

The Independent Republic of Vietnam and the French
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The 2nd of September of 1945, and that was really a scant two weeks after there had been a popular insurrection led by the Việt Minh, by the Patriotic Front in Indochina, a great national insurrection which had liberated the country — the 2nd of September of 1945, there is an immense assembly in the city of Hanoi. And at that assembly there are gathered some 500,000 Vietnamese people. And it is Hồ Chí Minh, who is then acting as the president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, who addresses the people and announces the independence of the country of Vietnam. Which means that after almost eighty years of French colonial rule, after almost eighty years in which the French had dominated over the Vietnamese people, suddenly there is at least the pretension of declaring that those people are independent. It is historic.

And what explains it? In the very large, of course: a great passion and a great will for independence that really is inscribed in the history of the Vietnamese people. And along with that will for independence, a growing knowledge of, a growing sensitivity to what imperialism is and what the consequences and the effects of imperialism are. But getting closer to the fact itself: there was quite obviously the weakening of the French colonial position as a result of those four years of Japanese occupation of Indochina. And along with that, of course, the defeat of the Japanese in the Second World War, which meant that the occupier of the country suddenly lay prostrate. And, third, and getting very close to the act itself — and you must underscore it in your mind — a kind of immense capacity on the part of the Indochinese Communist Party and Communist movement. A capacity, in a sense, that we can illustrate in three ways.

A capacity on the part of that party, first of all, to have survived. Because it survived under the worst possible conditions in the decade of the 1930s — when there was so much repression by the French, when that party was driven either underground or into emigration, and it managed to survive. But a capacity, in a second way, that is terribly important. And that a capacity of tactics, of knowing what to do at a crucial moment. I am talking about Hồ Chí Minh launching the Việt Minh in May of 1941, at that very crucial moment when the Japanese had occupied, when there was a growing patriotic opposition to that kind of Japanese occupation. And, consequently, to say that we will set aside our particular Communist goal and we will make an appeal to the largest number of people in Vietnam in order to drive out the French imperialists and to drive out the Japanese occupier. I mean that capacity on the part of General [Võ Nguyên] Giáp — that general, after all, who was going to be so much the authentic military hero of the Vietnamese

struggle. And it is that capacity of General Giáp in those years 1942, '3, and '4, really, to mount guerrilla warfare in the northern part of Vietnam — to go across the Chinese frontier into the area of Tonkin, and to know not only how to launch guerrilla bands, you see, but to anchor those guerrilla bands in political groups. Political groups that should handle propaganda, that should handle supply and communication. In other words, that should create a popular infrastructure within which those guerrilla bands operated, so that by the time the national insurrection is called, all of those provinces of northern Vietnam from the Chinese frontier down to Hanoi are already in the hands of the Việt Minh.

And I mean, finally, a capacity on the part of Hồ Chí Minh and his Communist Party to know when to call for that insurrection. That terrific sense of timing, that you do not precipitate something before the moment is really ripe, that you have that immense patience. You don't take on, in an insurrection, Japanese armies. You don't take on the armies of Admiral Decoux at Saigon, but you wait for the proper moment. And Hồ Chí Minh said that the proper moment was that period right after the Japanese surrender and until the Allied armies arrive. In other words, it was that moment of vacuum when the Japanese had been defeated and the Allied armies were not there, then, was the moment for the insurrection. And then to proclaim a Democratic Republic so that when the Allied armies should come, as surely they would, they would not find a vacuum, but they would confront a *fait accompli*. And so that was done.

And yet it is a pretension, because it is a very fragile read, that Democratic Republic of Vietnam. It is a small people, and it faces, after all, a veritable beehive of enemies: of external enemies, a veritable viper's tangle of conflicting interests and demands upon Vietnam. And, consequently, the Vietnamese revolution immediately would confront three very real interests.

The interest, of course, on the part of the French to restore their colonial rule. They are not giving up their empire easily. And we mean two things by that. We mean, of course, the French who are in Indochina. All of those people who don't want to go back to France and be just ordinary Frenchmen, who prefer to be administrators, and officers, and plantation owners, and *assimilés* over all of the resources of Vietnam and who, back in France, would just be ordinary. No, no. They will keep their position. But everything depends not on them, but on Paris. And what about that resistance, and what about that liberation, and what about that new French regime that is being installed? Did those Europeans, do any of us white people know what there is going on in those colored parts of the world? And, consequently, did that resistance movement have a sensitivity? Of course not, not to the empire. And so it was General de Gaulle, after all, as head of that new French government, who insisted that the French Union (which is a euphemism for the French Empire) should have to go on and that all parts of it should remain intact. And he said that about Indochina as early as December of '43 in the city of Algiers, when he said that new freedoms would be given to the Indochinese people in so far as they remain within the

French Empire, or the French Union. And he spelled it out in detail on the 24th of March of 1945 when he gave the official position of his government, that post war government, in which he said that there will now be an Indochinese Federation. In other words, not a united Vietnam, but always with those five states united into a federation which shall be installed inside the French Union. And the terms of that installation to be set by the National Assembly of France and not by the Vietnamese.

And so, there is a passion to restore that empire. And you ask, what about the left? And what about that French left that had fought that resistance? And didn't they look at Algeria, and didn't they look at Vietnam and say these are our brothers fighting also? And of course not. And the French Communists, for example, hadn't had that anti-colonial sensitivity in the years before. That you go all the way into the 1920s and there is Nguyễn Ái Quốc, or Hồ Chí Minh, who is already, as a young Vietnamese Communist, attacking his fellow Communists in the French party and saying that they really aren't preparing the workers of France to understand that their struggle is the same as the struggle in the colonies. Going even to the Comintern in 1924, and saying, in effect, you Westerners really don't ever sympathize with or understand. Saying, you see, what is the issue that the French Communist Party never created an anti-colonial public opinion which, after all, could mount an opposition movement.

And it was said in the 1930s, very poignantly, by Daniel Guérin — and I have a great affection towards Guérin, who still lives, because has been such a lonely liberation fighter in so many fields — and Guérin went out to Indochina at the beginning of the 1930s and wrote his passionate articles for a little left-wing newspaper in France called *Cri du peuple*, "Cry of the People." And he said over and again that the struggle at Yên Bái, that the struggle of those Annamites who are making insurrection in 1930, that that's the French struggle, the struggle of the French worker because the enemy is the same. And it fell on deaf ears. And even, you see, in that Popular Front — that Popular Front which is a government of the left — but never does the Popular Front pose the question of independence or liberation. All it did was to release a few political prisoners, provide a greater freedom of assembly or of press. And the Communists inside that Popular Front always, of course, obeying the Radical line, the line of the Radical Party, in order to maintain that anti-fascist coalition. And so, the left doesn't move. And the title of that film about Vietnam holds so very well for that moment of history that Vietnam, after all, is *loin* — everybody is *loin du Vietnam*, everybody is very far from that question.

And the Americans got closer, and that was the second issue. And that was the second interest. Now, who knows if there were Americans in Vietnam in the nineteenth century. Probably so, they were ubiquitous. And we know, for example, that Franklin Roosevelt's grandfather, maternal grandfather, Walter Delano, was out in Indochina taking up some land at one point or

another, but not a very big interest. That's just potatoes on the table. That's just what you can grab as you pass through. But it doesn't have, you see, a systematic kind of interest. But then it becomes interesting, quite obviously, for two very important reasons. One in terms of the very large question that Asia raises to American policy makers with the Japanese surrender. That question, of course, is what will happen if a vacuum is created by the Japanese surrender in which resistance movements in Asia, or the Communist movement of China, is to fill that vacuum? No, no.

And hence General Order No. 1 of the 14th of August, that it should be General MacArthur who should take the surrender of the Japanese and pass it on to whatever military and political groups he should designate. The larger idea being that Asia must, after all, fit into that new economic world order and must not go the way of revolution. And, more specifically about Indochina, it was an evolving position which, by 1945, finally came rather reluctantly to the idea that the French were the best bet there because the real opposition was a liberation movement that was dangerous. And, hence, those Potsdam Accords of July of 1945, in which the British were to occupy the area south of the 16th Parallel with their troops upon the evacuation by the Japanese. Go in there and disarm the Japanese. North of the 16th Parallel, and very clever, the Kuomintang. Because the Chinese were to be, after all, the kind of American agent on the continent of Asia. And, consequently, should be sort of the cat's paw in Indochina for the American interest, especially there in Tonkin in the north.

And that leads us, of course, to the third foreign interest. And that third foreign interest is the Chinese interest, and it was very real. Because the Chinese went in from the southern frontier of China and the northern frontier of Indochina and poured, ultimately, 180,000 troops into mainly the northern part of that country, so-called to disarm the Japanese. But, you see, Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang had the imperialist idea of making something of a satrapy out of Indochina. They disliked intensely, after all, the Communists. In fact, it was traditional with Chiang Kai-shek, very frequently, to fight with the Japanese against the Communists rather than to fight directly against the Japanese with the Communists inside China. And so, he had no sympathy for the Việt Minh. And not only that, but he jailed Hồ Chí Minh on Chinese soil at the end of 1941 and kept him in jail for over a year. And he gave no aid to that Việt Minh. The idea, on the part of the Chinese, was not to conquer the country but to make a kind of puppet government there. And, consequently, the Chinese sponsored a nationalist movement on the soil of China which was their own instrument called the Đồng Minh Hội. And the Đồng Minh Hội was supposed to be the agency that, ultimately, would provide a kind of Chinese cat's paw in northern Indochina. All of that, you see, on the horizon.

And so the terrible reality, if you were Hồ Chí Minh or those people who fought in the Việt

Minh, which is that no sooner had they proclaimed their republic and even before they proclaimed it, the foreign troops are already on their way to occupy the country. And the French wasted no time. And it was on the 16th of August of 1945 that General de Gaulle gave the order that the French army should be gathered from France, from Madagascar, and from French troops in Calcutta, and should converge in Indochina, should land at Saigon, and should be under the command of General Jacques Leclerc. That same General Leclerc who was, presumably, the hero of the liberation of Paris. And also, there should be a civilian authority, a High Commissioner. That commissioner, a French admiral, Admiral Thierry d'Argenlieu. And d'Argenlieu should go out then and become, really, the head of the French interests in Indochina. All of that already in the third week of August of 1945.

And that confronted the Việt Minh, established at Hanoi but rather weak in the southern part of the country. In the north, they had an infrastructure. In the south, they didn't have that kind of practice. There hadn't been guerrilla warfare. And it confronted them with a very real problem. If these French troops arrive and if they arrive with British troops that are also on their way, what should be the response? Should they try to keep them off the mainland of Indochina? Should they fight them at the very beaches? Or should they simply let them come on with the idea that they might be able to negotiate? The very revolutionary sectors of the independence movement, namely the Vietnamese Trotskyites, insisted that there should be a fight at once. In other words, that there should be a struggle otherwise the south of Indochina, in other words Cochinchina, would be lost once and for all. Vietnam would never be really unified.

But the Việt Minh took another position, and Hồ Chí Minh took another position. Which is that they really couldn't fight against this military force coming in. Not only was it the French military force, but the British arrive by the 12th of September, and they arrive with battalions of Gurkhas. These Gurkhas were very crack Indian troops. And what characterized these Gurkhas, not only their military genius, but the fact that they were imperialists. That, though they were not white men, they were fighting really for those white empires. And they were commanded by a British general, General Douglas Gracey, who in his very limited intellectual horizon, certainly did not have the idea of a free Asiatic country appearing anywhere upon it. And, consequently, the idea that the British would come in with very good equipment and with troops to feed the French also, how could you possibly oppose that? The position of the Việt Minh was that they had to let the French and the British land, and they had hope for some kind of an accord.

Was Hồ Chí Minh simply naive? Not if you look at it from the point of view of that he thinks he must save, certainly, the North, certainly Tonkin and Annam. But also, perhaps a little bit naive in this sense, that Hồ Chí Minh had some confidence still that the Soviet Union would come to the help of this liberation movement. And he had some kind of naive hope still, in 1945, that

maybe the United States really was anti-imperialist. Hồ Chí Minh knew very little about that whole phenomenon. Except all of those very peculiar deals, which I really can't go into, but which are so fascinating. Those peculiar deals being suggested up in the north over the Chinese frontier and into northern Vietnam by the OSS, by the Office of Strategic Services, those people known as General Robert Donovan's group. And Donovan's group, these intelligence agents, are operating up in the north, and they are proposing to Hồ Chí Minh a deal whereby they will help to oust the French and the Chinese in return for striking a certain economic deal with them. In other words, that the American group will come in to the repair the railroads, to repair the roads, to repair the airports, to really build the infrastructure of that particular country. Now, Hồ Chí Minh turned all of that down. But there was some kind of feeling that maybe the Americans would act as a kind of buffer against this Franco-British imperialism that was coming in.

And so, there was opposition on the 12th of September when both the French and the British began their landing, in which they built up over the following week. And it was a crushing disappointment because on the 22nd of September of 1945, the French struck in force at Saigon and took over the city of Saigon in simply a day, because there was very little organized fighting force of the Việt Minh in the south of the country. And, consequently, they took over in a day. And then you see what it is. Then, it's that terrific sense of vengeance. You know what happens, after all, when imperialists suddenly are called naked, when suddenly they are disrobed as they had been in the proclamation of this Republic of Vietnam, when it is said that they're not necessary, there's a moment of fear. And when they get the power back, there's a kind of vengeance which really has no parallel. And consequently, the French went amok. And on the 23rd and 24th, they beat up on the Vietnamese in the city of Saigon. And they killed them on the street, and Western reporters were shocked by, really, what they saw.

The result was that a resistance began to the occupation in the south almost immediately. And that resistance was a guerrilla existence and, really, it destroyed Leclerc's plan. Because General Leclerc thought that the mop-up to the 16th Parallel — in other words, Cochinchina and the southern part of Annam — that that mop-up would take a matter of days, perhaps a couple of weeks. But it was not until the 6th of February of 1946, in other words, four months before that mop-up was complete. What the French encountered was a guerrilla movement, a scorched earth policy, a hiding of the guerrillas in the villages. They encountered, you see, that network of cohesive villages which became the plague of anybody that tried to conquer that country and to defeat and destroy, ultimately, the liberation movement. But by February of 1946, the southern half of Vietnam had fallen to the French imperialists. And, consequently, they faced two problems.

They faced the problem of northern Annam and Tonkin. In other words, they faced the problems

of north of the 16th Parallel and, there, there was a very good insight into what their problem was that was given to French policy makers by Jean Sainteny. And Jean Sainteny really is one of the more intelligent French, in a kind of rogues' gallery that doesn't have many of them. But Jean Sainteny was an intelligence agent in the south of China from the middle of 1945 on, from the summer of 1945. And, consequently, he got down into northern Vietnam, into Hanoi, by the beginning of September and was in some contact with Hồ Chí Minh. Now, Jean Sainteny had, really, an interest in Indochina. Through marriage, he had very real financial interests in that country, and especially in the north, in Tonkin. So he has a certain sensitivity to the problem. And what Sainteny sees is that there are two problems: there are the Chinese who have occupied the northern part of the country, and there are the Việt Minh who are, after all, proclaiming their Democratic Republic. Of the two, said Sainteny, the Chinese are the biggest danger because they've got this big army and they've got big Chinese eyes. And, consequently, what they want is what they see in northern Indochina. And suddenly Sainteny sees that they are circulating Chinese currency, eliminating the Vietnamese currency circulating, circulating Chinese — printing it, just *en plus*, there — simply printing this bogus currency and buying up the French interest in northern Indochina. And they're getting mines, and they're getting factories, and they're getting real estate. And they are a danger.

And you've got to get them out even if you have to bargain hard. After that, you worry about the Việt Minh, who after all, don't have 180,000 men in a professional army. And so, with Sainteny's proposal, the French negotiate diplomatically, first of all, with the Chinese. And they make the Franco-Chinese treaty of the 28th February of 1946. And they give up a lot. They gave up all of their special concessions in China which they had gotten as one of the imperialist powers in China. And so they gave up their special concessions in Shanghai, in Canton, in Hankow, and they gave up their territory in Kwangchow in the south of China. They gave up the railroad that they owned in Yunnan province. And they said that the Chinese could have free port entry into the port of Haiphong for Chinese goods. In return, for which, the Chinese gave up only one thing. They said that they would withdraw their army and turn it over to the French between the 1st and the 15th of March of 1946. So, the French paid a healthy price to get the Chinese out of northern Vietnam. But they did that.

The other problem, of course, the Việt Minh. And it was Sainteny's idea, and he persuaded Leclerc of this, that the important thing was not to fight the Việt Minh, not to fight Hồ Chí Minh at this particular point, but to negotiate some way to getting French troops into the north without having to fight to do so. And after that, events will take care of themselves. Now, Leclerc was persuaded of this. First of all, he was a bit shocked by the fact that it took him four months to get to the 16th Parallel. And consequently, the idea of another guerrilla war, and in a place where the Vietnamese had a terrific infrastructure of guerrilla warfare, no, no. That didn't appeal. Secondly,

it was perfectly obvious that the Việt Minh really had control of that northern part of the country in terms of public opinion. And that was evident from the elections to the Assembly, to the National Assembly, on the 23rd of December of 1945, because in those elections, the Việt Minh candidates really swept everything. In his district, Hồ Chí Minh got 99% of the vote, and I believe it was an honest election. And, consequently, the Việt Minh obviously were a national force. You couldn't put in a puppet at that particular time. And then, said Leclerc, "Look, we start a war there and these people up there, these Việt Minh, have a chance of killing off our 25,000 *colons* in the north or of destroying all French property. No, no. It's better to negotiate."

And that's the background for the famous accords of the 6th of March of 1946. The 6th of March which were, in a way, a high call of French recognition that the world is changing and it's not quite the same as it was at the time of Guizot. And so there was, quite obviously, an accord made on the 6th March in which, on the one hand, the French recognized in point one. The French recognized "a free state in Vietnam with its own government, parliament, army, and finances." In other words, they recognized, and it's the only time that they did until the Geneva Accords, they recognized this free state of Vietnam north of the 16th Parallel. In the second principle, or the second point, the Vietnamese agreed that that free state should be part of the French Union, but what that meant was to be negotiated. Hồ Chí Minh agreed to that. There was to be, obviously later, a fleshing of what that term meant.

The third term was most important, and that was the big victory for the North. The third term said that the future of Cochinchina — in other words, the future of the South — should be left to a referendum. In other words, that there would be a referendum in the South as to whether they wanted to unify with the North, which was a *fait accompli*. Surely they would vote that. And so that was a great victory. What did the French get? They got the fourth point, which is the introduction of their troops into northern Vietnam without having to fight. And so, in the fourth point, it was decided that there should be 25,000 French troops to be introduced in order to protect French interests, to protect French property. But that force of 25,000 should be reduced by 5,000 a year until, by 1952, there were no longer any French troops in that particular area.

Now, you see what all that means? For Leclerc and Sainteny, they bought time. They got their troops in before they had to fight, and then they would build their force, and they would ultimately strike. In other words, they really felt that there would be a war. So far as Hồ Chí Minh and the Việt Minh are concerned, their interest really was to flesh out the terms of this accord. In other words, to get negotiations as quickly as possible, to get a conference as quickly as possible. And Hồ Chí Minh wanted it in Paris where it should not be in the South, in Saigon for example, under the eyes of the French colon. Where it should be under Radical eyes in Paris. Have a conference to flesh out points two and three. In other words, to say that the French Union

isn't going to be much for this free state, but to say that that referendum will be held. Well, you see, the people who were in charge of the French case really had no intention of those negotiations.

D'Argenlieu happened to be in Paris when the 6th of March Accords were made. And d'Argenlieu, you have to understand, is really a tough. I mean, a name like Thierry d'Argenlieu, it indicates already that, after all, his head is in the old regime. And consequently, you're dealing with somebody who was with de Gaulle and the Free French. And de Gaulle loved him. They had a certain kind of very real rapport. And there was a certain kind of common authoritarian view that there are a few people who were the leaders of the Free French and the rest of dismal humanity. And so, d'Argenlieu goes out to Vietnam but, really, as the representative, and note it well, really as the representative of the MRP [Mouvement républicain populaire], of that party of Georges Bidault. That party that really replaces the Radical Party as the key agency for French imperialism in Indochina, which has all of those Indochinese interests in it, like Max André for example, who is of the Banque de l'Indochine, the Bank of Indochina, or Jean Letourneau...

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... of Catholic mysticism that had been brought to the Vietnamese people. So that it suffices to say that there was, in d'Argenlieu, an interest in opposing any such implication as was the 6th of March Accords. And so, his reaction to it was to say that he was "amazed" when he heard it. Then, he goes on to say, "Yes, that is the word, amazement that France has such a fine expeditionary force in Indochina and yet its leaders prefer to negotiate rather than to fight."

Well, d'Argenlieu went back to Indochina, went back to Saigon and determined to sabotage, determined to frustrate that particular accord of March. And he did it in a variety of ways. First of all, here is Hồ Chí Minh chomping at the bit to have this conference in which you flush out the terms of the accord, and so d'Argenlieu says, well, the first half is a preliminary conference and we won't have it in France as you want, in Paris, but we will have it in Dalat. And Dalat is a seaport in southern Indochina, in Cochinchina, and it was where the *colons* went for their water and drink. In other words, it was the perfect colonial spot. So they go to Dalat on the 17th of April for a month, until the 17th of May of 1946. And the French don't send any negotiators for a conference. But they send Max André of the Bank of Indochina as the chief negotiator, and they make it very clear too, the French, that there is no idea of a referendum in order to add Cochinchina to this radical regime of the north. That isn't even discussed. There are no terms set of that kind. Hồ Chí Minh begins to get the idea. And then d'Argenlieu goes a little bit further, and in the end of May, the 27th of May, he discovers that there is an autonomous republic in the center of Indochina, in the center of Vietnam in the mountain area. There are all sorts of tribes

that are, really, the ethnic minorities, and their tribes are out in the mountains. And so he proclaims on the 27th of May the autonomous Republic of Central Indochina, or of the mountain peoples, with a High French Commissioner, of course, to dominate that.

Well, that's all bad enough. That's a little bit ludicrous. But then what d'Argenlieu does, which is really countermining totally the accords of 6th of March, Hồ Chí Minh goes off to Paris, leaves on the 1st of June of 1946. The very next day, d'Argenlieu back in Saigon proclaims the independent Republic of Cochinchina — in other words, simply breaks the accords, says there will be no referendum, we create our independent republic, independent Republic of Cochinchina. Well, we are stuck with it. We are still stuck with it, are we not? And consequently, it is about as independent then as it is now. And it was this independent republic which, of course, should have a so-called High French Commissioner, who obviously really pulled all of the strings. What happened was that d'Argenlieu didn't even make a good *passant*. He picked not one single even minor Indochinese national to put in this so-called General Council of this independent republic; he picked only collaborationists, people who had been in the French pocket from the beginning.

The president of this bogus republic was a poor sap named Dr. Nguyễn Văn Thinh. And Dr. Thinh was a big landowner and he thought that he was really making an independent republic. But his vice president was somebody a bit more clever, was a guy named Nguyễn Văn Xuân. And Nguyễn Văn Xuân was magnificent because he was a real opportunist. He became a colonel in the French army, he became a French citizen, and he becomes the vice president of this Republic of Cochinchina with one qualification that is superb, which is that he doesn't speak Vietnamese. And consequently, there he is as, obviously, a good French puppet. And consequently, even six months after that on the 10th of November of 1946, Nguyễn Văn Thinh — who really was a kind of a poor sap and really believed that there was going to be some independence — saw that he had been taken, and committed suicide. So the French had a great state holiday for him, a great state funeral, declared that he was a great patriot, and of course put in Nguyễn Văn Xuân as his replacement. So you get, you see, already an attempt to frustrate the accords.

Now, it really raises the question, why the hell does Hồ Chí Minh go to Paris if he sees that this is the way that they did? And that's a very real and interesting question. Why should we have gone off even to negotiate? There were left-wingers in his own, among the Vietnamese Communists, who said there's no point to it, and what we really ought to be doing is preparing our military struggle at this particular point. But Hồ Chí Minh has a number of ideas.

First of all, he certainly wasn't bemused by people like Leclerc. Leclerc, already, was showing

that he had no real conflict with d'Argenlieu, that he was just biding for time. And that becomes very obvious in the letter that Leclerc sends off to Robert Schuman, who is the foreign minister in the Bidault government, in June of 1946. And he sends off a letter to Robert Schuman, in which he says: "Who is this Hồ Chí Minh? Never forget that he is a great enemy of France, that he proposes to take a side, and that we must never really negotiate with him." That is Hồ Chí Minh is on his way. Well, Hồ Chí Minh knew that, knew, after all, that Leclerc had no real interest in an independent northern Vietnam or, certainly, an independent Vietnam that was united.

Also, I think it would be naive to believe that Hồ Chí Minh didn't realize that the French Communists were pretty much selling out the cause. And, you know, I mean, obviously that doesn't come in frame. Hồ Chí Minh doesn't say, "Thorez is a fake." But it suffices to say that there is a certain *antipathie*. And you get Harold Isaacs, for example, who is a damn good journalist, who is the correspondent for *Newsweek* during the war in Indochina, to write the anti-war, covering this whole struggle. And he wrote a marvelous book called *No Peace For Asia*. And Harold Isaacs was fairly close to a lot of Vietnamese Communists, and he asked them in September of '45 what their attitude toward the French Communists was. Would the French Communists back in France, would they really fight for the independence and the liberation of Vietnam? And the answer he got, as he summarizes the responses: "The French Communists, they are first of all colonialist first and Communist after. In principle they are for us, but in practice that is quite another thing." That, after all, conformed to the document that the French Communist Party sent to the Vietnamese Communists just two days after the proclamation of independence on the 2nd of September. It's dated the 4th of September. It is a PCF document that goes to the Indochinese Communist Party, and in which we read: "We must warn that any premature adventures in Vietnam might not be in the best interest of the Soviet Union." In other words, it is a warning that all policies in Indochina ought to be coordinated with the best interests of the Soviet Union.

But the worst thing is, here's Hồ Chí Minh leaving on the 1st of June of '46, but he's not left until that date. On the 29th of May of that year appears in a Saigon newspaper, the *Paris Saigon*, an interview that the correspondent in Paris made with Maurice Thorez. And Maurice Thorez was then, as you know, the vice president of the council, was minister of state. And this is what Thorez says, and it's printed in this bourgeoisie paper in Saigon, *Paris Saigon*: "The Communist Party of France, under no circumstances, wishes to be considered as the liquidator of the French position in Indochina, and it publicly wishes to see the French flag fly over all corners of the French Union." Now, Hồ Chí Minh could read. And consequently, it's perfectly obvious that in going off to negotiate at Fontainebleau or at Paris, he was not bemused by what the French Communists were going to do.

I think that you really have to leave it at simply the idea that Hồ Chí Minh hated war: he thought anything ought to be tried before there was actually a confrontation, and he would simply run this thread out and see how far the negotiating factor would go. Now, it didn't go very far, quite obviously. He got there at the beginning of June and found out, first of all, that he had to wait for a month before there were any negotiations because the French went through these elections in June of '46. As a result of the elections, the Socialist premier Félix Gouin was replaced by this damnable Bidault. So you get, first of all, this terrible MRP guy as the head of the government. Then, says Hồ Chí Minh, "I want to negotiate in Paris." They say, "No, that's too noisy." So we go to this nice little quiet town of Fontainebleau. Well, Fontainebleau, that's where there's a nice imperial palace, you see. It's a place that's perfectly reactionary, like Versailles. You go out to places like that and you are within a marvelous framework of tranquility.

So they negotiate out at Fontainebleau, and then comes the French delegation. And that's so insulting, you see what it is? It's all this damnable racist insult, because what the French do is send not one single minister of state. Nobody in the ministry, nobody in the cabinet goes out in the delegation to negotiate with somebody who, after all, has been recognized as the head of a free state in those 6th of March accords. But you have a group of Indochinese colonialists, in other words, people with an interest in restoring the French position. Max André is one of them, of the Bank of Indochina, Jean Letourneau. And I point out to you, because it's just terribly amusing that one of the negotiators with this passionate interest in getting back the French Empire in Indochina, who was at this Fontainebleau conference and on the French team, who was Pierre Messmer, who is the present prime minister of France. And consequently, you get that kind of a team.

I never saw Rivet, he was dead before I ever got to France. But one of the half-dozen closest friends I have in the whole world, Elizabeth Carmel — who is an American woman who had lived in Paris for forty years — was the companion, lived with Rivet for years and years and years. And so I know a lot about him, and I've asked Elizabeth many times, I've said, "Why the hell did Rivet go to Max André's house on the 5th of July of 1946? Why should he have participated?" She said, "Well, he was naïve. He was really a naïve guy and he thought that maybe the French really wanted to re-negotiate." Well [*inaudible*], to Rivet, because he then wrote a letter, he resigns even before the conference began, resigned the day before. And he wrote a letter to Marius Moutet, who was a Socialist, who was the minister of colonies, and he said, "I cannot countenance the large-scale maneuvers being undertaken with rare tenacity to bring the Fontainebleau conference to an impasse." In other words, to prepare a Bảo Đại solution.

You know what we mean when we talk about a Bảo Đại solution: in other words, you take this

little pocket emperor, the last of the Indochinese emperors, who had been deposed. And you take him and you make him, after all, the head of so-called independent Indochina, which means, really, French control. So that Rivet is saying, the whole maneuver was to make this Bảo Đại solution and then to ram it down the throat of Hanoi by depriving Tonkin of rice supplies from Cochinchina and thus provoking famine in that area. So, Rivet resigned. Well, he was quite right. The conference opened, the Fontainebleau conference opened on the 6th of July. For three weeks there was no budging. Certainly not raising the question of the referendum. Certainly not in any way indicating that the French really believed in that independence of northern Vietnam at all.

And then, after three weeks, at the beginning of August of '46, d'Argenlieu back in Indochina pulled another little coup. And what he did was to call the second Dalat conference. He said, "Well, while these people are mucking around in Fontainebleau, I really will set the terms of what we will do here in Indochina." So, he called the second Dalat conference. No representatives of Hanoi at all. No representatives of the Việt Minh. Representatives of Cambodia and Laos, who were thoroughly in the pocket of the French. Representatives of this free mountain republic of these tribesmen, representatives of the Republic of Cochinchina. And of something they invented called the Republic of Annam. And, consequently, they decided that there should be an Indochinese Federation under what they call French suzerainty.

Well, that was pretty dumb. At that point, you know, how long can you stay in Fontainebleau talking into the wind? And there is something very odd about that, because at the very last minute Hồ Chí Minh went, and went, and went to those ludicrous meetings. These Indochinese, I mean, these Vietnamese have an incredible patience. I mean, you know, sitting across from [US ambassador to South Vietnam Henry] Cabot Lodge week after week, I mean, you know, you've got to have a cast-iron stomach. And consequently, what I am telling you is exactly that Nguyễn Văn Linh told me that after sitting across from Cabot Lodge for five and a half months, and then Lodge was brought back and Bunker came, and so forth. After that, after sitting across from him week after week in this dismal Thursday meetings in Paris, and when he was finally recalled, he didn't even go around in diplomatic fashion to their hand and to bid them goodbye. It shows you what kind of bores we had [*inaudible due to laughter*]. But it suffices to say that, certainly, there is no question of that, that Hồ Chí Minh went back to that.

And finally, at the very last moment on the 14th of September of 1946, he did strike an accord, but a very strange one. At the very last minute after an all-night session, which was just a very heated session with Marius Moutet, who was the minister of colonies, Hồ Chí Minh struck an accord called the *modus vivendi*. And the only thing that you can say about that is that Hồ Chí Minh wanted something signed. In other words, he wanted some conclusion out of all those negotiations to show that he was a negotiating partner. Of course, you see, the *modus vivendi*

dealt with, first of all, economic interests that the French had in northern Indochina, in Tonkin, in the Democratic Republic, and it said that all property of the French that was confiscated would be given back. And secondly, that there would be no change in the status of any French property without the permission of the French. And it said, in the third place, that all French schools in the north would continue to function. But nothing was said about the referendum nor was there any recognition, as there had been in the 6th of March accords, that this was an independent and free state.

And there, you really can question Hồ Chí Minh and wonder whether he didn't go too far. And the explanation that Jean Chenault gives of that, because he's an old and dear friend of mine and I have talked to Chenault a lot about this. And so, what is it do you think was in Hồ Chí Minh's mind in signing that *modus vivendi* that seems to give away so much and seems to get nothing? He puts it in terms that I really don't agree with, or he doesn't agree with them anymore either, which is that the French Communists came to Hồ Chí Minh and said, "Look, I mean, there will be those November '46 elections. We are destined to pick up strength and, consequently, if you sign this, you will get better terms later." I don't think that. I think that it really boils down to a question of bidding for time — that there was a design on the part of Giáp, especially, to build up the military forces. They knew a war was coming. To build the infrastructure, to prepare for it as best as possible. And so, Hồ Chí Minh goes back in September of '46 with that dismal harvest.

And on both sides people know that the war is coming. Here is that damnable General [Jean Étienne] Valluy. General Valluy, after all, is going to replace Leclerc in July of 1946. And he's one of those toughs. You know, you have to understand about colonial generals. You have to understand that colonial generals live in a very, very strange authoritarian universe. They live all of their lives, basically, in a fascist environment. And here is General Valluy, and even before the March 6th accords he was in favor of attacking Hanoi, of destroying this regime in the north. And so is General Valluy on the 10th of April of 1946, only five weeks after the 6th of March accords, sending a directive to all of the French military barracks in north Vietnam, the ones who had come in under the accords of the 6th of March, and telling them to prepare for the imminent attack and assault upon the cities of northern Vietnam. And the Vietnamese are doing the same. And General Giáp understands that he's got to complete the infrastructure. There has to be propaganda among the people, there has to be a solidarity.

And then there is this contact, you must remember, with the guerrilla movement in the south because the guerrilla movement in the south never really was pacified. And it was under the command, for the most part, of Nguyễn Văn Linh. And Nguyễn Văn Linh did a magnificent job of creating guerrilla bands that would attack French posts. And the French were just ferocious and they began this whole system, of course, called questioning which was systematic torture, or

collective reprisal, going into villages from which there was firing from guerrillas and simply burning them, or setting them on fire, or destroying them, or taking hostages. All of that, you know, was done and it just created more guerrilla fights for the Vietnamese in the South. And then came the issue.

The issue came in October and November of 1946. What you're looking for is a *casus belli* — you're just looking, really, for a cause of war. On the 25th of October of 1946, the French did something contrary to the *modus vivendi*, which was enough of a concession on part of the Vietnamese anyway. In which, they took over the entire customs collections at Haiphong, at the port of Haiphong. It was supposed to be a duel operation. They pushed the Vietnamese out and took that over. So, they're already looking for some mode of breach. And it comes definitively on the 20th of November in the city of Haiphong in 1946 in that famous episode.

It begins on the 20th of November, in what is a very characteristic clash between the TỰ VỆ, which is the Vietnamese militia, and the French troops. It's a clash, and six French soldiers are taken prisoner. Well, there is a local commander in Haiphong who is a *supérieur*, who really is a man of [*inaudible*], and his name is Colonel Debès. Colonel Debès decides, at that particular time, that he must make a reprisal to get back these six French soldiers and, consequently, he makes a great big issue out of it and practically takes over the town of Haiphong militarily on the 20th of November. Well, Hanoi says negotiate and, consequently, the six prisoners are released to the French and presumably peace is restored. Except that at two in the morning of the 21st of November, Debès sends tanks and sends armor into the Vietnamese quarters of that city of Haiphong to level barricades that had remained. And when those tanks and that artillery move in, again there is an explosion of fighting. Again, Hanoi insists upon negotiating. It doesn't want this confrontation and, consequently, peace is restored on the 22nd, except that Saigon intervenes.

In Saigon, that means that General Valluy. General Valluy in charge now, wires to d'Argenlieu, back in Paris and he says, "I'm thinking of using force. What do you think?" And d'Argenlieu writes back and says (or wires back and says), "I talked to Bidault, he thinks it's a good idea." And so, goes on the 22nd November of 1946, goes this telegram from Valluy to Colonel Debès: "Use all the means at your disposal to make yourself complete master of Haiphong." And that's all this crazy colonel needs. So he issues an ultimatum at seven in the morning of the 23rd of November. The ultimatum is, in two hours every Vietnamese soldier has to be out of the city of Haiphong.

Impossible. Even logistically, even if one wanted to do it ideologically. And, consequently, by nine o'clock the war begins. It is the use of planes, it is the use of the cruiser *Suffren*, it is the use of artillery. It is a tremendous slaughter by the French against, basically, unarmed Haiphong

citizens. And within three days, upwards of 20,000 Vietnamese had been killed, tens of thousands injured in one manner or another, and the city of Haiphong taken over. That is the beginning of the French Indochina War.

At Hanoi there still was hope for negotiation. And especially after the 17th of December of 1946, because Léon Blum, Socialist par excellence, became the prime minister of France, only for six weeks in a caretaker government of all Socialists. And Hồ Chí Minh cabled to him from Hanoi and said, "See if we can't settle this," and got no answer. On the 19th of December, as a result, having sat hard on his own militia, on the Tự Vệ, finally those militia responded in the city of Hanoi and attacked the French quarter. On the 19th of December there was an attack on the French quarter in which some thirty-seven French were killed. But, you see, that is a balance. Thirty-seven French and 20,000 Vietnamese, it means that there is an equal justification for the war. So the French respond in force on the 20th of December. And their aim are the cities of north Vietnam, which cities they expect to take very quickly. And the city of Hanoi is the first one which is their target. What they thought they would take within days took three months to conquer. Within three months, however, they had depopulated the cities and occupied them. And the resistance movement had gone into the far-flung villages.

And so, it is in Léon Blum's government that the eight-year war that the French wage in Indochina begins. And poor Blum, he wrang his hands as he always did. And he said, "It is a terrible crisis of conscience because, *mon Dieu*, I am against colonialism and I am for decolonization, but then there is aggression, and one must answer aggression." Oh, and if he had only said that ten years earlier at the time of the Spanish Civil War, it would have been so different. But somehow he had to answer this aggression, by which we mean, really, that he let d'Argenlieu and the *colons* simply make the policy they wanted.

And there is something terribly important about that. Do you want the lesson of the comedy of parliamentary government? Do you want the lesson of the fragility of what is called democratic government? Then view it from the point of view that all of the key decisions were made by the military and by the *colons*; that the parliaments rubber-stamped for a period of almost eight years; that budgets were asked for and they were passed. It was one Tonkin Bay resolution after another. Just as it was at the time of the Algerian War, when *pleins pouvoirs*, full powers were always given to the *colons* in Algeria to settle these troubles as they chose to settle them. And so, the French war goes in two parts. It goes first in that period '47 to '50. And in '47 to '50, the French prove how utterly inept they are about the modern world. Because they prove, first of all, that they understand nothing about the will to fight on the part of the Việt Minh led by Hồ Chí Minh. And that becomes paramountly true at the time of the Paul Mus mission.

Now, Mus, you see, was one of those people who was a professor and a French agent. He was a Vietnam specialist: he really knew the language, had a certain sensitivity to the country. Taught, finally, at Yale University, where they like intelligence agents. And, consequently, Paul Mus in 1947 was picked by the French government, just as Bernard Fall was an American agent and worked for the American State Department. At any rate, they picked Paul Mus in May of 1947 to go into these hamlets and to find Hồ Chí Minh, and to tell him that, "Yes, the French would make a kind of unified Indochina, would make it under the Emperorship of Bảo Đại, but that the Việt Minh would have a role in it if it stopped fighting and gave up its arms." Well, Paul Mus found Hồ Chí Minh and Hồ Chí Minh received him and listened to him, and he said — well, he said, "You see, it's my view that in Vietnam, there is no place for cowards. So that's your answer." And, consequently, it shows a certain lack of imagination on the part of the French even to conceive of such a mission.

Or take the second fact that one can think of a solution for a liberation struggle that is as deeply rooted as I've tried to tell you, in terms of something like Bảo Đại. They finally strike their accords with Bảo Đại in March of 1949 and make this so-called Independent Federation of Indochina under the Emperor Bảo Đại. But he has no control over finance, no control over defense, no control over foreign policy, and, quite obviously, the French run the show. Can the French imagine that the Vietnamese people will accept that?

Or take, in the third place, that lack of imagination of what is wrong with the military effort. So you get General [Charles] Léchères who goes to Vietnam in May of 1949 to render a report. And General Léchères is the chief of the French Army in Paris. And things are going very bad. The war is going from defeat to defeat. General Léchères goes, and he goes to make a report. It's top secret, but I'll tell you what it says. And General Léchères says: "There's complete demoralization among our officers, and that because the Vietnamese fighting under their command really are not fighting at all." And so, General Léchères says: "Yes, what we must do is to whip up the enthusiasm of the Vietnamese to get some *élan* into the army" — not realizing that when you're fighting on the colonial side, it's hard to do.

So the trump card that the French had was you. And it was American aid. And that was the only trump card they had. And the American aid began seriously before the Korean War. But after the Korean War of June of 1950, it became very large. And the French didn't like it, because they thought that with that aid came strings and that the Americans were constantly saying, "Give this Bảo Đại government more independence," by which the French went, "Yes, yes," so you could make deals with them and get the resources. But still, they needed the Americans. Jules Moch, who was the minister of defense in the Plevin government, in October of 1950 went to Washington, said: "We're losing. We must have military equipment. We must have aid." And the

Americans said: "Whatever you need, you will get for this particular venture." And the Americans did send, very quickly, the aid that the French asked for. In fact, they sent things the French didn't ask for. They sent all of this radar equipment to detect the Việt Minh planes, but there were not Việt Minh planes. And, consequently, they sent a lot of things that simply lay there and that would be for a time. But it suffices to say that between 1950 and 1953, the United States gave \$3 billion in military aid and equipment to the French. And then, in the first six months of 1954, another \$654 million in that kind of aid.

And why? What was the American interest? It was a fourfold interest. It was the interest, first of all, in ending that war so that the French could get their troops back to Europe where the United States was trying to crystallize NATO and felt that the French were weakened in this colonial adventure. Secondly, was that idea of the dominoes. And the dominoes, everybody was talking about the dominoes. When I first came to the University of Wisconsin eleven years ago, all of the political scientists were domino people. Consequently, they were all talking in exactly the same way that Ambassador David Bruce talked to a Senate Committee in July of 1951: "There is no question that if Indochina goes, the fall of Burma and the fall of Thailand will be absolutely inevitable. Malaya will then fall shortly afterward, and then India." Consequently, there was that kind of fear.

There was the third fear that if Indochina were lost, somehow it would fall into the Russian net. One doesn't know why, but it would fall into the Russian net. "And the rich resources," said David Bruce, "should Vietnam thus fall from us and fall into the hands of the Việt Minh, the Russians will control the flow of rice, rubber, and so forth." And then finally, of course, the question of the resources which was very crucial. And you get Vice President Richard Nixon in December of 1953, speaking for the Eisenhower administration and saying, "Why is the United States spending hundreds of millions of dollars supporting the forces of the French Union in the fight against communism? If Indochina falls, with its prodigious supplies of rubber and rice, then Malaya and its tin and rubber will go, and Indonesia with its untold resources." And Nixon went on to say, "And if the Japanese, who so depend on those resources, have to then deal with the Communists, they will, and they will then fall out of our orbit."

So there were compelling...

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