

**CHARLES UNIVERSITY**  
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
Institute of International Studies  
Department of American Studies

**Master's Thesis**

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**Do Phuong Thuy**

**CHARLES UNIVERSITY**  
**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
Institute of International Studies  
Department of American Studies

**The OSS in Vietnam during the Second World War**

Master's thesis

Author: Phuong Thuy Do

Study programme: American Studies

Supervisor: PhDr. Jan Bečka, Ph.D.

Year of the defence: 2020

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on May 21, 2020

Phuong Thuy Do

## References

DO, Phuong Thuy. *The OSS in Vietnam during the Second World*. Praha, 2020. 68 pages. Master's thesis (Mgr.). Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of International Studies. Department of American Studies. Supervisor PhDr. Jan Bečka PhD.

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## **Abstract**

The United States engagement in Vietnam began during the Second World War. With military bases established in China, the U.S. took part in fighting the Japanese troops in the Pacific theatre. When France surrendered to Nazi Germany in 1940, Japan would take over the French Indochina and the war would spread to Vietnam as well. In order to collect intelligence on Japanese targets, the Americans needed to operate secret services on the ground. After the Japanese coup de main in 1945, they would eventually partner with Ho Chi Minh and his organization Viet Minh. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the wartime predecessor of the CIA, provided intelligence training and equipment, while the Viet Minh would assist with valuable information on Japanese troops. To some extent, the OSS helped Ho Chi Minh and Viet Minh accede to power in Vietnam after the war.

## **Abstrakt**

Americká angažovanost ve Vietnamu se datuje už od druhé světové války. Ze základny v Číně se Spojené státy zapojovaly do války v Pacifiku proti Japonsku. Když se v roce 1940 Francie vzdala do rukou nacistické říše, japonská vojska vstoupila do francouzské Indočíny. Válka se automaticky přesunula i na území Vietnamu. Pro účely bombardování japonských cílů, potřebovali Američané informace o poloze nepřátelských vojsk. V jihovýchodní Asii se tak pohybovali agenti Úřadu pro strategické informace (OSS), předchůdce dnešní CIA. Po japonském vládním převratu v Indočině v roce 1945, agenti OSS přišli i o své kontakty. Rozhodli se začít spolupracovat s Ho Chi Minhem a jeho organizací Viet Minh, kterým nevědomky po konci války pomohli k moci.

## **Keywords**

Vietnam, Second World War, the OSS, Office of Strategic Services, William J. Donovan, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Charles Fenn, United States, the Vietnam War, Ho Chi Minh, French Indochina, Japan, France, occupation, communism.

## **Klíčová slova**

Vietnam, druhá světová válka, OSS, Úřad pro strategické služby, William J. Donovan, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Charles Fenn, Spojené státy americké, válka ve Vietnamu, Ho Či Min, Viet Minh, francouzská Indočína, Japonsko, Francie, okupace, komunismus.

## **Název práce**

Role OSS ve Vietnamu za druhé světové války

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to express my gratitude to Jan Bečka for his patience during this three-years long process.

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## **Introduction**

For the country's strategic geographical position in Southeast Asia along the coast of South China Sea, Vietnam has always been an interest to world's superpowers. If we understand the defeat at Dien Bien Phu to be the end of the French dominion, the local population had been oppressed by the colonial regime for almost a hundred years. The French contribution to development of Indochina was quite limited. They changed the written language and the bureaucracy, built schools, road and railroads, but mostly for their own use. Only few were able to profit, among them mainly French citizens and local Chinese. Most of the colonial subjects suffered from poverty which was even deepened by the Great Depression. As a result, resistance to the French domination grew and many nationalist movements were formed. The most successful one was the Viet Minh, founded by Vietnam's most famous communist leader Ho Chi Minh.

The United States was not always engaged in the region, which was under the influence of European nations. This changed during the Second World War after the French surrendered to the Nazis and the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. To win the war in the Pacific theatre, Americans needed men on the ground, not only soldiers but also intelligence agents who would assist the U.S. army identifying Japanese targets and troops movements. But a unified U.S. intelligence agency did not exist, various government departments had their own secret services which only created unnecessary confusion and competition. Therefore, for purposes of war, President Roosevelt partnered with his long-time friend William J. Donovan and the two founded the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the CIA.

OSS work in Asia was very different from what their colleagues experienced in Europe. Roosevelt's anti-colonial stands and spread of communism limited options on which nation to work with. The OSS drafted many American civilians who worked for businesses based in Indochina merely for their contact networks and knowledge of the area but had minimum intelligence training. Based in China near Tonkin borders, the OSS partnered with the Chinese and many Frenchmen. Working with Vietnamese nationalist groups was not desirable by neither of the Allies for various reasons. The French were afraid the Vietnamese would use U.S. help to claim independence after the war. The Chinese wanted to stay loyal to the French and also warned of communist tendencies of the resistance groups. But gradually, cooperation with the Free French proved difficult due to the U.S. President's anti-colonial policy.

Furthermore, the whole network of OSS contacts was shattered with the Coup de March in 1945 when the Japanese brought down the French establishment. OSS's Chinese and French associates had to flee the country and wires turned silent. However, the U.S. Air Force needed intelligence on weather and Japanese targets and the Americans received clearance from the OSS headquarters to engage with the Vietnamese. They partnered with Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh despite the obvious inclination to communism. The OSS provided secret service trainings, weapons and other equipment and Viet Minh soldiers produced valuable intelligence.

After the Japanese army was defeated, French leader Charles de Gaulle was eager to reclaim the colonial empire and Vietnam found itself in a civil war. The United States tried to stay out of this conflict while de Gaulle kept urging Truman to send military help. In the context of the Chinese communist revolution and the Korean War, the United States eventually supported French army with limited airstrikes, but this would not prevent the grandiose Viet Minh's victory at Dien Bien Phu.

In Geneva, Vietnam was divided by the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. When free elections, which were supposed to unite the country, never occurred, the Vietnamese people found themselves in yet another civil war. The United States' involvement now came in full strength in the name of communism containment, and Ho Chi Minh who was once their great admirer and friend would now become their greatest enemy.

How come the once close allies who depended on each other in the Second World War would turn to be such rivals? Why would the United States agree to partner with an organization with inclination to communism, the political belief they would later despise so much in the first place? And why would they choose to cooperate with Viet Minh from all other Vietnamese nationalist groups?

Some OSS agents saw the reality on the ground and what the French and Japanese oppression had done. Some American officers started to sympathize with the Vietnamese, claiming that they had a full right and abilities to establish and govern their own country. If the OSS saw these indications, why would Harry Truman abandon his predecessor's anti-colonial policy and allow France to re-establish her colonial empire? How much did OSS agents – with provision of military trainings, weapons and other equipment – contribute to bringing the Viet Minh to power? And how much would cultural, religious and language barriers complicate their work? This thesis would try to conclude answers to all of these questions.

## **Methodology and Structure**

Due to my Vietnamese heritage, I have always been interested in Southeast Asia and the American engagement in the region. Many books and studies have been written, many movies and documentaries filmed about the Vietnam War, but there seems to be a lack of knowledge of the U.S. role in the area prior to one of the longest conflicts in American history. American soldiers had to collect intelligence to effectively defeat the Japanese in the Pacific theatre. In these hectic times and merely for the purpose of war, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was born, the first ever American central intelligence agency. I find it astonishing how few men, some of them with anti-colonial beliefs, would influence events in Indochina and possibly contribute to the rise of Viet Minh, and therefore, to Vietnamese independence.

This paper is written as a case study and maps the events of OSS engagement in Vietnam during the Second World War. It intends to find answers to questions on the extent of OSS agents' influence in Vietnam and to what degree they contributed to events that took place after the war – Ho Chi Minh's accession to power and declaration of Vietnamese independence, followed by the expulsion of the French from Indochina.

I work with a number of primary sources, some of them written by the OSS agents who served in Vietnam and even met Ho Chi Minh. The Vietnam War ended 45 years ago which provided enough time to reflect on the events during the war but also on those which preceded it. OSS reports from the Second World War have been declassified which enabled researches to conduct analysis and summarize them in their books. Primary sources in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) I was not able to access and had to rely on secondary sources which work with them. During my stay at the University of New Orleans, I also conducted interviews with two experts on the Far East who provided me with comprehensive understanding of the OSS role in Vietnam and the U.S. role in Southeast Asia in general.

I have divided the study into six chapters. For purpose of context and further understanding, the first one is the introduction to the French dominion over Indochina which dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nine decades of colonial rule, which failed to raise the natives from poor living conditions, set grounds for forming of many nationalist movements. Today, we know that Viet Minh under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, overshadowed them all. After the French surrendered to the Nazis and the Japanese invaded Indochina, Vietnamese nationalists started plotting plans for the French to never return back to power.

The second chapter describes American foreign policies towards Southeast Asia. The Vietnam War left a dark mark in U.S. history, but Vietnam and the United States had not always been enemies. President Roosevelt's anti-imperialist beliefs created hope of the U.S. support for independence of Asian colonies. He would articulate those visions aloud but would not manage to transform them into actions. After his death and the end of the Second World War, his ideas would be abandoned, and instead of focusing on small colonies far away, the United States would put Europe first.

Chapter number three introduces the figure of Ho Chi Minh and his movement Viet Minh. Ho was a very clever, charismatic and resilient communist leader, who appeared to be more of a nationalist in the first place. He would travel the world and learn many languages to later impress almost everyone who would meet him. He was a great admirer of the United States and would get inspired by the American Declaration of Independence. The Viet Minh was formed in 1941 in order to fight off the French and the Japanese and, following the U.S. example almost two hundred years ago, declare independence of Vietnam.

The fourth chapter focuses on the OSS. The agency was founded for war purposes in 1942 by President Roosevelt and his long-time friend William J. Donovan. The organization was the first U.S. central intelligence agency and would answer only to the President. OSS agents operated all over the world. In the China theatre, they would engage with the Chinese, the French and eventually with the Vietnamese. This study follows storylines of some of the OSS agents like Charles Fenn who was the first to meet and think of partnering with Ho Chi Minh.

The last chapter concludes with events which took place after the Japanese coup de march in 1945 which de facto removed the French rule in Indochina and, after the defeat of Japan, created a short power vacuum into which Ho Chi Minh stepped in and declared the Vietnamese independence. A bold step which would result in the Indochina War. The chapter also looks into the role of an OSS officer Archimedes Patti who was by the end of the Second World War deployed to China to lead on Indochina operations, and the OSS 'Deer Team' agents who operated inside Vietnam and provided training to the Viet Minh guerillas.

## Sources

The research relies on both primary and secondary sources. Two memoirs of former OSS agents Charles Fenn and Archimedes Patti were widely used to gain a picture of the operations on the ground. Fenn's book *At the Dragon's Gate: With the OSS in the Far East*<sup>1</sup> maps his life from the moment he was deployed from Washington to Burma, from where he was transferred to China to work with the well-known GBT (Gordon) Group on intelligence operations against the Japanese inside of Indochina. He was the first OSS agent to establish an official working relationship with Ho Chi Minh who started to work for the American secret service under the code name 'Lucius'. The cooperation proved successful and Fenn would open door for other OSS agents who worked directly with Ho inside of Tonkin and trained Viet Minh soldiers. Fenn's other book called *Ho Chi Minh: A Biographical Introduction*<sup>2</sup> is similar in events but focuses merely on life of the famous Viet Minh leader. Fenn's opinions at that time would be described as left-wing. He sympathized with the Vietnamese people and thought the French should be deprived of their colony.

Patti's book *Why Viet Nam? Prelude to America's Albatross*<sup>3</sup> is a comprehensive study on events which took place in regard to Indochina from January 1944 to September 1945 when he left Vietnam. Unlike Fenn, Patti does not focus on events immediately effecting only himself. In contrast to his fellow OSS colleagues, Patti had already been an expert on Vietnam prior to his arrival to the China theatre. In Washington, he worked as the head of Indochina desk at the OSS headquarters, therefore, was familiar with reports other agents had produced and came into the region with a clear plan of engagement with the Viet Minh. Similarly to Fenn, also Patti sympathized with the Vietnamese and would later criticize the U.S. government for getting involved in the Vietnam War. He claimed that if the U.S. government would look into the OSS reports, they would understand the true situation in Southeast Asia and the war could be avoided. Patti's and Fenn's books offer an insight into OSS operations without having to inspect the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). I treated both of these sources as memoirs and kept in mind that both authors display their subjective views.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Fenn, *At the Dragon's Gate: With the OSS in the Far East* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biographical Introduction* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Archimedes L. A. Patti, *Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).

During my stay in the United States in 2017, I interviewed two professors at the University of New Orleans, experts on the Far East. Both Allan R. Millet, PhD.<sup>4</sup> and John D. Fitzmorris<sup>5</sup> led courses about the Vietnam War. Both of them agreed that the Second World War was a great opportunity for Vietnamese nationalists to end the French domination and that the U.S. approach to Vietnam changed with President Roosevelt's death. They would also point out that the OSS agents had to deal with major racial, cultural and language differences which complicated their work extensively.

I also dived into the 1972 *U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations hearings on Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War*.<sup>6</sup> The hearings heavily relied on the leaked Pentagon Papers. Speakers including former OSS agents, academics and other experts offered an insight on events leading to the Vietnam War. It is only fair to point out that James. W. Fulbright, the longest serving chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was a Democrat and his party held majority in both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives during Richard Nixon's presidency. The Senator was also known for opposing McCarthyism and later the American involvement in Vietnam War.

To mention other essential primary sources, I also quote the *Pentagon Papers*<sup>7</sup> or the reports and diplomatic correspondence of the *Foreign Relations of the United States*.<sup>8</sup>

The most important secondary source is the book by Dixee R. Bartholomew-Feis, a researcher from Buena Vista University in Storm Lake, Iowa, called *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh: Unexpected Allies in the War Against Japan*.<sup>9</sup> This comprehensive research, by some considered the most detailed survey on the subject, uses a large amount of declassified primary sources from the NARA which I would not be able to access. Her work lacks a summary of historical debates

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<sup>4</sup> Allan R. Millet, PhD. (Professor at University of New Orleans), in a personal interview with the author, November 30, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> John D. Fitzmorris (researcher at University of New Orleans), in a personal interview with the author, December 4, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Transcripts of "Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Second Congress, Second Session on Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War, May 9, 10, and 11, 1972", Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/stream/causesoriginsles00unit/causesoriginsles00unit\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/causesoriginsles00unit/causesoriginsles00unit_djvu.txt) (accessed on July 5, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> "Pentagon Papers, Vietnam and the U.S., 1940-1950, Vol. 1", National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/research/pentagon-papers> (accessed on May 16, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> United States, Foreign Relations of the United States, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/>.

<sup>9</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, Dixee R., *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2006).

about the significance of the OSS-Viet Minh cooperation, but for the detailed study she was often cited by researchers at the CIA.

Other secondary literature books used are *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam*<sup>10</sup> by William J. Duiker, a former United States Foreign Service officer; *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency*<sup>11</sup> by Richard Harris Smith, a former CIA officer; *The Vietnamese revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War*<sup>12</sup> by Stein Tonnesson, a Norwegian historian whose research focuses on the Southeast Asian region; and *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power*<sup>13</sup> by David Marr, a former intelligence officer at the U.S. Marine Corps who was deployed to Vietnam in 1962. After that, he returned to the United States to engage in his research of Vietnam at various institutions. All of these books were released prior to 2000s and, therefore, do not offer as comprehensive understanding as Bartholomew-Feis's research does.

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<sup>10</sup> William J. Duiker, *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972).

<sup>12</sup> Stein Tonnesson, *The Vietnamese revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War* (London: SAGE, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

# 1. French colonial rule

French rule dates back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Vietnam was divided into three parts, Cochinchina and protectorates of Tonkin and Annam. The French held the power while formally letting a Nguyen Dynasty Emperor sit on the throne in Hue. When the colonialists completed conquering Laos by the end of the century, the Indochinese Union was formed. While the tropical climate and fertile soil promised economic profit, Indochina was not really profitable. Industry was based on agriculture, the region was technologically and socially underdeveloped, and the cost of occupation and administration by far exceeded any economic income.<sup>14</sup>

The French failed in increasing the quality of life of their colonial subjects. Their reforms to redistribute land and improve agricultural production did achieved colonial economic goals – for example, by the turn of the century, southern part of Vietnam was transformed into a rice and rubber exporter – but only the French and ethnic Chinese settled in Vietnam were able to make a profit. Also, the tax burden was shifted from the French to the Vietnamese, and France also gained monopoly for alcohol, opium and salt production and sale. Infrastructure was mostly built only for French needs. This all deepened the already existing poverty and misery of most of the colonial subjects,<sup>15</sup> which was even deepened with the Great Depression between both world wars.<sup>16</sup> Increasing literacy among the Indochinese also did not appear to be a priority for the French. Most of the Vietnamese did not (for the reason of resisting the colonial education) or could not attend school. As a result of this badly managed colonial system, many nationalist movements emerged throughout the region. Later, we would learn about a particular one which stood out the most – the Viet Minh led by Ho Chi Minh.<sup>17</sup>

During the 1972 U.S. Senate Vietnam War hearings which were set to investigate the U.S. involvement, professor James C. Thomson, jr. of Harvard University stated that the French governed the colony so badly, it led to a unification of Vietnamese nationalists and Vietnamese

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<sup>14</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 9-10.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 11-15.

<sup>16</sup> Martin J. Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina (1870-1940)* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 161.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Dalloz, *The War in Indo-China, 1945-54*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Dublin, Ireland: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), 8; Duiker, “Sacred War”, 15.

communists. This fusion became even stronger during the Japanese oppression and then even more when the French returned.

Thomson also compared Ho Chi Minh to George Washington:

“As a result of such coalescence, such fusion, the leadership of the Vietnamese revolution for independence and nationhood had largely fallen under the control of long-indigenous Vietnamese Communists by the mid- and late-1940’s. Ho Chi Minh was the George Washington of Vietnam, whatever we may think of his politics, though, like George Washington, he had to struggle against loyalist pro-European elements within the bureaucracy, army and intelligentsia.”<sup>18</sup>

During the hearings Thomson also implied that the French missed the opportunity to withdraw from Vietnam right after the Second World War. In result, they faced a disgraceful expulsion by Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap. But inconveniently for the United States, this all happened when Washington started to face the challenges of the Cold War, and the West lost China and North Korea to the communist forces.<sup>19</sup>

As we will see, the French colonial regime established an environment of white supremacy. Most Vietnamese nationalist movements originated from here, as a reaction to a century long oppression. If the French cared about the welfare of their subordinates and let their society evolve, the resistance and desire for independence would never become so strong. The Japanese understood this well and as they marched into Indochina, they pretended to champion equality and anti-imperialism for which they also created an organization called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (GEACPS).

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<sup>18</sup> Transcripts of “Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Second Congress, Second Session on Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War, May 9, 10, and 11, 1972”, Statement of James C. Thompson, Internet Archive, [https://archive.org/stream/causesoriginsles00unit/causesoriginsles00unit\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/causesoriginsles00unit/causesoriginsles00unit_djvu.txt) (accessed on July 5, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

## 1.1 French capitulation and Japanese take-over

French capitulation after the Nazi invasion in 1940 isolated the government in Paris from Asian colonies. The Japanese closed roads through which the French supported Kuomintang (KMT) in China. They handed an ultimatum to Governor General of Indochina Georges Catroux with two conditions, closing the Tonkin-Chinese border to the export of war material and admitting the Japanese military control over Tonkin. With the establishment of the Vichy government, Catroux decided that a limited cooperation with Japan would be better than losing the colonies in total.<sup>20</sup> To use their military manpower elsewhere, the Japanese let the French continue with governing of Indochina without further internal politics interference. The French were even allowed to keep their army as long as they would stay away from the Japanese operation.<sup>21</sup>

To only need few troops to control Vietnam was very advantageous for the Japanese army. By 1944, only 40,000 Japanese soldiers were present in Indochina. And as unbelievable as it sounds, they treated Vietnamese troops better than French commanders.<sup>22</sup>

Japan made a smart move. They secured an important strategic base in Southeast Asia at minimal military cost and were able to cut China off any military aid. At that time, the only way to support China was with deliveries through Tonkin's Haiphong port. Japan had overall control over Indochinese raw materials, agriculture, and harbors for shipping supplies and troops.<sup>23</sup> Japan had "a vastly superior army and weapons, plus complete control of the air, because China had neither an air force or air defense". Roosevelt had to find a new way to aid the Chinese. A group of paid volunteers of civil and Air Force pilots was established to combat Japanese plane attacks. The group was led by Claire L. Chennault, a war hero from the First World War, and would later rise to fame as 'the Flying Tigers' who "cleared the Chinese skies of Japanese aircraft (...) never bothering with tactics because the Chinese had no aircraft and almost no air defense."<sup>24</sup>

Due to disagreements with the Vichy government, Catroux handed over his position to Vice Admiral Decoux in summer of 1940. Decoux found himself in a more difficult position. He had to deal with an even stronger Japan which grew in power after signing the Axis Pact in

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled* (New York: Praeger, 1967), 235; John E. Dreifort, "Japan's Advance into Indochina, 1940: The French Response," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (September 1982): 280, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20070499> (accessed on April 17, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> R. H. Smith, "OSS", 320.

<sup>22</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, "The OSS and Ho Chi Minh", 26-27.

<sup>23</sup> Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam* (New York: Dodd Mead & Company, 1970), 21.

<sup>24</sup> Fenn, "At the Dragon's Gate", 23.

September. Vichy government had to recognize Japanese supreme political and economic interests in the Far East while kept being reassured of its sovereignty over Indochina.<sup>25</sup>

Probably, Ho Chi Minh put it best:

“The Japanese [have] become the real masters. The French [have] become kind of respectable slaves. And upon the Indo-Chinese falls the double honor of being not only slaves to Japanese, but also slaves of the slaves – the French. [sic]”<sup>26</sup>

Japan created the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (GEACPS) under a pretense of “Pan-Asianism”. Most of the Vietnamese, and the rest of the world, were sceptic about the concept. The truth is the “Asian for Asians” rhetoric only masked the continuation of yet another colonial relationship which allowed Japan to:

- secure raw material;
- ensure freedom of transport for raw materials and personnel;
- oppress the natives.<sup>27</sup>

Vietnam paid a horrible cost. The exploitation of land reduced rice crops to plant oil seeds, cotton, peanuts, and jute. The fertile South was able to survive, but bad weather, poor harvest and allied bombing led to famine in the North. One to two million Vietnamese starved to death in late 1944 and early 1945.<sup>28</sup>

It is to no surprise that after experiencing such exploitation from not only white colonialists but also fellow Asians, the Vietnamese craved for independence even more. Resistance movements spread ready to fight off the Japanese and simultaneously not letting the French restore the prewar order. Soon, they realized they needed to find allies for such cause and turned to a superpower which called for ending of imperialism and colonialism, the United States.

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<sup>25</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 26.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Goeffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 12.

<sup>27</sup> David Bergamini, *Japan's Imperial Conspiracy* (New York: Morrow, 1971), 812.

<sup>28</sup> David Marr, “Vietnam 1945”, 96-107.

## 2. The United States and Indochina

On May 9, 1972, Senator J. W. Fulbright opened the Vietnam War Senate hearings with this statement:

“The United States today has 68,000 troops stationed in South Vietnam, with an additional 52,000 men on ships offshore, 37,000 Air Force personnel in neighboring Thailand and 10,000 on Guam. The arrival of the sixth aircraft carrier stationed off Vietnam brings the number of combat aircraft to 1,000. On some days in past weeks these aircraft have flown as many as 1,000 sorties. As of April 29 of this year, over 55,861 Americans have lost their lives in Indochina.”<sup>29</sup>

Objectives of the hearings were to determine “Why are we fighting in Vietnam? How did we get there? What were the reasons for the initial U.S. commitment? Have these reasons changed, and if so, why do we persist?” Fulbright also acknowledged that roots of the engagement stretched back as far as the Second World War.<sup>30</sup>

According to Fulbright’s statement, publication of the so-called Pentagon Papers was what triggered the 1972 Senate hearings. The Committee on Foreign Relations had undertaken their own studies of important milestones, had analyzed critical decisions during the first year of John F. Kennedy Administration, they had examined attitudes toward Ho Chi Minh during and after the Second World War, and they also had looked into the events which led to the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem. The Committee had relied heavily on the leaked Pentagon Papers since other executive agencies had denied requests for additional documentation.<sup>31</sup>

The United States had many motives to become engaged in Vietnam. Proximity to their Asian allies was one of the main reasons. The National Security Council in December 1949 in NSC 48/1 reported to U.S. President Harry S. Truman that “colonial conflict provides a fertile field for subversive communist activities, and it is now clear that southeast [sic] Asia is the target of a

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<sup>29</sup> “Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Second Congress, Second Session on Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War, May 9, 10, and 11, 1972”.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

coordinated offensive directed by the Kremlin”.<sup>32</sup> Noam Chomsky during the 1972 Senate hearings stated that according to the Pentagon Papers, they did not have any evidence of that. The United States simply could not let Japan fall under the Soviet Union sphere of influence because it could lead to communist global dominance. But a strong Japan required Asian food, raw materials and markets in order not to be dependent on China which was taken over by a communist regime earlier the same year.<sup>33</sup>

As the NSC 48/1 report continue, it is clear that already by this time, the National Security Council understood the importance of starting the Southeast Asian communist resistance in Asia and not anywhere else:

“it must be remembered that the long colonial tradition in Asia has left the peoples of that area suspicious of Western influence. We must approach the problem from the Asiatic point of view in so far as possible and should refrain from taking the lead in movements which must of necessity be of Asian origin. It will therefore be to our interest wherever possible to encourage the peoples of India, Pakistan, the Philippines and other Asian states to take the leadership in meeting the common problems of the area... [sic]”<sup>34</sup>

But on December 30, 1949, the National Security Council advised President Truman to put the European Allies first:

“the United States should continue to use its influence in Asia toward resolving the colonial-nationalist conflict in such a way as to satisfy the fundamental demands of the nationalist movement while at the same time minimizing the strain on the colonial powers who are our Western allies. Particular attention should be given to the problem of French Indo-China

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<sup>32</sup> As quoted in “Pentagon Papers, Vietnam and the U.S., 1940-1950, Vol. 1”.

<sup>33</sup> “Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Second Congress, Second Session on Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War, May 9, 10, and 11, 1972”, Statement of Noam Chomsky.

<sup>34</sup> “Pentagon Papers, Vietnam and the U.S., 1940-1950, Vol. 1”.

and action should be taken to bring home to the French the urgency of removing the barriers to the obtaining by Bao Dai or other non-Communist nationalist leaders of the support of a substantial proportion of the Vietnamese... [sic]<sup>35</sup>

The NSC also encouraged U.S. companies to invest in the region where possible.<sup>36</sup>

Chomsky also disputed that the U.S. intervention, after the French were forced to leave, was mainly motivated by blind anti-Communism. He called it the rational imperialism as the intervention was motivated by access to new free markets, raw materials, cheap labor and investment opportunities by Japan and other Western powers. Chomsky accused the United States of using anti-Communism as propaganda to gain domestic support. But there was

“one form of anti-Communism motivated U.S. intervention: namely, opposition to indigenous Communist-led movements, under the assumptions of the domino theory. A second form of anti-Communism was invoked to justify the intervention, publicly and internally: fear of a Kremlin-directed conspiracy or Chinese aggression — as far as we know, the figment of imagination.”<sup>37</sup>

The United States kept being pushed by European Allies to get involved. The British needed “American finance, equipment, and manpower, plus the enthusiasm and energy of those who come fresh to the task”. Americans reciprocally needed UK know-how, experience and facilities.<sup>38</sup> In 1949, The British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Ernest Bevin wrote in a memorandum to the U.S. Secretary of State that he found it unlikely that Russia would militarily invade Southeast Asia. He even speculated that conditions for spreading Communism in the region were so favorable that it could fall as a whole a victim of Communism without any military effort. The British Foreign Secretary wanted to encourage his US counterpart to cooperate more with the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> “Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Second Congress, Second Session on Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War, May 9, 10, and 11, 1972”, Statement of Noam Chomsky.

<sup>38</sup> Fenn, *At the Dragon’s Gate*, 14.

European Allies and increase will to resist the Soviet ideology in Southeast Asia and strengthen defensive positions in Europe and the Middle East as well. He recognized that all Western attempts would be doomed to fail without the cooperation of local Asian governments. He called for Western support of local allied governments by providing technical assistance and advice, capital goods, even small number of weapons. Bevin, though, did not find it realistic for the South East Asian governments to come together due to the high number of local disputes, including the conflict of Viet Minh in Indochina. The only way they would unite was if they saw it would be in their own interest. What that common interest would be, he did not specify.<sup>39</sup>

The United States had many reasons to get involved in Vietnam: containing Communism, the domino theory, pressure from the European Allies, the memory of losing China and North Korea. But the U.S. approach to Southeast Asia had not always been like this, it changed after President Franklin Roosevelt died and the Second World War ended. FDR was a strong opponent of European imperialism and colonialism. He also enjoyed a working relationship with Stalin, which Truman did not maintain.

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<sup>39</sup> “Memorandum left by Ernest Bevin with Mr. Acheson during his visit to the United States, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, The Far East and Australasia, Volume VIII, Part 2”, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v07p2/d319> (accessed on April 29, 2020).

## 2.1. Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism heavily shaped Roosevelt's views on supporting his European allies in Asia. He saw the World War as a chance for change and did not envision France returning back to the Indochinese colonies. His sudden death, however, prevented him from overseeing establishment of the new world, his successors found themselves in turmoil of the Cold War and containing Communism came before freeing colonies.

Prior to the Second World War, foreign interest of the United States lay in Europe and Latin America. Little did Washington pay attention to Southeast Asia. That changed by 1938 when British Hong Kong and French Indochina remained last bases through which material to China could be transferred. Indochina Governor General Catroux was "reluctant to permit their [munitions shipments] passage for fear of Japanese reprisals". Most of all, he was afraid of key railroads bombing as Tokyo was well aware of U.S. support to Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>40</sup> Due to isolationism and anti-colonial policy, Roosevelt stayed away from sending troops to help France or the UK defend their colonies, he'd rather seek for peaceful resolutions.<sup>41</sup> As he stood for reelection, FDR provided as much support as he could but could not offer military intervention. Instead, he imposed economic sanctions when Japan moved to northern Vietnam in September 1940, a full embargo on oil, iron and steel scrap.<sup>42</sup> When this did not show to be effective enough, in order to prevent Japanese further expansion, he proposed the French Indochina to be neutralized with open access to trade. Japan rejected and moved to southern Vietnam, in reaction Roosevelt froze their assets. The goal was to avoid a war in Pacific, but as we know, Pearl Harbor would change that all.<sup>43</sup>

FDR's anti-colonial approach shifted as he had realized he would need to keep European allies strong. At the beginning of 1942, in an attempt to stop Vichy collaboration with the Tripartite pact, he sent the U.S. ambassador to France. The task was to assure Marshal Pétain that the United

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<sup>40</sup> "Memorandum Prepared in the Division of Far Eastern Affairs, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1938, vol. III, The Far East", Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1938v03/d600> (accessed on July 4, 2018).

<sup>41</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, "The OSS and Ho Chi Minh", 37.

<sup>42</sup> "Regulations Governing the Exportation of Articles and Materials Designated in the President's Proclamation of July 26, 1940, Issued Pursuant to the Provisions of Section 6 of the Act of Congress, Approved July 2, 1940", Foreign Relations of the United States, Japan, 1931-1941, Vol. II, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1931-41v02/d145> (accessed on May 16, 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, "The OSS and Ho Chi Minh", 38.

States recognized France as a superpower in Europe and that its colonies would be preserved in postwar era:

“It is most important for the French Government and the French people to realize that the President of the United States is about the best friend they have; that one of his greatest wishes is to see France reconstituted in the post-war period in accordance with its splendid position in history. (...) The word ‘France’ in the mind of the President includes the French Colonial Empire.”<sup>44</sup>

In the following years, Roosevelt’s antipathy to de Gaulle and both the Vichy and Free France grew as much as his anti-colonialist views. He confided to Russian foreign minister Molotov in mid-1942 about his plans for post-war world establishment where colonialism would have no place. The idea was to prevent struggles for independence and restore world peace. He had plans of forming an international trusteeship of the United States, Russia, the UK and perhaps China to serve as world’s policemen and guide colonies to self-governance.<sup>45</sup> In January 1943, Roosevelt denied making promises to France and “had grave doubts as to whether Indo-China should be” returned as a colony.<sup>46</sup> The U.S. president probably could not forget how easily the French surrendered to the Nazis and thought they simultaneously lost their position among world’s superpowers. In November 1943, he told Stalin that “after 100 years of French rule in Indochina, the inhabitants were worse off than they had been before”. He presented the idea of the international trusteeship again, Stalin fully agreed.<sup>47</sup> Roosevelt presented his vision publicly on several occasions, he was convinced there had been link between colonialism and war as he confided in his son Elliot:

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<sup>44</sup> “The Secretary of State to the Ambassador in France (Leahy), Washington, January 20, 1942”, Foreign Relations of the United States: Diplomatic Papers, 1942, Europe, Volume II, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1942v02/d133> (accessed on May 17, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 341-342.

<sup>46</sup> "Joint Chiefs of Staff Minutes of a Meeting at the White House," January 7, 1943, Foreign Relations of the United States. The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1941-43/d329> (accessed on May 16, 2020).

<sup>47</sup> "Minutes of Roosevelt-Stalin Meeting," November 28, 1943, Foreign Relations of the United States. The Conferences at Cairo and Teheran 1943, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943CairoTehran/d358> (accessed on May 16, 2020).

“The thing is, the colonial system means war. Exploit the resources of an India, Burma, Java; take all the wealth out of those countries, but never put anything back into them, things like education, decent standards of living, minimum health requirements – all you’re doing is storing up the kind of trouble that leads to war.”<sup>48</sup>

The plans were not only restricted to Allied held colonies, but also enemy-held territories like Korea were meant to come under the international supervision. However, Roosevelt could not get France and the UK on board. Whereas the United States saw China as a close ally unattained by communism or imperialism, the UK did not agree to China being part of the trusteeship.<sup>49</sup> Churchill would argue that China would take over Indochina once the French would leave, but Roosevelt contradicted that the British Prime Minister only saw the world through his imperial lenses.<sup>50</sup>

In freeing colonies, the American President saw an opportunity. He assumed they would become allies to the United States, the democratic champion. Indochina, he thought, would play an important security role in postwar Asia. China and the Soviet Union were the only ones to agree to his big plans, Stalin even suggested it would be dangerous to leave an important strategic point to France. As historian Bartholomew-Feis concluded, in the context of the Second World War, superpowers understood ending colonialism differently. To some it would mean freeing colonies from the Nazi, Fascist and Japanese occupation, some would understand it as freeing all colonies. As mentioned before, Roosevelt was convinced the French failed as a colonial ruler to improve the standard of living of their colonial subjects and, therefore, lost their right to rule. They basically failed to take up the ‘white man’s burden’. The Philippines, which became independent in 1945, on the other hand was the shining example of American culture and American exceptionalism.<sup>51</sup>

Even though Roosevelt seemed to be so fixated on freeing Indochina, he never developed a concrete policy to establish an international trusteeship or remove colonies from any of the Western Allies. By early 1945, he realized he would need the UK and France strong in postwar

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Elliot Roosevelt, *As He Saw It* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946), 74.

<sup>49</sup> Dallek, “Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-1945”, 329.

<sup>50</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 45.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-44.

Europe. De Gaulle would not want less than to lead Free France with its overseas empire. Therefore, Roosevelt decided to postpone the decision on Indochina until the overall Allied victory.<sup>52</sup>

Unfortunately for Indochina, President Roosevelt died in April 1945. His successor Harry Truman knew little about foreign policy, Roosevelt did not share his future plans with him. Truman did not get along with Stalin either. In order to keep the French position strong in Europe, he steered away from Roosevelt's dream of a free colonial world. When the French Communist Party rose in popularity, Truman supported de Gaulle. The U.S. Europe-first postwar policy overlooked nationalist tendencies in the rest of the world. After the communist takeover in China followed by the Korean War, American foreign policy restrained mostly to contain communist threat. The Truman Doctrine from 1947 allowed the U.S. army to get involved in far-away countries to defend them from external and internal authoritarian threats.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 47.

### 3. Ho Chi Minh

During the anti-French resistance, one of the most well-known communist leaders emerged. Nguyen Tat Thanh, later known as Nguyen Ai Quoc, but mostly as Ho Chi Minh, was born in 1890 in central Vietnam. His father refused to serve the French colonial bureaucracy, and growing up with the nationalist mentality, Ho soon realized that French colonialists did not care about a Vietnamese life.<sup>53</sup> Not much is known about his early life, he was probably the youngest of three children and was taught to learn foreign languages from an early age, first French and Cantonese, and then he added about five more.<sup>54</sup> From 1911 Ho travelled the world for four years as a cook on the French ship *Latouche-Treville*, then he visited Boston, San Francisco and settled for a while in Brooklyn where he learned English.<sup>55</sup>

In 1917 in Paris, Ho attended meetings of French Socialist Party, and later with other radicals he helped forming the French Communist Party. In 1919, as Nguyen Ai Quoc he wrote a petition to world's leaders assembling in Versailles at that time demanding the application of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen points to Vietnam called "Claims of the Annamite People". He requested for representation in the French parliament, freedom of press, assembly and association, release of political prisoners, and equal rights.<sup>56</sup> Ho was seeking to get an audience with the U.S. Secretary of State on June 18, 1919, but it was denied to him.<sup>57</sup>

In 1923, Ho moved to the Soviet Union to work for the Communist International (Comintern). He was influenced by Lenin since 1920 when the Soviet leader issued the 'Theses on the National and Colonial Questions at the Second Comintern Congress'. Lenin encouraged to work with nationalists groups and also to organize peasantry as the primary force in order to end imperialism.<sup>58</sup> Inspired by this, Ho Chi Minh wrote a piece of his own in 1960 called "The Path Which Led Me to Leninism". In this, he concluded that:

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 35.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Fenn, "Ho Chi Minh", 40.

<sup>56</sup> Jean Lacouture, *Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography* (New York: Random House, 1968), 24.

<sup>57</sup> "Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Ninety-Second Congress, Second Session on Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War, May 9, 10, and 11, 1972", Statement of Leslie H. Gelb.

<sup>58</sup> Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam and the United States* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 15; Lenin, "Theses on the National Question", in *Lenin Collected Works*, Vol. 19 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 243-251.

“Step by step, along the struggle, by studying Marxism-Leninism parallel with participation in practical activities, I gradually came upon the fact that only socialism and communism can liberate the oppressed nations and the working people throughout the world from slavery. [sic]”<sup>59</sup>

In 1925, after successfully helping with the Chinese revolution, Ho formed the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League. By this time, the French and the Chinese kept him close on their radar.<sup>60</sup> The League had to deal with many problems, its leadership was not united, and it had to compete for members with the Viet Nam Nationalist (Revolutionary) Party (an equivalent to Nationalist Kuomintang Party in China). In 1930, Ho formed the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP, also later known as the Indochinese Communist Party, ICP), which rules Vietnam until this day, but had to face criticism from within and outside his own party. In Moscow, he was criticized by the Comintern for not focusing enough on class struggle and dedicating all his time to fight for Vietnam’s independence instead. However, the Comintern soon understood the independence ambitions of the colonial world and changed their reputation accordingly to support independence movements.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile, the situation of peasants and workers in Vietnam worsened as Great Depression hit French Indochina hard like the rest of the world, which resulted in their growing anger.<sup>62</sup>

When economic recovery had begun, Léon Blum with his Popular Front was elected Prime Minister in 1936. They gave intellectuals a chance to criticize the colonial system and Ho saw an opportunity. With growing power of the Nazis in Germany, Ho also predicted that the world would have to come together to fight them. He was right, with the Second World War came new challenges and opportunities for the colonial world.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ho Chi Minh, “The Path Which Led Me to Leninism”, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/ho-chi-minh/works/1960/04/x01.htm> (accessed on May 18, 2020).

<sup>60</sup> William J. Duiker, “Ho Chi Minh”, 131.

<sup>61</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 18-21.

<sup>62</sup> Martin J. Murray, “The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina”, 161.

<sup>63</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 22.

### 3.1. Founding of the Viet Minh

When Ho returned to Asia, he was sent to China again in 1938 to help the Communist Party of China's (CCP) resistance against Kuomintang and the Japanese Imperial Army. From there, Ho could contact his fellow Vietnamese revolutionaries operating from Southern China and focus again on freeing Vietnam. He was joined by Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong, fellow long-time party members who came to China for a revolutionary operations training.<sup>64</sup>

Being a Communist was not safe anywhere in China. To conceal themselves, Ho briefly returned to Vietnam in May 1941 after many years abroad to establish the League for Independence of Vietnam, better known as Viet Minh.<sup>65</sup> It was a guerilla organization based on Communist ideology but presented itself as a nationalist movement to the fellow Vietnamese. When Ho traveled back to Vietnam again, with his new name Ho Chi Minh, he was arrested by Kuomintang and had to spend a year in prison.<sup>66</sup> After releasing him, Kuomintang hoped he would unite Vietnamese nationalist forces to help China. General Zhang Fakui, who ordered Ho's release, also formed the Vietnamese Revolutionary League (Dong Minh Hoi) and put Ho in charge. After many years abroad, Ho was finally able to return to Tonkin for a longer period of time in summer 1944.<sup>67</sup>

In the following years, many movements kept emerging in Vietnam, but Viet Minh attracted most people. By masses they were viewed as anti-colonialist, pro-independence or a nationalist movement, but not at all a communist one. Many Vietnamese had no idea what Communism was, but they knew very well what French rule did to their country. Viet Minh understood that and launched an anti-colonial campaign. The ongoing Japanese occupation worsened living conditions of most Vietnamese and weakened the French position.<sup>68</sup>

John Fitzmorris from the University of New Orleans told me that the Second World War was an excellent opportunity for Ho to call for Vietnamese nationalism. Because of the fall of France in 1940, the Japanese takeover of Vietnam and the French collaboration with the Japanese, the Vietnamese saw not just one but two enemies occupying their land. This allowed Ho Chi Minh

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>65</sup> Bernard F. Fall, *The Two Vietnams* (New York: Praeger, 1963), 62.

<sup>66</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, "The OSS and Ho Chi Minh", 23-24.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

and other ‘freedom fighters’ to promote a message of nationalism, to promote a sense that that they should be running their own affairs.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Fitzmorris, in a personal interview with the author.

## 4. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS)

### 4.1 Founding of the OSS

The founder and first director of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) William J. Donovan was a long-time friend of President Roosevelt. The CIA introduces him as “the prime mover in the creation of the United States’ first central, full-service intelligence service” who “left a legacy of strategic thinking and innovation both in Washington and the foreign field that was to influence the American government for decades to come”.<sup>70</sup>

Roosevelt and Donovan first met in 1904 at Columbia law school.<sup>71</sup> Donovan was a war hero from the First World War, where he served in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division under Douglas MacArthur. Him and MacArthur did not get along and their relationship would have a consequence on cooperation between the OSS and the U.S. Army in the Pacific theatre.<sup>72</sup>

After finishing law school, Donovan would become a member of the Republican Party,<sup>73</sup> but when Roosevelt in September 1937 made a speech about first steps to abandon the isolationist foreign policy, Donovan ceased the opportunity, left the Republican Party and supported the Democratic President.<sup>74</sup> In contrast to Roosevelt, Donovan was not an anti-imperialist and always tried to maintain good relationship with the European allies, including the French.<sup>75</sup>

Donovan knew a united U.S. intelligence agency was needed and thought of forming one which would be non-partisan and would answer directly to the President. To Donovan, the only way to resist Nazism was to “create an agency to coordinate intelligence operations and analysis.”<sup>76</sup> Intelligence agencies did exist in the United States prior to the OSS, but they existed under various Departments which created unwanted competition. Other State Departments opposed the idea of a single intelligence agency for foreign affairs, but Roosevelt supported Donovan by appointing him as coordinator of information in July 1941 when Office of the

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<sup>70</sup> “‘Wild Bill’ Donovan: Father of US Intelligence”, CIA, <https://youtu.be/Rnh8vrUGzt4> (accessed on May 19, 2020).

<sup>71</sup> Richard Dunlop, *Donovan America’s Master Spy* (New York, NY: Rand McNally and Company, 1982), 25-26.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-144.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>75</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 48-49.

<sup>76</sup> “‘Wild Bill’ Donovan: Father of US Intelligence”.

Coordinator of Intelligence (COI) was formed.<sup>77</sup> Until then, there had been eight intelligence agencies under various Departments:

- Army G-2,
- Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI),
- FBI under the Justice Department,
- State Department’s representatives abroad,
- customs inspectors for the Department of Commerce,
- Treasury’s Secret Service,
- Labor Department’s Immigration and Naturalization inspectors,
- agents for the Federal Communications Commission.”<sup>78</sup>

COI, however, faced criticism from the outside – FBI ruined at least one COI mission to protect itself, ONI and G-2 did not cooperate and withheld information<sup>79</sup> - as well as the inside of the organization and FDR had to abolish the institution on June 13, 1942. On the same day, Donovan became the director of the new Office of Strategic Services (OSS).<sup>80</sup> It was established by military order under the jurisdiction of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). The purpose was to plan and carry out special operations, for example collecting of foreign intelligence, espionage, sabotage, counterpropaganda, or guerilla warfare.<sup>81</sup> They used modern tools like “pencils that exploded when you twisted the lead, chocolates laced with poison whose efficiency he demonstrated on rats, and flashlamps that winked on and off”, or tiny tape recorders to record Japanese conversations without being revealed.<sup>82</sup> Agents would be trained and operate in five branches:

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 54-55; John Fitzmorris said to me that having so many intelligence agencies was a problem: “In fact, much of the blame for the attack on Pearl Harbor was based on the fact that we [the United States] did not have a coordinated intelligence service but various military branches competing with each other.” Fitzmorris, in a personal interview with the author.

<sup>79</sup> Lawrence H. McDonald, “The OSS and Its Records”, in *The Secrets War: The Office of Strategic Services in World War II*, edited by George C. Chalou (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1992), 83.

<sup>80</sup> David Hogan, *US Army Special Operations in World War II* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History Department of the Army, 1992), 97-98.

<sup>81</sup> R. H. Smith, “OSS” 1-6.

<sup>82</sup> Fenn, “At the Dragon’s Gate”, 21.

- Special Operations (SO)
- Special Intelligence (SI)
- Counterintelligence (X-2 or CI)
- Research and Development (R&D)
- Morale Operations (MO)<sup>83</sup>

The military did not enjoy Donovan engaging in their operations. To them he was an inexperienced civilian who posed as a security threat.<sup>84</sup> Donovan did not enjoy great popularity because he did not play by the book. He undertook independent actions, improvised and gave his men too much freedom.<sup>85</sup>

The OSS was a breakthrough organization but faced much criticism not only from the outside but from their own men as well. One of them, Charles Fenn wrote that the agency was found merely for war purposes and “operated with unlimited funds not accountable to Congress, and its membership was drawn very much from Donovan’s lawyer friends and associates, along with politicians, business executives, socialites, and academics in the top bracket”. Most of them were drafted as civilians, some of them were found physically unfit to serve in military, but their experiences and contacts were useful for the purpose of the intelligence agency. Those incompetent civilians who only cared about their personal gains were promoted to Army and Navy ranks.<sup>86</sup> “OSS was distinctly elite, selective, right wing, and university educated,” Fenn continued, “OSS operations in the Far East, an area more difficult for most Americans to operate in than Europe because they knew less about it, found it all very strange, and saw the inhabitants as hardly human!”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas F. Troy, *Donovan and the CIA* (Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1981), 136.

<sup>85</sup> R. Smith, “OSS”, 1-6.

<sup>86</sup> An official CIA video introducing the OSS says that the agency even employed Hollywood directors, movie stars, professional baseball players, academics, entertainers, circus performers or swimmers and safecrackers. They all had to undergo a special training, including learning the “correct way to hold and shoot a pistol and practiced this form in front of mirrors until it was perfected.”

“OSS: Training the Glorious Amateurs”, CIA, <https://youtu.be/vIYeEI5DFBQ> (accessed on May 19, 2020).

<sup>87</sup> Fenn, “At the Dragon’s Gate”, 4-7, 34.

## 4.2 The OSS in Vietnam

The strategic position in Southeast Asia along the coast of South China Sea has always been a blessing and a curse for Vietnam. It came to U.S. attention for its proximity to China and Japan, and during the Second World War OSS started planting and recruiting intelligence agents in the area. American officers witnessed the Japanese brutality as well as reality of the French colonialism and started to sympathize with the oppressed Vietnamese.

The wartime role of the OSS soldiers was to work with resistance groups in Europe and the Pacific. Many of these co-operations were later analyzed and criticized, particularly the brief partnership between the OSS and the Viet Minh. A great debate emerged especially after the Vietnam War. But OSS agents did not question the partnership, all they cared about was winning the war and finding allies for the common cause.<sup>88</sup>

Intelligence agents would soon find out that working in Asia would be more difficult than working in Europe. On the ground, they had to deal with racial, linguistic and cultural differences. Roosevelt's antipathy to De Gaulle and the French imperialism too would not make their mission any easier. Soon, they also had to deal with moral questions, like if reestablishing the European colonial regime would be the right thing.

When the Second World War ended, OSS officers remained in Indochina to assist with the Japanese formal surrender, repatriation of soldiers, and investigation of war crimes. After working with various groups, the Vietnamese, British, French and Chinese, and witnessing the conditions of the locals, they came to a conclusion that French colonialism had to be stopped. OSS agents wrote many reports on Indochina condemning the French rule, but Vietnam was not a priority to the United States yet.<sup>89</sup> No major Allied operation had taken place in Indochina to push the Japanese out. For Donovan, China or the Philippines, but mostly Europe were the highest priorities at the moment; and fighting colonialism was secondary to winning the war on all fronts.

In July 1944, Donovan reported to Roosevelt that de Gaulle had spoken to him about the Resistance movement in Indochina. Five hundred French soldiers were dropped which could provide valuable intelligence to the Allies but could as well prepare for France's return and reclamation of their dominion. To provide help in struggle against Japan and to also avoid the

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<sup>88</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, "The OSS and Ho Chi Minh", 3-6.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

French return to Indochina was impossible.<sup>90</sup> Many American authorities felt upset and even embarrassed about their nation working with the imperialists and colonialists in Asia. Many OSS agents expressed these thoughts aloud but had to focus on winning the war.<sup>91</sup>

The OSS struggled to create their network in Indochina. They found it easier to work with the British, Free French, and Chinese who had already broken ground on intelligence and gathered information about Japanese troops movement. This led to cooperation with Captain Milton Miles of the U.S. Navy and the notorious international trio known as the GBT.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>91</sup> Bradley F. Smith, *The Shadow Warriors: the OSS and the Origins of the CIA* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 320, 333.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

### 4.3 The OSS and Milton Miles

The OSS had difficulties operating from China from their base in Kunming. General Douglas MacArthur<sup>93</sup> had his own intelligence service established and wanted to keep the OSS out of his playfield. Donovan's agents tried to penetrate the Pacific theatre, but the one who was able to reach Philippines' soil was captured by MacArthur and sent home. The OSS was forced to maintain the Chinese base for Asian operations which automatically got them involved into Indochinese affairs as well. Donovan, therefore, had to choose someone who had good relationship with the Chinese to oversee operations in the Asian theatre. The right man for the job was U.S. Naval Captain Milton "Mary" Miles. By the end of 1942, he was appointed OSS chief for the Far East.<sup>94</sup>

Miles had a great relationship with Kuomintang's general Tai Li. In April 1943, they formed the Sino-American Cooperative Organization (SACO), and Tai Li became its director, Miles his deputy. They organized guerrilla trainings, espionage, sabotage operations, and radio interception. The Chinese provided their men and facilities, the Americans would support with trainings, arms, and other equipment.<sup>95</sup> Donovan was not very happy with this installation, but it was approved by Roosevelt. SACO's headquarters was established in Chungking, where Kuomintang was also based. It was hard for the OSS to work with Tai Li who had a bad reputation and was trusted by no one. Fortunately, later the OSS would break away and move the headquarters to Kunming where they would work under the famous commander of the 'Flying Tigers', general Chennault.<sup>96</sup>

Miles maintained good relationship with the Chinese but had many disagreements with the OSS. He was disturbed by the demonstration of 'white supremacy' from his fellow officers. In his memoirs he wrote:

"What bothered me most was that among those present were some before-the-war businessmen of Asia who still hewed to the 'white supremacy' line, as well as some others who were 'follow-the-British-Imperial-line' chaps, and even one or two 'let's-make-poor-old-China-

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<sup>93</sup> MacArthur and Donovan did not get along and MacArthur wanted nothing to do with Donovan's OSS.

<sup>94</sup> R. H. Smith, "OSS", 197-198, 250-251.

<sup>95</sup> B. Smith, "The Shadow Warriors", 249-252.

<sup>96</sup> R. H. Smith. "OSS", 245-252.

over' gentlemen. (...) About the Washington offices of the O.S.S. there were some who had little regard for the China's sovereignty and who also had a positive dislike of Chiang Kai-shek's government."<sup>97</sup>

He also claimed there were no intelligence operations in Northern Vietnam which concerned him. Miles planned to have 200,000 to 300,000 agents working for the OSS in Indochina within a few months. If his mission succeeded, the OSS would have an excellent covert network. Miles had great plans: encourage resistance against the Japanese, damage and annoy their shipping, smuggle material into China and get rid of the French if they could not help. Miles soon allocated pro-native French revolutionary parties in Vietnam, west from Saigon.<sup>98</sup>

Soon, Miles recruited a young French navy hero, Commander Robert Meynier. Meynier and his Euroasian wife who came from an influential Vietnamese family, were not allowed into Indochina, but had great contacts. Through them, the OSS would distribute leaflets to ask the friendly Indochinese for help, and learn about pilots who had been shot down.<sup>99</sup> But soon, working with the Meyniers and the French in Chungking became more and more difficult. They had split between the Gaullists and Giraudists,<sup>100</sup> were suspicious of one another and soon the French would also started to have disputes with the Chinese. Hostility between Tai Li, Meynier, and the French Military Mission (FMM) escalated, and Tai Li ordered the FMM to close their China-based facilities. According to Archimedes Patti, this crippled Gaullist operations until the end of the war.<sup>101</sup> As result of distrust, Robert Meynier was eventually released from his post in summer 1944 and left China with his wife.<sup>102</sup>

Opinion's about accomplishments of Meynier's group differ. Miles himself claimed that for the rest of the war he had received valuable intelligence about the weather, prisoners, status of wounded men, intelligence on shipping, reports about Japanese plans, ports and maritime information from the network they had created.<sup>103</sup> But OSS officer Archimedes Patti had a different opinion. In his memoir, he wrote:

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<sup>97</sup> Vice Admiral Milton E. Miles, USN, *A Different Kind of War: The Unknown Story of the U.S. Navy's Guerrilla Forces in World War II China* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 117.

<sup>98</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, "The OSS and Ho Chi Minh", 76.

<sup>99</sup> Miles, "A Different Kind of War", 187-188.

<sup>100</sup> General Henri Giraud was the leader of the Free French Forces.

<sup>101</sup> Patti, "Why Vietnam?" 36.

<sup>102</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, "The OSS and Ho Chi Minh", 85.

<sup>103</sup> Miles, "A Different Kind of War", 189.

“The Meynier mission, which took on so much importance in splitting the French, was a disappointing failure to OSS. It made little progress in penetrating Indochina and OSS did not receive the military information Donovan had anticipated and Miles had promised.”<sup>104</sup>

The truth was that the OSS as a whole never satisfied Donovan’s original goals. But the organization did manage to provide valuable information about Japanese movements in the region. Miles too had bigger plans for Indochina operations than what his team was able to achieve. He had issues with the OSS, and they would accuse him of not being loyal and of leaking information to the navy where he had been originally enlisted. Miles was not happy with the fact that the OSS wanted to control all China-related operations and had problem with the OSS looking down on Chinese and not treating them as equals. As a result, Miles quit as the chief of the OSS for the Far East and Donovan fired him from the OSS in December 1943. Lieutenant Colonel John Coughlin was appointed his successor.<sup>105</sup>

Miles was very disappointed by the role the United States played in Vietnamese history. He criticized the leadership in Washington and accused Donovan of wishing to preserve the prewar Asian status quo. Miles was convinced that the US were supposed to play a bigger role in supporting nationalism in Asia and that Vietnamese elites were entirely capable of leading their nation.<sup>106</sup> Like Miles, many other OSS officials had similar opinions on French colonialism and Vietnamese nationalism. They already knew that activities in Indochina would only be successful if they won the hearts of the people. There was a great potential as originally the Vietnamese saw Americans as pioneers of democracy, the ones who were able to get rid of colonizers, establish their own democracy, and were able of self-governance.

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<sup>104</sup> Patti, “Why Vietnam?” 36.

<sup>105</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 79-83.

<sup>106</sup> Miles, “A Different Kind of War”, 191.

## 4.4 The GBT

After Miles and Meynier left China, it created space for other intelligence groups in the region. The OSS lost the know-how and contacts and, therefore, had to partner with other groups, mostly with the GBT. This unique international trio of men worked very successfully undercover in Indochina. Laurence “Laurie” Gordon provided information to the British, Harry Bernard to the Americans, and Frank “Frankie” Tan to the Chinese. All of them came from a business background and all had legitimate businesses in Indochina from before the war. When the war began, they already had a broad network of contacts who they knew and trusted.

The group was also known as the Gordon Group because Gordon was the leader. He worked for the American oil Cal-Texaco Corporation in Haiphong, Tonkin. He had to leave for the United States after the Japanese invasion, but after Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Cal-Taxaco sent him back to Indochina under-cover. Donovan’s contacts allowed Gordon to join the British Secret Service, and he was assigned to work on military intelligence with the FMM based in Chungking, the residency of Chiang Kai-shek’s government. But gathering information under the controlling Kuomintang’s General Tai Li was hard. Gordon soon broke away from the FMM and the U.S. military attaché in China introduced him to an influential Chinese admiral Yang Hsuan-cheng who authorized Gordon to work on the northeast border of Tonkin from where he started contacting former Cal-Taxaco colleagues in the region. With British equipment and Chinese personnel, he started working with the two other Americans, Harry Bernard and Frankie Tan.<sup>107</sup>

Bernard was an official of the British-owned Asian Tobacco Monopoly, prior to this he also worked for the Cal-Taxaco. He was the one to make sure the less-glamorous tasks would be accomplished. Tan was a Chinese American. His Cantonese family was involved in the 1911 revolution which brought down the Ching Dynasty. He was fluent in both Chinese and English and like Gordon, he also received training from MI5. Tan met Gordon in Hanoi in 1938. Although, during the Second World War, the OSS and the FMM considered Bernard and Tan subordinates to Gordon, Tan’s activities made him the most famous of the three. He became the first American to walk into Indochina with Ho Chi Minh.<sup>108</sup>

The GBT network was formed by volunteers of many nationalities: Canadian, British, American, French, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Norwegian. The Chinese Tong family who helped

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<sup>107</sup> Patti, “Why Vietnam?” 44-45.

<sup>108</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 65-66.

with office work was very important to the group as well as André Lan, a French living in Indochina known as ‘agent No. 22’. The GBT received funding not only from Admiral Yang but also from general Zhang Fakui, the commander of the Nationalist troops in southern Kwangsi province. They also received support from the British MI5, the Free French, and American generals serving in China Joseph Stilwell (US Military Attaché), Albert Wedemeyer (Stilwell’s successor) and Claire Chennault (military advisor to Chiang Kai-shek and commander of the famous Fourteenth Air Force better known as the ‘Flying Tigers’).<sup>109</sup>

An OSS agent Charles Fenn, who would later work very closely with the GBT, described Gordon as very pro-French because he had worked in Indochina before the Japanese took over. This is how Fenn would describe Gordon’s network:

“Gordon said he now had a dozen friends in Indochina sending reports: two by radio contact, the others by courier. He had recently sent down six more portable transmitters, the famous B-2 model given him by the British. All his operators down there were volunteers.”<sup>110</sup>

The GBT worked with a wide range of both French and Vietnamese agents on the ground. They established a network of informants and couriers. Many authors later emphasized the role of Viet Minh in gathering intelligence needed in defeating the Japanese.<sup>111</sup> Gordon also gathered information from an American group called Air-Ground Air Services (AGAS). Their role was to collect intelligence but also rescuing downed pilots and prisoners of war (POWs). Through this group the GBT learned about several shot down pilots, one of them would be Rudolph Shaw, rescued by the Viet Minh.<sup>112</sup>

After Miles and Meynier left the China theatre, the OSS did not have many other options than to start working with the GBT. But it was Gordon who approached the OSS first with a plan for civilian resistance in Vietnam. The GBT did not need money from the Americans, but supplies

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 68, 87; Charles Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *US Army in World War II: The China Burma India Theater* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History United States Army, 1987), 6-8.

<sup>110</sup> Fenn, “At the Dragon’s Gate”, 45.

<sup>111</sup> Robert Shaplen, “The Lost Revolution”, 34;

Cecil B. Currey, *Victory at Any Cost: The Genius of Viet Nam’s Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey, 1997), 84.

<sup>112</sup> Fenn, “At the Dragon’s Gate”, 48.

and equipment, especially arms.<sup>113</sup> The man who was sent to liaise with the GBT was army Major Austin Glass. He left Washington in January 1944 to work for the OSS on gathering secret intelligence (SI) in and around Indochina. Bartholomew-Feis evaluated that he was not the best choice for the position, although, he had lived near Haiphong for thirty years and knew French and Vietnamese.<sup>114</sup> Glass worked with the FMM, had Vietnamese and some other contacts. He praised the GBT for being the most equipped group in and outside of Indochina. But the group still maintained independent and was not directly connected to the OSS. Another OSS agent, colonel Robert B. Hall, stressed that the group did not work in favor of the French only because they needed to maintain good relationship with the Chinese. Hall also reported that the GBT provided intelligence to the Air and Ground Forces Resources Technical Staff (AGFRTS), an organization established in April 1944 by Donovan as an OSS cover group to break free of SACO's control which was still the leading intelligence gathering agency in China.<sup>115</sup>

The Nazis surrendered Paris in August 1944 and the French could focus on liberating their empire. The French generals of the colonial army in Tonkin got in touch with Gordon urging him to help them establish official contact for the Resistance with the FMM in Chungking. But the OSS proposal to help the French Resistance encountered disapprovals in Washington. Roosevelt would rather stay away from Indochina and Donovan started questioning Gordon's loyalty. The OSS had to find a different way and as they were looking to increase activity in Indochina and also to keep control over the GBT, they assigned Lieutenant Charles Fenn as a new liaison officer. By the end of 1944, Fenn was the only OSS agent working with the GBT and the cooperation went quite well. But as Donovan was trying to bring the GBT fully under his control, the relationship worsened. Gordon wanted to keep his autonomy which was what made his group valuable for other agencies, and so he left for Washington to resolve this issue in person which left Fenn with Bernard and Tan. The three got close and it was with them that Fenn met a new Vietnamese agent, by that time already calling himself Ho Chi Minh.<sup>116</sup>

Through the GBT Fenn met André Lan, Gordon's chief agent in Vietnam. Lan worked in great danger inside Indochina, if caught, he would be executed. He told Fenn that when the

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<sup>113</sup> "The Gordon Plan" (RG 226, M1642, Roll. 88, Frames 1108-1113, NARA) as cited in Bartholomew-Feis, "The OSS and Ho Chi Minh", 90.

<sup>114</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, "The OSS and Ho Chi Minh", 88.

<sup>115</sup> R. Smith, "OSS", 260-261.

<sup>116</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, "The OSS and Ho Chi Minh", 92-94.

Japanese came to Indochina, they took over control of agriculture and in many areas changed rice crops to jute. But after they started the war with the United States, they could not export anymore, and the farmers were ruined. The Japanese made two more mistakes by introducing military yen as a new currency which the locals refused to adapt to, and constantly increasing taxes. Other than that, the Japanese did not really interfere between the natives and the French, the only exception would be freeing French political prisoners to free up prison space for their own use. But Lan also reported that the Japanese troops behaved better than any Western troops and the Vietnamese preferred them over the French.<sup>117</sup> But the British Ministry of Operation and Political Warfare Executive contradicted this by saying that the Japanese were being cruel and the locals were pro-Allied.<sup>118</sup> I wonder if pro-Allied in this case only meant pro-British and pro-American, because the Vietnamese so much despised the French. If the locals preferred Japanese cruelty, was it also a matter of race?

Most OSS reports from 1944 agreed with what the British had said. One OSS officer described locals as anti-Japanese who would take the opportunity of Allied trainings and join their operations. But as Miles already pointed out, the reports discussed the Vietnamese in pejorative terms and failed to see them as equals. One other report claimed that the ‘Annamites’ were incapable of working together on long-term goals and were only interested in short term fixes. It also stated that they had been a subject race for too long, therefore, ready to listen to foreign instructions as they were used to obey, but had no organizing abilities or initiatives on their own.<sup>119</sup> Yet another OSS report stated that the ‘Annamites’ were not capable of developing organization in any kind, particularly not an underground one, because they were suspicious to one another and tricked each other, and every organization they had created eventually fell apart. It also read that they would do anything for money but should not be expected to take risks from ideological motives. This report advised to rather join up with the French because they had more at stake in Indochina than the natives and their mentality was similar to the one of an American.<sup>120</sup> A different OSS report pointed out that the Nationalists and Communists had strong ties and the best would

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<sup>117</sup> Fenn, “At the Dragon’s Gate”, 76.

<sup>118</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 99-100.

<sup>119</sup> R. P. Leonard to Major Harley C. Stevens, Proposed Means of Disseminating Propaganda in Indo-China,” May 16, 1944 (RG 226, Entry 139, Box 138, Folder 1863, NARA) as cited in Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 103.

<sup>120</sup> R. P. Leonard, “Determinating [sic] a Policy for MO Operations in Indochina,” May 1944 (RG 226, Entry 139, Box 138, Folder 1863, NARA) as cited in Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 103-104.

be operating through them and catch the attention and belief of the higher educated class of ‘Annamites’.<sup>121</sup> Major Herbert Little, MO branch chief for the Far East, would later choose Vietnamese Catholics for special attention. He considered them as the most powerful political organization in Vietnam.<sup>122</sup>

John Fitzmorris from the University of New Orleans said that one of the big lessons he learned while studying U.S. foreign policy was that race was everything. How the Americans viewed race influenced the U.S. foreign policy. In Asia, people looked differently and spoke different languages, which created difficulties. The loss of China in 1949 left many wondering how it could happen, and Fitzmorris thought the reasoning was that the United States did not have an adequate respect for oriental thinking which led Americans to not treat Asians with respect. He also thought that the United States attempted to impose American-European values on people that were neither American or European, they attempted to apply Christian values on Buddhist and Confucianists. “Instead of trying to win the hearts and minds of the people we were trying to change the hearts and minds of the people.”<sup>123</sup>

His colleague Professor Millet claimed that religion was very important as well. Under the French, the Vietnamese Catholics prospered. They had access to foreign education, jobs and positions within the colonial government. They became very important because in America, they were the good guys and were supposed to lead Vietnam towards the West.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> B. M. Turner, “Comments re: Memorandum of Mr. Leonard,” May 23, 1944 (RG 226, Entry 139, Folder 1863, NARA) as cited in Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 103-104.

<sup>122</sup> Major Herbert S. Little, “Indo-China – Additional Rumor Themes,” July 22, 1943 (RG 226, Entry 154, Box 199, Folder 3276, NARA) as cited in Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 105.

<sup>123</sup> Fitzmorris, in a personal interview with the author.

<sup>124</sup> Millet, in a personal interview with the author.

## 4.5 Charles Fenn

“In the ordinary games of chess, a pawn may sometimes hold the king in check. In the high game of international politics, a human pawn may sometimes hold counselors of state in check. Such was briefly my role in World War II.”<sup>125</sup>

– Charles Fenn

Fenn began as a journalist photographer in China and South and Southeast Asia where he covered the first years of the Second World War. Like many other OSS agents, he was a civilian when he was drafted in 1943 by his friend for his experience from China.<sup>126</sup> Fenn chose to serve with the prestigious U.S. Marines and as a Marine lieutenant he worked with the OSS and the GBT.<sup>127</sup> Fenn was an outsider, he did not hold a university diploma or come from an elite family and his opinions were considered left-wing.<sup>128</sup> He very much sympathized with the Vietnamese. In his book he wrote:

“The problem was, of course, who to trust. I found by experience that those who called themselves Communists, whether party members or merely sympathizers, were the most trustworthy, willing to help, and efficient, being mostly young, as well as sincere and intensely anti-Japanese. It was, of course, such earnest youngsters, plus equally earnest and long-exploited peasants, who swelled the ranks of Mao’s veterans and helped him to overcome Chiang’s vast armies, despite America’s constantly increasing help with money and matériel.”<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Fenn, “At the Dragon’s Gate”, 1.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>128</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 97-98.

<sup>129</sup> Fenn, “At the Dragon’s Gate”, 29.

With the OSS, he undertook a basic training in all tranches. Due to his background, he first was put in charge of operations in Burma. MO operations there consisted of spreading false rumors about the Japanese army to turn the locals against them.<sup>130</sup>

Fenn worked with a commanding officer Herbert Little, a former lawyer. Fenn liked him as a person “but like many of the key men in OSS, he had been appointed by his lawyer pal Donovan and had no background in or knowledge of Far Eastern affairs except what he was now gathering from books or from the two or three members of his staff who had experience in or knowledge of that area”, Fenn wrote in his memoir.<sup>131</sup> To prove Fenn’s words, Little would later choose to work with the Vietnamese Catholics as he considered them the most powerful political organization in Vietnam.<sup>132</sup>

Their mission was secret, therefore, they traveled to China undercover as U.S. Army Major Little and U.S. Marines First Lieutenant Fenn to meet Chiang Kai-shek and to, in summer 1944, establish an OSS base in Kunming, where the GBT, the Fourteenth, AGAS, FMM, and Red Cross had their facilities too.<sup>133</sup> When the U.S. army found out they would need intelligence on weather, Japanese defenses and targets to effectively bomb the area, they got in touch with Gordon. But Gordon did not want to come under the OSS control because his operations could only be successful if his group was independent. The OSS then agreed to a compromise and promised to give him backing if he would take an OSS officer on board. Fenn’s name was the only one Gordon agreed to.<sup>134</sup> Gordon soon wired Fenn that he would be flying to Kunming soon and so Fenn got ready to come to the base on China-Vietnam border with him.<sup>135</sup>

Fenn grew his network very quickly and his Chinese agents provided valuable information to the Fourteenth, the OSS and the GBT throughout the war. In Kunming he met the rest of the GBT group, Gordon and Tan. Fenn was enthusiastic about the job but aware that he did not know anything about Indochina since his work had only been postings in Burma and China.<sup>136</sup>

Fenn established a network of Frenchmen while working with the GBT. But Roosevelt’s anti-colonial ideas would soon complicate their work:

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 8-10.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>132</sup> Major Herbert S. Little, “Indo-China – Additional Rumor Themes,” July 22, 1943 (RG 226, Entry 154, Box 199, Folder 3276, NARA) as cited in Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 105.

<sup>133</sup> Fenn, *At the Dragon’s Gate*, 11.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 36-37.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>136</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh*, 99-100.

“Everything was ticking over nicely when a frantic message from André, then back in Hanoi, told us he was being harassed by the French authorities because he had been reported to be working for the Americans! Even the Free French were now anti-American because we Americans would not recognize French rights to Indochina, whereas the British had done so. Churchill and de Gaulle had made this arrangement to recognize each other’s colonies on a reciprocal basis, but Roosevelt, disliking colonialism, had naturally opposed it.”<sup>137</sup>

The Chinese in an attempt of keeping a good relationship with the French also advised not to work with the Vietnamese. They received a visit from General Chen, who had been sent by Zhang Fakui. He was mainly interested if they were working with the ‘Annamites’. He warned them that the ‘Annamites’ were not to be trusted for they were equally anti-Japanese as anti-French, and to a lesser extent they were also anti-Chinese. He said that if they appeared seemingly pro-American, it was because they planned to use the United States to gain independence. He predicted that a Communist group disguised as Nationalist known as the Viet Minh would try to approach the GBT. They had already offered help to General Zhang Fakui to fight off the Japanese in exchange for support of independence, but Chiang Kai-shek wanted to do nothing with them. The Chinese chose not to offend the French in any way as the Europeans might come back in full strength into the region and claim back their colonies after the war. Gordon agreed and assured the General they had no intention to work with the ‘Annamites’ as their anti-French stands made them untrustworthy. But Fenn would not let go of this thought of working with the Vietnamese which would later cause problems between him and not only Gordon, but the whole GBT.<sup>138</sup>

Fenn’s opinion was that working with the most rebellious Indochinese would be the best way to produce intelligence. His conclusion would get him into trouble with Gordon, some other OSS officers, and both American and British governments. Both his critics and admirers agreed that Fenn contributed to make Ho Chi Minh the Viet Minh leader in 1945. By some he was blamed for bringing Viet Minh to power and the loss of Indochina to the Communists, and even for the

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<sup>137</sup> Fenn, *At the Dragon’s Gate*, 121.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

difficulties the United States then had to undergo in Vietnam. His supporters on the other hand say that he recognized the potential of Ho and Viet Minh, and if his arguments had been heard the loss of lives between 1946 and 1975 on both sides would be prevented.<sup>139</sup>

Fenn thought about engaging with the Vietnamese even more now Ho Chi Minh came to his attention. In late 1944, Lieutenant Rudolph Shaw had been shot down in Cao Bang, northern Vietnam near Chinese borders. He was found by members of Viet Minh. Ho Chi Minh ceased the opportunity and escorted Shaw himself to the American base in Kunming. There, he refused any reward and only asked to meet the famous general Claire Chennault “just for the honor”. Probably for political reasons, the request was refused.<sup>140</sup> Frank Tan reported on the safe return to China of two other pilots. One of them, Knight, described that the natives helped him when he was shot down and when the French came, the Vietnamese would not except any money. Knight was then taken over by André Lan and found out that André directed the whole deal.<sup>141</sup>

They would soon learn about another pilot named Marshall. He had been shot down near Haiphong and rescued by a Chinese farmer who read a leaflet that they should be helping the Americans because of their support to China. Had the farmer turned the pilot to the Japanese, he would receive a very high reward, but he explained he would rather help the Americans or the French. He said that the French were bad, but the Japanese were worse.<sup>142</sup>

After the Japanese found out about the Marshall rescue mission, they launched an operation to cease U.S.-Chinese air bases in Southeastern China, they managed to destroy six of them and the rescue missions came to an end.<sup>143</sup> After this episode, Fenn wrote, the GBT relationship with the French went downhill as “it was Gordon, not the FMM, who scored by bringing Marshall out. It was Gordon who now had an American officer attached to him. It was Gordon who had built an airstrip, thus invoking further Japanese vengeance.”<sup>144</sup> At this point, Gordon had enough of OSS. He said they had taken everything but gave nothing and had enough of the double-dealing. Gordon was about to go and meet with AGAS to take them on.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 95-96.

<sup>140</sup> Fenn, “At the Dragon’s Gate”, 131.

<sup>141</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 117.

<sup>142</sup> Fenn, “At the Dragon’s Gate”, 57-63.

<sup>143</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 111.

<sup>144</sup> Fenn, “At the Dragon’s Gate”, 64.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

The GBT realized that many OSS officers were anti-French. Gordon received funding from AGAS, Chennault, and the British, and came to a conclusion that although he appreciated OSS resources, he was not in desperate need of them. For him, the OSS was a backstabbing bunch sending people like Major Austin Glass to spy on them, even though, Glass consistently praised the GBT in his reports. Even Fenn's loyalty was questioned.<sup>146</sup>

Gordon thought the OSS was too autocratic. The link was destroying his group's reputation which made them so successful. Wedemeyer insisted that all intelligence groups in his theater would have to operate under him which would kill the GBT's independence. In February, Wedemeyer and the GBT reached a compromise. GBT transferred to AGAS and Fenn became an OSS liaison to AGAS.<sup>147</sup>

The year 1945 changed everything. In January, Chiang Kai-shek authorized the OSS to set up independent networks free from the oversight and control of General Tai Li. In February it was reported again that commanding General of U.S. forces in China, Albert Wedemeyer, had decided to merge the GBT into OSS structures and put the OSS in charge of SI operations.<sup>148</sup> But with the exception of Fenn's Chinese agents the GBT was almost exclusively made of pro-Allied Frenchmen. And only a few months earlier Roosevelt had prohibited aiding and working with the French in Indochina. Wedemeyer's group wanted to explore possibilities of utilizing the GBT network, Donovan, in Kunming, advocated for closer cooperation between the French and the OSS. The two best possibilities to collect intelligence in Indochina meant working with the French, which meant violating the presidential order. Historian Stein Tonnesson concluded, that Donovan could not work against the president and that probably he had an exemption from the presidential directive through some special arrangement with Roosevelt.<sup>149</sup>

The OSS did not get the monopoly on the GBT but were able to preserve access to the GBT network. In March 1945, the wires went strangely silent unless one message got through: "Japanese seized all posts throughout Indochina".<sup>150</sup> GBT's network was now non-existent. They wanted to send help, but air attacks had to cease because they were not able to receive any

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<sup>146</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, "The OSS and Ho Chi Minh", 113-115.

<sup>147</sup> Patti, "Why Vietnam?" 45; Fenn, "Ho Chi Minh", 76.

<sup>148</sup> "Gordon-Bernard-Tan Group" (RG 226, Entry 92A, Box 26, Folder 391, NARA). Bartholomew-Feis, The OSS and Ho Chi Minh, 113-115.

<sup>149</sup> Tonnesson, "The Vietnamese revolution of 1945", 197.

<sup>150</sup> Fenn, "At the Dragon's Gate", 138.

intelligence on the weather or the Japanese movement.<sup>151</sup> Japanese Operation MEIGO (Operation Bright Moon) destroyed the network and Japanese soldiers were now in complete control of Vietnam. French Indochina was no more.<sup>152</sup> Authorities in Tokyo concluded that a military takeover in Indochina was necessary. The U.S. army had invaded the Philippines in 1944 and liberated Manila in 1945, and the Japanese did not want to take chances of them reaching the shores of Vietnam.<sup>153</sup> This anticipation of the U.S. invasion would trigger the Franco-Japanese confrontation and pave way for revolution.<sup>154</sup>

New instructions from Wedemeyer and the U.S. Navy came in to urgently start building a new intelligence network and to work with the natives if necessary. Fenn almost immediately remembered the story about the rescued pilot Shaw and Ho Chi Minh and started asking around. He found out that Ho was still around coming to the Office of War Information to read news literature. Fenn thought Ho could be pro-American, so he asked his contact to fix a meeting and the next day he was supposed to meet the Viet Minh leader at the nearby ‘Dragon’s Gate’.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>152</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 118.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>154</sup> Tonnesson, “The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945”, 198-220.

<sup>155</sup> Fenn, “At the Dragon’s Gate”, 138.

## 5. After the Coup

The Japanese disruption of French domination would create a great opportunity for Viet Minh. Ho expected that the Allies would win in Europe soon and then they would focus on defeating Japan. He planned his return to Tonkin which had to occur as soon as possible to declare Vietnam's independence once the Allied forces would liberate Indochina.<sup>156</sup>

After Roosevelt's death, the China theatre commanders continued to work with his policy towards Indochina. Historian Stein Tonnerson speculated that the U.S. president could leave the Japanese remove the French regime as it played nicely to his intent of placing Indochina under the international trusteeship.<sup>157</sup>

To justify the coup, the Japanese would announce it was a reaction to French Resistance activities and collaboration with the Allies.<sup>158</sup> During the coup, 2,100 European men were killed or disappeared, but the number Vietnamese casualties were even higher.<sup>159</sup> The situation was multiplied by the worst famine in Vietnamese modern history which began in 1944.<sup>160</sup>

The OSS tried to collect intelligence with few of their own men. Their missions were highly dangerous as they needed to always get in and out of Indochina.<sup>161</sup> But it was not enough, the United States needed more intelligence. On March 1, 1945, few days before the coup, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Helliwell, SI chief of the OSS in the China, instructed Wedemeyer that rather than working with the French, the OSS should try and get in touch with native groups in Indochina which are both anti-French and anti-Japanese since these groups had already contacted the OSS and asked for cooperation, financial support, arms and ammunition. Helliwell thought the timing was critical, he did not want to risk losing the network entirely if the GBT group would have to withdraw from Indochina together with the French. He came to a conclusion that it was essential for the OSS to establish a network on their own and not to rely on other groups anymore.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Patti, "Why Vietnam?" 52.

<sup>157</sup> Tonnerson, "The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945", 219-220.

<sup>158</sup> Marr, "Vietnam 1945", 54-69.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>160</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, "The OSS and Ho Chi Minh", 140.

<sup>161</sup> Patti, "Why Viet Nam?" 88.

<sup>162</sup> "Policy in French Indochina" (RG 226, Entry 154, Box 199, Folder 3373, NARA) as cited in Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh*, 134.

## 5.1 The OSS and Ho Chi Minh

It is quite ironic that Viet Minh received the first professional military training from Americans. But at that time, Ho Chi Minh appeared to be a logical partner. Fenn was impressed not only by his knowledge of English:

“Ho was over fifty, but his face was unlined, and his wisp of beard and thinning hair were only barely touched with gray. His alert, eager look was enhanced by the brightest eyes I ever saw. I have heard much the same comment from people who have met either Lenin or Picasso, and it is said that such eyes are an indication of genius, intelligence, determination, and purpose.”<sup>163</sup>

Ho claimed he only wanted recognition for Viet Minh, and supply of arms and medicine in exchange for helping the Americans. Fenn was aware that he was talking to a communist, but Ho would argue that the French would label everyone who would resist them a communist.<sup>164</sup> The GBT, OSS headquarters in Kunming eventually also agreed to use Ho and the Viet Minh. They agreed that Ho would travel back to Indochina with a Chinese radio operator named Mac Shin and Frank Tan and Charles Fenn would be dropped in later.<sup>165</sup>

Before he left, Ho had one strange request. He wanted to meet Claire Chennault. The commander agreed as Ho saved one of his pilots and could be an important partner in the future. Fenn, Bernard, and Ho arrived at Chennault’s office on March 29. Ho would not ask for recognition of Viet Minh, but only for a signed photograph. From Fenn he would later ask for six new Colt .45 automatic pistols in their original wrappings.<sup>166</sup>

Ho was given a code name ‘Lucius’ and was introduced to SI, SO, MO, and X2 training. The partnership between the OSS and Viet Minh officially began.<sup>167</sup> When Tan and Mac Shin

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<sup>163</sup> Fenn, “At the Dragon’s Gate”, 139.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 139-140.

<sup>165</sup> Fenn, “Ho Chi Minh”, 76-77.

<sup>166</sup> Ho Chi Minh would later be able to use these little things for his propaganda to show what a great relationship he had with the Americans.

<sup>167</sup> Fenn, “Ho Chi Minh”, 77-79.

settled in Viet Minh base camp inside Indochina, the GBT and OSS network started to take shape again. They would send reports to Fenn and Bernard in Kunming and passed them on to the Flying Tigers or AGAS. But the relationship between the GBT and the OSS did not get better. The situation would change with an arrival of Archimedes Patti in Kunming on April 13, 1945.<sup>168</sup>

Ho stayed in touch with Charles Fenn by sending letters. Upon his return to Indochina, Ho would also start unifying the resistance movements, as Fenn recalls:

“He invited all the top leaders to a conference, not his own people, but rivals working for other groups, who had used his absence to push themselves forward. Ho told them he had now secured the help of the Americans including Chennault. At first nobody really believed him. Then he produced the photograph of Chennault signed ‘Yours sincerely’. After this he sent for the automatic pistols and gave one to each of the leaders as a present. The leaders considered Chennault had sent these presents personally. After this conference there was never any more talk about who was the top leader.”<sup>169</sup>

Stretching the truth would become a specialty of Ho. Although, he would exaggerate about his relationship with the Americans, he was careful not to lie about it.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 171.

<sup>169</sup> Fenn, “Ho Chi Minh”, 81.

<sup>170</sup> Patti, “Why Vietnam?” 69.

## 5.5 Archimedes Patti

The OSS in Kunming needed a French speaking personnel on the highest air priorities, and so Washington sent in Major Archimedes Patti. He was the son of a New York Italian-American attorney, a friend of General Donovan and had already been an OSS veteran and upon his arrival to China, he would take over the lead of OSS mission in Indochina. Patti came prepared, back in Washington he served as the head of the Indochina Desk at OSS headquarters. He came to conclusion that Viet Minh was just what OSS needed for operations in Vietnam, he already knew Fenn was in contact with Ho Chi Minh. Patti received clearance from Donovan to use anyone who would help against the Japanese but also received a warning not to get involved in French-Indochinese politics.<sup>171</sup>

Patti first met Ho on April 27, 1945 in China near borders with Vietnam and like many others, Patti was immediately impressed. Ho mentioned that American communication equipment, weapons, and trainings would be a great help to the resistance movement. It was more a suggestion rather than a direct demand. In return, he promised to assist the Allies in the war.<sup>172</sup>

Patti concluded that Ho could be trusted. Despite the clear instructions from Donovan, he could not stay away from the ‘political aspects of the Indochina question’. He knew that Ho wanted to gain the U.S. support to free Vietnam and came to conclusion that this objective was not at all against the American policy.<sup>173</sup> (He would later be accused of being anti-French not only by many Frenchmen but also by his fellow Americans.<sup>174</sup>) And when in late April a request to immediately obtain information from Indochina by establishing missions in both Hanoi and Saigon would come, from a practical point of view, Viet Minh seemed to be a perfect solution.<sup>175</sup>

In upcoming months, the Viet Minh would provide a very valuable intelligence about the Japanese troops for which Ho gained a lot of American admirers.<sup>176</sup> But the gathering information from the Viet Minh caused trouble within the GBT. Frank Tan and Mac Shin would still train Viet Minh agents in Indochina when AGAS, which provided funds, would demand transferring the GBT service including Fenn’s under AGAS. This happened in February 1945 with mixed feelings

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<sup>171</sup> Patti, *Why Vietnam?* 7, 29-30, 67-68.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-88.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-86.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-86.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

inside the OSS. The OSS was suspicious to both the GBT and Fenn. They forced the GBT to finally agree to come under the OSS or their supplies would be cut. Soon, when Gordon would finally return from Washington, he would be furious about the partnership with Viet Minh. The two organizations would part ways.

To escape his desk work which would get more and more complicated, Fenn planned to join Tan and Shin in Viet Bac, northern Indochina. But another agent, Lieutenant Dan Phelan from AGAS would be sent in instead. Fenn disliked him because politically, Phelan was right-wing and there was a risk, he would want to liaise with the French. Fenn warned Ho, but when Phelan arrived at the Viet Minh headquarters, he immediately started to see things in a different light.<sup>177</sup> “You are misunderstanding Vietminh attitude. They are not anti-French merely patriots [who] deserve full trust and support,” Phelan sent to the GBT in Kunming.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 181-186; Currey, “Victory at Any Cost”, 89.

<sup>178</sup> Quoted in Fenn, “Ho Chi Minh”, 81.

## 5.2 The Deer Team

In the first week of June Ho informed the OSS that he was ready to provide up to one thousand well-trained guerillas for American operations against the Japanese. In order to provide trainings to these Viet Minh soldiers, the OSS launched a plan to send two intelligence teams under code-names ‘Cat’ and ‘Deer’ that would infiltrate into northern Vietnam. Major Charles M. Holland and Major Allison K. Thomas would each lead one of them.<sup>179</sup> Some of French officers would have to be included because of the pressure from French authorities.<sup>180</sup>

During the next four weeks, Thomas and his team would provide training to about two hundred Viet Minh members, among them was as well Vo Nguyen Giap, later the Viet Minh’s mind over military strategy and tactics. Patti commented that:

“Some of us may have suspected that in the future the weapons and training might be used against the French, but no one dreamed that they would ever be used against Americans.”<sup>181</sup>

Major Thomas was specifically chosen for his good relationship with the French. The same would apply to his second man in command, Lieutenant René Défourmeaux. He was pro-French and would easily gain trust of French refugees who would feed him intelligence.<sup>182</sup> The reason for choosing these two men was that at first, the plan was to train and work with French troops, and not the Viet Minh guerilla. However, soon Patti would lose patience with the European Allies. He concluded that working with Ho was more realistic than waiting to finally reach an agreement with the French. The Americans were well aware that the Viet Minh were of a Marxist political orientation, but the immediate objective was winning the war in the Pacific.<sup>183</sup>

On July 16, Thomas’s team was dropped into northern Indochina. Patti advised them not to take any French with them because they were not welcome in Viet Minh controlled areas. But Thomas tried to compromise and took at least one Frenchman, Lieutenant Montfort with him whom he could trust. They were immediately recognized by the Viet Minh and Thomas then chose

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<sup>179</sup> Patti, “Why Vietnam?” 107, 125.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 106-107.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>182</sup> René J. Défourmeaux, *The Winking Fox: Twenty-two Years in Military Intelligence* (Indianapolis: Indiana Creative Arts, 1997), 105, 125-126.

<sup>183</sup> Patti, “Why Vietnam?” 124-127.

to eliminate the French. Their presence complicated the whole situation, and he would rather work with the Viet Minh.<sup>184</sup>

Between August 9 and 15, the Deer Team would engage in a heavy training of Viet Minh troops. The Americans dropped in arms and ammunition and the Vietnamese would learn how to fire all kinds of guns and use grenades. The Viet Minh would carry those weapons around to impress people of the countryside. Vo Nguyen Giap would make sure they would be seen by as many people as possible.<sup>185</sup> Defourmeaux became sceptic to the training:

“We were training recruits for conventional warfare while contemplating guerrilla operations. The most important factor for a successful guerrilla operation is the knowledge of the terrain. This was certainly not within our range of expertise. The people we were training could operate throughout Indochina without fear of being identified as other than natives. In no way could we, Occidentals, convince local people to take arms and resist an invading power... All they needed from us were weapons, and training to use these weapons.”<sup>186</sup>

But soon news of dropping atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima would also bring the Viet Minh training to an end. Ho Chi Minh would start executing his new plans. He called for the members of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) to meet in northern Vietnam. Over seventy delegates from all Indochina arrived and saw Ho Chi Minh side by side with the Deer Team members, for many the first Americans they had seen, and Ho was able to lift his reputation once again.<sup>187</sup>

During the Deer Team-Viet Minh training, OSS officers engaged in conversations with Ho. The Viet Minh leader would exhibit a wide range of knowledge and told the Americans about the French oppression. He would also talk about his plans for transformation of his country. He

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 124-128.

<sup>185</sup> Currey, “Victory at Any Cost”, 92.

<sup>186</sup> Defoumeaux, “Winking Fox,” 169-171.

<sup>187</sup> Marr, “Vietnam 1945”, 365.

indicated that he would accept a transition period during which the French would train the Vietnamese of self-governance and eventually hand over the country to them.<sup>188</sup>

On July 18, Ho told Major Thomas to send a message to Kunming that Ho was prepared to meet with a high ranking French official to talk about the country's future.<sup>189</sup> Ho really wanted to talk about de Gaulle's speech in Algiers from December 8, 1943, back then the French general said:

“To these people who have affirmed their national feeling and sense of political responsibility, France intends to give a new political order within the French community; in the framework of the Indochinese federal organization, the freedoms of the different countries will be extended and consecrated.”<sup>190</sup>

The Viet Minh had a five-point proposal:

- A parliament will be elected by universal suffrage. It will be the legislature for the country. A French governor will exercise the functions of president until our independence is assured. This president will choose a cabinet or a group of advisers accepted by the parliament. The precise powers of all these organs can be delineated in the future.
- Independence will be given to this country in a minimum of five years and a maximum of ten.
- The natural resources of the country will be returned to the inhabitants after a just compensation of the present holders. France will benefit from economic privileges.
- All the liberties proclaimed by the United Nations will be guaranteed to Indo-Chinese.
- The sale of opium is forbidden.<sup>191</sup>

This proposal went unanswered. On September 2, 1945 Ho proclaimed Vietnam's independence in Hanoi. With OSS officers standing nearby he began the speech with the words of Thomas Jefferson:

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<sup>188</sup> Defoumeaux, “Winking Fox”, 169-171.

<sup>189</sup> Patti, “Why Vietnam?” 128.

<sup>190</sup> Buttinger, “Vietnam”, 302.

<sup>191</sup> Bartholomew-Feis, “The OSS and Ho Chi Minh”, 212.

“With an OSS officer standing nearby, Ho Chi Minh began with the words of Thomas Jefferson: ‘All men are created equal. They are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’.”<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, *The Vietnam War* (TV series) (United States: PBS, 2017), Netflix.

## Conclusion

“America’s involvement in Vietnam began in secrecy. It ended thirty years later, in failure, witnessed by the entire world. It was begun in good faith by decent people out of faithful misunderstandings, American overconfidence, and Cold War miscalculation. And it was prolonged because it seemed easier to muddle through than admit that it had been caused by tragic decisions made by five American presidents belonging to both political parties.”<sup>193</sup>

- Ken Burns and Lynn Novick

The OSS played an unprecedented role in Vietnam during the Second World War. Americans were the first white men who would come to Vietnam not to colonize or oppress the people but to help fighting off a common enemy. The Deer Team’s training of the Viet Minh guerillas was not as big as it seemed and according to the University of New Orleans’ Professor Allan Millet it has often been exaggerated: “It was not an extended U.S. military mission to train a Vietnamese army. They showed them how to shoot guns and operate radios.” The OSS knew the Viet Minh was a communist organization and the U.S. agents did not come to create a new army or train guerillas, Millet claimed.<sup>194</sup>

I agree with the professor, but in my opinion the OSS team helped to bring the Viet Minh to power in a different way. It was paying attention to the small details that would reveal the powerful manipulation that Ho Chi Minh was able to pull off. His intelligence and ability to speak English made him appealing to the U.S. intelligence agents. He used the small contacts he had with the Americans to convince other Vietnamese nationalist movements that he had backing from the United States, like the time when he showed them a signed photo of commander Claire Chennault claiming they were close friends, or the other time when he used a simple presence of OSS agents to impress his fellow Vietnamese. It was in this way the OSS team influenced the events in Indochina. They helped creating an atmosphere of hope that when the war would be over, the United States would lobby for the Vietnamese independence at the international level.

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>194</sup> Millet, in a personal interview with the author.

While OSS agents on the ground found Ho Chi Minh very charming, Washington saw it differently. Charles Fenn or Archimedes Patti sent reports back to Washington describing the horrible living conditions the French and Japanese regimes had created in Vietnam. But winning the war was the priority, not freeing colonies. After the Japanese coup de march, all intelligence network went silent. In order to collect intelligence for bombing missions of the U.S. Air Force, instructions from OSS headquarters gave clearance to work with anyone who would be able to provide it, even the Viet Minh.

The OSS in general was a right-wing elitist organization, and while Fenn and Patti were able to see the Vietnamese as equals, many others were not able to do so. Language and race played an important role and would partly decide with whom the United States would partner with. OSS agents reported examples of demonstration of ‘white supremacy’ not only against the Vietnamese but also against the Chinese. Professor Millet used to serve with the U.S. Marines, and he told me that if had not leave, he would be sent to Vietnam for a simple reason. He could speak a little French. He claimed that only few made an effort to speak Vietnamese or Chinese. Millet also mentioned the importance of common religion. Americans would rather support the Vietnamese Catholics for they were the “good guys”.<sup>195</sup> But how foolish it is to put a Catholic in charge of a Buddhist country?

In this research I have listed few examples of reports which claimed that the Vietnamese were used to being oppressed and were not able to think and act on their own. Some Americans simply could not identify with the locals and would rather side with European allies. While culture, race and language might have played an important role in the development of following events, there were other reasons even more significant that would turn the U.S. focus elsewhere.

After the war against Japan had been won, these was no longer an objective to keep working with the Viet Minh. President Roosevelt did not include his Vice-President Truman into the plans of a postwar colonial free world and when FDR died, Truman, who was not knowledgeable of the U.S. foreign policy, would have to figure out a way to contain the growing power of the Soviet Union in Europe. De Gaulle threatened that if the United States would continue to articulate their anti-colonial policy, France would have no other choice than to fall into the

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<sup>195</sup> Millet, in a personal interview with the author.

Soviet influence. Truman chose to focus on strong Western Europe and the colonial world became secondary.

If postwar events would play out a little bit differently and the United States would be able to create the international trusteeship – Roosevelt so much dreamed about – to govern colonies before granting them independence, the Vietnam War would probably never happen. But instead the United States would soon become fully employed by containing communism, and while there were situations which Washington could comprehend better, many mistakes and unfortunate series of events, would lead to one of the worst foreign engagements in American history.

“Yes, the Vietnam War was very much avoidable but not inevitable.”<sup>196</sup>

- John D. Fitzmorris

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<sup>196</sup> John D. Fitzmorris, in a personal interview with the author.

## Souhrn

Americká přítomnost ve Vietnamu se datuje od druhé světové války. Spojené státy se po útoku na Pearl Harbor v roce 1941 naplno zapojily do bojů v Evropě i Pacifiku. Jednu ze základen měly v Číně, kde spolupracovali s generálem Čankajškem.

Když v roce 1940 po německé invazi kapitulovala Francie, do francouzské Indočíny vstoupila japonská vojska. Boje se tak automaticky přesunuly i do Vietnamu.

Spojené státy se nejdříve vyhýbaly spolupráci s vietnamskými nacionalistickými organizacemi. Dávaly přednost čínským nebo francouzským agentům. Když ale Japonci v roce 1945 provedli v Indočíně převrat, celá síť kontaktů, která by poskytovala cenné vojenské informace, zmizela. Pro účely efektivního bombardování ale spojenci potřebovali informace zevnitř Indočíny o pohybu nepřátelských vojsk. Důležité bylo nyní vyhrát válku, a proto se agenti OSS, válečného předchůdce dnešní CIA, rozhodli začít spolupracovat se skupinou Viet Minh a jejím vůdcem Ho Či Minem, později nejslavnějším vietnamským komunistickým vůdcem.

Američané věděli, že organizace Viet Minh má sklony nejen k nacionalismu, ale také ke komunismu. Co nejdříve porazit Japonce bylo ale přednější, a tak agenti OSS začali na území Indočíny s výcvikem omezeného počtu vietnamským gerilových jednotek.

Po shoení atomových bomb ale druhá světová válka v Pacifiku skončila. Ho Či Min využil dočasně vytvořeného mocenského vakua a prohlásil v Hanoji 2. září 1945 nezávislost Vietnamu. Nechal se tehdy schválně vidět po boku amerických agentů OSS, což mu přidalo na popularitě a vytvářelo dojem, že Spojené státy podporují vietnamskou nezávislost.

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