

■ President Eisenhower to the President of the Council of Ministers of Vietnam

Date: October 25, 1954

Author: Dwight D. Eisenhower

Genre: letter

Summary Overview

In October 1954, only five months after the Viet Minh (Vietnamese nationalist forces, including many communists) defeated the French armies at the decisive Battle of Dien Bien Phu, US president Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote to assure South Vietnamese prime minister Ngo Dinh Diem of the financial and military support of the United States. Vietnam was divided into two artificially created nations—South Vietnam and North Vietnam, the latter of which was under the leadership of the Communist Ho Chi Minh. Many in the south supported Ho's leadership and actively worked to reunite the nation under a Communist government. Although the separation of the country was meant to be temporary—lasting only until elections could be held—both the South Vietnamese and US governments felt that Ho Chi Minh stood a good chance of winning an election; thus, they actively promoted South Vietnamese independence as the only way of keeping the entire peninsula of Indochina from falling to the Communists.

Defining Moment

The seeds of American involvement in Vietnam, and Southeast Asia in general, were sewn long before President Dwight D. Eisenhower wrote to assure South Vietnamese prime minister Ngo Dinh Diem of his support in October 1954. France, which had left Southeast Asia in defeat only five months earlier, had been the dominant colonial power in the region since the late nineteenth century. Much of the animosity on the part of some Vietnamese leaders toward the West had been based on the fact that even as France withdrew direct colonial rule in the 1920s, it left the Catholic emperor Bao Dai as the head of what amounted to a French protectorate. This caused divisions within the predominantly Buddhist Vietnamese population.

In 1941, Vietnam was invaded by the Japanese Empire, which held power (via the pro-Axis Vichy French government) throughout the rest of World War II. For his part, Bao Dai cooperated with the Japanese, and in 1945, he declared Vietnam to be independent of its French colonial rulers, essentially transforming it into a protectorate of Japan. When World War II ended with Japan's defeat in August 1945, Ho Chi Minh—who had been fighting the Japanese occupation throughout the war, winning worldwide admiration and the loyalty of many Vietnamese citizens—persuaded Bao Dai to abdicate. Ho Chi Minh then declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (also known as North Vietnam) in September 1945. Though the French did away with Ho Chi Minh's government in late 1946, their efforts to reassert colonial government in Vietnam resulted only in a protracted war with Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh guerrilla army.

In 1949, the French reinstalled Bao Dai, this time as chief of state, and continued to fight the Viet Minh with American support. What began as a civil war with-in Vietnam quickly transformed into a Cold War face-off between the Communist Viet Minh and the French. After the war dragged on for another five years, the French forces were eventually defeated at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. In July, the Geneva Accords put a formal end to the war, as the nation was divided between Bao Dai's supporters south of the seventeenth parallel and Ho Chi Minh's supporters north of it. The accords called for elections to reunite the country by 1956. By the time of the accords, Diem had become prime minister and Bao Dai, though still technically chief of state, was living in France. Neither Diem's government nor the United States signed the Geneva Accords, as they knew that elections would likely result in Ho Chi Minh and the Communists coming to power.

Author Biography

President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969) led the Allied forces in the defeat of Nazi Germany during World War II, and by the 1950s, he was leading the United States through the early years of the Cold War—the ideological and sometimes military struggle with the Soviet Union and against Communism in general. Although he brought the Korean War to a ceasefire in 1953, Eisenhower began US involvement in Vietnam at the same time, providing the French with financial

and military aid. However, he stopped short of sending American bombers to support the French forces when the Viet Minh held them under siege at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Although not wishing to send American forces into Vietnam, Eisenhower had earlier in the year given his “domino theory” speech, which outlined his view that to let Vietnam “fall” to Communism would only lead to the expansion of Communism throughout Southeast Asia and beyond.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Washington, [undated]

Dear Mr. President: I have been following with great interest the course of developments in Viet-Nam, particularly since the conclusion of the conference at Geneva. The implications of the agreement concerning Viet-Nam have caused grave concern regarding the future of a country temporarily divided by an artificial military grouping, weakened by a long and exhausting war and faced with enemies without and by their subversive collaborators within.

Your recent requests for aid to assist in the formidable project of the movement of several hundred thousand loyal Vietnamese citizens away from areas which are passing under a *de facto* rule and political ideology which they abhor, are being fulfilled. I am glad that the United States is able to assist in this humanitarian effort.

We have been exploring ways and means to permit our aid to Viet-Nam to be more effective and to make a greater contribution to the welfare and stability of the Government of Viet-Nam. I am, accordingly, instructing the American Ambassador to Viet-Nam to examine with you in your capacity as Chief of Government, how an intelligent program of American aid given directly

to your Government can serve to assist Viet-Nam in its present hour of trial, provided that your Government is prepared to give assurances as to the standards of performance it would be able to maintain in the event such aid were supplied.

The purpose of this offer is to assist the Government of Viet-Nam in developing and maintaining a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means. The Government of the United States expects that this aid will be met by performance on the part of the Government of Viet-Nam in undertaking needed reforms. It hopes that such aid, combined with your own continuing efforts, will contribute effectively toward an independent Viet-Nam endowed with a strong government. Such a government would, I hope, be so responsive to the nationalist aspirations of its people, so enlightened in purpose and effective in performance, that it will be respected both at home and abroad and discourage any who might wish to impose a foreign ideology on your free people.

Sincerely,
[signature]

Document Analysis

In October 1954, President Eisenhower wrote Prime Minister Diem to reassure him of the support of the United States. Though both the South Vietnamese and North Vietnamese governments were internationally recognized as a result of the Geneva Accords, Eisenhower's sympathies are obvious when he refers to Ho Chi Minh's supporters as “enemies” and “subversive

collaborators” and Diem's supporters as “loyal.” As he sees South Vietnam as a bulwark against the further spread of Communism in the region, Eisenhower expresses his commitment to making the United States the guarantor of the “welfare and stability of the Government of Viet-Nam”—Diem's government, in other words.

However much Eisenhower sees Diem as preferable to Ho Chi Minh, his support is not without qualification. Eisenhower stipulates that American aid comes with an understanding that Diem's government will be "undertaking needed reforms." This is likely a reference to the Roman Catholic Diem's persecution of Buddhism while leading a largely Buddhist population. His reservations about Diem aside, Eisenhower considers the creation of South Vietnam to be a success in stemming the tide of Communist expansion in Southeast Asia, resulting in a government that he hopes will "be so responsive to the nationalist aspirations of its people, so enlightened in purpose and effective in performance, that it will be respected both at home and abroad and discourage any who might wish to impose a foreign ideology."

Eisenhower's 1954 letter to Diem sets the United States on a course of intervention in Southeast Asia. Though Eisenhower is committed to not entangling the nation in another Asian war, having just extricated the United States from the unpopular quagmire of the Korean War, the commitments he makes to Diem's government have unforeseen consequences that lead to heightened US involvement in Vietnam for the following twenty years.

Essential Themes

With the backing of Eisenhower now guaranteed, South Vietnamese prime minister Ngo Dinh Diem moved to consolidate his power. American military aid began to arrive in early 1955, as did American military advisers, hoping to train the newly established South Vietnamese army. By late 1955, it became clear that the American support of South Vietnam was directly tied to Ngo Dinh Diem rather than the official chief of state Bao Dai. In October, an election was held in which South Vietnamese were asked to choose between the two leaders. Given that Ngo Dinh Diem controlled the military, Bao Dai was in France, and campaigning for Bao Dai was forbidden, Diem was elected easily in a ballot that most observers acknowledged was fraudulent. Three days later, Diem then proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of Vietnam (also known as South Vietnam), with himself as president.

When the deadline for unifying elections outlined in the Geneva Accords passed in July 1956, a new phase of the Vietnamese conflict was near. The needed reforms within South Vietnam did not happen either, as Diem seized land from Buddhist peasants, giving it to his Catholic supporters, further alienating the population he governed. In March 1959, a renewed conflict began when Ho Chi Minh declared a war to unify Vietnam under his leadership; the first two Americans to die in the conflict were killed four months later. By the time US president John F. Kennedy took office in 1961, the insurgency of Communist forces in South Vietnam was becoming increasingly concerning, as was Diem's apparent inability to effectively govern the country or command its military.

By 1963, Kennedy had increased the number of advisers in South Vietnam to sixteen thousand, but Diem's failures had caused the administration to support a coup against him, which led to Diem's assassination on November 2, 1963. After Kennedy's assassination twenty days later, Lyndon B. Johnson became president, and the Vietnam War, with the United States as a full participant, began in earnest. In August 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin incident gave Johnson the excuse he needed to fully involve the US military. Over the following decade, 2.7 million American soldiers served in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War, and fifty-eight thousand Americans would die in the conflict, along with over one million Vietnamese.

—Steven L. Danver, PhD

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