CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Vietnam: Entry into the Morass; Truman and Eisenhower

It all began with the best of intentions. For two decades after the end of the Second World War, America had taken the lead in building a new international order out of the fragments of a shattered world. It had rehabilitated Europe and restored Japan, faced down Communist expansionism in Greece, Turkey, Berlin, and Korea, entered into its first peacetime alliances, and launched a program of technical assistance to the developing world. The countries under the American umbrella were enjoying peace, prosperity, and stability.

In Indochina, however, all the previous patterns of America's involvement abroad were shattered. For the first time in America's twentieth-century international experience, the direct, almost causal, relationship

the nation had always enjoyed between its values and its achievements began to fray. The too universal application of their values caused Americans to begin questioning those values and why they should have brought them into Vietnam in the first place. A chasm opened between the Americans' belief in the exceptional nature of their national experience and the compromises and ambiguities inherent in the geopolitics of containing communism. In the crucible of Vietnam, American exceptionalism turned on itself. American society did not debate, as others might have, the practical shortcomings of its policies but America's worthiness to pursue *any* international role. It was this aspect of the Vietnam debate that produced wounds which have proved so painful and so difficult to heal.

Rarely have the consequences of a nation's actions turned out to be so at variance with their original intent. In Vietnam, America lost track of the basic principle of foreign policy that Richelieu had put forward three centuries earlier: ". . . the thing that is to be supported and the force that is to support it should stand in geometrical proportion to each other" (see chapter 3). A geopolitical approach geared to an analysis of national interest would have differentiated between what was strategically significant and what was peripheral. It would have asked why America had thought it safe to stand by in 1948, when the communists conquered the huge prize of China, yet identified its national security with a much smaller Asian country that had not been independent for 150 years and had never been independent in its current borders.

When, in the nineteenth century, Bismarck, the arch-practitioner of *Realpolitik,* found his two closest allies, Austria and Russia, at loggerheads over the turmoil in the Balkans, which lay a few hundred miles from Germany's frontiers, he made it clear that Germany would not go to war over Balkan issues; to Bismarck, the Balkans were, in his own words, not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier. The United States did not base its calculations on a similar algebra. In the nineteenth century, President John Quincy Adams, a shrewd foreign policy practitioner, had warned his countrymen against venturing abroad in pursuit of "distant monsters." Yet the Wilsonian approach to foreign policy permitted no distinction to be made among the monsters to be slain. Universalist in its approach to world order, Wilsonianism did not lend itself to an analysis of the relative importance of various countries. America was obliged to fight for what was right, regardless of local circumstances, and independent of geopolitics.

During the course of the twentieth century, one president after another proclaimed that America had no "selfish" interests; that its principal, if not its only, international goal was universal peace and progress. In this

spirit, Truman, in his inaugural address of January 20, 1949, had grandly committed his country to the objective of a world in which "all nations and all peoples are free to govern themselves as they see fit. . . ." No purely national interest would be pursued: "We have sought no territory. We have imposed our will on none. We have asked for no privileges we would not extend to others." The United States would "strengthen freedom-loving nations against the dangers of aggression" by providing "military advice and equipment to free nations which will cooperate with us in the maintenance of peace and security."[1] The freedom of every single independent nation had become the national objective, irrespective of those nations' strategic importance to the United States.

In his two inaugural addresses, Eisenhower took up the same theme in even more exalted language. He described a world in which thrones had been toppled, vast empires had been swept away, and new nations had emerged. Amidst all this turmoil, destiny had entrusted America with the charge to defend freedom unconstrained by geographic considerations or calculations of the national interest. Indeed, Eisenhower implied that such calculations ran counter to the American value system, in which all nations and peoples are treated equally: "Conceiving the defense of freedom, like freedom itself, to be one and indivisible, we hold all continents and peoples in equal regard and honor. We reject any insinuation that one race or another, one people or another, is in any sense inferior or expendable."[2]

Eisenhower described America's foreign policy as not being like that of any other nation; it was an extension of America's moral responsibilities rather than an outgrowth of a balancing of risks and rewards. The test of America's policies was not so much feasibility—which was taken for granted—as worthiness: "For history does not long entrust the care of freedom to the weak or the timid."[3] Leadership was its own reward; America's benefit was defined as the privilege of helping others to help themselves. Altruism so conceived could have no political or geographic bounds.

In his only inaugural address, Kennedy carried the theme of America's selflessness and duty to the world even further. Proclaiming his generation to be the linear descendant of the world's first democratic revolution, he pledged his Administration, in soaring language, not to "permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world. Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty."[4]

The sweeping American global commitment was not related to any specific national-security interest and exempted no country or region of the world. Kennedy's eloquent peroration was the reverse of Palmerston's dictum, that Great Britain had no friends, only interests; America, in the pursuit of liberty, had no interests, only friends.

By the time of Lyndon B. Johnson's inaugural on January 20, 1965, conventional wisdom had culminated in the proposition that America's foreign commitments, springing organically from its democratic system of government, had erased altogether the distinction between domestic and international responsibilities. For America, Johnson asserted, no stranger was beyond hope: "Terrific dangers and troubles that we once called 'foreign' now constantly live among us. If American lives must end, and American treasure be spilled, in countries that we barely know, then that is the price that change has demanded of conviction and of our enduring covenant."[5]

Much later, it became fashionable to cite such statements as examples of the arrogance of power, or as the hypocritical pretexts for America's quest for domination. Such facile cynicism misreads the essence of America's political faith, which is at once "naïve" and draws from that naïveté the impetus for extraordinary endeavors. Most countries go to war to resist concrete, definable threats to their security. In this century, America has gone to war—from World War I to the Persian Gulf War of 1991—largely on behalf of what it perceived as moral obligations to resist aggression or injustice as the trustee of collective security.

This commitment was especially pronounced among the generation of American leaders who had in their youth witnessed the tragedy of Munich. Burned into their psyches was the lesson that failure to resist aggression—wherever and however it occurred—guarantees that it will have to be resisted under much worse circumstances later on. From Cordell Hull onward, every American secretary of state echoed this theme. It was the one point on which Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles agreed.[6] Geopolitical analysis of the specific dangers posed by the communist conquest of a distant country was deemed subordinate to the twin slogans of resisting aggression in the abstract and preventing the further spread of communism. The communist victory in China had reinforced the conviction of American policymakers that no further communist expansion could be tolerated.

Policy documents and official statements of the period show that this conviction went largely unchallenged. In February 1950, four months before the start of the Korean conflict, NSC document 64 had concluded that Indochina was "a key area of South East Asia and is under immediate

threat."[7] The memorandum marked the debut of the so-called Domino Theory, which predicted that, if Indochina fell, Burma and Thailand would soon follow, and that "the balance of Southeast Asia would then be in grave hazard."[8]

In January 1951, Dean Rusk declared that "to neglect to pursue our present course to the utmost of our ability would be disastrous to our interests in Indochina and, consequently, in the rest of Southeast Asia."[9] In April of the year before, NSC document 68 had concluded that the global equilibrium was at stake in Indochina: ". . . any substantial further extension of the area under the domination of the Kremlin would raise the possibility that no coalition adequate to confront the Kremlin with greater strength could be assembled."[10]

But was it really true, as the document implied, that every communist gain extended the area controlled by the Kremlin—especially given the experience of Titoism? And was it conceivable that the addition of Indochina to the communist camp could, by itself, overthrow the global balance of power? Since these questions were not raised, America never came to grips with the geopolitical reality that, in Southeast Asia, it was reaching the point where global commitment was turning into overextension—precisely as Walter Lippmann had cautioned earlier (see chapter 18).

There were in fact vast differences in the nature of the threat. In Europe, the principal threat emanated from the Soviet superpower. In Asia, the threat to American interests came from secondary powers which were at best surrogates of the Soviet Union and over which Soviet control was —or should have been understood to be—questionable. In reality, as the Vietnam War evolved, America came to fight the surrogate of a surrogate, each of which deeply distrusted the respective senior partner. In the American analysis, the global equilibrium was under assault by North Vietnam, assumed to be controlled from Beijing, which, in turn, was conceived to be controlled by Moscow. In Europe, America was defending historic states; in Indochina, America was dealing with societies that, in their present dimensions, were building states for the first time. The European nations had long-established traditions of how to cooperate in the defense of the balance of power. In Southeast Asia, statehood was just emerging, the concept of the balance of power was foreign, and there was no precedent of cooperation among the existing states.

These fundamental differences between the geopolitics of Europe and Asia, together with America's interests in each, were submerged in the universalist, ideological American approach to foreign policy. The Czech coup, the Berlin blockade, the testing of a Soviet atomic bomb, the com-

munist victory in China, and the communist attack on South Korea were all lumped together by America's leaders into a single global threat—indeed, a centrally controlled global conspiracy. *Realpolitik* would have sought to limit the Korean War to the narrowest possible dimension; America's Manichean view of the conflict worked in the opposite direction. Endowing Korea with a global significance, Truman had coupled his dispatch of American troops with an announcement of a significant increase in military aid to France in its own war against the communist guerrillas in Indochina (then called the Vietminh), and had moved the Seventh Fleet to protect Taiwan. American policymakers drew an analogy between Germany's and Japan's simultaneous assaults in Europe and Asia in the Second World War, and Moscow's and Beijing's maneuvers in the 1950s, the Soviet Union replacing Germany, and China standing in for Japan. By 1952, a third of the French expenditures in Indochina were being subsidized by the United States.

America's entry into Indochina introduced a whole new moral issue. NATO defended democracies; the American occupation of Japan had imported democratic institutions to that nation; the Korean War had been fought to turn back an assault on the independence of small nations. In Indochina, however, the case for containment was initially cast in almost exclusively geopolitical terms, making it all the more difficult to incorporate into the prevailing American ideology. For one thing, the defense of Indochina ran head-on against America's tradition of anticolonialism. Technically still French colonies, the states of Indochina were neither democracies nor even independent. Although, in 1950, France had transformed its three colonies of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia into the "Associated States of the French Union," this new designation stopped well short of independence because France feared that, if it granted full sovereignty, it could do no less for its three North African possessions—Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.

American anticolonial sentiment during World War II had focused on Indochina with particular intensity. Roosevelt had disliked de Gaulle and, for that matter, was no great admirer of France, especially after its collapse in 1940. Throughout the war, Roosevelt had toyed with the idea of turning Indochina into a United Nations trusteeship,[11] though he began muting this scheme at Yalta. And it was abandoned by the Truman Administration, which was eager for French support in the formation of the Atlantic Alliance.

By 1950, the Truman Administration had decided that the security of the free world required Indochina to be kept out of communist hands—which, in practice, meant bending America's anticolonial principles by

supporting the French struggle in Indochina. Truman and Acheson saw no other choice because the Joint Chiefs of Staff had concluded that the American armed forces were stretched to the limit by simultaneous commitments to NATO and Korea and that none could be spared for the defense of Indochina—even if it were invaded by China.[12] Hence they saw no choice except to rely on the French army, which would have to resist the Indochinese communists with American financial and logistical support. After victory in that struggle, America intended to reconcile its strategic and anticolonial convictions by pressing for independence.

As it turned out, America's initial commitment to Indochina in 1950 established the pattern for its future involvement: large enough to get America entangled, not significant enough to prove decisive. In the early stages of the quagmire, this was largely the result of ignorance about the actual conditions and the near-impossibility of conducting operations through two layers of French colonial authorities, as well as whatever local authorities the so-called Associated States of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were permitted to establish.

Not wanting to be tarred as a party to colonialism, both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the State Department sought to protect their country's moral flank by pressing France to pledge eventual independence.[13] This delicate balancing act finally landed in the lap of the State Department, which expressed its awareness of the complexities by naming its Indochinese program "Operation Eggshell." The label, unfortunately, conveyed a far greater understanding of the predicament than did the content of its program advance the solution. The idea was to prod France in the direction of granting independence to Indochina while urging it to continue waging the anticommunist war.[14] No one explained why France should risk lives in a war designed to make its presence in the region dispensable.

Dean Acheson described the dilemma with characteristic pungency. On the one hand, he said, the United States might "lose out" if it continued to support France's "old fashioned colonial attitudes"; on the other, if pressed too far, France might simply abdicate altogether with the argument: "All right, take over the whole country. We don't want it."[15] Acheson's "solution" turned out to be a restatement of the contradictions of America's policy: increasing American aid to Indochina while urging France and its chosen local ruler, Bao Dai, to "get the nationalists on his side."[16] He put forward no plan for resolving this dilemma.

By the time the Truman Administration prepared to leave office, evasion had matured into official policy. In 1952, a National Security Council document formalized the Domino Theory and gave it a sweeping character. Describing a military attack on Indochina as a danger "inherent in

the existence of a hostile and aggressive Communist China,"[17] it argued that the loss of even a single Southeast Asian country would lead "to relatively swift submission to or an alignment with communism by the remainder. Furthermore, an alignment with communism of the rest of Southeast Asia and India, and in the longer term, of the Middle East (with the possible exceptions of at least Pakistan and Turkey) would in all probability progressively follow."[18]

Obviously, if that estimate was realistic, such wholesale collapse was bound to endanger the security and stability of Europe as well, and to "make it extremely difficult to prevent Japan's eventual accommodation to Communism."[19] The NSC memorandum offered no analysis of why the collapse had to be so automatic or so global. Above all, it failed to explore the possibility of establishing a firebreak at the borders of Malaya and Thailand, which had far greater stability than Indochina—as favored by the British leaders. Nor was the perception of the long-range danger to Europe shared by America's European allies, which, in the years to come, consistently refused to participate in the defense of Indochina.

The analysis that a potential disaster was brewing in Indochina was followed by a remedy that was not even remotely equal to the problem —indeed, in this case, it was no remedy at all. For stalemate in Korea had destroyed—at least for a time—America's willingness to fight another land war in Asia. "We could not have another Korea, we could not put ground forces into Indochina," argued Acheson. It would be "futile and a mistake to defend Indochina in Indochina."[20] This cryptic remark seemed to mean that, if Indochina had indeed become the hinge of the global equilibrium, and if China was indeed the source of the trouble, America would have to attack China itself, at least with air and naval power—precisely what Acheson had resolutely resisted with respect to Korea. It also left open the question of how America should respond if the French and their Indochinese allies were defeated by indigenous communist forces rather than by the entry of the Chinese into the war. If Hanoi was a Beijing surrogate, and Beijing a proxy of Moscow, as both the Executive Branch and the Congress believed, the United States would be forced to choose in earnest between its geopolitical and its anticolonial convictions.

We know today that, soon after winning its civil war, Communist China came to consider the Soviet Union as the most serious threat to its independence, and that, historically, Vietnam has had the same fear of China. Therefore, a communist victory in Indochina in the 1950s would, in all likelihood, have accelerated all these rivalries. That too would have presented a challenge to the West, but not that of a centrally managed global conspiracy.

On the other hand, the arguments of the NSC memorandum were not

as shallow as they later appeared. Even in the absence of a central conspiracy, and for all the West knew at the time, the Domino Theory might *nevertheless* have been valid. Singapore's savvy and thoughtful Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, clearly thought so, and he has usually been proven right. In the immediate postwar era, communism still possessed substantial ideological dynamism. A demonstration of the bankruptcy of its economic management was another generation away. Many in the democracies, and especially in the newly independent countries, considered the communist world to be poised to surpass the capitalist world in industrial capacity. The governments of many of the newly independent countries were fragile and threatened by domestic insurrection. At the very moment the NSC memorandum was prepared, a communist guerrilla war was being waged in Malaya.

Washington policymakers had good reason to be concerned about the conquest of Indochina by a movement which had already engulfed Eastern Europe and taken over China. Regardless of whether communist expansion was centrally organized, it seemed to possess enough momentum to sweep the fragile new nations of Southeast Asia into the anti-Western camp. The real question was not whether some dominoes might fall in Southeast Asia, which was likely, but whether there might not be better places in the region to draw the line—for instance, around countries where the political and security elements were more in harness, such as in Malaya and Thailand. And surely the conclusion of the NSC policy statement—that, if Indochina were to fall, even Europe and Japan might come to believe in the irreversibility of the communist tide and adjust accordingly—went much too far.

Truman's legacy to his successor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, was an annual military-assistance program to Indochina of some $200 million (somewhat over $1 billion in 1993 dollars) and a strategic theory in search of a policy. The Truman Administration had not been obliged to face the potential gap between its strategic doctrine and its moral convictions, or to confront the necessity of making a choice between the geopolitical rationale and American capabilities: Eisenhower was left with the responsibility of dealing with the first challenge; Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon with the second.

The Eisenhower Administration did not question America's commitment to the security of Indochina, which it had inherited. It sought to reconcile its strategic doctrine and its moral convictions by stepping up pressures for reform in Indochina. In May 1953—four months after taking the oath of office—Eisenhower urged the American Ambassador to France, Douglas Dillon, to press the French to appoint new leaders with

authority to "win victory" in Indochina, and at the same time to make "clear and unequivocal public announcements, repeated as often as may be desirable," that independence would be granted "as soon as victory against the Communists had been won."[21] In July, Eisenhower complained to Senator Ralph Flanders that the French government's commitment to independence was made "in an obscure and roundabout fashion —instead of boldly, forthrightly and repeatedly."[22]

For France, the issue had already gone far beyond political reform. Its forces in Indochina were enmeshed in a frustrating guerrilla war, with which they had no experience whatsoever. In a conventional war with established front lines, superior firepower usually carries the day. By contrast, a guerrilla war is generally not fought from fixed positions, and the guerrilla army hides among the population. A conventional war is about control of territory; a guerrilla war is about the security of the population. Since the guerrilla army is not tied to the defense of any particular territory, it is in a position to determine the field of battle to a considerable extent and to regulate the casualties of *both* sides.

In a conventional war, a success rate in battle of 75 percent would guarantee victory. In a guerrilla war, protecting the population only 75 percent of the time ensures defeat. One hundred percent security in 75 percent of the country is far better than 75 percent security in 100 percent of the country. If the defending forces cannot bring about nearly perfect security for the population—at least in the area they consider essential—the guerrilla is bound to win sooner or later.

The basic equation of guerrilla war is as simple as it is difficult to execute: the guerrilla army wins as long as it can keep from losing; the conventional army is bound to lose unless it wins decisively. Stalemate almost never occurs. Any country engaging itself in a guerrilla war must be prepared for a long struggle. The guerrilla army can continue hit-and-run tactics for a long time even with greatly diminished forces. A clear-cut victory is very rare; successful guerrilla wars typically peter out over a long period of time. The most notable examples of victory over guerrilla forces took place in Malaya and Greece, where the defending forces succeeded because the guerrillas were cut off from outside supply sources (in Malaya by geography, in Greece due to Tito's break with Moscow).

Neither the French nor the American army, which followed in its footsteps a decade later, ever solved the riddle of guerrilla war. Both fought the only kind of war they understood and for which they had been trained and equipped—classical, conventional warfare based on clearly demarcated front lines. Both armies, relying on superior firepower,

strove for a war of attrition. Both saw that strategy turned against them by an enemy who, fighting in his own country, could exhaust them with his patience and generate domestic pressures to end the conflict. Casualties kept mounting while criteria to define progress remained elusive.

France conceded defeat more rapidly than America, because its armed forces were spread more thinly in their effort to hold all of Vietnam with a third of the forces America would eventually commit to defending half of the country. France was being whipsawed as America would be a decade later: whenever it concentrated its forces around population centers, the communists would dominate most of the countryside; when it attempted to move out to protect the countryside, the communists would attack the towns and the forts, one by one.

Something about Vietnam consistently blighted the reasoning power of foreigners who ventured into it. Bizarrely, the French Vietnam War came to a climax at a road junction called Dien Bien Phu, which was located in the remote northwestern corner of Vietnam, near the Laotian border. France had placed an elite force there in the hope of luring the communists into a pitched battle of attrition, and, in the process, maneuvered itself into a no-win situation. If the communists chose to ignore the French deployment, these forces would be wasted in a position far from areas of any strategic consequence. If the communists took the bait, their sole motive had to be the belief that they were within sight of decisive victory. France had reduced its options to irrelevance or defeat.

The French vastly underestimated the toughness and the ingenuity of their opponents—as the Americans would do a decade later. On March 13, 1954, the North Vietnamese launched an all-out attack on Dien Bien Phu which, already in its initial assault, overran two outlying forts that were supposed to dominate the high ground. They did so by using artillery which they were not even thought to possess, and which had been supplied by China in the aftermath of the Korean War. From then on, it was only a matter of time before the remainder of the French force would be ground down. Exhausted by what had become a war of attrition, and seeing little purpose in fighting only to have to withdraw from Indochina under American pressure, a new French government accepted a Soviet proposal to hold a conference on Indochina to begin that April in Geneva.

The imminence of this conference caused the communists to step up their military pressures and forced the Eisenhower Administration to choose between its theories and its possibilities. The fall of Dien Bien Phu would oblige France to yield a substantial portion, if not all, of Vietnam to the communists. Yet Dien Bien Phu could only be saved by a

major military escalation for which France had neither the resources nor the will. The United States would have to decide whether to back the Domino Theory with direct military action.

When the French Chief of Staff, General Paul Ely, visited Washington on March 23, Admiral Arthur Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, left him with the impression that he would recommend a massive air strike against communist positions around Dien Bien Phu—possibly including the use of nuclear weapons. Dulles, however, was far too committed to collective security to contemplate such a step without laying some diplomatic groundwork for it. In a major speech on March 29, 1954, he in effect urged collective military action to save Indochina from the communists, using the traditional argument of the anti-appeasement school—that failure to act immediately would require much more costly actions down the road:

> . . . the imposition on South East Asia of the political system of communist Russia and its Chinese communist ally by whatever means would be a grave threat to the whole free community. The United States feels that that possibility should not be passively accepted but should be met by united action. This might involve serious risks but these risks are far less than those that will face us a few years from now if we dare not be resolute today. . . .[23]

Under the banner of "United Action," Dulles proposed that a coalition composed of the United States, Great Britain, France, New Zealand, Australia, and the Associated States of Indochina be formed to stop the communist drive in Indochina. Eisenhower joined him in urging collective action, though almost certainly to thwart intervention rather than to promote it. Sherman Adams, Eisenhower's Chief of Staff, described the President's attitude this way: "Having avoided one total war with Red China the year before in Korea, when he had United Nations support, he [Eisenhower] was in no mood to provoke another one in Indochina . . . without the British and other Western allies."[24]

Eisenhower embodied that strange phenomenon of American politics by which presidents who appear to be the most guileless often turn out to be the most complex. In this sense, Eisenhower was a precursor of Ronald Reagan, for he managed to obscure extraordinary manipulative skills behind a veneer of warm affability. As he would over Suez two years later, and again over Berlin, Dulles' words implied a hard line—in this case, the Radford plan of aerial intervention or some variation of it. Eisenhower's preference was almost certainly to avoid military action alto-

gether. He knew too much about military affairs to believe that a single air strike could be decisive, and was reluctant to resort to massive retaliation (the official strategy) against China. And he had no stomach for a prolonged land war in Southeast Asia. Moreover, Eisenhower had had enough experience with coalition diplomacy to be aware of the extreme unlikelihood of United Action's being concluded in a time frame relevant to the fate of Dien Bien Phu. For Eisenhower, this no doubt provided a convenient way out, since he preferred the loss of Indochina to tainting America with the charge of being procolonial. As he wrote in an unpublished passage of his memoirs:

> . . . the standing of the United States as the most powerful of the anti-colonial powers is an asset of incalculable value to the Free World. . . . Thus it is that the moral position of the United States was more to be guarded than the Tonkin Delta, indeed than all of Indochina.[25]

Whatever their private reservations, Dulles and Eisenhower made a major effort to bring about United Action. On April 4, 1954, in a long letter, Eisenhower appealed to Churchill, who was then in his last year as Prime Minister:

> If they [France] do not see it through, and Indochina passes into the hands of the Communists, the ultimate effect on our and your global strategic position with the consequent shift in the power ratio throughout Asia and the Pacific could be disastrous and, I know, unacceptable to you and me. It is difficult to see how Thailand, Burma and Indonesia could be kept out of Communist hands. This we cannot afford. The threat to Malaya, Australia and New Zealand would be direct. The offshore island chain would be broken. The economic pressure on Japan which would be deprived of non-Communist markets and sources of food and raw material would be such, over a period of time, that it is difficult to see how Japan could be prevented from reaching an accommodation with the Communist world which would combine the manpower and natural resources of Asia with the industrial potential of Japan.[26]

Churchill, however, was not persuaded, and Eisenhower made no further effort to win him over. Devoted as he was to the "special relationship" with America, Churchill was an Englishman first and perceived more dangers in Indochina than benefits to be gained. He did not accept the proposition that the dominoes would fall quite so inexorably, or that one colonial setback would automatically lead to global catastrophe.

Churchill and Anthony Eden believed that the best place to defend Southeast Asia was at the borders of Malaya; Churchill therefore returned the noncommittal response that Eden would convey the Cabinet's decision to Dulles, who was about to leave for London. Churchill's avoidance of substance left little doubt that Great Britain was groping for ways to cushion its rejection of United Action. Had the news been favorable, Churchill would no doubt have conveyed it himself. Moreover, Eden's dislike of Dulles was proverbial. Even prior to the Secretary of State's arrival, Eden "thought it unrealistic to expect that a victor's terms could be imposed upon an undefeated enemy."[27]

On April 26, Churchill expressed his reservations personally to Admiral Radford, who was visiting London. According to the official record, Churchill warned of "war on the fringes, where the Russians were strong and could mobilize the enthusiasm of nationalist and oppressed peoples."[28] Indeed, there was no political rationale for Great Britain to become involved in a cause which Churchill described this way:

> The British people would not be easily influenced by what happened in the distant jungles of SE Asia; but they did know that there was a powerful American base in East Anglia and that war with China, who would invoke the Sino-Russian pact, might mean an assault by Hydrogen bombs on these islands.[29]

Above all, such a war would have thwarted the old warrior's great dream of his final year in office—to arrange a summit with the post-Stalin leadership "calculated to bring home to the Russians the full implications of Western strength and to impress upon them the folly of war"[30] (see chapter 20).

By now, enough time had passed that, regardless of Great Britain's decision, United Action could no longer save Dien Bien Phu, which fell on May 7 even as the diplomats were discussing Indochina in Geneva. As is often the case when collective security is invoked, United Action had turned into an alibi for doing nothing.

The debate over intervention at Dien Bien Phu showed, above all, the confusion which was beginning to descend on Vietnam policy and the growing difficulty of reconciling geopolitical analysis, strategic doctrine, and moral conviction. If it were true that a communist victory in Indochina would cause the dominoes to fall from Japan to Indonesia, as Eisenhower predicted in his letter to Churchill and in a press conference on April 7, America would have to draw the line regardless of the reaction of other countries, especially since the military contribution of the potential

participants in United Action would have been largely symbolic. Though collective action was preferable, it was surely not a precondition to the defense of the global balance, if that was indeed what was at stake. On the other hand, at about the same time that the Administration was attempting to organize collective action, it had changed its military doctrine to "massive retaliation." Proposing to strike at the source of aggression, in practice, meant that a war over Indochina would be directed against China. Yet there was no moral or political basis for air attacks against a country that was only indirectly participating in the Vietnam War and for a cause which Churchill had characterized to Radford as too peripheral and too dangerous to be sustainable for very long in Western public opinion.

Without doubt, the post-Stalinist leaders in the Kremlin would have been extremely loath in their first year of power to confront America for China's sake. However, since America's military leaders were incapable of describing either the targets or the likely outcome of massive retaliation against China (or within Indochina, for that matter), and since Indochina's independence was still only a plan, no realistic basis for intervention existed. Eisenhower wisely deferred a showdown until the various strands of the American approach could be harmonized. Unfortunately, they were still not in harmony a decade later, when America, oblivious to the vastness of the enterprise, confidently took up the task at which France had failed ignominiously.

Since both the Soviet Union and China feared American intervention, the Eisenhower/Dulles diplomacy of making implicit threats helped to bring about an outcome to the Geneva Conference that on the surface was far better than the military situation on the ground warranted. The Geneva Accords of July 1954 provided for the partitioning of Vietnam along the 17th Parallel. To leave the way open for unification, the partition was described not as a "political boundary" but as an administrative arrangement for facilitating the regrouping of military forces prior to internationally supervised elections. These were to be held within two years. All outside forces were to be withdrawn from the three Indochinese states within 300 days; foreign bases and alliances with other countries were proscribed.

Cataloguing the various provisions, however, gives a misleading impression of the formality and stringency of the Geneva Accords. There were many signatories to different parts of the agreement but no contracting parties, therefore no "collective obligations."[31] Richard Nixon later summed up the hodgepodge as follows: "Nine countries gathered at the conference and produced six unilateral declarations, three bilateral cease-fire agreements, and one unsigned declaration."[32]

What it all amounted to was a way of ending the hostilities, partitioning Vietnam, and leaving the political outcome to the future. Amateur analysts often invoke the ambiguity of such agreements as a demonstration of the confusion or the duplicity of the negotiators—a charge later leveled against the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. Yet, most of the time, ambiguous documents such as the Geneva Accords reflect reality; they settle what it is possible to settle, in the full knowledge that further refinement must await new developments. Sometimes the interlude permits a new political constellation to emerge without conflict; sometimes the conflict breaks out again, forcing each party to review its bidding.

In 1954, an uneasy stalemate developed which none of the parties was as yet in a position to break. The Soviet Union was not prepared for confrontation so soon after Stalin's death and had only marginal national interests in Southeast Asia; China feared another war with America less than a year after the end of the Korean conflict (especially in light of the new American doctrine of massive retaliation); France was in the process of withdrawing from the region; the United States lacked both a strategy and the public support for intervention; and the Vietnamese communists were not yet strong enough to continue the war without outside sources of supply.

At the same time, nothing that was achieved at the Geneva Conference changed the basic views of the protagonists. The Eisenhower Administration had not altered its conviction that Indochina was the key to the Asian —and perhaps the global—balance of power; nor had it permanently abjured military intervention, only intervention at the side of colonial France. North Vietnam had not abandoned its objective of unifying all of Indochina under communist rule, for which its leaders had been fighting for two decades. The new Soviet leadership continued to avow its commitment to the international class struggle. In terms of doctrine, China was the most radical of the communist countries, though, as was learned decades later, it generally filtered its ideological convictions through the prism of its own national interest. And China's perception of its national interest caused it to be deeply ambivalent about having a major power, even a communist one, on its southern border—the inevitable result of Indochina's unification under communist rule.

Dulles maneuvered skillfully through this thicket. Almost certainly he preferred military intervention and the destruction of communism, even in the North. For example, on April 13, 1954, he stated that the only "satisfactory" outcome would be a complete withdrawal of the communists from Indochina.[33] Instead, he found himself at a conference whose only possible outcome would be to give communist rule in North Vietnam an air of legitimacy which, in turn, would expand communist influ-

ence throughout Indochina. With all the bearing of "a puritan in a house of ill repute,"[34] Dulles tried to construct a settlement which, though "something we would have to gag about," would also be "free of the taint of French colonialism."[35] For the first time in the course of America's involvement in Vietnam, strategic analysis and moral conviction coincided. Dulles defined the American goal as assisting in "arriving at decisions which will help the nations of that area peacefully to enjoy territorial integrity and political independence under stable and free governments with the opportunity to expand their economies."[36]

The immediate difficulty, of course, was that the United States had refused to participate officially at the Geneva Conference. It tried to be both present and absent—sufficiently on the scene to uphold its principles, yet far enough to the side to avoid domestic obloquy for having to abandon some of them. America's ambiguity was best expressed in a concluding statement which declared that the United States "takes note" of the final declarations and would "refrain from the threat or the use of force to disturb them." At the same time, the statement warned that "it would view any renewal of the aggression in violation of the aforesaid arrangements with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security."[37] I know of no other instance in diplomatic history of a nation guaranteeing a settlement it has refused to sign, and about which it has expressed such strong reservations.

Dulles had not been able to prevent the communist consolidation of North Vietnam, but he hoped to prevent the dominoes from falling in the rest of Indochina. Faced by what he and Eisenhower perceived as the twin evils of colonialism and communism, he had jettisoned French colonialism and would henceforth be free to concentrate on containing communism. He viewed the virtue of Geneva to be its creation of a political framework which brought America's political and military objectives into harmony and provided the legal basis for resisting further communist moves.

For their part, the communists were preoccupied with establishing their system of government north of the 17th Parallel, a task they pursued with characteristic savagery, killing at least 50,000 people and putting another 100,000 into concentration camps. Some 80,000–100,000 communist guerrillas moved north, while 1 million North Vietnamese fled to South Vietnam, where the United States discovered in Ngo Dinh Diem a leader it thought it could support. He had an unblemished record as a nationalist; unfortunately, devotion to democracy proved not to be his forte.

Eisenhower's wise decision not to become involved in Vietnam in 1954 proved to be tactical, not strategic. After Geneva, he and Dulles remained

convinced of Indochina's decisive strategic importance. While Indochina sorted itself out, Dulles put the finishing touches on the collective security framework that had misfired earlier in the year. The Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), which came into being in September 1954, was composed, in addition to the United States, of Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and France. What it lacked was a common political objective or a means for mutual support. Indeed, the countries refusing to participate in SEATO were more significant than its members. India, Indonesia, Malaya, and Burma preferred to seek safety in neutrality, and the Geneva Accords prohibited the three Indochinese states from joining. As for America's European allies, France and Great Britain were not likely to run risks on behalf of an area from which they had so recently been ejected. Indeed, France—and to a lesser degree Great Britain—almost certainly joined SEATO in order to gain a veto over what they considered the potential for rash American actions.

The formal obligations contained in SEATO were rather nebulous. Requiring the signatories to meet a "common danger" by their "constitutional processes," the Treaty neither established criteria for defining the common danger nor assembled the machinery for common action—as NATO did. Nevertheless, SEATO served Dulles' purpose by providing a legal framework for the defense of Indochina. This is why, strangely enough, SEATO was more specific about communist aggression against the three nations of Indochina—barred from membership by the Geneva Accords—than with respect to a communist attack on the signatories. A separate protocol designated threats to Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam as being inimical to the peace and security of the signatories, in effect providing a unilateral guarantee.[38]

Everything now depended on whether the new states of Indochina, especially South Vietnam, could be turned into fully functioning nations. None of them had ever been governed as a political entity within its existing borders. Hue was the old imperial capital. The French had divided Vietnam into three regions—Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina—governed by Hanoi, Hue, and Saigon respectively. The area around Saigon and in the Mekong Delta had only been colonized by the Vietnamese relatively recently, during the nineteenth century, at about the same time that the French arrived. The existing authorities consisted of a combination of French-trained civil servants and a maze of secret societies—the so-called sects—some of which had religious affiliations, but all of which supported themselves and maintained their autonomous status by shaking down the population.

Diem, the new ruler, was the son of an official at the imperial court of

Hue. Educated in Catholic schools, he had for a few years served as an official in the colonial administration in Hanoi but resigned when the French refused to implement some of his proposed reforms. He spent the next two decades as a scholar-recluse in his own country or in exile abroad—mostly in America—refusing offers from the Japanese, the communists, and the French-supported Vietnamese leaders to participate in their various governments.

Leaders of so-called freedom movements are typically not democratic personalities; they sustain themselves through years of exile and prison with visions of the transformation they will bring about once they seize power. Humility is rarely one of their attributes; if it were, they would not be revolutionaries. Installing a government that makes its leader dispensable—the essence of democracy—strikes most of them as a contradiction in terms. Leaders of independence struggles tend to be heroes, and heroes do not generally make comfortable companions.

Diem's personality traits were compounded by the Confucian political tradition of Vietnam. Unlike democratic theory, which views truth as emerging from a clash of ideas, Confucianism maintains that truth is objective and can only be discerned by assiduous study and education of which only a rare few are thought to be capable. Its quest for truth does not treat conflicting ideas as having equal merit, the way democratic theory does. Since there is only one truth, that which is not true can have no standing or be enhanced through competition. Confucianism is essentially hierarchical and elitist, emphasizing loyalty to family, institutions, and authority. None of the societies it has influenced has yet produced a functioning pluralistic system (with Taiwan in the 1990s coming the closest).

In 1954, there was little foundation in South Vietnam for nationhood, and even less for democracy. Yet neither America's strategic assessment nor its belief that South Vietnam had to be saved by democratic reform took account of these realities. With the enthusiasm of the innocent, the Eisenhower Administration hurled itself headlong into the defense of South Vietnam against communist aggression and the task of nation-building in the name of enabling a society whose culture was vastly different from America's to maintain its newfound independence and to practice freedom in the American sense.

Dulles had urged backing Diem all along, on the ground that he was "the only horse available." In October 1954, Eisenhower made a virtue out of necessity by writing to Diem with a promise of aid contingent on standards of "performance . . . in undertaking needed reforms." American assistance would be "combined with" an independent Vietnam that was

"endowed with a strong Government . . . so responsive to the nationalist aspirations of its people" as to command both domestic and international respect.[39]

For a few years, everything seemed to fall into place. By the end of the Eisenhower Administration, the United States had given South Vietnam over $1 billion in aid; 1,500 American personnel were in South Vietnam; the United States embassy in Saigon became one of the largest missions in the world. The United States Military Advisory Group, containing 692 members, had ignored the limits on foreign military personnel established by the Geneva Accords.[40]

Against all expectations and with massive American intelligence support, Diem suppressed the secret societies, stabilized the economy, and managed to establish central control—astonishing achievements which were well received in the United States. After a visit to Vietnam in 1955, Senator Mike Mansfield reported that Diem represented "genuine nationalism" and had taken "what was a lost cause of freedom and breathed new life into it."[41] Senator John F. Kennedy endorsed the twin pillars of America's Vietnam policy, security and democracy, describing Vietnam not just as the "keystone of the arch" of security in Southeast Asia but as "a proving ground for democracy in Asia."[42]

Events soon revealed that America had been celebrating a lull in communist pressure, not a permanent achievement. America's assumption that its own unique brand of democracy was readily exportable turned out to be flawed. In the West, political pluralism had thrived among cohesive societies where a strong social consensus had been in place long enough to permit tolerance for the opposition without threatening the survival of the state. But where a nation has yet to be created, opposition may appear as a threat to national existence, especially when there is no civil society to provide a safety net. In these conditions, the temptation is strong, often overwhelming, to equate opposition with treason.

All of these tendencies become magnified in a guerrilla war. For the guerrillas' strategy is to undermine systematically whatever cohesion the governing institutions have managed to achieve. In Vietnam, guerrilla activity had never ceased, and in 1959 it moved into high gear. The guerrillas' initial goal is to prevent the consolidation of stable, legitimate institutions. Their favorite targets are the worst and the best government officials. They attack the worst in order to win popular sympathies by "punishing" corrupt or oppressive officials; and they attack the best because it is the most effective way of preventing the government from achieving legitimacy and of discouraging an effective national service.

By 1960, some 2,500 South Vietnamese officials were being assassinated

every year.[43] Only a small number of the most highly motivated, and a much larger percentage of the most corrupt, would run such risks. In the contest between nation-building and chaos, between democracy and repression, the guerrilla enjoyed a huge advantage. Even if Diem had been a reformer on the American model, it is questionable whether he could have won the unequal race between the time scale needed for reform and the time scale sufficient for bringing about chaos. To be sure, even if his country had not been enmeshed in a guerrilla war, Diem would not have proven to be a significantly more democratic leader. A mandarin, he held as a model the Confucian ruler governing by virtue, not consensus, and who achieved legitimacy, the so-called mandate of heaven, by success. Diem recoiled instinctively from the concept of a legitimate opposition, as have all Chinese-style leaders from Beijing to Singapore and nearly all of the leaders of Southeast Asia facing much less severe domestic difficulties. For a while, Diem's achievements in nation-building obscured the lagging pace of democratic reform. However, as security within South Vietnam deteriorated, the latent conflicts between American values and South Vietnamese traditions were bound to deepen.

Despite the American-sponsored buildup of the South Vietnamese army, the security situation steadily worsened. The American military was motivated by the same self-assurance which characterized the American political reformers. Both were convinced that they had somehow discovered the infallible remedy for success in a strife-ridden country geographically and culturally remote from the United States. They went about the business of creating a Vietnamese army as a replica of their own. The American armed forces were geared to combat in Europe; their only experience in the developing world had been in Korea, where their task had been to fight a conventional army crossing an internationally recognized demarcation line amidst a generally supportive population, a situation very similar to what military planners had anticipated would happen in Europe. But in Vietnam, the war lacked well-defined front lines; the enemy, supplied from Hanoi, defended nothing and attacked indiscriminately; he was at once everywhere and nowhere.

From the moment the American military establishment arrived in Vietnam, it began applying its familiar method of warfare: attrition relying on firepower, mechanization, and mobility. All these methods were inapplicable to Vietnam. The American-trained South Vietnamese army soon found itself in the same trap as France's expeditionary force a decade earlier. Attrition works best against an adversary who has no choice except to defend a vital prize. But guerrillas rarely have a prize they must defend. Mechanization and organization into divisions caused the Viet-

namese army to become nearly irrelevant to the struggle for its own country.

In those early days of America's involvement in Vietnam, the guerrilla war was still in its infancy, and the military problem was not yet dominant. It therefore seemed as if genuine progress were being made. Not until the very end of the Eisenhower Administration did Hanoi throw the guerrilla war into high gear, and it would still be some time before the North Vietnamese were able to set up a logistics system for supplying a major guerrilla war. In order to accomplish this, they invaded Laos, a small, peaceful, and neutral nation, through which they constructed what later became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

As Eisenhower prepared to leave office, Laos was in fact his main concern. In *Waging Peace,* he described that country as the linchpin of the "Domino Theory":

> . . . the fall of Laos to Communism could mean the subsequent fall—like a tumbling row of dominoes—of its still-free neighbors, Cambodia and South Vietnam and, in all probability, Thailand and Burma. Such a chain of events would open the way to Communist seizure of all Southeast Asia.[44]

Eisenhower considered the independence of Laos so crucial that he was prepared to "fight . . . with our allies or without them."[45] Defending Laos was to be the most specific recommendation he made to President-elect Kennedy during the transition period prior to January 1961.

As the administrations were changing, the level and the nature of America's involvement in Indochina were not yet of a scale that staked America's global credibility beyond the point of repair. The American effort still bore some relation to regional security objectives; and it was not yet of a magnitude that the act of vindicating it would provide its own justification.

The Domino Theory had become conventional wisdom and was rarely challenged. But like Wilsonianism itself, the Domino Theory was not so much wrong as it was undifferentiated. The real issues posed by Vietnam were not whether communism should be resisted in Asia, but whether the 17th Parallel was the right place to draw the line; not what would happen in Indochina if the South Vietnamese domino fell, but whether another defense line could be drawn, say, at the borders of Malaya.

That issue was never carefully examined in terms of geopolitics. Munich having been the seminal lesson of that generation of American leaders, retreat was considered as compounding the difficulties and, above

all, as being morally wrong. This, in fact, was how Eisenhower defended the American involvement in 1959:

> . . . our own national interests demand some help from us in sustaining in Viet-Nam the morale, the economic progress, and the military strength necessary to its continued existence in freedom. . . . [T]he costs of continuous neglect of these problems would be far more than we must now bear—indeed more than we could afford.[46]

America's universalist tradition simply would not permit it to differentiate among the potential victims on the basis of strategic expediency. When American leaders invoked their nation's selflessness, it was because they genuinely believed in it; they were more likely to defend a country to vindicate principle than on grounds of the American national interest.

By choosing Vietnam as the place to draw the line against communist expansionism, America ensured that grave dilemmas would lie ahead. If political reform was the way to defeat the guerrillas, did their growing power mean that American recommendations were not being correctly applied, or that these recommendations were simply not relevant, at least at that stage of the struggle? And if Vietnam was indeed as important to the global balance as nearly all of America's leaders were asserting, did it not mean that geopolitical necessities would, in the end, override all others and oblige America to take over a war 12,000 miles from home? The answers to these questions were left to Eisenhower's successors, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.