot ignore the resistance that [trusteeship] would encounter among European governments and public opinion."...

British observers also drew encouragement from increasingly apparent divisions within the U.S. bureaucracy. While Roosevelt and his supporters maintained their hostility to French colonialism, British diplomats watched with satisfaction as another body of opinion gathered strength. In Chungking, Ambassador Sir Horace Seymour found that Americans with practical experience dealing with colonial problems thought more realistically. "There is," Seymour reported, "among a considerable proportion of thinking Americans who have acquired some first-hand knowledge of dealing with 'dependent peoples,' a growing realization that the complexity of the problem of the 'Imperialist' Powers has not been fully appreciated at home." From Washington Ambassador Halifax similarly reported "a few encouraging signs." He wrote that "well-informed opinion" in the United States—a category that apparently did not include the president—was "moving towards a realization that ... problems of the treatment of dependent peoples cannot be disposed of by wholesale liberation or by a mere statement of liberal principles, but are complex and difficult of solution." Among the most encouraging trends seemed to be the growing realization among U.S. policymakers that China, in the throes of worsening internal chaos, would be unable to play a stabilizing role in Southeast Asia after the war. With China weak and unreliable, Americans seemed increasingly inclined to accept that European rule should be restored as the only way to preserve peace and stability to the region....

On one hand, some U.S. officials, most notably Franklin Roosevelt, advocated ending French colonialism in Indochina and setting the region on the road

to independence project during the French Empire meeting of Allie dred years," the place to improv even more stro French had "mi to return. Roosin his dislike of of Axis aggressi quire years to re tively charitable power for at lea ship, he declared

This set of This term is not about officials w deeply paternalis perception of A the term meant views. In fact, di flowed at differ particular decisic of ideas. Those much a defined 1 bureaucracies wl the United State the medium term characteristics o stewards of a r determination, a internationalism.' to promote mode dangerous explos to the way Americ structures....

Policymakers also invoked a st cials concerned v ised to be vital to routes between tl china fully integr to preserving Am dependent areas c

ting with his Soviet
earlier pronounces-
with the consent of

Washington would
phasized in internal
ces early in the war
g Germany's defeat.
have been desperate
neless expected that
rench officials specu-
lies predicated on the
generally accepted in
cism for its treatment
e Foreign Ministry's
in the United States
from their European
ington would push its
tain, countries whose
onstructing a postwar
sisted, "cannot ignore
uropean governments

asingly apparent divi-
his supporters main-
lomats watched with
n Chungking, Ambas-
sical experience deal-
"There is," Seymour
Americans who have
'dependent peoples,'
m of the 'Imperialist'
ashington Ambassador
He wrote that "well-
at apparently did not
n that ... problems of
of by wholesale libera-
complex and difficult of
o be the growing reali-
s of worsening internal
east Asia after the war.
increasingly inclined to
way to preserve peace

Franklin Roosevelt, advo-
; the region on the road

to independence. The president repeatedly expressed strong feelings on the subject during the course of the war. "Indochina should not be given back to the French Empire after the war," Roosevelt characteristically declared at a 1943 meeting of Allied war planners. "The French had been there for nearly one hundred years," the president growled, "and had done absolutely nothing with the place to improve the lot of the people." Early the following year, he spoke out even more strongly in favor of trusteeship, telling Ambassador Halifax that the French had "milked Indochina for a hundred years" and must not be allowed to return. Roosevelt's hostility probably sprang from numerous sources, including his dislike of de Gaulle, his contempt for the French performance in the face of Axis aggression, and his view of France as a decadent society that would require years to recover any international standing. France, he asserted in a relatively charitable moment, "would certainly not again become a first-class power for at least twenty years." If the French protested the Indochina trusteeship, he declared, "so what?"...

This set of ideas about Indochina might be called the "liberal" viewpoint. This term is not meant to imply anything especially praiseworthy or perceptive about officials who advanced these views. Indeed, liberal-minded officials held deeply paternalistic views of the Indochinese peoples and were driven by the perception of American self-interest far more than any sense of altruism. Nor is the term meant to imply that a fixed group of individuals held a static set of views. In fact, different elements of liberal thinking about Indochina ebbed and flowed at different moments, and different policymakers, depending on their particular decision-making roles, promoted different strands of the broader set of ideas. Those who advocated liberal opinions, in fact, constituted not so much a defined policymaking bloc as a loose collection of officials from different bureaucracies who followed different paths to the same basic conclusion—that the United States needed to promote Indochinese self-determination, at least in the medium term. Rather, the term *liberal* is apt because it captures two general characteristics of these individuals. First, they perceived of themselves as stewards of a new, Wilsonian world order based on free trade and self-determination, a complex of ideas that historians have sometimes dubbed "liberal internationalism." Second, these policymakers believed that the United States had to promote moderate change in the colonial world in order to head off a possibly dangerous explosion of revolutionary change later. In this way, *liberal* corresponds to the way American historians have often used that term—to denote political movements that seek to promote gradual change through existing political and economic structures....

Policymakers who advocated ending or loosening the bonds of colonialism also invoked a strategic rationale. Especially within the State Department, officials concerned with Asian affairs asserted that the Indochinese peninsula promised to be vital to the United States because of its position commanding shipping routes between the Far East, Australasia, and the Indian Ocean. A friendly Indochina fully integrated into a U.S.-oriented global security system seemed essential to preserving American access to the markets of East and South Asia. "Of all the dependent areas of the world, only the Caribbean is of greater importance to the

United States than ... Southeast Asia," wrote Abbot Low Moffat, chief of the State Department's new Division of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs. The region's importance, Moffat added, was likely only to grow over the next "several decades at least" as American trade and investment expanded into regions acquiring their independence from Europe.

Moffat rated Indochina the most valuable of all Southeast Asian territories, explaining that "its geographical position on the southern flank of China, with its potential naval base at Camranh Bay, halfway between Hong Kong and Singapore and the same distance due west of Manila, gives Indochina great significance." Like Roosevelt, Moffat doubted whether the United States could rely on France to ensure stability in such a crucial area. "France, whose major interests are in Europe and North Africa, was never and can never be in a position to protect Indochina," wrote Moffat, who also doubted French willingness to participate in any new U.S.-organized security arrangements for the region. Simmering tensions between U.S. and Gaullist officials in New Caledonia, a French colony where Washington had established a major wartime military base, seemed to bode ill for future cooperation. "Even in those regions nominally Free French there has been not only serious lack of cooperation in the war effort, but even interference," Moffat complained.

While liberal officials fretted that restoration of French rule would place Indochina in unreliable hands, they worried too about the impact on the indigenous population. If Washington permitted recolonization, they charged, it would ensure decades of resentment against the West and lay the seeds of political turmoil that might prevent establishment of a stable Southeast Asia open to cooperation with the United States....

But U.S. optimism also rested in part on a genuinely hopeful view among liberal policymakers of the capacity of the Indochinese people, above all the Vietnamese, for development. Policy papers advocating trusteeship or sharp curtailment of French control, while deeply patronizing in tone, gave the Vietnamese (called "Annamites" at the time) credit for significant levels of intelligence, cultural sophistication, and vigor. Kenneth P. Landon, assistant head of the State Department's Southeast Asian division and one of the few U.S. officials who had spent much time in Asia, went furthest in a June 1944 memo declaring that the Vietnamese had "a highly sophisticated, well-developed culture." . . .

Ranged against this cluster of liberal views stood a set of "conservative" ideas that favored allowing France to regain sovereignty over Indochina. As with *liberal*, the term *conservative* is not intended to imply the existence of a rigid or static set of views among a fixed group of decision makers. Rather, the term is useful because it aptly captures two important characteristics of the loose grouping of policymakers who favored restoring French control—principally State Department officials concerned with European affairs, but also War and Navy Department personnel and some OSS officials. In contrast to the liberals' vision of a Wilsonian order based on self-determination and free trade, conservatives believed, first, that the United States could best protect its interests through more traditional means of exerting power: close partnerships with like-minded industrial powers and the maintenance of geographical strong points from which

power could be used to bring a nation to channel a danger so great that it threatened the international environment.

Many conservative Americans were bitter over the loss of France, but they disagreed again for many reasons. Some conservatives anticipated cooperation in the international system, others a long-term boom in America's economy. Their goal was a free-trade regime that would permit equal access to markets. This was unrealistic, at least in the short term, given the colonial arrangements that powerful industrialists could provide the undeveloped areas. The trumped-up self-defense argument because of the vast distances that Paris might have to travel to defend its security system thus became irrelevant.

British defense increased assistance resources in Indochina, and defense at a time when Britain demonstrated to the European states. The Brussels Treaty, a defense pact between Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, Secretary Bevin hoped to carry a guarantee of European allies in case of a Soviet invasion. The administration generally favored the State Department's policy of keeping the United States out of the war on the other side. The Brussels Treaty in April 1948 would prevent Paris from joining Western security systems.

Moffat, chief of the
st Asian Affairs. The
over the next "sev-
panded into regions

east Asian territories,
lank of China, with
n Hong Kong and
ves Indochina great
United States could
France, whose major
l can never be in a
bted French willing-
arrangements for the
ls in New Caledonia,
wartime military base,
gions nominally Free
in the war effort, but

ch rule would place
impact on the indig-
on, they charged, it
ay the seeds of politi-
southeast Asia open to

hopeful view among
people, above all the
trusteeship or sharp-
g in tone, gave the
nificant levels of intel-
idon, assistant head of
f the few U.S. officials
1944 memo declaring
eloped culture."...
of "conservative" ideas
ndochina, As with lib-
ence of a rigid or static
ther, the term is useful
of the loose grouping
trol—principally State
it also War and Navy
it to the liberals' vision
ee trade, conservatives
t its interests through
ships with like-minded
ong points from which

power could be projected. Second, conservatives, in contrast to liberals' determination to channel revolutionary energies in moderate directions, detected no danger so great that it could not be managed by reestablished colonial regimes. Thus old forms of colonial control were still appropriate in the postwar international environment....

Many conservatives shared Roosevelt's antipathy toward de Gaulle and bitterness over the French performance against Nazi and Japanese aggression, but they disagreed with his assessment that France could not be a major power again for many years. On the contrary, those who backed French recovery of Indochina anticipated that the United States would depend heavily on French cooperation in the postwar period in rebuilding Europe and creating a new international system. Like their liberal counterparts, conservatives wished to sustain booming American productivity and protect U.S. economic interests over the long term. They differed, however, over the precise method to achieve this goal. Liberals sought to promote American prosperity by establishing a new free-trade regime that would break up exclusive colonial arrangements and permit equal access to resources and markets. Conservatives considered such a vision unrealistic, at least in the short term, and emphasized the necessity of preserving colonial arrangements in order to prevent economic chaos and the weakening of the powerful industrial economies of Europe that, once rebuilt from the war, could provide the United States with far more advantages than tiny, relatively undeveloped areas such as Indochina. For conservatives, French recovery trumped self-determination for Indochina as a U.S. policy objective, not only because of the value of France as an economic partner but also for the crucial role that Paris might play in the establishment of a new Western economic and security system that served U.S. interests around the world....

British defense planning for Europe also pointed to the need for dramatically increased assistance for the French war effort. The drain on French manpower and resources in Indochina threatened to weaken the French contribution to European defense at a time when the Attlee government [of Britain] urgently hoped to demonstrate to the United States the vigor of military cooperation among West European states. Washington had already given its blessing to the March 1948 Brussels Treaty, a mutual defense pact among Britain, France, Holland, Belgium, and Luxembourg, and promised to provide it with military assistance. But Foreign Secretary Bevin hoped for much more—nothing less than a North Atlantic Treaty carrying a guarantee from the United States to come to the defense of its West European allies in case of aggression against any of them. While the Truman administration generally backed that idea, reservations lingered through 1948 within the State Department and, more importantly, in Congress, where many wished to keep the United States free from such commitments. For London the key to allaying American concerns was to demonstrate a significant degree of European power and self-reliance—a task complicated by the French preoccupation with a draining war on the other side of the globe. Even after the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in April 1949, British officials worried that the French commitment in Asia would prevent Paris from fulfilling its assigned role at the heart of the emerging Western security system. "Everything that France sends out to Indochina is, in a

sense, at the expense of the Western Union," R. H. Scott, chief of the Foreign office's Southeast Asia department, complained in July....

Would the three powers be able to close the deal on a multilateral partnership? The worsening geopolitical situation clearly militated in favor of a positive answer. Mao's Chinese Communists achieved their final victory and declared the People's Republic of China in October [1949]. Four months later Moscow and Beijing announced a treaty of alliance, an ominous development that implied unity among world communist movements. There could now be little doubt in the minds of U.S. or British policymakers that a Viet Minh victory meant the further extension of the Sino-Soviet bloc. Longstanding connections between the Viet Minh leadership and international communism ruled out any other way of understanding the situation among officials disinclined to take risks and under increasing pressure to treat the communist menace with deadly seriousness....

In the second half of 1949, British officials saw mixed prospects of success in their bid to attract U.S. involvement. On the positive side, they recognized the rapid evolution of American attitudes toward Southeast Asia. Both public and official opinion in the United States seemed to be moving steadily in the direction of accepting a commitment to fight communism in Asia. Eventual American membership in a "Pacific Pact" or some other kind of organization involving both Asian and Western nations seemed to be possible. Above all, the Washington embassy reported, the Chinese Communists' looming victory was generating a strong sense within the Truman administration that the United States needed to "do something" about the spread of communism in Asia. Most promising of all, the Republican-controlled U.S. Congress was beginning to press the administration to spend \$75 million previously allocated for the Chinese Nationalists on assistance for other Asian nations threatened by communism. In September the State Department issued a public declaration supporting the principle of Asian independence while warning against the dangers of communism and promising American aid for countries attempting to resist outside aggression. At last, a consensus seemed to be forming behind U.S. aid for Southeast Asia....

On the last day of June 1950, eight American C-47 transport aircraft carrying a cargo of spare parts and maintenance equipment lumbered to a halt at Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airfield. U.S. aid had at last arrived. French officials, still fearful that U.S. help would amount to too little, too late, complained throughout the summer about the slow pace of U.S. deliveries and maintained steady pressure on Washington for greater and faster assistance. But there was little reason for worry. The decision to support the French war effort marked a major turn in U.S. policy. By early summer the U.S. military had begun channeling not only planes but also naval vessels, vehicles, weapons, ammunition, spare parts, and communications equipment to Indochina, while plans went ahead to establish an elaborate aid disbursement and military training bureaucracy in Saigon, the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group. Meanwhile, U.S. specialists initiated public health, agricultural development, and other civilian programs.

The outbreak of the Korean War on June 25 produced a sharp intensification of American aid as U.S. officials sought to bolster Western defenses against

the possibility of the Truman administration to about \$1 billion insisting that the 1950 practicable short o liveries increased shipment in 1950, 90,000 tons in 1951 the United States the United States

In the end, of objective. Part of The infusion of substantial assistance and September 1950, seventeen hundred tons, seventeen hundred medicine, communication team....

Nor did great tension that underpin sure for new French demands resulted spite continued ne the French govern

The Geneva parallel also sharp the division had to regroup and de administrative ent country—and the

By 1954 no A Ho Chi Minh's m link was real and c erating the outco wobbly French w region as a whole President Eisenhower if Vietnam fell to row of dominos. "you could have profound influenc administration mo Southeast Asian Vietnam's norther

Between 1954 and 1975, tions took up this

chief of the Foreign
multilateral partner-
n favor of a positive
ory and declared the
is later Moscow and
opment that implied
now be little doubt
Minh victory meant
ing connections be-
anism ruled out any
inclined to take risks
menace with deadly

prospects of success in
, they recognized the
Asia. Both public and
steadily in the direc-
a. Eventual American
organization involving
ve all, the Washington
tory was generating a
ited States needed to
Most promising of all,
o press the administra-
hinese Nationalists on
sm. In September the
the principle of Asian
nunism and promising
e aggression. At last,
theast Asia....

transport aircraft carry-
lumbered to a halt at
d. French officials, still
, complained through-
and maintained steady
But there was little re-
effort marked a major
had begun channeling
ns, ammunition, spare
ile plans went ahead to
raining bureaucracy in
anwhile, U.S. specialists
er civilian programs.
iced a sharp intensifica-
Western defenses against

the possibility of Chinese aggression in Southeast Asia. By the end of the year, the Truman administration had increased its near-term commitments to Indo-china to about \$133 million. The National Security Council approved a paper insisting that the United States must back the French war effort "by all means practicable short of the actual employment of United States military forces." Deliveries increased steadily. Washington sent about 11,000 tons of military equipment in 1950, 90,000 tons in 1951, 100,000 tons in 1952, and more than 170,000 tons in 1953. As fighting climaxed in Vietnam in the spring of 1954, the United States bore more than 80 percent of the war's material cost. In all, the United States paid nearly \$3 billion over four years.

In the end, of course, French and American exertions failed to achieve their objective. Part of the problem was the Viet Minh's growing military prowess. The infusion of American aid provoked the Chinese government to dispatch substantial assistance to Ho Chi Minh's forces for the first time. Between April and September 1950 China sent the Viet Minh fourteen thousand rifles and pistols, seventeen hundred machine guns, and 150 mortars, as well as munitions, medicine, communications equipment, and a seventy-nine-man advisory team....

Nor did greater American involvement do much to alter the political situation that underpinned conflict in Vietnam. U.S. officials continued to apply pressure for new French concessions to the Bao Dai government, but American demands resulted in little more than French resentment and foot-dragging. Despite continued negotiations between Saigon and Paris between 1950 and 1954, the French government refused to concede self-rule in various key areas....

The Geneva Conference's decision to divide Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel also sharply altered the situation. Although the accords specified that the division had merely the short-term purpose of enabling former combatants to regroup and demobilize in separate zones, the existence of a noncommunist administrative entity in the south clearly suggested a chance to keep half the country—and the wealthier half, at that—out of the communist orbit....

By 1954 no American officials had any doubt—nor should they have—that Ho Chi Minh's movement served the interests of international communism. The link was real and obvious, even if Western policy was largely responsible for generating the outcome that Western policymakers most dreaded. Meanwhile, the wobbly French war effort encouraged American worries about the fate of the region as a whole in the event Vietnam fell under communist control. In 1954 President Eisenhower gave American fears their classic formulation, asserting that if Vietnam fell to communism, the rest of Southeast Asia would collapse like a row of dominos. Once the communists had their way in Indochina, he said, "you could have the beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influence." Unsurprisingly, as the final French defeat neared, the U.S. administration moved boldly to form an alliance of Asian and Western states, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, to resist communist expansion beyond Vietnam's northern half....

Between 1954 and 1965 the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations took up this challenge, drawing the United States ever more deeply into

Vietnam as they sought to create a viable South Vietnamese state that would satisfy local nationalism while serving Western interests. This long and complex story has been well told elsewhere. For the purposes of this study, it is important to point out merely that the set of assumptions that drove American policy forward departed little from the ideas laid in place in 1950. In recent years historians writing about the American war have emphasized contingency; that is, they have stressed variations over time as different administrations with different needs, perceptions, and personalities reckoned with the Vietnam problem in their own ways. Thanks to this scholarship, we can now see that there was nothing wholly inevitable about the U.S. decisions for full-scale war in 1965. Above all, it seems, the Kennedy administration entertained grave doubts about America's Vietnam commitment and might have acted to scale back U.S. involvement if JFK had survived for a second term as president. Yet there is a danger in excessive attention to contingency. We can easily lose sight of the continuities that run through the entire American experience in Vietnam and of the possibility that these continuities may be the most important way to understand how the United States came to fight a war in Vietnam. The simple fact of the matter is that successive presidential administrations, however much latitude they enjoyed to change course in Vietnam, did not do so. In the end, patterns of thought laid in place in 1950 drove American policy uninterruptedly to 1965 and beyond. To understand the American war, then, it is vitally necessary to understand what transpired in the years leading up to 1950....

"The process of U.S. involvement in Vietnam began—seriously began—with the Truman administration and continued more or less uninterrupted through five presidents," argued Tran Quang Co, a long-time Vietnamese diplomat. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations, he added, merely followed the path of their predecessors "with readjustments made in accordance with the international context and the realities of the war at the time."...

Only when the hawks found a way to dampen misgivings about supporting colonialism and to reclassify Vietnam as a Cold War battleground could they have their way. Only, that is, when they redefined Vietnam as a Cold War conflict, stemming from the same causes and requiring the same solutions as anti-communist fights elsewhere, could the three governments close ranks around a common policy. Dissenters still bridled against the drift of Western policy in 1949 and 1950. After the Communist victory in China, however, it became increasingly difficult to resist the notion that French policy served Western interests....

In this way American officials satisfied themselves that they were holding true to their country's anticolonial traditions, bolstered their self-perception as advocates of progress, and perhaps most important, insulated themselves from challenges from those who demanded fundamental reform. Often though, assertions of liberality masked an underlying agenda that sought to impose strict limits on the pace and scope of change. In Vietnam the conservatives' ambition to form a partnership among the Western powers in Indochina became feasible only after the Europeans offered them an apparently liberal political solution that enabled them to nullify or sidestep the hostility of their bureaucratic

adversaries. F
achieved a to
left governme
who successfu
with subtlety
civility faded
anticolonial na
while proclaim
It is a peculiar
of the world.



FURTHER READING

Stephen E. Ambrose,
Christian Appy,
Carl Bernstein and
Robert Buzzanca,
George Herring,
Mary Hershberg,
Andrew Johns, I
(2010).

David Levy, *The
Fredrik Logevall,
Vietnam* (1995).

Kathryn Stalter,
Jonathan Shay, A
Melvin Small, Tl
Marilyn Young,

umese state that would This long and complex is study, it is important e American policy for recent years historians gency; that is, they have ith different needs, per problem in their own ere was nothing wholly 1965. Above all, it seems, out America's Vietnam nvolvement if JFK had nger in excessive attenuities that run through possibility that these con how the United States matter is that successive ey enjoyed to change of thought laid in place and beyond. To understand what transpired

gan—seriously began—e or less uninterrupted g-time Vietnamese dip added, merely followed in accordance with the time."... givings about supporting battleground could they am as a Cold War con same solutions as anti-nts close ranks around a ft of Western policy in na, however, it became policy served Western

that they were holding i their self-perception as isolated themselves from rm. Often though, assergnt to impose strict limits on conservatives' ambition to dochina became feasible liberal political solution ty of their bureaucratic

adversaries. Having mastered the rhetoric of liberalism, the conservatives achieved a total victory. One by one, progressive advocates of genuine change left government service or were forced out by Joseph McCarthy and his minions, who successfully silenced those Americans who viewed the decolonizing world with subtlety and sought to promote genuine change. The intimidation and incivility faded over time, but the effect was lasting. Leaders with scant regard for anticolonial nationalism maintained their grip on U.S. decision making, all the while proclaiming their country—and themselves—the champion of liberalism. It is a peculiarly American formulation, and one that led to great agony in much of the world.



FURTHER READING

- Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon*, 3 volumes (1987–1989).
- Christian Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (1993).
- Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *All the President's Men* (1974).
- Robert Buzzanco, *Vietnam and the Transformation of American Life* (1999).
- George Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam* (1995).
- Mary Hershberger, *Traveling to Vietnam: American Peace Activists and the War* (1998).
- Andrew Johns, *Vietnam's Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War* (2010).
- David Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam* (1990).
- Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (1999).
- Kathryn Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (2007).
- Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994).
- Melvin Small, *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (1999).
- Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (1991).