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Franklin Roosevelt and Indochina

GARY R. HESS

THE response to political change and nationalism in Southeast Asia ranked among the important challenges encountered by the United States during World War II. The disruptions caused by the war forced America to define its interests in the struggles of Asian peoples to end European imperialism. The Japanese overthrew European predominance in Southeast Asia. Within Japanese-occupied Southeast Asia, French Indochina received the greatest American attention because President Franklin D. Roosevelt was determined to prevent resumption of French rule and to establish instead an international trusteeship which would lead to eventual independence.

The trusteeship plan was Roosevelt's most conspicuous postwar goal for an area that had been part of a European empire. The pledge of the Atlantic Charter to recognize the rights of peoples to self-determination, augmented by occasional assurances that this applied to all areas of the world, stood as the basic policy on imperialism, but for most areas of the colonial world that policy remained a vague and platitudinous goal rather than a basis for specific policy and action. For example, in 1942 Roosevelt took an active interest in the impasse between the British government and the Indian National Congress, but he restricted his role to that of a concerned third party and avoided any direct intervention.¹ Yet, in Indochina, which had its own complexities and about which Roosevelt, the state department, and the American public had scant knowledge, Roosevelt embraced a postwar plan.²

The Indochina policy resulted in large part from Roosevelt's attitude toward the French. The collapse of the French resistance against Germany in 1940

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¹ Foster Rhea Dulles and Gerald Ridinger, "The Anti-Colonial Policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt," *Political Science Quarterly*, LXX (March 1955), 1-5; Samuel I. Rosenman, comp., *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (13 vols., New York, 1938-1950), XI, 436-37; Gary R. Hess, *America Encounters India, 1941-1947* (Baltimore, 1971), 33-88.

² A poll conducted by the Public Opinion Research Office at Princeton, April 1943, underscored the public ignorance of Southeast Asia. Only 47 percent of the sample replied affirmatively to the question, did the Japanese occupy Indochina; 45 percent answered in the "don't know" category. Twenty-two percent said the French had treated their colonial subjects fairly before the war; 17 percent said unfairly; and 61 percent had no opinion. Report, Office of Public Information, Department of State, Feb. 9, 1944, File No. 890.00/416, General Records of the Department of State, RG 59 (National Archives). See also, Kenneth Landon, "Southeast Asia and United States Foreign Policy," *United Asia*, XVII (July-Aug. 1965), 267-68.

convinced Roosevelt that France had become a decadent nation, which no longer deserved the status of a major power. Indochina had preoccupied Roosevelt since 1940 when the Japanese began exerting pressure on the French administration there. In August 1940, Japan bullied Vichy France into granting air bases in northern French Indochina. Then, in July 1941, France agreed to let Japan build air and naval bases in southern French Indochina. To Roosevelt, the French had behaved as shamefully against Japan as against Germany.³ As this pattern of thinking crystallized, Roosevelt came to attribute the worst characteristics to the French administration of Indochina. At various meetings with other leaders, Roosevelt reiterated that it was in worse condition after 100 years of French rule than it had been before the French arrived.

In motivation and implementation, Roosevelt's Indochina policy was typical of his leadership in foreign policy. Recent studies of Roosevelt's wartime diplomacy have underscored his lack of a systematic and realistic plan for the postwar world. Rather than carefully considering issues, Roosevelt inclined toward simple answers and rambled from question to question. Frequently worthwhile political objectives were lost owing to Roosevelt's reluctance to risk a rupture in the wartime coalition and to utilize fully his military and diplomatic power. The Indochina case was no exception. The trusteeship plan often remained in limbo. On occasion Roosevelt pursued it as a concrete goal, while at other times it was offered more as an idea or suggestion. In this matter, as in many others, Roosevelt preferred to keep policy formulation largely in his own hands rather than to work closely with the state department.⁴

During 1942, several offices in the state department considered the political and military situation in Indochina, but had no perceptible influence on presidential policy. A suggestion from the Chinese government that military operations should be undertaken in Indochina was viewed favorably in a February 4, 1942, memorandum drafted by Stanley Hornbeck, adviser on political relations.⁵ In August a detailed memorandum on Indochina, prepared by the former chief American diplomats there (Consuls Charles S. Reed and O. Edmund Clubb and Vice Consul Kingsley Hamilton), was forwarded to the Division of Far Eastern Affairs. It drew attention to the general indifference of the Indochinese peoples toward the political aspects of the war, the widespread hatred of the Japanese, and the determination of politically conscious Annamites to achieve indepen-

³Gaddis Smith, *American Diplomacy during the Second World War, 1941-1945* (New York, 1965), 12, 91-92.

⁴*Ibid.*, 1-12; William L. Neumann, *After Victory: Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, and the Making of the Peace* (New York, 1967), 52-55, 68-69; James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: Soldier of Freedom, 1940-1945* (New York, 1970), 494-95, 547-52, 592-93.

⁵"French Indochina: Political and Military Strategy," Feb. 4, 1942, File No. 740.0011 PW/1877, General Records of the Department of State.

dence from France. The United States, it was noted, was generally viewed very favorably.⁶ In October, the Division of Special Research, a branch established to formulate long-range policy objectives, suggested that the United States should issue a "Pacific Charter." An idea championed by various American liberals as well as by leaders of the Chinese government, the "Pacific Charter" was intended to affirm the universality of the Atlantic Charter.⁷ None of these memorandums received serious consideration at the higher levels in the state department. And the department had not attempted, nor had it been called upon, to draft a postwar policy for Indochina.

Roosevelt first took up the Indochina question in January 1943 at a meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While covering a variety of subjects, he mentioned briefly that, at the time of the North African invasion, Robert Murphy had exceeded his authority in assuring General Henri Giraud that France's colonial possessions would be restored after the war. Roosevelt added that some French territories would not be returned, and, he said further, that he had "grave doubts" as to the restoration of the French in Indochina.⁸ Roosevelt's doubts about restoring Indochina were apparently just beginning to crystallize, for he had already unwittingly undercut his position as announced to the Chiefs of Staff. Murphy's assurance was not the only one given to France. A year earlier Roosevelt had sent to his ambassador in France a message informing Vichy leaders that he was the best friend France had, and, as relayed by Secretary of State Cordell Hull, affirming that "the word 'France' in the mind of the President includes the French Colonial Empire."⁹ At the time that communication was sent, Roosevelt may have been thinking only of Africa, but no such qualification was included in the message.

In March 1943, when British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden arrived in Washington for lengthy discussions on postwar problems, Roosevelt first broached the trusteeship plan. At a meeting on March 27, Roosevelt ranged over his visions for a united nations, the emergence of a strong China, the transfer of Manchuria and Formosa to China, and the establishment of international trusteeships for Indochina and Korea. While Eden expressed his favorable impression of the general view, he quickly opposed the suggestions of

⁶Charles S. Reed to Division of Far Eastern Affairs, Aug. 14, 1942, File No. 851 G.00/76, *ibid.*

⁷Memorandum, Division of Special Research, Oct. 27, 1942, File No. 711.94/2640, *ibid.*; Sumner Welles to C. E. Gauss, March 25, 1942, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers: China, 1942* (Washington, 1956), 730; Gauss to Cordell Hull, March 28, 1942, *ibid.*, 738-39.

⁸Minutes, Meeting of Joint Chiefs of Staff at White House, Jan. 7, 1943, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942 and Casablanca 1943* (Washington, 1968), 514.

⁹Hull to William D. Leahy, Jan. 20, 1942, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1942, Europe* (2 vols., Washington, 1962), II, 123-24.

interference in the French Empire.¹⁰ Eden found some support from Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles and he cabled Winston Churchill:

I remarked that the President was being very hard on the French, from whom the strongest opposition was to be expected. He admitted this, but said that France would no doubt require assistance for which consideration might be the placing of certain parts of her territory at the disposal of the United Nations. Welles reminded the President that the United States Government had gone on record for the restoration of French possessions. The President said he thought that this referred only to North Africa, but Welles observed there was no such modification. The President said he thought in the ironing out of things after the war this kind of position could be rectified. . . .¹¹

Roosevelt's willingness to make hasty decisions on political questions distressed Eden. Indochina may have been on his mind when Eden, upon his return to London, expressed concern over the "cheerful fecklessness" of Roosevelt's policies.¹²

Even after Roosevelt's views became known, the White House and state department continued independent courses on Indochina policy. At the assistant secretary and divisional levels in the state department, uncertainty of United States postwar policy persisted, with only a faint awareness of the President's plan. Perhaps Hull and Welles were partly responsible for this lack of coordination; both believed that the French should be restored, provided an agreement was reached on the eventual independence of the area. Welles also favored establishing a regional trusteeship agency which would determine if colonial powers were implementing plans for independence.¹³ But the principal fault for the cleavage rested with Roosevelt; the trusteeship goal always had an indefinite status. While Roosevelt intermittently pursued the idea, he never fully developed his plan. Nor did he consult with his own subordinates about it. After the Eden meeting, a directive to the state department to study the plan's implementation would have been logical, but none was sent. Roosevelt talked about the trusteeship with everyone except the French and his own state department.¹⁴

The Roosevelt-Eden meeting signalled the beginning of the impasse between the Americans and British over imperialism in Southeast Asia. The differences

¹⁰Memorandum of conversation by Hull, March 27, 1943, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1943, The British Commonwealth, Eastern Europe, The Far East* (Washington, 1963), 36-38; Robert E. Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins, An Intimate History* (New York, 1950), 716-18; Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull* (2 vols., New York, 1948), II, 1595-96.

¹¹Earl of Avon, *The Memoirs of Anthony Eden, Earl of Avon; The Reckoning* (Boston, 1965), 438.

¹²Neumann, *After Victory*, 103.

¹³Hull, *Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, II, 1595-98; Sumner Welles, *The Time for Decision* (New York, 1944), 297-303.

¹⁴Ruth B. Russell, *A History of the United Nations Charter; The Role of the United States* (Washington, 1958), 79.

were further accentuated by disagreement over a draft of a United Nations declaration on dependent peoples. This declaration, drafted in the state department, approved by Roosevelt, and presented to Eden during his visit, called for placing certain Japanese-controlled areas under trusteeship and obliged imperial powers to follow policies leading to independence and to establish timetables for its implementation.¹⁵ Many months passed before the controversy over the United Nations declaration would be resolved. Meanwhile, Roosevelt concentrated on gaining the support of the Russians and Chinese for his Indochina plans. These efforts were undertaken at the Moscow, Cairo, and Tehran conferences.¹⁶

On October 5, 1943, Roosevelt met with Hull prior to the secretary's departure for the "Big Three" foreign ministers conference at Moscow. While elaborating on his postwar goals, Roosevelt reaffirmed his ideas for Indochina; and he suggested trusteeships for other areas, including the Japanese mandates. At Moscow, however, the trusteeship idea received little attention. Hull believed that before considering specific policies, it was important to gain British and Russian support for the American draft declaration on dependent peoples. When Hull presented the proposal, Eden reiterated the British objections, and Russian Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov suggested the need for further study of the problem.¹⁷

Prior to Roosevelt's journey to Cairo and Tehran, which took place in November and December 1943, the liberation and future status of Indochina received high-level state department consideration. The question of Allied planning for the liberation of Southeast Asia was initially presented in September 1943 by the Chinese. Following some discussion, the Division of Far Eastern Affairs recommended that after a period of military administration, Indochina should be returned to the French.¹⁸ By the time the far eastern division endorsed this position on October 22, however, there were apparently conflicting opinions among state department officials. Assistant Secretary Adolf A. Berle, following a meeting with a representative of the French Committee on National Liberation, reacted unfavorably to the French claims on Indochina. In reporting on his conversation, Berle stated: "This brings us squarely up to the problem of whether, in the Far East, we are re-establishing the western colonial empires or whether we are letting the East liberate itself if it can do so. I feel the

¹⁵Dulles and Ridinger, "Anti-Colonial Policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt," 10-11; Sir Llewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (London, 1962), 222.

¹⁶Smith, *American Diplomacy during the Second World War*, 91.

¹⁷Hull, *Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, II, 1305, 1596.

¹⁸Dean Acheson to Hull, Sept. 16, 1943, File No. 800.0146/164, General Records of the Department of State; Memorandum, Division of Far Eastern Affairs, Oct. 22, 1943, File No. 800.0146/170, *ibid.*

matter should be discussed on a high level with the President for his decision.”¹⁹ The following day Berle reiterated his concern to Under Secretary Edward Stettinius, warning that the French wanted American forces to support a shaky French regime: “France is unlikely to be able to maintain herself in control of, or protect, that province for a good while; so that we should have the added job of policing it against the Chinese as well as the Japanese in the interest of the French Colonial Empire.”²⁰ After considering Berle’s views and at the recommendation of Assistant Chief John Carter Vincent, the chief of the far eastern division, Joseph W. Ballantine, on November 2 reversed the October 22 proposal and suggested that Chinese troops be used in liberating Indochina and that the goal should be training for self-government.²¹

Berle’s talk with the French representative on October 21 had revealed that the French objected to the possible use of Chinese forces to oust the Japanese from Indochina. In passing on the issue raised by the French, Roosevelt did not clarify his position. On November 8, Stettinius informed the President of the French concern and the far eastern division’s conclusion that Chinese troops should be utilized in Indochina.²² The next day Roosevelt replied that the French case against the use of Chinese troops lacked validity and that, since the process of liberation was completely a military matter, it should be left to the discretion of the joint chiefs and officers in the area.²³ Whether Roosevelt really believed that the process of liberation was essentially a military issue can only be conjectured. He must have perceived that whatever troops occupied Indochina would influence to some extent the ultimate disposition of the area. He obviously did not want French troops to be used, and if British troops were employed they would likely allow the French to move in. Chinese forces thus fitted in best with his plans, especially since China had already informed the United States that it favored the establishment of an Indochina trusteeship.²⁴

The plans for the liberation of Indochina were still undecided when the conferences took place at Cairo and Tehran. At these meetings, Roosevelt pursued with determination his Indochina policy and gained support from the Russians and Chinese. In his talks with Chiang Kai-shek at Cairo, Roosevelt suggested the desirability of reaching a mutual understanding on the future of

¹⁹Memorandum of conversation by Adolf A. Berle, Oct. 21, 1943, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1943: China* (Washington, 1957), 883-84.

²⁰Berle to Edward R. Stettinius, Jr., Oct. 22, 1943, *ibid.*, 884.

²¹John Carter Vincent to Berle, Nov. 2, 1943, *ibid.*, 885-86.

²²Stettinius to Roosevelt, Nov. 8, 1943, *ibid.*, 886.

²³Roosevelt to Stettinius, Nov. 9, 1943, *ibid.*, 886-87.

²⁴Memorandum of conversation by Stanley K. Hornbeck, Sept. 28, 1943, *ibid.*, 133-37. Although the Chinese leaders assured Americans of their support of a trusteeship, a recent study on China’s policy toward Vietnam observes that the Nationalist regime lacked any established policy for Vietnam at this time. King C. Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954* (Princeton, 1969), 91.

Indochina, Korea, and Thailand. Chiang readily agreed that the United States and China should help Indochina attain independence, for which, he added, the region was not prepared. Perhaps to test the sincerity of China's support of a trusteeship, Roosevelt offered Chiang control of Indochina, but the Chinese leader declined. In the Chinese official account of the conversation (there was no official American record), the two leaders did not designate a process for independence of Indochina. But, according to Roosevelt's recounting of this conversation, a trusteeship was discussed and presumably approved by Chiang.²⁵ Moreover, the Roosevelt-Chiang conversation may have been predicated on an understanding of the trusteeship formula, for, as already noted, the Chinese had previously informed Washington that they approved an Indochina trusteeship.

Journeying to Tehran, Roosevelt found Josef Stalin solidly behind his determination to reduce France. In a meeting with Roosevelt on November 28, the Russian premier launched into a condemnation of the French including an insistence that Indochina not be returned to France. The President responded that 100 years of French rule had left Indochina worse than before. When he advocated a trusteeship that would prepare Indochina for independence within twenty to thirty years, Stalin readily agreed.²⁶ Churchill objected to this disposition of the French colony, but Roosevelt reminded him that the British were outvoted three-to-one.²⁷

As the Tehran Conference ended amid great hopes for continued Allied cooperation, the trusteeship for Indochina had been embraced by two of America's three principal allies. Yet, it remained more a principle than a plan to which any government was committed. Roosevelt made no effort to induce Stalin or Chiang to consider the details of a trusteeship—the administering powers, the process for attaining independence, the degree of international supervision. And the British objections to a trusteeship could not be turned aside by claiming that the Indochina question would be handled by a majority vote. Indeed rather than attempting to resolve their differences, Roosevelt generally avoided Indochina and other colonial issues in his meetings with Churchill.²⁸

Roosevelt's efforts disturbed the British, resulting in a further Anglo-American cleavage over postwar Asia. The British were uncertain of the seriousness of Roosevelt's ideas. On January 3, 1944, Lord Halifax inquired of Hull whether Roosevelt was planning a trusteeship because British sources indicated the

²⁵Chinese Summary Record of Roosevelt-Chiang Dinner Meeting, Nov. 23, 1943, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conferences at Cairo and Tehran 1943* (Washington, 1961), 325.

²⁶Minutes of Roosevelt-Stalin Meeting, Nov. 28, 1943, *ibid.*, 485.

²⁷Edward R. Stettinius, Jr., *Roosevelt and the Russians, The Yalta Conference*, Walter Johnson, ed. (Garden City, 1949), 237-38.

²⁸Neumann, *After Victory*, 121-22; Herbert Feis, *Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin: The War They Waged and the Peace They Sought* (Princeton, 1957), 314-17.

President had talked frequently along those lines during his recent trip to Cairo and Tehran.²⁹ Hull requested clarification from Roosevelt, and the President responded bluntly that the plan had the “wholehearted” support of the Chinese and Russians and that the British could be ignored: “The only reason they seem to oppose it is that they fear the effect it would have on their own possessions and those of the Dutch. They have never liked the idea of trusteeship because it is, in some instances, aimed at future independence. This is true in the case of Indochina.”³⁰ While the President presented a confident air, his Indochina policy came under an increasingly strong challenge from the British and French. As the Allies began planning their thrust against the Japanese, the future of Indochina became linked to military operations. Roosevelt appreciated the relationship of military operations to political settlements, but only to a point. While he took certain steps to prevent a French role in the liberation of Indochina, Roosevelt continued to hold that the final political settlement could be delayed until after the war.

At the Quebec Conference, Roosevelt had accepted a British suggestion to establish the Southeast Asia Command (SEAC). The British Chiefs of Staff and a British commander, Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten, had responsibility for military operations; these were to be coordinated by the American Joint Chiefs of Staff with the China Theater in which the United States still asserted the predominant role. The establishment of SEAC had far-reaching political ramifications, for it provided a vehicle for the reestablishment of British and other colonial influences. Whether Indochina was to be included in SEAC or the China Theater was, however, not immediately decided.³¹

The United States quickly faced the question of whether it should attach diplomatic personnel to SEAC in India. Initially, headquarters officers in Washington inclined toward dispatching advisers to SEAC, but John Paton Davies, political adviser to Lieutenant General Joseph Stilwell, argued that identification with SEAC could only harm the United States among colonial peoples and would produce increasing friction with the British.³² Davies’ view prevailed, for in March 1944, the state department formally declined the British invitation to dispatch representation to SEAC.³³

²⁹Memorandum of conversation by Hull, Jan. 3, 1944, *Foreign Relations . . . Cairo and Tebran 1943*, p. 864.

³⁰Roosevelt to Hull, Jan. 24, 1944, *ibid.*, 872-73.

³¹Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *The United States Army in World War II, China-Burma-India Theater: Stilwell's Command Problems* (Washington, 1956), 5-6; Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War: Closing the Ring* (Boston, 1951), 77-78, 86, 89.

³²Hull to New Delhi Mission, Nov. 26, 1943, File No. 740.0011 PW/3513, General Records of the Department of State; New Delhi Mission, George R. Merrell to Hull, Nov. 29, 1943, File No. 740.0011 PW/3565, *ibid.*; Memorandum by John Paton Davies, ca. Nov. 22, 1943, *Foreign Relations . . . Cairo and Tebran 1943*, pp. 371-72.

³³Hull to New Delhi Mission, March 27, 1944, File No. 740.0011 PW/3589, General Records of the Department of State.

For the United States to dissociate itself from SEAC proved easier than meeting a simultaneous problem: the determination of the Free French to participate in Indochina operations. In December 1943, Henri Hoppenot of the Washington delegation of the French Committee for National Liberation raised with Berle the French interest in participating in Pacific operations, particularly in Indochina.³⁴ Berle delayed acting on the request, but two months later the question was presented to Roosevelt. When the war department requested advice from the state department on Indochina, Stettinius took up the question with the President. Stettinius informed Roosevelt that the state department assumed that some French troops would be utilized, that the French would be involved in the administration, but that this would not prejudice the ultimate status of Indochina.³⁵ On March 14, Roosevelt vetoed the suggestion, holding that an Anglo-American military occupation should be undertaken with a trusteeship to follow.³⁶ Yet, as definite as Roosevelt sounded, he also conceded that the views of other governments on the trusteeship concept had not been ascertained. Nor had he consulted the British on such joint military operations in Indochina.

In the fall of 1944, Indochina again commanded Roosevelt's attention, and it remained an important question during the last months of his life. He became more outspoken in his determination to prevent resumption of French rule. In October the President confronted the issue of whether the United States should support French and native resistance in Indochina. The fiction of French rule persisted, despite the presence of Japanese forces in Indochina. Gaullists there organized resistance operations and received assistance from the British. The Office of Strategic Services sought permission to airlift equipment and supplies to the resistance forces. Overriding a state department recommendation to approve such operations, Roosevelt held out against supporting the French under any conditions. In an executive order, he denied permission to aid the French resistance.³⁷

Meanwhile, the French were continuing their efforts—and with some success—to gain a military role in Southeast Asia. The British had permitted a French military mission to become attached to SEAC headquarters. The substantial growth of the French mission led to state department inquiries as to

³⁴Henri Hoppenot to Berle, Dec. 13, 1943, File No. 740.0011 PW/3630, *ibid.*

³⁵Stettinius to Roosevelt, Feb. 17, 1944, File No. 851G.01/46, *ibid.*; Memorandum, War Department, Civil Affairs Division, John H. Hilldring to Director, Office of European Affairs, James C. Dunn, Feb. 18, 1944, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1944, The Near East, South Asia, Africa, The Far East* (Washington, 1965), 1190-94.

³⁶Dunn to Hilldring, March 14, 1944, *ibid.*, 1205-06.

³⁷Hull to Roosevelt, Oct. 13, 1944, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1944: The British Commonwealth and Europe* (Washington, 1965), 776-77; Roosevelt to Hull, Oct. 16, 1944, *ibid.*, 777.

whether the French presence was based on any agreement reached with Churchill at the Second Quebec Conference held in September 1944.³⁸ Roosevelt replied that the United States had not approved the French mission and that no final decision on Indochina had been reached.³⁹ To the French, however, Indochina was not a debatable subject. The foreign office in liberated France informed American Ambassador Jefferson Caffery of plans to dispatch two divisions for Indochina operations. When reports reached the White House indicating that American military personnel attached to SEAC had given tacit recognition to the French mission, Roosevelt, in orders of November 18 to the war and navy departments and the Office of War Information, reaffirmed that the United States had not approved the French mission and that the future of Indochina had not been decided.⁴⁰ Shortly afterward, the American consul at Colombo reported a statement attributed to Mountbatten that the French mission had American approval.⁴¹ Roosevelt gave an even more forthright directive: "It should be called to the attention of our British friends that Mr. Churchill and I did not officially recognize the French Military Mission at SEAC and furthermore, I have made no agreement, definite or otherwise, with the British, French, or Dutch to retain their Far Eastern Colonial possessions."⁴²

Despite the determination of these statements, Roosevelt did not link his political goal with military operations. During the fall of 1944, Roosevelt received several reports from Hull, Stettinius, who succeeded Hull as secretary of state, General Albert Wedemeyer, and Ambassador to China Patrick C. Hurley that the British, French, and Dutch had reached at least an informal understanding to cooperate in reestablishing their empires.⁴³ Yet despite these reports, Roosevelt made no efforts to further his plans for an Indochina trusteeship. He continued to believe that the final political decision could be postponed until Indochina was liberated. Even more important to the resolution of the Indochina question, he decided that the United States should avoid a military role in the liberation of Indochina. In a memorandum to Stettinius on

³⁸Hull to Roosevelt, Oct. 10, 1944, *ibid.*, 775-76; Stettinius to Roosevelt, Nov. 2, 1944, *ibid.*, 778-79.

³⁹Roosevelt to Stettinius, Nov. 3, 1944, *ibid.*, 780.

⁴⁰Jefferson Caffery to Hull, Nov. 4, 1944, *ibid.*, 780-81; Stettinius to Roosevelt, Nov. 15, 1944, PSF Indochina, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park); Roosevelt to Secretaries of Navy and War, Directors of Office of War Information, and Office of Strategic Services, Nov. 18, 1944, *ibid.*

⁴¹Stettinius to Roosevelt, Nov. 20, 1944, *ibid.*

⁴²Roosevelt to Stettinius, Nov. 24, 1944, *ibid.*

⁴³Hull to Roosevelt, Sept. 8, 1944, File No. 851G.01/9-844, General Records of the Department of State; Waldemar J. Gallman to Hull, Sept. 19, 1944, File No. 740.0011 PW/9-1944, *ibid.*; Memorandum, Division of Near Eastern and African Affairs, Paul H. Alling to Hull, Nov. 1, 1944, File No. 740.0011 PW/11-144, *ibid.*; Memorandum by Assistant to President's Naval Aide, G. M. Elsey, n.d., Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference) 1945* (2 vols., Washington, 1960), I, 915-16; Stettinius to Roosevelt, Dec. 1, 1944, PSF Indochina, Roosevelt Papers; Memorandum, Stettinius to Roosevelt, Dec. 27, 1944, *Foreign Relations . . . 1944: The British Commonwealth and Europe*, 783-84.

January 1, 1945, Roosevelt stated succinctly: "I still do not want to get mixed up in any Indochina decision. It is a matter for postwar. By the same token, I do not want to get mixed up in any military effort toward the liberation of Indochina from the Japanese."⁴⁴

When the Yalta Conference opened in February 1945, prospects for furthering the trusteeship plan were bleak, particularly since Roosevelt had decided not to undertake direct military operations in Indochina. As was frequently true in his diplomacy, Roosevelt was seeking to achieve political goals without paying the necessary price. Moreover, Roosevelt continued to avoid the British on the subject, preferring to deal with Stalin. Meeting with Stalin on February 8, Roosevelt talked of his Indochina plans and, curiously, did so without building upon Stalin's previous assent. As reported in the minutes: "The President then said he also had in mind a trusteeship for Indochina. . . . The President said that the Indochinese were people of small stature, like the Javanese and Burmese, and were not warlike. He added that the French had done nothing to improve the natives since she had the colony."⁴⁵

The next day the British objections to American trusteeship plans came into the open. For several months, the state department had been planning for the inclusion in the future United Nations Charter of a declaration on the rights of independent peoples and the establishment of a trusteeship system to provide machinery for self-government in certain areas. The war department had strongly objected that trusteeships could hinder American security, particularly in the Pacific where permanent naval and air bases were envisioned, but Roosevelt had endorsed the state department's objectives. When at Yalta, Stettinius presented the trusteeship proposal, Churchill interrupted, vehemently denouncing any possibility of interference within the British Empire. Roosevelt called an intermission, during which American officials decided to calm Churchill by reminding him that trusteeships were to be restricted to former League of Nation mandates, territory taken from the enemy such as the Japanese possessions in the Pacific, and areas voluntarily turned over to the United Nations by the states responsible for their administration.⁴⁶ While Indochina was not mentioned, this delineation implicitly ruled out a trusteeship there. Presumably trusteeships might be established in areas Japan had controlled prior to the war, but not in regions conquered during the war. Obviously, France would not voluntarily place Indochina under an international trusteeship. Yet to Roose-

⁴⁴Roosevelt to Stettinius, Jan. 1, 1945, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945: The British Commonwealth, The Far East* (Washington, 1969), 293.

⁴⁵Minutes of Roosevelt-Stalin Meeting, Feb. 8, 1945, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conferences at Malta and Yalta* (Washington, 1955), 770.

⁴⁶Stettinius, *Roosevelt and the Russians*, 236-38; Russell, *History of the United Nations Charter*, 336-48, 510-14, 540-42, 573-81; Smith, *American Diplomacy during the Second World War*, 148.

velt, Indochina remained an exceptional case. In the President's mind, France was not the nation responsible for Indochina and thus free to establish the postwar settlement there. Indeed, Roosevelt believed that the trusteeship remained an attainable goal. Returning from Yalta, he told reporters of his plan for an Indochina trusteeship; but after noting Churchill's "mid-Victorian" outlook on colonial matters, the President concluded: "Better to keep quiet just now."⁴⁷

Roosevelt revealed his continuing desire to prevent the restoration of Indochina in March 1945, when French forces there called for aid against the Japanese. On March 9, the Japanese overthrew the collaborative French regime and disarmed French forces. A nominally independent government was established, but real power rested with the Japanese. Scattered elements of French resistance radioed for assistance from the Fourteenth American Air Force stationed at Yunnan. In the following days, the French government and the American military pressured Roosevelt to aid the resistance. In Washington and Paris, the French government pressed for air assistance and renewed bids for recognition and support of the French mission in SEAC. At a meeting with Stettinius on March 12, French Ambassador Henri Bonnet urged that the two governments reach an agreement on the postwar military administration of Indochina, but the secretary of state declined.⁴⁸ The following day, in a meeting with the American ambassador, General Charles de Gaulle warned that the French people would be disappointed by United States policy in Indochina, perhaps resulting in France moving toward the Soviet Union.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, American military leaders pushed for supporting the French in Indochina, provided that aid did not interfere with operations in China.⁵⁰ Since the French in Indochina could no longer be dismissed as collaborators, it became increasingly difficult for the Roosevelt administration to resist these pressures. Finally, on March 29, the President reluctantly approved air support for the French, but by that time the resistance had almost completely collapsed.⁵¹

⁴⁷Rosenman, *Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, XIII, 563. In his study, Edward R. Drachman presents a different interpretation of Roosevelt's diplomacy. He contends that Roosevelt, under British and French pressures, abandoned his trusteeship plans by mid-1944. Edward R. Drachman, *United States Policy Toward Vietnam, 1940-1945* (Rutherford, N.J., 1970), 51-55.

⁴⁸Charles F. Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *United States Army in World War II, China-Burma-India Theater: Time Runs Out in CBI* (Washington, 1959), 259-60; Patrick J. Hurlley to Stettinius, Feb. 6, 1945, *Foreign Relations . . . , 1945: The British Commonwealth, The Far East*, 296-97; Henri Bonnet to Stettinius, March 12, 1945, *ibid.*, 297-99; Caffery to Stettinius, March 13, 1945, *ibid.*, 300; Acheson to Caffery, March 19, 1945, *ibid.*, 301; Memorandum of conversation by Stettinius, March 12, 1945, File No. 851G.00/31245, General Records of the Department of State.

⁴⁹Caffery to Stettinius, March 13, 1945, *Foreign Relations . . . 1945: The British Commonwealth, The Far East*, 300.

⁵⁰Memorandum of conversation by Dunn, March 19, 1945, *ibid.*, 301-02.

⁵¹Stettinius to Bonnet, April 4, 1945, *ibid.*, 303; Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams; A Political and Military Analysis* (New York, 1967), 57-59.

Even in the midst of these pressures, Roosevelt held to his trusteeship proposal. During a conversation with a state department official in mid-March, the President discussed Indochina in the context of his concern that failure to support nationalist aspirations in Asia would discredit the United States in the eyes of a billion people. With respect to Indochina, Roosevelt asserted that he would tolerate a French political presence only on the condition that France agreed to assume the function of a trustee and promised independence. Such a policy remained anathema to the French. As American officials were well aware, the French still held that Indochina was their exclusive concern; moreover, the French planning for Indochina anticipated full integration within the colonial system as a part of France's *mission civilisatrice*. Thus until Roosevelt's death, American and French objectives remained irreconcilable.³²

The Indochina trusteeship died with Roosevelt. President Harry Truman declined to interfere in French plans. At the San Francisco Conference, French Foreign Minister George Bidault received assurances from Stettinius that the United States did not question French claims to Indochina. As reported by Stettinius: "It was made quite clear to Bidault that the record is entirely innocent of any official statement of this government questioning, even by implication, French sovereignty over Indo-China. Certain elements of American public opinion, however, condemned French governmental policies and practices in Indo-China. Bidault seemed relieved and has no doubt cabled Paris that he received renewed assurances of our recognition of French sovereignty over that area."³³ Finally, at the Potsdam Conference, the Americans and British agreed that the liberation of Indochina should be accomplished by the British south of the sixteenth parallel and by the Chinese north of that line. This proved to be vital because it made certain the French return in the south.³⁴

Roosevelt's plan held much potential for the United States and for the peoples of Indochina. An international trusteeship arrangement might have prevented the clash between the French and nationalists that triggered the long and bitter struggle which culminated in Dienbienphu. It also would have helped elevate the Allied cause among the colonial peoples because it would have shown that the war's goal was not to reestablish the European empires.

³²Memorandum of conversation by Charles W. Taussig, March 15, 1945, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945: General; The United Nations* (Washington, 1967), 121-24; Caffery to Stettinius, Jan. 30, 1945, Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945: Europe* (3 vols., Washington, 1968), II, 667-68.

³³Joseph C. Grew to Caffery, May 19, 1945, *Foreign Relations . . . , 1945: The British Commonwealth, The Far East*, 307.

³⁴Memorandum by U.S. Chiefs of Staff, July 17, 1945, *Foreign Relations . . . (The Potsdam Conference) 1945, I, 922, II, 1313-15.*

The Allied ambivalence on colonialism after the war produced disillusionment among the peoples of South and Southeast Asia.³⁵

The trusteeship plan, of course, did not anticipate the rapid growth of nationalism during the late stages of the war which would have necessitated accelerating the timetable for independence. When Roosevelt first devised his scheme, nationalism was latent owing to French suppression of the principal nationalist elements. The war, however, reinvigorated nationalism, giving it an irrepressible force. The weakness of the French in the face of the Japanese discredited the French among the peoples of Indochina. And while the Japanese-French regime was dictatorial, it did encourage Vietnamese to assume an increasingly responsible role in the government. The Japanese coup brought an independence, which was largely fictional but nevertheless had important psychological implications.³⁶

Most important, the nationalist movement became unified and gained a sense of direction, with the Communist-led Viet Minh providing the leadership. When the Japanese control abruptly collapsed in August, the Viet Minh moved into a political vacuum. But while the Viet Minh gained the political ascendancy, it did not exercise full and effective political control when the British and Chinese forces began arriving.³⁷ Had the Allies been committed to a trusteeship plan, it is possible that such an arrangement could have been the formula for a transitional political settlement. If the willingness of Ho Chi Minh, in his dealings with the French in 1945-1946 to accept intermediary measures short of immediate independence can serve as a guide,³⁸ it is likely that he would have accepted the trusteeship arrangement.

The trusteeship, moreover, could have built upon the favored position of the United States within Indochina. Bao Dai is said to have remarked in 1944 that everyone anticipated a Japanese defeat would result in independence under American guidance.³⁹ Most important, the United States had become identified with the Viet Minh, having aided it during the war through the Office of

³⁵Harold R. Isaacs, *No Peace for Asia* (New York, 1947), 231-42. On the trusteeship, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has written: "Roosevelt's proposal had a certain eccentricity of detail; but it was founded in realism and wisdom, and, if its essence had been carried out, the world might have been spared much bloodshed and agony." Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941-1968* (Greenwich, Conn., 1968), 23.

³⁶Willard H. Elsbree, *Japan's Role in Southeast Asian Nationalist Movements, 1940 to 1945* (Cambridge, 1953), 97-98; F. C. Jones, *Japan's New Order in East Asia: Its Rise and Fall, 1937-45* (London, 1954), 392-93.

³⁷Fall, *Two Viet-Nams*, 60-63; Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled, From Colonialism to the Vietminh* (2 vols., New York, 1967), I, 269-78, 292-99.

³⁸Philippe Devillers, "Vietnamese Nationalism and French Policies," *Asian Nationalism and the West; A Symposium Based on Documents and Reports of the Eleventh Conference, Institute of Pacific Relations*, William L. Holland, ed. (New York, 1953), 247-48; Robert Trumbull, *The Scrutable East; A Correspondent's Report on Southeast Asia* (New York, 1964), 196.

³⁹Buttinger, *Vietnam*, I, 602.

Strategic Services, and the American officers who had contact with Ho and his followers had manifested enthusiastic support for the Viet Minh's claims against a resumption of French control. Ho cultivated the friendship of the OSS officers and, through them, conveyed to Washington his sympathy for the United States and the ideals of the Atlantic Charter.⁶⁰ When United States policy shifted to tacit support of the French, the American position understandably suffered.⁶¹

These comments are not to suggest that the trusteeship plan offered a conclusive solution to the Indochina problem. Nor would a trusteeship somehow have produced a strong native power group more acceptable in the long run to the United States than the Viet Minh. Looking back over the twenty-five

⁶⁰While the full record is not available, apparently the initial contact between the American military and the Viet Minh occurred late in 1944 when the Viet Minh assisted an American pilot shot down over Tonkin. Ho personally helped the pilot reach Kunming, where Ho established contacts with the OSS and was recruited to organize rescue teams for American flyers and given some arms and munitions. This assistance was provided with the understanding that it would be used against the Japanese, not against the French. While Roosevelt presumably had no knowledge of this operation, he did, in response to military inquiries about Indochina, issue a directive on February 4, 1945, that any actions there had to be against the Japanese, not in support of the French. Thus, the OSS undertaking was consistent with Roosevelt's order. After the March coup, the OSS parachuted additional military supplies and radio equipment to the Viet Minh.

The principal OSS-Viet Minh collaboration took place after Roosevelt's death. In May 1945, several OSS units parachuted into Tonkin and worked closely with the Viet Minh for the next several months. After the Japanese surrender, Ho utilized the Americans to transmit his messages to the state department, in a futile effort to win official backing and perhaps recognition of his movement.

Much of the account, however, remains fragmentary. In writing *Vietnam and China*, King Chen sought to examine the OSS files pertaining to Indochina, but was denied permission by the Central Intelligence Agency. King Chen, *Vietnam and China*, 90-93, 102-12. The following documents underscore the OSS enthusiasm for the Viet Minh: Consul-General, Kunming, Philip D. Sprouse to James Byrnes, Sept. 27, 1945, File No. 851G.00/9-2745, General Records of the Department of State; Memorandum of conversation by J. F. Cady, Dec. 12, 1945, File No. 851G.00/12-1245, *ibid.*; Memorandum of conversation by R. L. Sharp, Dec. 5, 1945, File No. 851G.00/12-545, *ibid.* These conversations were with OSS officers who had recently returned from Hanoi.

The Viet Minh effort to establish contact with the Truman administration is documented in the following dispatches: Embassy in China, Walter S. Robertson to Byrnes, Oct. 18, 1945, File No. 851G.00/10-1845, *ibid.*; Sprouse to Byrnes, Oct. 24, 1945, File No. 851G.00/10-2445, *ibid.*; Sprouse to Byrnes, Oct. 25, 1945, File No. 851G.00/10-2545, *ibid.*; Robertson to Byrnes, Nov. 8, 1945, File No. 851G.00/11-845, *ibid.*; Embassy in China, Robert L. Smyth to Byrnes, Nov. 26, 1945, File No. 851G.00/11-2645, *ibid.*; Consul at Shanghai, Richard P. Buttrick to Byrnes, Dec. 1, 1945, File No. 851G.00/12-145, *ibid.*

The position developed above differs with that of Gabriel Kolko, who maintains that the OSS officers, by emphasizing Ho's Communist background in their reports to Washington, influenced the American decision to support the French. Gabriel Kolko, *The Roots of American Foreign Policy; An Analysis of Power and Purpose* (Boston, 1969), 92-93; Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War; The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943-1945* (New York, 1968), 608-10. Kolko's conclusion can be questioned on the grounds that the decision not to interfere in the French resumption of authority was based on the Truman administration's concern with seemingly more important problems elsewhere, rather than on the nature of reports received in the war and state departments. Moreover, Kolko's premise that the OSS officers emphasized Ho's Communist orientation is not supported in the state department reports cited above. In both of his books, Kolko refers to the passage in the September 20, 1945, letter of Brigadier General Philip Gallagher in which Ho is described as "an old revolutionist . . . a product of Moscow, a communist." A fuller excerpt of Gallagher's letter, reprinted in Richard J. Barnet, *Intervention and Revolution; The United States in the Third World* (Cleveland, 1968), 184, reveals Gallagher's emphasis on Ho's determination to achieve independence and apparent admiration for the Viet Minh movement.

⁶¹Isaacs, *No Peace for Asia*, 170-75.

years of bloodshed in Indochina since the end of World War II, a scholar can conclude that the trusteeship plan deserved more thoughtful consideration by the Allies and more vigorous advocacy by Roosevelt than it received.