

Dien Bien Phu: The French Empire Dies in Vietnam

by Gail G. Billington

Fifty years ago, for 55 days, from March 13 to May 8, 1954, a small town in Northeast Vietnam was the scene of a battle between the forces of the French colonial occupying power and those of the pro-independence Viet Minh, led by Ho Chi Minh and his senior general, Vo Nguyen Giap.

The stage for the battle was a small town with the unremarkable name “Seat of the Border County Prefecture,” or, in Vietnamese, Dien Bien Phu, located in Tin Keo, northern Viet Bac province. The battle that raged in Dien Bien Phu would go down in history books as one of the decisive battles of the 20th Century, and the lessons learned, as well as those not learned from that bitter engagement, would reshape the military posture of the world’s major powers.

Vietnam will soon commemorate the 50th anniversary of its victory in the battle of Dien Bien Phu. Vietnam’s war of independence against France was neither the first, nor the last war fought by the Vietnamese against occupying forces, but it shall be remembered as the first victory over a European colonial occupation, even though America’s mis-adventure in Vietnam, which followed the French defeat, would postpone Vietnam’s independence for another 20 years.

The tragedy of the anti-colonial wars in Vietnam in the post-World War II era, both that against France (1945-1955)



Ho Chi Minh delivering his Declaration of Independence, Sept. 2, 1945, in Hanoi.



French paratroopers being dropped into Dien Bien Phu, in the spring of 1954.

and America (1964-1975), is that both could have been avoided, if the U.S., after Franklin Roosevelt’s untimely death in 1945, had lived up to Roosevelt’s personal commitment to ending the European colonial occupations in Asia and Africa.

The Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia in 1941 drove the

British and Dutch out of their respective Southeast Asian colonies, but the Japanese allowed the French to remain in control of Vietnam, since the French, under the Vichy government, were collaborating with the German occupation forces, who were, in turn, allied with Japan. The French only ruled in name, as the Japanese had full military basing rights and final say on issues of substance.

The existing Vietnamese resistance against the French, therefore, was sustained, and even expanded, against the Japanese occupation. The resistance leader, Ho Chi Minh, was a leading international figure in the communist movement, but, in his own words, “it was patriotism and not communism that originally inspired me.” He had a deep admiration for the United States, and when the U.S.

Office of Strategic Services (OSS) sent a team into Vietnam during the war to provide supplies and training to Ho Chi Minh’s forces, Ho worked closely with them, both on fighting the Japanese, and in preparing for independence. OSS officer Archimedes Patti worked with Ho, sending numerous letters to President Truman in 1945, appealing to Truman to implement the plan of the recently deceased President Franklin Roosevelt. FDR had proposed that the United States establish a “trusteeship” over Vietnam, with a definite time set for elections and independence, similar to the U.S. plan for the Philippines. Patti also cooperated with Ho in drafting the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, which Ho delivered in Hanoi Square on Sept. 2, 1945—much of it based directly on the American Declaration of Independence.¹

Roosevelt had no intention of allowing the European colonial powers to reoccupy their former colonial holdings, as he told Winston Churchill directly in 1941, during negotiations for the Atlantic Charter. He wanted his plan for “trusteeship” to be an integral part of the United Nations Charter. His death in April 1945 also marked the death of that intention, as the new President, Harry Truman, proceeded to provide extensive support to the British, French, and Dutch in reasserting control over their former Asian colonies. Truman never responded to Ho Chi Minh’s letters, and even helped the French re-occupation of Vietnam after the war.

Viet Minh

The 1954 battle at Dien Bien Phu was waged by an army of liberation, seeking to establish the sovereignty of the nation of Vietnam, after 90 years under French colonial rule.

Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, now age 92, who commanded Vietnamese forces in that battle, told a seminar in March 2004: “Internationally, the Dien Bien Phu victory meant that for the first time, a nation that was a semi-feudal colony, with a small



Vietnam People's Army

Planning the attack: Ho Chi Minh (center) and Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap (right).

land area, small population, a backward economy, and rudimentary weaponry could defeat a Western power with large economic and military potential and sophisticated weapons.”²

The French expeditionary forces and the Viet Minh had reached a stalemate, after more than six years of fighting, by March 1953.

The French Indochina War had dragged on indecisively since December 19, 1946. In the preface to his seminal history of the battle, *Hell in a Very Small Place*, author Bernard Fall wrote of France at the time, that “one of the sides in the conflict [France] had lost its chance of attaining whatever it had sought to gain in fighting the war.”

The war had cost the nation of France an estimated \$10 billion, and the French population was war-weary, so much so, that the National Assembly imposed a freeze on conscription of forces. The effect of this would be seen in the battle at Dien Bien Phu, where motivated Viet Minh soldiers engaged in combat against France’s demoralized colonial army, about half of which were comprised of North African, Algerian, and other colonial subjects, fighting on the side of the colonial master, together with an equal number of Vietnamese nationals fighting on the French side.

General Henri-Eugene Navarre, the French Commander-in-Chief at the time of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, wrote after the war in his *Agonie de l’Indochine*, that there were two acceptable but contradictory war aims: “France could be expected to fight the Indochina War alone but with all her might, **only** if the Indochina States [Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia] would accept a ‘special relationship’ that would justify the expenditure in blood and money that the fight would entail—and if they were willing to help in the fight to the utmost of their abilities.

“If, on the other hand, the Indochina War had become an integral part of the world-wide struggle, led by the United

States, for the containment of communism, **all other** nations concerned with stopping communism had an obligation equal to that of France to participate in the struggle.”³ Navarre’s words would come back to haunt the United States in its own war in Vietnam.

The decision of France to establish a garrison at Dien Bien Phu was the result of the “Navarre Plan.” In May 1953, General Navarre devised a two-stage strategy to better coordinate French units in Indochina. The first phase of his plan, from the spring of 1953 to the fall of 1954, called for pacification of Vietnam below the 18th parallel, and the consolidation of friendly bases and positions in southern Vietnam. In the North, the objective was to maintain a “defensive mentality” and avoid large-scale confrontations.

Having achieved supremacy in the South, Navarre would implement the second phase of his plan: From late 1954 to 1956, the French Expeditionary Corps would launch offensives against enemy strongholds throughout the North to provoke what Navarre called “general war.”

But the orders issued to Navarre by Army Chief of Staff Paul Ély, said something quite different: “Navarre’s objective was to create military conditions that would allow the government to negotiate a satisfactory, honorable solution in Indochina. Navarre was to show the Viet Minh the futility of seeking a victory by force, but rather seize the opportunity to negotiate,” as General Ély spelled out after the fact in his memoirs, *Indochina in Turmoil*.

Ély wrote: “By 1953, Paris understood that a military victory in Indochina was impossible. Its aim, therefore, was to prepare for negotiations and a political settlement from a position of strength.” The result of the Dien Bien Phu showdown was to be the exact opposite.

On Nov. 20, 1953, Navarre parachuted six battalions of the Expeditionary Corps into Muong Thanh Valley in the district of Dien Bien Phu, in part with the aim of defending Laos, also a French colony. Dien Bien Phu was located along route 41, at a crossroads which commanded the main access routes running into Laos from Vietnam. The French High Command estimated that control of this strategic point would not only halt the flow of supplies entering Laos from Vietnam, but also deter further Vietnamese involvement in Laos. In late December, the Viet Minh authorities approved the plan to destroy the French outpost at Dien Bien Phu, and named Vo Nguyen Giap campaign commander.

Informed of the enemy’s preparations, Navarre elected not to pull out the troops. On Dec. 3, he ordered that the remote outpost at Dien Bien Phu be fortified, thereby accepting the risk of a decisive confrontation with the Viet Minh. Aware of the implications of the decision, Navarre instructed his subordinates that, in the event of attack, the position “must be defended at all cost.”

Even while the battle was taking shape, the Viet Minh and the French agreed to hold peace talks to resolve the situation in Indochina. Following consultations with foreign governments, Paris decided to hold the meetings in Geneva as part of the first international conference to be held to discuss the Korean armistice. At the conclusion of the talks on Korea, the Indochina phase of the first Geneva Conference on Far Eastern Problems would begin. The scheduled date for the start of those negotiations was May 8, 1954—which would end up being the day after the fall of Dien Bien Phu!

The inclusion of the Indochina conflict in the Geneva meetings raised the stakes markedly for Vietnam. With the conference announced, Navarre understood that there would be a battle at Dien Bien Phu, and that the fate of France in the region would depend on its outcome. Ho Chi Minh agreed with this view, and ordered Vo Nguyen Giap to “throw all available forces against the Expeditionary Corps at Dien Bien Phu.”

Giap understood the importance of a victory there over the French. He believed that the destruction of the enemy outpost could alter the character of the war, and end the stalemate, and assure future victories. With the growing American financial and material commitment to the French cause, the Viet Minh needed a clear victory on the battlefield to prevent an extension of the conflict.

New research conducted by Pierre Asselin, at the University of Hawaii, indicates that the Politburo of the



Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap reviewing the troops, 1951.



Viet Minh transport on the road to Dien Bien Phu.

cover for the Viet Minh troops, and far greater capacity for undetected logistical supply.

Giap launched the attack and siege on March 13, having performed a miracle of logistics in the intervening two months. The Viet Minh mobilized 33,500 *dan cong* (patriotic workers) to assist and support the Viet Minh contingent at Dien Bien Phu, using 2,724 modified bicycles known as *xe tho*, 2,673 junks, and 17,400 horses. Their contribution was essential to enable Giap to wage a protracted conflict. For the period January-May 1954, the *dan cong* contributed 5 million work days to the anti-French resistance.

Bernard Fall wrote, in *Hell in a Very Small Place*: “The Viet-Minh had at its disposal a total of 600 Russian *Molotova*, 2.5-ton trucks for which barely passable roads and river ferries had to be built by tens of thousands of coolies. But the mainstay of the supply system was the tough bicycle-pushing human supply columns; a rider would carry often 200 kilos (440 pounds) of supplies on a standard bicycle whose seat had been replaced by a short holding stick and whose handlebars had been extended by another stick permitting the vehicle to be easily guided even when heavily loaded. Some 8,286 tons had been shipped over 600 miles of jungle from China to Dien Bien Phu: 4,620 tons of petrol products, 1,360 tons of ammunition, 46 tons of spare weapons, and 2,260 tons of consumable goods, including 1,700 tons of rice, of which 400 were eaten by the carrier columns on the trek.”

In the end, the French forces would be devastated by the

Vietnamese Communist Party and the Army Party Central Committee originally planned to launch the attack on Dien Bien Phu in the late afternoon of Jan. 26, 1954. That very morning, however, Giap called off the attack.

At the time of the commemoration of the battle in 2004, General Giap said in an interview with Voice of Vietnam News: “I remember President Ho told me, ‘you have the right to decide the campaign, fight it if you are sure you can win; if not, don’t fight.’ Giap said: “Thanks to his saying that, I decided to withdraw the troops when the battle was about to start and changed the tactic.” That change in tactic was decisive in the success of the Vietnamese forces. A withering campaign of attrition was conducted against the French forces, whose only lines of supply were air drops into the valley where the Dien Bien Phu base was located, surrounded by steep mountains of tropical rainforest, providing extensive

lack of logistics in depth, the passionate sense of mission that motivated the Viet Minh forces, and the choice of a theater of battle that was a certain death trap.

The French seriously underestimated the stamina and determination of the Viet Minh. Reports reaching the French about the massing of artillery in the hills around them were dismissed by the French as impossible. Alfred McCoy, author of *The Politics of Opium in Southeast Asia*, writes: “Confident that the Viet Minh could not possibly transport sufficient heavy artillery through the rough mountain terrain, the French generals ignored these warnings. When the artillery duel began in March 1954, French generals were shocked to find themselves outgunned; the Viet Minh had two hundred heavy artillery pieces with abundant ammunition, against the French garrison’s 28 heavy guns and insufficient ammunition.

“On the French side, estimates of supplies parachuted into Dien Bien Phu from March 13 to May 7 varied from 6,410 to 6,900 tons, and daily figures from 117 tons to 123 tons; but actually received usable supplies reduced this to about 100 tons per day. While this was not enough, it was a great deal more than any besieged fortress had received during World War II, from Corregidor to Stalingrad.”⁵

A long-time friend of Presidential candidate Lyndon H. LaRouche, U.S. Army Col. Malloy Vaughn (now deceased), had been sent to Dien Bien Phu, on a special mission, which he related to this author, to evaluate the potential use of nuclear weapons in the theater, at the request of then Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.

Colonel Vaughn found that the French were self-defeated long before the major battle began. Despite the fact that they had been given the most advanced tanks available by the U.S., they literally turned them into bunkers, rendering them immobile in what was admittedly hostile terrain. In Saigon, Colonel Vaughn repeatedly witnessed the off-loading of life-saving medical goods intended for Dien Bien Phu in Saigon, where they were exchanged them for cases of fine French wine. Reportedly, the French had stocked some 48,000 cases of vintage wine in Dien Bien Phu. French officers also kept their mistresses in camp.

In Dien Bien Phu itself, he noted that the entrance to the structures which served as underground bunkers were only dug wide enough for a single person to crawl in, such that if a French soldier was killed in the bunker, other soldiers, with no place to take cover, would become easy targets for the Viet Minh firing into the French compound.

Geneva

On May 7-8, 1954, the Viet Minh divisions overwhelmed the garrison. Estimates of the French killed were 3,000, with 10,000 captured, and estimates of 10,000 Vietnamese dead.

Simultaneously, on May 8, Vietnamese, French, Russian, Chinese, British, and American delegates sat down together for the first time in Geneva, Switzerland to discuss peace settlements in Korea and Vietnam. With the sudden military collapse of the French forces, the issue of Vietnam and Vietnamese independence could not be bypassed, no matter how much the Dulles brothers (Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and CIA Director Allen Dulles) wished they could.

OSS officer Archimedes Patti, who had worked closely with Ho Chi Minh during the war, described the scene as the second phase of the Geneva conference met at 4 p.m., on May 8, 1954:

“All the conferees had come with specific motives, none of which was altruistic: France had lost the will to fight and wanted a quick settlement; the United States had failed to keep France in the fight against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia through united military efforts, but still pursued containment as a goal; Britain wanted to restore peace and reduce the international tension which adversely affected its interests in that region; Communist China was seizing the opportunity to face the United States on an equal footing in matters of international significance; and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) wanted, and expected, to be recognized as a sovereign entity to be dealt with on its own merit.

“Of all the participants, the United States was the most encumbered ideologically. All along we had voiced concern



French Army

The last helicopter evacuates wounded French soldiers under shellfire.

Eisenhower on Strategic Defense

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who took office in January 1953, was faced immediately with demands from the French, and from the synarchist circles within his own administration and military, to deploy militarily into Vietnam in defense of the French colonial forces, against the war of independence led by the Viet Minh under Ho Chi Minh. Eisenhower provided support to the French, but refused to intervene. When the French under General Henri Navarre chose to make a stand at the isolated valley outpost of Dien Bien Phu, Eisenhower wrote: “Finally, they came along with this Dien Bien Phu plan. As a soldier, I was horror-stricken. I just said, ‘My goodness, you don’t pen troops in a fortress, and all history shows that they are just going to be cut to pieces. . . . I don’t think anything of this scheme.’ ”

Militarily, Eisenhower accepted the “domino theory,” and knew what it would take to win such a colonial war, but he also knew the consequences: “If they [the French] quit and Indochina falls to the Commies, it is easily possible that the entire Southeast Asia and Indonesia will go, soon to be followed by India. That prospect makes the whole problem one of interest to all. I’d favor heavy reinforcements to get the thing over at once; but **I’m convinced that no military victory is possible in that kind of theater.** Even if Indochina were completely cleared of Communists, **right across the border is China, with inexhaustible manpower.**”

Encouraged by the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “air-power” advocate Adm. Arthur W. Radford, to both defend the French and wage a “preventive” war against China, Eisenhower said: “If the U.S. took action against Communist China, there should be no halfway measures or frittering around. The Navy and Air Force should go in with full power, using new weapons, and strike at air



National Archives & Records Admin.

President Dwight Eisenhower with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, in 1956.

bases and ports in mainland China,” adding that this would likely lead to war with Russia as well. Eisenhower told Radford: “I want you to carry this question home with you. Gain such a victory, and what do you do with it? Here would be a great area from Elbe to Vladivostok, torn up and destroyed, without government, without its communications, just an area of starvation and disaster. I ask you what would the civilized world do about it? I repeat there is no victory except through our imaginations.”

‘No Such Thing’ as Preventive War

Asked at a press conference to comment on the idea of preventive war, Eisenhower responded: “I don’t believe there is such a thing; and, frankly, I wouldn’t even listen to anyone seriously that came in and talked about such a thing.” He was asked, if his answer was based on military or moral considerations. “It seems to me that when, by definition, a term is just ridiculous in itself, there is no use in going any further,” Eisenhower replied.

On unilateralism: “To go in unilaterally, in Indochina or other areas of the world which were endangered, amounted to an attempt to police the entire world. If we attempted such a course of action, using our armed forces and going into areas whether we were wanted or not, we would lose all our significant support in the free world. We would be everywhere accused of imperialistic ambitions.”

Eisenhower accused the French of using “weasel words in promising independence; and for this one reason as much as anything else, [they] have suffered reverses that have been really inexorable.” He further accused the French of alienating even the non-communist Vietnamese, in the same way the British had lost the War of American Independence by treating the majority of Loyalist Americans as “colonials and inferiors.”

Quotes taken from: Decision Against War, Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, by Melanie Billings-Yun; and Eisenhower: Soldier and President, by Stephen E. Ambrose.

—Gail Billington

for Indochina's future status as an independent state in various forms and in many forums. With the passing of time the concept of self-determination for the Indochinese became confused and eventually degenerated into mere lip service, although remaining an ideological 'hang-up.' At Geneva, [former U.S. Secretary of State Dean] Acheson and Allen Dulles talked only of 'containment of communism,' not the freedom from French rule for which the Viet Minh had fought so hard."⁵

Ho Chi Minh was faced with a dilemma at Geneva. One option was to demand Viet Minh control over all of Vietnam, or at least a coalition with prominent Viet Minh participation. This option would be backed up by a threat to extend military operations from the North into the southern section, still under French control, if national reconciliation were to be prevented by the French or the U.S.

But Ho knew that Secretary Dulles would not agree to a unified Vietnam with Viet Minh participation, and that such a demand would play into the Dulles faction's intention for the U.S. to essentially replace the French as an occupying power. Ho decided to take the chance that the U.S. would live up to its anti-colonial heritage, and keep a promise to allow nationwide elections within two years—elections which everyone knew would be won by Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh.

China's Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai agreed. The new People's Republic of China, established in 1949, had been devastated by the 1950-1953 Korean War. The vast expenditures of human and economic resources in that war had severely held back their plans for internal development. Although China provided substantial aid to the Viet Minh, they did not want to become entangled in another war. Secretary of State Dulles refused to negotiate with China (and famously refused to accept Zhou Enlai's outstretched hand at the Geneva Conference), but Zhou nonetheless encouraged Vietnam to compromise, by accepting a "temporary" division of the country into North and South at the 17th parallel, with the promise of a nationwide election in the near term. That promise was made at Geneva, but was never fulfilled.

The Nuclear Option

Had Truman still been President at the time of Dien Bien Phu, or if President Dwight Eisenhower had accepted the utopian dogma of "air power" and preventive war, Dien Bien Phu could well have become the beginning of World War III (see box). Although Eisenhower accepted the "domino theory," and wanted to stop what he saw as the spread of communism in Asia, he understood the principle of strategic defense, and the consequences of imperial thinking.

From the moment President Eisenhower took office in January 1953, there was intense pressure on him, from within his own administration and from certain military leaders, to join the French militarily in their war with the Viet Minh, even if it meant a nuclear strike on China. John Foster Dulles had even proposed using nuclear weapons to

save the French at Dien Bien Phu.

On April 29, in the midst of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu, Eisenhower told his National Security Council: "To go in unilaterally in Indochina or other areas of the world which were endangered, amounted to an attempt to police the entire world. If we attempted such a course of action, using our armed forces and going into areas, whether we were wanted or not, we would lose all our significant support in the free world. We would be everywhere accused of imperialistic ambitions."⁶

Ike accused the French of using "weasel words in promising independence; and for this one reason, as much as anything else, [they] have suffered reverses that have been really inexcusable." The French had alienated the non-communist Vietnamese, he said, in the same way the British had lost the War of American Independence by treating the majority of Loyalist Americans as "colonials and inferiors."⁷

Historian Stephen Ambrose, in his book *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, relates that "Five times in 1954, virtually the entire National Security Council, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and State Department recommended that he intervene in Asia, even using atomic bombs against China. . . . Five times he said no."

Only with the end of Eisenhower's Presidency in 1961, and the assassination of his successor, John F. Kennedy, in 1963, were the utopians able to achieve their intention of dragging the U.S. into a full-scale colonial war in Asia.

After 50 years, the battle of Dien Bien Phu is still a reminder of the folly of imperial ambitions, and the fact that a sovereign nation, ultimately, can not be defeated through bestial policies of shock and awe by an occupying power. The utopians of our day have clearly failed to learn that lesson. The Vietnamese would be well served if patriots around the world would join in the commemoration of their great victory.

Notes:

1. Archimedes L.A. Patti, *Why Viet Nam? Prelude to America's Albatross*; University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980; p. 223.
2. www.channelnewsasia.com, posted March 11, 2004.
3. Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place, The Siege of Dien Bien Phu*; J.B. Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1967; Preface, p. viii.
4. McCoy, Alfred W., *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*; Harper & Row, New York, 1972, p. 105.
5. Patti, p. 436.
6. Melanie Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954*; Columbia University Press, New York, 1988, p. 144.
7. Billings-Yun; p. 151.

Suggested reading:

- Alfred W. McCoy and Cathleen B. Read, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*; Harper & Row, New York, 1972
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- Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, A History*; Penguin Books, England, 1983