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Before Vietnam: Understanding the Initial Stages of US Involvement in Southeast Asia, 1945-1949

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Abstract

The Vietnam War, widely considered the worst foreign policy debacle in American history, remains the most controversial event of the twentieth century. Much criticism for Vietnam involvement stems from two sources: 1) disapproval with how American leadership conducted the war, and 2) disagreement over the reason for the conflict in the first place. Few historians, if any, dispute the first criticism. The historical community remains divided, however, in terms of a definitive position on the basis or origin for the conflict. For a holistic approach to the origin of the Vietnam War, one must first elucidate the conception of American intervention in the region, including “why” and “how” it arose. Any analysis of American involvement in Vietnam must begin with President Truman and his administration following the conclusion of the Second World War. This can only be accurately accomplished viewed in the context of US foreign policy during the Cold War. The initial American involvement in Southeast Asia in the context of the developing Cold War must be thoroughly examined to more fully understand the origins of the Vietnam War. Considering the increasingly complex situation in Southeast Asia following the Second World War, Truman and his administration acted consistently, bearing in mind the vested interests of the United States, their Allies, and the people of Southeast Asia, in light of the threat of Communist expansion in the region and across the world.

Keywords

Vietnam, United States Foreign Policy, Containment, Post-War Policy, Southeast Asia, Truman Administration

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Before Vietnam: Understanding the Initial Stages of U.S. Involvement in Southeast Asia, 1945-1949

Jacob Mach

History and Government

Introduction

The Vietnam War, widely considered the worst foreign policy debacle in American history, remains the most controversial event of the twentieth century. Much criticism for Vietnam involvement stems from two sources: 1) disapproval with how American leadership conducted the war, and 2) disagreement over the reason for the conflict in the first place. Few historians, if any, dispute the first criticism. The historical community remains divided, however, in terms of a definitive position on the basis or origin for the conflict. For a holistic approach to the origin of the Vietnam War, one must first elucidate the conception of American intervention in the region, including “why” and “how” it arose. Any analysis of American involvement in Vietnam must begin with President Truman and his administration following the conclusion of the Second World War. Only when viewed in the context of US foreign policy during the Cold War can this be accomplished. America’s initial involvement in Southeast Asia in the context of the developing Cold War must be thoroughly examined to more fully understand the origins of the Vietnam War.

The traditional view posited by historians such as Alonzo Hamby and David McCullough praises Truman for his character and resilience in facing an extraordinary foreign policy landscape. Truman met the unprecedented challenges brought on by the rise of the Soviet Union and communism head on and without compromise. Although Hamby criticizes some of Truman’s decision making (notably his decision to drop the atomic bomb), he ultimately concludes that such decisions were justifiable given the extreme circumstances. Revisionist historians of the Truman Presidency, including Arnold Offner, criticize Truman’s underlying assumptions of the superiority of democracy and of the United States. Additionally, Offner criticizes the confrontational style of Truman, arguing that had he remained open to working with the USSR and China, tensions could have been severely decreased. Because of these assumptions, the US’s foreign policy toward Vietnam was doomed for failure, resulting in an unwinnable war. These historians simply believe that the US should never have been involved in the first place. While there are various interpretations of the foreign policy decisions of the Truman administration, these two interpretations contrast sharply. Truman either made consistent and reasonable foreign policy decisions or he made foolish and unfounded decisions.

To understand the circumstances surrounding the initial stages of American involvement in Southeast Asia and Vietnam, it is necessary to consider the developing world events following the conclusion of the Second World War. The rehabilitation of Europe, the rebuilding of Japan, the rise of the Soviet Union, and an emerging Southeast Asia all demanded the attention of Truman and his administration. The situation facing Truman was considerably more intricate than many historians acknowledge, which made decision-making more delicate. While there are plenty of legitimate critiques, in view of the world situation and the information available at that time, the Truman Administration truly acted in a reasonable fashion amid great uncertainty. Considering the increasingly complex situation in Southeast Asia following the Second World War, Truman and his administration acted consistently. In light of the threat of Communist expansion, the administration was bearing in mind the vested interests of the United States, their Allies, and the people of Southeast Asia.

After a decade of conflict engulfing nearly the entire world, the Second World War finally concluded in August 1945. Belligerent nations suffered nearly 100 million casualties, civilian and military combined. The United States suffered the death of their President only months before the war ended. Franklin Delano Roosevelt steered the United States valiantly through four years of warfare. The entirety of the US, and much of the whole free world, mourned the loss of FDR. Harry S. Truman, thrust into the Presidency of the most powerful nation in the world, ultimately consented to the use of atomic weaponry to end the war against Japan. With this pronouncement, Truman made his first of many landmark decisions that would define his Presidency. FDR's legacy, however, continued to have an acute impact on the Truman Presidency for years to come, specifically in Southeast Asia.

Roosevelt held intense anti-colonialist sentiments during his years as President. American policy, specifically in the 19th century, tended to be more sympathetic to independence movements than many of its European counterparts. While the US did acquire land from both Mexico and Spain, its imperialistic gains paled in comparison to the British and French empires. This sympathy, coupled with a moralism that included an emphasis on missionary work, was the extent of American concern for Southeast Asia until the Second World War. Roosevelt, however, differed from his predecessors quite significantly. His anti-colonialism, fueled largely by hatred of colonial rule, its lack of democratic tendencies, and his own sensitivity to nationalism, recognized that less colonialism meant greater trade opportunities for the United States. Altruism played only a part in Roosevelt's anti-colonialist ideas. His administration believed colonialism left room for "secret diplomacy and war," which Roosevelt endeavored to avoid at all costs. His allies, however, did not hold the same beliefs about colonialism, resulting in friction between the US, Great Britain, and France. Both Britain and France maintained colonial holdings throughout the world, including Southeast Asia. Despite the entanglements of his allies, Roosevelt remained privately anti-colonialist throughout most of the war, which caused concern for Churchill and other British officials. The fate of post-war colonial holdings of the Western Allies was uncertain.

Roosevelt focused his attention on French Indochina and argued that the people of Indochina were infinitely better off before French interference. While Roosevelt

entertained the idea of pushing the French to place the colony into an international trusteeship after the war, he decided to curb his criticism of colonialism for the sake of the Allied war effort. In January 1945, Roosevelt declared a prohibition on US involvement in French Indochina until the end of the war (this included helping the French rid the country of the Japanese). Roosevelt would not live to see the end of the war, but his hardline personal views on colonialism created a lasting tension between the Allies. Both Britain and France were irritated by FDR's stance, and Truman needed to restore the relationship with his closest, most important allies. This was the atmosphere with the death of Roosevelt. Thankfully for the Allied leaders, Truman did not maintain the harsh stance of his predecessor. The Western Allied countries received their colonial holdings after the war with little trouble, but the uneasy situation in Southeast Asia would only grow in the coming decade.

As a result of the tenuous relationship with his closest allies, Truman took a step back from the hardline rhetoric of his predecessor to assure the Allies of their continued control in Southeast Asia. In fact, American policy toward both Indochina and Southeast Asia was marked by a certain "ambivalence." No distinct policy directed what transpired in the region. Instead, Truman opted for a "hands off" approach. He and his administration desired to stay "neutral" in Southeast Asia, not fully supporting the independence movements in the region or their Western Allies. That is, until an official policy toward Indochina surfaced in 1947. Their neutrality, however, generally favored their European allies and help to restore the relationships damaged by the Roosevelt Administration. The ultimate cause for such ambivalence in Southeast Asia stemmed from the emergence of the Soviet Union. Although Joseph Stalin, leader of the USSR, promised free and open elections throughout Eastern Europe, he immediately used his power to support, or in some cases, place Communist-leaning leaders such as Bulgaria and Romania in control of governments in Eastern European nations. Churchill foresaw the impending clash between the two political systems as early as March 1946 when he gave his famous "Iron Curtain" Speech. Truman slowly realized that Europe needed his full attention, and Southeast Asia soon faded as the Soviet Union rose to the forefront of US foreign policy concerns.

The single most important document in the evolving situation between the US and the Soviet Union was George Kennan's "Long Telegram," sent to Secretary of State James Byrnes in February 1946. George Kennan proved influential in many foreign policy decisions of the early post-war years, and his "Long Telegram" was no exception. Kennan believed the USSR existed in a state of antagonism toward Western capitalist nations, referencing a statement made by Stalin the First American Trade Union Delegation in 1927. It argued that a battle between the socialist center (Moscow) and the capitalist center of the world (United States) would "decide the fate of capitalism and of communism in the entire world." Thus, Kennan deduced Soviet policy toward the West, and the United States would serve to ensure the success of the socialist center and debilitate the capitalist center. Not only would it seek to weaken the West as a whole, but they would also, Kennan warned, seek to increase divisions between capitalist Allies. This included leveraging non-communist political leaders against capitalist nations. In light of those goals, he warned that the USSR and US would not coexist peacefully, nor did he think Soviet officials believed such potential existed. He cautioned the US government not to take the circumstances

lightly. Although he hoped the situation would not devolve into wholesale war, he advised officials to take thoughtful precautions as if they were fighting a war. Such was the gravity of the situation Kennan described to US officials, and the US did not need to wait long to see Kennan's warnings come to fruition.

In March 1946, only a month after Kennan's "Long Telegram," civil war broke out in Greece. Greek Communist forces backed by the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, and Albania, fought with government forces backed by the British and the United States (although true American assistance did not arrive until 1947). The Soviet support of this attempted communist takeover displayed what Kennan predicted in his "Long Telegram." A separate government report, the Clifford-Elsey Report, written in September 1946, supported Kennan by arguing the USSR had and would continue to provoke animosity between the East and West through any and all methods available. The Soviet support of the Greek communist force, the report argued, was a clear example of a Soviet attempt to gain entrance into a previously non-communist state. George Marshall commented, "we are faced with the first crisis of a series which might extend Soviet domination to Europe, the Middle East, and Asia," a statement with which Kennan and others readily agreed. Both Kennan's "Long Telegram" and the Clifford-Elsey Report directly contributed to the Domino Theory, which is the idea that the fall of one country to Communism would result in Communist insurgencies in the surrounding countries. This theory influenced the development of the most significant foreign policy decision of the 20th century: the Truman Doctrine.

The Truman Doctrine, working in conjunction with the Marshall Plan, radically reoriented American foreign policy toward two interrelated goals: 1) rebuilding a democratic, capitalist dominated Europe, and 2) defending against an ever expanding, ever aggressive Soviet-style Communism. Truman believed there was no other option; the information he received reinforced containing communism. His political advisors cautioned that a failure to check Soviet expansion would result in Soviet domination of Europe. In response to the aggressive actions of the Soviet Union and the information received from political advisors like Kennan, Truman called for Congress to allocate \$400 million in assistance to Greece, and later Turkey, in their fight against Communist insurgencies supported by the Soviet Union. These Communist insurgencies could result in far-reaching effects felt by the entire world. The concern was that if Greece or Turkey fell to Communism, other rebuilding European nations would also be in danger of falling to Communism. Although Kennan cautioned the President not to promise support to all the world in fighting against Communism, Truman declared that it "must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures."

The line in the sand was drawn. The Truman Doctrine cemented the approach of the Truman administration in Europe and eventually in Southeast Asia; it would be hardline, fixed, and immovable against the expansionistic plans of the USSR. Dean Acheson, who served as Truman's Secretary of State, would play an ongoing role in the development of foreign policy. Truman trusted him implicitly and lauded his instrumental part in crafting the Doctrine. The Truman Doctrine, however, was only part of the two-pronged attack on Soviet expansion. The Marshall Plan played an equally essential role in checking the

expansion of the Soviet Union and in creating a strong, democratic Europe not disposed to Communism.

The Marshall Plan, named for its chief originator, George Marshall, called for nearly \$17 billion in American funds to assist in the rebuilding of Europe. The majority of funds went to Great Britain and France, the two nations who expended the most resources during the war. Britain and France also represented the two largest economies in Europe and their economic rehabilitation was imperative to the success of the Marshall Plan throughout the continent. The war devastated the industrial capabilities of Western Europe, weakening their economic capabilities severely. The Marshall plan operated under the belief that economic instability leads to political instability, leaving countries open to communist revolutions. If they did not fall to Communism, the resulting weak economic output would cause a dip in production, which would plunge the continent into a depression it could not handle. American policy operated under a combination of altruism and self-interest; a sincere desire to help their Allies rebuild coupled with a desire to prevent a worldwide depression that the United States would inevitably experience as well. The Marshall Plan called for an astronomical amount of funds, a call that Congress heavily debated. Truman and his advisors ultimately swayed Congress, however, arguing that the funds were necessary to check Soviet expansion. Ironically, Marshall Plan dollars were offered to the Soviet Union and the states under their sphere of influence. Consistent with the information presented by Kennan in 1946, however, the USSR turned down the offer and refused to allow any of the Eastern European countries to accept any money from the Western nations. Stalin refused to allow any "capitalist" influence in regions under his control. The West vs. East schism continued, affirming the predictions of Truman's political advisors. How did these developments in Europe, however, effect the landscape in Southeast Asia? While Europe took precedence both economically and politically, Southeast Asia remained intimately connected with the evolving situation in Europe. The colonial holdings of Great Britain and France would play a substantial role in rebuilding after the war.

French influence first arrived in Indochina through a Jesuit preacher named Father Alexander de Rhodes. The Jesuits, characterized by a sincere desire to spread the Catholic message, sent missionaries around the world, including Asia and South America. French colonization of Indochina, however, began in the 1870's following the creation of the Third French Republic. Their intent, however, was to acquire resources, not to spread the Catholic message. Decades passed before Indochina became a valuable portion of the French Empire. The French developed rubber colonies in Indochina which proved to be extremely valuable (rubber was a precious commodity of the time). By the 1920's, French Indochina became the largest rubber producer in the world, creating a valuable industry for the French that hired 80,000 Indochinese. Unrest grew in Indochina, however, as many inhabitants decried poor working conditions and their inferior status compared to the French living in the region. In response, the French significantly improved the plantations, making working conditions more tolerable. In addition, the French created opportunities for the Indochinese to receive a French education. These advances placated the unrest of the Indochinese for a time, but desires for independence soon enveloped the country, creating a turbulent situation for the French. Meanwhile, a Vietnamese nationalist named

Ho Chi Minh catapulted himself onto the world stage in the name of Vietnamese independence.

Born in 1890, Ho Chi Minh traveled to France where he received a Western education and involved himself with the French Socialist Party. In the 1920's he ventured to Russia where his communist/socialist ideology continued to develop. He even served as a Comintern agent (International Communist Advocate) during his time in Russia. These sojourns helped cement his growing nationalist ideas as well as his communist leanings. In 1941 he returned to French Indochina to lead a Vietnamese independence movement known as the Vietminh. While the organization was not technically a Communist entity (progressive nationalist), the leadership of the Vietminh contained embers of the Indochinese Communist Party. The French, aware of Minh's affiliation with Communism, grew concerned with a possible communist revolution in the region. The Second World War prohibited any decreased tension between the French and the Vietminh; the Japanese wrested control from the French Vichy government in early 1945, asserting Bao Dai as emperor of the region, an act that would last only until the end of the war in August. The Vietminh, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, continued to grow in number during the war. After the war, the Japanese surrender created significant issues for the Allies, though it did eliminate Japanese from the region, which greatly relieved the Indochinese. British troops entered Indochina to organize the surrender of the Japanese, while the Free French tried to bring control back to the region. As tens of thousands of British troops entered Indochina, Ho Chi Minh declared independence for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). The British did not want to entangle themselves in a French conflict and quickly left the region. The French responded to the Vietminh with violence, and the country plunged into war. The year 1946 marked a turning point for French activity in Indochina, a subject which will be addressed later. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Great Britain and the United States drastically increased their involvement.

Great Britain maintained a vast but shrinking colonial empire well into the twentieth century with Malaya and Burma serving as the most profitable colonies for the British in Southeast Asia. Independence movements like those in Vietnam quickly spread to the British colonies, creating a tenuous situation for British leadership. On the one hand, British officials constantly encouraged the French to give concessions to Minh in Vietnam. The post-war world brought new opportunities for previously colonized countries to create their own governments, and the British understood this desire for self-government. Democracy needed to be the hallmark of the post-war world. The problem for British officials, however, was the post-war conditions in both Malaya and Burma. Glenn Abbey, an American diplomat in Burma, wrote to Secretary of State James Byrnes in 1946 about the situation the British faced. Though British and American leaders desired independence for Burma, the country, decimated by the war, was simply not ready for such responsibility. The economic situation simply had too much to balance. If Burma failed, the whole Asiatic region stood at risk for destabilization. In addition, Abbey showed concern for possible Communist intervention, "Unless the new Government can get off to a good start economically... [it] will be subjected to infiltrations of totalitarian methods." The same fears dictated the Western approach to Malaya, where the Communist threat was more prominent.

In Malaya, British officials continued to monitor both the Soviet Union and Communist elements of China for any possible influence there. The situation in Indochina/Vietnam worried the British. While they knew independence would inevitably come for Malaya, officials were concerned about the potential Communist influence. In turn, the British slowed their approach to independence due to the economic importance of the colony and the Communist threat to the region. Britain desperately needed the production power of Malaya to emerge from its dilapidated economic state, but a prolonged colonialism could create more unrest. Malaya provided the British with precious quantities of rubber and tin, creating industries that the British could not afford to lose. Officials understood the Malayan people wanted more independence, and like what was occurring in French Indochina, a refusal could drive nationalist groups to Communism. In response, Britain relinquished power to the Malaysians. They gave them a new constitution in 1948 while reiterating that full independence would not come “until the communist insurrection had been liquidated.” Malaya continued to play an important part in post-war Britain for the next decade.

The United States held no colonies in Southeast Asia but, after defeating Japan, they inherited an equally demanding and delicate process: the rehabilitation of Japan. In many ways, Japan would determine the success or failure of the Allies in Southeast Asia. The United States fought the Japanese with little assistance from her other Allies, giving US officials the directive in the post-war policy toward Japan. Almost immediately, US officials developed a plan for its post-war activities in Japan. Two significant objectives defined their efforts in Japan: 1) purging Japanese nationalists who led the country into war, and 2) creating an anti-communist state driven by capitalism. The United States faced demilitarization as its first obstacle in Japan. After the purging of nearly 200,000 ultranationalists from public service, the US focused on bringing democracy to Japan, the only true method of demilitarization in the minds of many US officials. Such extreme purges, however, created an unstable political landscape in Japan, leaving the nation with few experienced politicians.

George Atcheson served as the political advisor to Japan in 1946 and wrote a confidential report to President Truman about the developing political situation in Japan. Four main political parties arose during the “democratization phase” following the major purges. The Japanese quickly developed Progressive, Liberal, Social Democrat, and Communist Parties. Although the presence of a Communist party worried Atcheson to some degree, he worried more about the development of democracy in Japan. Democracy remained a young political theory in Japan, and he recognized the inseparable relationship between economics and politics at this time in Japanese history. Japan suffered greatly during the war, enduring bombings that decimated their industrial capabilities. If democracy, as introduced by the Americans, failed to quickly produce significant economic output, the Japanese may turn to other avenues for provision. Atcheson referred to those other avenues as “extremism of types we do not desire,” meaning Soviet Communism. Two other American diplomats bitterly disagreed over the Communist threat to post-war Japan. John Davies, First Secretary of the Embassy in the Soviet Union, wrote in a 1946 memorandum that the Soviet Union disapproved of American policy directives in Japan, and Soviet policy toward Japan was specifically designed to prevent the development of friendly relations between the

United States and Japan. This information seemed consistent with the advice given by George Kennan concerning Soviet policy toward the US. Davies further warned, "If we (United States) withdraw from Japan without having assured ourselves of a favored position there, Japan may in all probability sooner or later be captured by the Soviet Union."

Such a statement evoked a spirited reaction from fellow diplomat John K. Emmerson, Assistant Chief of the Division of Japanese Affairs. He disagreed with the assertions of Davies, arguing that the Soviet Union posed an insignificant threat to Japan. Emmerson feared an ideological battle would doom Japan. He wanted to create a Japan dominated by neither the US nor the Soviet Union. A policy based upon a non-existent Communist threat might damage that possibility. Robert Fearey of the Office of the Political Advisor in Japan held a similar belief to that of Emmerson, but still acknowledged the Communist threat. As of April 1946, the Japanese were overwhelmingly pro-American and anti-communist, Fearey stated. Such an atmosphere could change, however, if the economic situation did not soon improve in Japan. American officials realized that economic development remained crucial to the ultimate success of the rehabilitation of Japan. By 1948, Congress appropriated over \$100 million for economic development in Japan. The decision was further influenced by the increasingly bleak situation in China.

The Chinese Civil War officially commenced in 1927, but hostilities remained checked throughout the Second World War because of the Japanese occupation of China. The civil war pitted government forces under the control of Chang Kai-Shek (Kuomintang) against the Communist forces of Mao Zedong (Communist Party of China) for control of the Chinese government. The Japanese invasion of China temporarily halted hostilities between the KMT and the CPC, focusing their attention on combatting the Japanese invaders. As soon as the war ended, however, hostilities again commenced between the two Chinese forces and continued until 1950. Stalin and Truman closely monitored the situation in China, knowing the result of the war could change the balance of power in Asia. Both leaders wanted to ensure victory for their respective allies while avoiding actual war between the two superpowers. Truman immediately faced a major issue; over 60,000 US troops remained in China to oversee the surrender of Japanese troops. Stalin did not like the idea of US troops stationed in China while the two Chinese factions engaged in active warfare. The situation left the US troops stuck in the middle, worsening the tension between the USSR and the US. Both Truman and Stalin wanted to avoid a long-term conflict in China and pressured the two sides to come to an armistice. In January 1946, the KMT and CPC agreed to allow the Communist party more power within the government, while keeping the KMT in charge for the time being. This compromise merely halted hostilities for a time and fighting soon resumed.

The US monitored the evolving situation closely, concerned about the danger a Communist China presented for the region. While the Communist leader, Mao Zedong, publicly stated that his party was "independent of Moscow," the Truman administration viewed these assertions with intense skepticism due to his well-documented adherence to Marxist-Leninism. The US had little reason to believe Zedong, but it also had little evidence that he was lying. In 1945, George Kennan communicated that the Soviets were extremely

interested in the possibility of a Communist government in China and would do what it could to ensure its success. A Communist China would drastically change the balance of power in Asia, including Southeast Asia. The US confronted a progressively desperate situation. As the war in China swung in favor of the Communist forces in 1948-49, US leaders grew increasingly concerned. The US assumed a Communist China would operate in the same way the Soviet Union did, concentrating their power to expand Communism in their immediate vicinity. Soviet support for Communist China remained strong, leaving US officials no choice but to connect the USSR and the CPC. In addition, the Plans and Operations division notified Truman that a communist China would result in Communist influence in Indochina. As 1949 wore on, the CPC gained firm control of China. Truman faced a monumental decision, one that would impact US-Chinese relations for decades.

The US was in a quandary. It could recognize the Communist government and seek to somehow build a relationship with a potentially antagonistic nation or refuse to legitimize the CPC and treat it as an outgrowth of the Soviet Union. The US government was divided about China, unlike the application of the Truman Doctrine in Europe which garnered significant support from all sides. The context of the decision on Communist China, however, was very different. Dean Acheson and other officials stood in favor of recognizing the Communist government in China, hoping such a recognition would encourage a split between the Soviets and China, or at the very least form a rift. The United States was at a point of heightened concern about communism, due in large part to the efforts of Joseph McCarthy. Truman did not want to go against popular opinion or appear weak against a legitimate communist threat to the security of the US and its Allies. He believed there was too much at stake both domestically and internationally to acknowledge the CPC. Even while the British recognized the CPC and pushed the Americans to do the same, they tempered their rebuke, knowing the necessity of American support moving forward.

Truman and his administration focused on reorienting their foreign policy approach in light of the Communist takeover of China. The Chinese had long been a “benign” friend to the US. After its fall to Communism, the US no longer had any relationship with China. The US desperately needed a friendly nation in Southeast Asia to supplement the loss suffered in China. The Truman administration wanted to create a “collective security” in the region, combining economic and military assistance, in essence, to apply the Truman Doctrine in Southeast Asia. Japan stood as the only hope for the US in Asia. Japan remained the only nation who could become a democratic stronghold that the rest of Southeast Asia could look to for support. Truman and his officials began to realize the important role Japan would play in terms of containment in the region. This “collective security” would need a stable nation with a successful economy that maintained Western connections, and Japan was the only possible location. The hope was to build up Japan to be able to assist other nations in Southeast Asia economically, together warding off Communist influence. US foreign policy was firmly entrenched in preventing the spread of Communism both in Europe and Southeast Asia. Its goal was to create a Southeast Asia united against communism on its own, only utilizing Western assistance when necessary. This further development of containment-based foreign policy came in the midst of a second flourishing Communist revolution, this time in Vietnam.

While the US was firmly committed in Japan by 1948-49, the same could not be said for the US in Vietnam. The French, still engaged in war against Ho Chi Minh and the Vietminh, continually appealed for US support in Vietnam. Minh claimed his government to be “the only legitimate government throughout Indochina,” which made the French appear as evil imperialists. Non-communist national groups failed to unite the Vietnamese as effectively as Minh, resulting in the massive support for the Vietminh. Where non-communist groups failed, Minh succeeded, broadening his message to include those who wanted to be free from French influence and not just communist sympathizers. Moreover, the French treatment of the Indochinese in the immediate post-war period pushed many inhabitants from “nonviolent reformism to advocacy of radical revolution.” Although Ho painted the French as imperialists, French leaders saw Minh and his Vietminh as a roadblock to their goals for the region, not a legitimate threat to French sovereignty. The potential connection to Communism, however, did concern many. French officials remained convinced that the Vietnamese nationalists under Minh were using nationalism as a guise for Soviet-inspired Communism in Indochina, although corroborating evidence for such claims was lacking at the time. Such a claim, no doubt, weighed on the mind of Truman and his advisors. Could they allow a genuine Communist threat, even a non-Soviet Communist threat, to grow in an Allied controlled colony?

With the French requesting for assistance notwithstanding, the US continued to be hesitant and nonreactive. It was clear that Truman wanted the Vietnam problem to remain a French issue, though the potential communist threat made complete non-involvement nearly impossible. Further muddling the situation, the American Ambassador in France, Jefferson Caffrey, wrote to the Secretary of State in 1947. Caffrey, a highly respected diplomat, reminded the Secretary of “Ho’s long and prominent connection with world Communism,” which slowly came to the attention of the French. If Minh did succeed, which Caffrey considered a high possibility, Vietnam would certainly become Communist. The French were fighting a battle destined for failure. History showed, he explained, “how [a] relatively small, but well-trained and determined, minority can take over power in an area where democratic traditions are weak.” Caffrey, along with persistent requests from the French government, presented Truman with an ultimatum: either assist the French and preserve the status quo, or see Vietnam fall to Communism while the French lose a valuable colony, severely damage US-French relations, and potentially threaten European recovery and security in Southeast Asia.

As the 1940’s ended, the Truman administration faced a crisis in Southeast Asia, specifically in Vietnam. The US government needed to take a definitive position on the French efforts in Vietnam; it could no longer remain “neutral.” Whatever the US decided to do, it would differ greatly from the approach it took with the Dutch in Indonesia. From 1945-1949, US policy used a hardline approach toward Dutch Indonesia by attempting to force the Dutch out of their colonial holding. The US government pressed the Dutch on multiple occasions, even threatening to pull financial aid for the Netherlands if they refused to work toward independence in Indonesia. Communism did not threaten Indonesia as it did Vietnam, which allowed the US to push the Dutch harder toward independence. Allied officials did not need to worry about a free Indonesia becoming Communist because Communism did not have a foothold in the country. Most importantly, the Netherlands

contributed less to European recovery than did the French; the US could not afford to lose valuable and essential French assistance for the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan in Europe. The US approach to Vietnam was delicate given the relationship between the US, France, and European economic recovery/communist containment.

As the French worked to establish Bao Dai (former emperor under the Japanese occupation of Indochina) as the leader of the independent State of Vietnam, the US position began to take shape. Vietnam, in contrast to Indonesia, was key to stability in Southeast Asia, as well as for economic stability for France. Economically, Vietnam remained extremely valuable for a still recovering France. The colony still held \$2 billion in French investments, mainly in rice and rubber, commodities it could scarcely afford to give up given its importance to the recovery of Western Europe. Politically, Vietnam became an “important link in the US defensive perimeter” against communism in Southeast Asia. This was due in large part to two assumptions made by US officials: 1) China was looking to expand its Communist influence either through arms/aid to groups like the Vietminh, or directly to Minh, and 2) the rest of Southeast Asia would be directly threatened if Vietnam fell to Communism. While theoretically the US could allow France to handle the situation on its own, potential Communist containment took precedence. Historical American disapproval for colonialism was pitted against communist containment and friendship with the most important US ally in continental Europe.

In 1948, the US made its first move toward intervention in Vietnam. In August, the government assisted the French in Vietnam under the pretext of “anti-communism.” Though, some US officials balked at such an offer, given the indiscernible link between Minh and Moscow. No thoughtful official doubted Minh’s communism, however, in light of his professed Communist views and connections with the French Communist Party, the Indochinese Communist Party, the USSR, and Communist China. Some officials pleaded with Truman to listen to Minh and seek some kind of compromise between the French and the Vietminh. This was never seriously considered, however, due to Truman’s policy to not acknowledge Communist governments or work with them. Archimedes Patti, an Office of Strategic Services (OSS) agent in Vietnam, argued that had the Truman administration treated Ho better and treated him more like a nationalist and less like a communist, conflict could have been avoided. The suggestion, however, ignores the volatile nature of Southeast Asia and the risk associated with such an assumption. Also, the decision would have alienated and angered the French, hindering European recovery, which was the US government’s primary foreign policy concern in the immediate post-war years.

Conclusion

Eventually, the National Security Council (NSC) prompted Truman to finalize American intervention in Vietnam. The Council, created by Truman in 1947, served as the principle avenue used by the President to make foreign policy decisions. The goal of the Council was to help organize and synthesize data to present the President with all relevant information about foreign policy matters. Its goal was not to be a powerful, all-encompassing organization acting on its own prerogative. Rather, it allowed Truman (and future

Presidents) to utilize all the agencies at his disposal to come to the best possible conclusions. An NSC report written in December 1949 about the situation in Southeast Asia cemented Truman's decision for American involvement in Vietnam. The report suggested three basic objectives the US must meet in Southeast Asia: 1) develop military power in non-Communist states in Southeast Asia for security, 2) work for the gradual reduction of Soviet influence in the region, and 3) prevent "power relationships" that would challenge the security of the US (or its Allies). The first point carried the most weight in the context of Vietnam. The French offered an alternative to Ho and his communist/nationalist Vietminh in Bao Dai. Dai was the "non-Communist force" available in Vietnam. This approach allowed the US to support an alternative to a Communist organization, while supporting French wishes in the region. Additionally, the NSC suggested that the US work toward "resolving the colonial-nationalist conflict in such a way as to satisfy the fundamental demands of the nationalist movement while at the same time minimizing the strain on colonial powers who are our Western allies." Such a plan would support both the nationalist, non-communist movement in Vietnam, and the French who were desperate to find an alternative to Ho Chi Minh.

Ambassador Caffrey indicated that expressed support for the proposed Bao Dai government, though risky, would increase the likelihood of success in the long term. Failure of the government would inevitably hurt the world perception of US power, but no alternative solution existed that satisfied all foreign policy objectives stated by Truman and his advisors. Some officials, like Charles Reed, Consul to Saigon, disagreed with the potential backing of the French because he was not confident the French would maintain their commitments to the extent they claimed. Dean Acheson favored the perspective of Reed, stating that no amount of American support could amount to any success "unless it can rally the support of the people." The world situation, however, prompted the final decision. Communist movements posed a significant threat in Czechoslovakia, and China was firmly entrenched in Communism. The US could not bear the loss of the Southeast Asia to Communism neither the loss of an essential ally in France. In February 1950, the US finally declared recognition of the Bao Dai government in Vietnam and committed to the military and economic assistance of Southeast Asia by March of that year, totaling \$15 million. Acheson, not completely in favor, reasoned such a declaration would communicate "displeasure with Communist tactics" and hopefully embolden other nationalist, non-communist groups in the region. In less than five years, the US radically altered their approach to Southeast Asia. The Truman administration moved from "strict noninvolvement to unconditional support of the French" in an effort to accomplish the many foreign policy objectives set throughout Europe, Asia, and domestically. The US remained entrenched in Vietnam for the next two decades.

The Truman administration came to power in a volatile time and faced an increasingly complex, multifaceted foreign policy landscape. Historians criticize Truman for his belief in American superiority and his perceived ignorance toward compromise in certain situations, specifically his treatment of Communist China. While Truman could have more seriously considered recognition of a communist China, such a decision would have alienated many Congressman and officials in the US, jeopardizing the rehabilitation of Europe and Japan in the process. McCarthyism was in full swing as 1950 dawned, creating

hesitation for any alliance with Communist groups, much less a communist nation. Additionally, many historians critical towards Truman forget the strides made by the Truman administration throughout the Pacific. His administration helped bring independence to Indonesia, Burma, and Ceylon, facts sadly overlooked due to the ultimate failure of his containment policy of Indochina. In the end, the Truman administration faced a nearly impossible situation in Vietnam. It could not afford to alienate the French by remaining “neutral” in Southeast Asia because France played too large of a role in European Recovery and communist containment. Thus, American involvement in Vietnam was established in order to solidify the cooperation of the French in European recovery. While the US sought to satisfy its other foreign policy objectives in Southeast Asia, Japan and Europe, a non-communist, friendly Vietnam played an essential role. The origins of American involvement in Vietnam must be understood in that context.

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