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France Loses Indochina

The French Indochina War had begun on December 19, 1946, involving at first about 20,000 French troops and fewer than 50,000 Viet-Minh guerrillas. By the time the French decided to transform what had been essentially a colonial war into a *civil war* by setting up a Vietnamese government under their aegis in March, 1949, the war had grown to 150,000 troops on the French side and nearly a quarter-million on the Viet-Minh side. And at the point the war had become a part of the over-all Western policy of containment of Communism in Asia, following the outbreak of the Korean War, almost a million men were locked in battle and the United States had become involved in the war at the side of the French.

In France itself, the war had never been popular. In fact, contrary to the prevailing mythology on the subject, no colonial war ever had been: In 1885, Prime Minister Jules Ferry had been turned out of office for having sent French troops to North Viet-Nam which, in the course of a skirmish with Chinese marauders, had lost a few men. The French Communist Party successfully exploited the unpopularity of the war (and its real cost to France until the U.S. began to finance much of it in 1953), as will be seen in Chapter 2—but what most people have ignored is that it began to call the Indochina War a “dirty war” only *after* the CP’s chances of controlling France in the late 1940’s became nil. This “chauvinism” of the French Communists certainly was not lost on Ho Chi Minh at the time, and it should be remembered today as

North Viet-Nam once more casts abroad for support in her resistance to American pressure.

The French in Indochina, however, were still searching for an alternate solution to the dilemma of having to negotiate with their principal military opponent, the Viet-Minh. Yet, as is shown below, representative government under a non-Communist regime was never given a real try—and still has not been almost two decades later. Militarily, the French did not, as is often assumed, limit themselves to the defense of static positions. In fact, the Navarre Plan was perhaps at fault for overextending the limited French resources of manpower and matériel and wedding the French to a policy of victory that was clearly unrealistic to anyone who had seen the war from close up, even before the disaster of Dien Bien Phu exposed to public view how desperate the French position really was.

It was this that led me to hope for a compromise solution along the lines of the Korean armistice even before the battle was fought—for an undefeated French Army, supported by reform-minded allies, would have left behind something other than the shambles of a non-Communist Vietnamese rump state. Yet, as the last two articles in this section show, even the amputated state did have a good chance of survival, and the Geneva agreements did not foreclose its future altogether, had the violation of some of the provisions of the agreements been accompanied by strict application of others and by an offer of fruitful alternatives to the northern brother-state.

It was the total absence of such alternatives that raised the chances of a violent conflict in Viet-Nam from a remote possibility to an absolute certitude.