

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #33A

During the post-World War II period between 1947 and 1962, the British, French, Dutch, and Belgian empires all but disintegrated in a momentous collapse of European global power. When colonial revolts produced independent-minded or socialist-minded regimes in the so-called Third World, the presidential administrations of Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower often treated them as pawns of the Soviet Union to be opposed at all costs.

French Indochina, created in the 19th century out of the old kingdoms of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, offered a special, unique variation of Third World nationalism that swept the old colonial world of Asia and Africa after World War II – damaging both the power and prestige of the colonial powers. During that war, Japanese control of the area had required their support of pro-Vichy French civil servants (French collaborators with the Nazis), as well as opposition to the local nationalists. Most prominent among the latter were the adherents to the Vietminh (Vietnamese League for Independence), who had fallen under the influence of Communists led by Ho Chi Minh. At the end of World War II the Japanese occupiers of Vietnam had surrendered to Nationalist China in the north and Britain in the south. The Vietminh, the nationalist movement that had led the resistance against the Japanese, had seized control in the northern part of Vietnam. On September 4, 1945, Ho Chi Minh had proclaimed a Democratic Republic of Vietnam, with its capital in Hanoi.

Ho's declaration of Vietnamese independence had included borrowed words from Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal." American officers had been on the reviewing stand in Hanoi, and American planes had flown over the celebration. Ho had received secret American help against the Japanese during the war, but his petitions for further aid after the war had gone unanswered. Vietnam took low priority in American diplomatic concerns at that time. President Truman could not stomach American aid for a professed Communist. This single fact outweighed American and British commitment to self-determination.

In 1946 the French government, preoccupied with domestic politics, had recognized Ho's new government as a "free state" within the French union. Before that year ended, however, Ho's forces had come into conflict with French efforts to establish another regime in the southern provinces. This clash had quickly expanded into the First Indochina War. In 1949, having set up puppet rulers in Laos and Cambodia, the French had reinstated Bao Dai as head of state in Vietnam. Later in that same year, the victory of the Chinese Communists had been followed by Red China's diplomatic recognition of the Vietminh government in Hanoi. When France had moved to restore its control over the country, the U.S. and Britain had sided with their European ally. Each nation had recognized Bao Dai as the legitimate leader in Vietnam. Moreover, President Truman had rejected Ho's plea to support the Vietnamese struggle for independence. Meanwhile, the Vietminh had resumed their war of national liberation.

The Vietminh government thereafter had become more completely dominated by Ho Chi Minh and his Communist associates as well as more dependent on the Soviet Union and Red China for help. In 1950 with the outbreak of fighting in Korea, the struggle in Vietnam became more and more a battleground in the Cold War.

President Eisenhower picked up where Truman had left off. Eisenhower argued that, if the French failed, then all non-Communist governments in the region would collapse. This so-called “domino theory,” which represented an extension of the “containment” doctrine, guided U.S. policy in Southeast Asia for the next 20 years. The Eisenhower administration was less concerned about democracy than about stability. It tended to support governments, no matter how repressive, that were overtly anti-Communist even if they lacked broad-based support. When the Korean War ended, American aid to the French in Vietnam, begun by the Truman administration, continued. By the end of 1953 the Eisenhower administration was paying about two-thirds of the cost of the French effort in Vietnam – about \$1 billion annually. But the money was not enough to defeat the determined Vietminh, who were fighting for the liberation of their country.

John Foster Dulles served as Secretary of State under President Eisenhower from January, 1953 until April, 1959 – one month before his own death. He made no significant departure from the strategy of “containment” created during the Truman administration. Instead, he institutionalized it with his rigid Cold War rhetoric and extended it into the military strategy of “deterrence.” Dulles had an affinity for colorful phrases, such as “roll back,” “massive retaliation,” and “going to the brink.” “Massive retaliation” was actually a shorthand version of his phrase “massive retaliatory power,” which was a description of the “New Look” in military strategy – an effort to get “more bang for the buck.” Budgetary considerations lay at the root of military plans, because Eisenhower and his cabinet shared the fear that, in the effort to build a superior war power, the United States could spend itself into bankruptcy.

During 1953, members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff began to plan a new military posture for the American government. The heart of their so-called “New Look” was the assumption that nuclear weapons could be used in limited-war situations, allowing reductions in conventional forces and, therefore, budgetary savings. Dulles, who announced the policy early in 1954, explained that savings would come “by placing more reliance on deterrent power, and less dependence on local defensive power.” No longer could an enemy “pick his time and place and method of warfare.” American responses would be “by means and at places of our choosing.” Vice President Richard Nixon said that no longer would “the Communists nibble us to death all over the world in little wars.”

By this time both the United States and the Soviet Union had exploded hydrogen bombs. The threat of nuclear war was terrifying. But the notion that the U.S. would risk such a disaster in response to local wars had little credibility. Dulles' policy of "brinkmanship" depended for its strategic effect on those very fears of nuclear disaster. The first occasion on which a firm stand had halted further aggression had been American threats in 1953 to break the Korean stalemate by removing restraints from the armed forces. The second one came in 1954, when aircraft carriers moved into the South China Sea "both to deter any Red Chinese attack against Indochina and to provide weapons for instant retaliation."

Dulles, however, neglected the complexity of the situation in French Indochina. By the early 1950s most of British Asia was independent or on the way toward independence – India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Burma, and the Malay states. The Dutch and French, however, were less ready than the British to give up their colonies. Thus, they created a dilemma for American policy-makers. Americans sympathized with colonial nationalists, who sometimes invoked the example of 1776. But the U.S. government wanted Dutch and French help against the spread of communism.

For covert American tasks, Secretary of State Dulles used the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), newly created in 1947, and run by his brother, Allen Dulles. But, when covert operations and coups failed or proved impractical, the American approach to emerging nations could entangle the United States in deeper, more intractable conflicts.

Such an instance was unfolding in Vietnam – a small country utterly unknown to most Americans. The U.S. found itself at the edge of the "brink" to which Dulles later referred. A major French force had been sent to Dien Bien Phu, near the Laos border, in the hope of luring Vietminh guerrillas into a set battle and grinding them up with superior firepower. Instead, the French found themselves trapped by a Vietminh force that threatened to overrun their stronghold.

In March, 1954 the French government requested an American air strike to relieve the pressure on Dien Bien Phu. Eisenhower himself seemed to endorse forceful action when he advanced his "domino theory" at a news conference on April 7, 1954. He stated: "You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly." Eisenhower was, nevertheless, playing a cautious game. When congressional leaders expressed reservations, he took a stand against American intervention unless the British lent support. When they refused, he backed away from unilateral American action in Vietnam.

After a 56-day siege early in 1954, the massive attacks directed by Vietminh General Vo Nguyen Giap finally overwhelmed the last French resistance at Dien Bien Phu. It was the

very eve of the day an international conference at Geneva, Switzerland, took up the question of Indochina. Six weeks later, as French forces continued to suffer defeats in Vietnam, a new French government promised to get an early settlement. On July 20th representatives of France, Britain, the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, and the Vietminh reached agreement on the Geneva Accords. The next day they produced their Final Declaration, which proposed to neutralize Laos and Cambodia and divided Vietnam temporarily at the 17th parallel. The Geneva Accords called for elections within two years to reunify the troubled nation. In the meantime, the Vietminh would take power in the north, and the French would remain south of the line until elections took place in 1956.

American and South Vietnamese representatives refused either to join in the accord or to sign the Final Declaration. As a result, the Soviet Union and China backed away from their earlier hints that they would guarantee the settlement. The United States not only rejected the Geneva Accords, but it also immediately set about undermining them. Dulles responded by organizing mutual defense arrangements for Southeast Asia. On September 8, 1954, at a meeting in the Philippine Islands at Manila, the United States joined seven other countries in an agreement that Dulles wanted known as the Manila Defense Accord (MANDAC), but which the press quickly labeled the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). The impression that it paralleled NATO was false, because the Manila Accord was neither a common defense organization like NATO, nor was it primarily Asian. The signers agreed that, in case of attack on one, the others would act according to their "constitutional practices," and, in case of threats or subversion, they would "consult immediately." The members included only three Asian countries – the Philippines, Thailand, and Pakistan – together with Britain, France, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. India and Indonesia, the two most populous countries in that region, refused to join. A special protocol added to the treaty extended coverage to Indochina. The treaty reflected what Dulles' critics called "pactomania," which by the end of the Eisenhower administration contracted the U.S. to defend 43 other countries. President Eisenhower announced that, though the United States "had not itself been party to or bound by the decision taken at the [Geneva] Conference," any renewal of Communist aggression "would be reviewed by us as a matter of grave concern." He failed to note that the U.S. had agreed at Geneva to "refrain from the threat or use of force to disturb" the agreements.

In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh took over the north, while those who wished to leave for South Vietnam, mostly Catholics, did so with American aid. With the help of the CIA, a

pro-American government took power in South Vietnam in June, 1954, headed by Ngo Dinh Diem. He was imposed on Emperor Bao Dai by the French at the urging of the American government. Diem, an anti-Communist Roman Catholic, who had been residing in exile at a Catholic seminary in New Jersey, returned to Vietnam as premier. Earlier he had opposed both the French and the Vietminh. In 1954 Eisenhower offered to assist Diem “in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means.” In return, the United States expected “needed reforms.” American aid was forthcoming in the form of CIA and military cadres charged with training Diem’s armed forces and police.

Instead of instituting political and economic reforms, however, Diem tightened his grip on South Vietnam, suppressing opposition on both right and left, offering little or no land distribution, and permitting widespread corruption. At the start of 1955 French Indochina was dissolved. A referendum was scheduled in South Vietnam for October 23rd to determine its future. In a rigged election Diem ousted Bao Dai, who advocated restoration of the monarch. In 1956, facing certain defeat by the popular Ho Chi Minh, Diem refused to join in the scheduled reunification elections and installed himself as president of an independent South Vietnam. Diem’s efforts to eliminate all opposition played into the hands of the Communists, who found recruits and fellow travelers among the discontented. By 1957 guerrilla forces known as the Vietcong had begun attacks on the government in South Vietnam. In 1960 the resistance coalesced as the National Liberation Front.

As the last French soldiers left in March, 1956, the Eisenhower administration propped up Diem with an average of \$200 million a year in aid and a contingent of 675 American military advisors. This support was just a beginning. As guerrilla warfare gradually disrupted South Vietnam, the Eisenhower administration was helpless to do anything but “sink or swim with Ngo Dinh Diem.”