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FEAR AND LOATHING IN INDOCHINA:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE AMERICAN REFUSAL TO SIGN THE GENEVA ACCORDS, 1954

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FEAR AND LOATHING IN INDOCHINA:
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On a warm spring morning in 1954, five countries came together to discuss the fate of a nation. Delegates from the Soviet Union, France, China, the United Kingdom, and the United States met in a city on the southern edge of Switzerland that would later come to be known as the "Peace Capital of the World"—Geneva—and attempted to come to a resolution on the ongoing violence in Indochina. America's refusal to sign the ultimate accords passed at this conference summed up neatly how the fear of communism radicalized their policies, both globally and in Vietnam. With this decision, the United States demonstrated not only how alarmed they were by communist expansion in any sphere, but also just how extreme the measures were that they were willing to take to curb it, including supporting obviously corrupt and negative leadership and entering willingly into a twenty-year, \$690 billion conflict.¹

In theory, the intent of the conference was to resolve the crisis over leadership in Southeast Asia. Since the early 1940s, control of Vietnam (and to a lesser extent, Cambodia and Laos) had been contested by the sometimes-at-odds, sometimes-allied colonial forces of France

¹ John S. Bowman, ed., *The Vietnam War: An Almanac* (New York: World Almanac Publications, 1985), 5.

and Japan. The conflict was further complicated by the struggle for political control among the Vietnamese people, which echoed the Cold War ideological divide across the globe. The interests of the Indochinese nations were supposed to be at the center of the conference's discussion, but in reality, the debate reflected most strongly the contemporary desires and fears of the world's most prominent powers.

The French feared losing their territory in Vietnam, but even more fervently worried that all their military and political efforts in the area over the last century would be for naught. The Soviet Union, already embroiled deeply and bitterly in the Cold War, supported Ho Chi Minh but feared what the democratic world powers were willing to do in order to staunch the spread of communism. Most afraid of all was the United States. They were deeply concerned about the continuation of the only political movement—communism—which really posed a threat to their newfound world power. They were also troubled by the idea that a scrappy group of revolutionaries (the Viet Minh) could really best a standing world power (France) and, as a result, pose a danger to the new authority of the United States. Vietnam, a nation "without substantial economic independence, without real experience in political struggle... [and] insecure and subject to manipulation from various sides"² awaited a decision from Geneva that would be made by five immensely powerful but also extremely unsettled leaders who were really being asked, directly and unavoidably, what system of world power they were choosing to support.

The events that took place in Geneva in 1954—the provisions put forth in the peace accords, the positions of the world powers, and the ultimate resolutions of the American

² David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 203.

delegation—proved crucial in understanding U.S. action in Vietnam moving forward. In the 21 years following the conference, the world bore witness to "the most divisive and demoralizing struggle in a century of American history"³ and generally what is considered to be the most massive military loss in the country's existence.⁴ The nation of Vietnam, which may have originally appeared insignificant, actually served as "a microcosm of processes that unfolded across much of the globe after 1945 as anticolonialism nationalism surged and the great powers, concerned largely with gaining advantage in the Cold War, struggled to harness it to their purposes or, failing that, to dampen its challenge."⁵ Indochina epitomized the global conflict between communism and democracy; for that reason, the decision made at the conference reflected the position that America took on the issue globally and the extremist political ideologies that were used in Vietnam over the next twenty years.

Therein lies the true importance of the Geneva convention of 1954. Since the end of the war in 1973, countless historians have attempted to explain the complete and total failure of the United States' actions in Vietnam. They generally do so by undertaking a study of the reasons for America's entrance into Vietnam, their global policies at the time, their often-disturbing military action in the nation, or numerous other areas of inquiry. However, such research nearly always ignores the fact that there was a single event—a single political decision—that summed up how and why everything went so wrong. That event was the Geneva conference. "To understand the course and outcome of the Vietnam wars," wrote Mark A. Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall in the

³ Peter A. Poole, *The United States and Indochina from FDR to Nixon* (Washington D.C.: Dryden Press, 1973), 2.

⁴ ¶ Alan Axelrod, *America's Wars* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002).

⁵ Mark A. Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007), 6.

introduction to their compilation of analytical works titled *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*, "it is essential to appreciate the connections between political-military events within Vietnam and the geopolitical currents in the wider world that gave those events meaning among the governments that possessed the power to influence Southeast Asia's postwar order."⁶

The actual bulk of the conference took place in a series of plenary and private meetings between May 8 and July 21, 1954, where each of the parties in attendance took turns at leading the discussion.⁷ Depending on the nature and sensitivity of the material discussed at each meeting, transcripts or "summarized...press briefings"⁸ were or were not made available at the conclusion of each day. Information about the conference also made its way to the public through the addresses of members of the American administration, such as President Eisenhower's infamous "domino theory" interview on April 7, 1954 (during an earlier phase of the conference) and John Foster Dulles' address to the American people on May 7.⁹

Over these thirty total sessions, delegations argued feverishly on the global controversies they had set out to resolve as well as on numerous situational roadblocks. For example, a debate

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ These parties included France, Cambodia, Laos, the United States, the United Kingdom, Vietnam (DPRV), China (CPR), Korea, and the Soviet Union (USSR.)

⁸ United States Department of State, "The Geneva Conference on Indochina, May 8-July 21, 1954," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954: The Geneva Conference* (Washington, 1954), 397.

⁹ A transcript of Eisenhower's interview was published as "President Eisenhower's News Conference, April 7, 1954," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1954* (1954 Department of State Document), 398. The full text of John Foster Dulles' address was published as "Address by Secretary Dulles Delivered to the Nation over Radio and Television, May 7, 1954," *The Issues at Geneva* (1954 Department of State Bulletin), 740-744.

over whether or not the Viet Minh-led representatives from Cambodia and Laos should be allowed to sit next to the standing Cambodian and Laotian government representatives began on the first day of the conference and was not settled until June 18. Those involved in the conference as well as public observers also criticized fundamental issues in the structure of the conference including the "communication gap," which was eventually summarized in *The Pentagon Papers* as follows:

Nine delegations seated at a roundtable to exchange views, about every second day, obscured the fact that true bargaining was not taking place. Proposals were, of course, tabled and debated; but actual give-and-take was reserved for private discussions, usually in the absence of the pro-Western Indochinese parties. Even then, the Geneva talks on Indochina were hardly dominated by Big Power cabais; political and ideological differences were so intense, particularly between the American and Chinese representatives, that diplomacy had to be conducted circuitously...Not until the latter half of June did high-ranking French and Viet Minh delegates meet face-to-face, did Viet Minh military officials confer with Cambodian and Laotian representatives, and did French and Chinese heads-of-delegation privately exchange views. Communist and non-Communist Vietnamese, meanwhile, refused to talk to one another until July.¹⁰

Despite the numerous and time-consuming deficiencies of the conference, however, significant and effective debate was eventually accomplished nonetheless.

Each of the nine nations present brought different opinions on the subject and desires for resolution to the table; however, the most influential countries by far were the United States, France, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam. Over the two decades preceding the convention, these four nations had been locked in an increasingly inflammatory waltz around one another over control of either Vietnam's lands or its politics, a contention that "[pitted] imperialism against the two principal competitors that gained traction by mid-century—communist-inspired

¹⁰ "The Geneva Conference, May-July, 1954," *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

revolutionary nationalism and U.S.-sponsored liberal internationalism.”¹¹ Because these countries played the most direct role in the situation of Vietnam at the time of the conference, their desires, fears, and political motivations ended up having the most effect on its final outcome.

Out of the four, France had been involved with Vietnam in some way or another for by far the longest—so far, in fact, that their desires and positions at the conference are worth summarizing. The French began their colonization of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos almost a century before Geneva, but since the early 1940s, they had been forced to defend their leadership against the expansionist Japanese, the threat of Allied intervention, and numerous attempts at rebellion by the Vietnamese people. To make matters more complicated, French leadership was also being contested in their own country, although the nation and its colonial holdings (including Vietnam) were controlled by the Pro-Axis “Vichy” French at the time that the relevant Indochinese conflict began.

The French quarreled near-continuously with Japan from 1940 until August 1945, when the island nation was forced to surrender from WWII and pull their forces out of Indochina. During those five years, however, the on-again, off-again fighting and political labyrinth that was the Japanese-French relationship distressed and angered the people of Vietnam.¹² It was after the first Japanese military action that the Vietnamese decided to attempt real, widespread nationalist revolt (although communist sympathizers also took part) for the first time; they were rewarded

¹¹ Mark A. Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007), 6.

¹² The Japanese and French eventually entered into an agreement of “common defense” in the early days of World War II, wherein the French would be allowed control of Vietnam if they agreed to help finance the Japanese war effort as well as set up Japanese military bases in various strategic locations. However, in the years following, Japanese interests continued to have a profound influence on the leadership of Vietnam.

with equally widespread and savage executions by the ruling French. Although the rebellion was small and quickly quelled, it deserved recognition because it signified the Vietnamese people were more than willing to fight *and* die for their independence. As David G. Marr put it, colonial French and Japanese efforts in the early 1940s represented "...[a] critical, sustained challenge to the Vietnamese identity that...had at last become the apocalyptic nightmare of the millions...Crisis intensified the fears and torment of almost every segment of the population, lending more credence to radical social proposals."¹³ And "radical social proposals" were indeed not far behind: It was during this period that Ho Chi Minh, a Leninist-Marxist and the founder of the Indochina Communist Party (ICP), began to redirect and consolidate his political following into a guerrilla force to be reckoned with that would later come to be known as the Viet Minh Doc Lap Dong Minh, or more simply, the Viet Minh.

After the Japanese surrender, the French finally expected to enjoy uncontested control of their Southeast Asian holdings. Shortly after the August stand-down, however, the Viet Minh staged their first majorly successful insurgency in the form of the "August Revolution," which launched the two groups on a path of violence and border disputes that led straight to the French invasion of Minh-controlled Haiphong, the beginning of the First Indochinese War. This was the war that still raged as the nine delegations met in Geneva.¹⁴ Despite their opposition on the battle field, however, the desires of the French, of Ho Chi Minh and his supporters, and of the representatives of the imperial Vietnamese government did not differ much around the

¹³ David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 276-277.

¹⁴ In fact, at the time of the conference, a particularly vicious and infamous battle was taking place at Dien Bien Phu. The historian Jules Roy has written some significant works on the battle that may be relevant, including Jules Roy, *The Battle of Dienbienphu* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2002).

conference table. After so much struggle and strife over nearly a century of colonial presence in Indochina, the French delegation and their primary representative Foreign Minister Georges Bidault were desperate to put an end to the costly and destructive fighting in any way possible but also wished to maintain a presence in Indochina. In the collective French mind, wrote Lawrence and Logevall, "...political leaders and public opinion alike viewed the battle as the final test of their country's ability to keep Indochina within the French empire."¹⁵ At the same time, the Viet Minh delegation, led primarily by Pham Van Dong, desired the freedom from colonial rule that they had originally rebelled for, but also recognized that they did not have the resources to continue this attrition-like war for much longer. The state of Vietnam's delegation, meanwhile, just wanted peace for its people and its country for the first time since the Japanese had invaded.

The other major "power pair" of the Geneva conference—and really, of the world in the decades following the end of WWII—was the United States and the Soviet Union. After the U.S.'s success in 1945, they became a part of what Peter A. Poole called "[an] awkward but sometimes splendid leadership as a world power."¹⁶ Now responsible for nearly half of the world's industrial production, the American government and its people enjoyed a period of fervent economic growth and a high quality of living.¹⁷ But with their great power also came great responsibility: if they were to be serious about lasting success and peace in the Pacific Theatre, the American leaders had to determine once and for all whose leadership they supported

¹⁵ Mark A. Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

¹⁶ Peter A. Poole, *The United States and Indochina from FDR to Nixon* (Washington, D.C.: Dryden Press, 1973), 2.

¹⁷ John Kunkel, *America's Trade Policy Towards Japan: Demanding Results* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 33.

in Indochina. As James M. Carter noted, “The question was how to oppose revolutionary nationalism, appear progressive and committed to an end of colonialism, and win over the support of and maintain some control over developments within the former colonial world”—and this question was not one easily answered.¹⁸

The Soviet Union was also interested in political control of Southeast Asia. In the decades following the end of WWII, and indeed at the 1954 conference, the USSR played the role of direct opposition to the American dominance. As an outline of American military objectives known as “NSC 68” submitted to President Truman in 1950 stated, “The defeat of Germany and Japan and the decline of the British and French empires have interacted with the development of the United States and the Soviet Union in such a way that power increasingly gravitated to these two centers.”¹⁹ Stalin appraised the situation perhaps more ominously in a 1927 speech:

In course [sic] of further development of international revolution there will emerge two centers of world significance: a socialist center, drawing to itself the countries which tend toward socialism, and a capitalist center, drawing to itself the countries that incline toward capitalism. Battle between these two centers for command of world economy will decide fate of capitalism and of communism in entire world.²⁰

Although these words were written over a decade before anyone had even heard of a “Cold War,” they still accurately summarized how the global stage was being set in the 1940s and 1950s—

¹⁸ James M. Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State-Building* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 32.

¹⁹ “A Report to the National Security Council – NSC 68,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1950* (1954 President’s Secretary’s File).

²⁰ This excerpt of the speech originally appeared in “Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall February 22, 1946,” *The Elsey Papers* (1946 Harry S. Truman Administration File).

like a chessboard with the United States on one side, the USSR on the other, and all the other countries as little pieces in between. At Geneva, the dichotomy between communism and nationalism was reflected in the relationship between the Soviet Union delegation (including Minister of Foreign Affairs V. M. Molotov) and the United States delegation (including Secretary of State Walter Bedell Smith and Undersecretary John Foster Dulles.) The strength of this division was reflected in the way the other seven nations eventually allied themselves with either one or the other nation. China, Korea, and the Viet Minh (also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Vietnam) ended up on the communist side led by the USSR while Cambodia, Laos, the United Kingdom, and France sympathized with the capitalist agenda of the United States. This was where the idea of Vietnam as a "microcosm" came into play—just as on the global stage, the conflict in the Indochinese peninsula pitted the two political titans (along with their allies) of the 1940s and 1950s against each other for control of part of the world.

As the nations began their private and public debates, each made their desires and concerns clear, and the debate moved inexorably forward despite issues of communication and seating. The two most important questions of the conference began to become apparent. The first was more direct: which leadership would the powerful nations of the world choose to support in Vietnam? The second was implied: would the conference result in a communist or "free" leadership of the nation? What is important to remember about the Geneva conference and what was ultimately reflected in the answers to these questions is that at no time was actual rationality, reasoning, and logic applied to these questions in order to find an answer. Each country knew exactly what they stood to personally gain from the situation, so instead, they decided they would misrepresent their own position and manipulate the positions of others in order to achieve their own desired outcome.

The first question addressed at the conference—that of leadership—was not a new issue. Ever since the United States had entered the conflict in the Pacific Theatre, they had struggled with the question of which nation they would support for leadership there when they ultimately pulled their forces out. Early on in the Indochinese conflict, even before the U.S. became involved in World War II, they made efforts to ally themselves with the Viet Minh bid for leadership.²¹ The American wartime intelligence agency, the Office of Strategic Services, also remained in known support of Ho Chi Minh and his forces for many years, although the United States themselves never vocally allied with the movement.

However, it is important to recognize that the United States' early cooperation with Ho Chi Minh and his forces did not signify their sanctioning of the communist ideology. Rather, the relationship between the Americans and the Vietnam nationalists was one of necessity: all other forces in Indochina were stubbornly pro-Axis, which at the time posed a much greater threat in American eyes. As the 1940s progressed—as America entered the war, fought it, and ended it on August 6, 1945—President Roosevelt (and later Truman and Eisenhower) struggled to find a leadership for Vietnam that would be both successful and congruent with the U.S.'s ideals.

The United States' opinion on leadership in Southeast Asia was most radically changed when the threat of communism became apparent to American leaders for the first time. This is also where the second question of the conference—of communism versus capitalism or otherwise "free" government—came into play, where the dichotomy mentioned above was "born," and where the American terror of communism that would come to define its political policy was created, thanks in major part due to a man named G.F. Kennan.

²¹ Refusing French and Japanese weapon purchases, sending military and economic support to the Japanese enemies such as China and the Philippines, and placing successively more and more restrictive embargos on the island nation were all examples of American actions taken against the Axis nations.

During WWII, and in the months directly following its conclusion, the relationship between the USSR and the U.S. was not yet an unfriendly one—in fact, it was anything but as Soviet aid had played an enormous role in the Allies' European victory. In 1946, however, a counselor at the Russian-U.S. Embassy in Moscow (Kennan) sent an article known as "The Long Telegram" to the U.S. Treasury Department as an attempt to address their questions regarding the Soviets' refusal to cooperate with new global organizations including the World Bank and the IMF. His article, of course, (the essence of which was later published in the magazine *Foreign Affairs* under the pseudonym Mr. X, which is perhaps how it is more infamously known) ended up influencing much more than that.

The report contained a great deal of alarming language and information. For perhaps the first time, but certainly the most dramatic time, the USSR (and the communism movement) was presented to the United States as a clear and present threat rather than an ally. Kennan described the propaganda of the Soviet Union, which emphasized “No permanent peaceful coexistence [between capitalism and communism],” and discussed the Russian “deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power.” He went on to caution the U.S. government against what he called “internal policy devoted to increasing in every way strength and prestige of Soviet state [sic]: intensive military industrialization; maximum development of armed forces.”²² In general, he concluded, the true intent of the Soviet Union was as follows:

...to undermine general political and strategic potential of major Western Powers. [sic] Efforts will be made in such countries to disrupt national self-confidence, to hamstring measures of national defense, to increase social and industrial unrest, to stimulate all forms of disunity...We have here a political force committed fanatically to the belief that...the internal harmony of our society

²² "Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall February 22, 1946," *The Elsey Papers* (1946 Harry S. Truman Administration File).

be disrupted.²³

Although “Mr. X” may not have been the first person to suggest this kind of idea to the United States government, his suggestion certainly had the most effect. “The Long Telegram” and its later-published version “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” painted a picture of the USSR as a massive malevolent world power masquerading as a friend to lull the United States into a false sense of security while its secret agents dismantled capitalism from the inside out. Naturally, the articles inspired quite a bit of fear in the American leadership and were serious contributors to the United States' Cold War mindset, described above and summarized more succinctly in this paragraph from NSC 68:

Three realities emerge as a consequence of this purpose: Our determination to maintain the essential elements of individual freedom, as set forth in the Constitution and Bill of Rights; our determination to create conditions under which our free and democratic system can live and prosper; and our determination to fight if necessary to defend our way of life, for which as in the Declaration of Independence, "with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor."²⁴

This is the mindset that the United States delegation carried with it to the Geneva conference and considered when making the decisions that shaped the global history of the following two decades. It was also the mindset that led the U.S., in 1950, to decide the leadership of the French was more palatable to American interests than the Communist Viet Minh and, subsequently, make their support of French colonial leadership known with an “initial financial outlay of \$15

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ "A Report to the National Security Council – NSC 68," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1950* (1954 President's Secretary's File).

million.”²⁵ The colonial, once-pro-Axis leadership which had once seemed so ludicrous to the United States was now infinitely preferable to one more day supporting any communist-backed organization. The long path of American extremism—of poor decisions made because the communist alternative was unthinkable—had begun and it would end with the most devastating military loss in American history.

The conference therefore started with the Soviet-backed Viet Minh in direct opposition to the U.S.-backed French, representing the global trend towards communism and the global trend towards capitalism respectively in Vietnam's little microcosm. By the end of the conference, however, the alliances would not be so clear. Although the accords were the result of days of debate wherein all the nations voiced their respective opinions, the final copy was not agreeable to all present. “The Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference: On Restoring Peace in Indochina” officially ended hostilities in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam and “[permitted]...full independence and sovereignty” in each of the Indochinese nations without written alliance to any particular political movement. It split Vietnam into two “regrouping zones”, one governed by the Viet Minh and one by the state of Vietnam's standing government (with former Prime Minister Ngo Diem Dinh as president); these would later come to be known as North and South Vietnam, although at the time the declaration noted that, “The essential purpose of the agreement relating to Viet-Nam is to settle military questions with a view to ending hostilities and that the military demarcation line should not in any way be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary.” Finally, the accords declared that “free general elections by secret ballot” would be

²⁵ Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 5. This is a great reference for information about the French-American relationship in Indochina, as well as the American attempt to decolonialize Vietnam, a topic which was omitted from this paper for the sake of clarity.

held in July 1956, wherein “each member of the Geneva conference undertakes to respect the sovereignty, the independence, the unity, and the territorial integrity of [Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.]”²⁶

When the nine delegations in attendance were asked to consider these accords, they were really being asked to consider all the events leading up to that day in 1954, all the political positions of the countries, all the alliances to both communism and capitalism that they may or may not have participated in, and their own desires in the situation. William Bedell Smith and John Foster Dulles were forced to consider their newfound global standing and the work of Mr. X, which had so dramatically reshaped their view of the Soviet Union who now stood in defiance to everything they held dear. They were unsettled—even afraid—of what the Viet Minh had been able to achieve against the French forces; they knew also that the decision they made in this little sphere of influence would make a statement about their efforts against communism on a global stage. As Logevall and Lawrence put it, “All over the globe, policymakers and media invested the battle raging in remote jungles of northwestern Vietnam with enormous symbolic value. Nothing less than Indochina’s political destiny seemed to be at stake.”²⁷ Now the accords passed at the conference were asking them to take their hands off the situation—to leave the political future of Vietnam to free and fair ballots. But the Americans wanted—needed—an absolute victory for capitalism and could not leave anything up to chance. They had already begun to accept more extreme, formerly-unacceptable political choices out of fear for the spread of communism; now, they accepted one more.

After almost fifteen years of involvement in Indochina and after days of debating with the

²⁶ “The Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference: On Restoring Peace in Indochina, July 21, 1954,” (1954 Department of State Bulletin, no. 788), 164.

²⁷ Mark A. Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

standing world powers, the United States refused to sign the Geneva accords. In April 1975, President Gerald Ford declared the U.S. retreat from Vietnam—the ultimate failure. But here, in Geneva, Switzerland, twenty-one years earlier, the stage for failure was already set.

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