

2. State Department Advisers Debate U.S. Support for the French in Vietnam, 1949

[November 4, 1949]

SECRET

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. [Philip C.] Jessup [Ambassador-at-Large]

In his memorandum of November 1 on Indochina, Mr. [Charles] Yost argues that "a further major advance of Communism will be considered as, and will in fact be, a defeat for the United States, whether or not we are directly involved." He therefore recommends, among other steps, support of the Bao Dai government (after the March 8 agreements are ratified), economic assistance to Bao Dai, etc.

Raymond B. Fosdick to Philip C. Jessup, November 4, 1949, National Archives 896.00/11-1849; and W. Walton Butterworth to Fosdick, November 17, 1949, National Archives, Lot Files, "French-Indochinese Relations, PSA, Box 5.

It seems to me this point of view fails to take into consideration the possible, and I think the probable, consequences of such a decision. In grasping one horn of the dilemma, it ignores the other. My belief is that the Bao Dai regime is doomed. The compromises which the French are so reluctantly making cannot possibly save it. The Indochinese are pressing toward complete nationalism and nothing is going to stop them. They see all too clearly that France is offering them a kind of semi-colonialism; and to think that they will be content to settle for less than Indonesia has gained from the Dutch or India from the British is to underestimate the power of the forces that are sweeping Asia today.

What kind of independence is France offering the Indochinese today in the March 8th agreements?

- (1) The foreign policy of Indochina is to be under the final control of France.
- (2) French military bases are to be established and the Indochinese Army in time of war is to be under French direction.
- (3) France is to be in charge of the so-called General Services:
 - (a) Control of immigration
 - (b) Communications
 - (c) Industrial development of Indochina
- (4) Customs receipts are to be divided between France and Indochina in accordance with a formula to be agreed upon.
- (5) Extraterritorial courts for French citizens are to be continued.

This shabby business is a mockery of all the professions we have made in the Indonesian case. It probably represents an improvement over the brutal colonialism of earlier years, but it is now too late in the history of the world to try to settle for the price of this cheap substitute. For the United States to support France in this attempt will cost us our standing and prestige in all of Southeast Asia. A lot of that prestige went down the drain with Chiang Kai-shek [President of the then-recently exiled Republic of China]; the rest of it will go down with the Bao Dai regime if we support it. Ambassador [to China, John] Stuart calls our relationship to this regime "shameful" and I am inclined to agree with him.

Ev[erett] Case argued yesterday that it is too late to do anything else except support Bao Dai. I disagree. It is never too late to change a mistaken policy, particularly when the policy involves the kind of damage that our adherence to the Generalissimo [Chiang Kai-shek] brought us. Why get our fingers burned twice?

Ho Chi Minh as an alternative is decidedly unpleasant, but as was pointed out at our meeting with FE yesterday, there may be unpredictable and unseen factors in this situation which in the end will be more favorable to us than now seems probable. The fundamental antipathy of the Indochinese to China is one of the factors. Faced with a dilemma like this the best possible course is to wait for the breaks. Certainly we should not play our cards in such a way that once again, as in China, we seem to be allied with reaction. Whether the French like it or not, independence is coming to Indochina. Why, therefore, do we tie ourselves to the tail of their battered kite?

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