

A Turning Point in American-Vietnamese Relations

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The recognition of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam by Communist China, the U.S.S.R. and its Eastern European satellites in January, 1950 was the paramount milestone that created an irrevocable rift between America and the D.R.V.

An argument can be made for various events in the time span between 1941 through 1964 that may be considered as the most critical turning point for the United States' involvement in Vietnam. The list of significant occurrences involving American and Vietnamese relations is plentiful in that frame of time; however, the years 1945 through 1950 provided the biggest impetus for America's meddling in Vietnamese affairs and culminated with the eventual war. Domestic events in both countries and international developments shaped the hard line attitudes especially on the American side that led to a war.

Ho Chi Minh's declaration of Vietnamese independence from France in 1945 did not engender a significant negative reaction from the United States. American political and military leaders were ambivalent about Ho's political leanings and some viewed him positively due to the help he provided during the war against the Japanese. Our intelligence reports portrayed his declaration of independence as the result of a popularly supported nationalistic movement to get rid of French colonial rule. Due to their own colonial ambitions, British troops

aided the French in their efforts to re-establish colonial rule in Vietnam in 1946. Americans provided some logistical support, but it was not an overt action to overthrow the Viet Minh. We helped the French because they did not have enough resources to transport their troops to Vietnam and as a show of support to our weakened World War II ally. Throughout 1946, the Viet Minh and the French were engaged in diplomatic talks hoping to find a solution to their impasse. The French were stalling for time until their forces were strong enough to re-establish their colonial rights in Vietnam. Subsequently, the French War started in late 1946.

Asian issues did not take precedence in America's foreign affairs; the United States' attention was focused on Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe in the period immediately following World War I. Stalin's desire to create a buffer zone between Western Europe and Russia emboldened him to use the Soviet army to create satellite nations in Eastern Europe ruled by communists. To prevent the further spread of worldwide communism, President Truman announced the Truman Doctrine in 1947. America pledged to use its economic and military resources to aid countries being threatened by either an internal or external communist takeover. The Doctrine was initially used to successfully defend democratic regimes in Turkey and Greece, which were being threatened by communists. The Marshall Plan was an integral part of the Truman Doctrine. It was implemented in Western Europe to stabilize and re-start economies devastated during World War II. The communists considered these American actions as provocative and the start of the Cold War.

Back in East Asia, the French created the state of Vietnam in 1948 to counter Ho Chi Minh's independent republic. They installed Emperor Bao Dai as its head in 1949. Neither the French nor the Viet Minh could gain an advantage in their ongoing war. American leadership was not actively participating in an

effort to permanently overthrow Ho Chi Minh and his Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Tacit support was given by America to the French war effort in the form of economic aid through the Marshall Plan.

The main concerns for the United States in Asia at this time were the nationalist insurrections in Malaysia and Burma plus the ongoing civil war between the Chinese communists and nationalists. America provided military and economic support to the nationalists. Unfortunately, their leader, General Chiang Kai-shek, was an unpopular despot who was only interested in keeping his power and not improving his country. The year, 1949 proved to be a good year for worldwide communism. The Chinese communists defeated the nationalists late in the year and established the People's Republic of China. The Soviet Union successfully tested its first atomic bomb during the same year. Suddenly, a movement that now rivaled our military power was threatening America's interests in Asia as well as in Europe.

President Truman and his administration were heavily criticized for the "loss" of China. The criticism implied that if additional help had been provided to the nationalist forces, they might have been able to hold off and possibly beat the communists. The Truman Doctrine had failed to keep communism from obtaining a large foothold in Asia. The recognition of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam by China, the Soviet Union and most of its satellite Eastern European allies in January 1950 further increased the pressure on President Truman to contain the spread of communism in Asia. Vietnam and, later in the year, South Korea needed to be saved from the clutches of communism. Once Ho Chi Minh and the D. V. R. were recognized as the legitimate government of Vietnam by other communist countries, American military and economic aid to France increased exponentially in an effort to keep the country from becoming

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communist. It became a mantra for future American administrations that they would not be known for “losing” the next Vietnam to the communists.