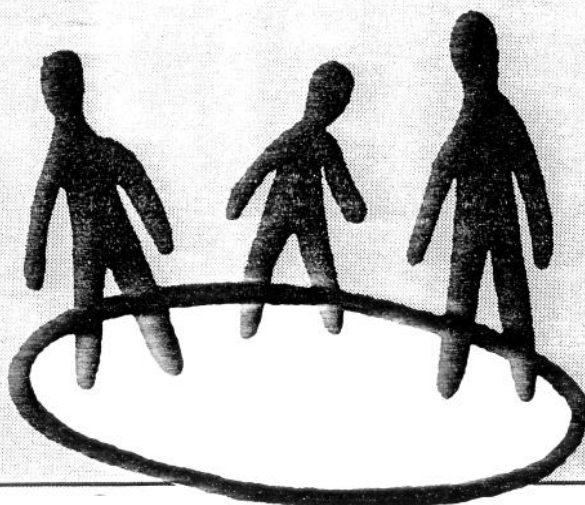


The outbreak of war in Indochina 1946

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COMAR HAIPHONG à SAIGON:

Mission de la Marine parfaitement
exécutée notamment tirs "SAVORGNAN
DE BRAZZA" sur KIENAN et un village
désigné. No. 30.693-94,
23 Novembre, 1946.

Behind these words lies the suffering of thousands of human beings, who ended their lives in the massacre of Haiphong and Kien An, just in time not to experience thirty years of war. This thesis tries to tell how the war in Indochina began, but its victims will not be present in the account. It is a thesis on high level decision-making, about the presidents, ministers, commissioners, admirals, generals and colonels - all of them with no exception men - who decided whether hundreds of thousands of people, men, women and children, would die or be left in peace.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AE	Affaires Economiques
Ambafrance	Ambassade de la France
AN	Archives Nationales
AOM	Archives Nationales Section Outre Mer
AOM-Aix	Archives Nationales Section Outre Mer - Depot à Aix-en-Provence
AP	Affaires Politiques
BCR	Bureau Central de Renseignements d'Indochine
BFD0C	Bureau Fédéral de Documentation (Indochinese branch of the French intelligence agency)
BR	Bulletin de Renseignements
C	Carton
CAB	Cabinet (secretariat)
CIAC	Copy In Author's Collection
Comafpol	Commissaire des Affaires Politiques
COMAR	Commandant de la Marine
Cominf	Commissaire de l'Information
Cominindo	Comité Interministériel de l'Indochine
Comrep	Commissaire de la République
Cororient	Corps expéditionnaire d'Extreme-Orient
CP	Conseiller Politique
d	Dossier

Dai Viet	Dai Viet Quoc Dan Hoi (Great Viet Nam Nationalist Association - pro-Japanese party)
D.B.	Division Blindée
D.E.C.	See SDECE
Defnat	Défense Nationale
DGER	Direction Générale des Etudes et Recherches (name of the French intelligence agency until 1946, when it was baptized SDECE)
D.I.C.	Division d'Infanterie Coloniale
Dircab	Directeur de Cabinet
Dirsurfe	Directeur de la Sureté Fédérale
DRV	The Democratic Republic of Vietnam
EMGDN	Etat Major Général de la Défense Nationale
EM(P)	Etat Major (Particulier)
FOM	Ministère de la France d'Outre Mer
Fransul	Consul de la France
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States
G	Local time
Génésuper	Le Général Commandant Supérieur des Troupes Francaises en Extreme-Orient
Hausnaire	Haut Commissaire
HC	Haut Commissariat
IMIF	Indochine Microfilm
Lien Viet	Hoi Lien Hiep Quoc Dan Viet Nam (League for the National Union of Viet Nam)
MAE	Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (1946)
MRE	Ministère des Relations Extérieures (1982)
MRP	Mouvement des Républicains Populaires

NADF	National Archives and Records Service, Record Group 69, Decimal Files
O.S.S.	Office of Strategic Services
PCE	Service de Protection du Corps Expéditionnaire
PCF	Parti Communiste Français
PCI	Parti Communiste Indochinois
Prési. Paris	Présidence Paris (Hotel Matignon)
R.I.C.	Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale
s/d	Sous-dossier
SDECE	Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage (name of the French intelligence agency which until 1946 was called DGER)
Secstate	Secretary of State
SFIO	Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (the Socialist Party)
Tel	Carton de télégrammes
TFEO	Troupes Françaises en Extrême-Orient
TFIN	Troupes Françaises Indochine du Nord
TFIS	Troupes Françaises Indochine du Sud
Tong Bo	The Direction Committee (or Political Bureau) of the Vietminh, elected by the Central Committee
Tu Ve	Thanh Nien Tu Ve Thanh Ha Noi (Youth for the protection of the Hanoi city)
UDOFI	Union pour la Défense de l'Oeuvre Française en Indochine
Vietminh	Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh (Viet Nam Independence league)
V.M.	Vietminh

V.N.	Vietnam
VNDCD	Viet Nam Dan Chu Dang (Vietnamese Democratic Popular Party - Socialist party inside Vietminh)
VNQDD	Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (Viet Nam Nationalist Party)
Z	French time

INTRODUCTION

This thesis attempts to analyze anew the outbreak of the Franco-Vietnamese war in 1946 in the light of documents recently released by French ministerial and colonial archives. The study relies on a systematic perusal of telegrams and memoranda in the archives of the French ministries of Overseas France and of Foreign Affairs, the Contemporary Section of the "Archives Nationales" (Paris), the Saigon files, kept in the "Archives Nationales Section Outre Mer" (Aix-en-Provence) and the American diplomatic files in the National Archives (Washington). For a more detailed presentation of the sources, see the bibliography.

Up to 1952, the official French version, describing the outbreak of hostilities as a premeditated Vietnamese aggression, dominated French media, and with exception for some few well-informed officials and politicians and left wing intellectuals, it was probably generally believed. On the other hand, the Vietnamese claimed that the French were responsible for the outbreak of war by starting the reconquest of northern Vietnam in violation of existing agreements. The Vietnamese version did not impress the West.

Since the very beginning of the war, however, there existed also a critical French version, presented to the public by such newspapers as Franc-Tireur and Combat, and by Philippe Devillers in Le Monde. The critical version became somewhat reluctantly accepted too by the very nationalist Communist press. The critical articles maintained that the responsibility for the war was divided. First, French authorities in Saigon engineered the occupation of Haiphong at the end of November 1946, which seriously damaged the

Franco-Vietnamese relationship; then the Vietnamese government took the initiative for the December 19 attack in Hanoi, which was the immediate cause for the outbreak of general hostilities. In 1952 the critical version was very much strengthened by the publication of Philippe Devillers, Histoire du Viet-Nam de 1940 à 1952. Devillers' balanced interpretation influenced the standard American accounts in books such as Ellen Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina, (1954), Joseph Buttinger, Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled (1967) and The Pentagon Papers (1971), although the American authors were even more critical to French policy than Devillers. A pro-French version was presented to American and British readers by Bernard Fall, Street Without Joy (1963).

In the late sixties, French responsibility for the Haiphong battle was well documented by the publication of General Morlière's detailed report of January 10, 1947 in two books by Georges Chaffard, Les carnets secrets de la décolonisation (1965) and Les deux guerres du Vietnam de Valluy à Westmoreland (1969). Chaffard's revelations led General Valluy to write four articles which defended his actions in 1946, but also had a flavor of self-criticism (La Revue des deux mondes 1967). Valluy's highly interesting answers represent an important contribution in the reconstruction of the events leading towards war.

The recently released French documents have led this author to conclude that French responsibility for the outbreak of war was even significantly greater than has been assumed till now. French authorities in Saigon, with somewhat reluctant support from Paris, consciously sought the rupture, while Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh desperately tried to avoid it. This conclusion is not only in contradiction with the official French version, but also challenges some of the Vietnamese accounts, which claim that Ho Chi Minh in the autumn of 1946 realized the inevitability of war and prepared for the rupture (See for instance Vo Nguyen Giap, Unforgettable Days (1970, English ed. 1975). the Vietnamese certainly prepared for war as a

contingency measure, but Ho Chi Minh's actions in December 1946 show that even after the occupation of Haiphong, he did not regard war as inevitable. In Vietnamese accounts, the December 19 attack is almost taboo. When it is mentioned at all, the information given is vague and sometimes doubtful. Something happened that day that the Vietnamese leaders still seem unwilling to uncloud. This study attempts to find an explanation to this by an exhaustive examination of the December 19 events.

The present thesis does not merely discuss whether the French or the Vietnamese were responsible for the outbreak of hostilities. Its first aim is to establish a correct chronology for the development of Franco-Vietnamese relations from the signing of the Modus Vivendi on September 14, 1946 to the outbreak of war in Hanoi on December 19. Its second aim is to examine the decision-making process on the French side, concentrating on the relationship between the High-Commissioner in Saigon and the government in Paris. The concluding chapter will also discuss the general French motives for their policy towards Vietnam and the crucial question of whether the war was inevitable or not.

In order to illustrate some of the problems discussed in this study, we may turn to the great Indochina debate from March 11 to 18, 1947 in the French National Assembly. On March 18, both the official and the critical French versions were presented in speeches made by Minister of Overseas France Marius Moutet and Communist affiliate Pierre Cot.

Pierre Cot rejected the view that Vietnam alone was responsible for the evolution from agreement to war. France was to blame too, first of all for failing to honor her obligations under the March 6, 1946 agreement. By that convention, France had promised to respect the result of a referendum which had to decide on whether Cochinchina

should be an independent state or part of a unified Vietnam. Instead of holding the referendum, French authorities in Saigon had established a Cochinchinese government, which was not representative of the population. Moutet replied that he himself was totally responsible for the decision not to hold the referendum. It was impossible to arrange free elections in a state of terror. He admitted that the Cochinchinese government had not been representative, but "we took the elements we could find," and it was unacceptable (like was done in the press of the extreme left) to "compare men sincerely attached to French civilization to puppet or Quisling governments."¹

Pierre Cot mentioned as the second French fault the April 1946 instructions on the part of the military commander of Northern Indochina to work out plans for "coup d'états" in all towns hosting French garrisons. In September and October, French customs controls were established in the North in violation of the September 14 agreement, and when this was met with Vietnamese opposition, the French command exploited an incident in Haiphong on November 20 to carry out the plans for bombing the town and taking full control of it. Pierre Cot claimed that thousands of Vietnamese and Chinese had been killed in the bombing and that the Haiphong incident was infinitely more regrettable in its consequences than the incidents in Hanoi one month later.

Moutet retorted that the instructions prepared for the French troops were defensive contingency plans. The import-export controls had been necessary because of enormous quantities of contraband rice from Tonkin and because of a considerable illegal arms import into the country. He only commented briefly upon the Haiphong affair, but maintained that the Vietnamese had opened fire first, and France had suffered serious losses, just as the opposite party. He did not deny, however, that the Haiphong events had been of a "certain gravity."

When proceeding to December 19, it was Pierre Cot's turn to be brief. He admitted that French authorities could not be held responsible for the Hanoi incident, but felt that the Vietnamese attack had been an act of insanity ("acte de folie"), which could only be explained by the atmosphere of apprehension and panic, in turn largely due to the Haiphong events one month earlier.

Moutet emphasized that when the Vietnamese leaders ordered the December 19 attack, they knew that Léon Blum's new French cabinet had decided to send him, Moutet, on a mission to Indochina. They took no notice of that, but hoped to take the French forces by surprise and wipe out the French soldiers while they were dispersed in cinemas, cafés and dance halls. Only because of warnings from the remarkable French intelligence service were the French soldiers confined to the barracks in time and thus saved from "the Tonkinese vespers." As an example of Vietnamese methods Moutet quoted from a friendly letter sent to the French by the Vietnamese Minister of the Interior only hours before the attack. Moutet found these methods to be very "Far Eastern," comparing them to the Japanese ploy of making friendly inquiries in Washington while preparing the attack on Pearl Harbour. Moutet did not, however, hold Ho Chi Minh personally responsible, but claimed that after the Vietnamese president's return from negotiations in Paris, some secret extremist members of Vietminh's leading organ, the Tong Bo, had taken over the reins of power. On this last point, Moutet was contradicted by right wing deputies, who pointed to the fact that Ho Chi Minh had also sent a friendly letter to the French on the very day of the attack. One deputy called Ho Chi Minh a war criminal and compared him to Hitler.

Although opposing some of the most central aspects of French Indochina policy, Pierre Cot avoided a direct criticism of the French government. He explained all

French faults by way of actions taken by Saigon in defiance of instructions from Paris.² The formation of the autonomous Cochinchinese Republic, the establishment of the customs controls and the bombing of Haiphong had all been carried out on Saigon's initiative in defiance of governmental policy. The main communist spokesman Jacques Duclos went one step further by citing an article in a socialist review which denounced Saigon's policy for having placed the French government before a "fait accompli."³

Moutet answered this by defending d'Argenlieu against the charges of having acted in defiance of orders from Paris. Moutet did not reproach him for not always having followed governmental directives, but he reproached the High-Commissioner for most often having moved ahead of them.⁴ This was an important statement because it implied that essentially the policy goals and methods of the government (a coalition of Christian Democrats, Socialists and Communists) and of the High-Commissioner were identical.

By their March 1947 statements Pierre Cot and Marius Moutet pointed to some of the fundamental questions which will still have to be taken up in a study on the outbreak of the Indochinese war:

- Why were the March 6 and September 14 agreements not observed?
- Why were the negotiators unable to find an arrangement for the French-controlled southern half of Vietnam that was acceptable to both parties?
- Did the French command actively prepare for a reconquest of the North?
- What was the relative importance of the Haiphong and Hanoi incidents?
- Why did the Vietnamese attack on December 19? Was it an act of desperation or a well prepared aggression?
- Was the outbreak of war the result of an independent Saigon policy carried out in defiance of instructions

from Paris, or was the High-Commissioner supported by Bidault's coalition cabinet?

The last of the above questions will be a "leitmotif" of the thesis, touched upon in almost every chapter, only to be finally and exhaustively considered in the conclusion.

As the study is primarily based on French sources, it will focus mainly on French motives and decisions and less on those of the Vietnamese counterpart. French intelligence reports permit the historian to make fairly well-informed guesses on the motives for Vietnamese decisions, but the emphasis will be on the French side. As the subject is the Franco-Vietnamese political relationship, many interesting topics fall outside the scope of the thesis. This concerns i.e. economic development, the essentially military aspects of the conflict, the internal political struggle between different factions of Vietnamese nationalism as well as French and Vietnamese relations with Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and China. The Indochina policies of the United States, Great Britain and the Soviet Union will also hardly be mentioned. It is thus all the more necessary to open chapter 1 by briefly placing Franco-Vietnamese relations in an international context.

PART 1

MODUS VIVENDI



MAP OF INDOCHINA
 ONLY PLACES MENTIONED IN THE TEXT ARE INCLUDED

CHAPTER 1

PARIS

1.1 Between World War II and the Cold War

In September 1946, almost two years had passed since Paris was liberated by Free French forces led by General Leclerc, and since Leclerc's superior, General Charles de Gaulle, installed himself in the French capital as head of a provisional government. World War II had ended a year ago, but the full onset of the Cold War was yet in the future. The Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan were not proclaimed till the spring of 1947, and Germany was still occupied territory, divided in four occupation zones.

In Paris the allied powers were still hanging over the peace treaties with Italy and the Axis satellites, and the process towards the partition of Germany into two hostile states was only in the making. France demanded recognition as one of the four great powers and intended to play an independent role in relations with the "Anglo-Saxons" and the Soviets. British and American policy-makers were very sensitive to the need for keeping France aligned with the West. They therefore tried to avoid giving offence to French feelings, to stay away from measures that could increase the strength of the French communists, and they searched for ways to secure fundamental French interests, such as the need for coal, for the purpose of aligning France with their policy for Germany.

The Russians felt a similar need to treat France with care. They would have liked to keep France away from the emerging Anglo-American alliance and certainly did applaud some French policies in Germany. In 1947, it proved

impossible, however, to accomodate the French parliament, strengthen the French Communist Party and pressure Russian goals in Germany at one and the same time.

In an Asian perspective, the Vietnamese revolution in August 1945 was a part of the nationalist wave which in the wake of Japan's capitulation brought India, Burma, the Philippines and Indonesia their independence. The August Revolution may also be viewed as a part of the communist drive that in 1949 triumphed in China, but was defeated militarily in Malaya and stalemated in Corea. It is important to have in mind, however, that in 1946-47, there was no cold war in Asia. At that time, the impending partition of Europe was the main concern of the American and Soviet policy-makers. The war in Indochina began long before this part of the world really claimed the sustained attention of the leading statesmen in Moscow and Washington. When occasionally it was taken into account, it was as part of their overall relations with France. This may explain why France was allowed to engage herself in a colonial war without being deterred either by the anticolonialist Soviets or the anticolonialist Americans.

1.2 The Conclusion of the Fontainebleau Conference

While the victors of World War II negotiated the peace treaties in the very heart of Paris, another conference took place at Fontainebleau, a small town boasting a famous palace some 65 kilometres south-east of Paris. Here, a Vietnamese delegation, headed by Pham Van Dong, hammered throughout the summer of 1946 on the two principal Vietnamese demands: independence and unity. At the same time, the president of the young Vietnamese republic, Ho Chi Minh, appeared in Paris to plead the cause of his country. But all in vain. The French delegation to the conference rejected the primary Vietnamese demands. In fact, while the conference was in session, French authorities in Saigon promoted a separate Cochinchinese Republic in the southern part of Vietnam, and this was approved by Paris.

In the first days of September, Vietnamese and French representatives edited the text of a preliminary agreement, avoiding the two principal problems of independence and unity. The text was ready on the morning of September 10, but in the afternoon, Pham Van Dong made Vietnamese signature conditioned on French agreement to a date and a procedure for a referendum in Nam Bo (Cochinchina) on the question of this region's inclusion in Vietnam. France had accepted the demand for a referendum in a previous agreement with Ho Chi Minh on March 6, but had, because of alleged "terrorist" activity, never been willing to fix a date. The French negotiators stuck to this line during the Fontainebleau negotiations, and did not bow to Pham Van Dong's demand on September 10. Most of the Vietnamese negotiators, including Pham Van Dong, subsequently left Paris on September 13. President Ho Chi Minh and the two Vietnamese negotiators Dueng Bach Mai and Hoang Minh Giam stayed behind. During a lunch on September 11, Minister of Overseas France Marius Moutet declared to Ho Chi Minh that a total deadlock was unacceptable. Ho Chi Minh agreed and entreated the French not to let him return empty-handed. "You won't regret it if you strengthen my hand against those who intend to supplant me," he said.

If we have to fight, we will fight. You will kill ten of us, but we will kill one of you, and in the end you will be the one who gets exhausted.¹

That same evening, a meeting was organized between three French representatives and two Vietnamese, whereupon Ho Chi Minh wrote a new draft. He received a French counter-proposal on September 14, which he possibly discussed in the afternoon with French Prime Minister Georges Bidault.² Very late in the evening of September 14, the Vietnamese president came to see Moutet at home, declaring that he was after all prepared to sign. The so called Modus Vivendi was then signed, in the bedroom of the Minister.

The Modus Vivendi was the last part of an agreement complex, based on three pillars:

- partition of Vietnam at the 16th parallel,
- a referendum in the South to decide on its eventual fusion with the North,
- a cease-fire between French and Vietnamese forces in the South.

The partition of French Indochina in one British and one Chinese occupation zone had been decided in July 1945 at the conference in Berlin (Potsdam). Neither the French nor the Vietnamese took part in that decision, but the British zone soon passed over to French administration while the Vietnamese revolutionary republic was tolerated in the Chinese zone.

The referendum was included in the Franco-Vietnamese agreement of March 6, in which France recognized Vietnam as a free state within the Indochinese Federation and the French Union. In return, Vietnam permitted France to have 15,000 troops north of the 16th parallel.

The cease-fire in the South was the most important clause in the September 14 agreement.

The Modus Vivendi contained 11 articles outlining the conditions for Franco-Vietnamese relations in the economic, cultural, diplomatic and military fields, but apart from the cease-fire and the grant of democratic liberties, it included no new concessions to Vietnam.

Ho Chi Minh, ponding possible Vietnamese reactions to the unsatisfactory agreement, is said to have murmured on his way back to the hotel in the evening of September 14: "I have just signed my death sentence."³ Before analyzing the content of the Modus Vivendi and the reactions to it in

Hanoi and Saigon, we will have to present the two signers and recapitulate the Vietnamese and French background to the agreement: Who was this president who could single-handedly commit his heir nation on issues of such fundamental importance for its future existence? What could have induced the French to come to terms with a revolutionary leader in French Indochina - the "pearl of the French Empire"?

1.3 Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Revolution

In September 1946 Ho Chi Minh had been president of the Vietnamese Republic for one turbulent year. It had required great skill just to remain in power. He had to negotiate continuously with opposing nationalist parties, remaining Japanese troops, as well as British, French and Chinese occupation forces. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh having led the League for National Liberation (Vietminh) through the successful August revolution, proclaimed Vietnamese independence before an enchanted crowd in Hanoi, the former capital of the French colonial administration. Ho Chi Minh became the new republic's first president, while simultaneously holding the offices of prime minister and foreign minister. The name Ho Chi Minh for the first time made headlines throughout the world.

Less than two months after the proclamation of the Republic, the Research and Intelligence Service of the Department of State in Washington issued a 90 page intelligence survey containing biographies of 69 prominent nationalist leaders in French Indochina.⁴ Ten pages were reserved for Ho Chi Minh, who was presented as "Nguyen Ai Quoc (Now known as Ho Chi Minh; alias Ly-Thuy; Mr. C.M. Hoo)." The report concluded that Nguyen Ai Quoc was the same person as Ho Chi Minh,⁵ and Nguyen Ai Quoc was reported to be

the most experienced and intelligent of the Annamite nationalist-Communist leaders ... with a remarkable degree of organizing ability⁶.

Nguyen Tat Thanh, the later Nguyen Ai Quoc and Ho Chi Minh etc., was born in 1890. 21 years old, he left Indochina to work his way around the world on a French ship. After having visited England and America, he went to Paris, where he took part in the foundation of the French Communist Party and argued the cause of the oppressed colonies through articles in small leftist publications. In the 1920's, he spent some time with the Comintern in Moscow and participated in the organizing of its South-East Asian department. Later, he worked with Comintern networks in China and Siam, and in 1930, he played a decisive role in uniting different factions of the Indochinese communist movement and in founding the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP).

The French "Sureté" had been chasing him for many years when in 1931 he was arrested by British police in Hong Kong. The files on Nguyen Ai Quoc in the French "Sureté" ends with the information that he died in Hong Kong 1933.⁷ How he managed to get out of prison is uncertain, but he was in Moscow during the 7th Congress of the Comintern in 1935, where the policy of the international communist movement was changed to one of promoting broad popular antifascist fronts. During the short period from 1936 of the French socialist Léon Blum's Popular Front Government, the nationalist and communist parties in French Indochina were permitted to work legally. Ho Chi Minh still seems to have stayed in Moscow until 1938.

Towards the end of 1937, the ICP was forced to go underground again, and in 1939 many of Ho Chi Minh's close collaborators, such as Le Duan, Duong Bach Mai and Tran Huy Lieu were arrested. Others, like Pham Van Dong and Vo Nguyen Giap fled to China, whereto Ho Chi Minh had returned in 1938.

During World War II, French Indochina remained a French colony, under the administration of Admiral Decoux, who stayed loyal to the French collaborationist regime in Vichy and permitted Japanese bases in the country. This was the main reason why President Roosevelt could permit himself to demand the dismantling of the French empire in South-East Asia and the foundation of an international trusteeship for Indochina. In March 1945, the basis for this anticolonialist and anti-French American policy vanished when the Japanese abolished the French colonial administration. The allied invasion of France had signalled the end of Vichy, and the new French government under de Gaulle established contacts with influential elements of the Decoux administration. The Japanese as a consequence staged a coup against Decoux on March 9, 1945. The great majority of the French colonial troops were quickly defeated and placed in concentration camps. Only small French forces were able to give some fight to the Japanese while fleeing to China. The Japanese set up a puppet regime in Hué under the emperor of Annam, Bao Dai.

The Japanese coup was immediately exploited by de Gaulle to push for a change in American Indochina policy. The death of President Roosevelt, who had opposed strong advice from the Department of State to recognize French sovereignty in Indochina, eased the transition. Only days after Roosevelt's death, the U.S. Secretary of State promised his French colleague to respect France's sovereignty in her South-East Asian colonies.

At the same time, however, the Japanese coup prepared the way for Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh league, which had been founded in 1941. Ho Chi Minh had entered Indochina illegally in the early forties. On a later mission to China, he was arrested by the local warlord, but after some time in prison he negotiated his own release by offering his services to the warlord in the fight against the

Japanese. With Chinese support, and in collaboration with pro-Chinese Vietnamese exiles, he established anti-Japanese networks inside Vietnam and Laos. He also worked for American intelligence missions in China, helping downed American pilots and providing the Organisation of Strategic Services with valuable intelligence on Japanese military movements.⁸

The Japanese, in this last phase of the war, had no interest in fighting the Vietminh and were satisfied with holding the main cities and communication lines. They allowed the Bao Dai regime to appoint Vietnamese to important administrative positions. The Vietminh seized the opportunity to establish a strong military base in the North of Vietnam (Tonkin or Bac Bo) and to infiltrate the administration of the Bao Dai regime.

As early as August 1944, the Vietminh leadership was able to foresee the postwar situation when anarchy would provide favorable revolutionary conditions. "We will not even have to seize power by force, for there will be no power any more," says a Vietminh document, dated August 6, 1944.⁹ The first news of Japanese demands for peace one year later gave the signal for the August Revolution. The Vietminh, partly in cooperation with other nationalist groups, seized power quickly in Hanoi, Hué and Saigon. Bao Dai abdicated, and on September 2 the Vietnamese Republic was proclaimed. The Japanese authorities did not want to employ their troops to prevent the Vietnamese revolution. The war was lost, and they returned to the barracks.

It was the power vacuum after the Japanese capitulation that made the revolution possible. It was Ho Chi Minh's ability to foresee and make preparations for this situation that elevated himself and the communist leadership to the position of organizers and leaders of the national revolution. Bao Dai's abdication invested the new republic with an important national legitimacy, forcing the opposing

parties to work within the framework of the new republic. Bao Dai was in fact appointed "supreme advisor" to the new government.

The August Revolution was a great adventure. The alignment of forces was favorable to Vietminh's cause. A great majority of the people was united in support of independence, but the paramount powers in South-East Asia had yet not accepted the existence of a Vietnamese state. As the Central Committee of the ICP asserted in November 1945, "the easier the seizure of power, the more difficult to preserve it".¹⁰

The August Revolution took place before the arrival of allied occupation forces. When the British South East Asia Command under Lord Mountbatten had been established in 1943, no formal agreement had been reached as to the position of Indochina. The British wanted Indochina to be Mountbatten's responsibility along with Thailand and Burma. The Americans wanted it to be part of Chiang Kai Shek's China theater. This was a matter of inter-allied dispute on several occasions. At the Potsdam conference in July 1945 the Combined Chiefs of Staff agreed on a compromise. Indochina north of the 16th parallel was allotted to Chiang Kai Shek, the southern part to Mountbatten. This first division of Indochina profoundly influenced Vietnamese history.

Some twenty days after the Japanese capitulation and a week after Ho Chi Minh's proclamation of the Republic, British troops arrived in Saigon while a huge Chinese army began to pour in from the north. The British wanted to transfer power to French forces as soon as possible, while some of the Chinese commanders planned to resist French reoccupation of Tonkin and establish a China-oriented regime in Vietnam. Their troops wanted to stay as long as possible in order to live off the country and bring as much booty as possible back to China.

On October 5, French General Leclerc arrived in Saigon where rearmed French prisoners of war had staged a coup against the Vietnamese revolutionary committee on September 23. The French and British forces subsequently "pacified" the country, even using Japanese troops. In March 1946, the last British forces withdrew and left the French in control of all big towns and main communication lines, and probably a majority of the villages, south of the 16th parallel.

If the United States had conceded to the British demand at Potsdam that the whole of Indochina be placed under Mountbatten's command, the French would probably have been able to oust Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary government from Hanoi and provoke general warfare in the autumn of 1945.¹¹ It was the presence of the large, pillaging Chinese army in the north that permitted Ho Chi Minh to stay in power. The French were only able to secure a Chinese promise of withdrawal on February 28, 1946. In return France gave up all her old privileges in China and promised that Haiphong would be a free port for Chinese commerce. Breaking Chiang Kai Shek's promises, the Chinese troops stayed through May. Most of them left in June, but the last Chinese unit was only shipped out from Haiphong in mid-September.

In February 1946, Leclerc's troops were preparing to invade the North, and a French fleet left Saigon on March 1 to land troops at Haiphong. Paratroopers were ready to attack Hanoi. This operation was extremely risky, the Chinese forces still holding the North and the French population in Hanoi being without protection. The French understood the danger and feared both a drawn out war with Vietnamese resistance fighters and military incidents involving Chinese troops. On March 6, the French representative in Tonkin, Jean Sainteny, succeeded in negotiating an

agreement with Ho Chi Minh. The same morning, French ships had entered the Haiphong port and been met with Chinese gunfire.

In the March 6 agreement, France recognized the Vietnamese Republic as a free state ("Etat libre") within the Indochinese Federation and the French Union with its own government, parliament, army and finances.¹² The term "free state" was a compromise between the Vietnamese demand for "independence" and the French offer of "autonomy". The question of independence was left to the future.

The other major problem in the negotiations between Sainteny and the Vietnamese leaders concerned the question of uniting the three "Ky" or "Bo", i.e. the three parts that constitute Vietnam:

1. Bac Bo (Tonkin) with Hanoi as capital.
2. Trung Bo (Annam) with Hué as capital.
3. Nam Bo (Cochinchina) with Saigon as capital.¹³

Within the French colonial structure these three had been kept as separate bodies, Tonkin and Annam being "protectorates" (as Laos and Cambodia) and Cochinchina a direct colony.

French colonial planning for the postwar period aimed at preserving Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina as separate entities. Cochinchina had the largest French population and was through its great plantations economically the most important part of Vietnam. By February 1946, the French controlled Cochinchina and Annam south of the 16th parallel. The Vietnamese government insisted that Cochinchina was a part of Vietnam. In the March 6 agreement France promised that the decision of the people, consulted in a referendum, would be respected.

This promise and the recognition of Vietnam as a "free state" were the main French concessions in the March 6

agreement. In return the Vietnamese government declared itself ready to receive cordially the French troops, coming in order to relieve the Chinese occupation forces. In an appendix to the agreement the number of French troops in the North was fixed at 15,000. On April 3, a more detailed military convention was signed, stipulating the number of French troops in each part of Tonkin and North-Annam.

When Sainteny told Ho Chi Minh how satisfied he was that war had been prevented, Ho Chi Minh answered:

And I am suffering, because basically you are the one who have won. You know very well that I wanted more than that ... But after all I also understand that one cannot have everything in one day.¹⁴

Ho Chi Minh was in fact immediately accused by the nationalist press of having sold out to the French. He had, however, anticipated this reaction and induced the most important nationalist leader, Vu Hong Khanh, to sign with him and Sainteny. On March 7, Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap were able to swing a hostile crowd in Hanoi to accept and applaud the compromise with the French. On March 18, the troops of General Leclerc were welcomed in Hanoi by quiet, but anxious Vietnamese and by an exstastic crowd of French citizens.

During the spring and summer of 1946, Ho Chi Minh and his government supported the formation of a resistance army in the south. In the North, the Vietminh-dominated government was only one of three competing power centers, the other two being the French and Chinese forces respectively. This triangular structure precluded great changes or clashes, all three fearing that by taking the initiative they would face the forces of the other two simultaneously.¹⁵ The drawn-out and fruitless Franco-Vietnamese negotiations took

place in this period, first on Vietnamese soil in the spring, then in Paris during the summer. The French pressed diplomatically for Chinese withdrawal, and the last Chinese unit left Haiphong on September 18, four days after the signing of the Modus Vivendi. The triangular structure had been changed to one of a fragile bipolarity.

We shall presently accompany Ho Chi Minh on his way home on board a French battleship and give a detailed account of his sustained effort both to prevent, and prepare for, war with France during the period from October to December.

Three days before signing the Modus Vivendi, Ho Chi Minh met the American journalist David Schoenbrunn and made a statement rendered famous by later events: Vietnam did not have the "true attributes of independence", her own customs control, her own diplomatic representatives abroad, her own currency. Vietnam was "truncated". France had set up "puppet, separatist regimes" in the South. He feared that in the end the Vietnamese would be forced to fight. It would be "a war between an elephant and a tiger". If the tiger ever stood still, the elephant would crush him with his mighty tusks. But the tiger would not stand still. He would lurk in the jungle by day and emerge by night. He would leap upon the back of the elephant, tearing huge chunks from his hide, and then he would leap back into the dark jungle. Slowly the elephant would bleed to death.¹⁶

Ho Chi Minh considered war likely, but not inevitable. His talents for making friends with his adversaries played an important role in the Vietnamese attempts to prevent war. General Leclerc, General Salan, Commissioner Sainteny and Minister Moutet were all called dear friends in the letters they received from Ho Chi Minh. Many of those who met Nguyen Ai Quoc or Ho Chi Minh have commented on the great impression he made. It could be negative when the author

detested the case Ho Chi Minh had devoted himself to, as when Nguyen Ai Quoc in the 1930's was described by a French anti-communist writer as having the appearance of a Russian nihilist with a high and well-formed forehead and deep seated eyes that reflect the incurable melancholy so natural in certain types of Destoyewsky. His "high and hollow cheeks" revealed "the inner flame" and were "feverishly colored". A "line of bitterness" deformed somewhat his mouth.¹⁷

His later adversaries were often more positive. Sainteny praised Ho Chi Minh for his rich culture, intelligence and asceticism and deplored that France did not understand his value and his power.¹⁸ Paul Mus said that Ho Chi Minh was a "brilliant actor", and as all brilliant actors, he needed no other means than his "sincerity".¹⁹

Giap also dwells on the "magnetic charm" of Ho Chi Minh. Even his enemies showed respect for him. They "seemed to lose some of their aggressiveness when they were in his presence."²⁰ It is only fair to say that the present author also has been charmed by the historical person whom the Vietnamese call "Uncle Ho".

1.4 Marius Moutet and French Postwar Colonialism

In his speech to the French National Assembly on March 18, 1947, Marius Moutet told that he had been convinced of Ho Chi Minh's wish to cooperate with France when the Vietnamese president left Paris in September 1946. "I am a man who is accustomed to his kind. I am so much older than him that I know them," Moutet declared. Though being experienced enough to know that what "Far-Easterners" say should not be accepted as if it was "words from the Gospel which cannot be discussed," Moutet was convinced that Ho Chi Minh had been impressed by France, who had received him as a "real head of state."²¹

Marius Moutet was born in 1876 and was thus 14 years older than Ho Chi Minh. Moutet was a lawyer and took part in the French socialist movement from its very start. Sixty years old, he was chosen by Léon Blum as Minister of Colonies in the 1936 Popular Front Government. He opposed the Vichy solution in 1940 and from 1944 to 1946 worked against de Gaulle's plans for a "presidential republic" along with other veterans of the Third Republic.

During World War II, de Gaulle's and Vichy's colonial policies were basically similar. While Vichy wanted to strengthen the French overseas empire to compensate for its limited power in France, de Gaulle wanted to use the colonies as a base for reconstructing a strong France. They thus had common interest in maintaining the strongest possible French foothold in the colonies, and Petainists and Gaullists yet fought each other bitterly in the colonies during the war. In Japanese-occupied Indochina the colonial regime remained loyal to Vichy when most others had deserted. When Admiral Decoux was received after the war by de Gaulle, the general was in Decoux's words "more than cold; he was glacial, as it suits the "First Resistant of France" when he receives a vulgar Governor General from the abhorred Vichy regime."²²

Decoux's collaboration with the Japanese made it impossible for de Gaulle to obtain American recognition of French sovereignty in Indochina, and de Gaulle was incapable of sending troops to Indochina without allied help. At the news of the Japanese coup on March 9, 1945, de Gaulle acted immediately. He demanded allied help for French "resistance groups" in Indochina, he demanded that French forces be allowed to participate in the war against Japan, and he pressed for allied recognition of France's sovereignty over Indochina. When these claims met American reluctance, de Gaulle threatened the American ambassador, Jefferson Caffery, by asking him if the United States

wanted France to become "one of the federated states under the Russian aegis."²³ Subsequently the French troops on their way to China received American air drops. French sovereignty was acknowledged by the American Secretary of State, but French participation in the Pacific War never materialized.

On March 24, 1945, a de Gaulle declaration laid the foundation for French postwar Indochina policy. The declaration had been prepared since February 1944.²⁴ It stated that the five countries that composed the Indochinese Federation, and which were separated by "civilisation, race and tradition" would remain separate bodies. The French Governor General (the title was later changed to High-Commissioner) would be heading the Federation.²⁵ The French obviously did not intend to abandon their Far Eastern colonies. The March 24 declaration was met with protests even from the most French-oriented Vietnamese.

De Gaulle himself appointed his trusted officers Leclerc as commander in chief of the Far Eastern Expeditionary Corps and d'Argenlieu as High-Commissioner for Indochina. When de Gaulle resigned in January 1946, leaving the metropolitan political arena to the despised political parties, a military and gaullist-oriented hierarchy was left behind in Vietnam. The tripartite government under Felix Gouin, which succeeded de Gaulle, did not change the decision-making system for Indochina that de Gaulle had created.

De Gaulle had dominated French foreign policy at the expense of his foreign minister, Georges Bidault. Bidault, a Christian Democrat (Mouvement des Républicains Populaires - MRP) and the former president of the French internal resistance movement, later confided to a French writer that the day when de Gaulle left office was "the most beautiful

day" in his life.²⁶ Georges Bidault and Charles de Gaulle were rivals. The history teacher and the officer both believed themselves to be no mere politicians. They had a mission in the history of the French nation. They were both avid nationalists, they were both anticommunists, and they detested one another.

While de Gaulle had to wait twelve years before the nation again called on him, Bidault enjoyed some of the most influential positions in the Fourth Republic. He was Foreign Minister from September 1944 to July 1948, with the exception of the month from December 1946 to January 1947. As regards the Indochina question this interval is of the utmost importance, as war broke out at this moment. In June 1946, during the heated debate on constitutional issues, Bidault became Prime Minister (Président du Conseil) while remaining Foreign Minister. In the period preceding the outbreak of war, he was thus the most powerful politician in France.

It was also in the aftermath of de Gaulle's retirement that Marius Moutet became Minister of Overseas France. One month earlier, he had written two programmatic articles on Indochina for the socialist daily Le Populaire.²⁷

In these articles Moutet stated that France should remain both in French Asia and French Africa, but not against the will of the local population. In his opinion, France had in the past made a considerable effort on behalf of the Indochinese people, but not enough. More should be done in order to invest the word "colonialism" with new and positive connotations. According to Moutet, American or Russian domination would not be preferable to French colonialism. He took a clear stand on the two issues that were to remain undecided through 1946, i.e. those of unity and independence.

He stated that "geographically, ethnically, politically, the main characteristic of Indochina is diversity. It

consists of five countries: Tonkin, Annam, Cambodia, Laos and Cochinchina".²⁸ He did not at this time accept the legality of Ho Chi Minh's government even if he believed it possible to come to terms with some of the Vietminh leaders. He denounced the Vietminh for its opposition to French authority and for having constituted, or "believing to have constituted" a government:

One does not improvise a government, a legislation, an administration in a heterogenous country where the public is not yet capable of expressing consciously its preferences.²⁹

The latter sentence embodies Moutet's way of thinking. He conceived of colonialism as emancipation of undeveloped peoples under French tutelage. It was even more clearly expressed when Moutet in August 1946 tried to make sense of his own political evolution before a socialist gathering in La Rochelle:

As a young socialist militant I called for the liberation of the working class. Today the French working class has the means to liberate herself: she has conquered political and social rights. It is now our task to widen this liberation by fighting for the peoples that we are to educate and to support. It is this need for liberation and emancipation that I devoted myself to already in 1936 as Minister in the Popular Front Government.³⁰

This idea of educating other peoples was also written into the foreword of the French constitution that was accepted in a referendum on October 13, 1946:

Faithful to her traditional mission, France intends to lead the peoples which she has taken care of, to the freedom to administrate themselves and to direct democratically their own affairs.³¹

In the constitution this idea of emancipating other peoples towards some degree of autonomy was mingled with rivalling ideas of assimilating elites from the colonies into French culture to the point where they could be accepted as full French citizens. French debates over colonial issues can often be viewed as philosophical battles between those who regarded the colonial relationship as one between a developed and several undeveloped territories and those who considered it as one between a metropole and its citizens in different parts of the world. Yet this conflict made little impact in the process of decolonisation following World War II. When the colonial peoples demanded total independence, both camps reacted in the same manner. The catholic nationalist Bidault and the socialist emancipator Moutet do not seem to have disagreed on the crucial aspects of French colonial policy in 1946.

Marius Moutet has been considered a weak person, who came to betray his own and his party's peaceful socialist ends by giving in to the influence of more dominant personalities in the government, above all Georges Bidault, and to the influence of the colonial administration in Indochina.³² Most certainly this is partially true. Moutet was a man easily influenced by others. There are, however, two factors that tend to modify the image of the "weak personality." Firstly, Moutet never expressed the anti-colonialist attitudes that were held by many other socialist leaders in 1946-47. He never wished to give in to Vietnamese demands for independence and unity, and in fact he fully backed d'Argenlieu's policy for Cochinchinese autonomy. Moutet's actions can be seen as consistent with his personal views. Secondly, it was not only his personality that was weak. His position in the decision-making system that de Gaulle had created for Indochinese affairs was also precarious.

1.5 The French Decision-Making System

The Colonial Ministry was directly responsible for all French overseas territories with the exception of Indochina. Moutet obviously wanted this arrangement for Indochina as well, but by a decree of February 21, 1945, de Gaulle had set up an independent body to coordinate the reoccupation of Indochina. This body was called the Interministerial Committee for Indochina (Comité Interministériel de l'Indochine), hereafter: Cominindo. The Cominindo was preserved by Gouin and Bidault, and in late 1946, the members were:

- Premier and Minister of Foreign Affairs Georges Bidault (MRP), who chaired the committee.
- Minister of Overseas France Marius Moutet (SFIO), who was deputy chairman.
- Minister of War Edmond Michelet (MRP).
- Minister of Armament Charles Tillon (PCF).
- Minister of Finance Robert Schuman (MRP).
- Chief of Staff (EMGDN) General Juin.
- Chief of Intelligence (DGER, later SDECE) Henri Ribière.

Cominindo also had the right to summon other key personalities for its sessions, and this gave Minister without portfolio and Chairman of the Association for the Defense of French Achievements in Indochina (UDOFI) Alexandre Varenne (radical) an almost permanent position on the committee.

The Cominindo had its office in the Ministry of War (Ministère des Armées). As many as 26 persons were employed at the most, and the secretariat was headed by a secretary general. The secretary general of the Cominindo was no doubt the best informed Paris official of Indochinese developments. The only other Paris institution which got direct information from Saigon, was the Chiefs of Staff (EMGDN), in charge of the military communication.

All non-military dispatches and cables to and from Indochina went through the office of the Cominindo. The secretary general decided on the distribution of information to the ministries, organized the weekly advisory meetings of representatives from the member ministries, and summoned the ministers when important decisions were to be made.

In the crucial months preceding the outbreak of war, later gaullist Premier Pierre Messmer held this position. Originally, de Gaulle had designated Messmer as French Commissioner in Hanoi, but when he was parachuted into Tonkin in August 1945, he was captured by the Vietminh and held as their prisoner until he was able to escape. Jean Sainteny, who had lead a French intelligence mission to China and had come to Hanoi on his own initiative, had done Messmer's work in Hanoi. Sainteny was then appointed Commissioner for Tonkin and North Annam instead of Messmer, and Messmer returned to Paris, later to fill the equally important, but less conspicuous position as secretary general of the Cominindo.

In spite of his unpleasant experiences from Vietnamese captivity, Messmer was no hard-liner. In March 1946, he published an article where he declared himself in favor of a liberal policy in Indochina, even accepting Vietnamese arguments for unification of North and South.³³ In April, he annoyed French authorities in Indochina by using the familiar "tu" in conversations with Vo Nguyen Giap at the Dalat conference.³⁴

The secretary general of the Cominindo had an important position in the French decision-making system, but he was probably not as influential as he was central. Messmer could not impose any policy on Saigon without a formal cabinet or Cominindo decision, and while Bidault chaired the Cominindo, clearcut decisions were seldom made. When they were made, they often consisted in approving what

Saigon had already done. Bidault was so preoccupied with other matters that he was unable to follow events in Indochina closely, and he seems to have left the initiative to Saigon rather than permitting his Socialist and Communist ministers to influence French policy in Indochina.

In 1945, the official explanation for the establishment of the Cominindo had been that the reoccupation of Indochina would create problems of a military nature that could not be handled by the Ministry of Colonies alone.³⁵ When the reoccupation of Southern Indochina had been accomplished and France had signed the March 6 agreement, this was (at least officially) no longer the case, and in fact Moutet's ministry took over some of Cominindo's functions. In September, Cominindo's staff was reduced to 17, and Messmer does not seem to have opposed this. The Cominindo was, however, preserved, and the secretariat in 16, rue St. Dominique continued to centralize communications with Saigon.

The main impact of the lack of authority in the Cominindo system was a strengthening of the autonomous power of the French High-Commissioner. When Bidault was succeeded by Léon Blum in December 1946, the Cominindo was reorganized and put under direct control of the Minister of Overseas France (by decree of January 9, 1947). Moutet, who retained his portfolio in Blum's cabinet, stated that the Cominindo system had led to a "dispersion of responsibilities that has been harmful to sound administrative management." Moutet had found himself deprived of his normal functions and the "means of action that he should dispose of."³⁶

This was changed in January 1947 in spite of violent protests from the High-Commissioner,³⁷ but at that time war was already a fact.

1.6 The Fontainebleau Conference and French Policy for an Autonomous Cochinchina

The dispersion of responsibilities in the French decision-making system was clearly shown in the lack of coordination between the High-Commissioner's actions to foster an autonomous Cochinchina and the French government's attempts to negotiate in Fontainebleau.

On March 29, 1946, Georges Bidault had instructed d'Argenlieu that if Cochinchina, "the richest and most densely populated province in Indochina," should be linked up with Vietnam, France would lose one of her greatest "trumps".³⁸ Yet, the Ministry of Overseas France instructed d'Argenlieu during the abortive conference on Indochinese soil at Dalat in April 1946 that it would be considered a French "manoeuvre" if France permitted an autonomous Cochinchinese government to be constituted after having promised in the March 6 agreement to respect the result of a referendum on the question of Vietnamese unity. It would also lead to Vietnamese protests and put the French government in a "difficult situation" if, as was the plan in Saigon, a delegation of Cochinchinese representatives was sent to Paris.³⁹

On April 23, a delegation of this sort, led by Nguyen Van Xuan, nevertheless left Saigon for Paris, and on April 26 Admiral d'Argenlieu sent a memorandum to Paris with arguments for the formation of a provisional Cochinchinese government.⁴⁰ On May 11, the Dalat negotiations broke down because the French refused to enter a detailed discussion on how to organize the referendum.

Four days later, Cominindo transmitted a telegram from Nguyen Van Xuan to Saigon, informing d'Argenlieu that Xuan had been encouraged by "highly placed personalities" to pursue action in favour of the rapid establishment of a provisional government for an autonomous Cochinchina.⁴¹

In a comment to the telegram, Messmer's predecessor as secretary general, Labroquère, warned d'Argenlieu that this was not government policy. The government had decided to

keep strictly to the clause of the March 6 convention stipulating that a referendum would fix the status of Cochinchina.⁴²

The very same day, Moutet transmitted another telegram to d'Argenlieu from Alexandre Varenne, who advised Saigon to:

1. Postpone the referendum until the situation was completely restored.
2. Constitute without delay a provisional "Annamite" government in Cochinchina with a prestige comparable to the one of the Vietnamese government.⁴³

Moutet specified that this was only Varenne's opinion and that he would express his own at a later date.⁴⁴

This was enough for d'Argenlieu to act. While Ho Chi Minh was on his way to France in an aeroplane, d'Argenlieu authorized the proclamation of a Cochinchinese Republic. This was done on June 1, and Dr. Think was appointed president of the provisional government.

This decision was approved by the Cominindo in its meeting on June 4.⁴⁵ The pattern is clear: D'Argenlieu acts, as soon as he thinks he can do it without being disavowed, Cominindo approves.

The proclamation of the Cochinchinese Republic was certainly tantamount to a slap in the face of the Vietnamese. On the first day of the conference at Fontainebleau, the leader of the Vietnamese negotiators, Pham Van Dong, protested vigorously. The negotiations dragged on through July without producing any results. Then, on July 25, d'Argenlieu announced that he would convene on August 1 in Dalat a new conference including

representatives from Laos, Cambodia, Cochinchina and observers from South-Annam and from the highland minority peoples in North-Annam, whose areas had just been occupied by French military forces in violation of the military appendix to the March 6 agreement. This meant that while the Vietnamese negotiators in Paris thought they were negotiating on behalf of the whole of Vietnam, d'Argenlieu started negotiations on Vietnamese territory with hand-picked representatives from areas that the Vietnamese government considered to be under their authority.

D'Argenlieu had not been explicitly authorized to do this by Paris,⁴⁶ and when the news arrived in Paris, it caught the government and the delegation to Fontainebleau unprepared. Pham Van Dong at once accused France of violating the March 6 agreement, and delivered a formal note of protest. Moutet drafted a reassuring reply and tried to persuade Bidault to make an urgent decision. Bidault said he was too preoccupied with the Paris Peace Conference, and asked Moutet not to bring the matter up on the cabinet's first meeting - he had not had time to read the documents. When, on August 1, the Vietnamese had received no answer, they broke off the negotiations.

The Vietnamese were packing their bags, but on August 9, the leader of the French delegation to Fontainebleau assured the Vietnamese that the conference in Dalat would take no decisions, but only be used as a sounding board. On this basis the Vietnamese agreed to continue the talks. The Cominindo met on August 10 and 12 and decided to propose a preliminary agreement, avoiding the two main issues of independence and unity.⁴⁷ Moutet explained this policy in a personal letter to d'Argenlieu on August 19. He criticized the High-Commissioner for having convened the Dalat conference without properly informing Paris. The Vietnamese had thus been given the necessary pretext to break off negotiations. Yet Moutet assured d'Argenlieu that if there was a disagreement between the

High-Commissioner and himself, it was not on the essence, but on the form.⁴⁸

What d'Argenlieu feared most of all, was that the French delegation to the conference at Fontainebleau would bow to Vietnamese demands for a rapid organization of the referendum. This would ruin his policy for Cochinchinese autonomy. D'Argenlieu had wished to demonstrate that the Vietnamese government only represented the North, and that was why he had summoned the conference at Dalat. On the first day of this conference, he sent a long memo to Paris where he favored the suspension of the whole Fontainebleau conference in order to give the other federated states more time to build up their institutions.⁴⁹ Moutet did not care for that advice; he wanted to avoid a rupture at Fontainebleau, but he assured d'Argenlieu that time was not ripe to fix a date for the referendum, and this would make it impossible to reach an overall agreement with the Vietnamese. Before the referendum, local authorities should be established in Cochinchina in order to create support for the Cochinchinese government. This would give the population a sense of freedom, without which a majority would no doubt express itself in favor of a united Vietnam. Much had to be done in order to "obtain a referendum favorable to autonomy." Moutet thought that "authentic Cochinchinese" should take care of the propaganda effort, and that groups should be created in every locality, secretly at first, to work for autonomy. A program for social and agrarian reform would also be necessary.⁵⁰ This shows clearly that the evolution of Cochinchinese autonomy was not d'Argenlieu's personal policy. It had the full backing of the Minister of Overseas France.

These events, attached to the Fontainebleau conference, have been related in detail partly to show the impact of the Cochinchina issue on Franco-Vietnamese relations, partly to outline the pattern of internal relations between

the French decision-makers. As of August 1946, there was no disagreement between the most important French decision-makers over major issues in the Indochina policy, but the distribution of responsibilities was unclear. D'Argenlieu took important decisions on his own as soon as he thought he could do it without risking to be disavowed by Paris. Moutet was hesitant and was not in a position to make important commitments without preliminary backing from the Prime Minister or from a meeting in the cabinet or the Cominindo. Bidault was the one formally responsible, but he was preoccupied with other matters and willingly left the field to d'Argenlieu. After the Fontainebleau conference, Bidault thanked d'Argenlieu in a personal telegram for his efforts in the name of France and assured him of his full confidence and friendship.⁵¹

1.7 The Modus Vivendi

It has been described how Ho Chi Minh in the evening of September 14 decided to sign the Modus Vivendi although he had obtained no concessions on the fundamental demands of independence and unity. What was the content of the Modus Vivendi?⁵²

It was declared in the introduction to the 11 articles of the Modus Vivendi that the March 6 agreement would continue to be in force. This meant for one thing that there would still be a limit to the number of French troops north of the 16th parallel, for another that France maintained the promise to respect the result of a referendum on national unity. In article 10 the contracting parties agreed that negotiations for a definite treaty should begin as soon as possible not later than January 1947. The provisions of the Modus Vivendi should enter into force on October 30, 1946 (article 11).

The first eight articles were formulated as reciprocal engagements, but in fact they were a list of Vietnamese concessions to French interests in the territories controlled by the Vietnamese state.

Ho Chi Minh promised:

- To let French nationals enjoy the same freedoms in Vietnam as Vietnamese nationals, first of all the freedom of establishment (article 1).
- Not to make any change in the status of French property and concerns in Vietnam without a preliminary agreement with France (article 2).
- To restitute all French property requisitioned by the Vietnamese government to its owners (article 2).
- To permit French educational and scientific institutions to work freely in Vietnam under French programs and give the Pasteur Institute in Hanoi back to the French (article 3).
- To guarantee an absolute priority to French nationals whenever Vietnam needed advisers, technicians or experts (article 4).
- To respect the French-controlled Indochinese piastre as the sole currency for all of Indochina (article 5).
- To form a Customs Union with the other members of the Indochinese federation (article 6).

It was agreed to establish five mixed commissions. The three most important were:

1. A coordinating committee for customs, foreign trade and currency. This committee was to prepare the organization of the Indochinese customs service (article 6).
2. A coordinating committee for communications in all of Indochina (article 7).
3. A commission to determine arrangements for Vietnamese consular representations in neighbouring countries and its relations with foreign consuls (article 8).

These eight articles reflected the degree to which Ho Chi Minh was prepared to compromise on actual Vietnamese independence.

Article 9 mainly concerned the French-controlled Cochinchina and South-Annam, where a guerilla war had been fought since Leclerc's army reconquered it in late 1945 and the beginning of 1946.

It was agreed on a general cease-fire to enter into force on October 30. The French and the Vietnamese General Staffs were therefore to arrange the "conditions of application and supervision of measures decided in common." This cryptic sentence was to be interpreted quite differently by the two sides.

The enjoyment of democratic freedoms should be reciprocally guaranteed. Unfriendly propaganda on both sides should be terminated. A person designated by the Vietnamese Government should be accredited to the High-Commissioner to establish the cooperation indispensable for the carrying out of the agreement.

To the Vietnamese it was important that France had engaged herself in an agreement with the Vietnamese Government on a cease-fire in Cochinchina and South-Annam. This was interpreted by the Vietnamese leaders as an implicit recognition of Vietnamese institutions south of the 16th parallel. The French authorities in Saigon were to interpret this quite differently. They conceived the cease-fire to be the prelude to the disarming or withdrawal of Vietnamese military forces in the South.

Ho Chi Minh had asked for a period of six weeks between the signing of the Modus Vivendi and the application of the agreement. Both sides therefore had much time to prepare their interpretations and to make up strategies for how to

use the agreement for their different ends. The interpretations were to become opposite indeed, and very little of the Modus Vivendi was actually to be applied.

Before leaving the stage in Paris, we shall see how Moutet wanted the agreement to be applied one week after having signed.

1.8 The Strategy of Marius Moutet

On September 21, Marius Moutet signed a letter of political instructions for d'Argenlieu.⁵³ He declared that the Modus Vivendi no doubt constituted a notable French progress in relation to the provisional agreement of March 6. The French position north of the 16th parallel had been appreciably improved, and the High-Commissioner was instructed to use all his authority to secure that the Vietnamese government would fulfil its obligations with a "maximum of precision". France for her part would also have to apply the agreement loyally in order to create a detente. D'Argenlieu was instructed to avoid any action that could worsen Franco-Vietnamese relations before the date when the agreement was to enter into force: October 30. It would even be advisable for French authorities to take the first steps towards detente by establishing democratic rights in Cochinchina. The Government had gained the conviction that Cochinchina was "the very pivot of our whole Indochina policy." France had to succeed quickly in Cochinchina, because the future French presence in Indochina would almost exclusively depend on the success of the Cochinchina policy.⁵⁴

One of the first steps that should be taken was to enlarge the Cochinchinese cabinet of Dr. Thinh, with the long range aim of creating a government that would represent the

majority of the people in Cochinchina. D'Argenlieu should not be afraid to let persons who were in favor of Vietnamese unity join Dr. Thinh's government. The French Government did not fear the evolution of a "sincere democracy" in Cochinchina, even if this would eventually lead to the unification of the three Ky under one form or another. This last instruction was probably meant to pave the way for Nguyen Van Xuan. He had led the Cochinchinese delegation to Paris, and had kept in close contact with French Socialist leaders. He was not an easily controlled person, but he was hostile to the Vietminh and had declared to French journalists present at the Dalat conference on August 4 that nothing would have prevented the unification of the three Ky if the Hanoi Government had been less left leaning.⁵⁵

The instructions from Moutet to d'Argenlieu show that Moutet had much the same view as Xuan. The policy of Cochinchinese autonomy was not a matter of principle. Moutet feared war with Vietminh. He stated in his letter to d'Argenlieu that a "policy of force" would almost certainly be unsuccessful because French military means were and would continue to be limited.⁵⁶ Moutet also feared the unification of Vietnam under Vietminh dominance. His strategy was to build a political force in Southern Vietnam that could counterbalance Vietminh's power in the North.

This was a political strategy, and the cease-fire would deprive the French of military means. The man who was expected to apply Moutet's strategy from his office in Saigon was not a politician, but an admiral and a monk. While d'Argenlieu made clumsy attempts to create popular support for French-sustained autonomy, Vo Nguyen Giap concentrated on the suppression of the China-oriented opposition in the North, and Ho Chi Minh was on his way back home on board a French warship.

CHAPTER 2

HANOI

2.1 One Month on board a French Ship

Some hours before the Modus Vivendi was signed, 25 members of the Vietnamese delegation to the Fontainebleau Conference left Marseille on board Pasteur,¹ and only arrived in Haiphong on October 3. They made no mention of the Modus Vivendi in their first public statement after the return, as could be expected since they had left France before the conclusion of the agreement. One of the first days at sea, they received two short telegrams from Ho Chi Minh informing them that the Modus Vivendi had been signed.² Pham Van Dong cabled Hoang Minh Giam, who stayed in Paris as Vietnamese representative to France, that he would like to see the Modus Vivendi.³ Cominindo then instructed Saigon to give the Vietnamese delegation a copy when Pasteur arrived at Cap St. Jacques.⁴ The delegation to Fontainebleau thus had to wait for approximately two weeks before learning the ultimate result of their own negotiations.

The negotiations had not been the only business of the Vietnamese delegation. It had done a lot of purchasing in France and brought six tons of luggage, mainly radio equipment, to the ship. In Marseille this luggage was "by an error" marked "Saigon" instead of "Haiphong." Cominindo told Saigon that this "error" would give the necessary "pretext" (sic.) for disembarking the luggage at Cap St. Jacques and hold it there for a while.⁵ When Pasteur arrived in Haiphong, there were complaints because luggage had been wrecked.⁶

On the delegation's return to Hanoi, the Vietnamese government got the first confidential reports on the Fontainebleau negotiations. Serious preparations for the application of the Modus Vivendi could therefore only start about three weeks after the agreement had been concluded.⁷ The French High-Commissioner, for his part, was thoroughly informed by his collaborators Pignon, Torel and Gonon, who left Paris with a plane for Saigon on September 24.

Ho Chi Minh left France four days after the Pasteur on board the French man-of-war Dumont d'Urville, and only arrived in Haiphong on October 20, ten days before the Modus Vivendi entered into force. Giap writes in his memoirs that the ship sailed at a rather leisurely pace and that the French seemed to deliberately delay the return of Ho Chi Minh.⁸ Why didn't the president take a plane? Jean Sainteny, who accompanied Ho Chi Minh during his stay in France, says that Ho Chi Minh refused a French offer of a plane, using his health as pretext.⁹ Giap tells that the leaders in Hanoi were afraid the French might try to obstruct the return of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese delegation.¹⁰ Ngo Dinh Diem later suggested that Ho Chi Minh had signed the Modus Vivendi in order to be sure that the French would let him return to Hanoi,¹¹ but this is pure speculation.

It is difficult to understand why Ho Chi Minh preferred a long journey by sea. One possibility is that he feared French sabotage, another that he wanted to give Giap more time to strengthen Vietminh power in the North and Nguyen Binh to build up his forces in the South. When the president returned, he would have to show the French his moderation. Vietnamese actions before his return could always be excused by his absence. It could thus be intelligent to delay the return of the moderate president in order to give his subordinates more freedom of action.

During Ho Chi Minh's long journey, he could only communicate both with France and Vietnam through French military cables. The French therefore knew, and we know, what Ho told Hanoi. Before leaving France, he informed the Vietnamese government of the Modus Vivendi, adding that a copy would be sent to Hanoi by air.¹² From the ship, he instructed Hanoi to explain the terms of the Modus Vivendi to the people and to start executing its clauses, and he asked for information on the situation back home.¹³

On the ship Ho Chi Minh played his role as the friendly and moderate national leader and obtained an excellent relationship with the French crew, who admired him for his asceticism. In contrast to the delegation on Pasteur, Ho had no luggage and impressed the crew by washing his own clothes.¹⁴ The French commander later praised Ho for his intelligence and charm, but added that the president seemed to bow quite easily to advice from those who had his confidence.¹⁵

On the first day of his journey, Ho assured Moutet of his friendship and said that he counted on Moutet's loyalty in applying the agreement.¹⁶ About one week later, he received a courteous, but non-political, telegram from Bidault. Ho, having received the first reports from Vietnam, thanked Bidault for his friendly message and remarked:

Modus Vivendi has not satisfied population Vietnam. That's human. Will do my best and will succeed if French friends in Cochinchina apply loyally democratic freedom, cessation hostilities, liberation prisoners and abstain from unfriendly words and actions. I count on your active help to accomplish work in interest two countries.¹⁷

This message is important for two reasons:

1. It shows that in Ho Chi Minh's view, loyal Vietnamese application of the Modus Vivendi depended on a change in French Cochinchina policy.

2. It represents an attempt to make the French government directly responsible for French Indochina policy and to establish direct contact between the Vietnamese president and the French premier.

For Ho Chi Minh, it must have been important to keep in touch with Bidault. Bidault was the most influential of the French politicians, and direct contacts between Ho and Bidault would be of an inter-state and not a colonial nature. Bidault of course understood this and did not answer the telegram. Considering it to be of political nature, he thought that it should be answered neither by the Premier nor by the Minister of Overseas France, but by the High-Commissioner. In the beginning of November, he forwarded Ho's telegram to d'Argenlieu and told him to answer it if he wished to.¹⁸

When the Dumont d'Urville sailed into Cam Ranh Bay on the south-east coast of Indochina, admiral d'Argenlieu was there to meet the Vietnamese president and to demonstrate that in the future, it was the High-Commissioner who would represent France in negotiations with Vietnam.

2.2 Ho Chi Minh meets d'Argenlieu

Ho Chi Minh and d'Argenlieu met twice on board the admiral's ships in 1946, March 24 on Emile Bertin in Ha Long Bay, October 18 on Suffren in Cam Ranh Bay. The admiral favored these naval meetings because they could be held in an atmosphere of French force. In March, according to Sainteny, d'Argenlieu had received Ho Chi Minh with a "lot of apparatus." Ho Chi Minh reacted to this by strengthening his "ultra simple" features.¹⁹ He asked for immediate negotiations in Paris. D'Argenlieu refused and wanted the negotiations to take place in Dalat, the proposed capital of the Indochinese Federation. This was

why the negotiations at Fontainebleau had to wait till after the fruitless Dalat conference in April. In his report from the March 24 meeting, d'Argenlieu said that the parade and the naval review seemed to make a great impression on the Vietnamese president.²⁰ Ho Chi Minh denied this by telling General Salan, who accompanied him on his way back to Hanoi, that the admiral's ships could not go up the Vietnamese rivers.²¹

On October 18, the subject for discussion was the application of the Modus Vivendi. The difficult point was the Franco-Vietnamese relations in the South after the cease-fire. Ho Chi Minh promised to choose an official representative to Saigon who would permit the "exchange of friendly views." They agreed to start talks with the purpose of fixing the principles for the cessation of hostilities in the different sectors, and when d'Argenlieu denounced terroristic activity in Cochinchina and South-Annam, Ho Chi Minh answered by disclaiming such acts and authorized the High-Commissioner to quote him.²²

When d'Argenlieu, however, demanded the withdrawal (he called it "repatriation") of all Vietnamese troops from the South, and told Ho Chi Minh that he had received "the most formal instructions" on this matter, Ho Chi Minh was in d'Argenlieu's words "absolutely intransigent."²³

D'Argenlieu had all the same the impression that Ho Chi Minh sincerely desired an entente with France and concluded that the actions of the president upon his return to Hanoi would show if he really meant to apply the Modus Vivendi. The proof of pudding would be in the eating.

D'Argenlieu said he sensed that Ho Chi Minh was anxious about the situation he would find at his return. This was obviously true. Ho Chi Minh had been away for over four months, and during the last month, his contacts with the outside world had been through French cables. Now he would

meet Giap and other of his close collaborators and have them tell in full confidence what had happened since he left Hanoi on May 31.

2.3 The Vietminh Republic

The Dumont d'Urville sailed into Haiphong harbour on October 20, and on the following day Ho Chi Minh travelled to Hanoi with a special train. According to the American vice-consul, 80.000 people met the president in the capital.²⁴

The most important change that had taken place since May, was the departure of the Chinese troops. Their generals had never recognized the Vietnamese Government and had represented a continuous danger to the Vietminh. They had forced Vietminh out of the northern border provinces and obliged Ho Chi Minh to give the two pro-Chinese parties (VNQDD and Dong Minh Hoi) nominally influential positions in the cabinet. When the Chinese troops left, the government reconquered most of the northern provinces and suppressed the central apparatus of the pro-Chinese parties. Their most important leaders took refuge in China or in remaining strongholds near the Chinese border. In July their Hanoi headquarters were searched by a police commando unit. Corpses of tortured and killed French soldiers were found, and the responsibility of the pro-Chinese parties for kidnappings of French citizens was proved. The xenophobic attitude of the opposition made it possible for the Vietminh to centralize power in the North without provoking any French reaction.²⁵ In the summer of 1946, Vietminh was certainly moderate in comparison with VNQDD and Dong Minh Hoi.

The suppression of the nationalist parties eliminated the only organized opposition to Vietminh rule. There was no more any political channels for the probably widespread discontent with the Modus Vivendi, and Ho Chi Minh could

forget his fears of being outflanked by aggressive elements outside Vietminh. When he on October 23 addressed the people in a public declaration, he even dared say: "On your behalf, I have the honor to thank the French government and people."²⁶

By October, Vietminh was in control of:

- an administration built on Administrative Committees and People's Councils.
- One hundred and twenty newspapers, one radio station, a rapidly growing army.

The great problem was to finance the new state, for the economy was in complete disorder.

What was the Vietminh?

Even without any real opposition, Vietnamese politics in 1946 were extremely complex. There were lots of political parties, trade unions, religious organizations and united fronts. The broadest front was the Lien Viet (National Popular Front of Vietnam), founded in May 1946, in which the China-oriented parties were being permitted to participate (until their suppression) together with the Democratic Party, the Socialist Party, Buddhist and Catholic associations, trade unions and the Vietminh.

The Viet-Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh (Vietnam Independence League) was a front within the front. Vietminh, founded in 1941, consisted of several organizations and some parties, but it was dominated by the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP). ICP was officially dissolved in November 1945, but the party organization was held in reserve under cover of "Marxist Study Groups." Some of the communist leaders, like Truong Chinh and Hoang Quoc Viet worked in the shadow, while others from the inner circle, like Ho Chi Minh himself, Vo Nguyen Giap and Pham Van Dong held positions in the Republic that exposed them to the public.

The dissolution of the Communist Party in November 1945 was proclaimed and publicly motivated by:

- the exceptional occasion for gaining Vietnamese independence,
- the need for national unification without any class or party distinctions,
- the will to prove that the communists were able to make great sacrifices and to place the interests of the fatherland above those of the classes and of the party,
- the desire to avoid all misunderstandings both in Vietnam and abroad.²⁷

In reality, the voluntary dissolution was first of all a measure aimed at inducing the Chinese occupation forces to tolerate Vietminh rule in their zone. It seems, however, that the party organization was somewhat neglected from 1945 to 1947. It grew rapidly in quantity, but most political work was made through the Vietminh or Lien Viet fronts, and the leaders later complained of the lack of party discipline in the years from 1945 to 1950. The official dissolution of the ICP also gave reason for some embarrassment in relations with other communist parties. From 1948, the party was strengthened and it was emphasized that it had never been dissolved. It had only gone underground.²⁸ This is certainly true; ICP existed in 1946 too and probably played the role as ideological watchdog behind the scenes, but it is not sure that the party as such influenced day to day decisions.

There was much speculation at the time as to whether the real decisions were taken by the Vietminh or by the organs of the state. This was difficult to say as the same persons normally held the most influential positions both in the Vietminh and in the People's Councils or Administrative Committees.

The evolution of the Vietminh and the institutions of the Vietnamese Republic can be said to have gone through three phases:²⁹

1. the clandestine phase from 1941 to August 1945.
2. The phase when Vietminh and the organs of the state were one and the same, August 1945 to March 1946.
3. The period from March to December 1946, when it was attempted to draw a line between the political organization Vietminh and the state.

In the first phase, Vietminh was organized through two parallel hierarchies:

- one vertical based on election of the leaders,
- one horizontal based on appointments from above.

The vertical system was built on separation between organizations of different types: parties, youth organizations, women's organizations, religious organizations, the army etc. The horizontal system was based on a hierarchy of committees, covering one geographic entity.

Politically, control from the top was rigid, but in practical matters, each committee enjoyed great freedom of action. Central control with Nam Bo was limited to a minimum.

In each region, the vertical and horizontal systems were united on the top by a Vietminh committee. The chairman of this committee was appointed by the above level, but a certain number of the members were elected as representatives of each vertical organization. On the nation level, there was a Central Committee which consisted of representatives of all the vertical organizations, representatives from each of the three "Bo" and the leaders of special organizations, such as the armed forces (guerilla), the propaganda and the financial organization. Until the August revolution, Ho Chi Minh chaired the

Central Committee, but when he became president of the republic, Nguyen Luong Bang took over as chairman. The Central Committee elected a political bureau or Direction Committee (Tong Bo) which was Vietminh's day to day leadership. In his book on Vietnamese history from 1940 to 1952, Devillers lists the following eight persons as the probable Tong Bo members in 1946:

- Ho Chi Minh
- Truong Chinh
- Vo Nguyen Giap
- Pham Van Dong
- Tran Huy Lieu
- Hoang Quoc Viet
- Ho Tung Mau
- Nguyen Luong Bang.³⁰

In the second phase, after the August revolution, the horizontal system simply replaced the old administration of the vice-kings, which had already been thoroughly infiltrated by the Vietminh. The state was therefore simply identical with one of the two Vietminh hierarchies. In January 1946, there were elections to a National Assembly, however, and the introduction of representatives from the China-oriented parties in the state organs made it necessary to separate the state from the Vietminh. Vietminh therefore gradually became the name of a front, only consisting of vertical organizations, and its function was to create popular support for governmental policy and to prevent the China-oriented opposition from gaining real power.

In the third phase from March 1946, the separation was clearer, but the old system persisted in the many regions where Vietminh was the only organized political force. The creation of the Lien Viet gave reason for even more confusion, but that was essentially a tactical move in the game against the Chinese and the China-sponsored parties.

It is of special interest to examine the relationship between Vietminh and the state on the top level, i.e. between Tong Bo and the cabinet.³¹ In November 1946, French intelligence reported that the Tong Bo met at least once a week. In addition to this meeting, there was a weekly meeting between the Tong Bo and key officials from all important ministries. At this meeting Tong Bo decisions were "communicated for execution," but discussion was permitted. If this is correct, Tong Bo must have had more power than the cabinet. From the beginning of November, however, the distinction between the cabinet and Tong Bo lost some of its importance as the cabinet for the first time was under complete Vietminh control.

The question of internal disagreements in Tong Bo and the Vietnamese cabinet was much discussed by the French. They were convinced that there was a conflict between a moderate and an extremist faction, and in the last period before war, they invested great hopes in the possibility of a scission. Ho Chi Minh was reckoned to be moderate while Tran Huy Lieu and Hoang Quoc Viet were believed to be the most important extremists. Vo Nguyen Giap was by some believed to be extremist, by others included in the moderate group. Important government officials without positions in the Tong Bo, such as Hoang Minh Giam and Hoang Huu Nam, were considered to represent the moderates. French intelligence did not penetrate the inner circle, however, and the distinction between "extremists" and "moderates" seems to have been built more on the administrative and political functions of the Vietnamese leaders than on their views. Ho Chi Minh was head of state and responsible for the execution of foreign policy. Hoang Minh Giam, Hoang Huu Nam and Vo Nguyen Giap held official positions and had frequent talks with French representatives. They had to act in a way that did not jeopardize this contact. On the other hand, Giap was also head of the army. This could explain why some considered

him a moderate while others called him an extremist. Hoang Quoc Viet was a shadowy figure and thus an obvious "extremist." Tran Huy Lieu was responsible for Vietminh propaganda and hence the "extremist" above all. The labels must therefore basically be considered reflections of the official or unofficial positions of the respective Vietnamese leaders. But we may also safely assume that their functions influenced their views. It can therefore not be excluded that the French labels to some degree reflect reality.

The sources for this book do not include many internal Vietminh documents. It is therefore impossible to reach any conclusions on the matter of internal contradictions. Yet it should be emphasized that developments in 1946 offer no evidence of any serious intra-Vietminh conflict. The leading group seems to have been homogenous and disciplined. If there were disagreements, they were not aired in public. If it had been otherwise, the "extremists" would have had their great opportunity in late September and October, when Ho Chi Minh was away and therefore unable to defend his compromise with the French. We have seen how anxious Ho Chi Minh was for the reaction at home. He had no reason for fear. Until the return of the president, the Vietnamese government simply forbid any sort of comment on the Modus Vivendi.³²

The first reaction in Hanoi when the news arrived that the Modus Vivendi had been signed, was one of relief.³³ One French liaison officer noticed that the atmosphere suddenly changed. The Vietnamese faces lost their distrust and anxiety.³⁴ The French looked for attacks on Ho Chi Minh in the Vietnamese press, but did not find any. The only negative comments were published by Vietminh's official organ Cuu Quoc, which stated that the Vietnamese people was not satisfied and deemed Vietnamese concessions to be too great.³⁵ This became the basis for Ho Chi Minh's cable to Bidault, where he declared this reaction to be "human."

A typical local reaction to the Modus Vivendi was found by French intelligence in Hué. Directives from the Vietminh Committee in the province of Hué, dated September 23, explained the agreement by the need to obtain support for Vietnamese independence from great powers like the United States, Great Britain, Russia and China (in that order). Vietnam was not strong enough to start the fight for independence, and it was therefore necessary to profit as much as possible from the agreement which had been obtained. The local Vietminh organs were told to convince the people that everything which "our old president" had done had always been for the good of the nation, but in accordance with governmental instructions no public comments should be made on the September 14 agreement.³⁶

On October 23 Ho Chi Minh made a declaration to the people where he defined the Modus Vivendi and tried to pave the way for an effective application of the cease-fire in the South:

Toward the French Army we must be correct. Toward the French residents, we must be moderate, so that the provokers who intend to divide us may find themselves with no pretext, and our unity and independence will soon succeed.

Ho Chi Minh promised his compatriots in the South that unity would come: "No one can divide Vietnam." But to obtain this it was necessary to respect the agreement:

The Vietnamese army like the French army must simultaneously stop fighting ... Violent actions are absolutely forbidden.³⁷

Ho Chi Minh's warning against division did not only apply to the South. From October 23 to October 27, new measures were taken against the opposition in the North. The French reported that more than 200 were arrested.³⁸ This was the prelude to the second session of the National Assembly. The Assembly had been elected on January 6, 1946, but in these elections there were no alternatives as

the China-oriented parties rejected the offer to present candidates. As a result of Chinese pressure, they were granted the right to nominate 70 representatives, but they still did not participate in the elections. The 70 members of the opposition took part in the Assembly session in March 1946, but when the Assembly met again on October 28, only 37 of the 70 were present.³⁹

The Vietnamese cabinet, which had been formed during the crisis that preceded the March 6 agreement, was a broad coalition, where non-party personalities and China-oriented nationalists held important positions. Some of its ministers had by October taken refuge in China. The coalition cabinet resigned on October 29, and on November 3, Ho Chi Minh announced the formation of a new one. This cabinet conformed more to the reality of political power than the previous one. The Vietminh took all important positions:

Ho Chi Minh continued as president and also assumed responsibility for foreign affairs. Hoang Minh Giam, soon to return from Paris, served as Under-Secretary in the Foreign Ministry. Vo Nguyen Giap became Minister of National Defense. The non-party and very old Huynh Thuc Khang, who had been acting president during Ho Chi Minh's absence, received the post as Minister of the Interior, but the man in control was Hoang Huu Nam (Vietminh) as Under-Secretary. Pham Van Dong received an equally important position as Under-Secretary of National Economy. The post as minister was reserved for a representative of Nam Bo.

With the formation of this cabinet, the Vietminh took complete control of the governmental apparatus. The Republic had again become a purely Vietminh republic, but it is important to remember that the Vietminh was by no means only a manipulative fraud, as the French were soon to tell the world. It was a genuine coalition, which in the

struggle for national unity and independence most likely represented a majority of the people.

The National Assembly, which met in the beginning of November, was modelled on the French - with Marxists and Socialists to the left, Democrats in the middle and Moderates to the right. The Assembly no doubt represented the national aspirations of the people, even if there had never been elections with alternative candidates and even if the China-oriented parties had been ruthlessly suppressed. On November 8, the National Assembly adopted a democratic constitution, but in face of the difficult and unsettled relations between the new republic and France, it was decided to let the government decide when time was ripe for its promulgation.⁴⁰

The Vietnamese constitution of 1946 was never promulgated.

CHAPTER 3

SAIGON

3.1 D'Argenlieu, Leclerc and the March 6 Convention

Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, French High-Commissioner for Indochina from August, 1945 to February, 1947, is normally painted in black colors. The French use him as a scapegoat for their failure, the Vietnamese as a caricature of the "reactionary colonialist." Giap calls him a defrocked priest with small, wily eyes under a wrinkled forehead and thin lips." After spending a moment with him, Giap's impression was that he was an "experienced, cunning, arrogant and mean man."¹ In a French witticism d'Argenlieu was said to have the most brilliant mind of the twelfth century.

D'Argenlieu served in the French navy during World War I, but in the interwar period he was a monk in a Carmelite monastery. In 1939 he was mobilized, and after the military defeat in 1940 he joined the Free French in London. De Gaulle appointed him High-Commissioner for Indochina at the Japanese capitulation in August 1945. In 1947, he returned to his monastery.

Admiral d'Argenlieu is often compared to General Leclerc, a great French hero commemorated by a statue in Paris and a large avenue bearing his name. They had the same aristocratic background. Both were catholics. Both joined de Gaulle as early as in 1940. They were appointed to the two highest positions in Indochina knowing nothing about the country. D'Argenlieu received the senior political position, Leclerc became Commander in Chief of the military

forces, and was d'Argenlieu's subordinate. Leclerc is generally regarded as the moderate of the two, insisting on a political solution, while d'Argenlieu is said to have preferred the use of military power.² The difference was not so obvious at the time. On February 4, 1946, the American Secretary of State told his ambassador in Paris that the Department would appreciate information as to who had the French government's backing. "Leclerc, the intransigent and uncompromising colonial-minded" or "d'Argenlieu the conciliatory and moderate."³

This was no mere misunderstanding, but was probably based on the impression made by Leclerc's "pacification" campaign in the southern half of Vietnam. The difference between the two gaullists has certainly been exaggerated in the French (and American) historical tradition. Jean Sainteny stated in 1973 that the two held basically similar views, but d'Argenlieu was too much influenced by the false optimism in Saigon. Leclerc had a better understanding of the situation in the North, but d'Argenlieu had the backing of the French government.⁴ The best comparison of the two gaullists was made in 1967 by general Valluy, Leclerc's successor in Indochina. He affirmed that d'Argenlieu and Leclerc were antithetic, both of nature and of ideas. D'Argenlieu always wanted to demonstrate his patriotism and to go through with a policy of almost architectural coherence. Leclerc, to the contrary, was an inimitable tactician, but floating in politics. D'Argenlieu's actions were always consistent with the long range objective of implementing the principles that had been laid down by his great master Charles de Gaulle on March 24, 1945. For some time, Leclerc favored a liberal policy, but then hardened.⁵

The conflict between d'Argenlieu and Leclerc began in

January or February, when the French military forces started to prepare for the reoccupation of the North. In the beginning of February, d'Argenlieu sent the commander of the 9 D.I.C., General Jean Valluy to Paris in order to ask for a rapid decision in the Cominindo. Valluy presented the Cominindo with a memorandum which listed three conditions for a successful reinstallation in the North:

1. Military action.
2. Diplomatic action towards the Chinese.
3. Political action towards the "Annamites."

There would be little time because climatic conditions for the landing of troops were best in late February or early March. Valluy insisted that pure military action was undesirable, and gave four reasons for that:

1. It would be met with both Chinese and "Annamite" resistance at the same time.
2. It could provoke a massacre on the French population in the North.
3. It would create the risk of drawn-out guerilla warfare.
4. It would lead to dangerous reactions both at home and abroad.

Military action would therefore have to be "covered" by diplomatic and political action. Ho Chi Minh, fully aware that the game in Cochinchina was lost, could according to Valluy be reckoned to behave reasonably.⁶

Valluy's recommendations were accepted. There were negotiations with China in Chungking which led to the agreement of February 28, and there were talks between Sainteny and Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi. On February 13, d'Argenlieu went to Paris and left Leclerc behind as interim High-Commissioner as well as Commander in Chief. On February 14, Leclerc advised Paris to go as far as to express the word "independence," arguing that the

Vietnamese would accept under this term the same as the French understood by "autonomy."⁷ It is not impossible that Paris would have been prepared to accept Leclerc's advice if not on February 16, Sainteny had met Ho Chi Minh and got the impression that he was willing to negotiate on something less than independence. This was reported to Paris, where d'Argenlieu wrote an answer. On February 20 d'Argenlieu's reply was approved by the Cominindo. It authorized Sainteny to sign an agreement with Vietnam on the basis of "self-government" (The English word was used). D'Argenlieu insisted, however, that nothing should be included in the agreement which would indicate that France accepted the fusion of the three "Ky":

President HO CHI MINH will certainly admit that it would be contrary to democratic principles to adopt a solution on this point without first allowing the peoples concerned to make known their opinion in full liberty and in full independence.⁸

It is possible that d'Argenlieu only meant this as a negative argument against making any agreement with Ho Chi Minh on Cochinchina. However, in the talks between Ho Chi Minh and Sainteny, d'Argenlieu's point was turned into a positive argument for a referendum, and Sainteny was obliged to promise that France would respect the decision of the people, consulted in a referendum.⁹

D'Argenlieu returned to Saigon on March 2. He endorsed the March 6 convention officially, but is said to have complained in private to General Valluy that the chiefs of the excellent French expeditionary corps would rather negotiate than fight.¹⁰ On March 9, d'Argenlieu made a speech in commemoration of those who had resisted the Japanese coup one year earlier. He declared that he would accept the March 6 convention,¹¹ but the speech met with unfavorable Vietnamese reactions because d'Argenlieu called the Vietnamese government "the Hanoi government" and because he compared the status of Vietnam to the one of

Cambodia.¹² At about the same time, serious tension resurfaced in the North, and on March 15, Leclerc sent a telegram to d'Argenlieu where he warned against a possible Chinese scheme to provoke a break in the newly established Franco-Vietnamese cooperation:

In order to frustrate this scheme, we must break the Sino-Annamite collusion and as soon as possible take the Vietminh government away from the influence of the Chinese and the extremist Annamite parties.¹³

Leclerc favored immediate negotiations in France and even instructed General Salan to promise Ho Chi Minh a conference in Paris.¹⁴ This promise may have been instrumental in making the Vietnamese welcome Leclerc's troops in Hanoi without incidents of any sort, but the promise had not been cleared with d'Argenlieu. In fact, d'Argenlieu had cabled Paris as early as March 7 or 8 that it would be a serious error to open a conference in Paris. That would reduce the authority of the High-Commissioner, and the best would be to negotiate with "the federated states" in Dalat, the future capital of the Federation. This would prevent the talks from being disturbed by "spontaneous or organized mass demonstrations."¹⁵

When d'Argenlieu met Ho Chi Minh at Ha Long Bay on March 24, he did not permit Leclerc to be present, and by rejecting Ho Chi Minh's demand of immediate negotiations in Paris, he disavowed the general. This provoked the decisive rupture between the admiral and the general.¹⁶

Leclerc's arguments in the March 15 telegram show that the principal motive for his conciliatory attitude was the fear of a simultaneous conflict with the Chinese and the Vietminh. He based his views on the situation in the North. D'Argenlieu for his part, on return from Paris, was probably more afraid of the concessions that Ho Chi Minh could possibly obtain in Paris, where the Socialist and Communist parties had a strong position and the political situation was unstable.

On March 27, Leclerc explained his policy in a long report which he addressed to General de Gaulle although de Gaulle had been out of power for two months.¹⁷ Leclerc defended the March 6 agreement and declared that if his forces had been engaged in serious combats both with the "Annamites" and the Chinese, "the reconquest of Tonkin, even partially, would have been impossible." He criticized d'Argenlieu (without mentioning his name) for not having informed the French government properly of this danger.

According to Leclerc, France had now won the first round. The second would have to be won by means of politics and negotiations. As soon as the Chinese had left the country, the problems would be a lot more easily solved, and the French negotiators would have a stronger position.¹⁸ Leclerc was wrong if he thought that a stronger military position would necessarily mean a stronger bargaining position. The Chinese troops were detested by Vietnamese and French alike, but it was their presence that made it necessary both for the French and the Vietnamese to solve their problems without resorting to violence. Once the Chinese had left, none of the two would have to fear a two-front war. There was no reason to believe that this would make the Vietnamese more yielding on the principles of independence and unity. It seems, however, that Leclerc entertained this illusion. When the majority of the Chinese troops had left in the beginning of June, he sent a letter to Paris, warning against making concessions at the Fontainebleau conference. This time, he addressed himself to MRP chairman Maurice Schumann, who forwarded the letter to Bidault. It stated that France now held all the vital points in Indochina; France held all the trumps.

I think, under these circumstances, that it would be very dangerous for the French representatives at the negotiations to let themselves be duped by the deceptive language (democracy, resistance, the new France) that Ho Chi Minh and his team master to perfection.¹⁹

General Leclerc had definitely hardened, and when he had left his command and returned to Paris, he told a group of influential newsmen that a firm French attitude would oblige the Vietnamese to be more conciliatory. If not, the Vietnamese government would have to withdraw to the interior of the country. French control with the rich Cochinchina and with key positions in the North would then, after some time, force the Vietnamese leaders to change their attitude.²⁰

In the summer of 1946, Leclerc therefore seems to have held about the same views as d'Argenlieu, but after their conflict in March, d'Argenlieu had asked the French Chiefs of Staff to replace Leclerc. This was done, but with some delay. Leclerc left his command on July 18, and was replaced by General Valluy.

In Leclerc's final report he pointed at two main problems: The first was that the French garrisons in the North were "almost prisoners," that they had no space to move in. The second was that the government in Hanoi was at the same time negotiating with France and supporting a war against the French in the South. "As Janus, this government has two faces."²¹ These were the two problems Admiral d'Argenlieu and General Valluy sought to solve in the following period, but with the opposite priority:

1. Eliminating Vietminh's influence in the South and building up Cochinchina as a cornerstone of the Indochinese Federation.
2. Giving space to the French forces and securing French interests in the North.

Moutet had asked d'Argenlieu to obtain the first objective by means of Cochinchinese autonomy. The efforts of the High-Commissioner ended in the suicide of the Cochinchinese president.

Valluy had a plan with regard to the second objective. This plan will be dealt with in chapter five. It led to war.

3.2 Cochinchinese Autonomy and the French "Colon"

After the arrival of French forces in the South in September 1945, the question of institutionalized cooperation between the French "colon" and anti-Vietminh members of the indigenous establishment soon arose.

De Gaulle's declaration of March 24, 1945, which was d'Argenlieu's program, said that the local governments in each of the five Indochinese countries should be developed or reformed, and appointments would be open to the citizens. On the French side, those who had collaborated most loyally with Admiral Decoux and the Japanese, had to keep out while the few having some kind of "resistance" background took leading positions in collaboration with new administrators coming from France. They established a consultative Council with the help of local friends, first of all Dr. Nguyen Van Thinh, President of the Democratic Party, a passionate anti-revolutionary and a man influential with the local economic elite. It was extremely difficult for him and his few associates to induce other upper-class Cochinchinese to join the Council. They feared to be stigmatized as collaborators. Yet on February 12, 1946, the Consultative Council was formally constituted with four French members and eight "notables."²² The French members originally wanted to include Cochinchina in France as a French "département."²³ The Cochinchinese members were against this idea, preferring some kind of autonomy.

The members of the Council, both native and French, considered themselves deceived when France promised Vietnam to respect the result of a referendum on Cochinchina's inclusion in Vietnam. The March 6 agreement became known in Saigon just after Ho Chi Minh had declared to le Monde that Vietnam wanted teachers, journalists, doctors and engineers from France, but no more administrators.²⁴ In 1946, the number of French civil servants in Indochina in fact rose to 14.000. In 1939, there had been about 3.500.²⁵ The need for so many newcomers may be explained by the August Revolution's elimination of the old mandarin system and by the fact that the majority of the educated class supported Vietnam. In spite of the increase in the number of administrative personnel, d'Argenlieu continuously complained of lack of personnel.²⁶

Both the old and the new civil servants of course felt the fusion of Cochinchina with Vietnam as a threat. The native representatives in the Cochinchinese Council, for their part, feared the social changes that Vietminh power would bring about, and this must also have been important to that part of the French population which had economic interests in the production of rice and rubber.

On March 12 the Cochinchinese Council met and demanded the same status as that obtained by the Vietnamese government. The Commissioner for Cochinchina, Jean Cédile, declared that the March 6 agreement was only a local convention for the North. The referendum would not be held before order had been completely reestablished.²⁷

On March 26, the Cochinchinese Council designated Dr. Think as president of the provisional government of the Cochinchinese Republic, although he was not formally recognized as such by the High-Commissioner till June 1. The March 26 decision provoked a wave of assassinations against the "traitors" and stepped up the propaganda war

between "unionists" and "separatists." In April, a Cochinchinese mission was in Paris, and d'Argenlieu asked the French government to make a decision as soon as possible, but reluctance in Paris caused the official proclamation of the Cochinchinese Republic to be postponed till June 1, 1946. Two days later, a Franco - Cochinchinese Convention was signed by Commissioner Cédile and Dr. Think.²⁸ During the conference at Fontainebleau, the Cochinchinese Council was enlarged to include 92 members, but they were all designated by the High-Commissioner. No elections were held.

There was much speculation as to the probable outcome of a referendum on national unity. Devillers quotes one of the French members of the Council as saying in September 1946 that it would be sheer folly to confront a referendum because it would be interpreted as a pro et contra France. 90% would be "against us."²⁹ The American consul in Saigon, Charles Reed, thought, one month later, that 65-70% would vote for inclusion in Vietnam. He pointed at the fact that the unionist press outnumbered by far the separatist newspapers.³⁰

If the population in Nam Bo was not permitted to have their referendum, the French citizens were allowed to participate in the French referendum. On October 13, the constitution of the French Fourth Republic was adopted against the advice of General de Gaulle with a majority of only 53%. But a large majority of the French in Indochina voted no. 34,292 French citizens in Indochina had the right to vote. 18,213 voted. 3,559 voted yes. 14,456 voted no.³¹ The American Consul explained this as a "possible Fascist reaction."³² The Vietnamese government protested against the holding of a French referendum on Vietnamese soil.³³ The French leftist newspaper Franc-Tireur commented: "The "colons" have voted no. The people had no right to speak."³⁴

In September Moutet instructed d'Argenlieu that Cochinchina was the axis of French Indochina policy and that France had to succeed and succeed quickly in Cochinchina. The High-Commissioner planned to hold municipal elections as a sort of electoral test. In late September, he toured parts of the Cochinchinese countryside with Colonel Xuan, Vice-President of the Cochinchinese Council. Saigon cabled Paris that d'Argenlieu was everywhere received by an enthusiastic population and quoted from his speech. The speech, however, was not likely to impress people favorably:

Cochinchina has now been liberated thanks to the French forces who after having liberated France did not regard their task to be accomplished as long as the Japanese enemy was still holding Indochina.

The audience must have known that the Japanese capitulated before the French arrived and that the French had "liberated" their country not from the Japanese, but by the help of Japanese troops. D'Argenlieu continued his speech in much the same vein and soon ran into a paradox which merits quotation:

We wish Cochinchina to be free, and we do not permit that anyone in the name of this freedom make you their slaves. France is at your disposal, and it matters that no one forgets that.³⁵

This was a warning against supporting the resistance movement, which had stepped up guerilla warfare considerably during the summer of 1946. The municipal elections were held in some few places, but lack of success and Vietnamese reprisals against those who let themselves be elected, forced the French to give up their attempts to "establish democracy."

The freedom of press, promised by France in the Modus Vivendi made it possible for the southern unionists to demonstrate that the Cochinchinese separatists had little support. In September/October, French policy-makers in Saigon began to look for alternative solutions. Commissioner Cédile, who had been the most important French supporter of the separatist cause, left Indochina in October. Albert Torel, the new interim commissioner for the South, was more in favor of a monarchical solution.³⁶ In the end of September, the French took contact with former emperor Bao Dai, now staying in Hong Kong and tried to induce him to go to North Africa in order to be held in reserve. Bao Dai considered the offer seriously, but decided in the end of October to stay in Hong Kong and await developments in Indochina.³⁷

The increase in guerilla activity, the political strength of the unionists, French reluctance to give Dr. Think real power, and signs that French authorities might abandon their support for the separatists - all these factors combined to generate a severe crisis for Cochinchinese separatism. Both French and local members of the Cochinchinese Council (an assembly meant as a precursor for an elected parliament) blamed the crisis on Dr. Think's cabinet, and on November 7, the Council demanded a cabinet reshuffle. Dr. Think was obliged to promise the Council that he would present it with a new cabinet before November 15.³⁸ On November 10, however, his body was found hanging from the bolt of his window.

D'Argenlieu immediately informed Paris of Dr. Think's suicide. He said it was certainly motivated by a desire to expose the injustice of the attacks which had been directed against him from groups influenced by the Hanoi government - attacks which "the Modus Vivendi had given even more liberty of expression."³⁹ In France the news of Dr. Think's suicide arrived at the same time as the first

results of the French general elections, but le Populaire had enough space for a comment that was probably more to the point than the explanation given by d'Argenlieu:

The loyal application from both sides of the "Modus Vivendi," signed by M. Ho Chi Minh and Marius Moutet, removes little by little all "raison d'etre" and all d'etre authority of this pseudo-government. The suicide of its president will, no doubt, forward its disappearance.⁴⁰

The death of Dr. Thinh was the final blow to French hopes that Cochinchina would become a faithful, strong and autonomous cornerstone in the Indochinese Federation. The suicide did not, however, make the Cochinchinese government disappear. After one month's deliberations, semi-unionist Nguyen Van Xuan had to give up his candidature, and on December 6, Le Van Hoach was elected new president. Like his predecessor, he never succeeded in gaining real strength, and when the whole federative concept eventually collapsed, the Cochinchinese government vanished in the process towards the "Bao Dai solution."

3.3 The Pentagonal Federation

Valluy said in 1967 that d'Argenlieu had been "attached with passion to his pentagonal federation," as stipulated in de Gaulle's declaration of March 24, 1945.⁴¹ The Federation should be controlled by a Council, consisting of 10 representatives from France and 10 from each of the five states. The main attributions of the Federal Council should be to vote the federal budget, decide on taxes and pass laws proposed by the Federal Government.

The Federal Government, which in contrast to the Council came into existence, was headed by the High-Commissioner. He was assisted by commissioners, who had about the same attributions as ministers in an independent state. There were commissioners of Political Affairs (Pignon), Finance

(Gonon), Foreign Affairs (Clarac), Justice (Lacharrière), Education (Baeyens), Health, Information etc. The commissioners had weekly cabinet meetings, presided by the High-Commissioner and with the Commander in Chief as "vice-président."⁴² The commissioners had all important governmental services under their authority: Army, police, customs service, post, radio etc.

This did not leave much room neither for Cochinchinese autonomy, nor for Vietnamese "freedom." In fact, d'Argenlieu considered the March 6 agreement only as the basis for one of the five future agreements with the member states. He wished to reach a more detailed convention with Vietnam at the first Dalat conference in April, but when this conference broke down, d'Argenlieu felt that it was time to concentrate on the rest of the Federation and leave Tonkin to its own fate. He reported to Paris that the Chinese presence made it necessary to be careful in the North, but if France concentrated on building up the federal organization of the other states, the "free state in the North" would probably return to the Federation at some later time, at least on the military, economic and cultural levels. He therefore affirmed that a break-down of the Franco-Vietnamese conference, which was going to take place in France, would do no harm. That would only give Laos, Cambodia, Cochinchina, South Annam... and France "total freedom of action."⁴³ In May, he proposed that representatives of the other federated states be invited to Paris together with the Vietnamese delegation. When this proved impossible, he summoned representatives of the other "countries" to the second Dalat conference.⁴⁴

D'Argenlieu always insisted that negotiations should take place in Dalat. That was because he intended to realize a twenty year old plan of creating a new Indochinese capital in that highland town. The second Dalat conference, which was held at the same time as the negotiations at Fontainebleau, came up with detailed proposals for the

composition and the attributions of the federal institutions, emphasizing that Dalat should be the capital.⁴⁵ D'Argenlieu in fact prepared for moving his headquarters to Dalat and ordered a lot of equipment from France for that purpose. The equipment did not arrive, and d'Argenlieu complained.⁴⁶

During his stay in France, Ho Chi Minh was asked about his views on the planned federation. He replied that Vietnam would willingly accept a federation of essentially economic nature, but was determined to prevent the prewar "Gouvernement Général" from resurfacing under the guise of a federation.⁴⁷ This was a rather precise description of French intentions, but there was one important difference between the prewar "Gouverneur Général" and the postwar High-Commissioner: The fact that the Cominindo was headed by the Premier and not the Minister of Overseas, France made the High-Commissioner more independent of the French colonial ministry.

The concentration on Cochinchina continued to be French policy until November, but d'Argenlieu kept an eye on the North too. He had a passion for symbols and was unable to forget that the commander of the Chinese occupation forces had established his headquarters in the palace of the "Gouverneur Général" in Hanoi, the prewar capital of French Indochina. When the Chinese forces prepared to leave in the end of May, d'Argenlieu instructed the commissioner in Hanoi to take immediate possession of this "symbol of French authority in all of Indochina."⁴⁸ Valluy, who at that time commanded the French forces in the North, feared negative reactions from the Vietnamese and only placed a small French guard in the palace. Ho Chi Minh yet protested. To him the palace was the symbol of colonialism.⁴⁹ The building remained almost empty. In November, d'Argenlieu again instructed Valluy, this time from Paris, to install the commissioner for Tonkin and North Annam in the Governor General's palace. Valluy once again refused, arguing that it would be an unnecessary

provocation.⁵⁰ This was as the Franco - Vietnamese relations entered the last and decisive crisis with the French occupation of Haiphong. When, one month later, Ho Chi Minh fled from Hanoi, d'Argenlieu could at last set foot in the palace of his predecessors. On December 30, he cabled his pleasure to one of them, Albert Sarraut:

I have had the satisfaction to be received in this "Gouvernement Général", which was for so long your residence.⁵¹

When war broke out between France and Vietnam on December 19, d'Argenlieu believed that he would at last be allowed to go on with the interrupted construction of his pentagonal federation. He was disappointed. Once the rupture with the Vietnamese government was a fact, neither d'Argenlieu's own advisor Pignon nor the government in Paris saw any hinder to French acceptance of Vietnamese unity - under pro-French leaders.⁵² When d'Argenlieu took new steps to develop Cochinchinese autonomy and asked Paris for permission to convene the third Dalat conference he was summoned to Paris for consultations. On his arrival in France, he was dismissed.⁵³

3.4 The Guerilla

The most important reason why the French had to give up their federation so soon, was their inability to construct a viable political alternative to the Vietminh in Cochinchina. At the moment of the August revolution, the Vietminh was absolutely dominant in the North. This was not at all the case in the South, where the two religious sects Hoa Hao and Cao Dai had considerable backing in the countryside and the trotskyites were strong in the cities. The communist movement in the South was dominated by theoretically inclined intellectuals with far less organizing ability than their comrades in the North. The contentious character of the nationalist movement in the

South facilitated Leclerc's "pacification campaign" in the end of 1945 and the beginning of 1946. He took the armies of the Hao Hao, the Cao Dai and the Vietminh one after the other. At first sight, this was a military success. In March, Leclerc estimated that his troops controlled not only the cities, but also 80 percent of the villages.⁵⁴ Politically, however, France confronted and alienated all the most important factions, and when the Vietminh reorganized its forces and started to cooperate with the religious sects, guerilla activity resurfaced in most of the areas that the French believed to have "conquered." Leclerc had posted small French units at many minor control positions. When the guerilla started their nightly attacks, these positions proved to be untenable, and the French forces had to concentrate. In Pignon's words, this concentration was "militarily indispensable, but politically a catastrophe."⁵⁵ During the Fontainebleau conference, he denounced French military authorities for their "extreme naivety."⁵⁶ According to a later report from Leclerc, only 10 percent of the villages in Cochinchina were under French control by January 1947.⁵⁷

The reorganization of the guerilla in the South was not carried out by Vietminh's Saigon leadership, but by Nguyen Binh, the commander of the military zone north-east of Saigon. Until March, however, Nguyen Binh concentrated on the organization of a military network and did not engage his troops in serious fighting. In the beginning of March, the French 9th Colonial Infantry Division (9. D.I.C.) and the Second Armoured Division (2. D.B.) left for the North, leaving only the dangerously scattered Third Colonial Infantry Division (3. D.I.C.) to control the South. This decrease in French military capacity occurred at the same time as the creation of the provisional Cochinchinese government. Nguyen Binh found the time ripe for a military campaign. Collaborators were assassinated and guerilla units began to harass isolated French units. A National United Front was founded under Nguyen Binh's leadership on

April 10, including Codaists, Hoa Haos and other anticolonialist groups. On April 19, Nguyen Binh ordered a general offensive to "support the Dalat conference."⁵⁸ The war dragged on through the summer, and when the French troops concentrated in large units, pro-French village "notables" were left without protection.

The methods used by the guerilla were established in general instructions from Hanoi, signed by Tran Huy Lieu and sent to the South in September 1946. In fact these instructions give an accurate description of the tactics that the Vietnamese "tiger" was going to use for nearly thirty years in the war against the two western "elephants."

...They operate in a familiar atmosphere. Secrecy and surprise are the general conditions for their success in confrontations with an awkward adversary who is badly informed and operates in an unfavorable climate.

The miracle of the guerilla is that the whole population takes part in it. The soldier is the inhabitant, and the inhabitant is the soldier...
 ...The tactics consist in avoiding well guarded positions, attacking posts where the garrison is weak, advancing if the enemy retreats and retreating if the enemy advances, organizing ambushes where the enemy will be overcome by numbers in spite of his value...One of the guerilla tactics consists in making the enemy "blind." Our soldiers do not wear uniforms, they don't concentrate in barracks, they slip through the crowd which hide them if necessary. In that way, the French soldiers are incapable of detecting their presence...Another of the guerilla tactics consists in making the enemy "deaf"...⁵⁹

These were only small parts of Tran Huy Lieu's instructions. They show that as early as in 1946 the Vietnamese were quite familiar with the guerilla principles.

The telegrams from Saigon to Paris in September and October were full of reports on clashes between French and "rebel" forces. Details and assessments of the gravity of the insurgency differed, but all reports cited a higher number of "rebels" killed than of French.⁶⁰ A report from

October 7 can be used as illustration: "An ambush region Tanan costs us one dead, 2 injured. Rebel losses serious."⁶¹ In addition those killed on the French side were often "partisans" i.e. Vietnamese fighting on the French side. The French worked hard to establish a "partisan army," and on September 19, the High-Commissioner asked Paris for equipment to 9300 "partisan" troops in Cochinchina and to 1200 in South Annam.⁶² The "partisans" seem to have been used as guards for the most dangerous outposts. On the same September 19, Saigon reported:

In region Hocmon, Thudcumot, favorable activity of our patrols: 6 rebels killed, 3 injured, 23 prisoners, of whom several members assassination committee. Same region partisans have evacuated a post under pressure rebels and lost 2 dead, 1 disappeared.⁶³

The one who disappeared would probably reappear as "rebel" in a later telegram.

During the last weeks before the application of the Modus Vivendi, the Vietminh launched a major military offensive in order to strengthen its position before the cease-fire. On October 26, d'Argenlieu reported a serious attack on the city of My Tho, southwest of Saigon.⁶⁴ Devillers affirms that Vietminh held practically three quarters of Cochinchina before the entry into force of the Modus Vivendi.⁶⁵

CHAPTER 4

THE APPLICATION OF THE MODUS VIVENDI

The Modus Vivendi formally entered into force on October 30. From that date Vietnamese and French authorities were supposed to:

- liberate all political prisoners, respect democratic liberties, such as freedom of press and organization, and to terminate all hostile propaganda,
- cease all acts of hostility,
- establish mixed commissions to prepare a durable military arrangement for the South, the conditions for economic cooperation and for the restitution of French property in the North to its owners.

This chapter will discuss how these obligations were met by the two sides.

4.1 Prisoners, Liberties and Propaganda

There is no indication that the Modus Vivendi induced the Vietnamese government to liberate any of its prisoners. Actually, French intelligence captured a top secret Vietnamese circular, instructing municipal and provincial authorities to make a list of executed or imprisoned "reactionary traitors" and fabricate documents to prove that they had been:

1. killed trying to escape,
2. held in prison for collaborating with the Japanese, or
3. for producing counterfeit.¹

The Vietnamese did not have to present such lists to the French, however, for French authorities only began to prepare demands for release of prisoners on November 21, two days before everything was changed by the battle of Haiphong.²

Only a short time before the issuing of this circular, the Vietnamese press started a campaign against French oppression in the South. They attacked the French for having arrested a well-known engineer and for having executed five identified Vietnamese patriots. D'Argenlieu informed Paris that three of them had been mortally wounded trying to escape. The fourth had died in hospital from battle wounds. The fifth was not dead at all, but was under arrest in Saigon. D'Argenlieu asked Paris to use this information and preclude new attacks from Hanoi propaganda and "its extensions in France which constitute the most important arm that the Vietnamese government counts on."³

The Vietnamese error of including on their list of French executions the name of a man who was still alive, furnished d'Argenlieu with a propaganda opportunity he could not resist. Already before the return of Ho Chi Minh he had liberated ten well known political prisoners, including both the man believed dead and the engineer who had been identified in the Vietnamese press. Nine of the liberated prisoners were to be sent to the North, while the engineer was to be taken to Paris in order to keep him away from "local influence." The High-Commissioner secured wide publicity for this gesture before the return of the Vietnamese president and used it in his talks with Ho at Cam Ranh Bay.⁴ The ten mentioned prisoners were the ten most important of a group of 85, who were released before the return of Ho Chi Minh. On October 31, another 150 were released, so altogether, Saigon released 235 political prisoners.⁵

The sources for this study include only scarce information on the freedom of press in the North. It is yet clear that when the China-oriented opposition was suppressed, its (violently anti-French) press was either stopped or put under Vietminh control. There seems to have been an effective Vietnamese censorship, but it was mostly used to hinder the most violently anti-French expressions. Just after the return of Ho Chi Minh, commissioner Morlière in Hanoi reported that the president had violently admonished the Vietnamese director of information for having permitted an anti-French campaign in the press.⁶

French censorship in the South was lessened as a result of the Modus Vivendi. This permitted the unionist press to demonstrate how little support Dr. Thinh's "pseudo-government" enjoyed, and the French later evoked the liberty of the press as one of the reasons for their failure. In mid-November, the French language marxist journal Lendemains published an interview with the chairman of the Administrative Committee for Nam Bo. The interview was reproduced in four Vietnamese-language newspapers. This was too much for the French authorities, who decided to suspend the publication of Lendemains for one month and the four unionist newspapers for four days. When this measure was explained to Paris, Pignon argued that the population would have the impression that the French cause was essentially bad if those responsible for its defense accepted to be openly and publicly hold up to ridicule.⁷

4.2 The Cease-Fire

One week before the crucial date, the Vietnamese press reported that the commissar for the Vietnamese armies in Nam Bo had ordered all units to terminate hostilities from the night between October 29 and 30.⁸ The order was faithfully observed. The daily French military bulletins reported several attacks in the days preceding October 30,

but in the November 1 bulletin, the message was different: "Cochinchina - Since October 30, Q-time, situation calm on all sectors..."⁹ A similar message was sent to Paris two days later: "Nearly absolute calm and cessation terroristic activity signalled in all Cochinchinese provinces."¹⁰

The truce seems to have been observed for a bit more than a week, but on November 9, the Cochinchinese Council complained in a cable to Paris of Vietnamese attacks on partisan posts and of attempts at the life of one Cochinchinese councillor, all in violation of the Modus Vivendi.¹¹ A few days later, the first protests against French violations of the cease-fire were sent from Hanoi,¹² and on November 23, d'Argenlieu presented to the Cominindo a table of kidnappings, assassinations, desertations, sabotage actions and skirmishes aimed at showing that the truce had only been effective for a week and that on November 20, the activity of the "rebels" was back on the normal scale.¹³

Why did the Vietnamese adhere so strictly to the cease-fire agreement in the first days, and who was responsible for its break-down?

The strict observance of the truce at the day and time which had been fixed by Nguyen Binh, showed that Vietnamese authorities had full control of their troops in the South. This was probably the motive for their avoiding all incidents in the first days of November.¹⁴

The responsibility for the break-down is more difficult to establish, but it was probably due to contradiction between the Vietnamese and French interpretations of the cease-fire. The Vietnamese maintained that all troops should stay at their positions and not move into territory controlled by the adversary. The commander of the French forces in the South, General Nyo, had a different view. On

October 30, he ordered French troops to secure the maintenance of law and order on the whole territory and to react immediately against any "rebel element" which created trouble. The local commanders were also told to prepare for larger operations against passive "armed bands," but these operations should only be started on the explicit order of general Nyo himself.¹⁵ With such orders it seems probable that the clashes in November have occurred when French troops moved into territory controlled by the guerilla.

In a private conversation in late October, Ho Chi Minh told American vice-consul O'Sullivan that the effectiveness of the Modus Vivendi would depend upon French actions in Cochinchina. If they would implement the promise of civil liberties, release political prisoners and stop attacking Vietnamese forces, things would go well for them in Tonkin. Otherwise the mixed commissions would not accomplish much.¹⁶ On October 30, Hanoi instructed the liaison officers in 11 towns north of the 16th parallel not to start applying the Modus Vivendi before they had received a precise order from the government.¹⁷

In practice, this meant that the application of the Modus Vivendi in the North would depend on a successful cease-fire in the South and an arrangement which included both the Vietnamese military forces in Nam Bo and the Administrative Committee for Nam Bo. The Vietnamese were only willing to meet their obligations in the North if the French would accept Vietnamese institutions in the South as partners in a political and military solution. The military solution was meant to be found in the so-called Nyo talks.

4.3 The Nyo Talks

In the last phase of the Paris negotiations, the French had proposed that the cease-fire be followed by the withdrawal of all Vietnamese forces from the South. This was rejected by Ho Chi Minh and was not included in the agreement.¹⁸ For this reason, the Modus Vivendi gave no details on the implementation of the cease-fire. It was only stated:

Agreements of the French and Viet Nam General Staff should arrange the conditions of application and supervision of measures decided in common. (article 9b)

The French ministry of National Defense prepared internal instructions for the interpretation of the military clauses of the Modus Vivendi, which were sent to Saigon on October 1.¹⁹ They directed the High-Commissioner to demand the withdrawal and disarming of all Vietnamese forces in the South. On October 31, d'Argenlieu assured Paris that the fundamental issue in the military negotiations would be the "repatriation" of regular troops which had come to the South from the North, and the disarming of the "rebels" in the South. The preservation of these troops in Cochinchina and South-Annam would "be tantamount to recognition of Hanoi's sovereignty over these territories." D'Argenlieu had therefore instructed General Nyo to put forth these demands at the very start of the military negotiations.²⁰

At the opening of the talks in Hanoi on November 3, the Vietnamese rejected Nyo's demand out of hand. None of the parts were willing to compromise, but as neither party wished to be responsible for a total deadlock, talks were continued until interrupted by the outbreak of hostilities in Haiphong.²¹ The Vietnamese delegation tried to make Nyo accept a preliminary agreement, only aimed at precluding acts of hostility until a definite agreement was reached. The French did not bluntly refuse, but no preliminary agreement was reached.²²

4.4 The Administrative Committee

It thus proved impossible to reach an agreement involving French recognition of Vietnamese forces in the South. But the Vietnamese had also hoped that the French would accept to deal with their leading organs in the South. On September 13, the Resistance Committee for the South had been reorganized, and on September 22, the provisional Administrative Committee for Nam Bo, which had governed Nam Bo during the first month after the August revolution in 1945, issued a proclamation where it claimed to be the sole legal authority in Nam Bo.²³ The Administrative Committee was now chaired by Pham Van Bach, and Nguyen Binh was commissar for military affairs. On October 17, the Administrative Committee sent instructions to the provincial committees explaining why the Modus Vivendi had been signed and how it could be used to make progress in the struggle for unity and independence. It was emphasized that loyal French application of the clauses would mean that France recognized the authority of the Vietnamese government in the South. Therefore:

We must show the French and the foreign powers that we are well disciplined, that we obey the orders of the Government and that we respect the signature of Ho Chi Minh.²⁴

The Modus Vivendi settled that a person designated by the Vietnamese government and approved by the French government should be accredited to the High-Commissioner in Saigon. In late October, the Vietnamese government designated Pham Van Bach as their representative to Saigon, thus hoping for an indirect French recognition of the Administrative Committee. D'Argenlieu was not to be fooled, but asked the French government for authorization to inform Ho Chi Minh that the designation of Pham Van Bach could not be approved. At the same time he cabled Ho Chi Minh that

"nothing was less probable" than an approval from Paris.²⁵ Ho Chi Minh asked several times for the final answer. The French government's refusal only arrived in Hanoi on November 27.²⁶ At that time, focus was no longer on Nam Bo.

To the French it was not enough to disapprove of Pham Van Bach's designation, however. On November 2, Moutet wanted to know if the commissioner in Hanoi had made "the necessary representations" to the Vietnamese government with relation to the organizing of the Resistance Committee for the South.²⁷ In reality, the Resistance Committee had only been reorganized by a Vietnamese decree of September 13, but Moutet's request started an exchange of notes between d'Argenlieu and Ho Chi Minh on the legality of the Administrative Committee for Nam Bo (See Appendix 2.) D'Argenlieu's first protest against the existence of the Committee was delivered to Ho Chi Minh on November 7. The activities of the Committee were asserted to be in contradiction both to the March 6 and the September 14 agreements, and Ho Chi Minh was asked to stop immediately all activities by institutions in Cochinchina representing the Vietnamese government.²⁸

Ho Chi Minh retorted that the Administrative Committee had existed since August 25, 1945 and that both the March 6 and September 14 agreements were based on the preservation of the de facto situation until the referendum.²⁹

D'Argenlieu replied that Ho Chi Minh's interpretation of the March 6 and September 14 agreements lacked any juridical foundation. Cochinchina was French territory, and its status could only be changed by a decision of the French parliament, which would ratify the wish of the population, consulted in a referendum. He warned Ho Chi Minh that if he persisted in his interpretation, it would affect the very basis of the current negotiations.³⁰

On November 14, Ho Chi Minh answered that article 9 of the Modus Vivendi was incompatible with the thesis that denied the existence of Vietnamese administrative and military institutions in Cochinchina. Cochinchina was a part of Vietnam where there was a special de facto situation due to the presence of French military forces. He warned the High-Commissioner against resorting to violence as that could lead to a suspension of the application of the Modus Vivendi. In that case the Vietnamese government would decline all responsibility.³¹

It was d'Argenlieu who had first mentioned the possible suspension of the Modus Vivendi. Ho Chi Minh's remark was a reaction to this.³² On November 13, d'Argenlieu left Saigon for Paris, determined to ask the Cominindo to declare the suspension. It was thus interim High-Commissioner Valluy who closed the correspondence with Ho Chi Minh by a letter delivered on November 20. Valluy confirmed what had been said in the previous letters and only added that article 9 of the Modus Vivendi referred to the existence of armed hostilities which it was meant to terminate, and not to any situation de jure.³³

The correspondence on the status of Nam Bo/Cochinchina was the final demarcation of two incompatible positions. At Fontainebleau, the French had refused to fix a date for the referendum because they needed time to create support for Cochinchinese autonomy. When the press was let free and the "rebels" permitted to show their loyalty to Hanoi by a well disciplined observance of the cease-fire, the opposite occurred. It became clearer than ever that the population in Nam Bo wished to be Vietnamese. In the light of this development, the instructions from Paris to obtain the withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from the South became totally inapplicable. But in the Nyo talks, France avoided any concession that could create the impression that France

would tolerate the existence of Vietnamese armed forces in the South. At the same time, d'Argenlieu, incited by a request from Moutet, chose to accentuate the most delicate of all the topics by demanding that Vietnamese institutions in the South be abolished. The conflict over the status of Nam Bo condemned the whole Modus Vivendi.

4.5 The Mixed Commissions

On October 31, the Vietnamese gave the Pasteur Institute in Hanoi back to the French, but this remained the only clause of the Modus Vivendi that was implemented in the North. On November 7, French intelligence reported that Vietnamese authorities had decided to let the attitude of their representatives to the mixed commissions depend on the success of the Nyo talks.³⁴ This report was probably correct. The Vietnamese prepared for hard and drawn-out negotiations in the mixed commissions and by no means intended to let Vietnamese economy be integrated in the French-controlled federal services. French intelligence even reported that the Vietnamese negotiators had been instructed by the Tong Bo never to pronounce the words "federal service" or "federation."³⁵ The Vietnamese preparations were of no use, however, as it proved impossible to agree where to locate the talks. The mixed commissions were never established. Ho Chi Minh insisted that they meet in Hanoi,³⁶ while d'Argenlieu maintained that the site for the most important commissions should be Dalat. He explained to Paris that as a matter of principle federal matters should be discussed in Dalat. Moreover, it was necessary to take the Vietnamese negotiators away from Hanoi, where they would use all their time on political agitation instead of negotiating sincerely.³⁷

Some days after d'Argenlieu's departure, Saigon decided that the disagreement on where to locate the commissions should not be allowed to delay the promised restitution of French property. The chief economic negotiator, Ladreit de Lacharrière, was therefore sent to Hanoi in order to

establish those of the commissions which were supposed to prepare the restitution. Valluy told Paris that this was a "gesture of reconciliation."³⁸ When d'Argenlieu read this back in Paris, he apparently feared that Valluy had gone soft, for he hastened to express the hope that the mission of Lacharrière was inspired by the necessity of making Hanoi meet its obligations rather than a wish to make new gestures of reconciliation.³⁹

Just after de Lacharrière arrived in Hanoi, a serious incident occurred in Haiphong as the result of a conflict over customs. De Lacharrière obtained a promise from Ho Chi Minh to establish immediately the commissions for the restitution of French property, but in return Ho Chi Minh wanted a special mixed commission to find an urgent provisional solution to the customs conflict in Haiphong. De Lacharrière discussed this with Commissioner Morlière and the delegate for economic affairs Davée. They all agreed that Ho Chi Minh's proposal should be accepted, and their view was cabled Saigon.⁴⁰

On November 23, Valluy refused, arguing that the creation of a special mixed commission would give the impression that France had modified her position and bowed to Vietnamese pressure.⁴¹ When cabling his refusal to Hanoi, Valluy had already ordered French forces in Haiphong to take complete control of the town. The battle of Haiphong put an end to all hopes that the Modus Vivendi would be applied.

4.6 Apprehension in Saigon

Vietnamese strategy with regard to the Modus Vivendi was clear. They wanted to exploit article 9 to the maximum and delay the application of the other clauses till the French had made concessions in the South.

French strategy was more wavering, due to the fact that the agreement had been signed against the wish of the High-Commissioner. Saigon had no faith in the Modus Vivendi and especially disliked article 9. The first reports on the effective cease-fire seem to indicate that there was a short period of moderate optimism in Saigon. The abortive Nyo talks, defections of village notables and the suicide of Dr. Thinh soon changed the mood to a state of extreme apprehension. By mid-November, Saigon became convinced that the Vietnamese government would have to be taught a lesson.

The evolution of Saigon's attitude will now be examined more closely by the help of the official reports to Paris. As early as October 15, three days before Ho's return, d'Argenlieu regretted that a vicious campaign was made with the purpose of obliging the French to accept the Vietnamese view with regard to Cochinchina. The French were giving only very moderate answers to the Vietnamese "calumnies," because otherwise the favorable climate for the application of the Modus Vivendi could be disturbed, but the French could very soon find themselves in an inferior position if they maintained this modest attitude before an "adversary with no scruples." In any case, the Vietnamese campaign would cease if Ho Chi minh wanted it: "We will be enlightened as to the real intentions of V.N when the President has resumed the reins of power."⁴²

After the meeting at Cam Ranh Bay, d'Argenlieu cabled Paris a quite optimistic report. He had the impression that Ho Chi Minh wanted, at least for some time, to consolidate the results he had already gained, by seeking a detente with France. But d'Argenlieu was also convinced that Ho Chi Minh would try, by "mixing kindness and friendly declarations with blackmail and intimidations," to improve his position in Cochinchina, even beyond the substantial

gains he had achieved through article 9 of the Modus Vivendi.⁴³ A few days later, d'Argenlieu had to forward some very friendly declarations to Paris. Ho Chi Minh sent thankful and courteous telegrams both to Bidault, Moutet and to the Communist Minister of Reconstruction Francois Billoux. The telegram to Bidault was the most substantial ("loyal application of the Modus Vivendi" etc.), the one to Billoux the most informal ("kisses to the kids" etc.)⁴⁴

D'Argenlieu did not like these telegrams. On October 26, he complained to Paris of the false impression made by "official courtesy." He spoke of Hanoi's "double game" and called Ho Chi Minh a shrewd politician who was prepared to disavow officially his subordinates when their actions were too defiant, while at the same time the underground groups in the South continued to receive instructions from Hanoi urging them to maintain terrorist activity. D'Argenlieu quoted some of these instructions, captured by French intelligence. He concluded that the Vietnamese by exploiting article 9 sought to undo one year's efforts in Cochinchina. The Modus Vivendi would in fact transform those who were legally and legitimately considered to be rebels into regular troops of a member country of the French Union. D'Argenlieu warned that it could become indispensable to overthrow a scheme so minutely made up by an "implacable adversary" of France. If this proved necessary, the best would be to inform Ho Chi Minh that the date for the entry into force would have to be postponed.⁴⁵

This was indeed a sharp attack on Paris for having signed the Modus Vivendi. D'Argenlieu did not, however, put his threat to postpone the application into effect. On October 30, he instead delivered a lengthy speech, denouncing terrorist activity in the South, assuring the Cochinchinese provisional government of French support and pronouncing his doubts that Vietnam would comply with all her obligations.⁴⁶

On November 3, the High-Commissioner suddenly described the situation in the South as "seriously improving" and reported that talks in Hanoi developed favorably.⁴⁷ Two days before, d'Argenlieu had confirmed to Paris his impression from the meeting at Cam Ranh Bay that Ho Chi Minh seemed to avoid actions that would justify to postpone the application of the Modus Vivendi.⁴⁸ This statement was repeated to Moutet on November 6, and this time d'Argenlieu told that his information on Ho Chi Minh's desire to avoid a rupture stemmed from an absolutely reliable source.⁴⁹ D'Argenlieu further affirmed that Ho Chi Minh was in full control of the situation.⁵⁰ The opposition in the North, whose only weapon was xenophobic outbidding of the Vietminh, was incapable of organizing and expressing its views publicly, as the Vietnamese security forces were both numerous and efficient. The opposition was according to d'Argenlieu looking to Bao Dai for a solution. Some hoped that France, others that the United States, would bring him back.⁵¹

The cables sent to Paris in the first days of November did not repeat any of the stiff words that d'Argenlieu had used in his October 26 message. This might reflect a temporary optimism in Saigon, caused by the success of the cease-fire. It is also possible, however, that d'Argenlieu deliberately avoided to say anything which could meet with unfavorable reactions in Paris. On November 13, he went to Paris himself in order to obtain instructions in accordance with his views.

Valluy's cables to Paris soon began to take up the same themes as those expressed by d'Argenlieu in October. He blamed the worsening situation in Cochinchina on France's "tacit recognition" of the Vietnamese claims on the region.⁵² On November 19, he warned the French government that the French position in Cochinchina, as well as in the rest of Indochina, was about to be compromised.

French "unilateral application" was more and more detrimental, and therefore an all out effort "with all available means" was being planned. Valluy insisted that this effort be supported by a solemn declaration by the French government on French sovereignty in Cochinchina.⁵³

In itself, the Modus Vivendi had seemed to be a French victory. France obtained important Vietnamese long term concessions without giving in to the demands for independence and unity. The effective execution of the cease-fire and the demonstration of popular support for national unity made the application of the agreement a Vietnamese political victory.

A serious crisis in French Indochina policy ensued. Until November, the French had hoped to have their cake and eat it too: control of Cochinchina and peace with Vietnam. By mid-November, Saigon became convinced that an urgent choice was inescapable. Either France would have to make a deal with Ho Chi Minh in which Cochinchina and South Annam were incorporated in the Vietnamese republic, or France would have to harden her policy, press for application of the agreements concerning the North and take the risk of an open confrontation.

Saigon never doubted that the second road should be taken. The problem was to obtain the necessary backing from Paris.

CHAPTER 5

CONQUEST OR ABANDONMENT

"Neither abandonment, nor conquest." This Socialist slogan for French Indochina policy was meant to satisfy both right wing colonialists and left wing antagonists of war. In reality the concept implied a two-pronged strategy: France would for a certain period accept Vietminh power in the North if the Hanoi government would tolerate French control of the South. When sufficient French control had been established in the South, the French reckoned that North would have to come to terms because it depended economically on the South.

The Vietnamese leaders were not willing to give up the South. They insisted on the inclusion of the referendum in the March 6 agreement and fought stubbornly for this referendum at Fontainebleau. When Ho Chi Minh accepted the Modus Vivendi, it was because article 9 made it possible for the institutions in the South to enter into the open. Saigon saw this danger even before the agreement entered into force. Unable to have it postponed, they turned their eyes on Tonkin and resurrected the spring plans for military conquest of the northern towns hoping that way to provoke the collapse of the Vietminh and thereby obtain peace and order in Cochinchina.

This chapter will:

- Examine the plans that had been shaped for "giving space" to the French forces in the North,
- make out the relationship between French decision-makers in Paris and Saigon,

- discuss Saigon's motives for escalating the conflict to the North.

5.1 The Slow Method

After the reinstallation of French forces in Tonkin in March 1946, a military convention between Vietnam and France (Conférence d'Etat-Major) was signed on April 3 (see Appendix 1; IV). This convention, which formally remained in force, stipulated that a force of 10,000 Vietnamese and 15,000 French troops were to relieve the Chinese occupation army. The number of French and Vietnamese troops in each garrison was also fixed. Vietnamese troops would remain under Vietnamese control, but were to be put at the disposal of the French commander. French forces in the North were explicitly not to exceed 15,000, while no ceiling was established for the Vietnamese army not included in the "forces of relief." A permanent Vietnamese delegation would be accredited to the French commander, and in order to prevent local incidents, the Vietnamese should be informed 48 hours in advance of French troop movements. There was to be mixed liaison commissions on all important levels. Approving the convention on April 5, General Leclerc the following day signed a general order "Directives No. 1," to the French troops, whose task was defined as the defense of French interests,

- by the slow method, marking every day some little progress without growing weary.
- by force when necessary...1

This should be done while maintaining the "fair-play with the Annamites."

Leclerc's order was not very precise, but it shows that he did not consider the agreement as final. It was a step on the way to stronger French control. General Salan was the

one who signed the April 3 convention, but on April 1 he had been replaced as commander of the French forces in Northern Indochina by General Valluy.² Specifying the "slow method" in a new general order, "Directives No. 2," on April 10, Valluy emphasized the instability of a situation where the French were threatened by a hostile population as well as by Chinese troops. Thus in every garrison the commander must set up a plan for the security of French forces. The plan should include prescriptions for the permanent protection of the military quarters, and

above all a plan of action for the seizure of the town. For the best way to defend oneself is quite often to attack.

In addition to these local plans for "neutralizing" the enemy and occupying "sensitive points," methods should be elaborated for modifying the military occupation and

finally transform the scenario which was one of a purely military operation to a scenario of a "coup d'état."³

As an indication of appropriate methods, the general order prescribed:

- effective intelligence,
- teams of specialists (possibly in disguise) charged with the "neutralization" of local leaders,
- absolute secrecy.

We may assume that such plans were set up in the various French garrisons, but they were not executed until November. On April 27, after a trip to Hanoi, American Consul Charles Reed reported that there might be ulterior motives behind the French insistence on a rapid withdrawal of the Chinese troops as the French would possibly stage a military coup when the Chinese were gone.⁴ Reed was

correct in identifying the Chinese as the main obstacle to the French "coup." This obstacle was removed from most of Tonkin in June, but from Haiphong only in September. If the French had attacked Vietnamese forces in the northern towns immediately after the Chinese withdrawal in June, this would have coincided with the Paris negotiations. Saigon could not be sure that Paris would back them if French forces in Indochina seemed to be the aggressors. In the first period after the Chinese withdrawal, French and Vietnamese forces coexisted in the North with few incidents. The only major one occurred in Bac Ninh in early August, contributing to the crisis in Fontainebleau, but not leading to further trouble on the spot.⁵

French moderation in the North until November can be explained by two negative factors: the continued Chinese presence, and the negotiations between DRV and France in Paris. One positive factor has to be added: In August, General Louis Constant Morlière assumed responsibility as Commander of the French Forces in Northern Indochina and as interim Commissioner of the Republic for Tonkin and North-Annam. He was a man with an approach that was quite different from the one of Valluy. In February 1947, after his dismissal, Morlière was proud to state that from the incident of Bac Ninh till the Haiphong affair, the calm in Tonkin had been almost total.⁶

The commander in Haiphong, Colonel Dèbes, implemented Valluy's instructions by sending detailed orders in the end of October to all unit commanders. These orders were in closed envelopes which should only be opened on Dèbes' specific order.⁷ During the battle of Haiphong in late November, Vietnamese forces found a copy of Valluy's general order, and also one of Dèbes' unit orders. The unit order had been signed on October 30 under the authority of instructions signed by Dèbes on October 21.

The unit order prescribed the use of armoured cars and artillery in an effort to gain complete control of Haiphong. It was introduced with these less than defensive words:

As the situation is still unstable, we can at any moment be led to intervene very fast on our own initiative. To that possibility must correspond an offensive plan.⁸

It seems clear that a military offensive remained one of the French options throughout the period from April to November. In October preparations were intensified, and in late November offensive plans were carried out in Haiphong and Langson. In December, Valluy's general order became doubly important. Firstly, it served as the basis for plans worked out for the battle of Hanoi. Secondly, as the order was known to the Vietnamese, they increasingly came to fear that the French were preparing for the conquest of Hanoi as well. This fear must have strengthened the hand of those within the Vietnamese leadership who thought that the phase of negotiations was over and that it was time for the people's war.

5.2 Paris-Saigon

Paris-Saigon was the name of a Saigon weekly, published by a group consisting of liberalminded French residents and left-leaning officers in Valluy's staff. It specialized in interviews with French and Vietnamese officials in order to promote mutual understanding. On October 2, the journal published an interview with Pignon, who declared himself to be generally satisfied with the Modus Vivendi, but not with article 9. As the agreement entered into force on October 30, an interview with Ho Chi Minh was printed. He was asked if there were parallels between the political trends in Vietnam and France, and answered:

There are not only parallels, but also a kinship between the political trends in Vietnam and France. What does Vietnam want? Simply to realize the French ideals: liberty, equality and fraternity between our two peoples.⁹

This was obviously not a picture of the world as Ho Chi Minh saw it, but as he would have liked it to be. During his stay in France, he had worked hard to create support for the Vietnamese republic, but the French left was much too preoccupied with domestic matters to use its energy on Indochina. The French right and center saw the reconquest of Indochina as an important cause. To the left, Vietnam represented no cause, only an unwelcome problem.

French leftist and liberal-minded groups in Indochina, who served as links between Vietnam and the leftist parties in France, only represented a minority, despised by the mainstream of French colonists. Even Valluy was called "the defeatist general" by the French population in Hanoi.¹⁰

D'Argenlieu was extremely concerned about the few existing links between Vietnamese authorities and French leftists. In October, he deemed Hanoi's propaganda and its "extensions" in France as the Vietnamese government's "most important weapon"¹¹ He told Paris that problems were aggravated by connivances between "certain French" and organizations in Hanoi. This could force him to consider "the most serious restrictive measures." He even spoke of eliminating ("neutraliser") dangerous elements.¹² If pro-Vietnamese propaganda in the weak and badly informed French leftist press was part of Vietnam's "most important weapon," Vietnam was weak indeed. The French Socialist and Communist parties in Indochina and the group behind Paris-Saigon had little influence and did not manage to mobilize any substantial movement for a peaceful

solution on the domestic scene. From the end of the Fontainebleau conference, formulation of French Indochinese policy was left almost exclusively to d'Argenlieu's apparatus in Saigon and to his superiors in Paris: Moutet, Bidault and their advisers. The rest of this chapter will therefore be limited to a discussion of the relationship between the High-Commissioner, the Minister of Overseas France and the French Premier.

Paris and Saigon basically agreed on the desirability of keeping Cochinchina and South-Annam away from the influence of Hanoi. In April, d'Argenlieu expressed his view very clearly when he told Paris that a break-down in the forthcoming negotiations with Vietnam would do no harm. France could simply go on organizing the Federation of Cochinchina, South-Annam, Cambodia and Laos, and let Tonkin and North-Annam persist as a free state. Hanoi would probably return to the Federation later on.¹³

During the Fontainebleau conference, d'Argenlieu was afraid that this policy would be compromised by French concessions to Vietnam and expressed clearly to Paris that he wanted the conference to break down. Moutet wished to reach an agreement at Fontainebleau, but agreed with d'Argenlieu that it was necessary to postpone the referendum in the South until the position of the autonomists had been strengthened. In August and September he instructed d'Argenlieu to intensivate propaganda in Cochinchina and "succeed rapidly" (see chapter 1.8).

In November, it was Moutet who asked d'Argenlieu to protest formally to Hanoi against the existence of the Resistance Committee for the South.¹⁴ At this time, the situation had been turned upside down. Decision-makers in Saigon had concluded that the policy for Cochinchinese autonomy was impossible as long as the attraction on the southerners of the northern republic was permitted to work. They became

convinced that the problems of the North and South could not be separated. This change in Saigon occurred at a time when the domestic scene was marked by one constitutional referendum, two general elections and a cabinet crisis in the making. After the battle of Haiphong, there was irritation in some Paris circles because it was felt that Saigon had failed to carry out the instructions regarding the South and had provoked a conflict in the North instead.¹⁵

A generally agreed upon policy for Cochinchinese autonomy was at the root of the conflict that led to the outbreak of war. This policy was not in any way imposed on Paris by Saigon, as it has often been stated. The French cabinet (with a possible, but very silent exception for its Communist members) supported the policy for Cochinchinese autonomy, and there was no essential disagreement between Saigon and Paris in this matter.

In spite of this basic agreement between the three main decision-makers, there was a crisis in their relationship in early August. D'Argenlieu advised Paris to suspend the conference at Fontainebleau once and for all and convened the second Dalat conference while the negotiations were still going on at Fontainebleau.¹⁶ This infuriated Moutet, who is said to have demanded the replacement of d'Argenlieu as High-Commissioner. This demand is said to have been refused by Bidault.¹⁷ The leader of the Asian department in the French foreign ministry later stated that this issue had come close to creating a rupture in the French cabinet.¹⁸

After this crisis, both Moutet and Bidault sent assurances to d'Argenlieu of their confidence.¹⁹ Moutet's assurance was more reserved than Bidault's.²⁰ On November 5, Moutet told AFP that Admiral d'Argenlieu had the confidence of the government. The disagreements in August had only been

"tactical divergencies." The "policy of agreements" had always been practiced with the total agreement of Admiral d'Argenlieu, General Leclerc and his successor Valluy. Moutet emphasized that general Leclerc had refuted none of his earlier ideas after his return to France.²¹

Moutet's statement on Leclerc was wrong. Leclerc had become far more anti-Vietminh since March. Moutet's statement must however be taken as an indication that he as early as November 1946 wished to replace d'Argenlieu with Leclerc, as he in fact tried to do in February 1947.

We may conclude from the evidence of the conflict in August and September that within the French cabinet d'Argenlieu was opposed by Moutet and protected by Bidault. It must have been a disappointment to d'Argenlieu when MRP lost the elections on November 10 and the days of Bidault's premiership seemed to be counted.

By a letter to d'Argenlieu of October 1, 1946, Moutet proposed important changes in the Indochinese administrative structure, which must be interpreted as an attempt to place Saigon under the control of Moutet's ministry and probably also to get rid of d'Argenlieu. Unfortunately, Moutet's proposals are only known through d'Argenlieu's sulky answer.²² As described in chapter 3.3, d'Argenlieu had established a sort of federal cabinet, "federal commissioners" playing the roles of ministers, the commanding general that of vice-president, d'Argenlieu himself that of president. Moutet now proposed a return to the prewar structure with a Governor General supported by a Secretary General to be responsible for the administrative apparatus. Moutet even said he had a candidate for the latter post.²³ D'Argenlieu reacted violently against the whole idea, and said it would be in contradiction with the political framework which had been laboriously constructed

for more than a year. He insisted that nothing be done presently to implement Moutet's ideas.²⁴ Moutet had to wait till Bidault's resignation and the outbreak of war.

Vietnamese attempts to establish direct contact with Paris represented another potential area of conflict. However, as Paris accepted the High Commissioner's monopoly in dealing with Hanoi on behalf of France, no conflict arose.

When Ho Chi Minh left France in September, his close collaborator Hoang Minh Giam stayed behind as head of a permanent Vietnamese delegation in Paris. On learning this, d'Argenlieu at once cabled Paris that this delegation was not part of the Modus Vivendi agreement and urgently asked for an explanation. On October 5, Paris replied that the Giam mission had no official status and that a letter had been sent to the Vietnamese president expressing the "inappropriateness" of the delegation. Paris was not prepared, however, to deny the members of the Vietnamese delegation the right to stay in a private capacity. D'Argenlieu was not satisfied and asked Moutet to send the four Vietnamese home.²⁵ His demand was not met, but Hoang Minh Giam soon realized that he wasted his time in Paris. In November, he returned to Hanoi and was replaced in Paris by a less highranking personality, Tran Ngoc Danh. When d'Argenlieu forwarded a telegram from Ho Chi Minh to Paris on this matter, he enclosed a comment:

It may be acceptable that messages of a purely formal and conventional nature are addressed directly from Ho Chi Minh to the French Premier, but this should not be the case for messages of a political nature.²⁶

To support his monopoly of political communications with the Vietnamese government, d'Argenlieu referred to Bidault's decision in October not to answer a political message from Ho Chi Minh.²⁷

During the crisis in November and December, Ho Chi Minh addressed numerous protests and appeals to the French government. The colonial authorities in Saigon delayed them in transmission, and Bidault never answered them. His successor as premier, Léon Blum, decided to break with this custom and to send a message directly to Ho Chi Minh, but that was on December 18, the eve of war. When Blum's message reached the Vietnamese president, he had established his headquarters in the countryside. Over the presidential palace in Hanoi flew the tricolore.

Demands for greater economy of spending was a permanent source of friction between Paris and Saigon. In its electoral campaigns, the French Socialist Party had made a point of reducing military expenditures. Moutet and the other Socialist ministers had to do something about it. In September, an Interministerial Control Commission, led by inspector Gayet, was sent to Indochina in order to study the possibilities for financial cutbacks. Naturally, the commission almost instantly became unpopular both with the civil and military authorities in Saigon. Valluy and Gayet soon became enemies, as they could not agree on how many troops there actually were in the Saigon area.²⁸ By anticipation d'Argenlieu contested Gayet's conclusions when on October 4, he cabled Paris that the Modus Vivendi would by no means reduce the demand for troops, adding:

I think that presently there can be no better use for the finances and for the French troops than the preservation of the territories of the Union.²⁹

In Gayet's first report, he affirmed that massive cutbacks in the number of European troops would very soon be possible if the Modus Vivendi were applied.³⁰ He further stated that there were too many superior officers in Indochina. Gayet's views provoked a violent reaction from

the French Chiefs of Staff. In a letter to Moutet, the EMGDN rejected all Gayet's conclusions and supported Saigon's demand for the preservation of 75,000 French troops in Indochina throughout 1947.³¹

The conflict with Gayet must have contributed to the state of nervousness which reigned in Saigon in October and November. Reductions had to wait till 1954.

Gayet was not the only metropolitan representative to be sent to Indochina in the period preceding the outbreak of war. While Gayet could be said to be Moutet's man, "Administrateur des Colonies" Jacques Boissier represented Bidault. While Gayet went to Saigon on the initiative of Paris, it was Saigon who asked Boissier to come.³²

Boissier arrived in Indochina in late October, at about the time when d'Argenlieu suggested to postpone the application of the Modus Vivendi. He left Saigon with d'Argenlieu on November 13. There are few traces of Boissier's actions in French archives. He did, however, support d'Argenlieu's monopoly of answering Ho's telegrams.³³ The American archives give a more important piece of information: In Hanoi, Boissier met American Vice-Consul O'Sullivan, whom he knew from before, and told him his inside impression of what French policy would be. In O'Sullivan's summary to Washington the main points were: French policy toward Vietnam would "almost inevitably stiffen". The French had no intention of holding the referendum in Cochinchina before a "deep and profound peace" had been established. They believed that the Vietminh group which was actually in power was "becoming unwilling to give up prerogatives of office."³⁴

Boissier's statements must reflect the growing conviction in Saigon that the Vietminh would have to be forced out of office.

For a long time, d'Argenlieu had wished to present his views personally to his superiors in Paris. Bidault permitted him to come in November.³⁵ When the admiral left Saigon on November 13, Consul Reed doubted that he would return if "leftist elements unite for political control."³⁶ The French press printed a news bulletin from AFP which said that d'Argenlieu would probably go back to his monastery.³⁷ This led Valluy to demand the dismissal of the AFP director.³⁸ The question of d'Argenlieu's return to Indochina became a hot potato in Paris in November and December. While the Socialist and Communist press demanded his dismissal, d'Argenlieu lobbied effectively in the political establishment and sent assurances to Saigon that a firm policy would be backed by Paris.

Before leaving Saigon, d'Argenlieu had fixed the lines of responsibility for his collaborators. Valluy was to be interim High-Commissioner, but Pignon (political commissioner) and Gonon (financial commissioner) would also act in the name of the High-Commissioner. This made Reed conclude that a triumvirate would govern Indochina.³⁹ It was this triumvirate, topped by Valluy, who with encouragements from d'Argenlieu in Paris, took the decisions that led to war.

5.3 Why did Saigon Decide to Take Action?

As has been seen, after his meeting with Ho Chi Minh in Cam Ranh Bay, d'Argenlieu wanted to postpone the application of the Modus Vivendi. In the first days of November, d'Argenlieu's telegrams were more optimistic, but after d'Argenlieu had gone to Paris, Valluy's cables became more and more desperate. On November 19, he announced that action with "all means at our disposal" was under way. On November 21/22, he ordered the occupation of Haiphong.

This represented a dramatic change from concentrating on Cochinchina to confronting Hanoi. This change was probably a result of a decision made by d'Argenlieu on November 11. That was the day after Dr. Thinh's suicide, the day after the Communist victory in the French elections and two days before the admiral's departure from Saigon. In 1967, Valluy revealed that on November 11, 1946, d'Argenlieu had given him a letter, instructing him not to "exclude the possibility that one might be forced to have recourse to a direct forcible action against the Hanoi government."⁴⁰ Valluy seems to have resented to be left with the responsibility under such conditions.

It may seem strange to discuss the motives for this change of strategy before describing what actually happened when Haiphong and Langson were conquered in late November and Hanoi, Hué, Da Nang and other northern towns one month later. The discussion of motives will be made in advance firstly in order to permit the reader to have some of the main points in mind when we turn to the details in the outbreak of war, secondly because the focus will afterwards shift from the South to the North of Vietnam. In the South, the guerilla war from before the Modus Vivendi gradually resumed in the course of December, but this happened in the shadow of the northern cataclysm.⁴¹

The possible motives will be discussed in the following order:

- The weakened French position in the South.
- The non-application of the Modus Vivendi in the North.
- The elimination of the political opposition in the North.
- The fear that French military superiority would be reduced.
- The fear that a French left wing government would concede to Vietnamese demands.

The Weakened French Position in the South

The serious setback for French Cochinchina policy in October/November was obviously one of the reasons for the change in Saigon's policy. On October 25, d'Argenlieu told his collaborators in Saigon that one should

prepare to answer, perhaps already in January 47, a reopening of hostilities with forcible action, aiming at politically and morally neutralizing the Hanoi government and thus facilitating the pacification of the South...⁴²

After the suicide of Dr. Thinh, Saigon saw that the separatists were about to lose the little support they had, and French authorities could not effectively stop the unionist press and organizations without violating the political freedoms which had been promised in the Modus Vivendi. This probably motivated d'Argenlieu's November 11 instructions to Valluy. The Vietminh continued to expand its military control in the countryside under cover of the cease-fire. On November 19, Valluy cabled Paris that French application of the cease-fire worsened the French position with an accelerating rhythm. When in the same telegram he said that an energetic effort "with all the means at our disposal" was under way, he did not make clear if he thought of military action in the South or in the North. It was the following day that the news of an incident in Haiphong provided him with the necessary pretext. On November 22, at the same time as he sent his second order to Hanoi and Haiphong, he cabled Paris an alarming report on the political and military situation in the South.⁴³ This shows how developments in the South motivated military action in the North.

The report pointed out that the strict execution of the cease-fire on the day and time fixed by the "rebel leaders" gave proof of the discipline of the "rebel bands". At the

very moment of the cease-fire, an intense, "insidious" and well prepared political campaign had been launched in all southern provinces, and the population had understood this as a stage on the way to acceptance of the unionist position. The Administrative Committee was gaining ground every day, the notables were turning away from the French, and there had been 200 desertions from the partisan troops. In spite of great efforts the French were without the means to counteract the political progress of the rebels. When Valluy wrote the following conclusion he had already decided to order the occupation of Haiphong:

There is no reason to believe that it is possible to arrive at an agreement on an armistice in Hanoi on the conditions that have been elaborated by Paris. On the other hand we cannot give Hanoi the moral advantage it would be if the rupture came from us. I estimate the situation to be difficult, repairable in detail and in certain places, but essentially serious and certainly not favorable as one seems to be pleased to say in certain circles in Paris.⁴⁴

Valluy's scheme was to present the battle of Haiphong as premeditated by the Vietnamese. He therefore could not tell Paris explicitly that action in the North was motivated by developments in the South. This was only shown implicitly by the sending of a southern summary to Paris at the very moment of his most fatal order to Haiphong. On November 23, Valluy and Pignon told Paris that the problems of North and South could no longer be separated.⁴⁵

The Non-Application of the Modus Vivendi in the North

The mixed commissions that should prepare the application of the Modus Vivendi in the North were never established because the two parties could not agree on a site for them.

This shows that neither party felt an urgent need to apply the Modus Vivendi in the different fields that concerned the North. It seems that both the Vietnamese and the French wished to prolong the unsettled situation in the North until they had obtained concessions in the South. The non-application of the Modus Vivendi in the North therefore cannot have constituted any major reason for Saigon's decision to "teach the Vietnamese a lesson," but it was certainly used as one of the main French arguments against Vietnam after the outbreak of hostilities.

The Elimination of the Political Opposition in the North

In 1973, Pignon stated that even as he returned from the Fontainebleau conference, he had lost hope of a peaceful solution. He gave as the main reason that the Vietminh had liquidated the nationalist groups in the North and that France was therefore facing a monolithic bloc.⁴⁶

In retrospect, Pignon seems to have confused cause and effect. There is no doubt that Saigon followed the opposition closely also before the rupture with Hanoi. Pignon very soon began to consider the possibility of using Bao Dai.⁴⁷ The suppression of the opposition in the North must certainly have disturbed his plans, but to a political strategist like Pignon, the lack of a political alternative cannot have represented a major reason for breaking with the Vietminh. There must have been other reasons for Saigon's shift of strategy, but the suppression of the opposition has surely represented a suitable rationale. On November 13, Pignon asked Morlière to forward all available information on Vietnamese purges before and after the cabinet reshuffle. This was "indispensable for propaganda."⁴⁸

In December, the suppression of the anti-Vietminh parties

became one of Pignon's main concerns.⁴⁹ This had two reasons: He needed arguments that could impress the Vietnamese, and he sought for possible political solutions to the situation that would arise when the existing government had been eliminated. This concern for the opposition was an effect, not the cause for the decision to start a confrontation in the North.

The Fear of Reduced Military Superiority

The Vietnamese army was making rapid progress in quantity and quality during the autumn of 1946, while the French army was under budgetary pressure. The French commanders also knew that they would face difficulties in the beginning of 1947, when a large part of the trained troops (some 12,000 men) were to be repatriated and replaced by less experienced (and probably African) troops.

During the occupation of Haiphong, Valluy expressed these fears in a request to Paris for reinforcements:

The intentions of the Hanoi government and our new constraints in Cambodia make it impossible to affirm that our military superiority can be maintained with the same margin in the months to come.⁵⁰

Such considerations do not, of course, figure as explicit arguments for changes of policy. It is therefore difficult to evaluate their importance. It seems reasonable, however, to assume that once the French military authorities in Saigon felt that a rupture was desirable (the Saigon word for "desirable" being "inevitable"), the deteriorating military situation must have urged them to seek it as soon as possible.

The Fear of a French Left Wing Government

The Communists were the great victors in the November 10 elections for the first National Assembly of the Fourth Republic, where the PCF became the largest party. On November 15, the same day as d'Argenlieu arrived in Paris, the communist daily l'Humanité announced that PCF demanded the position as head of government for their leader Maurice Thorez. There was great fear in military and colonialist circles that a cabinet dominated by the left might modify the French stance before the new negotiations that were to start in January 1947. Many of those who have discussed the outbreak of the first Indochinese war have accused d'Argenlieu/Valluy (and Bidault) of deliberately creating a fait accompli before the change of government. This was in fact the result of Saigon's actions in November, but it is difficult to prove that it was also its purpose.

In his apology of 1967, Valluy denied that there had been any conspiracy between him, d'Argenlieu, Pignon and Dèbes (the Haiphong commander), who, he said, came to the same conclusions separately, as decisions were imposed on them from the outside.⁵¹ The question is then: Which was the role of domestic political development among the causes "from the outside?"

There is one important indication that the elections in France influenced the climate in Indochina: Pignon in a report, dated December 17, stated:

It is easy to see that the situation was clearly influenced, I would even say commanded, by the metropolitan political circumstances on November 10... There is no doubt that the results of the elections to the Metropolitan National Assembly created premature hopes and illusions in the Hanoi leadership which were to become perilous...⁵²

Pignon pretends that the "perilous" influence of the November 10 elections was due to their impression on the Vietnamese leaders. This idea is of course only a mirror of the influence that the elections had on Pignon himself and his surroundings. If the result of the elections influenced the Vietnamese leaders, it was towards renewed hope for a peaceful solution. For the French leaders in Saigon, this "peaceful solution" was what they feared most because it could give the Vietnamese Republic legitimacy in the South. When d'Argenlieu on October 25 spoke of breaking with Hanoi "perhaps already in January 47," he possibly had the future negotiations in mind.

When d'Argenlieu gave Valluy the November 11 instructions, he had probably just received the first news of the French election results.

Another indication of the role played by domestic political developments is the final sarcasm in Valluy's November 22 report to Paris: "...as one seems to be pleased to say in certain circles in Paris."⁵³ By November 22, there was reason to believe that these circles would dominate the next French cabinet.

Valluy also wrote letters to his friend General Salan in November, where he told that a "psychologic shock" would have to be made and "revolutionary measures taken." Valluy complained that d'Argenlieu (or his successor) did not return to assume responsibility in this critical situation, and he further complained that the Chiefs of Staff did not inform him of the atmosphere ("ambiance") in Paris. But he had instructions, which he was prepared to apply to the letter ("très strictement").⁵⁴

Concern for domestic political developments is of course a kind of motive that colonial decision-makers seldom put on

paper, at least not the sort of paper which is later to be found in public archives. Such motives therefore create difficulties for an historical analysis strictly based on written sources. Even without hard proof it yet seems reasonable to assume that the domestic political situation has had crucial influence on the actions of Saigon. The news of the victory for the French left arrived in Saigon shortly after the death of Dr. Thinh and at a time when the strength of the unionists was clearly demonstrated. The new political situation in Paris has probably induced Saigon to act rapidly in order to forestall approaches between Hanoi and Paris. Valluy and his advisers must have known that a shift of French cabinet was imminent. Earlier frustrations had taught them that it was difficult to obtain clear-cut instructions from coalition cabinets, especially when they were in crisis. The decision-makers in Saigon felt that they could and would have to act on their own. When the incident in Haiphong on November 20 gave them the necessary pretext, it was possibly earlier than they had expected. On November 21 and 22, however, Valluy sent his fatal orders to the North, following d'Argenlieu's instructions, but also knowing that he was creating a *fait accompli* for the French government.

Saigon's decision was motivated by a conviction that there was no longer a middle road between conquest and abandonment. If France did not take action "with all means at her disposal," it would eventually lead to Vietminh power in all of Indochina. This conviction was based on developments in Cochinchina and in France, not in the North. Action to provoke a rupture with Hanoi was believed to be necessary

- in order to show the southern population that France would never give up Cochinchina,
- in order to prevent that the French government give further concessions to Vietnam.

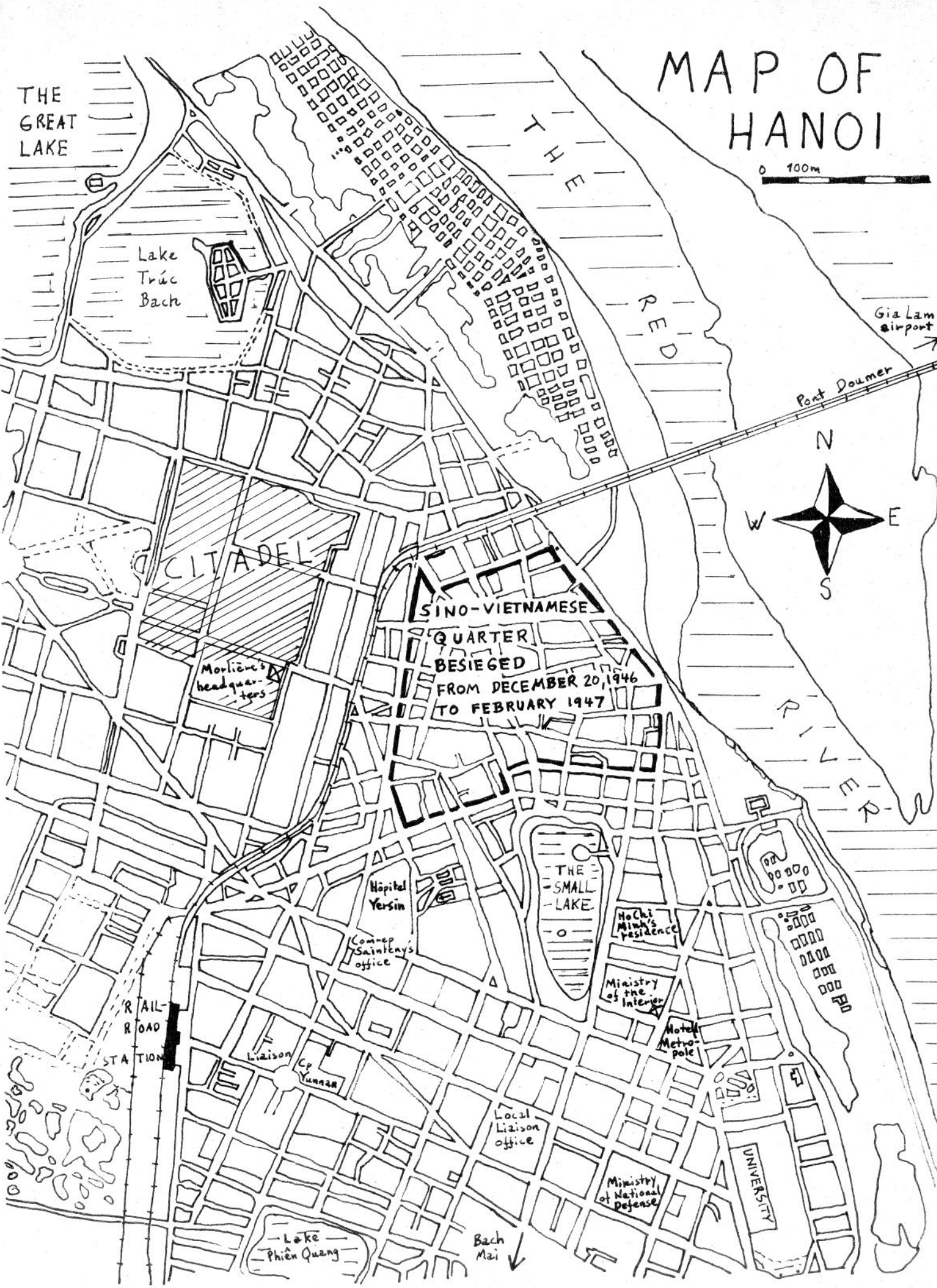
Military action against the North was motivated by a political defeat in the South. The parallel to the situation before the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964 is striking.

PART 2

THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

MAP OF HANOI

0 100m



THE GREAT LAKE

Lake Truc Bach

CITADEL

Moulin's headquarters

SINO-VIETNAMESE QUARTER BESIEGED FROM DECEMBER 20, 1946 TO FEBRUARY 1947

Hôpital Yersin

Comrap Sainteny's office

RAILROAD STATION

Liaison Cp Yunnan

Local Liaison office

Lake Phien Quang

Bach Mai

THE SMALL LAKE

Ho Chi Minh's residence

Ministry of the Interior

Hotel Metro-pole

Ministry of National Defense

UNIVERSITY

Port Doumer

Gia Lam Airport



3748L

CHAPTER 6

HAIPHONG AND LANGSON

In January 1947, le Figaro affirmed with pleasure that the two "gateways" to Tonkin, by land at Langson and from the sea at Haiphong, were closed. The Vietminh had thus been deprived of all hope for easy supplies.¹ This illustrates perfectly the issue at hand in the battles of Haiphong and Langson in late November 1946. When the two gateways to Tonkin were closed, Hanoi had lost control both of its port and of its most direct railroad link to China. The French professor Paul Mus called Haiphong "Tonkin's lung."² General Valluy in 1967 stated that to any perceptive commander Haiphong was the focal point, but also the most exposed and vulnerable.³

6.1 The Chinese

There was an important Chinese population in Haiphong, and Chinese merchants handled most of the city's foreign trade. The Chinese were therefore caught in the middle of the struggle for control of Haiphong. The French wished to make the Chinese accept French military protection and to avoid cooperation between Chinese merchants and Vietnamese authorities. This was difficult as long as there were Chinese troops in Haiphong. One of the concessions made by France to China in the February 28 agreement, was a promise to create a free zone in Haiphong for Chinese commerce. D'Argenlieu delayed its implementation till the withdrawal of Chinese troops was completed.⁴

Relations between Vietnamese and Chinese were also difficult. On the one hand, the Vietnamese depended on trade through Chinese merchants, and they had reason to fear tighter French control once the Chinese troops left. A French intelligence report from April 12, stating that Vietnam had asked the Chinese 53rd army to stay in Tonkin until a definite agreement had been concluded with the French, might therefore be correct.⁵

On the other hand Vietnamese finances were in a disastrous condition. Individual taxes could not bring much, and they had anyway been abolished during the August revolution. The two main possibilities for financing the Vietnamese state were campaigns for the sacrifice of personal belongings and taxes on foreign trade. The latter would bring conflict with the Chinese, but a regular state income was not only necessary in order to meet expenses, but also to create trust in the "Ho Chi Minh notes," which were being printed in increasing quantities and were symbols of the struggle for an economy independent from the "piastre" of the "Banque de l'Indochine". In May, the Vietnamese began to collect customs duties, and in June and July a steadily more efficient customs service was established.⁶ At first, the Chinese merchants agreed to pay, but when customs officers became more efficient and rates higher, some of them began to complain and to seek French protection. At this phase, the French military entered the scene, and the August incident occurred.⁷

6.2 The August Incident

In June, most of the Chinese troops left. Only the First Chinese Division of Honor stayed behind, and General Leclerc found the time ripe for taking full control of the port. He authorized Valluy to use military means if necessary.⁸ At this stage, Valluy was the "dove." On

July 5 he informed Leclerc that military occupation was unnecessary because for all practical purposes the port was already in the hands of the French. Besides, military action would lead to the loss of "indigenous specialized manpower."⁹ Valluy further affirmed that French customs control in Haiphong would be inefficient, as goods would only be landed elsewhere. The only efficient control could be made through inspection at sea.

On July 7, the French commander in Haiphong, Colonel Dèbes, advised the Chinese consul to instruct Chinese citizens not to pay customs duties to Vietnamese authorities and to accept French military protection. The Chinese consul was not enamored by the proposal and in fact informed the Vietnamese of what Dèbes had said.¹⁰ As no Chinese request for protection was forthcoming, the French commander felt obliged to accept that the Vietnamese policed the Chinese sector of the town, while French control was limited to the port and the European sector.¹¹

In the middle of August, a group of Chinese merchants complained to the French that Vietnamese customs officers had confiscated a large number of piastre bank notes and a substantial stock of cigarettes. The complaint was not supported by the Chinese consul, but the French at once seized this opportunity to set an example by demanding that the Vietnamese return the notes and cigarettes to their owners. The Vietnamese refused to do so, and on August 29, Dèbes' troops occupied the Vietnamese customs buildings and arrested a number of policemen and customs officers. There was some fighting, but the mixed liaison commission quickly intervened and negotiations started. They dragged on through the first half of September. The French made the release of the prisoners conditioned upon the return of cigarettes and bank notes to the owners.¹² The demand was unacceptable to Hanoi and a delegate arrived to uphold Vietnamese sovereignty. As the superior French forces

controlled the port his negotiation position was weak. When the news of the Modus Vivendi arrived, the Vietnamese hoped for a final arrangement of the customs problem and decided to give in to the French demands.¹³ Cigarettes and bank notes were exchanged for prisoners on September 18, the very day when the last Chinese unit left Haiphong on board an American vessel bound for the war against the Chinese Red Army.

6.3 The Import-Export Controls

During the customs crisis, d'Argenlieu's "chef de cabinet" Longeaux was on a mission to the North. He reported to d'Argenlieu that Hanoi seemed to accept French control of Haiphong port even if they were denied customs revenues.¹⁴ Shortly after Longeaux's departure from Hanoi, the new interim commissioner for the North, General Morlière, issued instructions for the establishment of an agency for control of imports and exports to be effective from October 15, 1946.¹⁵ Exporters and importers were required to apply for a "federal" licence. This followed a French decision at the end of August prohibiting export of rice. Gasoline imports were at the same time restricted to the major petroleum companies, which were under strict French control.¹⁶

The Modus Vivendi and the conclusion of the conflict in Haiphong on September 18 temporarily improved the atmosphere. The Modus Vivendi stated: "Vietnam shall form a Customs Union with the other countries of the Indochinese Federation," and that a coordinating committee should "prepare the organization of the Indochinese customs service."¹⁷ The French assumed that the agreement authorized a federal customs service while the Vietnamese held that each state should have a separate service with a common external tariff and no internal barriers. As the

mixed commission was never established, no negotiations took place, but the French continued building up their federal Import-Export Controls.

On October 14, Davée, delegate for economic affairs in the North, signed instructions for enforcing import-export controls from the following day, but he emphasized that the controls would be provisional pending final agreement between the parties.¹⁸ The Vietnamese reproached the French for creating the new system unilaterally, preferring status quo until agreement was reached. Davée offered Vietnamese participation in the organizing of the import-export controls, but received no answer. From October 15 it was necessary, at least formally, for all importers, and for exporters of a number of articles, to obtain a federal licence. The issue of licences was restricted to the few importers who were able to pay in foreign currency.

Davée promised at a press conference that imports banned by import-export controls would be replaced by goods furnished under a French plan.¹⁹ He later admitted, however, that this was the weak point of the system: The North was deprived of certain consumer goods with no immediate compensation from Saigon. The Vietnamese were soon to call this a blockade, and Davée confirmed in a report to Saigon: "If not a blockade, at least a contraction of imports to Tonkin."²⁰

During the first month, French authorities in the North showed caution in implementing the controls. Saigon seems, however, to have refused to cover shortages in the North with provisions from the South. On November 4, Davée and Morlière asked Saigon to reconsider a decision not to send consumer goods to the North. If the decision was not changed, they argued, one would either "provoke incidents by refusing imports," or the import-export regulations

would have to be disregarded when licences were issued.²¹ There is no indication that Saigon answered the request, which certainly strengthens the suspicion that Saigon deliberately sought to provoke incidents.

A couple of days before November 20, French authorities in Haiphong learned that a Chinese junk was planned to enter Haiphong loaded with gasoline.²² On November 18, Morlière warned Saigon that the new import-export rules would require confiscation. This would further aggravate Vietnamese opposition, which remained "total and very intense," but Morlière stressed that to abstain would imply giving up the whole scheme.²³

On the morning of November 20, the junk had arrived...

6.4 French Intentions

One day after the outbreak of hostilities, the High-Commissioner found the time ripe for informing Paris of the customs quarrel. He denounced the DRV for protesting against controls, which was a "simple administrative measure," made necessary by the "total incompetence" of the Vietnamese customs service. The purpose was to:

- prevent an enormous contraband trade in rice, other foodstuffs, metals etc, particularly with China, in order to:
- protect the supplies of the Tonkinese population and:
- protect the piastre by exchange control.

No customs duty was collected in order "not to raise problems of principle."²⁴

These were the official objectives, repeated by the French press. On November 27, Moutet used the information from Saigon when declaring to a news agency that there had been

an enormous contraband trade in foodstuffs from Tonkin.²⁵ There are no other references in French sources to any important export of foodstuffs from northern Vietnam, which had normally relied on provisions from the South. Davée's report does not refer to such a trade, and Davée considers considerable reduction of imports the main consequence of the controls. This at least indicates that Valluy's concern for the Tonkinese population was less important than he pretended. As a matter of fact, the Vietnamese government had banned export of rice as early as in October 1945.²⁶

But the second objective was real; it was important for the French to stop the depreciation of the piastre, mainly on the Hong Kong market, which was partly due to a negative balance of trade in the North.²⁷ What Valluy failed to mention, was that protection of the piastre was closely linked to depreciation of the Ho Chi Minh notes.²⁸

The regulation of imports and exports was of course an important element in the general effort to reintegrate Tonkin in a French-controlled economic system. Its rapid implementation without any prior negotiations seems to indicate, however, that there were political and military objectives as well. Three possible goals will be examined more closely:

- To halt supplies for the Vietnamese army.
- To undermine the economic foundations of the Vietnamese state.
- To oblige the Vietnamese government to react by forcible means.

There is no doubt that a major reason for taking control of imports and exports was the desire to stop provisions for the Vietnamese army. The ban on rice exports was publicly justified by the importance of rice for the Vietnamese population. To Saigon it was presumably more important

that the Vietnamese occasionally paid for weapons with rice.²⁹ The ban on gasoline imports was probably also motivated by the Vietnamese army's need for fuel.³⁰

Davée says in his report that it was necessary to find the means for denying the Vietnamese weapons.³¹ When, on November 27, Saigon authorities tried to explain the battle in Haiphong, they maintained that the Vietnamese government had searched for an occasion to remove restrictions on her activities, "first of all the contraband trade in arms."³² One month later, Saigon explained the control of imports by the need to defend the piastre and to stop the contraband of arms.³³

The Davée report also admits the possibility that, when decided in the beginning of September, the purpose of import-export controls was to "transfer the combats abandoned on the military level, to the economic level."³⁴ This was before Davée became responsible for economic affairs in the North. Davée subtly argued that when Ho Chi Minh accepted a federal customs service in the Modus Vivendi (Davée took office in Hanoi five days after the agreement had been signed in Paris), it followed that import-export controls were only to be considered technical measures to protect the country's economy and no longer economic warfare. But, and this was a great disappointment to Davée, the Vietnamese refused to cooperate. Davée concluded that Ho Chi Minh was only the figurehead of a government dominated by extremists who wanted the "total eviction of the French." There were thus in Davée's view only two possible solutions: France could leave Indochina or use force to restore her authority.³⁵

Davée's report is hardly consistent. He admits that in the beginning of September, the import-export decision was economic warfare, but pretends that this was changed by the Modus Vivendi. This agreement did not, however, authorize the immediate establishment of a French controls system on a

unilateral basis. The agreement said there should be "a federal customs service" built up on the basis of negotiations in a mixed commission. When in October and November DRV protested against the import-export controls, this contradiction between its unilateral nature and the text of the Modus Vivendi was their main argument. Davée tried to justify this contradiction by the fact that he offered Vietnamese participation in the controls system. This was a weak argument as they could not be expected to participate in applying a French unilateral decision.

It seems surprising that Davée was able to see the political motives for the controls system before September 14, but not after. It is tempting to explain this by the fact that Davée himself only assumed responsibility for economic affairs in the North after the initial decision. The report was meant to cover his own political responsibility for the affair that led to the battle of Haiphong. He signed the report on November 23, the same day as the bombing began. Davée was yet not the hawk of the affair. In the beginning of November, he and Morlière tried to reverse Saigon's decision not to send supplies to the North. It seems probable that Davée was principally interested in the controls system as such while the political and military authorities in Saigon saw it as an opportunity to exert pressure on Hanoi. Davée's indignant conclusion yet served to justify the French occupation of Haiphong.

A French intelligence report from January 1947 concluded that by controlling Haiphong and excluding the Vietnamese customs service, French authorities had attacked a field which was considered to be vital, if not by the whole Vietnamese cabinet, at least by Giap and the military.³⁶

As early as December 8, Admiral Barjot in the French Chiefs of Staff (who was critical of Valluy's policy) concluded that import-export controls had led inescapably to armed

conflict.³⁷ These were afterthoughts, but both on November 4 and on November 18, Morlière had spoken of the possibility that one might provoke incidents.³⁸ It is tempting, therefore, to believe that Saigon deliberately wanted to provoke incidents in order to create a pretext for breaking off cooperation as envisaged by the Modus Vivendi. When the incident finally occurred, Ho Chi Minh asked the French to agree on the immediate establishment of a mixed commission to prepare a preliminary agreement on customs. De Lacharrière, Davée and Morlière supported this demand, but Saigon refused.³⁹ We still lack direct evidence that Saigon planned to provoke an incident. Yet it seems most likely that such was at least one of the intentions with export-import controls.

6.5 Vietnamese Reactions

At the end of October, the French Sureté confirmed that the Vietnamese government was more and more preoccupied with modernizing the economy. A trading company (Viet-Tien) had been founded for the purpose of promoting exports and imports, industrialization, transports etc.⁴⁰ On November 12, French intelligence suddenly reported that the Tong Bo on November 9 had decided on a program for economic self-sufficiency based exclusively on agriculture. The economic reconstruction of the country would have to be adjourned.⁴¹

What had happened from October to November that could explain such a dramatic change of perspective? Ho Chi Minh had returned and had met d'Argenlieu at Cam Ranh Bay. The Vietnamese National Assembly had met, and the cabinet had been reshuffled. The cease-fire in the South had proved effective, but the first meeting with general Nyo had given little hope for a lasting settlement. DRV could not agree with Saigon on the site for the mixed commissions. Ho Chi

Minh had received d'Argenlieu's protest against the existence of the Administrative Committee for Nam Bo. The French had unilaterally established import-export controls in Haiphong.

These developments must finally have convinced the Vietnamese that negotiations with Saigon would prove futile. If the French government did not intervene to correct d'Argenlieu's policy, it would soon be necessary to take up arms for the defense of Vietnamese sovereignty. It is probably this conviction that is reflected in the November 9 decision of the Tong Bo.⁴²

In late September, there was some uneasiness in Hanoi with the "capitulation" in the customs conflict that followed the August incident. In October, the Vietminh journal Dan Chu declared that Vietnamese control of customs should be defended "with blood."⁴³ When import-export controls were established in mid-October, the Vietnamese government sent a formal protest to Morlière. In the relaxed atmosphere after Ho Chi Minh's return no one really paid attention to the protest. In late October Hanoi concentrated on the suppression of the China-oriented opposition, but during the session of the National Assembly the customs issue was raised again. At its last meeting on November 8, the Vietnamese National Assembly instructed the new cabinet not to give in on the customs issue "at any price."⁴⁴

Ho Chi Minh followed up on November 11 by protesting in the most traditional diplomatic language to the High-Commissioner against the "unilateral creation of a French customs office and control of foreign trade in the port of Haiphong." He warned that it would have serious effect on the forthcoming negotiations if these measures were not revoked.⁴⁵

How was the climate inside Haiphong the last month before the battle? On October 30, the Sureté pointed out that rumors were abroad in Haiphong that the French troops were waiting for a favorable moment to conquer Haiphong.⁴⁶

This note was written at the same time as Dèbes' detailed instructions for how to take control of Haiphong were distributed in shut envelopes.⁴⁷

After the battle of Haiphong, the French found several documents showing that a state of extreme apprehension had prevailed in the Vietnamese command through October and November. On October 13, the chief of Haiphong military sector told his troops that the French would start a general attack on October 15. On the day of Ho Chi Minh's return (October 21), the troops were told to prepare for any emergency. On October 31, French troops were rumored to prepare for an attack on the Municipal Theatre. The Vietnamese troops were alerted, but ordered to open fire only in self-defense. On November 13, the Haiphong command reported an "extremely provocative" French attitude and warned the troops that a serious incident might occur.⁴⁸ On the next day, the Ministry of the Interior instructed "all cities & Haiphong" to oblige French soldiers to go back to the French sector if they appeared in other areas without a Vietnamese permit.⁴⁹ From these orders we can draw an important conclusion: When the November 20 incident occurred, the Vietnamese troops had been in a state of extreme tension for more than a month. Given their lack of experience, they could be expected to overact.

6.6 November 20

There are three main sources to the events in Haiphong on November 20. The first is a detailed report, written by the French commander, Colonel Dèbes, the very same evening.⁵⁰ The second is a report to General Giap, also

written the same evening, by a Vietnamese liaison officer, Captain Le Van My.⁵¹ The third is a public Vietnamese version, printed in Le Peuple November 23, 1946⁵² and reprinted in some more detail in the Ho Chi Minh memo.⁵³ The French source is independent from the two Vietnamese, but the authors of the second Vietnamese version may have read Le Van My's report. All later accounts rely directly or indirectly on either Dèbes' report or the Vietnamese version.⁵⁴ I have tried to reconstruct the events by using these sources and will only refer directly to any one of them when they differ.

In the early morning of November 20, the unloading of gasoline from the Chinese junk had already begun when a French landing craft arrived and took the junk in tow. Three security officers, led by lieutenant Jumeau,⁵⁵ seized what had already been unloaded. Then Vietnamese police intervened, and Vietnamese soldiers arrived. At this point, the two versions separate. According to the Vietnamese, the French landing craft opened fire on the Vietnamese while the French soldiers guarding the gasoline attacked the Vietnamese policemen, killing one. According to Dèbes, the Vietnamese soldiers subjected the French boat to fire, and Jumeau, far from killing anyone, discussed with a Vietnamese police officer who declared that the affair was a matter between the French and the Chinese which did not concern the Vietnamese.

On the first point, Dèbes is probably right. The landing-craft had the boat in tow and had no reason to open fire, while the soldiers ashore were supposed to oppose the seizure of the junk and would have had every reason to open fire. On the other hand, the Dèbes report says that no one was hit on the boat. It is thus possible that the Vietnamese were firing warning shots. On the second point, Dèbes' version, based on information from Jumeau, is hardly credible. Le Van My reports that it was the French liaison

officer Orsini who answered, when the Vietnamese asked for a mixed intervention in the affair, that it was a French-Chinese affair of no concern to the Vietnamese. Morlière later stressed that Jumeau and his two companions were agents of the intelligence agency BFDOC, which "constantly generated trouble."⁵⁶ This makes the Vietnamese version more convincing than the Dèbes report as far as the actions of Jumeau are concerned.

It is at least clear that the Vietnamese quickly sent a stronger force to the place where the gasoline was stored. This force disarmed the Jumeau group and led the prisoners to the police station. Then the liaison intervened, and Le Van My accepted a French demand for the immediate release of Jumeau's group and some other French soldiers who had been arrested on the market place. The car sent to pick up the released prisoners was met with Vietnamese fire. Two gunners were injured while the driver saved himself by pretending to be dead.⁵⁷ This was most probably a great Vietnamese blunder, due to lack of discipline, which furnished Dèbes with the necessary pretext for escalating the level of violence. Dèbes ordered armoured cars to enter the scene. They moved towards the police station, met Vietnamese gunfire with canon and machine gun fire and took up position in front of the City Theatre. The liaison officers intervened again, and French officers were handed over at about Noon.

This could have been the end of the affair,⁵⁸ but Dèbes refused to withdraw the tanks and instead demanded that the Vietnamese pull out of the Chinese quarter and dismantle all barricades. According to Dèbes these demands were accepted by Vietnamese authorities, but when he sent a bulldozer to take away the barricades, it was met with renewed fire. In the Vietnamese version the demands were not accepted, and Dèbes consequently launched a general offensive in the afternoon, which did not end until late in

the evening. Dèbes also describes this offensive, where French troops occupied the City Theatre (except the top floor) and other strategic points. During the combats at the Theatre, the chief of the French liaison, Camoin, was killed.

Who was responsible for the incident on November 20? Although the facts related in Dèbes' report show that the Vietnamese army and self-defense groups acted nervously and were difficult to handle for their commanders, he concluded his report by saying that Vietnamese authorities had provoked the incident.⁵⁹ Vo Nguyen Giap maintained that hostilities had been premeditated by the French troops which had taken the initiative and would have to carry the whole responsibility.⁶⁰ It is impossible to establish with certainty whether the French or the Vietnamese opened fire first when the junk was seized. Both parts were prepared to use violence, the Vietnamese in order to protect their customs service, the French to defend their import-export controls. As Morlière told Saigon already before November 20, violent incidents were the almost inevitable result of the parallel existence of the two services. It is not certain that the incident had been planned by either party. If it had, it was most likely by the French.

Certainly the Vietnamese had far more to lose than the French, who were militarily superior in Haiphong. Events clearly show that the Vietnamese authorities wanted to stop the fighting while Dèbes wished to use the incident for the purpose of improving his positions. He concluded his report to Morlière by stating that the French should not withdraw from the strategically important Theatre building and the other points which had been conquered during the day.⁶¹

It was not till late in the afternoon that the centre of French decision-making was moved from Haiphong to the less hostile Hanoi level. At 14.30 hrs., Vietnamese liaison officers in Hanoi had approached their French colleagues on the matter, but Morlière's headquarters were not yet informed of the incident. It was only at 16 hrs. that Morlière received the first news from Haiphong. This was a short telegram from Dèbes, only telling that a car had been attacked and that two gunners had been injured.⁶² Dèbes does not seem to have wanted any interference from Hanoi. Shortly after 16 hrs., Morlière managed to contact Dèbes on the telephone. Morlière later claimed that this had been at a moment when Dèbes made ready to use artillery. Morlière stopped this by instructing Dèbes to avoid aggressive violence and seek to stop the incidents.⁶³ It was after having received these instructions that Dèbes managed to conquer the Theatre.

After having given his instructions to Dèbes, Morlière sent his political adviser Colonel Lami to meet with a representative of the Vietnamese government, Hoang Huu Nam. They agreed on an immediate cease-fire, decided to send a mixed commission to Haiphong in the morning, and settled that troops on both sides should in principle return to their respective barracks. This agreement was telephoned to Haiphong, but it was not respected. When Dèbes concluded his report to Morlière by demanding that the French troops keep in control of the Theatre, this was in defiance of the Lami-Nam agreement, which Morlière had explicitly accepted.

While Lami discussed with Nam, Morlière informed Saigon of the events.⁶⁴ He stated that he had instructed Dèbes to avoid aggressive violence and stop the incidents, a piece of information that Valluy would by no means appreciate. On the following day, the centre of French decision-making was moved from Hanoi to vengeful Saigon.

6.7 November 21

The train carrying the mixed commission was obliged to stop outside Haiphong because it was shot upon.⁶⁵ The commission then arrived in jeeps and armoured cars. After a brief meeting, its Vietnamese members left in order to stop fire on the Vietnamese side. They succeeded, but only after several hours' difficulties.⁶⁶ The French members had a heated discussion with Dèbes, who did not take part in the new meeting of the mixed commission in the afternoon. At 16.45 hrs. a new agreement was signed by Major Herckel for the French and Hoang Huu Nam for the Vietnamese. All fire was prohibited under any pretext whatsoever, and the French armoured cars were to withdraw immediately.⁶⁷ The evening of November 21 was calm in Haiphong, and the Nam-Herckel agreement would probably have put an end to the fighting if Saigon had not intervened.

As from the evening of November 20, Morlière informed Saigon of the latest developments, and Valluy soon understood that Morlière was ruining an excellent occasion to teach the Vietnamese a lesson. At 17.52 hrs. on November 21, he sent a telegram directly to Dèbes, a procedure which in Morlière's words was "contrary to all rules of hierarchy and command structure."⁶⁸ In this telegram, Valluy said it was "absolutely necessary to take advantage of the incident and ameliorate our position in Haiphong." He told Dèbes that he had instructed Morlière to demand the evacuation of all Vietnamese forces from Haiphong and obtain it by force after a preliminary inquiry.⁶⁹ It was correct that Valluy had sent these instructions to Morlière too, and Morlière also received another cable telling him to react immediately and vigorously to the Vietnamese provocations and not to refrain from "capturing, disarming and even destroying the local Vietnamese regular garrisons."⁷⁰

The same evening, Saigon informed Paris of the events and called Morlière's order to cease hostilities a result of an "extreme mood of conciliation."⁷¹ Valluy also informed Paris of his harsh instructions to Morlière,⁷² but the centre of French decision-making was never really moved from vengeful Saigon to the irresolute Paris level.

6.8 November 22

Valluy's instructions went much further than Dèbes' report. This was what Morlière found out when he meditated on Valluy's orders during the night of November 21 to 22. He decided to give in to Dèbes' demands and thus break with the Nam-Herckel agreement, but to try and make Valluy moderate his excessive orders. At 8.45 in the morning, he sent Dèbes a telegram where he approved of the conclusions in his report and ordered him to keep up the occupation of the Theatre.⁷³

One hour later he finished a message to Valluy, where he repeated the instructions he had just given to Dèbes and added:

To demand complete evacuation of Haiphong...would mean to decide with absolute certainty - I repeat, with absolute certainty - the conquest of this town, which must be preceded, if one will avoid great losses, by its partial destruction by artillery. This would end up in a complete rupture with the March 6 agreement and the Modus Vivendi, and almost certainly to the spread of combats to all our garrisons in Tonkin.⁷⁴

When this warning arrived in Saigon, Valluy had already issued new and even stronger orders to Morlière. They were sent simultaneously to Hanoi and Haiphong:

It is clear that we are faced with premeditated aggression, carefully prepared by the regular Vietnamese army which does not seem to obey its

government any more. Under these conditions your honorable attempts at conciliation and sharing out of military quarters as well as the inquiry I have laid down for you, are now out of place. The moment has come to teach those who have treacherously attacked us, a severe lesson. By all the means at your disposal you must gain complete control of Haiphong and make the Vietnamese army and government regret their mistakes..."⁷⁵

Morlière's warning, arriving on Valluy's desk some time after the expedition of the above words, did not change the attitude of the commanding general. He repeated to Morlière that it was necessary to exploit any possibility to improve French positions in Haiphong by chasing all Vietnamese forces from the town and its neighbourhood. He added, in a moment's caution, that artillery should only be used as the last resort, but he authorized the use of it if necessary.⁷⁶

November 22 was militarily calm in Haiphong, where Dèbes was considering the possibility of presenting the Vietnamese with an ultimatum. Lami urged Dèbes not to do this and even gave the colonel a formal letter before leaving Haiphong:

We must do everything to avoid the outbreak of a conflict which will be generalized immediately and will put in danger not only the isolated French posts in Hai Duong and Vinh, but even more the civilian population in Hanoi. Neither the High-Commissioner, nor the French Government do want such a conflict. I consequently think that the ultimatum must only be presented to local Haiphong authorities after confirmation from Hanoi.⁷⁷

Dèbes, however, found his own views abundantly confirmed by the new telegram from Saigon. He prepared his ultimatum, which was presented to the Vietnamese in the morning.

6.9 November 23

Dèbes justified his ultimatum by alleged Vietnamese troop movements and concentrations in the Chinese quarter contrary to the November 21 agreement. He demanded Vietnamese withdrawal:

- a) from the whole Chinese quarter,
- b) from a section of the town near the station,
- c) from the village Lac Vien.

He also demanded the disarming of Vietnamese civilians in the same areas. Dèbes said he made these demands on order from the High-Commissioner, and affirmed:

I demand pure and simple acceptance of these conditions before November 23, at NINE HOURS, otherwise I reserve myself to take all measures which the situation requires.⁷⁸

This ultimatum was handed over to the Vietnamese at 6 in the morning. They had three hours to make their answer. At first they said that the ultimatum was contrary to earlier agreements and asked for time to seek instructions from Hanoi. Dèbes agreed to delay the ultimatum till 9.45, but when no positive answer had been given till that time, he ordered an all-out attack, including artillery, which started at 10.05.⁷⁹

This is not a history of war, only of how and why it began. It does not seem pertinent therefore to relate the details of the five days' battle in Haiphong, the French attack, a Vietnamese attempt at counterattack, and the final French conquest of the whole Haiphong area. But the horror of the Vietnamese population at the sight of French naval batteries, land artillery and air fighters destroying large parts of the Vietnamese quarter of Haiphong killing thousands, had a profound effect on the evolution towards total war. I shall therefore go somewhat into detail as to the damage done and discuss the various estimates of casualties.

6.10 The Massacre

Colonel Dèbes' strategy was to smash the Vietnamese quarter of Haiphong with heavy artillery in order not to sacrifice French lives in the conquest of this part of the town.⁸⁰ The Chinese quarter was spared from this destiny and only attacked with light artillery and troops. It was in this sector that the French suffered most of their small losses, but the houses were spared, and most of the Chinese civilians survived.

Vietnamese civilians had only partly evacuated Haiphong before the bombing started.⁸¹ Considerable numbers of civilians must have died in the ruins, and Ho Chi Minh even complained that fleeing civilians had been attacked by aeroplanes. French telegrams do confirm that the roads leading out of Haiphong were strafed.⁸²

It was and remained an essential part of Vietnamese military strategy not to apply the traditional separation between uniformed soldiers and civilians. In the Haiphong affair this strategy did not work because the French had no inhibition against attacking civilians if there was a chance there were military targets among them. Many of the civilians who managed to escape Haiphong, stopped in the nearby village Kien An.⁸³ Kien An had attracted French attention already before the battle of Haiphong because the Chinese merchants had responded to import-export controls by directing their boats to Kien An instead.⁸⁴ It is also possible that the Vietnamese army had local headquarters in Kien An.⁸⁵ General Valluy first instructed Morlière to occupy Kien An, but second thoughts made him cancel the order. Morlière agreed that an attack on Kien An would be unwise, but the agreement of the two generals came much too late to stop Colonel Dèbes and his naval colleague Barrière from bombing the village, full of

refugees.⁸⁶ News that Kien An had been bombed were published in the Vietnamese press already on November 24. Morlière denied it officially,⁸⁷ but was then informed from Saigon that the bombing of Kien An and another "designated village" had been "perfectly executed" by the navy.⁸⁸ A report from the "Sûreté" in Haiphong, written on November 29, says that the number of corpses found in the ruins of the Vietnamese quarters in Haiphong was not very high. Both the civilians and the army had apparently evacuated the town before its destruction. On the other hand, the "Sûreté" had received reports that the bombing of Kien An and its surroundings, as well as the "strafing of the roads around the town," had resulted in many victims.⁸⁹ Vice-consul O'Sullivan concluded a report to Washington by stating that

the immediate use of artillery fire on Kienan as well as strafing by planes in the vicinity of Haiphong also tends to support the theory that this was a terroristic measure.⁹⁰

Jean Sainteny, who inspected Haiphong on December 3 after having reassumed his position as Commissioner for Tonkin and North-Annam, said that the military action in Haiphong had been "very brilliant, but very brutal."⁹¹

One might expect that Saigon would try to minimize the damage on Haiphong in reports to Paris. In fact such "minimization" had become so well established that Saigon felt the need to do the opposite in the Haiphong case: to warn Paris against minimizing the damage. Paris was told that it had been impossible to hide the damage to the foreign consuls and that it would be advisable

not to minimize the destructions in order to avoid that a badly informed public be placed abruptly and without preparation before tendentious assertions which charge our troops with the responsibility for the damage.

The best would be to tell the public that the destruction had been made by the Vietnamese, who set fire to the houses before evacuating the town. Artillery had only been used as the last resort, and this had not been of punitive nature.⁹²

Before the battle, there were about 100,000 inhabitants in Haiphong.⁹³ In the beginning of December, 50,000 were left.⁹⁴ How many of the lacking 50,000 had been killed?

There exist a great number of estimates. I shall cite five of them:

1. Valluy in 1967 said: 300.⁹⁵ He must have known better.
2. Most of the literature cites the figure 6000, but this stems from one single source: Admiral Battet. He was not in Indochina at all in November 1946, but told the French Professor Paul Mus in May 1947 that "not more than 6000 could have been killed, as far as the fire from the cruiser on the refugee flocks was concerned."⁹⁶
3. According to O'Sullivan, the chief of French military intelligence (2ème Bureau) after a visit in Haiphong estimated the number of Vietnamese killed and wounded during November 20-27 as 1500 to 2000.⁹⁷
4. The military intelligence gave their colleagues in the intelligence agency BFD0C a quite different figure: 10,000 killed and wounded in Haiphong and Langson, most of them civilians.⁹⁸ It is clear that the number of casualties in Langson must have been far less important than in Haiphong/Kien An.
5. Ho Chi Minh spoke in a letter to Léon Blum and Vincent Auriol on December 19 of the 3000 victims of Haiphong.⁹⁹

It is extremely difficult to assess the value of such estimates. One might argue that Ho Chi Minh's figure

should be an upper level because he had no interest in giving a lower number than the truth. On the other hand, Vietnamese authorities did not control the battlefield after the battle, so it was easier for the French intelligence to collect the necessary information. The figure of 10,000 given by military intelligence is extremely vague. It includes both killed and wounded, both in Langson and Haiphong and does not say anything of the ratio between killed and wounded.

We may, however, with certainty conclude that several thousand people were killed, most of them civilians. It seems reasonable, given French military superiority, to call this a massacre, a massacre which in Sainteny's words was "brilliant" because it permitted the French to take control of the Haiphong area in only five days and with very few losses.

6.11 Langson

The bombing of Haiphong and the occupation of Langson took place at virtually the same time, but this does not necessarily mean that they were parts of the same French plan. It is important to establish the relationship between the conquests of Haiphong and Langson.

Langson is an important road junction controlling access to China as well as the road that parallels the Chinese boarder to the Gulf of Tonkin. As a result of the French occupation, Vietnam lost control of the eastern part of the border to China. The highland border in the north-west of Tonkin was partially controlled by the army of the China-oriented VNQDD party under Vu Hong Khanh. The population in the province of Langson was not as loyal to the Vietnamese government as was the case elsewhere. Out of 170,000 inhabitants, only some 9,000 belonged to the Vietnamese ethnic majority. About 5,000 were Chinese, 4,000 "man", 72,000 "tho" and 80,000 "nung".¹⁰⁰

During the Chinese occupation, Vietminh did not control Langson, even if they dominated most of the province. The town was held by the China-supported Dong Minh Hoi party. When the Chinese army left, Langson was occupied by Vietnamese troops, but only a few days later (July 8), the first French units arrived. They came with the acceptance of the Vietnamese command in Hanoi, but the Vietnamese wanted them to stay in a limited sector of the town. When French troops began almost at once to move out to the nearby towns and villages, this provoked protests and minor incidents. The Bac Ninh incident in early August began with a clash between Vietnamese troops and a convoy of French reinforcements for Langson.¹⁰¹

Tension between Vietnamese and French forces in the Langson area built up, and on October 12, Ho Chi Minh protested formally against confiscations, kidnappings, murders, interference with the local administration, hostile propaganda and incorporation of Chinese bandits and pro-Japanese Vietnamese in the French forces. The French commissioner answered by refuting all charges. He regretted that it had been impossible to establish any cooperation with the Vietnamese army in the border area. The mission of the French troops in Langson was to "supervise the border in cooperation, if possible, with Vietnamese troops."¹⁰² Exactly one month later, lack of cooperation changed into open conflict.

There are three main sources of information to the incident on November 21 and its repercussions in the following days. The Vietnamese version is given in a letter from Giap to Morlière on November 21, and in a note covering the ten days from November 15-25.¹⁰³ The most accurate French version is to be found in a report from Lieutenant-Colonel Sizaire, commander of the Langson sector.¹⁰⁴

The French were preparing a ceremony for November 24 in memory of the French soldiers and officers who had been killed in March 1945. They wanted to dig up as many as possible of the French corpses before the ceremony, and they wished it to take place in the Citadel, a Vietnamese military quarter. The Vietnamese refused the use of the Citadel, but on November 20, the French began to dig up corpses close to the Citadel and removed under armed protection some Vietnamese defense works which hampered access to the graves. In the Vietnamese version the French forces used the opening of the graves as a pretext for military reconnaissance, attached to a plan for a "coup de force."

In the evening, Vietnamese authorities established their quarters outside Langson. When the French arrived in the morning to continue their grave-digging, the barrier had been reconstructed and mined. The French began to dismantle it once more, and at this point firing began. Sizaire relates that the Vietnamese opened fire from positions behind and in front of the barrier. In the Vietnamese version a Vietnamese warning was answered with heavy French fire. A third version was given in the first report from Hanoi to Saigon. Here, two French soldiers had been killed by the mines, and French authorities had reacted rapidly.¹⁰⁵

After a few hours' fighting, the liaison intervened, and a cease-fire agreement was concluded. After the cease-fire, French troops occupied the railroad station and the post office, arguing that there had been shots from these buildings in violation of the cease-fire agreement. Sizaire names 9 dead and 9 wounded on the French side and estimates the enemy's losses at 50. The French at once called the incident a "premeditated ambush," while Giap affirmed that the well-intentioned Vietnamese forces had been the victims of a "long-premeditated" plan.¹⁰⁶

During the night to November 22, the Vietnamese built a lot of barricades, but no important fighting followed, and in the evening the chairman of the Administrative Committee met Sizaire for negotiations. Sizaire demanded that the barricades be removed, but would not accept a Vietnamese counter-demand that the French troops leave the buildings occupied on November 21. Therefore, no agreement was reached.¹⁰⁷

On November 23, Morlière instructed Sizaire not to hesitate if he found it advisable to attack the garrison in the Citadel.¹⁰⁸ The same day, Sizaire met his Vietnamese counterpart once more, and now the French commander made new demands: the release of two French soldiers who had been captured by Vietnamese forces and of ten Chinese who were under Vietnamese arrest. The Vietnamese accepted to release the soldiers, but not the Chinese prisoners.

November 24 was calm, but Sizaire decided to take control of the town on the following day if his demands were not accepted.¹⁰⁹ When, in the morning of November 25, the Vietnamese once more refused to release the ten Chinese, Sizaire launched a full scale attack in accordance with a modified version of a plan from July.¹¹⁰

After the defenders of the Citadel had been machinegunned from an air fighter and an opening had been made by a howitzer, it was conquered in less than three hours. Before dusk the center of the town was also in French hands. The outskirts of the town were kept under artillery fire, and while the French only counted 3 dead and 17 injured, Sizaire estimated Vietnamese losses to be heavy.¹¹¹ Sizaire concluded his November 30 report by saying that the rapid Vietnamese defeat and the spontaneous joy of the "partisans" showed how

frail and artificial the Vietnamese fabric was, constructed with the help of propaganda and menaces in a country where it had never really established its authority.¹¹²

Some sceptic staff member in Pignon's office scribbled in the margin of Sizaire's optimistic finale: "Conclusion valid for the region from Langson to Moncay, but not for CaoBang."¹¹³

This points at a serious political problem for French authorities in late November and the beginning of December: What were they to do with the occupied areas? Would it be wise to exploit the anti-Vietnamese sentiments of the ethnic minorities and establish a durable political fabric in the regions dominated by the minorities? The French do not seem to have had a fixed plan for the solution to this problem. Soon after the conquest of Langson, Giap asked Morlière what the French envisaged to do with the occupied areas. Morlière was unable to answer. He cabled Saigon for instructions, but said it would be impossible to let the Vietnamese Administrative Committee return to Langson because:

1. that would be damaging to French "prestige with the natives,"
2. it could expose them to reprisals.

Morlière proposed to grant the Hanoi government formal "suzerainty," but let the minority people build up their own local administrations. The French garrison should take care of the military supervision of the area in cooperation with a "provincial militia."¹¹⁴

Saigon answered immediately that Morlière should demand French military control of the whole border area from Langson eastwards to the Gulf of Tonkin (except for the time being: Mon Cay). Instructions regarding political and administrative measures would be forthcoming.¹¹⁵

Pignon followed up by constructing an ambitious plan for the establishment of an autonomous "tho" and "nung" region along the Chinese border under French "high protection." Loc Binh, Dinh Lap and Mon Cay should be occupied in order to be included in this region. The Vietnamese government could be offered to participate in a mixed commission which from time to time would inspect the area. Pignon ended his proposal by warning against implementing the plan if the French government was not "firmly determined to stay in Tonkin." To start executing the plan and then give it up would "give the population a final conviction of our impotence and irresolution."¹¹⁶

Pignon did not discuss in his memo the risk that the gap between France and the Vietnamese majority would widen if France was to base its political control on the ethnic minorities. There is no trace in the sources for this thesis of further discussions or any decision on Pignon's plan - before the outbreak of total war.

Only 24 hours passed from the incident in Haiphong on November 20 to the opening of hostilities in Langson on November 21. Vo Nguyen Giap remarked to Morlière when the news from Langson arrived that this new incident occurred at a time when the Haiphong affair had not yet been sorted out:

This simultaneousness becomes even more troublesome when one considers that in both cases the French troops have aimed with the same careful preparation and the same grimness at our public buildings and our military positions.¹¹⁷

Giap feared that the two incidents were based on a French offensive plan. He was right to suspect that French operations both in Haiphong and Langson were based on previously prepared and detailed offensive plans, but there is no reason to believe that the simultaneousness had been planned.

A public report on Haiphong, written by Lami in late November, also stressed the simultaneousness. He took it as a proof that the incidents had been the result of instructions from Hanoi.¹¹⁸ The French told the public that they had found such instructions both in Haiphong and Langson. I have found many translated Vietnamese documents among French intelligence sources, but no instructions to create incidents. In fact, it is also questionable if Lami, who had really tried to stop Dèbes in Haiphong, believed his own words to the press.

O'Sullivan also commented on the simultaneousness from his neutral position. He accepted the French view that it was the Vietnamese who had opened fire both in Haiphong and Langson and thought the incidents had been intended as warnings that the French could not "proceed unilaterally as they wish."¹¹⁹

The available evidence does not support the theory of planned provocation by any of the two parties on any particular date. Both parties were prepared to risk an incident. The Vietnamese felt obliged to take this risk, both as O'Sullivan says, to warn the French against unilateral procedures and because they had lost face once in Haiphong and were under public pressure not to suffer another September defeat. The French command in Haiphong, and probably also in Langson, were waiting for the Vietnamese to take some kind of action which could be used as an excuse for improving French military positions. O'Sullivan concluded on November 23 that the Vietnamese "warnings" seemed to have the opposite effect upon the French, "who seem now even more belligerent and confident of their power to impose whatever they wish upon the Vietnamese."¹²⁰

If the simultaneousness of the incidents was coincidental - as I think it was - their escalations were closely

connected. Valluy's order in the evening of November 21 to capture, disarm and destroy the local Vietnamese garrisons was explicitly said to apply for "all places."¹²¹ It must be this order from Saigon which has been interpreted by Morlière when, on November 23, he told Sizaire not to hesitate in attacking the Langson Citadel. When Sizaire launched his attack on November 25, he knew that the conquest of Haiphong had begun two days before. Both the conquest of Haiphong and of Langson were thus made on Valluy's order.

6.12 Responsibilities

The responsibility for the initial incidents in Haiphong on November 20 and in Langson on November 21 can perhaps be discussed, but the responsibility for the escalation both in Haiphong and Langson was entirely French. There is no reason to believe that the Vietnamese wanted a military confrontation in November 1946. They most certainly tried to gain time. We shall therefore concentrate on discussing the lines of responsibility on the French side.

There were four levels in the French decision-making system:

- Haiphong: Dèbes/Barrière (Langson: Sizaire)
- Hanoi: Morlière/Lami
- Saigon: Valluy/Auboyneau/Pignon
- Paris: d'Argenlieu/Messmer/Barjot (Juin)/Moutet/Bidault/Michelet¹²²

Dèbes and Valluy wanted the battle in Haiphong. Morlière did not. Both Valluy and Morlière thought they interpreted the will of the French government. Morlière was not in a position where he could have contact with Paris, while Valluy constantly informed the French capital and soon received reassuring replies...from d'Argenlieu.

If there had not been a conflict between Morlière and Valluy, if Morlière had not intervened against Dèbes' intention to use artillery on November 20, Valluy would never have had to intervene either. Such a development would have been perfectly in the spirit of "the slow method" and Valluy's April circular.¹²³ Things would have developed as he wanted without his intervention, and the historian would be obliged to hold Dèbes as the main responsible, lacking evidence that he only interpreted the will of his superiors.

Morlière ruined this scheme for Valluy with his "extreme mood of conciliation," and Valluy felt he had to interfere, first by his instructions on November 21, then with new and even harsher orders on November 22. When Dèbes ("this magnificent soldier") applied the instructions on November 23, he made three errors in Valluy's view:

1. He transformed Valluy's instructions into an explicit ultimatum, a procedure with a "bad reputation."
2. He did it in the name of Valluy, thereby tying up the highest French authority in Indochina.
3. He gave the Vietnamese too little time to consider the demands.¹²⁴

Valluy wrote this in 1967. It is possible that point 1 and 3 are critical afterthoughts, but point 2 must have been felt as an error in Saigon immediately. By referring directly to Valluy's secret instructions in his ultimatum, Dèbes broke with the whole concept of "the slow method." Conflicts should develop locally and be used for amelioration of the French position locally without engaging the responsibility of the highest French authority.

Dèbes' errors were, however, small in comparison with the attitude of Morlière. In fact, the conflict between Valluy, Morlière and Dèbes was not a new one. Morlière and Valluy were rivals from the war in Europe. If the

traditional principles of seniority had been respected, Morlière would have been Valluy's superior, but in the French postwar army, there was a criterion which counted more than seniority: When did you join de Gaulle's Free French? Leclerc, d'Argenlieu and Valluy had been with de Gaulle from the very first days. Morlière was a traditional colonial officer who had served Vichy in North-Africa until de Gaulle arrived with the Americans in 1942. In 1944, while fighting the Germans in France, Morlière was replaced as commander of the 9.D.I.C. by the younger Valluy. The Chief of Staff to both Morlière and Valluy in the 9.D.I.C. was Colonel Dèbes.¹²⁵ In Hanoi, Morlière came to fill a position in the hierarchy between Dèbes and Valluy.

Very soon after his arrival, Morlière became convinced that Dèbes was responsible for the August incident in Haiphong. Morlière had been twice in Indochina before World War 2 and felt a sort of patriarchal compassion for the "Annamite". In his January 10 report he showed this compassion in his characterization of Dèbes: "The least that can be said is that Dèbes does not like the Annamites." Morlière considered in September to ask for the replacement of Dèbes, but he refrained from doing it because Valluy would surely refuse and because Dèbes was all the same to be relieved at the end of November.¹²⁶ The battle of Haiphong postponed this relief. In January 1947 Morlière was dismissed and replaced by Dèbes.

General Morlière was disliked by the colonels. He was not a man who liked the fight. He was too intelligent, "he was an office man," says General Salan.¹²⁷ Even in Giap's evaluation of Morlière there is a taste of contempt when he tells that Morlière declared his sympathy with the Vietnamese people by "heaping praise on one of his servants who was a very skilful and honest cook!"¹²⁸

Now, what about the fourth level? Paris did not intervene. This is not astonishing. As commanding general, Valluy had the authority to take important military decisions without consulting Paris. But the lack of interference from Paris makes the Saigon-Paris relationship resemble the one which would have been between Dèbes and his superiors if Morlière had not intervened. The question is: Was it Valluy or Morlière who interpreted French governmental policy best? Was there any determined policy in Paris at all? I shall discuss these questions in chapter 8 and now only examine the correspondence between Paris and Saigon on the responsibility for Haiphong.

Did Saigon inform Paris properly? Until November 21, the High-Commissioner does not seem to have informed Paris of the import-export controls and their possible implications.¹²⁹ It is all the same clear that Valluy sought support from Paris for a firm policy by a series of telegrams. It was not his wish to keep Paris out of the game and become personally responsible for a "fait accompli."

The information sent to Paris during fighting in Haiphong was not complete. The affair was constantly referred to as a premeditated Vietnamese provocation. Nothing was said about the number of victims, nor was the dispute with Morlière explicitly mentioned. On the other hand Valluy told Paris without much delay both of his November 21 and his November 22 instructions, quoting even the very crudest words.¹³⁰ A protest from Ho Chi Minh to Bidault, asking him to give the necessary instructions for an immediate cease-fire was also forwarded to Paris on November 27.¹³¹

The first reactions from Paris must have been a great relief for Valluy. Several telegrams from d'Argenlieu assured him of governmental support for his hard line,¹³² but soon also critical questions began to arrive. On November 28, Barjot simply asked for more information.

Valluy answered that he had nothing to add to what he had already told.¹³³ Barjot then had to formulate more precise questions. He asked for a description of the import-export controls and the Vietnamese reactions to them, for the time and date of the Herckel-Nam agreement in relation to the time and date for Valluy's order to occupy Haiphong, and he wanted to know how much damage had been done to the Chinese sector of Haiphong. He also demanded an evaluation of the general military situation in the North.¹³⁴ This questionnaire arrived in Saigon along with a demand from Moutet for an explanation of the Dercourt order, one of the offensive unit orders from Haiphong, which had been published by the Vietnamese press.¹³⁵ Valluy "explained" to Moutet that the unit commanded by Dercourt had a special mission which would necessarily be somewhat offensive even in a generally defensive context.¹³⁶ The questionnaire from Barjot was forwarded to Morlière, who at once scrupulously assembled all instructions received and all instructions given during the battle in Haiphong, wrote a short introduction and sent it to Saigon.¹³⁷

This was far too much for the High-Commissioner, who answered Morlière sourly that the questions from Barjot had a "journalistic" purpose and did by no means constitute a governmental inquiry. The answers would be sent to d'Argenlieu, who could handle the contact with Barjot.¹³⁸ As second in command of the French Chiefs of Staff Barjot was certainly d'Argenlieu's superior! I don't know if d'Argenlieu showed Morlière's December 4 report to anyone, but it was only sent from Cominindo to the Foreign Ministry (Baudet) on January 3, 1947.¹³⁹ Moutet and Messmer received one copy each in Saigon as late as January 6.¹⁴⁰

Morlière's report must have troubled Pignon's conscience in the beginning of December. He was preparing a long report

to Paris on Haiphong and Langson with 17 appendixes. How could he avoid including Morlière's report? A solution was found: He quoted the numbers of all the telegrams quoted by Morlière, said they had been ciphered with an operational code, that they were very secret and could not be circulated. Competent authorities could claim the deciphered texts from Valluy's headquarters.¹⁴¹ I do not know if this ploy was ever uncovered by Paris, but both Valluy and Pignon remained in their posts. Pignon later became High-Commissioner. During Moutet's mission to Indochina in late December and the beginning of January, he met Morlière. After this meeting Morlière wrote a new report, signed on January 10.

The January 10 report, along with some critical notes from Admiral Barjot, soon began to circulate outside the official milieu, but it was not before 1965 that Morlière's report was used in a book: Georges Chaffard, Les carnets secrets de la décolonisation. When Valluy answered with four self-defending articles in 1967, he opened with the following words:

I have never hidden my responsibility in what is called the Haiphong affair from November 46, to which personal questions are connected. But the decisions, which today, with the knowledge of what has happened since, I consider as mistakes due to a certain impulsiveness and a certain impressionability - these decisions, I would say, appeared at the time and place to my civilian and military surroundings, to the great majority of French in Indochina and even to many Vietnamese, as well as in Paris to Admiral d'Argenlieu, to the politicians and the ministers, as salutary measures imposed by the policy of Ho Chi Minh's team.¹⁴²

Chapter 8 and 9 will discuss if the support for Valluy's policy was as massive in France as he pretends.

6.13 Ultimatum Without Time Limit

Morlière and Lami had expected the conquests of Haiphong and Langson to lead to a general conflagration almost immediately. They were astonished to see that Vietnamese authorities did not react that way. On the contrary, the foreign consuls could tell Morlière that several members of the Vietnamese cabinet had expressed their desire to localize the conflict and even put an end to it.¹⁴³ Giap even asked to see Morlière, and this started a voluminous correspondence between the Generals Giap, Morlière and Valluy.

Morlière fixed the meeting with Giap to November 26 at 16 hrs. and decided to put forward demands which would guarantee French military control of Haiphong and only permit the Vietnamese civilian administration and the militia, not the regular army, to stay inside a demarcated zone around Haiphong. Morlière informed Valluy of his intentions before implementing them,¹⁴⁴ and that gave Valluy just enough time to stop him. Two hours before he was going to see Giap, he received an order from Valluy to postpone the meeting,¹⁴⁵ and the same evening he was ordered to continue military operations until Hanoi had accepted the following conditions:

1. the demarcation of a (larger) zone around Haiphong.
2. no military or paramilitary Vietnamese units (including militia) would have the right to stay inside this zone.
3. Passage of military units and of river boats through the zone would be submitted to French authorization and control.
4. Full freedom of circulation for the French on the road from Haiphong to Dason.

In Langson, Morlière was to keep up the obtained advantages and wait for new orders.¹⁴⁶

Morlière did not present Giap with these conditions at once. He first warned Valluy that point 3 would be absolutely unacceptable to the Vietnamese because it could mean full French control of the important river traffic. Valluy, now even more confident in his cause because he had just received a formal assurance of support for his policy from the most important French ministers, answered that control would only be made on military transports, but vetoed any modification of the proposed text.¹⁴⁷

Morlière gave Giap the conditions orally on November 27, and sent him a written copy on the following day. He told Giap that the demands had been approved by Saigon, but did not say dictated.¹⁴⁸ Giap at once answered by proposing to establish a mixed commission which would discuss the question. Morlière replied that the conditions were the result of "very precise instructions." They could therefore not be discussed, and a mixed commission would only be useful if its purpose was to fix the modalities for the execution of the measures demanded.¹⁴⁹

Giap retorted that the conditions were affecting Vietnamese national sovereignty and therefore asked Morlière to reconsider the question and inform Saigon of his suggestions.¹⁵⁰ Morlière reiterated that the conditions were perfectly well known to the Superior French Command and that Saigon had been constantly informed of Giap's proposals.¹⁵¹ This letter closed the correspondence because Giap never gave another reply. When O'Sullivan informed Washington of Morlière's conditions, he called them an "ultimatum without time limit" and said the French seemed determined to force Vietnamese collaboration on French terms "or to crush Government."¹⁵²

French forces did not crush the Vietnamese government in the first half of December, even if Saigon wanted to. There are several reasons for this:

- The concern for the fate of French civilians in Hanoi and for the weak garrisons in Vinh, Hai Duong, Bac Ninh and Phu Lang Thuong.
- Warnings from Paris that if there was to be war, the Vietnamese would have to appear as the aggressors.
- A hope that it would be possible to impose French terms on the "moderate" faction of the Vietminh, splitting it from the "extremists."

There was no time limit to the French ultimatum because Saigon had to take care not to be disavowed by Paris. In fact, the French were waiting for Hanoi to take action.

At the same time as he reported the French ultimatum, O'Sullivan affirmed that the Vietnamese course of action was "not yet determined." The exodus from Hanoi, which had started when Dèbes launched his attack on Haiphong, was continuing. The Vietnamese government, at least in part, had evacuated the capital, and the population, particularly in the outskirts, was "almost in panic."¹⁵³ On November 30, Morlière also reported the continued evacuation of civilians from Hanoi. He had received information from the foreign consuls as to Vietnamese attitudes. In face of the French refusal to discuss the terms, and of the French government's determination, Morlière felt that "the Vietnamese government does not consider aggressive action, but tries to drag things out."¹⁵⁴

Both sides were thus waiting for the other to take the first step. None of them could move back without losing face. The stalemate in December will be the subject for the long and detailed chapter seven. It will start with the end, the outbreak of war in Hanoi on December 19 and the different interpretations of what really happened on that fatal day. Then we shall go back to the last weeks before war:

- the military preparations on both sides,
- Sainteny's attempts to provoke a split between Ho Chi Minh and the "extremists,"

- Morlière's feeling of resignation before the inevitability of war,
- hesitation in Saigon to trigger off the war because signals of disapproval at last arrived from Paris,
- Vietnamese reluctance to open hostilities in the hope of intervention from Paris, Nanking or Washington,
- Ho Chi Minh's passionate appeals to the new French Premier, the aging Léon Blum,
- the incidents of December 17 and 18 and the last French menaces...

The chapter will end where it started, on December 19 - morning, afternoon and dusk - and in a renewed, but - I hope - more qualified uncertainty as to what happened among the Vietnamese leaders in the final hours up to eight p.m.

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CHAPTER 7

HANOI

At 20 hrs. on December 19, electricity was cut and the water supply turned off in Hanoi. A few minutes later, Vietnamese assault units attacked the houses of French civilians and took away some 200 persons as hostages. The civilians had been armed by the Sureté two weeks before, and many of them tried to defend their homes. Between 20 and 30 French citizens were killed, and some of them were reported to have been burnt or mutilated in other ways. These excesses were most probably committed in defiance of given orders, but they were exploited to the maximum by French propaganda, which made Ho Chi Minh and Giap directly responsible for the murder of French citizens.¹

While the hostages were taken out of Hanoi, self defense forces (Tu Ve) opened fire everywhere in Hanoi. A train was moved into a position where it hampered the movement of French vehicles, and roads were mined. French Commissioner Jean Sainteny was wounded when his car ran into a mine. The French counter-attacked, but the regular Vietnamese army on positions around the capital did not enter Hanoi, even though later in the evening Giap ordered all Vietnamese forces to take up arms. After 24 hours' fighting, the French troops were in control of the European section of Hanoi. At 16 hrs. on December 20, all the defenders of the presidential palace had been killed, and the "tricolore" was hoisted over Ho Chi Minh's residence. The president and his cabinet had escaped.

During the night of December 19, all the other French garrisons in the North were also attacked. The longer the distance from Hanoi the later the attacks were launched.² Thus they did not surprise the French commanders, who had been warned from Hanoi. Only at Hai Duong and at Vinh did the Vietnamese meet with some success.

In the late evening of December 20 and the early morning of December 21, Ho Chi Minh broadcasted his famous appeal: "Fight with all the means you dispose of. Fight with your arms, your picks, your spades, your sticks."³

In the Sino-Vietnamese quarter of Hanoi, fighting dragged on through January and February. The French refrained from employing artillery indiscriminately in the Haiphong manner, but after two months, the Vietnamese forces pulled out. Eight years were to pass before Ho Chi Minh could return to his capital.

The outward chronology of these events is well established. A number of puzzles yet remain to be solved:

- Which were the Vietnamese motives for the attack?
- What can explain the contrast between the sudden attack at 20 hrs. and two very conciliatory letters which had been sent to the French in the morning and the afternoon?
- Why was the attack executed in such a haphazard manner? There were a number of faulty steps in Hanoi, as well as the apparently inexplicable delay in the attack on the other garrisons.

Before trying to solve these puzzles through a detailed account of the December 19 events, we shall see how they were interpreted both on the Vietnamese and the French side.

7.1 Interpretations

The first official Vietnamese interpretation of the

outbreak of war in Hanoi was prepared before the event. On the poster proclaiming martial law the year, month, date and time (20 hrs.) were filled in by hand. It was put up in Hanoi the same evening and was prefaced by the following declaration:

Official order

Compatriots of the Capital:
The French troops have opened
the conflict in Hanoi..⁴

Before dawn on December 20, the French poster was ready, introducing the official French interpretation, which was to dominate the whole Western press:

Proclamation

Viet Minh has treacherously started hostilities, taking up the tactics of the Japanese "coup de force" of March 9, 1945. The Viet Minh cabinet is on the run. French authorities find themselves obliged to reestablish order...⁵

It is worth noting that the Vietnamese cabinet had so fast become the Viet Minh cabinet. The French no longer regarded it as the legal representative of the nation.

General Morlière felt sure that the attack had been made according to a "premeditated plan," prepared by the military on order from the Vietnamese cabinet. He even claimed that the attack on the other garrisons coincided with the one in Hanoi.⁶

Commissioner Sainteny, at the hospital, declared that the "beautiful country Vietnam has been the prey of downright bandits, who have at last, while we were waiting, thrown away their mask and showed the degree of their barbarity."⁷

Pignon did not like this statement because it referred to French "waiting" and ordered that it should not be

published. Another statement from the wounded Sainteny was more appropriate: "I have been hit as one of the first by the blows of an unspeakable treason even though I offered Vietnam nothing but my loyalty." This statement was immediately forwarded to Paris, and Saigon asked for international broadcasting of these words "from the mouth of the man who signed the March 6 agreement."⁸

Interim High-Commissioner Valluy assured Paris as early as December 21 that the conflict had started with a surprise attack by responsible Vietnamese authorities. He also repeated Morlière's misinformation on the "simultaneousness" of the attacks on all garrisons and considered that a proof of premeditation.⁹

Vice-Consul O'Sullivan also felt sure that the attack had been planned by the Vietnamese government. His telegrams to Washington pleased Saigon so much that they stole the texts, translated them and sent them to Paris in order to convince sceptic government officials that Hanoi was not a new Haiphong.¹⁰

Commissioner of Political Affairs Pignon's analysis is the one that corresponds most closely to what became the official French version. He reiterated the claim that the attack had been based on a premeditated plan, modelled on the Japanese coup on March 9, 1945, but added some important theories:

1. The attack had been preceded by a number of loys to make the French believe that relations were improving. Among them was counted the friendly letter from Ho Chi Minh to Sainteny and from Nam to Morlière, and the attempts by Vietnamese liaison officers to make the French release their troops from their confinement to the barracks.

2. The purpose of these ploys was to ensure of complete surprise. The Vietnamese intended to massacre the French soldiers who were dispersed in cinemas, restaurants etc.
3. The ploys were at first successful, as Morlière did release the troops, but as a result of an alarming report from a spy, he hastily reconfined the soldiers to the barracks. This saved the troops from suffering the fate of the civilians.
4. The Vietnamese ploys showed that the whole Vietnamese cabinet, including Ho Chi Minh and Hoang Huu Nam, had wished to wipe out the French garrisons. France was therefore facing a united block, determined to eliminate French presence in Indochina.

Pignon hoped that this would finally enlighten French and international public opinion as to the real nature of the Viet Minh.¹¹ In France this interpretation for years and years shut out all rival explanations of the outbreak of hostilities. Its simplicity, its logical structure as well as the amazing image of the lonely spy, saving the lives of several hundred young French boys, made Pignon's version survive in spite of all the evidence that it could not explain.¹²

Ironically, Vietnamese accounts of December 19 tend to confirm Pignon's theory. President Ho Chi Minh gave his first public version in a radio speech on December 25. He accused the French of being responsible for the outbreak of hostilities. They had handed over an ultimatum on December 19, demanding French control of the police. When the Vietnamese refused, "fighting broke out."¹³ If the AP-correspondent has minuted the radio speech correctly, Ho Chi Minh's words are astonishing. It is perfectly normal on such occasions to accuse the adversary of having taken the first step. By saying only that fighting "broke out,"

Ho came close to admitting that the Vietnamese had begun.

Ho Chi Minh was no more specific in a memo signed on December 31. He mentioned three "ultimata" of December 18 and 19, but only described the attack in a very summary way: "General attack started brusquely in the evening of December 19, and at nightfall, the last preparations are almost accomplished." This does not make much sense. Even in this long memo, Ho does not go beyond stating in very general terms that the French had "started and wanted" the conflict.¹⁴ Later on French communists often asked Vietnamese comrades for the truth about December 19, only receiving evasive answers.¹⁵

Hanoi Commander Vuong Thua Vu three years later wrote an article on December 19 with the promising title The Truth on December 19 in Hanoi.¹⁶ There were seven and a half pages on the military background, six pages on the fighting that ensued, but only half a page on December 19. This half page told that the Tu Ve forces gathered in the City Hall to declare themselves ready. Then French soldiers provoked incidents at 20.03 hrs. and occupied public buildings obliging the Vietnamese troops to defend themselves. Such accounts of course only strengthened the credibility of the French version.

In 1975, Minister of Defense and Supreme Commander of all Vietnamese forces Vo Nguyen Giap published his memoirs covering the years 1945-46. His readers must have been surprised to find that he stopped on the brink of the essential:

Dusk fell. The whole city was unusually quiet. It was cold and dry. The houses seemed to shrink back and to be standing warning themselves in the yellowish electric light.¹⁷ Outwardly, the city seemed to grow lazy in the cold and go to bed early. But beneath this calm surface, line upon line of surging wave was ready to rise. All the combatants were present at their posts. It was reported that not a single French

soldier was to be seen in the restaurants, bars or streets. And enemy armoured cars began to push out and stood blocking some crossroads... (The three silent points have been put there by Giap).¹⁸

We must inevitably conclude that the Vietnamese have good reason not to go into detail about December 19. At first glance, this might tend to confirm the French version of the events. It seems unreasonable, however, that Giap as late as 1970 could make any kind of political gain by denying that the attack had resulted from a plan. If that had been the case, Giap would have been proud to tell that the Party had realized the inevitability of war and ordered the attack. Secondly, if the attack had been the result of a well considered decision, it seems most likely that an explanatory public statement had been prepared.

There must be something else the Vietnamese want to conceal, something they feel more uneasy about than a premeditated attack. The course of events suggests that they did not act according to plan. Their actions were rather characterized by irresolution, and this might be due to an internal conflict in the Vietnamese leadership. After the defeat on December 19, some of the leaders have probably been accused of having placed too much hope in Léon Blum's new cabinet.¹⁹ These leaders may have felt that the attack was premature and that it ruined an excellent occasion to split the French colonialists from the Socialist government in Paris. It seems likely that Ho Chi Minh belonged to those who deplored the December 19 attack, and as will be shown later in the chapter, the attack was presumably launched without the consent of Ho Chi Minh. It seems a reasonable hypothesis that this is what the Vietnamese still want to conceal: On December 19, 1946, Ho Chi Minh was not in control.

Pignon's December 23 interpretation was accepted and reproduced by the near-total of the press in France. To my

knowledge, only two journalists tried to construct alternative explanations, Léon Boutbien in Franc-Tireur and Philippe Devillers in Le Monde.²⁰ Boutbien had accompanied Moutet on his mission to Indochina in late December 1946 and the beginning of January 1947. He opposed the idea that France had been faced by a united and determined block and claimed instead that the Vietminh leadership had been divided. Vo Nguyen Giap was the leader of the extremists, and according to Boutbien he had ordered the assassination of the French civilians. The moderates were Hoang Huu Nam, Hoang Minh Giam and Ho Chi Minh himself, the "enigmatic figure" of the events. At some point, the extremists had assumed power behind the scenes. The cabinet was incapable of retreating, and Ho Chi Minh was forced to follow the movement in order not to lose confidence.

Philippe Devillers, who had returned from an 11 month stay in Indochina before the outbreak of war, also pointed at internal disagreements in the Vietnamese leadership. To him Giap was not the extremist. Giap had been instrumental in maintaining a relaxed atmosphere in Tonkin during the Fontainebleau conference, but had afterwards come under pressure from extremists like Tran Huy Lieu and Ha Ba Cang. French Cochinchinese policy and the refusal to make any concessions to Hanoi had strengthened the hand of these extremists. In December, French reactions had exasperated the Vietnamese so much that the extremists had taken the lead. In Devillers' view it was a dangerous error to consider the Vietminh as one block and to mix uncompromising enemies of France with the moderates.

Neither Boutbien nor Devillers was in a position where they could question the details of the official French version, but in 1947 the French journalist Jean Bidault published anonymously an (anti-Vietminh) pamphlet, based on inside information.²¹ This pamphlet revised the official explanation on one important point: When Morlière confined

the troops to the barracks Giap's scheme was ruined. He hesitated and decided to cancel the attack, but this new order did not reach everybody, and at 20 hrs. fighting was started all the same. This seemed to explain why the regular army around Hanoi did not take part in the attack and why the assaults on the other garrisons were so much delayed.²² When Devillers published his book in 1952, he included Jean Bidault's point, but added that the Tu Ve might have deliberately ignored the order to cancel the attack.²³

Jean Bidault and Devillers' revision was important, but the idea of Ho Chi Minh and Hoang Huu Nam having written conciliatory letters in order to deceive the French was left unchallenged. It seems that the events of December 19 can best be explained if we assume that the letters were not intended as a ploy and that Giap cancelled the attack before the French troops were confined to the barracks. Such an interpretation would not leave out any of the major problems that are left outside the existing explanation framework. Before producing the necessary evidence, however, we shall have to revert to the three weeks' stalemate which preceded December 19.

7.2 Offensive Plans

As for Haiphong and Langson the French also had plans ready for the conquest of Hanoi. Valluy's instructions to foster plans for "coups d'état" were later defended this way by d'Argenlieu:

When the sudden Vietminh attack on December 19 was unsuccessful, it was thanks precisely to the meticulous preparation of our counter-attack which developed as the "scénario of a coup d'état."²⁴

The French troops were dispersed in some ten different quarters, the citadel, the former palace of the Governor General, some schools, a couple of other buildings and the airport Gia Lam. It seems that a group of officers in Hotel Metropole, close to the Department of the Interior and to the residence of Ho Chi Minh, played a key role in French planning.²⁵ We remember that in his April instructions Valluy recommended the establishment of special teams working in disguise, charged with the discreet elimination of the enemy's leaders.²⁶ Giap later related that the Vietnamese had discovered the existence of a detachment at the Hotel Metropole, "disguised as civilians."²⁷

It seems reasonable to link this "special task force" to the role of one of Valluy's trusted intelligence officers, Colonel Trocard, who is often, but rudimentarily mentioned in the memories of French officers. Trocard had been criticized by uninformed French hardliners for having far too much contact with the Vietnamese "marxists."²⁸ These contacts may have been important to French planning in December. It is possible that Trocard made a short journey to Paris in the beginning of December to consult with d'Argenlieu.²⁹ Later the same month, Valluy sent him to Hanoi.³⁰

On December 5, Sainteny told O'Sullivan that the French were preparing for a "police action" to rid the Vietnamese government of undesirable characters, but Ho Chi Minh was to remain president.³¹ In 1967 Valluy referred to this "police action" by saying that if "we had not been interims" (it is unclear whether the allusion applies to the caretaker cabinet of Bidault or to Valluy's interim as High-Commissioner), we would have been able to "seize the person of the president and his ministers: their collapse seemed possible, and perhaps were we very close to this!"³² Valluy states that by the end of November it was too late, and it was decided to send Sainteny to Hanoi

for negotiations instead. However, Sainteny's words to O'Sullivan show that the idea of the "police action" had not been abandoned by December 5. Sainteny seems to have been a part of the plan.

On December 19, it seems to have been Trocard's people in Hanoi who provided Morlière with the report which made him confine the troops to the barracks.³³ When French troops conquered Ho Chi Minh's residence on December 20, the president and ministers had escaped. Colonel Trocard was killed by the Vietnamese in 1947.

It is obvious that the French had contingency plans for taking full control of Hanoi. It may also be concluded that they were planning a preemptive strike against the Vietnamese government. As will be shown later in this chapter, there is no reason to believe that the French intended to carry out this plan on December 19 or 20, but it is possible that the Vietnamese attack was motivated by a fear of French action against their leading cadres.

What about Vietnamese preparations? A feverish activity started in Hanoi immediately after the outbreak of hostilities in Haiphong. Many civilians were evacuated. Pro-French or "unreliable" persons were arrested and sent out of town.³⁴ The top leaders spent the night outside Hanoi, and government institutions and archives were moved out of the capital.³⁵ Barricades were systematically constructed in the Sino-Vietnamese section of the town, where all sorts of preparations were made for a sustained defense. In order not to give the French a pretext for attack, however, the free circulation of French cars in the European sector and in essential streets was not impeded.³⁶ Giap divulges that a detailed plan for the defense of Hanoi was made, but does not mention a plan for an attack. The concentration of troops around Hanoi, however, was no defensive measure,³⁷ and an army cadre, Ngo Van Chieu, confided to his diary that there was a plan for an attack.

The Tu Ve were to attack French civilians and soldiers "locally" while the army was to move in from the outside, conquer the citadel, eliminate the French there and form a shock unit with the equipment they could find.³⁸ Events on December 19 make it reasonable to presume that a plan similar to the one described by Ngo Van Chieu, has really existed.

Did the Vietnamese intend to carry out their plan under all circumstances, and when was it decided that December 19 would be the day of attack? Some of the documents that French intelligence found after the battle seem to indicate that the Vietnamese had expected to have more time for their preparations. A circular to the suicide squads, dated December 1, can be used as example. It asked the section commanders to make lists of all missing objects (sabres, grenades, bottles with explosives etc.). These lists should be handed in before December 18 at 9 hrs. This gave the squads 17 days (!) to find out what they were missing and would give the command only 1 day to furnish them with the necessary objects if attack on December 19 is assumed.³⁹

Throughout 1947, French intelligence "proved" again and again that December 19 had been premeditated. The above document was proof no. 1 in the d'Argenlieu report. The reason why the French went on with their "proofs" was that none of them was completely satisfactory.

Premeditation can be defined as "preplanning of an act showing intent to commit it." The French were able to prove that the attack had been preplanned, but the documents found did not tell under which conditions the Vietnamese intended to commit the planned act.⁴⁰ The French were never able to prove that the decision to attack had been made before the final crisis on December 17 and 18.

This makes it reasonable to assume that both parties, while having laid offensive plans, remained undecided up to the last moment. On the brink of war, they both hesitated, but on December 19, they stumbled into it.

7.3 Sainteny and Morlière

Jean Sainteny, representing a policy of agreement, was often called "the man of March 6"⁴¹ while General Morlière to the contrary was nicknamed "the man of the ultimata." It was not until much later that his role in the Haiphong affair became publicly known. The role of Sainteny in December has been concealed to this date, as Morlière kept completely silent about it in his January 10 report. The myth, as expressed on the jacket of Sainteny's memoirs, is that he returned to Hanoi too late to avoid December 19.⁴² This myth seems to have no more foundation than the one saying that General Leclerc warned against the war. Sainteny's task in Hanoi, as defined in instructions from d'Argenlieu and Valluy, was to exploit his friendship with Ho Chi Minh in order to provoke a split in the Vietnamese cabinet and thereby obtain the collapse of the Vietnamese republic. Far from promoting contact between Ho Chi Minh and the new French premier, Sainteny actively warned against Ho Chi Minh's attempts to get in touch with Léon Blum. Sainteny did not arrive too late in Hanoi, but his instructions were so narrow and strict that no negotiated settlement was possible. From December 3 to 19, Sainteny acted in Hanoi faithfully on lines set by d'Argenlieu and Valluy.

In the beginning of October, d'Argenlieu praised Sainteny for his "qualities of firmness and diplomacy" and asked Moutet to send him back to resume his post in Hanoi.⁴³ D'Argenlieu was in two minds about Sainteny, however. He thought he was "too much a business man" and feared his tendency to seek local arrangements without considering the

larger context.⁴⁴ D'Argenlieu had not quite forgiven Sainteny for having introduced the referendum in the March 6 agreement. When it proved impossible for Sainteny to go to Saigon before d'Argenlieu's departure from Indochina on November 13, d'Argenlieu decided to keep Sainteny in Paris until he had seen him there.⁴⁵ They met on the first day of d'Argenlieu's stay in Paris, and Sainteny landed in Saigon at the same time as Dèbes' artillery started the destruction of Haiphong.

D'Argenlieu had asked Valluy to detain Sainteny for some time in Saigon in order to prepare him for the most important issues he would have to handle in Hanoi.⁴⁶ Valluy thus kept him in Saigon while dictating Morlière the ultimatum for Giap. He thought it best to hold Sainteny in reserve until the first Vietnamese reactions were known. On November 30, he decided to send Sainteny up north to do something about Morlière's failure to make sufficient political profit on the military successes. Valluy had received reports indicating that the Vietnamese leadership was deeply divided and that one group, with Giap, wanted to evacuate the government and take up arms, while another was so "scared" (sic.) by this prospect that it would be willing to make certain concessions. Ho Chi Minh's position in relation to these tendencies remained "undecided." In this situation, Valluy felt that Sainteny was the only person capable of "pursuing the political exploitation of the situation."⁴⁷

Before Sainteny left Saigon, a meeting of the most important members of the federal cabinet (and Torel) set down very precise instructions. The substance was:

- exploit in all fields the advantages that we have obtained in Tonkin as a result of our military successes in Haiphong and Langson without forcing Ho Chi Minh and his cabinet to desperate solutions.
- take ascendancy over the Vietnamese leaders to compel them to negotiate under conditions far more favorable to us.

- act in order to obtain the president's repudiation and, if possible, elimination of the extremist elements.
- assert our will to give up none of our earlier or newly won positions, but in case of a rupture, painstakingly leave initiative to our partners while taking all precautions to avoid being surprised by the events.

The demands that Sainteny was to put forward in the negotiations were also defined:

In Cochinchina:

- carrying out of the instructions from Paris for repatriation of Vietnamese troops.
- guarantees for the rice harvest.
- total suppression of terrorism.

In Tonkin:

- control of the broadcasting from radio Bach-Mai.
- liberation of the hostages.
- resumption of economic life in its totality.

In return, Sainteny was authorized to make two concessions. The first was a promise that decisions on customs and international trade would be made on the basis of negotiations. The second was the withdrawal of French troops from Bac Ninh and Phu Lang Thuong.⁴⁸

The decision to abolish these two garrisons had already been made because they were too vulnerable and because the control of the road from Langson and the Gulf of Tonkin would make control of the road between Hanoi and Langson superfluous.⁴⁹

The instructions to Sainteny were of course impossible to implement. No faction whatsoever of Vietnamese nationalism could accept such demands, and Sainteny's instructions made it impossible for him to negotiate. The warning against forcing Ho Chi Minh to desperate solutions, however,

indicates that not all in Saigon wanted to break with Ho Chi Minh. Some of them still believed that it would be possible to impose French authority on the Vietnamese president while eliminating the "extremists" who surrounded him.

The day before Sainteny's arrival, Morlière saw Nam and Giam and reported that Ho Chi Minh and his advisers were discouraged and in disarray. They desired to avoid a spreading of the conflict to Hanoi and did not intend to attack, but they were determined to defend themselves against "any new provocation."⁵⁰ Morlière also reported that Ho Chi Minh considered making changes in his cabinet by introducing two moderates.⁵¹ Sainteny was welcomed in Hanoi by Morlière on December 2, and according to Sainteny Morlière now confined himself to his military role, preparing himself for what "seemed to be more and more inevitable; the test of strength."⁵²

One of the first manifestations that met Sainteny, was a strong protest against Haiphong, Kien An and Langson from the "Association Viet-Nam France," which represented the most moderate and pro-French faction of the nationalist movement in Hanoi.⁵³

Ho Chi Minh received Sainteny in the evening of December 3, and the guest found that his host suffered from an illness which "even if it was not diplomatic did not seem to be unrelated to the actual events." Giam (or Giap) and Nam were present and did not leave Sainteny alone with Ho.⁵⁴ Sainteny told the president that "certain elements in his entourage" had prejudiced Franco-Vietnamese reconciliation during Ho Chi Minh's prolonged stay in Paris (an allusion to Giap). Instead of answering, Ho Chi Minh charged the French with responsibility for Haiphong and Langson, but added that it was necessary to calm down temperaments, proposing:

1. That the military commission and the commission for restitution of French property, both envisaged in the Modus Vivendi, continued their work.
2. That two special commissions were established in order to settle the Haiphong affair both on the military level and with relation to customs control.
3. That French and Vietnamese units retreat to the positions they held before the incidents.

Nam and Giam also emphasized the third point as vital.

Sainteny replied that point one was acceptable, but declared that the French government would refuse categorically the return to status quo ante, and Vietnamese aggression would meet with French countermeasures also in the future. The only result of the meeting was a press release telling that an exchange of views had taken place in order to explore the possibilities for relaxation of existing tension.⁵⁵

Sainteny's impression was that Ho Chi Minh and those of his followers who were loyal to him would do everything to avoid a rupture. Sainteny was not yet sure as to who these loyal followers were and how much power they still wielded, but he felt certain that he had made them understand that France was now playing the last card before the test of strength.⁵⁶

In his report to Valluy, Sainteny did not mention that he had promised the Vietnamese to send an urgent message to Paris on Ho Chi Minh's proposals. The Vietnamese were hoping that this report would make Paris intervene,⁵⁷ and in an interview with Paris-Saigon on December 7, Sainteny asserted that he had sent it.⁵⁸ It has yet not been possible to locate any such report in the French archives. The Vietnamese press was positive to Sainteny at his arrival, but after the first ten days of his stay in Hanoi, the tone changed, and Sainteny was denounced for having played comedy since March 6.⁵⁹

In the morning of December 5, Sainteny informed O'Sullivan of the planned "police action." He explained that the Vietnamese government had become far more "terroristic" than before and that it now only represented a minority of the population. The French would allow Ho Chi Minh to stay as president, but anti-French elements would have to go. After the present cabinet had been dismantled, the people would be allowed to choose whatever cabinet it wished, provided that it was not anti-French. Sainteny denied that this would lead to the establishment of a puppet government, but O'Sullivan felt that "despite Sainteny's words," the French would be forced to set up a puppet government. He feared that French efforts to rid the country of the Vietminh would take much longer than the short time Sainteny was foreseeing.⁶⁰

Later the same day, Sainteny saw Giam and advised him that the only alternative to the "test of strength" would be a profound cabinet reshuffle, replacing "certain ministers by clearly pro-French personalities." After a long discussion, Giam promised to present the French government with a list of potential Vietnamese ministers (!) if the French would adhere strictly to the March 6 agreement. After the meeting, Sainteny felt uncertain as to Giam's real power and complained to Saigon that he knew so little about internal Vietnamese power relations.⁶¹

O'Sullivan mentioned that Sainteny believed in a rapid French victory. This is confirmed by an attempt at a prophecy, made by "l'homme du 6 mars" in a political report of December 10. He admitted that Vietminh's victory at the interior level seemed total. The last strongholds of the China-oriented opposition in the North-West of Tonkin had just been conquered. But Sainteny warned against illusions as to a "union" built so rapidly and with violent means. "Vietminh's edifice is still young, and as all totalitarian regimes, it can be expected to come tumbling down at the first serious defeat."⁶² In his report Sainteny

meditated over the queer fact that he could talk man to man with Nam when the situation was so close to war. His impression was that the Vietnamese leaders were unable to accept realities. They would neither accept French conditions because that would mean to admit a military defeat, nor would they proclaim general insurrection. Applying "typical Far Eastern tactics" the Vietminh preferred to act as if things could arrange themselves as soon as the alert had passed by.⁶³ The obvious conclusion was not committed to paper by Sainteny, but was no less real for being held in obedience: France would soon have to do something to help Hanoi make its choice. When recalling in his memoirs his own and Morlière's decision on December 19 to release the troops from their confinement to the barracks, Sainteny explained it as an operation with a double aim: either to improve the atmosphere, or to oblige the Vietminh to "show its cards."⁶⁴

On December 26, just about to recover from his wounds, Sainteny wrote to a friend in the Saigon bureaucracy, expressing his desire to know why the Vietminh leaders so abruptly had decided on a suicidal policy. Who had wanted it, and who had been against, and did Ho Chi Minh have any freedom of action? They had perhaps suddenly realized that time was running out because the French were improving their position for every false move they made. Sainteny was reluctant to believe that Ho Chi Minh had been party to that act of insanity, and felt almost certain that the president had for several weeks been working under severe restraints. He wondered whether he would ever know.⁶⁵

When Sainteny came to Hanoi, Morlière was relieved of his duty to represent Saigon in political negotiations with Vietnam, but he did not confine himself entirely to his military role. On December 12, he signed a report where he considered the impossible situation and possible future scenarios. This report differs a great deal from the one

he wrote one month later. On December 12, he considered that French "reactions" in Haiphong and Langson expressed the unanimous feelings of the troops and the French population.⁶⁶ Morlière felt himself to be in a dead-end street as a result of having to work with the paradoxical situation where the two parties were simultaneously fighting in Cochinchina and having dinners with toasts in Tonkin.⁶⁷ The Vietnamese government would not give in to French demands as this would mean "self-condemnation," but France could not accept a return to the pre-Haiphong situation as this would only lead to new incidents. The entire French presence was at stake. No French enterprise would be able to settle or develop without French control, and this control would be illusive without French forces.⁶⁸

This was the crux of the matter. When the mutual hatred had reached a stage where even French economic activity seemed to be at stake if Vietminh remained in power, then even men like Morlière and Sainteny were prepared to face the rupture.⁶⁹ For the most ardent colonialists and militarists like d'Argenlieu, Valluy and Dèbes, motives like French prestige and the honor of the army could perhaps be decisive, but as regards the cooler intellectuals such as Morlière, Sainteny and Pignon, the factor that tipped the scale in favor of war, was probably the fear that France would lose her economic and other interests.

Morlière stated in his report that either the Vietnamese cabinet should be reshuffled, or it would have to disappear. The only thing that would make it disappear, was a military defeat. Therefore, a conflict seemed "nearly inevitable." The population would certainly prefer "butter to guns," and the Vietnamese government would therefore face numerous problems if it retreated to the interior of the country. Finally, it would reform or dissolve itself and listen to the "voice of reason." Then

the time would come for France to be generous. Morlière concluded that only a determined attitude on the part of the French government and a decision to accept and sustain a serious and prolonged effort would make it possible to save French Indochina and with her the rest of French overseas territories.⁷⁰

Under the pressure of events. Morlière had changed his mind since Haiphong. In the days up to December 19, the conviction that war was inevitable seems to have been close to unanimous among the French in Indochina. Nevertheless, it should be noted that while Sainteny believed in a rapid collapse of the Vietminh, Morlière stressed the need for a prolonged struggle. In January, at the prospect of his dismissal, Morlière found that his December 12 report had not been liberal enough. He affirmed that no purely military solution would be possible and that negotiations should be reopened the sooner the better.⁷¹

7.4 Hesitation in Saigon

The four weeks from November 23 to December 19 correspond to four distinct phases in the evolution of Saigon's tactics.

In the first week, from November 23 to December 30, Saigon thought, and probably hoped, that a general conflict would evolve as a direct result of Haiphong, Langson and the November 28 ultimatum. Sainteny was retained in Saigon.

In the second week, from December 1 to 7, Saigon sent Sainteny to Hanoi and prepared for a double manoeuvre: Troops from Haiphong were to march towards Haiduong and Hanoi in order to open the road between the two towns, while Sainteny was to keep in contact with the Vietnamese leaders. The troop movements would lead to Vietnamese

reactions which could be used as a pretext for a "police action" against the "extremists" in the government and the Tong Bo.

In the third week, from December 8 to 14, Saigon suddenly hesitated and postponed both the reopening of the road Haiphong-Hanoi and the "police action."

In the fourth week, from December 15 to Thursday 19, Saigon urged Sainteny and Morlière to take a tougher line against Vietnamese war preparations. This led to serious incidents on December 17 and 18, which were used by the French to justify new demands, put forward on December 18 and in the morning of December 19.

These changes in Saigon's attitude can only be understood if seen in relation to political developments in France.⁷² Meetings of the Cominindo on November 23 and 29 and the last meeting of Bidault's coalition cabinet on November 28 gave clear support to d'Argenlieu and Valluy's policy. Bidault formally resigned on November 28, but continued as a leader of a caretaker government. Representatives of the most important ministries worked out secret instructions for d'Argenlieu, which were delivered to him on December 10. Until December 12, nobody knew who would be France's next premier, but on that day, socialist veteran leader Léon Blum, who had not taken part in the preparation of d'Argenlieu's instructions, consented to form the new cabinet. After some abortive talks with the Communist and MRP leaders, Blum formed an all Socialist cabinet on December 16, keeping Moutet as Minister of Overseas France. On December 17, it was accepted by the National Assembly with 544 votes against 2. On December 18, Bidault handed over his office in the foreign ministry to Léon Blum, who, like his predecessor, was to combine the premiership with responsibility for foreign affairs. On the evening of December 18, Blum's cabinet met for the first time and decided to send Moutet on a mission to Indochina

in order to seek a peaceful solution. The news reached Hanoi about six hours before war broke out.

The first phase in Saigon's attitude corresponds to a period where Bidault's cabinet assured Saigon of support. The second and third phases were during Bidault's caretaker government when the outcome of the political crisis was unknown. The fourth phase coincided with Blum's taking office.

The First Week

The first reaction from Paris to Valluy's occupation of Haiphong was a telegram of approval from d'Argenlieu. He declared that Valluy's instructions to Morlière were in accordance with French governmental policy as defined in the meeting of the Cominindo on November 23.⁷³

D'Argenlieu also sent Valluy a summary of the proceedings of this meeting. The summary had been read by Moutet and Michelet and approved by Bidault. It authorized Valluy to break the cease-fire in Cochinchina and "reduce agitation by force."⁷⁴ D'Argenlieu assured Valluy that this gave him a free hand in the military field, and urged him to further increase his vigilance.⁷⁵

Valluy must have been delighted by these news, and on November 27 he informed the commissioners in Saigon, Nha Trang and Hanoi. They were told that further instructions would arrive from Paris after a new Cominindo meeting on November 29. In the meantime they should let Bidault's and Moutet's firm declarations at the November 23 meeting inspire their actions and their dealings with the Vietnamese. They were also urged to let the position of the French government be known by "calculated indiscretion."⁷⁶

The reassuring telegrams from d'Argenlieu must certainly have inspired Valluy's action when he dictated Morlière the ultimatum that was handed over to Giap on November 28, and

when he refused Giap's proposal of a mixed commission to discuss it. The ultimatum, however, did not lead to any immediate rupture in Hanoi. The last meeting of Bidault's cabinet did not make new important decisions, and the Cominindo meeting on November 29 was not able to finish the promised instructions. On November 30, Saigon took the decision to send Sainteny to Hanoi.

The Second Week

Sainteny's fruitless attempts to create a split between Vietnamese moderates and extremists have been mentioned. The second element in Saigon's tactics at the beginning of December was a military offensive westwards from Haiphong in order to reopen the road which had been cut by the Vietnamese at several places during the battle of Haiphong. On December 5, Morlière declared himself ready to start the operation as soon as reinforcements had arrived in Haiphong.⁷⁷ Sainteny, however, warned Saigon that this operation would involve great risks of a general conflagration and proposed a postponement until the precise position of Paris was known.⁷⁸

When he received Sainteny's warning, Valluy had just been informed by d'Argenlieu that the second meeting of the Cominindo had confirmed the position of the former, but that it was impossible to obtain a public declaration from the caretaker government.⁷⁹ Valluy estimated this to be sufficiently reassuring to ignore Sainteny's warning. He instructed Sainteny to demand of Ho Chi Minh both that the road Haiphong-Hanoi be reopened and that all blockhouses, barricades and mines in Hanoi be removed. To make himself absolutely clear, Valluy added that once Sainteny received order to "open the essential road by force, you cannot but conform to it."⁸⁰ It should be noted that these words were addressed to the political commissioner, not to the military commander.

It seems clear that on December 5-6, Valluy was preparing for the decisive rupture with Hanoi. On December 6, the interim High-Commissioner edited two long telegrams to Paris, warning that war was imminent, asking for a firm governmental declaration and emphasizing the positive effect that a firm position in the North would have on the political climate in Cochinchina.

In the first cable, he declared that Morlière's failure to implement legitimate and even indispensable local counter-measures could not be tolerated much longer. It was indispensable that the road Haiphong-Hanoi be opened in a matter of days, and if this would have to be done by force, the chances for localizing the conflict would be minimal: "It is my duty to warn the government of the almost inevitable rupture that the hatred and insincerity of the Hanoi government leads us to." The only thing that could preclude the rupture was to take the last hope away from the extremist elements by a governmental declaration of France's firm will to intensify her military effort and reestablish peace and order.⁸¹

In the second cable, the interim High-Commissioner commented on the formation of a new Cochinchinese cabinet. Its success would depend upon French policy towards Vietnam. If the northern crisis could be untangled without French retreats, the fear that "Vietnamese elements" would return to power in the South could be removed. The new policy in Cochinchina would then bear fruit, and the population would recover the spirit of self-defense which was necessary to resist the rebels and quell them with French support.⁸²

These two telegrams must have been discussed in Paris on Saturday the 7th. On Sunday morning, Valluy suddenly changed his orders to Hanoi and instructed Sainteny to defer action.⁸³

The Third Week

In the new instructions to Hanoi of December 8, Sainteny and Morlière were asked to avoid a generalization of the conflict until reinforcements had arrived from France by January 15. It was in response to this "unexpected moderation" that Morlière wrote his December 12 report.⁸⁴ The need for reinforcements could not be the reason for the sudden shift in Valluy's attitude. He had in fact argued in his cable to Paris that it was necessary to start military operations without delay because the planned repatriation of experienced French troops in January would make the military situation more difficult. What else could explain his sudden moderation?

It would seem probable that the presence of an official American guest, Chief of the South East Asian Division in the State Department Abott Law Moffat had a moderating effect on Saigon. On December 8, Moffat reported to Washington that his presence was considered as a deterrent to open fighting since the outburst of such fighting during the visit of a distinguished foreigner would involve loss of face. He thought, however, that the reasons were "to be sought elsewhere."⁸⁵ He was undoubtedly right, for Moffat arrived in Saigon on December 3 and in Hanoi on December 6. The moderation only surfaced on December 8.

The only imaginable cause for the change in Saigon must be a rapid negative answer from Paris to Valluy's December 6 cable. It has not been possible to find this answer in the French archives,⁸⁶ but on December 12, Bidault personally disapproved of Valluy's course of action in a cable to Saigon. He declared himself surprised by the terms of Valluy's December 6 telegram, where

you suddenly speak of an alarming situation which nothing in your previous reports has permitted to foresee. I hope that it is not a question of simple smartness meant to cover your responsibility in any case.

Before this cable was transmitted, however, the last sentence (I hope...) was deleted.⁸⁷

Whether Bidault was sincere or writing for Blum's record will be discussed in chapter 8.3. Here, suffice it to say that Bidault's message must have shocked Saigon. It arrived together with the news that Léon Blum would form the new French cabinet, Blum, who in the December 10 issue of Le Populaire advocated Vietnamese independence and refuted all ideas of war of conquest. Saigon was in total disarray as to the intentions of Paris. Valluy has given a vivid, but rudimentary account of the confusion and the many telegrams between him and d'Argenlieu and Cominindo. According to Valluy d'Argenlieu reproached him for having sent information directly to Bidault.⁸⁸

Valluy decided to send his chief of staff Le Pulloch to Paris in order to find out if there existed any French policy. Le Pulloch was permitted to present his views to a meeting of the consultative Cominindo (gathering officials from the most important ministries) on December 14.

Le Pulloch recommended immediate military action, emphasizing the necessity of opening the road Haiphong-Hanoi and declaring that the Vietnamese army would have to be regarded as an adversary. He estimated French military forces to be strong enough to control both Haiphong and Hanoi, reestablish communications between the two towns and chase the Vietnamese government from Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh's government would then be unable to survive as it would lose the financial support which was necessary to maintain guerilla warfare. According to Le Pulloch, it was necessary to seize the occasion to obtain the fulfilment of the military clauses laid down by General Morlière in the demands of November 28.⁸⁹

Le Pulloch was soon engaged in a heated discussion with Messmer. The latter emphasized that it would be an

impossible political situation if France was to have a badly disguised ("voilée") indirect administration in the South while limiting French presence in the North to a few big towns. The only solution to the Cochinchinese problem would be an arrangement where Hanoi took part. At the tactical level, Messmer deemed it advisable to seek some sort of provisional arrangement with Ho Chi Minh and try to obtain a split between the tendencies of Ho and Giap respectively. The discouraging experiences with the autonomous government in Cochinchina showed how unwise it would be to make Ho disappear.

Le Pulloch replied that it would be difficult to obtain the desired split as Giap controlled both the army and the police and had "practically removed ("écarté") Ho Chi Minh from power."⁹⁰ Messmer warned against negative reactions both from French and international public opinion and stressed that if new incidents were to occur, the fault ("torts") should not be on the French side.⁹¹

Le Pulloch concluded the discussion by insisting that the actual military situation in Tonkin was favorable and that an instant effort, if the government so decided, could lead to a favorable settlement before the spring. It would be desirable to start military operations before the planned troop relief in January.⁹²

While Le Pulloch discussed with Messmer, d'Argenlieu saw Blum. Blum's own newspaper had demanded the replacement of d'Argenlieu, but Blum did not dare to challenge the political right and center so openly, so after their conversation, d'Argenlieu remarked drily to the press: "I will go back to Saigon,"⁹³ which he did four days later, receiving the news of the Vietnamese attack during an intermediate landing in Cairo.

On December 10, d'Argenlieu had at last received the formal governmental instructions, which, arguing against the grant

of independence to the existing Vietnamese regime, were in strict opposition to Blum's article, published by Le Populaire the same day.⁹⁴ Even if these instructions did not explicitly prescribe a rupture with the Vietnamese republic, they provided Saigon with a sort of legal basis for doing the opposite of what the new French premier was known to desire. One of the signatures under the December 10 instructions was the one of Marius Moutet.⁹⁵ Moutet was one of two French politicians who had known Blum for so long that they could address him with the familiar "tu".⁹⁶

Le Pulloch must have returned to Saigon fully aware that Paris could not be expected to tolerate a new Haiphong, and at the same time knowing that in a matter of days, Blum's cabinet was likely to intervene. There was not much time left for action.

The Fourth Week

In a political report to Paris of December 17, Pignon left no doubt as to Saigon's intentions. He tried to convince Paris that the political situation in Indochina must be seen as a whole, largely determined by the overall relationship between France and Vietnam. The future of Indochina could only be envisaged with confidence when the team in power in Hanoi had disappeared. A sincere agreement could never be concluded with the Vietminh. It would also be futile to place hope in Ho Chi Minh. He was smarter and more careful than his young collaborators, but his goals were the same as those of the Tong Bo. A cabinet reshuffle in Hanoi would be a trap. Only the elimination of the Vietminh party would permit a return to peace. The solution to the Indochinese problem did not reside in Cochinchina, but "only and exclusively in TONKIN and in the presence on the political scene of the VIET MINH PARTY." A great number of "Annamites" had come to understand that the Vietminh was the "obstacle to the realization of their national aspirations: independence and the union of the

three KY."⁹⁷ The elimination of the Vietminh or at least a considerable weakening of it, was the condition for maintaining France as a "major nation in the preeminent position that she should retain with regard to all associated countries." It is noteworthy that Pignon before December 19 had abandoned the quest for Cochinchinese autonomy and introduced the idea of accepting Vietnamese independence and unity under an alternative leadership. It took him three years to arrive at the establishment of Bao Dai's puppet regime.

There is no doubt about Saigon's intentions in December. They were to take full control of Hanoi the sooner the better. What held Valluy back, was the fear of being disavowed by Paris. At the return of Le Pulloch he had very little time left before direct contacts would be established between Léon Blum's government and Ho Chi Minh. That was likely to immobilize Saigon. While Pignon was writing his political report, Valluy went up north to Haiphong, where on December 17 he had a conference with Morlière, Sainteny and Dèbes. After the outbreak of war in Hanoi, Valluy criticized Morlière for having failed until December 17 to stop the building of barricades in Hanoi.⁹⁸ Before discussing the results of Valluy's December 17 conference with Sainteny and Morlière, however, the intentions of the Vietnamese government, as perceived by the French, will have to be examined.⁹⁹

7.5 Reluctance in Hanoi

On Sainteny's first day in Hanoi, Cuu Quoc, the Vietminh organ, published an article signed by the Tong Bo, stating that the French reactionaries were about to invade Bac Bo. If the invasion continued, the invaders would learn the courage and force of the Vietnamese people. Vietnamese history was evoked to demonstrate the will to fight:

The Vietnamese people does not like war, but how many times has she not fought for her independence? She has had the occasion to drown the Chinese soldiers of the "Nguyen" at Bach Dang and to bury alive the troops of the "Thanh" at Dong Da.

We do not want anything excessive. We simply wish our homeland to be independent, and we are determined to sacrifice our blood and our bones to protect this independence.

WE ARE PREPARED!¹⁰⁰

This proclamation must have been meant both as a warning to the French and as an assurance to the infuriated low rank cadres that no more concessions would be made. In the period after the publication of this proclamation, Vietnamese censorship concentrated on suppressing the most violently anti-French articles.¹⁰¹

On December 9, the chief of the French Suret  in Tonkin reported that the Vietnamese government was feverishly preparing for the worst, and well informed personalities generally thought that if the Vietnamese government was forced to use violence, it would do it. If the French command left the "Annamite leaders" in the actual dead end, they would start the war.¹⁰²

This was of course what Saigon hoped for, but other reports from Hanoi were less "optimistic." The fear (or hope) for a Vietnamese attack was notably weakened when L on Blum's article in Le Populaire was reproduced by the Vietnamese press on December 12 and 13. On this occasion Sainteny informed Saigon that the Vietnamese government invested great hopes in Blum's premiership and emphasized that if the new premier's article had been deformed by the Vietnamese, its alleged content should be disclaimed.¹⁰³ Sainteny notified that there was no reason to "fear that the Annamite Government was prepared to start a general conflict."¹⁰⁴

In an unsigned official report to Saigon on the situation in Hanoi at December 15, the author added his personal opinion. He did not think that the Vietnamese command intended to start the conflict in Hanoi. Several serious incidents had provided it with the opportunity, but it had not seized the occasion. Therefore: "According to the view of everybody, it is in our interest to take the initiative of the operations."¹⁰⁵

On the same day, the resistance committee at Dong Da (close to Hanoi) met with Tran Huy Lieu (A French spy was also present.) Tran Huy Lieu, considered by the French as the extremist above all, came from a meeting with Ho Chi Minh and commented on some strong rumors that the Chinese government was about to intervene. He did not consider these rumors to be without any foundation, but thought that a Chinese intervention was improbable as long as French troops were present. On the other hand, the French troops were not likely to take action for fear of a reaction of their allies. Tran Huy Lieu thought that these two factors, i.e. Chinese and French fears of each other, might be exploited in order to avoid a conflict, and he believed that the development of world politics would become more favorable to Vietnamese independence. If a conflict was to break out presently, Indochina would become a great battlefield, and "we would regret that we had been unable to control our temper."¹⁰⁶

It may be concluded that four days before the attack, the Vietnamese leaders still believed it possible to avoid war. They had their contingency plans ready for the attack, but only wanted to carry them out if convinced that the French were about to take action. The Vietnamese leaders were reluctant, and the French knew it.

On December 17, while Sainteny conferred with Valluy in Haiphong, his office in Hanoi worked out a report on a number of serious clashes that had taken place in the

streets. The report affirmed that the Vietnamese liaison had done everything possible to avoid escalation of the incidents.¹⁰⁷

7.6 Ho Chi Minh's appeals

Ho Chi Minh's illness did not prevent him from sending a stream of appeals to Paris during his last weeks in Hanoi. On November 27, Saigon forwarded a personal appeal to Bidault, where Ho Chi Minh begged for precise instructions to cease hostilities in Haiphong and Langson.¹⁰⁸ On December 6, the sick president made a radio appeal to the French National Assembly and the French government, asking them to order the French troops to return to the positions they held before November 20.¹⁰⁹ This appeal was published by Le Populaire on December 9 and motivated Blum's article on the following day. On December 12, Ho Chi Minh protested against the landing, three days earlier, of French reinforcements in Da Nang (Tourane). According to the president, this could only strengthen the fear of the Vietnamese that France was preparing for a "coup de force."¹¹⁰

Then Ho Chi Minh received Blum's article and learned that the new French premier would be the old socialist, whom he had listened to, although disagreeing, at the scission of the French Socialist Party at Tours 26 years earlier. This was the straw that Ho had waited for. He tried to clutch it by writing a long message to Blum on December 15 with precise proposals for a solution. Ho promised the return to normal economic life in the cities, abolishment of all protective measures and the reopening of communications between Hanoi, Haiphong and Langson. In return, the French would have to withdraw the troops in Haiphong and Langson to the positions they held before November 20, withdraw the reinforcements from Da Nang and cease military operations in Cochinchina and South-Annam. Ho Chi Minh further

proposed to establish the mixed commissions envisaged in the Modus Vivendi, with sites in Saigon and Hanoi.¹¹¹ To sum up, Ho Chi Minh proposed to forget about the last weeks and return to the Modus Vivendi.

This message was delivered to Sainteny for transmittal on December 15. On the following day, Hoang Minh Giam told its basic content to O'Sullivan, who at once reported it to Washington, who in turn informed the embassy in Paris.¹¹² American Ambassador Caffery thus knew Ho's proposals in the morning of December 18 while Léon Blum only received his copy on December 20, almost simultaneously with the news of the attack.¹¹³

What did Sainteny do with the message on December 15? Saigon claimed to have received it by "valise" (official airborne post) in the morning of December 18, which in fact was after Valluy's meeting with Sainteny on December 17. If that is correct, Sainteny must deliberately have delayed the transmission to Saigon. It seems more probable, however, that Sainteny transmitted it to Saigon on December 15, along with a warning that the "Annamite Government" would be trying by all means to contact Blum personally. Sainteny declared in this warning that he was transmitting "the official telegram, addressed to president BLUM", but that other channels had probably also been used (possibly thinking of American channels). Sainteny asked Pignon to forward Ho's message to Messmer. On December 16, Pignon forwarded the warning to Messmer, but not Ho's message. He instead told Messmer that the message Sainteny was announcing in the warning was identical with a congratulation telegram to SFIO Paris, which had been forwarded by Saigon on December 14. When receiving Sainteny's warning in the afternoon of December 16, Messmer therefore still did not know the existence of Ho's proposals. He distributed the warning to d'Argenlieu and to Moutet, but not to Blum.¹¹⁴ Blum may of course have been informed by Moutet.

Saigon then at last transmitted Ho's message to Paris in the morning of December 18, but with so low priority that it took two days before it was ready to be circulated in Paris. Saigon even included a long comment, where all Ho Chi Minh's proposals were refuted. Paris was also warned against the "manoeuvre" of the Vietnamese government, which consisted in attempts to communicate directly with the French government.¹¹⁵

It should here be noted that, in his December 10 article, Blum had declared that the decisions on French Indochina policy should not be made by military authorities, nor by civilian colonists in Indochina, but by the government in Paris. When he said government, he explicitly thought of the cabinet and the responsible minister and not of

one of these interministerial committees which have not had more success in the Indochinese than in the German affair.¹¹⁶

It seems clear that Pignon/Valluy, and to some extent also Sainteny, were using all available means to preclude any contact between Ho Chi Minh and the new French premier. Their action represents a glaring example of how the bureaucracy can obstruct the decision-making process when the views of the political authorities do not respond to its liking.

On December 18, having received no answer from Blum, Ho Chi Minh wrote a new appeal, where he proposed that a French parliamentary delegation be sent to Vietnam.¹¹⁷ It was too late. On December 18, the crisis that led to war had entered its final phase.

7.7 Two Days Before War

In the morning of December 17, Morlière and Sainteny met Valluy at Haiphong,¹¹⁸ and at the same time, the

Vietnamese cabinet was listening to reports from Giap and Nam.¹¹⁹ Unfortunately, available sources do not reveal what was said and decided at the two meetings, but there is abundant information on what happened simultaneously in the streets of Hanoi. When the French and Vietnamese versions are contradictory, it is yet difficult to know which of them is most reliable. On some points they will therefore simply be juxtaposed.

On December 15, the French liaison had demanded that three specific barricades be taken away. As this was not done, the French themselves removed one of the barricades from 9 to 12 hrs. in the morning of December 17. The Vietnamese did not try to oppose this removal and in the afternoon they even voluntarily removed the other two barricades.

At another place, however, there was shooting at 9.45 hrs. between a group of Tu Ve, who was building a new barricade, and a French military car which was driving along that road.¹²⁰ According to the French, the Tu Ve opened fire on the car and killed two French soldiers. The Tu Ve post was subsequently "destroyed", the quarter searched and weapons seized.¹²¹ The Vietnamese maintained that fire had been opened from the car.¹²²

At 9.50 hrs., the French sentry in the mixed guard at the electric plant killed the Vietnamese sentry. This put the workers on the plant on strike,¹²³ but they resumed work at 13 hrs.¹²⁴

At 15.45 hrs., a French police sergeant was killed by a sniper. The blockhouse he shot from was "destroyed" (French version). In the Vietnamese version, the whole quarter was put under heavy French fire, and the inhabitants were barely permitted to collect their dead and injured.¹²⁵

The French liaison demanded that another barricade near Morlière's office be removed before the next day.¹²⁶

In the Vietnamese version of December 17, it was concluded that more than fifty had been killed or wounded and that premeditation and initiative of the incidents were entirely on the French side.¹²⁷ The French conclusion (in Hanoi) was that the Vietnamese government had shown its will to avoid incidents, but that its orders were not always obeyed.¹²⁸ This conclusion was omitted when Saigon repeated Hanoi's information to Paris.¹²⁹

Back from Haiphong in the evening, Sainteny discussed the situation with the foreign consuls. The following morning O'Sullivan warned Washington that the situation was "drifting aimlessly and dangerously." The Vietnamese government did give some evidence of awaiting developments in Paris, but had reacted negatively to the news that d'Argenlieu would return. While O'Sullivan had the impression that neither side wished war, he deemed the situation to be "literally powder keg which may explode at any time."¹³⁰

In the early morning of December 18, about one hundred paratroopers searched some private houses in the quarter of the big market belonging to Vietnamese "presumed to be responsible for the murder" of another paratrooper six days earlier. Thirty were killed on the Vietnamese side, one on the French, but these reprisals did not lead to any reaction from the Vietnamese.¹³¹

At 11 hrs., French workers began to dismantle a barricade close to Morlière's headquarters in the presence of a Vietnamese liaison officer. To this officer's great embarrassment there was a shot from a neighbouring house, wounding one French worker in the stomach.¹³²

At Noon Hanoi reported to Saigon that there seemed to be friction within the Vietnamese government. Its attitudes were in a flux. Uptil then, it had been unwilling to start the general Clash, but Nam had "tacitly admitted" in private talks that the government was about to be outflanked ("dépassé") by certain extremist elements.¹³³ French attitudes were not in a flux. The pressure on the Vietnamese government was increased by new demands. Before Noon, the Vietnamese liaison received from its French counterpart a letter announcing that the French would occupy the buildings of the financial department ("direction") and the ministry of communications, because a French car had been shot at from these buildings. The occupation of these houses was carried out without incidents. The same letter also demanded that a great number of barricades be removed. If not, the French command would feel obliged to clear the roads by its own means.¹³⁴ It is this letter that the Vietnamese were later to call the first French ultimatum.

The same morning, a French liaison officer, Major Fonde, had on his own initiative gone to see Giap. He asked Giap to permit the French troops to circulate freely and to have provisions. Otherwise, there would be an explosion with numerous killings and great destruction. According to Fonde's memoirs, Giap's answer went like this:

That will depend on you. Our decision has been made. We will not give more concessions. The destructions, what does that mean? The losses, one million dead Vietnamese. No importance. French will also die. We are prepared. It may last two years, five years, if necessary. We are prepared.¹³⁵

Fonde returned to his office and wrote what the Vietnamese were to call the second French ultimatum, in which he complained that the Vietnamese police was unable to fulfill its duties and notified:

The French command has asked me to let you know that if these shortcomings persist, it will take charge of the maintenance of order in Hanoi from December 20, 1946, at the latest.

This letter was not addressed to Giap, but to Nam.¹³⁶ Nam immediately answered that the police was "courageously" continuing to accomplish its tasks, and the French ought not to use this as a pretext to strike a blow at the Vietnamese government's right to fill the police function, a right that was derived from Vietnam's "sovereignty as a free state."¹³⁷

According to Vietnamese radio, Nam also protested to the French against the removal of barricades and declared:

At the moment when the formation of the French cabinet permits hope for a peaceful and friendly solution to the crisis that was provoked by the bloody incidents of Langson and Haiphong, any act that risks to endanger the situation must be carefully avoided.¹³⁸

During his meeting with Giap, Fonde had imagined that the powerful Tong Bo was assembled in another room of the presidential palace. Giap states in his memoirs that the Party Central Committee (Giap often talks of the "Party" when in reality it was probably question of the Vietminh front) met in a village by a small river in Ha Dong and that Ho Chi Minh declared: "The period of conciliatory efforts is over."¹³⁹

There exists no public report nor any French intelligence from this meeting, but events on the following day may indicate that a decision for a two-pronged initiative was made:

1. To carry out the last preparations for an attack by surprise in the evening of December 19,¹⁴⁰ thereby forestalling the French action that Fonde's letter permitted to foresee.
2. To avoid any incident in Hanoi during the day of December 19, take contact with the French in order to know their intentions and if possible obtain guarantees that could make it possible to delay the attack and thereby get to know the intentions of Blum.

Let us now return to the day where in Devillers' words everything is "bizarre, illogical, even suspect."¹⁴¹

7.8 December 19: Morning

At sunrise, the Vietnamese troops around Hanoi were put on a state of alert, and the officers were ordered to prepare for an assault in the evening. At 11 hrs. elite troops took position between the river and The Great Lake, from where they would be able to attack the citadel.¹⁴²

Inside Hanoi, the unit commanders of the "suicide squads" were ordered to prepare for their dangerous missions. In an order signed by commissar Le Hong, they were told to count the dead, injured and survivors after the engagement and report to the command in the village of Gia Quat Ha (east of the Red River).¹⁴³ The signal for attack would be given this way:

- preparation signal: green rockets.
- assault signal: red rocket, followed by 3 explosions made by 3 grenades.
- signal given tonight (19/12.46) at 18.45 hrs.¹⁴⁴

Military discipline would be secured by severe sanctions:

- retreat: death
- bad interpretation of the orders: death
- fomentation of plots: death¹⁴⁵

The second penalty is no doubt the most discouraging of the three, for it is not at all easy to interpret Le Hong's order. He announced that two signals would be given, one green and one red. Then he told the exact time for the signal, without saying which of them.¹⁴⁶ This ambiguity was perhaps not so dangerous for the suicide squads. They could wait till 18.45 hrs. and see if the rocket was green or red. For the historian, who is (fortunately) not

capable of replaying the events, it is more difficult. And yet the color of the 18.45 rocket may be crucial for the interpretation of Vietnamese actions that evening. We will revert to that problem.

While the suicide squads were preparing for their missions, special Tu Ve groups were making ready to attack French civilians in their houses, seize as much arms and ammunition as possible and take the civilians out of Hanoi as hostages.¹⁴⁷

While all these preparations were made behind the scenes, the situation in the streets was apparently improving. Vietnamese police was everywhere to secure law and order. Vietnamese workers resumed their work in the citadel, which had been abandoned for some days, and mixed Franco-Vietnamese military patrols once again patrolled in the town.¹⁴⁸

At 9.30 hrs. Hoang Minh Giam tried to make an appointment with Sainteny for the afternoon. Sainteny was busy and refused to see Giam before the next morning.¹⁴⁹ Giam had been charged by Ho Chi Minh with delivering a short letter to Sainteny. As Sainteny refused to see him, he only received the letter later in the day. Ho Chi Minh's letter was no doubt an attempt to reach a preliminary solution that could make it possible to call off the attack:

Commissioner and dear friend,
The atmosphere has become more tense these last days. This is really regrettable. While waiting for Paris' decision, I count on you to search with M. Giam for a solution that can improve the climate.¹⁵⁰

There was no reply, but Sainteny had also written a letter to Ho Chi Minh that morning, warning that if those guilty of a recent murder of a French civilian were not arrested

and imprisoned within 48 hours, he would himself proceed to the necessary investigations as well as to the measures that would preclude such crimes in the future. This letter never reached the addressee.¹⁵¹

Morlière, for his part, wrote a letter to Nam that morning, reiterating five demands which he had laid down orally for Nam earlier:

1. Removal of all barricades and termination of all hostile preparations.
2. Disarming of the "undisciplined and irresponsible" Tu Ve.
3. Release of all arrested French citizens.
4. Cessation of the "incendiary propaganda campaign."
5. Strict cooperation of all institutions responsible for maintenance of order.¹⁵²

This letter, received by Nam the same morning, was called the third French ultimatum.

If the above reactions from Sainteny and Morlière had been the only French response to Vietnamese overtures that morning, the attack would probably never have been called off. As on the previous morning, however, Vietnamese liaison officers asked their French contacts if the French troops were to be kept in the barracks through the day.¹⁵³

It is obvious that the French soldiers would be in danger if they were given leave, but on the other hand this would be the safest way to show that the French were not preparing for an immediate attack. The French command decided to let 1200 soldiers be off. They spread in the bars, restaurants and cinemas of Hanoi. Sainteny explains in his memoirs that this was done as a "manoeuvre" with the double aim either to provoke relaxation or oblige the Vietminh to "show its cards."¹⁵⁴

7.9 December 19: Afternoon

Where were the Vietnamese leaders in the afternoon? Giap tells that he inspected the military forces in the company of Hanoi sector commander Vuong Thua Vu and member of the Hanoi Resistance Committee Tran Quoc Hoan. They were discussing the probability of a French attack. "When would they start? Tomorrow or even earlier?"¹⁵⁵

Shortly before the Vietnamese attack Sainteny reported that Ho had come back to the capital after several days' absence.¹⁵⁶ It was later reported by the French that Ho, Giap and the other cabinet members had left Hanoi again in the afternoon several hours before the attack,¹⁵⁷ but Ho Chi Minh stated in a letter to Blum on December 23 that he had been in his residence when the French troops attacked and only escaped by a miracle.¹⁵⁸

It is thus uncertain where the Vietnamese leaders were in the evening, but we may safely assume that they stayed in Hanoi in the afternoon. They have probably met in the presidential palace in order to discuss if the attack should be carried out or called off. Morlière's letter and Sainteny's refusal to see Giam have been arguments for the attack. The suspension of the barrack confinement of the French troops has on the one hand represented a temptation: The French were more vulnerable. On the other hand it was fairly improbable that the French were about to launch their attack when they had made such a gesture. While these considerations were made, news arrived that possibly settled the matter. At 14 hrs. the French information service learned from Radio Saigon that Blum's cabinet had decided to send Moutet on a special mission to Indochina. The information service immediately telephoned the news to the parallel Vietnamese service, where second assistant Minh, very impressed by the news, assured that he would inform the members of the cabinet at once.¹⁵⁹

Some time between 14 hrs. and 16 hrs., which was well before the French decision to reconfine their troops to the barracks, the Vietnamese cabinet must have decided to cancel the attack. At 16 hrs. Giap summoned the most important military commanders at Bach Mai to tell them the decision.¹⁶⁰ At 16.45 hrs. the unit of Ngo Van Chieu received order not to attack. He noted in his diary that the attack had been called off and that it should not be carried out "under any pretext" if there was not a written or verbal order from Giap personally or from one of his two direct assistants. Any provocation against the French troops, which were on leave in the town, should be avoided.¹⁶¹ Ngo Van Chieu's diary clearly indicates that there were internal disagreements in the Vietnamese leadership and that Giap feared unauthorized action from his subordinates.

After the decision to cancel the attack, Ho Chi Minh wrote another letter to Léon Blum and to Blum's disciple Vincent Auriol, president of the National Assembly. Ho Chi Minh told the two French socialists that he had asked his compatriots to stay calm despite the many provocations. This he had done because of his love for France and his confidence in Blum and Auriol.

But for how long will I have to suffer from seeing my compatriots being killed before my eyes. I address to you once more this urgent appeal. In the highest interest of our two countries, I beg you once more to make the provocations and the bloodshed cease.¹⁶²

Blum and Auriol probably never got that letter.

While the president wrote to the two French statesmen, Nam in capacity of the Defense Minister's delegate answered Morlière's "ultimatum":

I have referred the matter to the Minister of National Defense. He has charged me with answering that he will submit your proposals to the weekly meeting of the

cabinet tomorrow, Friday December 20, 1946. In the meantime he has given orders to avoid all misunderstanding. He hopes that, on your side, the necessary orders will also be given to avoid any aggravation of the present situation.¹⁶³

Ho had asked his compatriots to "stay calm." Giap had given orders to "avoid all misunderstanding." He hoped that Morlière would do the same. When Morlière received the letter from Nam, he just had, or was about to do, the opposite.¹⁶⁴

Some time in the afternoon, the French command began to receive information that troops were massed outside Hanoi and that there were plans for an attack the same evening.¹⁶⁵ One of these reports came from a spy, named Fernand Petit, who had infiltrated the Tu Ve.¹⁶⁶ According to a pamphlet, published (anonymously) by the French journalist Jean Bidault, Petit had been told in the morning of December 19 that the attack would be made at a not specified time in the evening. He managed to give this information to French intelligence a little before 18 hrs. When he returned to his Tu Ve group, he was told that the attack would be made at 20 hrs. He managed to have ten minutes leave and communicated the hour to French contacts.

This Petit-story does not mention that the attack had been cancelled, and that might indicate that the Tu Ve command had ignored Giap's counter-order. Jean Bidault gives Petit the honor of having saved the French troops from massacre, but if Jean Bidault's time-table is correct, the Petit report can not have influenced Morlière, who reconfined the troops to the barracks as early as 17 hrs.¹⁶⁷ It is puzzling that so little is to be found in the archives and the literature on Petit and on the kind of information that motivated the decision to reconfine the troops.¹⁶⁸

The news that the French soldiers and officers were suddenly being recalled from the streets must have arrived at the Vietnamese headquarters just as efforts were being made to explain the Tu Ve that the attack would have to be cancelled.¹⁶⁹

7.10 December 19: Dusk

The chronology of events up to and just after 20 hrs. is so confused and difficult to establish that it will be necessary to do it first from the French side and then from the side of the Vietnamese. To reconfine the troops to barracks was not a radical measure in view of the mounting evidence of a planned attack. Did Morlière really believe that a Vietnamese attack was imminent, and did he prepare his troops for combat?

On this point, the sources are contradictory. Ho Chi Minh included as an appendix to his memorandum of December 31 a note from a Vietnamese liaison officer stating that, at 18.30 hrs., the police had reported the presence of French armoured cars on five sensitive spots.¹⁷⁰ Jean Bidault gives the same information and adds that the armoured cars were blocking the roads that the Vietnamese troops outside Hanoi would have to use in order to penetrate into the town.¹⁷¹ D'Argenlieu, however, asserted that Ho Chi Minh's allegations to French preparations were "manifestly wrong." There had been only two armoured cars in town that evening, following the customary itinerary of the mixed patrol.¹⁷² D'Argenlieu's report aimed both at establishing the culpability of Ho Chi Minh and at showing that Morlière had failed to fulfill his military duties. His conclusions may therefore have been influenced by his double aim. In an appendix to his report it is categorically affirmed that the French in Hanoi had been

surprised by the attack, the troops being in the barracks instead of at the positions of alert which had been fixed throughout the town.¹⁷³

It would have been easy to reject d'Argenlieu's contentions but for the fact that O'Sullivan and the first report from Hanoi to Saigon support his statement. O'Sullivan stated that the first French forces only began to move into the city from the various cantonments at 20.20 hrs. They consisted principally of armoured units - half tracks, assault guns, armoured cars and jeeps. The

inexperienced troops manning these vehicles added to the confusion by shooting almost indiscriminately at anything which moved.¹⁷⁴

O'Sullivan's account is consistent with one of the first reports from Hanoi to Saigon, which states that French intervention began at 20.20 hrs. Until 21.30 hrs. it was quite calm, but from then on combats were intense.¹⁷⁵ This probably means that the organized French offensive, which rapidly led to the conquest of the European sector and all important public buildings, began at 21.30 hrs.

French journalist Pierre Voisin held the same view in a Figaro article of February 1, stating that the troops had neither been prepared for combat nor placed at their tactical positions. He must have forgotten that he had written in the same newspaper ten days before that the command had been able to reassemble all the forces so that the 9 D.I.C. could react instantly at 20 hrs. with vigor and efficiency.¹⁷⁶

With such contradictory information it is difficult to assess the degree of French preparation for combat. Ho Chi Minh's detailed information on the five strategically

placed armoured cars, confirmed by Jean Bidault, is convincing. French armoured cars were probably blocking the main approaches to the city, but in spite of that the French command seems to have been surprised by the attack. Morlière did not prepare his troops the way he would have done if he really believed there would be an attack.

If Morlière did not take the warnings seriously, the same was certainly true for Sainteny. In a cable, sent from Hanoi at 17 hrs. he emphasized Ho's "extremely amiable" letter and only just mentioned that "other information" had signalled a great attack for the same evening.¹⁷⁷ When the water and electricity was cut at 20 hrs., Sainteny was either at home or on his way home. In his memoirs, he claims to have heard the clock of Hopital Yersin strike eight before he left his office. Just as he was in his car, at 20.04 hrs. "exactly," he heard an explosion and saw all lights go out.¹⁷⁸ This story is strange, for one of Hanoi's first reports to Saigon said that the electricity was cut at 19.55 hrs.¹⁷⁹ Sainteny thus seems to have considered the danger to be so small that he left his office to go home before 20 hrs. Despite the cut of electricity he seems to have driven his car home, for half an hour later Morlière sent an armoured car to Sainteny's home to fetch him. At 21 hrs. this car struck a mine, and Sainteny, injured and under Vietnamese fire, had to wait a long time before he was saved by a half-track.¹⁸⁰

French military confusion of the first one and a half hour and Sainteny's strange behavior are two factors which point at the same conclusion: In spite of warnings from Petit and others, the French were taken by surprise. Was it a real military attack that took them by surprise? It seems no. When we now turn to developments on the other side, we shall see that confusion reigned no less among the Vietnamese.

The only effective Vietnamese operation at 20 hrs. was the Tu Ve attack on French civilians. This permitted them to take some 200 hostages. The rest of the attack was pure obstruction: water and electricity cut, crossroads blocked by tramways, a long road by a train, mines placed in the streets, and aimless fire with mortars and anti-aircraft artillery. There was no attempt to attack French military forces in their cantonments, and an attempt to destroy the vital bridge Pont Doumer (Long Bien) was a failure. Was it all meant as a cover for the taking of hostages? Or was only one part of the greater plan accomplished, the battalions around Hanoi being kept back refusing to do their part of the job? Was the poor coordination of the assault the result of vacillation in the Vietnamese leadership reflecting divergencies between the political and military wings?

These questions are difficult to answer, but one thing is certain: To attack on December 19, just as Blum had taken office and Moutet was preparing for his mission, was a tactical blunder of the very worst sort. It was the best gift that Saigon could have: only few French military losses, and the world's best excuse for breaking with the Vietnamese republic once and for all. Ho Chi Minh probably understood that.

On January 12, 1947, French intelligence could report that Giap had ordered all units to destroy immediately the daily order of December 19 with all appendixes.¹⁸¹ Since then, the details of December 19 have been taboo. What was Giap's role that evening? Was the attack a sudden decision made by him in the last hours, struck by a fear that a French attack was imminent? Or was he pressured from below? Was the attack perhaps an unauthorized action from the Tu Ve, who had been infiltrated by the anti-Vietminh VNQDD and who feared that a negotiated settlement would include their disarming? Before examining these

possibilities, we must take a look at the military hierarchy in Hanoi:

- LEVEL 1: President Ho Chi Minh, assisted by personal secretary (and doctor) Pham Ngoc Thach and undersecretary of foreign affairs Hoang Minh Giam.
- LEVEL 2: Defense Minister and Supreme Commander Vo Nguyen Giap with two direct assistants who were allowed to sign orders in his name, and with Minister of the Interior Hoang Huu Nam as "special delegate."
- LEVEL 3: Hanoi military sector under the command of Vuong Thua Vu and under the authority of Hanoi's Resistance Committee with the following members:
- chairman: Nguyen Van Tran
(or colonel Le Quang Ba)
 - deputy chairman: Vuong Thua Vu
 - political commissar: Tran Do
 - ordinary members: Tran Quoc Hoan
Khuat Duy Tien
Dang Viet Chau
Tran Duy Hung
Le Quang Dao 182
- LEVEL 4: - At least 4 battalions of the regular army at positions around Hanoi.
- 1 battalion of the regular army inside Hanoi with the task to defend public buildings, first of all the residence of the president.
 - Suicide squads with special tasks in the fight against armoured cars, probably with Le Hong as political commissar of the command, which stayed in the village Gia Quat Ha.
 - Tu Ve forces, led by a Central Executive Committee, consisting of about 8500 men, organized in sections and companies in each quarter of the town. 183

Along with this decision-making hierarchy the organs of the Viet Minh front with its influential central committee (Tong Bo) might have had some influence, but key personalities in the Tong Bo (like Nguyen Luong Bang) were

charged with preparing clandestine headquarters in the interior of the country and thus incapable of influencing decisions in Hanoi. If any of the "hidden leaders" remained in Hanoi on December 19 (Ho Tung Mau, Truong Chinh or Hoang Quoc Viet), they probably sat on the Executive Committee of the Tu Ve.

We may thus now pose the question: Was the ultimate decision to attack made at the two first levels or at one of the two lower levels? Did Giap launch the attack because he misunderstood French immediate intentions, or was the attack a result of disobedience on the part of Giap's subordinates? Let us first examine the arguments that may support the hypothesis of disobedience.

1. Giap's and Ho's order to fight came after the fighting had begun. If Giap had taken the decision to attack at 20 hrs., he would probably have ordered his troops to attack the other French garrisons in Tonkin at the same time. The other garrisons were attacked much later, and Giap's order to all military units for combat on all fronts, has apparently been written after 20 hrs.¹⁸⁴ Devillers says 21.30.¹⁸⁵ French intelligence had also reported on December 12 that the Vietnamese planned to have Ho Chi Minh make a radio proclamation when the general attack was decided. Ho Chi Minh's famous proclamation only came in the evening of December 20, after 24 hours of complete silence on Radio Bach Mai.¹⁸⁶

2. The regular army did not attack at 20 hrs. The strict order received by Ngo Van Chieu only to carry out personal orders from Giap or his two assistants shows that Giap did not fully trust his subordinates. The actions of the regular army, which must be supposed to have been better disciplined than the Tu Ve, probably reflect Giap's intentions better than the Tu Ve. It would therefore be important to know what the regular army in and outside Hanoi did from 20 hrs. The first French report from Hanoi

to Saigon only said that electricity had been cut and "V.M. action" started at 20 hrs.¹⁸⁷ In the next telegram, electricity had been cut at 19.55, and fire from Vietnamese mortars and automatic weapons had "begun everywhere simultaneously."¹⁸⁸ On December 21, it was added that units of the regular army in the building of Compagnie Yunnan (inside Hanoi) had fired on the central liaison office from 20.05 hrs.¹⁸⁹ This means, if it is true, that at least one unit of the regular army did open fire before French troops intervened, but this might be the result of a spontaneous order from the local commander, following up the action of the Tu Ve.

Ngo Van Chieu noted in his diary that about fifty young fellows were passing by his post at 18.30 hrs. One of them shouted: "It will be soon, comrade. The victory is ours! Long live President Ho!" A little later, Ngo Van Chieu saw other Tu Ve fighters leave a house, armed with hunting guns and an enormous sabre. He was afraid that they might disobey orders and asked the commander of the regiment what to do. The answer was: "What do you want to do? Fire at them?"¹⁹⁰ At 19.20 hrs. the commander of the neighbouring unit told Ngo Van Chieu that the French troops had been reconfined to barracks and that he thought "it will be for tonight." This indicates that at least some of the regular troops had received no new order 40 minutes before the electricity cut. Ngo Van Chieu received new orders at 19.50 hrs. They were to move around the town and take position at the road from Hanoi to Haiphong in order to be held in reserve.

3. The Tu Ve were poorly organized. The Tu Ve forces numbered about 8500, but they had little training. The group and section commanders had been through two courses, one of two days and one of three days.¹⁹¹ In a document presented to the regional Vietminh congress on October 24, only 217 Tu Ve fighters were said to be Vietminh members.¹⁹² In a

circular to local Tu Ve commanders, dated December 12, they were asked to make a report on the morale, ideas and desires of the Vietnamese in their service and to tell if they were "reactionnaires." (i.e. adherent of the China-oriented opposition).¹⁹³ A report from Pignon, signed on December 17, affirmed that the VNQDD had continued its activities since the suppression, now concentrating on infiltration of the Tu Ve which it wanted to set up against the French "in order to create difficulties for the VM leaders."¹⁹⁴

The same day as this report was finished in Saigon, the French in Hanoi launched a propaganda campaign in order to set the regular Vietnamese army up against the Tu Ve.¹⁹⁵ Morlière followed up on the morning of December 19 by demanding that the Tu Ve forces be disarmed. In Nam's answer to Morlière, it was promised that this would be discussed on the December 20 cabinet session. How did the Tu Ve Executive Committee react to that? Ngo Van Chieu wrote in his diary that at 20 hrs., the Tu Ve guard at the electric plant gave the alert because of an ignoble French provocation.¹⁹⁶

It thus seems that the Tu Ve were both poorly organized, infiltrated by the VNQDD and on December 19 under the threat of being disarmed. These three factors may have created difficulties when the Tu Ve were ordered to call off the attack. The Vietnamese Right may have seen a French-Vietnamese confrontation as the only way of getting rid of the Vietminh. There were secret contacts between French authorities and anti-Vietminh nationalists in the days preceding December 19.¹⁹⁷ The VNQDD probably infiltrated the Tu Ve in order to provoke a conflict, and they may have obtained to set the rank and file Tu Ve cadres up against the Vietminh leaders. It would also be interesting to know whether French infiltration of the Tu Ve (Fernand Petit) had anything to do with this. The

infiltration alone, however, can hardly explain the December 19 attack. It is difficult to see that a group of infiltrators could be so centrally placed that they were able to start an attack on the scale of the operations that were carried out at 20 hrs.

These were the arguments for the hypothesis of disobedience. Let us now turn to certain facts which seem to indicate that the attack was after all the result of a top level decision:

1. The attack was probably delayed in relation to the plans. If we may assume that Le Hong thought of the red rocket (the signal of attack) when he announced that the signal would be given at 18.45 hrs., then the attack was delayed. If this was the case, it would indicate that the Tu Ve have obeyed the order to call off the attack and that something has happened in the late afternoon which provoked a reconsideration.¹⁹⁸

2. French preparations created fear. From 17 hrs. the French soldiers and officers disappeared from the streets. This must have been reported to the Vietnamese command while it was explaining the Tu Ve that the attack had been called off. Some time later, the presence of armoured cars at five sensitive spots was also signalled to Giap, and movements seem to have been reported in Hotel Metropole, close to the residence of the president. This was where the Vietnamese had discovered a disguised French force.¹⁹⁹

These three separate items of information; reconfinement to barracks, armoured cars and movements in Hotel Metropole, may have created a fear that the French were about to launch an attack on the leading Vietnamese organs. In fact, when Ngo Van Chieu was ordered at 19.50 hrs. to move around Hanoi, it was in order to use his troops for the protection of the cabinet's escape route.²⁰⁰

3. Hanoi post office was informed one hour before the attack that it would come. In an internal Vietnamese letter, dated December 23, the war commissar at Hanoi's central post office told that he had been warned of the attack a little after 19 hrs. by the political commissar of the section of the National Guard.²⁰¹ If the National Guard commissar may be presumed to have acted under Giap's order this should indicate that Giap had changed his mind since the attack was called off. The National Guard Commissar might, however, have his information from the Tu Ve command or from one of the members of Hanoi's Resistance Committee. The warning to the post office yet at least weakens a hypothesis that the attack was the act of a group of VNQDD infiltrators.

7.11 Conclusion

Obviously we do not at present have access to sufficient evidence for any final conclusion as to whether the attack was made in defiance of the supreme command's orders or on the personal order of General Giap. It seems clear that the Vietnamese government was under pressure from below. It also seems clear that French precautionary measures in the late afternoon must have made it difficult for Giap to resist the pressure and maintain the cabinet order to call off the attack. What actually happened on the Vietnamese side from 17 to 20 hrs. will for the time being remain a mystery. There are several possibilities:

- The Tu Ve group at the power plant and the waterworks may have started the attack on their own.
- The Tu Ve command might be responsible for the ultimate decision.
- The decision can have been made at the Hanoi command level by a majority or minority of Hanoi's Resistance Committee's members.
- Giap can have decided the attack without any prior consent from Ho Chi Minh.

- Giap can have given his order in cooperation with the president.

All these possibilities remain open, but the first and the last are perhaps the least probable.

If the final decision remains in the shadow, it seems most likely that the whole Vietnamese leadership knew that an offensive plan had been made. It had of course been possible for the Vietnamese cabinet to withdraw in silence to the interior of the country and leave the initiative to the French. That, however, could have led to a loss of confidence in the Hanoi population and paved the way for the opposition. The French could also be expected to interpret it as a voluntary abdication. There was not much option left to the Vietnamese government in December.

It had been driven into a corner by the occupation of Haiphong and Langson. Until December 19, it managed to resist the pressure, continuously seeking for a peaceful way out of the deadlock. On December 19, it either lost control of its forces or of itself.

The French in Indochina were playing with fire. They steadily increased the pressure on Ho Chi Minh on the diplomatic level while at the same time stimulating the agitation of the Tu Ve by propaganda and harsh reprisals. This was done with the double purpose of either forcing the Vietnamese government to take up arms or creating a split between "moderates" and "extremists." Pignon and Valluy opted for the first of these possibilities and won. Sainteny continued to gamble on the second, hoping to save his friend Ho for France. He lost.

The game that Valluy/Pignon/Sainteny were playing was not only directed against the Vietnamese republic. It was also a game against time and the intervention that was bound to come from Paris. The crux of the matter is that at the moment when the Tu Ve cut off the lights in Hanoi, a personal message to Ho Chi Minh was lying on Valluy's desk in Saigon. The message bore the signature of Léon Blum.

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CHAPTER 8

PARIS

We shall now have to retrace our steps by examining the November and December events from the Paris viewpoint. Chapter 7 stopped with December 19. This chapter will include an investigation of the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of war; the missions of Moutet and Leclerc to Indochina, the dismissals of Morlière and d'Argenlieu and the earliest attempts to find a puppet and thereby exclude any possibility of new negotiations with Ho Chi Minh.

8.1 French Politics

In postwar French politics, two ideals were sacred: peace and grandeur national. The first stemmed from the horrors of the two world wars and was a general European idea. The second had its background in the 1940 national humiliation. They were both beyond debate and not necessarily contradictory. It was generally agreed that France should resume her seat among the great powers and use her position to prevent the division of the world into two hostile blocks by speaking the "language of peace."

The ideal of national greatness was closely linked to the assumption that it was the empire that made France a great power. Indeed, this was reflected in the textbooks of the period:

European France is a medium range power, with Overseas France she is a great power, the French Union.

It is the overseas territories that confer on France her rank as a great power.¹

The principle of peace was written into the constitution of 1946:

The French Republic will not embark upon any war of conquest and will never use her forces against the freedom of any people.²

With regard to Indochina the two goals could not be reconciled. This conflict was most deeply felt on the political left where the peace ideal was strongest. Until November 1946, the two ideals could be combined in the negatively formulated socialist slogan: "Neither abandon nor conquest." War broke out in Hanoi just as the control of the levers of power had passed from one of the most ardent protagonists of national restoration to a man whose humanitarianism was strong enough to make him remind the deputies on December 23 that not all blood shed was French.³

French politics in 1946 was dominated by three political parties and one retired general.

General de Gaulle influenced the policy that led to war in Indochina in three ways. First through the decision-making system that he left behind when retiring in January. This system weakened governmental control and strengthened the power of the High-Commissioner. Second through his influence on the officers who served under his orders during World War II and who continued to hold the most important positions in Indochina: Leclerc and d'Argenlieu. We have seen that when conflict arose between the two, Leclerc presented his views to de Gaulle rather than to the French government.⁴ It is not impossible that Leclerc's warnings against concessions during the Fontainebleau conference may be traced to advice from de Gaulle. Third

by fear on the part of leading French politicians that failure in Indochina would be exploited by de Gaulle. The Minister of War in 1946, Edmond Michelet, later stated that de Gaulle had appealed directly to Bidault to make no concessions to Ho Chi Minh.⁵ In his campaign against the constitution that was adopted in the October 13 referendum, de Gaulle argued that it was too equivocal and too liberal with regard to the French Union. At a press conference in August, he insisted that if France was deprived of the overseas territories, there was a risk that she would no longer be a great power. These territories would then be left to the dominance of foreign powers.⁶

Under Bidault's leadership, the Christian Democrats (MRP) (26 percent and 164 deputies from November 10, 1946) would probably have advocated a firm Indochina policy even without the pressure from de Gaulle, but the widespread respect and admiration for the General in the MRP may have contributed to unite the party behind Bidault's intransigence.⁷ The MRP came out of the French Resistance and was strongly nationalist. It dominated French governmental policy until December 1946 and certainly carried most of the political responsibility for the policy that led to war. The MRP does not seem to have wavered. Bidault's policy was supported without qualification by party chairman Maurice Schumann in the party paper l'Aube. On December 12, the same day as the National Assembly designated Léon Blum to succeed Bidault, the MRP issued a leaflet, proposing that a "unanimous French government" should manifest its will to make the French presence in Indochina respected and as soon as possible carry out a plan to "fight energetically all kinds of terrorism."⁸

The French Socialist Party (SFIO) (18 percent and 105 deputies) is the most interesting of the three parties because the Socialists were divided among themselves. A study of the internal Socialist quarrels over Indochina in

1946 would certainly provide important evidence as to what led Léon Blum's government to abstain from those measures which could have prevented the outbreak of war. Internal party debates fall beyond the scope of this study, but we easily discern the strong difference between Moutet's policy in government and the line of action advocated by the party press. While Moutet supported Cochinchinese autonomy, the Socialist press constantly attacked the provisional Cochinchinese government and emphasized French obligations as settled by the March 6 agreement. At the 38. SFIO Congress in August-September 1946, a left wing opposition, led by Guy Mollet and Jean Rous, gained support from the majority of the delegates, and Guy Mollet became secretary general. Franc-Tireur, mouth-piece of the Jean Rous group, campaigned in November-December for the replacement of d'Argenlieu and warned almost daily against the danger of a prolonged war. The young left-wing Socialists were far more outspoken on Indochina than the Communists, and they held a strong position in the party apparatus. In December the "responsible veterans" yet seem to have been able to make their Indochina policy accepted by a majority in SFIO's "Conseil National," and this enabled Moutet to sign the December 10 instructions to d'Argenlieu while Blum appeased the party opposition through his leading article in Le Populaire.

The Communist Party (PCF) (28 percent and 170 deputies) which was the only important political force that really set its sights on cooperation with Ho Chi Minh's government, did not give up hope for a peaceful solution after December 19, but in 1947 continued to favor negotiations with the "legal Vietnamese government." The Communist Party seems to have been critical of the policy for Cochinchinese autonomy at a very early date and supported Vietnamese claims for national unity.⁹ This was no doubt the general attitude of the Communist leaders, but they were not eager to make it known or to impose it on the other political parties. In fact, the Indochina policy

of the French Communist Party in 1946 can be summed up in two words: Keep quiet!

To the PCF, political positions in France were of course far more important than the interests of the Vietnamese communists, and in the first postwar period, PCF did its utmost to pose as a moderate and patriotic political force. This policy reached its climax in November 1946, when it became the largest party in France and hoped to see Maurice Thorez become prime minister. The French Communists were therefore not very enthusiastic about the Vietnamese revolution. When Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Vietnamese Republic on September 2, 1945, the near total of the French press commented negatively. The main Communist paper, l'Humanité, only mentioned the event on September 15 by quoting a brief note from AFP.¹⁰ Six months later, the Communists reacted favorably to the March 6 agreement, and during the Fontainebleau conference close contacts were established between Ho Chi Minh and some Communist leaders. There is no indication, however, that PCF used its position in the Cominindo (Charles Tillon) or in the delegation to Fontainebleau (Henri Lozeray) to exert pressure for concessions to the Vietnamese, and when Franco-Vietnamese relations worsened in November, the Communist press either withheld comment or tried to blame the incidents on some third force, preferably the Chinese or the Americans. The lack of an active Communist Indochina policy enabled the French government to claim to represent all political parties in France when refusing to make concessions.¹¹ The PCF would rather sacrifice the communists in Vietnam than risk its domestic political positions, and this seems also to have been in accordance with Moscow's Eurocentered policy. As we shall see, this led to serious problems for the PCF in late December and in the first half of 1947, when the Communist deputies were expected to demonstrate their patriotism by voting for war credits and rising up in honor of French soldiers.

The two remaining political groups, the various Conservative elements and the Radicals (each obtaining some 11-12 percent of the vote and 40 deputies) were both violently colonialist and anti-Vietminh. The following analysis of the news coverage and editorials on Indochina by six important Paris newspapers is intended as an illustration of the kind of information offered to the French public. From our perspective the reactions to the bombing of Haiphong and the events leading up to December 19 are of particular importance.

8.2 Six Paris Newspapers

The six newspapers which have been selected are: Le Figaro (independent conservative), Le Monde (independent), L'Aube (MRP), Le Populaire (SFIO), Franc-Tireur (left wing socialist), L'Humanité (PCF). These dailies are not fully representative of the Paris press, and even less of the French press in general. We are here mainly interested in discovering what kind of information emanated from Indochina and in finding out how the newspapers of the different political tendencies commented upon them.¹² None of the six had correspondents in Indochina in November and December.¹³ They therefore had to rely mainly on news from AFP, and to some extent on AP, which had correspondents both in Saigon and Hanoi.¹⁴

In order to assess the journalistic value of news from AFP, it is necessary to say a few words about the relationship between this agency and the French colonial administration. French authorities in Saigon had an ingrained fear of a free press. They tried to avoid giving visa to critical journalists,¹⁵ and established such close cooperation with AFP that the press agency could be considered a branch of the colonial administration. When d'Argenlieu received the news of the December 19 attack, he at once reminded Valluy of how important it was to control information and the press.¹⁶ On December 20 a tacit

agreement was reached between Hanoi authorities and the AFP correspondents that no interview with Vietnamese personalities should be published.¹⁷ Saigon assured Paris that control with the French press "of all categories" was taken care of. Information from AFP could be considered to be of "an official nature."¹⁸ The only problem was statements on the Vietnamese radio, which were heard by the AP-correspondents. Saigon tried to censor or delay cables based on Vietnamese radio news. This led to American protests, and Moutet instructed Saigon not to censor reports from the international correspondents, but instead try to destroy the Vietnamese radio.¹⁹ There is no reason to believe that control was less effective in November than in late December.

During the first three weeks of November, the six Paris dailies wrote very little about Indochina. The news of the effective implementation of the ceasefire and of Dr. Thinh's suicide were published, but no attempt was made to investigate the application of the Modus Vivendi. The suicide encouraged some critical comments. Le Populaire predicted the disappearance of the Cochinchinese government. Jacques Guérif in le Monde did not doubt that the Cochinchinese wanted autonomy, but deplored that the provisional government had not been really democratic.²⁰

When news of the November 20 incident in Haiphong arrived, le Figaro, l'Aube and le Monde at once blamed it on the Vietnamese,²¹ but le Monde also printed the Vietnamese version.²² The headlines in the three left wing newspapers were neutral. Le Populaire and Franc-Tireur emphasized that the incident originated in a conflict over customs, while l'Humanité in a small note on page 3 hinted that the incident might be due to a "provocation from anti-Vietnamese Chinese elements."²³

On November 23, AFP reported that Dèbes had presented the Vietnamese with an ultimatum, and this had led to a

Vietnamese attack. This piece of information was faithfully reproduced by le Monde and l'Aube. The latter even stated in the headline that the French had been attacked once more. Le Figaro brought a respectably neutral summary of the French and Vietnamese versions. Le Populaire and Franc-Tireur did not believe the official version, but could not offer any alternative one. Le Populaire hoped the government knew what really had happened, and Franc-Tireur asked for the replacement of d'Argenlieu, refuted the thesis of a "Vietnamese provocation" and asked if "certain oldfashioned colonialists were trying to save an absurd policy by military provocations."²⁴ The November 26 front page of l'Humanité concentrated on the demand that Thorez head the new government, but page 3 contained more about Vietnam than usual. Some undefined "éléments provocateurs" were blamed for the incidents. The article pleaded confidence in Ho Chi Minh and demanded a termination of "equivocal methods which always give room for provocations." On the following day, the fact that the incident had started with an inspection of a Chinese junk was used to prove that "certain private interests, foreign to the interests of French and Vietnamese nationals, are calling the tune."²⁵ When the French occupation of Haiphong had been completed, l'Humanité used the following headline: "Calm returns to Vietnam."²⁶

The use of artillery and the strafing of fleeing civilians from airplanes were only mentioned by the Paris press in the form of official denials, but le Populaire correctly remarked that one of the denials in fact confirmed Vietnamese allegations that artillery had been used.²⁷ Much was said on the number of French soldiers killed. In order to refute exaggerations in the Chinese press, it was also stated that only 50 Chinese nationals had been killed. Noone at that time tried to estimate the number of Vietnamese killed, and the massacre in Haiphong was generally referred to as the Haiphong incident. On

November 28, le Monde's Rémy Roure affirmed that from the French side, "not a single shot had been fired, except in defense."

When Morlière handed over the "ultimatum without time limit," le Populaire only reproduced this news item without comment. L'Aube emphasized that the Vietnamese delayed answering. Le Figaro cited an explanation from d'Argenlieu, while l'Humanité thought the method of ultimatums was "no good." The "pseudo-policy of firmness," which had earlier been applied in Lebanon and Syria, had according to the PCF daily endangered French moral authority and "opened the door to others."²⁸

Franc-Tireur presented the ultimatum in blazing headlines, asked whether France was preparing for a "reconquest" and demanded that a parliamentary commission be sent to Indochina.

In December, the three left wing papers warned against the possibility of war, Franc-Tireur most vigorously by several times repeating the demand for d'Argenlieu's replacement. Le Populaire made the same demand, while l'Humanité warned against the danger of Chinese intervention.²⁹ L'Aube on several occasions outright supported d'Argenlieu and announced with pleasure that he would go back to Saigon. As early as November 30, le Figaro's Jacques Darcy had emphasized the danger inherent in the "calculated passivity" of the PCF. Every hour of hesitation and inertia would be "paid in French blood."

The incidents in Hanoi in the days that preceded December 19, made front page headlines in all six dailies. While le Figaro and le Monde only reproduced official information, L'Aube dramatized the events by telling that 300 Vietnamese, armed and trained by the Japanese, had attacked a French unit.³⁰ In the same issue, MRP leader Maurice Schumann stated that respecting agreements did not merely

imply observing them, but also "MAKING them observed." Le Populaire emphasized the cabinet's decision to send Moutet to Indochina, where in cooperation with Ho Chi Minh he would work out the modalities for an effective application of the Modus Vivendi. L'Humanité found it curious that the new incidents occurred just as the French cabinet crisis was about to be resolved and wondered aloud whether someone acted with the purpose of "dividing the French on a difficult and painful question in order to carry out certain domestic political operations."³¹ The left wing Socialists felt less need than their Communist colleagues to give priority to the domestic scene. Franc-Tireur launched a frontal attack on d'Argenlieu and his "camarilla," consisting mainly of Valluy and Morlière (!) who were "placing the Paris government before a fait accompli."³²

It seems superfluous to repeat the version of December 19 that was published on the basis of AFP bulletins. It was the same official version that we know from chapter 7.1. The December 19 attack opened for a wave of indignation against the "unspeakable treason."³³ In an article by Schumann the interval between the receipt of Nam's "billet doux" and the attack had shrimped to two minutes, and in another l'Aube headline Hanoi had been attacked by 30,000 Vietnamese.

December 19 also opened for vigorous attacks on the French Communists. L'Humanité reproduced the news from AFP without any comment, and in the National Assembly, Communist deputies hesitated in voting for a message of sympathy to the French soldiers. Le Figaro commented that certain acts could not be justified without hazarding the refutation of the "proclamations tricolors" which had been made in the electoral campaign.³⁴ Le Monde took one further step by publishing a front page article by Rémy Roure under the insulting headline "The return of Doriot."³⁵

In l'Humanité, Pierre Hervé answered by interpreting the events in Vietnam as part of a plot to prepare the way for de Gaulle's return to power, and Pierre Courtade emphasized that the Communist deputies had voted for the message of sympathy to the French combatants.³⁶ Pierre Courtade's article is quite revealing of PCF's attitude. He once more saw Indochina in the light of domestic politics and refused to accept the fact that general hostilities had broken out. He denounced the fighting as fratricidal and declared that the war had only started in the brains of the reactionaries, as did also Robert Verdier in le Populaire. Courtade regarded December 19 as just another incident. His main argument against continuing the fighting was that it would sooner or later lead to the intervention of foreign powers in "the internal affairs of the French Union." While le Populaire and l'Humanité refused to accept that war had broken out (we shall see that this was also Blum's first reaction), Franc-Tireur stated resignedly: "The colonialists have got their war."³⁷

This survey of the press has been included to convey some essential features of the political atmosphere in which the political leaders had to make their decisions. The Right and Center were evidently on the offensive in the Indochina affair. L'Aube and the commentators in le Figaro and le Monde pressed for a firm policy and supported d'Argenlieu. Le Populaire and l'Humanité were opposed to solutions by force, but their comments were restrained. Franc-Tireur was the only of the six newspapers that took a clear anti-colonialist stand, but Franc-Tireur was free to do so because it did not represent any party.

This political atmosphere should be kept in mind as we now proceed to the deliberations of the top-level decision-makers.

8.3 Bidault's Coalition

Bidault's cabinet was based on a coalition of the three largest parties, but also included one Radical, the former Governor General in Indochina, Alexandre Varenne. The cabinet, and especially the Cominindo, was dominated by MRP ministers. Three of the political members were MRP (Bidault, Schumann, Michelet). SFIO was only represented by Moutet, PCF only by Tillon. Varenne also sat on the Committee.³⁸

D'Argenlieu arrived in Paris in the afternoon of November 15. He saw Sainteny before sending him back to Indochina and then started to lobby for a tougher governmental approach. When the Cominindo met on November 23, they were presented with a long memorandum from d'Argenlieu, making up status for the preceding three months. D'Argenlieu found the situation in Laos and Cambodia satisfactory even if the local monarchs still would have to be "sensibly advised and discretely controlled." Laotian and Cambodian politicians, however, were observing French policies in Cochinchina and Tonkin, asking themselves if France would show "strength and resolution or weakness and hesitation in front of the imperialist pretentions and ambitions of the Annamites."³⁹

D'Argenlieu conceded that the French had failed in Cochinchina and that the suicide of Dr. Thinh was a "sign of this defeat." This was still more important as "the Annamite problem centered on the Cochinchinese problem."⁴⁰ D'Argenlieu blamed the failure on the French government's irresolution and on the contrast between the reserved silence that Paris had kept with regard to Cochinchina and the great interest shown in the Vietnamese Republic and the "person of Ho." Vietnam had exploited the uncertainty as to French intentions, and article 9 of the Modus Vivendi had made this easier. In fact, article 9 contained "en-soi" a serious menace to the French

"patrimony."⁴¹ D'Argenlieu therefore found it indispensable to suspend the application of the *Modus Vivendi*. This measure would produce a "psychological shock" which would be highly favorable for France.⁴²

It is important to note that although d'Argenlieu before leaving Saigon had instructed Valluy not to exclude a direct confrontation with the "Hanoi government,"⁴³ in his memo to the Cominindo he only spoke of Cochinchina not mentioning the possible conflict in the North with a single word. His memorandum was presented to the Cominindo on November 23, the same day as Valluy and Dèbes created the "psychological shock" not by suspending the cease-fire in the South, but by bombing Haiphong. All the participants at the Cominindo meeting, with a possible exception for Tillon, must have been informed of Valluy's November 21 instructions to Morlière, demanding complete Vietnamese withdrawal from Haiphong.⁴⁴ The meeting began at 15 hrs. The telegram from Valluy with his second set of instructions to Morlière telling him to teach the Vietnamese a severe lesson, is dated by the Paris cipher office: November 23, 17.47 hrs.⁴⁵ It thus seems probable that at least some of the Cominindo members received these news at the end of the meeting or later in the evening.

D'Argenlieu's statement was followed by a long discussion between Bidault, Moutet, Michelet and Tillon.⁴⁶

Unfortunately neither of the existing summaries of the November 23 discussion reports the content of Michelet's and Tillon's statements. Neither Bidault nor Moutet seems to have mentioned Haiphong. We may suggest that this had something to do with Tillon's presence. At the next Cominindo meeting on November 29, he was kind enough to stay away. Both Bidault and Moutet were in favor of authorizing Saigon to break the cease-fire agreement in the South. Bidault emphasized that Cochinchina was a French colony and would remain so until the French National Assembly had decided otherwise. As long as this was not

the case, French law was valid in Cochinchina , and "the Government has the duty to make all French rights respected with all means, including force."⁴⁷

Moutet made clear that article 9 of the Modus Vivendi did not give Vietnam any authority to intervene in Cochinchina. The only Cochinchinese matter which could be discussed with the Hanoi government, was the order for the termination of hostilities. It was Moutet's view that the French command had observed the cease-fire, but French soldiers were still attacked, the same being the case for those "Annamites" whom the French command was obliged to protect. "In consequence it (the command) must consider it as its duty to reestablish the order and to quell any agitation, if need be by force."⁴⁸

Bidault's and Moutet's November 23 declarations only seem to apply to Cochinchina, but when we consider that Bidault and Moutet knew Valluy's order to Morlière, they must have understood that their statements could be interpreted as an approval of forcible solutions in the North as well. That was at least d'Argenlieu's conclusion when in the morning of November 25 he cabled his approval of Valluy's actions to Saigon:

I totally approve of the instructions that you have given to general MORLIERE. They are in the line of the mood of the government ("dispositions gouvernementales") as this can be derived from the November 23 session of the Committee.⁴⁹

In between the two Cominindo sessions of November 23 and 29, Bidault's cabinet met for the last time (November 27), and when the first National Assembly of the Fourth Republic met on November 28, Bidault announced his resignation.

On November 27, Moutet adopted Valluy's version of the Haiphong events in a statement to the press. He furthermore stated that if the "policy of agreement" was

sabotaged by the other party, the only option left to France was "firmness without any faltering."⁵⁰ This statement was well received by the Saigon authorities, who asked for the full text which could be "useful on a later occasion."⁵¹

When, on November 29, the Cominindo met again, the ministers were only members of a caretaker government, and nobody knew for sure if the next premier would be Thorez, Bidault or someone else. Moutet opened the debate,⁵² but it has not yet been possible to find any summary of his statement in the French archives. After his introduction, Varenne made a statement emphasizing that it had been necessary to prevent the contraband trade in arms in order to stop the "proliferation" of the Vietnamese army, which had reached a number of 75,000 troops. In Varenne's view, the government ought to do two things:

1. Make a vigorous announcement.
2. Make clear that the policy of agreements could only be continued if the adversary ceased breaking them.⁵³

Bidault pointed to a fundamental dilemma in French colonial policy. On the one hand, nothing should be done in Indochina which could be exploited by the Moroccan sultan or the Tunisian bey. On the other hand, the resort to pure force (Bidault made an allusion to Dèbes' bombing) could alienate both French and international public opinion. It would yet be necessary to make known that France would not leave Indochina and that she would defend her presence "with all means."⁵⁴

Bidault apparently was reluctant to accept Valluy and Dèbes' actions. What was said on the rest of the meeting is unfortunately unknown, but no public declaration followed,⁵⁵ and the instructions to d'Argenlieu which had been meant to be finished on November 29, were only handed over to the admiral on December 10. This indicates that

there was some disagreement in the Cominindo and that in fact no final decisions were made.

One of the participants at the November 29 meeting was the deputy Chief of Staff, Admiral Barjot. On November 30, Barjot signed a critical memo on Haiphong and Langson. He emphasized that the import-export controls had been established without any prior negotiations and that Valluy's instructions to Morlière had led to renewed hostilities in Haiphong at a time when the conflict had been settled locally.⁵⁶

Barjot's memo must have been discussed in Paris during the first days of December. When Valluy's December 6 warning of an impending rupture arrived, Paris must have reacted immediately, and this obliged Valluy to change plans. On December 8, Barjot wrote a new memo even more critical of the policy pursued by Saigon. He raised the question whether import-export controls had been intended as a measure to gain control of the Vietnamese currency, and affirmed that "in any case, this measure had led inescapably to armed conflict."⁵⁷ He accused Saigon of having delayed sending vital information to Paris, and criticized d'Argenlieu for having failed to carry out governmental instructions for obtaining the withdrawal and disarming of Vietnamese troops in the South. Saigon had instead turned its eyes on Tonkin.⁵⁸

Barjot criticized Saigon for having abandoned the policy of concentrating on Cochinchina. He feared that the situation would lead to a struggle on several instead of one front. Barjot regarded Cochinchina as "strategic territory," the "keystone of French presence in Indochina."⁵⁹ This illustrates how the strategy abandoned by Saigon had survived as option in parts of the Paris bureaucracy. Barjot maintained the hope from the beginning of October

that the Vietnamese government could be compelled to withdraw or disarm the forces in the South at a time when these forces were part of a cease-fire agreement. The Vietnamese interpreted the Modus Vivendi as a recognition of the existence of their forces in the South and certainly not a prelude to their disarming.⁶⁰ This was soon understood by French authorities in Saigon, who never believed that the Nyo talks would lead anywhere, but some Paris decision-makers continued to believe in the possibility of keeping the Vietnamese away from the South without a confrontation in the North. Haiphong therefore came as a shock, at least to Barjot. Paris suddenly had to face a new situation in the midst of a cabinet crisis. On November 23, the High-Commissioner had been authorized to break the cease-fire in Cochinchina, but did this also mean that Valluy would be free to act on his own in the North? D'Argenlieu's answer was in the affirmative, but Barjot was of the opposite opinion. The Chief of Staff, General Juin, does not seem to have supported Barjot. On December 13 Juin declared that it was not one of Barjot's duties to evaluate the situation in Indochina the way he had done in the December 8 memo. On that basis Messmer decided not to distribute the document to Blum's new ministers.⁶¹ When Barjot understood that he would not be allowed to present his views, he made a desperate attempt to influence public opinion by secretly contacting the journalists in Franc-Tireur and giving them his memo. On December 20, this paper was thus able to quote from Valluy's instructions to Morlière.⁶²

On December 3, the French National Assembly elected Socialist Vincent Auriol as its president. On the following day, the Assembly refused to entrust Thorez with the formation of a new government, but most of the

Socialists voted for Thorez (quite aware that he would be defeated). On December 5, the Assembly voted even more decisively against Bidault. It was in this situation, when Bidault knew for sure that he would have to leave Hotel Matignon, that Paris obliged Valluy to temporize.

On December 7, the SFIO "Conseil National" adopted a "programme d'action gouvernementale." The chapter in the program on the French Union was a clear victory for Moutet over the left wing anti-colonialists. It explicitly criticized those who "pushed the indigenous populations toward totally autonomous regimes or independence in contradiction with their real interests," and it emphasized that France would not just observe the agreements which had been signed, but also make them observed. The High-Commissioner should put an end to the painful incidents which stood in the way of the reestablishment of peace and order. As soon as calm had been restored, he should concentrate on settling the difficult problems of Cochinchina and the integration of the "various countries" in the Indochinese Federation and the French Union.⁶³

This program offered Moutet a political basis for signing the governmental instructions to d'Argenlieu together with Bidault and Michelet. The fact that d'Argenlieu received the instructions on the same day as Blum's article appeared in Le Populaire was hardly coincidental. Moutet's signing of the instructions was probably the result of a majority decision in SFIO's leading organ. It seems likely that Blum's article was partly motivated by the need to appease the party minority. That does not imply that Blum was insincere. Léon Blum stated in his article:

...No, there is but one way, one only, to preserve the prestige of our civilisation, our political and spiritual influence, and also those material interests

which are legitimate: that is sincere agreement on the basis of independence, that is confidence, that is friendship.

According to the instructions to d'Argenlieu the first objective of French Indochina policy was to maintain French cultural influence and French economic interests. This would be impossible if France did not maintain "a certain control of plans" and remained in military control of some "well determined territorial zones." Therefore:

It may be subject to later reconsideration, but at the actual stage of the evolution of the Indochinese peoples, France does not intend to grant them an unconditional and total independence, which in reality would only be a fiction seriously prejudicial to both parties.⁶⁴

This was the conclusion of the introduction on objectives. It is in obvious contradiction with Blum's article, but the instructions come closer to the program adopted by SFIO's "Conseil National" than do Blum's statements.

Only the introduction to the instructions is known, not the part that dealt with the actual situation in Tonkin. Messmer's statements to Le Pulloch on December 14 seem to exclude, however, that the instructions in any way urged Valluy to go on provoking a rupture.⁶⁵ On December 12, the National Assembly charged Blum with forming the new cabinet, and on the same day Bidault sent a message to Valluy, refusing to accept that the situation in Indochina was so alarming as Valluy had asserted in a cable of December 6.⁶⁶ Before sending the message to Saigon, Bidault deleted the most critical sentence ("I hope that it is not a question of simple smartness meant to cover your responsibility in any case."). This sentence yet seems to indicate that Bidault was far more preoccupied with the responsibility for the outbreak of war than with trying to prevent it. Valluy later revealed that d'Argenlieu had

reproached him for informing Bidault directly.⁶⁷ This may of course mean that d'Argenlieu feared interference from Bidault, but it is also possible that there was a tacit understanding between Bidault and d'Argenlieu to the effect that crucial decisions should be made in a way that made it impossible to trace them back to the premier. It seems to have been Bidault, not Valluy who tried to "cover his responsibility in any case."

8.4 Léon Blum

Léon Blum was a man of great moral integrity. His Jewish background, his antimilitarism and his intelligence made him both one of the most insulted and the most respected politicians of the third French republic. In his political career he was, like most politicians, often obliged to renounce on his ideals and adjust to the necessities of the situation. During World War I his antimilitarist reputation made him the person best suited to mobilize the French workers for the fight against Germany. In 1920, his well known concern for socialist unity made him the most convincing spokesman for the minority that left the party when it accepted the principles of Komintern. In the 1930's his sceptical attitude to Socialist participation in cabinets of the capitalist state contributed to make him the unquestionable leader of the Popular Front government, and his close contacts with the leaders of the Spanish republic invested him with moral authority to defend non-interventionism.

This repeated contradiction between Blum's ideals and actions can not be forgotten in a study of his role in the outbreak of the Indochinese war. The contrast in December 1946 between what he intended and tried to do and what he felt obliged to let happen, is unmistakable.

On December 9, Auriol asked Blum to stand as candidate for the premiership, and on December 12, he was formally charged with the task by the National Assembly, but Blum did not take over Bidault's administrative functions until December 18. Blum first had to negotiate with the MRP and PCF leaders in order to investigate the possibilities of a coalition cabinet. On December 14, when he still had not formed the new all-Socialist cabinet, he discussed Indochina with Moutet and d'Argenlieu and accepted the decision of the caretaker ministers to let d'Argenlieu return to Saigon.⁶⁸ Why did Blum ignore the demand of his own newspaper le Populaire that d'Argenlieu be replaced by a civilian?⁶⁹ We can only hazard a guess, but it seems quite probable that the MRP made its support for Blum's cabinet conditioned upon him having d'Argenlieu remain High-Commissioner. It is at least certain that the MRP pressured Blum on Indochina. On December 13, l'Aube emphasized that before voting for Blum, all the speakers in the Assembly had evoked the seriousness of the Indochinese question "...with exception for M. Duclos." On the following day, the MRP paper reported that the party's deputies had gathered and expressed their "desire to see continued the work of Premier Georges Bidault with relation to the French Union and the overseas provinces." Before the December 17 ballot, when Blum's cabinet was accepted against only 2 votes, Maurice Schumann insisted on the necessity of "maintaining the national position in Indochina."⁷⁰ When Bidault turned over his offices in Hotel Matignon and at Quai d'Orsay to Blum in the afternoon of December 18, the two politicians had a private conversation which lasted one and a half hours.⁷¹ At this time, neither of them knew of the proposals that Ho had handed over to Sainteny on December 15, the only Parisian acquainted with them being the American ambassador.⁷²

After the conversation with Bidault, Blum went directly to the first meeting of his cabinet, where it was decided to send Moutet on a mission to Indochina. That same evening, Blum joined Moutet in the Ministry of Overseas France, where the premier signed a message to Ho Chi Minh. This message announced that Moutet would go to Indochina together with d'Argenlieu in order to "clear up the misunderstandings" which stood in the way of an immediate application of the Modus Vivendi, reestablish confidence and put an end to all hostilities.⁷³ The message was marked "URGENT" and with "ABSOLUTE PRIORITY" and was dated December 18, 22.00 hrs., 17 hours before the outbreak of war in Hanoi. In the morning of December 20, Valluy told Paris that he had been about to send Blum's message to Hanoi when he got the news of the Vietnamese attack. He would "in any case...nevertheless, in spite of the events" (sic.) try to reach the addressee.⁷⁴ Ho Chi Minh got the message.

In the morning of December 19, Blum had a conversation with d'Argenlieu before the admiral left for Saigon. Blum later stated that he had presented the admiral with his global views on the future of the French Union and that the High-Commissioner had declared to agree completely.⁷⁵

Paris seems to have been informed some time after noon, December 20.⁷⁶ Blum reacted rapidly by ordering Valluy to negotiate a suspension of hostilities if it was possible without compromising the position of the troops and of French civilians. This order was given in a telegram signed by general Juin. Juin also informed Valluy that Moutet would arrive in order to "try and avoid the definite outbreak of hostilities." He asked Valluy for precise information as to the origin of the events and especially to explain what had motivated the occupation of public buildings on December 18. At the same time, Valluy was asked to forward a new telegram to Ho Chi Minh from Blum

and Moutet where the president was urged to terminate hostilities on his side. Blum and Moutet assured Ho Chi Minh that they desired to maintain peace and continue to apply the agreements if it was done loyally. But no violation of the agreements would be tolerated.⁷⁷

While the order to Valluy and the message to Ho Chi Minh were transmitted to Saigon, Moutet declared in the National Assembly that the government was trying to defend French interests by peaceful means if possible, but the government would not permit anything to be imposed on it by violence.⁷⁸ After Moutet's statement the President of the Assembly, Auriol, read aloud a message of sympathy to the French combatants, proposed by an MRP deputy. Blum intervened in order to declare that he did not oppose the proposed message, but added that the lack of precise information from Hanoi allowed hope that events were less serious than feared at first. He did not mention his order or his telegram to Ho Chi Minh.⁷⁹ The message was adopted unanimously.

Before Valluy received the government's order to try and terminate hostilities, he had done the exact opposite by instructing Morlière to carry out "energetic action" against the Vietnamese troops, reopen the Haiphong-Hanoi road and take full control of all traffic between the two cities. Valluy also prepared to send reinforcements to Haiphong and demanded that ten more batallions be sent as soon as possible from France.⁸⁰

When Valluy received the order from Juin, he decided to ignore it and tell Paris why:

I honestly don't see how I can obtain a suspension of fighting. We have lost contact with the VN government, which is undoubtedly in the view of all French and foreign observers (a word lacking) the aggression. It

seems that for the sake of French prestige the request for a suspension of fighting should come from that government.

Yet, if it proves impossible for general Morlière to reach president Ho, I am prepared to make the text of the message from Monsieur President Blum known by radio Saigon. I feel obliged, however, to draw the attention of the Government to the very serious consequences that this would have on the morale of the troops engaged in a hard struggle and of the French civilians who are very affected by the assassinations perpetrated on their fellow citizens with a savagery and a perfidy that will be related to you otherwise.

I add that even the indigenous public opinion would not understand it.

General Valluy.⁸¹

This answer from Valluy was followed by a stream of telegrams proving the "premeditation" of the attack. Blum then rapidly retreated, and in the afternoon of December 23, Juin informed Valluy that he agreed with Valluy's conclusion and that the governmental instructions had been due to lack of information.⁸²

That same evening, Blum made a new declaration to the National Assembly, stating that he had been disappointed in his hopes for more reassuring news. He now emphasized that the "necessary orders had been given without any wavering and without any delay," speaking no doubt about Valluy's orders to Morlière and not of his own to Valluy. Blum confirmed that France had been obliged to face violence and assured that the French in Indochina, and the "friendly peoples," could count unreservedly on the vigilance and the resolution of the government. In the rest of his declaration he concentrated on his global ideas about colonialism, stating that colonial possessions were only justified the day they terminated.⁸³ These views did not provoke any excitement either in the Assembly or in the next day's press. Blum had after all taken the national stand in the conflict at hand. In the late evening of

December 23, an unanimous Assembly (including the Communists) permitted the government to move funds from one part of the defense budget to another in order to send reinforcements to Indochina.⁸⁴

The press as a whole reacted favorably to Blum's statement. Pierre Courtade in l'Humanité said that it was "perfectly reasonable" and that Blum had pointed out "the only possibly solution: negotiations as soon as peace and order had been reestablished." Franc-Tireur emphasized Blum's anti-colonialist principles while Robert Verdier in le Populaire evoked the "unjust destiny" which had placed Blum's new government before severe responsibilities. The same concern for the destiny of the socialist veteran motivated Alain Guichard's comment in l'Aube:

Even if it is impossible to subscribe to everything that the head of government affirms, his sincerity and the conflict inside him between the hard realities and his old pacifist dreams give reason for sympathy.⁸⁵

8.5 The Peace Messenger

On December 22, Moutet left Paris, only to arrive in Saigon on December 25. During his flight, Le Populaire showed Moutet confidence by calling him "le messenger de paix."⁸⁶ When news began to arrive on Moutet's statements in Indochina, the comments in le Populaire became increasingly ironical, and on December 29, it was l'Aube who under the headline "le messenger de paix," asserted that Moutet now more than ever deserved to be called the peace messenger.⁸⁷ Just after Moutet had left Paris, American ambassador Caffery informed Washington that there was general scepticism as to sending a "man of Moutet's age and temperament" to Indochina. The advocates of a firm policy feared that he would make new concessions to Ho Chi Minh while the conciliatory school was afraid

that he would come under the influence of the military and colonial officials in Saigon.⁸⁸ The conciliatory school had every reason to be afraid; the officials in Saigon effectively prevented Moutet from coming into contact with anyone to whom he could make concessions. Moutet's anti-Vietminh statements were yet so strong and came so soon after his arrival in Saigon, that the influence of colonial officials can hardly be considered the sole explanation. There was probably a real contradiction between the views of Blum and Moutet, yet it seems that Blum had full confidence in Moutet. This confidence was even shared by Franc-Tireur, who on December 14 had urged Blum to keep Moutet as Minister of Overseas France. When the French cabinet met on December 26, Blum is said to have assured the ministers that Moutet and General Leclerc, the latter having been sent on a military mission to Indochina, would make it impossible for d'Argenlieu to take any harmful action. Blum called Moutet his direct representative with the right to make any decision on the spot, and Leclerc should serve as Moutet's military adviser.⁸⁹

In reality Moutet does not seem to have cooperated with Leclerc at all. Moutet travelled according to an itinerary prepared in Saigon. He started out in Cochinchina by promising representatives of the Cochinchinese government that France would not "give up a single element of the freedom of the populations in Cochinchina and Annam to govern themselves." In Cambodia and Laos, Moutet was a guest of the local "autonomous" governments. In planning Moutet's mission d'Argenlieu seems to have taken revenge for all the undeserved attention that in his opinion Hanoi had received on earlier occasions. Moutet was to be used to show the importance of the other federated states, and the minister seems willingly to have gone along with d'Argenlieu's scheme. He only arrived in Hanoi on January 2 and stayed for less than two days, making no attempt to contact Vietnamese authorities.

Moutet's declarations of friendship with the Cochinchinese, the Cambodians, the Laotians and the "montagnards," mingled with indignant comments on the December 19 attack, were met with delight by le Figaro, le Monde, l'Aube and probably the rest of the bourgeois press. Le Populaire was ironical, l'Humanité dissappointed and Franc-Tireur violently satirical.

When the French cabinet met on December 31, Guy Mollet and Francois Tanguy-Prigent asked Blum what Moutet was actually doing. According to Franc-Tireur Blum answered:

- I admit that I am a bit surprised by the silence of my old friend Moutet.
- You call that silence?
- Yes, because for my part, I have yet not received anything from him. And what disturbs me most is that one does not succeed in taking contact with Ho Chi Minh.⁹⁰

If Franc-Tireur's informers have summarized the replies correctly, Blum did not tell the whole truth, for he had received something from Moutet. Moutet's first message to Blum was sent on the day he arrived. It was a report on the military situation which was said to be "good, becoming excellent as soon as the first reinforcements arrive from the metropole."⁹¹ On the two following days, Moutet repeated his demand for reinforcements. On December 27, he even "insisted" that four batallions be sent as soon as possible.⁹² Saigon soon received a positive answer and was even promised six batallions,⁹³ but the reinforcements were late in arriving, being obliged to do another job on Madagascar.

As early as December 23, the Vietnamese radio reported that Ho Chi Minh had sent a telegram to Moutet, declaring that he would be glad to see him in Hanoi.⁹⁴ While Moutet was in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh tried to send him a message, but the messenger "disappeared." A new message was sent through

the Chinese consul, but as Moutet left Hanoi after less than two days and soon also left Indochina, he only received Ho's message after his return to France.⁹⁵

On December 31, Ho Chi Minh had also signed a memo with proposals for a solution to the conflict and with 76 attached documents meant to prove French violations of the March 6 and September 14 agreements and their responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities. It was probably his intention to deliver the memo to Moutet, but as Moutet left so soon, this proved impossible. Paris only received the memo on February 4.⁹⁶

In the memo, Ho Chi Minh made the following proposals:

- immediate cease-fire,
- liberation of war prisoners as well as political prisoners,
- withdrawal of all troops to the positions defined in the March 6 and April 3 agreements,
- no further reinforcements from France,
- a meeting between Moutet and Ho Chi Minh to arrive at a sufficiently precise framework for a definite treaty, which would have to include:
 - a) organizing of a referendum in Cochinchina,
 - b) Vietnamese diplomatic relations with foreign countries,
 - c) the organization of the Indochinese Federation,
 - d) Vietnam's place in the French Union,
- once the framework had been decided upon, a new Franco-Vietnamese conference should start in Paris in order to work out a definite treaty.

This was Ho Chi Minh's basis for the talks he hoped to have with Moutet. It seems quite obvious that Moutet would have rejected Ho's proposals,⁹⁷ but the Vietnamese were in a situation where they had little to lose by a preliminary truce with less precise French promises than the ones demanded by Ho Chi Minh. The task with which Blum had

entrusted Moutet does thus not seem to have been impossible.

Why didn't Moutet try to see Ho? The minister had some personal and political reasons for returning to Paris as soon as possible,⁹⁸ and if he had started negotiations with the Vietnamese president, he would probably have been obliged to stay in Indochina for some time. This is perhaps part of the explanation, but it would seem that Moutet in any case preferred not to see Ho. While he was in Hanoi, he declared to AFP that

before any negotiation, it is today necessary to have a military decision. I deplore this, but one cannot commit such madness as the Vietminh has done with impunity.⁹⁹

After that declaration, Vietnamese radio called Moutet "the war messenger."¹⁰⁰

The reason why Moutet did not see Ho is probably a combination of moral outrage caused by the December 19 attack, pressure exerted by d'Argenlieu and the local French population, and Moutet's desire to return forthwith to Paris.

It would be interesting to know what Moutet and Blum said to one another when on January 12 Moutet returned to Paris. At that time, however, only a few days were left of Blum's month as premier, and it was not politically feasible for him to choose another course of action than the one Moutet had forced upon him by his public statements which had been applauded by the whole bourgeois press.

Blum's successor Paul Ramadier kept Moutet on as Minister of Overseas France. Before being invested, Ramadier made a declaration in the National Assembly whereby he settled the government's Indochina policy. According to Ramadier the war had been imposed on France. France had not wanted it,

and still did not want it. She would stop it as soon as order and security had been reestablished. In the meantime, France would assume her responsibilities. At this point Ramadier was interrupted by Georges Bidault, who just wanted to say "Very good!"¹⁰¹

8.6 Leclerc's Mission

It was only after he had the news of the December 19 attack that Blum decided to send Leclerc on a mission of inspection to Indochina. On December 24, d'Argenlieu was informed of the decision.¹⁰² Blum reportedly stated in a cabinet meeting that Leclerc of course did not belong to "our political friends," but he was an "honest and loyal officer" who was aware of the military difficulties of "a new colonial expedition." In addition Blum reminded the ministers of Leclerc's "legendary conflict" with d'Argenlieu. He had asked Leclerc to negotiate, as soon as the military situation permitted it, and after consultations with Moutet.¹⁰³

During the whole mission, General Leclerc and Admiral d'Argenlieu seem to have avoided meeting each other, but Leclerc disappointed Blum exactly the same way as Moutet. A few days after his arrival in Saigon, the general concluded that reinforcements were needed and insisted on this in telegrams to Paris.¹⁰⁴ He approved of the actual military operations as well as those which had been planned for the future. He praised the remarkable military effort, but also drew the attention to the serious political problems, especially in Cochinchina.¹⁰⁵

In Hanoi, Leclerc was met by a radio message from Ho Chi Minh:

...An equitable peace can still be obtained. I speak to you from heart to heart as it has been very painful for me to see the young French and the young Vietnamese, the flowers of the two countries, furiously killing each other.¹⁰⁶

On the first day of the new year, Leclerc addressed himself to the French troops by means of the French radio Hanoi:

...France has already understood that the army is equal to its task, and you can count on me to emphasize it. The country prays for you. I will do everything within my power to make sure that you have the means to take efficient and rapid action in order to regain - in respect of our history - peace, prosperity and the confident cooperation that we so much need.¹⁰⁷

It has been maintained that Leclerc wanted to see Ho Chi Minh, but that he was unable to do so without the permission of Moutet, who was kept away from Leclerc by d'Argenlieu and only arrived in Hanoi on January 4. The source is an oral statement by one of the officers who accompanied Leclerc.¹⁰⁸ It has not been confirmed by the sources available for this study, and Leclerc's final report does not indicate that Leclerc favored negotiations with Ho Chi Minh. It seems, however, that Leclerc used his authority in Paris to obtain the dismissal of Morlière. In Hanoi Leclerc was met by Valluy and Morlière. Valluy apparently succeeded in obtaining Leclerc's support for asking Paris to dismiss Morlière. On January 1, Valluy criticized Morlière in an official telegram to Paris for having failed to remove Vietnamese barricades in Hanoi until December 17. Valluy stated that a firmer attitude in Hanoi would have secured the French forces a better position when the conflict started, and he announced that he would "draw the necessary conclusions in order to preclude such faults from reappearing."¹⁰⁹ In 1967, Valluy stated that Leclerc had dismissed Morlière with his approval.¹¹⁰ What seems to have happened, is that Leclerc, after his return to Saigon from Hanoi, asked Paris

to dismiss Morlière. On January 6, a telegram was also sent from Valluy to Hanoi summoning Morlière to Saigon. Morlière left immediately and arrived the same day. That was earlier than had been expected, as Moutet who had not been informed of the decision to dismiss Morlière had not left Saigon. The indignant Morlière asked to see Moutet and told him everything about his conflict with Valluy in November and December. Moutet then ordered Morlière to go back to Hanoi, write a formal report (signed on Jan. 10) and wait for the decision of the French government.¹¹¹ The French cabinet, which by then wished to replace d'Argenlieu with Leclerc, accepted Leclerc's demand for the dismissal of Morlière, and on February 4, Morlière had to leave his command to Colonel Dèbes.

Morlière's January 10 report is revealing of Saigon's policy from November 20 to December 19 and has been used extensively in this study (especially in chapter 6). After his return to Paris, Morlière wrote another report, trying to discuss the future. He emphasized that even if many "Annamites" were hostile to the Vietminh, they did not hesitate to line up behind Ho Chi Minh, who had become the symbol of the Vietnamese nation. France was thus not only fighting the Vietminh party, but the majority, perhaps even the totality of the population. Morlière therefore favored rapid negotiations for a cease-fire. When the cease-fire entered into force, a date for the referendum on the unification of the three Ky should be fixed immediately. After the referendum, there should be general elections for representative assemblies in all the countries of Indochina. Under French auspices delegates of these assemblies should negotiate the status of the Federation, if the latter could be saved. Morlière warned that if the gulf between France and the local population was widened by continued violence, it would with certainty lead to a rapid loss of Indochina.¹¹²

Morlière's reports do not seem to have had any impact upon the political decisions in Paris. Leclerc's January 8 report was to the contrary read attentively in official French circles. In most of the literature on the war in Indochina this report is considered a lucid warning against trust in a military solution. When read attentively, the message is in fact the opposite, expressing in general terms the same ideas as were formulated far more precisely by Pignon (see chapter 8.7). The most important point in Leclerc's report was a proposed increase of 40,000 troops to reach a total of 115,000 (90,000 Europeans and 15,000 Indochinese). Leclerc also emphasized, however, that the military effort would have to be accompanied by initiatives in the political field. The stronger the military effort, the more rapidly it would be possible to reach a political solution. This solution would be to "oppose to the existing Vietminh nationalism one or several other nationalisms."¹¹³ This was the same idea as Pignon formulated as follows: "Our objective is clearly fixed: to move the quarrel that we have with the Vietminh party over to the interior Annamite level."¹¹⁴ At a much later date this procedure was called vietnamization.

8.7 The Puppet Solution

In January 1947, the French press abounded in rumors that Ho Chi Minh had lost control of the Vietminh and that it was now led by a group of unknown extremists. In this atmosphere, Saigon tried to obtain a clear decision in Paris to ban negotiations with the Vietnamese government once and for all. The attempts were unsuccessful, probably because they were blocked by the Socialists and Communists. As early as December 27, PCF's political bureau issued a declaration in favor of negotiations with the Vietnamese government.¹¹⁵ L'Humanité emphasized that Franco-Vietnamese relations were of a diplomatic and not a

purely administrative nature, and that Ho Chi Minh's government was the only legal representative of the Vietnamese people.¹¹⁶ D'Argenlieu was not slow taking the opposite position. On December 29, he stated that the hopes that Ho Chi Minh could be isolated from "our out-and-out enemies" and that it would be possible to build up an acceptable government around him, had been mined. France should now find "other men."¹¹⁷

The question was: Who were these men? It was not easy to find anyone willing to play the French game. O'Sullivan discussed the matter in a January 7 report to Washington. He found the field extremely limited. The VNQDD leaders were in China and had little support in Tonkin. The Catholics had few leaders, and they disagreed among themselves. Ngo Dinh Diem, who had met d'Argenlieu six months before, was according to O'Sullivan a possibility, but he was "very nationalistic," and to obtain his support, the French would have to promise much. O'Sullivan also mentioned the possibility that Bao Dai might return as president or as constitutional monarch, but regarded this to be remote. O'Sullivan found it most likely that a weakening of the Vietminh would make Ho Chi Minh acceptable again.¹¹⁸

Saigon did in fact consider all anti-Vietminh possibilities, even taking interest in the nationalists in Chinese exile who in the wake of December 19 had announced that they would form a "provisional Vietnamese government," hoping for a Sino-American intervention.¹¹⁹ French hopes, however, soon centered on Bao Dai, at the time living in Hong Kong.

It was during Moutet's trip to Hanoi that Pignon wrote his "note d'orientation No. 9," on how to separate the cause of the Vietminh party from the national cause of the Vietnamese. He bluntly claimed that it was impossible to reopen negotiations with Ho Chi Minh's government. That

would be "synonymous with capitulation" and would lead rapidly to the loss of all French influence, not only in the "Annamite countries," but also in the rest of the Far East. French prestige could not survive such an abdication, which could "break up the whole French empire."¹²⁰ Still, it would be necessary to accept the existence of strong nationalist sentiments in all parts of the population and reconsider French opposition to the unification of the three Ky, in due time also to the demand for independence. It was in Pignon's view utterly important to make known that France would fulfill her obligations in the March 6 agreement, but in cooperation with more worthy leaders than the team of Ho Chi Minh. Only that way could the quarrel with the Vietminh be moved to the "interior Annamite level." Pignon did not yet explicitly mention Bao Dai in this context, but this was done by d'Argenlieu ten days later. On January 14, he demanded that the French government make a statement that excluded any future negotiations with "the former Ho Chi Minh government," and at the same time argued that a monarchical restoration in Annam might prove opportune. He considered that, because of the ancient traditions of the Annamite empire, such an act would lead to a spontaneous reorientation of public opinion. The legitimacy of the thousand year old monarchy would place it beyond any suspicion of being a "puppet government."¹²¹ Léon Blum refused to accept d'Argenlieu's conclusions, but promised to make them known to his successors. Moutet explicitly forbid d'Argenlieu to take any positive steps.¹²²

Léon Pignon was more careful when on January 21 he developed the ideas from the "note d'orientation No. 9" by a long and interesting political report. It is interesting first because its conclusions are strikingly similar to the policy that was later to be applied, second because it challenged some of d'Argenlieu's basic principles and third because it probably influenced official circles in Paris.¹²³

The report started with a discussion of Vietminh's policy in 1946 and concluded that Vietminh was an "active minority which imposed its will on the whole country by terrorist means." Pignon asserted that everybody agreed on the total responsibility of Ho Chi Minh for the December 19 events:

Ho Chi Minh has profoundly deceived us. His apparent sincerity and friendly attitude was concealing a profound hatred for our country, a hatred that is moreover normal for a man who has fought against us all his life. 124

Pignon's problem was that there existed no "sufficiently dynamic elements" to oppose the Vietminh. He explained this by the late government's "methodical elimination" of all opposition. The two existing alternatives were the pro-Chinese VNQDD (and Dong Minh Hoi) group and the traditionalist party which had been the basis for the Japanese puppet government in 1945. By saying this, Pignon implicitly recognized the fact that the vast majority of the French-oriented intelligensia was with the Vietminh while the only opposition came from groups of Chinese or traditional Annamite (and Japanese) culture.

Pignon found it too risky to deal with the pro-Chinese groups because that would introduce foreign powers in Indochina (China and the U.S.A.). He emphasized instead the "psychological shock" that could be created by the return of Bao Dai or his son, combined with French acceptance of the unity of the three Ky. Pignon warned, however, against making premature decisions on personalities. France should not impose a new government on the "Annamites," but accept their own choice. At the moment it was more important to remove all misunderstandings as to French intentions with the "Federation." Even France's closest friends were according to Pignon convinced that the only purpose of the federation was to restore the old colonial system.

While d'Argenlieu was hoping that December 19 would at last pave the way for his "pentagonal federation," Pignon was in fact about to give it up, and Pignon gained support in Paris. In Ramadier's January 21 presentation of the new cabinet's policy he stated emphatically that some day in the future, France would no doubt face representatives of the "Annamite people" with whom she could talk reasonably. At that time, France would

not fear to see realized, if that was the wish of the population, the union of the three Annamite countries, nor refuse to allow Vietnam independence in the framework of the French Union and the Indochinese Federation.¹²⁵

He still spoke of the Indochinese Federation, but it was no more pentagonal, and it was only mentioned after the French Union.

It was yet not until the middle of 1947, when the French Communists were out of government and the military command prepared for an autumn offensive, that the possibility of new talks between France and Ho Chi Minh was definitely put aside, and it was not until late 1949 that France was prepared to make promises large enough to induce Ba Dai to return.

8.8 Exit d'Argenlieu

Official French scepticism to d'Argenlieu was so great as early as December 1946 that the director of Asia-Oceania in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the American ambassador that the replacement of d'Argenlieu might prove desirable in the future.¹²⁶ At that time, d'Argenlieu was probably saved by the MRP, who feared that replacement would be interpreted by the Vietnamese as a sign of weakness. When the war had broken out, this

argument was no longer valid, and in January 1947, the MRP leaders seem to have bowed to the demand from their Socialist and Communist colleagues. The dismissal of d'Argenlieu may have appeared desirable for at least three reasons:

- In the beginning of January, Moutet had at last succeeded in reorganizing the Cominindo system. The High-Commissioner was now dependent upon the Ministry of Overseas France, and there was no reason to believe that d'Argenlieu would accept such control.
- The replacement of d'Argenlieu could be used to appease all those who were sceptical to French Indochina policy, first of all the United States.
- The elimination of Vietminh from power made it unnecessary to oppose the unification of the three Ky and go on building up a five state federation. D'Argenlieu was closely associated with the old line and in early 1947, he in fact tried to go on applying the policy laid down by de Gaulle in the declaration of March 24, 1945.

The problem was to find an able and willing successor to d'Argenlieu. Both the Socialist and the MRP leaders wished to replace d'Argenlieu with Leclerc, but on the advise of General de Gaulle, Leclerc refused.¹²⁷ The offer then went to Juin, who also refused. The job finally went to a civilian, the Socialist Emile Bollaert.

There will not be room in this study for a discussion of Bollaert's policy, but before concluding, we shall examine the conflict in January and February 1947 between d'Argenlieu and the French government, mostly because it illuminates some of the main features of French Indochina policy in 1946:

- the lack of governmental control with the High-Commissioner,
- the insistence on the five-state concept,
- the experiment in Cochinchinese autonomy.

The dissolution of the Cominindo was made by a governmental decree of January 8, 1947.¹²⁸ In reality, the Cominindo was not dissolved, only reorganized. The change was that the Minister of Overseas France took over as chairman of the committee (which was renamed commission).¹²⁹ This was yet an important change because it enabled Moutet to take decisions which had previously been left to the High-Commissioner.

On January 21, Moutet announced the change in a letter to d'Argenlieu. He explained that the old system had led to a "dispersion of responsibilities, harmful to sound administrative management."¹³⁰ At the same time he demanded the dissolution of all d'Argenlieu's agencies in Paris, arguing that the central power in Paris had delegated the execution of its Indochina policy to the High-Commissioner, but this did not authorize the High-Commissioner in his turn to delegate power to agencies in Paris.¹³¹ In fact, d'Argenlieu had established an Indochinese Agency (AGINDO) in Paris, probably paid over the federal budget, with administrative, economic, military, public works and information sections. In 1946, this had been tolerated, probably even approved by Paris.

D'Argenlieu reacted violently to Moutet's letter, and the answers from the High-Commissioner show that he perceived the Indochinese Federation as a sort of autonomous state, and that he confused his own autonomous power with the autonomy that had been promised to the local populations. He defended the Agindo by stating that it was necessary in order to uphold a rapid liaison both with public and private institutions in France.¹³² He pretended that it would be difficult to explain to the Indochinese peoples that it was their "destiny" to come under the authority of the Ministry of Overseas France once more, like any other French colony, and he found this proposal even more strange because it emanated from a cabinet (Blum) which in theory favored the independence of the Indochinese states. It was

in d'Argenlieu's view a paradox that France now wanted to compromise on the administrative level the "admirable effort" which she was accomplishing on the military, financial and diplomatic levels.¹³³

D'Argenlieu concluded that it would be impossible to implement the decree of January 8, 1947 and that the French government would have to return to the decree of February 21, 1945.¹³⁴ On Moutet's copy of the memo, he commented: "Bravo."

D'Argenlieu did not only react negatively to steps taken by Paris, but also took positive steps in order to continue the construction of his federation. On January 13, he informed Paris that he was preparing for a third Dalat conference to start on February 10 with five representatives from the federal government and five representatives from each of the governments in Cambodia, Laos and Cochinchina.¹³⁵ Paris must have reacted negatively, for on January 20 and February 4, d'Argenlieu insisted on the necessity of the conference. Paris answered by summoning d'Argenlieu to France for consultations and said that the conference would be discussed during his stay in Paris.¹³⁶ It was another matter, however, that provoked the decision to call d'Argenlieu home. On February 1, he issued a decree that expanded the powers of Le Van Hoach's provisional Cochinchinese government. He did this without any prior approval from Paris and defended the move by the urgent need to do something that could support the planned "pacification campaign" in Cochinchina.¹³⁷ This, and an unauthorized statement which d'Argenlieu had made to AP, gave Paris the necessary arguments for dismissing him. They came very conveniently, for on February 6, Ambassador Caffery formally expressed to Foreign Minister Bidault American misgivings regarding the situation in French Indochina, even mentioning the possibility that the matter might be brought before the Security Council of the United

Nations. Bidault assured Caffery that France would be generous and conciliatory in trying to find a solution, and was able to back his words by citing the decision to accept d'Argenlieu's resignation.¹³⁸ In fact, d'Argenlieu had written a letter where he threatened to resign. Paris took this as a demand for resignation, and accepted.¹³⁹

As an epitaph to d'Argenlieu's Indochina policy, we may cite a January 15 circular to his subordinates:

The moment has come to remove all ambiguity. The term VIET-NAM is forbidden in all official documents and if possible also in the press and in conversations... the ancient, legitimate and unequivocal terms TONKIN, ANNAM, and COCHINCHINA must now be used again...When it is necessary to refer to them as a whole, one should resort to expressions such as the Annamite Countries or the Countries of Annamite language.¹⁴⁰

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CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS

9.1 Summary

The Potsdam decision of July 1945 to divide Indochina in a northern, Chinese and a southern, British occupation zone had far-reaching consequences. The Chinese presence from September 1945 to June 1946 gave the revolutionary republic an additional seven months to organize the new state before French forces arrived in the North. The British on their hand actively helped the French to reconquer the South. By March 1946, there was thus a French-controlled South-Vietnam, and a North-Vietnam which was controlled by the Vietminh in reluctant cooperation with pro-Chinese nationalist parties and Chiang Kai Shek's troops.

By signing the February 28 treaty with China and the March 6 convention with Vietnam, France managed to introduce her military forces north of the 16th parallel without bloodshed. The price was recognition of Ho Chi Minh's government and a promise to respect the result of a referendum on the inclusion of the South in the free state of Vietnam. These concessions were not the expression of a French policy of decolonization. They were dictated by the relation of forces and aimed at winning time in order to improve the French military positions. Although it was the French left that later insisted on observing the March 6 convention, the agreement itself was not the result of leftist influence. It was proposed and desired by French military authorities in Indochina; Leclerc, Valluy and (perhaps more reluctantly) d'Argenlieu.¹

To Vietnam as well as to France the March 6 convention was only a step on the way to more ambitious goals. The mutual concessions were on both sides believed to be necessary under the circumstances in February/March 1946, but neither party intended to be bound by it in the future. The convention was not a compromise between one advancing and one retreating force, but between two advancing powers. The catalytic factor was the presence of a third: the Chinese forces. In the long run, the Vietnamese were no more inclined to tolerate French military presence than the French were willing to accept the permanent existence of a Vietminh-controlled state. The French would under no circumstances tolerate Hanoi control of the South, while national unification was the primary Vietnamese goal.

During the summer of 1946, decisive changes took place in all three decision-making centers, Hanoi, Saigon and Paris. The Chinese troops withdrew from Hanoi, and the Vietminh was able to gradually eliminate the influence of the pro-Chinese parties. Due to the francophobia of the opposition, Vietminh was able to monopolize political power in the North without provoking French reactions. This was observed with dismay by Saigon which would have preferred to see Hanoi weakened by permanent internal power struggles.

In Saigon, French authorities established a provisional Cochinchinese government, but as an overwhelming majority of the southerners favored national unification,² the provisional government only represented a tiny, wealthy and pro-French minority. It was faced with a hostile public opinion and an increasingly powerful guerilla, led by the Vietminh in cooperation with the powerful religious sects. The French never even trusted the Cochinchinese government enough to give it real power. The experiment with Cochinchinese autonomy proved a total failure.

Saigon also tried to construct the Indochinese Federation, as envisaged by de Gaulle in March 1945, by summoning a conference of representatives of Laos, Cambodia and CochinChina and including observers from South-Annam and the highland minority peoples. This proved a partial failure as well, as protests from the Vietnamese delegation to the Fontainebleau conference forced the French government to instruct Saigon to further delay federation-building as long as the Fontainebleau conference was still in session.

In Paris Georges Bidault succeeded Gouin as premier just before the Fontainebleau conference. The negotiations soon landed in a stalemate. France would perhaps have accepted formal Vietnamese independence if Vietnam had given up its claims on the South, but that was inconceivable to the Vietnamese. The French, aware that a referendum would go against them, refused to fix a date for it. The conference was abortive, but at the last moment, Moutet and Ho Chi Minh signed the Modus Vivendi, of which the most important clause was the agreement on a cease-fire in the South.

By October 30, the cease-fire was effective, but while the Vietnamese interpreted the cease-fire as a recognition by France of the existence of Vietnamese forces and institutions in the South, the French saw it as a prelude to Vietnamese withdrawal from the South. These incompatible interpretations made the talks in the first half of November between General Nyo and Vietnamese military authorities fruitless. At the same time a heated exchange of notes between Saigon and Hanoi on the legality of Vietnamese institutions in the South exposed the incompatibility of the positions.

The propaganda war in the South was won by the Vietminh. Their political success on the one hand and the French and autonomist failure on the other became only too evident

when on November 9 Dr. Thinh committed suicide. These developments, together with the fear that the Communist victory in the November 10 French elections would result in a new French cabinet that might favor concessions to Vietnam, led to a rapid reorientation of Saigon's policy. Until then the strategy had been designed to avoid any large scale military conflict in the North while concentrating on building up French control of the other parts of the Federation.³ It was believed that a successful application of this strategy would eventually oblige Hanoi to come to terms on about the same conditions as those given the other federated states, including an autonomous Cochinchina. The Cochinchinese failure and the fear that Paris might make concessions to Hanoi convinced Saigon that a rapid change of strategy was needed. Something dramatic would have to be done in order to demonstrate French will to remain in control of Indochina. The decision to seek a confrontation in the North was probably made on November 11, when d'Argenlieu instructed Valluy not to "exclude the possibility that one might be forced to have recourse to a direct forcible action against the Hanoi government."⁴ It is important to note that the principal purpose for this decision was still not to conquer the North, but to secure French control of the South. Saigon believed that a rupture in the North would have a favorable effect on the attitude of the population in the South.

Neither the Vietnamese nor the French had placed much emphasis on the clauses of the Modus Vivendi concerning the North. Their main focus was on the South, and the mixed commissions which were supposed to lay the basis for economic cooperation in the North were never established as a result of disagreement over their location. The French had, however, unilaterally created an agency for import-export controls in the North without taking account of Vietnamese protests. The controls had a dual purpose to

defend the French piastre by reducing imports to the North, and to stop the influx of arms, ammunition and gasoline to the Vietnamese army. French authorities in Hanoi warned Saigon that a strict execution of the controls would deprive the population of necessary goods and lead to serious incidents. Saigon does not seem to have done anything to prevent this from happening, and it seems probable that both the French Haiphong command and the Saigon authorities waited for the incidents. When the first conflict erupted on November 20, General Valluy overruled the "extreme moderation" of the commander of the French forces in the North and instructed the local commander to exploit the occasion to gain complete control of Haiphong. The city was bombed, thousands of civilians killed, and in a matter of days Vietnamese resistance was broken. Another incident in Langson was exploited the same way, and by the end of November, the French were in full control of the two gateways to Tonkin.

The occupation of Haiphong and Langson did not lead to an immediate outbreak of war, as Saigon had probably anticipated. A one month stalemate ensued, during which Paris had the chance to intervene. Ho Chi Minh desperately wanted an intervention from the French government in order to gain time and avoid war. Saigon, to the contrary, had no time to lose. Valluy was prepared to launch a military offensive westwards from Haiphong, combined with a police action to capture the Vietnamese leaders. These plans had to be stopped because new signals arrived from Bidault's caretaker government. Paris made it clear to Saigon that if a general conflict was to break out, blame must clearly be seen to fall on the Vietnamese.

This could have immobilized Saigon, but a subtle game, following a well manipulated action-reaction-overreaction pattern, yet led to the desired rupture. The Vietnamese

had reacted to Haiphong by cutting the Hanoi-Haiphong road and erecting barricades in the capital. The new signals from Paris made it impossible for Valluy to proceed to open the road. That would appear as yet another aggressive French move. Instead he induced the Hanoi command to react to Vietnamese war preparations by demanding the removal of barricades and by severely punishing hostile actions in Hanoi. This led to serious incidents in the capital on December 17 and 18, followed by French reprisals and occupation of two public buildings. The French also made new demands, including the disarming of Hanoi's self-defense forces. The Vietnamese probably feared that this was the prelude to an attack on their leading cadres. They prepared for an assault on the French forces, including the taking of civilian hostages and the withdrawal of the government to the interior of the country. In the morning of December 19, however, at least some of the top leaders still hoped for intervention from Paris. They tried to contact the French in order to improve the climate, and when the French command decided to give their troops leave, and the news arrived that Moutet would come on a mission to Indochina in order to seek a peaceful solution, the Vietnamese attack was called off. Then suddenly, following intelligence reports, the French troops were recalled to the barracks and as a result either of a misunderstanding of French intentions or of disobedience on the side of the self-defense forces, the planned attack was launched all the same, but without support from the regular Vietnamese troops posted around Hanoi. The Vietnamese had overreacted, and that was exactly what Saigon had been waiting for. The attack gave Saigon the best conceivable arguments for breaking all contacts with Ho Chi Minh's government. In French vocabulary it changed overnight from the "Hanoi government" to the "Vietminh government." They had never quite been willing to call it the "Vietnamese government." When the order to negotiate a cease-fire

arrived from Léon Blum's new French cabinet, Saigon could easily ignore it by pointing to Vietnamese premeditation of the attack and the killing of French civilians in Hanoi. These arguments were impressive enough to make Blum resign himself to his fate, and Moutet to declare that new negotiations would have to await a military solution.

Moutet's declaration in Hanoi has often been set up against Leclerc's insistence on a political solution.⁵ It is said to be a paradox that the socialist minister favored a military solution while the general wanted a political one. This seems due to a misunderstanding. When Moutet said that a military solution would have to come first, he meant before new talks with Ho Chi Minh's government. When Leclerc spoke of a political solution, he thought of building up alternative "nationalisms" which could exclude Vietminh from power or at least reduce its influence.⁶

The architect behind the "political solution" was the chief political adviser in Saigon, Léon Pignon. He had finished as early as December 17 a thorough study of the political alternatives to the Vietminh, concluding that France should accept the unification of the three Ky once the Vietminh had been eliminated from the political scene.

Pignon's strategy for building up a puppet government with nominal authority in all of Vietnam did not become official French policy at once, but High-Commissioner d'Argenlieu, who preferred to go on supporting Cochinchinese separatism and building the five-state federation, was dismissed. The presence of Communists in the French cabinet and the existence of an anti-war Socialist opposition prevented the possibility of new talks with Ho Chi Minh from being ruled out until the middle of the year 1947. The last direct contact between Ho Chi Minh and a French representative was on May 12, 1947, when Professor Paul Mus handed over a French proposal to the Vietnamese president, which was in

fact a demand for capitulation. When Ho had read the terms, he declared "If we accepted this, we would be cowards. In the French Union there is no room for cowards."⁷

9.2. Fait Accompli?

In March 1949, the Socialist Oreste Rosenfeld discussed the responsibility for the outbreak of war two and a half years earlier in a statement to the Assembly of the French Union:

If we truly want to determine who was responsible, I do not hesitate to say that the great responsibility falls on the government of 1946 which let its High Commissioner formulate a policy contrary to government policy. You know very well that the High Commissioner, M. Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, appointed by General de Gaulle, had exorbitant powers in Indochina. He was not even under the authority of the Minister of Overseas France, but directly under the Premier and so of the government...The great responsibility of the government of M. Georges Bidault and M. Maurice Thorez was not to have had the authority to prevent Admiral d'Argenlieu from following a policy contrary to that of the French Government.⁸

This statement is closely linked to the common assumption that the outbreak of war was a "fait accompli" carried out by Saigon in defiance of French governmental policy.

Rosefeld's statement consists of three contentions:

1. D'Argenlieu had exorbitant powers in Indochina.
2. There was a cardinal contradiction between d'Argenlieu's policy and that of Bidault's government.
3. The responsibility of Bidault's government consisted in a lack of authority to impose its policy on Saigon.

Evidence presented in this study seems to support the first contention, but to repudiate the other two. Until Bidault

was succeeded by Blum, there was no basic disagreement between Saigon and Paris. Blum was indeed faced with a "fait accompli," but this was not one of only Saigon's doing, but also of the resigning cabinet.

D'Argenlieu's exorbitant powers were a result of the fact that it was the Premier and not the Minister of Overseas France who headed the decision-making system for Indochina that de Gaulle left behind when he resigned in January 1946. This system placed the High-Commissioner under the authority of the Interministerial Committee for Indochina, chaired by the premier. This deprived the minister of Overseas France of the power to direct French Indochina policy. As the premier (Bidault) was unable and probably not desirous of assuming direct responsibility for the Indochina policy, its formulation and execution was left to the High-Commissioner. The normal procedure when important decisions were to be made was for Saigon to make a proposal. Paris either approved or delayed the decision. When the decision was delayed, d'Argenlieu sometimes moved ahead on his own by initiating the proposed policy. This normally led to an overdue approval in the Cominindo, but sometimes also to criticism. This criticism was never directed against the principles of d'Argenlieu's policy, only against his lack of coordination with events in France. Moutet seems to have been quite critical of d'Argenlieu, and he probably tried to have him replaced and to augment the influence of the colonial ministry. Bidault protected d'Argenlieu, and preserved the Cominindo system. Bidault's MRP dominated the Cominindo, and the premier seems to have trusted d'Argenlieu more than his Socialist and Communist ministers. It seems likely that Bidault consciously preferred exorbitant powers in Saigon to the "lack of firmness" that a stronger Socialist and Communist influence might lead to.

During the February 1946 crisis, both d'Argenlieu and Valluy were in Paris to obtain clearcut decisions. They gained what they wanted, a deal with China and an

authorization to sign an agreement with Ho Chi Minh.⁹ After this, there was a conflict over where to continue the talks. Leclerc and Ho Chi Minh preferred Paris, d'Argenlieu Dalat. The first conference was held in Dalat. Only after its failure was the Fontainebleau conference convened. In April/May d'Argenlieu tried to obtain Paris' approval for recognizing the Cochinchinese government. Paris was reluctant. On June 1, d'Argenlieu went ahead although Paris had yet not consented on the move. On June 4, the Cominindo approved.¹⁰ During the Fontainebleau conference, d'Argenlieu suddenly summoned the second Dalat conference. This disturbed the negotiations in Paris. Moutet reacted violently, but only against the inappropriate timing of the conference, not against the principle of building a five-state federation with a powerful French-controlled executive power. Bidault assured d'Argenlieu of his confidence, and after the conclusion of the Fontainebleau conference he explicitly conferred on the High Commissioner the monopoly of political dealings with the Vietnamese government.¹¹

Saigon and Paris were equally desirous of controlling Cochinchina. Moutet viewed French control of Cochinchina as the axis of French Indochina policy and urged d'Argenlieu to secure a rapid success in Cochinchina. When the Modus Vivendi had been signed, Paris gave d'Argenlieu the instructions he wanted, namely to obtain Vietnamese withdrawal from the South and the disarming of the "rebels." In the beginning of November, Moutet asked Saigon to protest against the existence of a Vietnamese Resistance Committee in the South, and when on November 23, d'Argenlieu argued that the cease-fire had been detrimental to French interests in the South, both Moutet and Bidault explicitly authorized Saigon to break the truce, even though they refused to make that statement in public.¹²

D'Argenlieu and Valluy interpreted Bidault's and Moutet's statements as a go ahead for Valluy's occupation of Haiphong and Langson too. That may have exceeded Paris' intentions at the moment, but there is no doubt that when the Cominindo gathered once more on November 29, the decision-makers in Paris knew perfectly well what was at stake in Vietnam. At that stage, they did nothing to stop Valluy. It was only after Bidault's defeat in the French National Assembly that Paris finally tried to restrain Valluy. Yet Valluy was not instructed to withdraw from any of the recently occupied territories. Neither was he blamed for what he had done, but it was made clear to him that if further conflict was to evolve, the other side must be at fault. Bidault was afraid of France being branded the aggressor, but took no active steps to hinder the outbreak of war.

It has been contended that a stronger French government might have avoided war. The opposite seems to be the case. If the results of the November 10 elections had not obliged Bidault to resign, it is possible that Valluy would have been allowed to launch the war in the beginning of December. The war was so late breaking out because the Vietnamese clung desperately to the hope that it could be postponed or avoided and because Bidault feared the political consequences of being responsible for a French-provoked outbreak of hostilities just before leaving Hotel Matignon. In fact, the question of what the French government could have done to stop Saigon should not be approached in terms of its strength, but of its political coloration. As long as the MRP dominated the cabinet and the Cominindo, and as long as the Ministry of Overseas France was in the hands of a man of Moutet's character and views, Paris could not be expected to intervene effectively. A change occurred when Blum took over, even though he kept Moutet as Minister of Overseas France.

Blum's shortlived cabinet changed the Cominindo system by placing the High-Commissioner under Moutet's authority. The very first cabinet meeting decided to send Moutet to Indochina in order to avoid further hostilities. By sending Ho a telegram the same evening, Blum also broke with Bidault's principle of avoiding direct contact between the French premier and the Vietnamese president.

Many factors combined to cause Blum's defeat. First, he came too late. He took office the day before war broke out. Second, he did not dismiss d'Argenlieu, probably because of MRP pressure. Third, Saigon delayed the crucial telegram with peace proposals from Ho Chi Minh, which, if it had arrived in time, would probably have been commented upon by Blum on December 18. Fourth, Saigon ignored Blum's order to arrange for a cease-fire. A French public opinion exasperated by the "premeditated Vietnamese aggression," made it politically impossible for Blum to take an open conflict with Saigon. Fifth, Blum relied on Moutet, who upon his arrival in Saigon did not hesitate to adopt Saigon's position.

Blum was confronted with a fait accompli. The decision-makers, both in Saigon and in Bidault's caretaker government, were responsible, but it must be added that Saigon had a great deal of luck. The fact that war broke out on Blum's second day in office, one day before he received Ho's proposals and before his December 18 telegram reached Ho, was not only a result of Saigon's planning, although Saigon had both urged Sainteny to harden the line in Hanoi and delayed the messages between Ho and Blum. Chance contributed to the result, and it is thus tempting to ask what might have happened if the chronology of events had been somewhat different.

Before discussing if the war in Indochina could have been avoided, however, the general French motives must be examined.

9.3 French Motives

In preceding chapters French motives for each of the many decisions that finally led to war have been considered. But as yet, no attempt has been made to unravel either the underlying motives for French intransigence during negotiations with the Vietnamese, or French willingness to risk war. The chain of events leading from French refusals to concede any point of importance at Fontainebleau, by way of Paris support of the occupation of Haiphong to the conclusions of French decision-makers that Vietnam after December 19 no longer had a legal government, suggests that we must look for a set of underlying motives, or at least a frame of mind, to explain the policies of metropolitan France and its colonial administrators.¹³

This is not the place for a long discussion of French public opinion, neither in the metropole nor in Indochina itself. The crucial decisions of foreign and colonial policy were the preserve of top level decision-makers. Most Frenchmen probably did not much care about Indochina. When they were forced to pay attention to the problem, they seem to have been torn between nationalist sentiment and fear that war might take a great toll in French lives and be a drain on the war-ravaged French economy. The great bulk of French colonists and officers in Indochina called for firmness for obvious reasons. The colonists were afraid of losing their livelihood, and those who had been imprisoned or in Chinese exile from March 1945 to the French reoccupation, felt humiliated and sought revenge. The new troops and civil servants coming from France were rapidly drawn into the fold of the French colonialist milieu as they were met by a hostile native population and heavily influenced by the local French population. The High-Commissioner and his advisers were under constant pressure from their compatriots, and this may partly explain their increasing hostility to the Vietnamese leaders. But they were also

subjected to pressure from a growing anticolonialist international opinion, and their policies were modified by the need for backing from Paris. The decision-makers in Saigon were not merely instruments of the local "colon." D'Argenlieu, Pignon, Valluy, Sainteny, Morlière and their advisers to a certain degree held views and pursued policies independent of both Paris and French colonists. They also to a certain extent pursued their policies independently of one another, and were at times apparently at cross-purposes.

In documents originating both in Paris and Saigon, a long list of arguments for a firm Indochina policy can be found. Charges of "dishonesty" or "Franco-phobia" on the part of the Vietnamese authorities are quite common. The French persisted in considering the deteriorating Franco-Vietnamese relationship the result of Vietnamese provocations. France was only at the receiving end. Moral indignance and concern for French "prestige" may have influenced French decisions, but the present study above all documents that the French rather than the Vietnamese was the more provocative party. "Vietnamese provocations" can yet not be brushed aside in an analysis of French motives. The French in Indochina certainly felt Vietnamese attitudes as provocative. They were especially annoyed by hostile articles in the Vietnamese press and by limitations imposed on French troops' freedom of circulation by Vietnamese authorities. French pride and offended feelings may to a certain extent explain the excesses in Haiphong and in other places.¹⁴ But such psychological factors cannot alone explain Saigon's general hostility to the Vietminh and even less the unanimous and carefully debated French refusal to make the necessary concessions to avoid war.

Another recurrent motive in the discussions of French policy-makers was the need to protect the Cambodians,

Laotians and the highland minorities against "Annamite imperialism." This carried considerable weight in French political circles, as it was difficult to attack the image of France as the "protector of the small and oppressed." But it seems highly unlikely that France would risk a costly war for the sake of the ethnic minorities. France was mainly concerned with Cochinchina, which was inhabited chiefly by "Annamites," and it seems obvious that the "need to protect," just like "Vietnamese provocations," was employed as a convenient justification of a policy having other motives.

The British historian R.E.M. Irving has discussed the motives behind the policies pursued by the Christian Democrats and their coalition partners during the First Indochina War.¹⁵ He takes the whole 1945-1954 period into account while we presently concentrate on 1946-47. His analysis may yet serve as a useful point of departure. Irving focuses on five factors, anti-communism, Catholicism, Gaullist pressure, economic interests and national prestige.

He affirms that anti-communism only became a major motive for MRP's Indochina policy at the end of 1947 or the beginning of 1948 and that it was unimportant in the early stages of the conflict. Irving draws this conclusion in spite of interview statements by the Christian Democrat leaders Max André, Maurice Schumann and Paul Coste-Floret, who in 1966 all claimed that anti-communism had been important from the beginning.¹⁶ The sources for this study confirm Irving's conclusion. In fact, the only occasions when French politicians and officials seem to have evoked Ho Chi Minh's communism in 1946, was in private conversations with American representatives. In the second half of 1946, the American vice-consul in Hanoi, the consul in Saigon, the ambassador in Paris, and Washington officials with contacts in the French embassy all reported

that French representatives pointed to Ho's communist record and emphasized alleged instructions from Moscow.¹⁷ These were no doubt tactical statements, meant to deter American interference in favor of the Vietnamese government and not reflecting real French concern. It may, of course, be argued that anti-communism inspired French politicians, but that PCF's strength prevented it from being said aloud. That sort of anti-communism, however, was directed against Thorez rather than Ho Chi Minh. In the immediate postwar period, ideological anti-communism of the American style was virtually non-existent in France. In the great March 1947 debate in the French National Assembly, the small right wing opposition (and one Radical deputy) made anti-communist statements and tried to exploit the Indochina affair to force the PCF ministers out of office. Both Moutet and Schumann answered by avoiding any mention of Ho's communism and instead emphasized the role of xenophobic attitudes, Japanese advisors and troskyites (!) in Vietminh's leadership, thereby trying to make the war more acceptable to the PCF deputies.¹⁸ It was not Vietminh's communism, but its strenght that provoked the French.

Irving considers the Catholicism of the MRP a "factor which cannot be ignored." A large part of the Catholic community belonged in Tonkin, and French Catholics wished to protect them against the Vietminh. In the sources for this study, nothing has been found, however, which indicates that Catholicism as such contributed to strengthen French hostility to the Vietminh. Ho Chi Minh's government strove to establish cordial relations with the Catholics, and initially succeeded in doing so. In late 1946, some problems arose, however, when priests recently educated in France returned and tried to restrain the church from in any way conferring legitimacy in the new regime. The Catholic-Vietminh conflict was rather a result of French political influence than a motive for French policy. The

French tried to use the Catholics against the Vietminh, which in turn induced strong anti-French and pro-American attitudes in the Catholic community. Catholicism can most probably be disregarded as a motive for French anti-Vietnamese policy in 1946-47.

Irving also makes a point of Gaullist pressure on the MRP. He admits that Bidault probably did not require any Gaullist encouragement to insist on the need for a tightly-knit Union, closely controlled from Paris, but claims that Gaullist pressure was a major factor in uniting the MRP as a whole behind Bidault. As no attempt has been made to study the inner conflicts and decision-making processes of the French political parties, this part of Irving's hypothesis cannot be discussed. However, newspaper articles and parliamentary statements by MRP Chairman Maurice Schumann indicate that he was in no doubt as to the need for a firm policy.

The key to understanding of French intransigence is to be found in Irving's two final factors; economic interest and national prestige. Irving claims that the latter was more important than the former. Here, the two factors will be regarded as about equally important, as national prestige was the dominant MRP motive while economic interest was more important to the Socialists.

National prestige is a diffuse concept. In the present context concern for national prestige was embodied in a conviction that the status of France as a great power was conditional upon the cohesion of the French Union (Empire). If one link in the chain was allowed to be broken, it was felt that the empire would disintegrate. The fear that concessions to Vietnam would have dangerous repercussions in North-Africa was felt already at the signing of the March 6 agreement. When Messmer defended this agreement and argued for a liberal policy in

Indochina, he carefully emphasized the difference between Indochina and the other colonies, which would not be offered autonomy, but be merged with the metropole.¹⁹

The fear of encouraging nationalism in other colonies did not vanish, however, and it seems to have constituted Bidault's most important argument against granting independence to Vietnam. During the Fontainebleau conference, a standard French argument claimed that France did not yet have a constitution, and the status of the member states of the French Union would only be defined by the constitution. The constitution that was approved in the October 13 referendum, was, however, open to interpretation and did by no means solve the matter.

At the Cominindo meeting of November 29, 1946, Bidault's crucial argument against doing anything that might weaken the impression of French firmness, was formulated as follows:

There is a local problem, which concerns Indochina, and a general problem, which concerns the French Union. They cannot be separated.

We must not do anything in Indochina that may serve as a precedent, especially as regards Morocco or Tunisia, either in the way of concessions or in the way of initiatives.²⁰

This seems to have been a "idée fixe" in Bidault's thinking. Even later, he refused to authorize the granting of independence as a part of a puppet solution because Indochina was considered "a link in a chain." If one link were broken, the whole French Union would gradually fall apart.²¹ In fact it seems that Bidault's Indochina policy to a large extent was determined by concern for North-Africa. In this respect, Bidault was not alone. On December 1, a leading Figaro article asserted that if Indochina was lost, half the empire would be lost:

The keystone of all French overseas possessions and interests is today to be found in the Far East. The future of France as a world power is at stake in Indochina.²²

On December 25, C.L. Sulzberger noted in the New York Times that the French loss of Syria and Lebanon together with the fighting in Indochina and troubles in North-Africa made it evident that the world's second greatest empire was "sorely beset by centrifugal forces." He stated that the French right wing parties envisaged major disturbances in North-Africa if the Indochinese problem was not definitely settled.

In his "Note d'orientation No. 9" of January 4, 1947, Léon Pignon claimed that a decision to reopen negotiations with Ho Chi Minh would lead to the loss of all French influence in Indochina and next to the disintegration of the whole French empire.²³ The same idea was repeated by several speakers in the March debate of the National Assembly. The Radical Maurice Violette warned that the day when France no longer possessed the colonial empire, her name would be "crossed off the list of great nations."²⁴ Maurice Schumann also stated that the destiny of the French Union was at stake in Indochina, and added that if the French government had been without the option of resorting to North-Africa after the 1940 defeat, France would perhaps have been liberated from Germany, but she would not have been counted among the victors of World War II.²⁵ The prewar Conservative Premier, Paul Reynaud, on March 13, 1947 compared Indochina to the rip in a sack of grain on a wagon bound for the mill. Nothing serious would happen if the farmer mended the rip in time, but if he neglected it, the entire contents might empty out on the bumps in the road. Paul Reynaud declared himself confident that Premier Ramadier would not be the negligent farmer and was applauded by all except the Communists.²⁶

Reynaud's metaphor resembles Eisenhower's domino theory, formulated three years later. Such images constitute powerful arguments because they are simple and play on the fear of total loss. The French grain theory and the American domino theory rested on two seemingly logical deductions. French greatness (American security) depended on the preservation of the French Empire (the Free World), which again depended on the preservation of Indochina. If one part fell, the rest would fall too. There is no reason to believe that these ideas were used only for purposes of justification. French politicians of the Right and Center sincerely feared the repercussions in North-Africa of a "soft" Indochina policy. Irving demonstrates quite convincingly how this theme runs through the MRP's many refusals to make concessions to Vietnamese nationalism until Cold War motives were substituted in 1949/50 and obliged France to invest their puppet emperor with the trappings of an independent state.

Irving concludes that the MRP, which formulated so much of French Indochina policy between 1945-54, opposed colonial concessions above all for patriotic or nationalistic reasons. There is according to Irving

no real evidence that economic interests or pressures had any real influence on the MRP. But in the last analysis it was nationalism which was the driving force behind French policy.²⁷

Irving here makes the error of indentifying the MRP with France. MRP certainly dominated French Indochina policy, both in 1946 and later, but the policy could not have been carried out without active Socialist support, and in 1946 also by implicit Communist approval. In fact, the idea that French greatness depended on a firm Indochina policy was not at all adopted by the Socialists. They seldom spoke of French greatness. The Communists did, but they drew the opposite conclusion from that of the MRP and the

Right. It was a common notion in France that Syria and Lebanon had been lost because France had been stabbed in the back by her British and American allies. The Communists joined in denouncing the British and Americans, but they also emphasized that de Gaulle's provocative policy in the Middle East was the reason for Anglo-American intervention and ultimately for the elimination of French presence. By the end of 1946, they feared that history would repeat itself in Indochina, that d'Argenlieu's provocative policy would lead to a Sino-American intervention and the loss of Indochina. On this basis, the Communists favored cooperation with Ho Chi Minh. While the Right believed that French greatness depended on a firm Indochina policy, the Communists felt that the whole French presence would be threatened if France did not make the necessary concessions to the tide of Asian nationalism.²⁸

L'Humanité's December 1946 articles have already been quoted.²⁹ In the March 1946 debate, Henri Lozeray (PCF) affirmed that the Communists were also "anxious to secure the durability of French greatness," and that was why they sought a peaceful solution.³⁰ Another PCF deputy, Jean Guillon, claimed that negotiations with the Vietnamese government would be the only way for France to "preserve her industrial, commercial and intellectual positions in Indochina."³¹ Pierre Cot warned that the war in Indochina threatened the stability of the French Union. The war might also lead to intervention from the United Nations, and France might be supplanted, on the economical level, by a "country that I won't name." Pierre Cot concluded this statement by saying that if the deputies wanted to serve French interests, if they wanted France to fill her mission in the world, they should "not make war, but make the French Union."³²

Some of the other Communist deputies violently denounced the war for being fought in the interest of the rice

exporters, the rubber companies and the "Banque de l'Indochine." There seems no reason to believe, however, that the PCF would have objected to French economic interests in Indochina if controlled by a nationalized "Banque de l'Indochine" under the control of a government having Communist members. There is no reason to accuse, as did the French Right, the Communists of having opposed the war because of instructions from Moscow or loyalty to Communist comrades in Vietnam. The PCF simply believed that French interests were best served by a policy of agreement with Ho Chi Minh, and, in retrospect, that was by no means an unreasonable position to take.

The most influential Socialists seem to have come to the opposite conclusion. Strange as it may seem economic interests constituted a more important motive for the Socialists than for the MRP. This is, however, only an apparent paradox. The nationalist and colonialist ideology of the MRP was so strong that they had no need for an economic justification of a firm colonial policy. Only the moderates, those in doubt, those who had entertained some hope for cooperation with the Vietnamese government and who were prepared in principle to grant independence to a country with "reasonable leaders," felt that the economic interests really counted in a situation when they were forced to make a choice.

On January 5, 1947, C.L. Sulzberger remarked in the New York Times:

Whether France will be able to hang on to her empire under an economic guise, as Britain has done with her possessions in the Far East - and the United States has emphatically done in its own quiet way with the Philippines - remains to be seen.

Sulzberger seems to have singled out exactly the question

that preoccupied the moderate faction of the French establishment in late November and December 1946. Would France be able to preserve her interests in Indochina if political power was completely transferred to the Hanoi leadership?

We have seen that the December 1946 crisis convinced moderates in Indochina, such as Davée, Sainteny and Morlière, that Vietminh rule would be incompatible with continued French economic activity. They all concluded that the whole French presence was at stake.³³ In Paris, Moutet was the most important moderate within the establishment. At the end of November and beginning of December 1946, Saigon's actions forced Moutet, in cooperation with the MRP ministers, to decide on the general guidelines for French Indochina policy. The new instructions for the High-Commissioner were meant to be finished on November 29, but it was only on December 10 that they were given to d'Argenlieu. The instructions were introduced by a chapter on French objectives. We find in the introduction no phrase even remotely reminiscent of any kind of concern for "French greatness" and for repercussions in the rest of the empire. It seems rather to reflect the thinking of Moutet (or of pragmatic officials in his ministry or in the Cominindo) than that of the MRP cosigners Michelet and Bidault. The instructions pointed out three basic objectives:

1. Maintenance of French cultural influence and economic interests.
2. Protection of the ethnic minorities.
3. Strategic bases.

It stated emphatically that these objectives did not permit the High-Commissioner to give up "on the political level, the maintenance of a certain control with the planning and with some well determined territorial zones."³⁴

The instructions held forth that for nations such as the United States it was possible to secure existing investments in the Philippines by "the obligatory resort to economic and financial aid which implied certain privileges." France, however, was only about to recover from the war and did not possess the means to implement such a policy, and was also on principle opposed to such stratagems. The instructions also compared French colonies to territories associated to the Soviet Union and stated that the Soviet metropole was favored by small distances which made the "possibilities of intervention immediate." Having made this comparison the authors of the instructions pointed out that if the Indochinese states, and particularly Vietnam, had been able to safeguard the normal French economic and cultural activities, nothing would stand in the way of the "abandonment of all guarantees." But "more than one hundred years of experience," as well as the latest incidents in Tonkin, showed that such a decision would be premature. A purely symbolical attachment to the French Union, like in the Commonwealth, would "rapidly sanction ("consacrer") a total French abdication and the sacrifice of all her interests." The same would be the case if France did not control certain zones militarily. Therefore, France did "not at the actual stage of the Indochinese peoples' evolution, intend to grant them unconditional and total independence."

The December 10 instructions oppose Vietnamese independence because it was assumed to threaten the French cultural, economic and military presence. The instructions do not differentiate between these three levels of presence, but cultural and military presence in Indochina would be terribly expensive unless compensated for by financial gain. Before World War II, 70 percent of French trade with her overseas possessions had been with Indochina. In 1939, five-sixths of the Cochinchinese rice-fields were on French hands, the rubber plantations were all French, and the

minerals in the North were extracted by French companies. The Bank of Indochina was at the center of all important economic decisions.³⁵ In 1946, it was hoped that reoccupation would lead to an economical revival, and considerable efforts were made by the Federal Government's economic departments in order to attract French investments and secure the necessary conditions for trade in rice, rubber and other products. Economic interests must thus have been of overruling importance to the moderate faction of the French decision-makers when they feared that the entire French presence was at stake.

It is important to note that the leading figures of the economic establishment were not among the political hardliners. In June 1946, when Ho Chi Minh arrived in the French capital, the political authorities under Georges Bidault were not very eager to see him, but as early as June 24, the chief executives of the Bank of Indochina had a long conversation with the Vietnamese president.³⁶ The person among the French political decision-makers in Indochina having the closest relationship with influential financial circles was the moderate Jean Sainteny, whom d'Argenlieu regarded as "too much of a businessman."

There is no reason to draw any direct line from the Bank of Indochina to the December 10 instructions, but the pragmatic reasoning of the instruction embodies the thinking of men who are primarily concerned with material interests and not with ideological prestige. It is quite astonishing that one Socialist (Moutet) and two MRP ministers (Michelet and Bidault) in a caretaker cabinet, where the Secretary General of the Communist Party was deputy premier, were able to agree on such an outspoken and pragmatic defense of French colonialism. No wonder that

they were kept secret. It seems clear that the December 10 instructions embodied Socialist rather than MRP thinking. This is confirmed by the fact that the arguments in the instructions were later repeated first of all by leading French Socialists. This does not include Léon Blum, who, when on December 23 reluctantly accepting that France had to confront Vietnamese violence, emphasized that it was "not a question of satisfying private interests." This was no doubt a careful comment on the December 10 instructions.³⁷ In the March 1947 debate, Moutet held forth the principles of the instructions by stating that the French objectives in Indochina had always been the same; to "assert the necessity of maintaining the presence of France, defend her interests and protect her friends." On June 14, 1947, the president of the Republic, Vincent Auriol, had lunch with the Philippine vice-president. Auriol denounced the Philippine representative to the U.N. for having spoken of "French colonialism." Auriol explained his Philippine guest that there were two ways of granting other countries their independence. One way was to chain them up materially, economically and militarily and then give them political independence. That was not the French way (Auriol made no mention of why it was not the French way, i.e. that France lacked the means). The French way was to "lead them step by step to democracy and independence and leave them full economic and social independence."³⁹ In October 1947, Premier Paul Ramadier stated in the French cabinet that December 19 had proved it a false move to permit independent armies in the overseas territories. Only the United States could do that "because it had the dollars and the bases."⁴⁰

We must conclude that in 1946 and 1947 the two basic motives for French intransigence were the fear of repercussions in other French colonies, mainly in North-Africa, and the fear of a loss of French economic assets in Indochina, mainly in Cochinchina. The first was

the most important MRP motive while the latter was the dominant concern of the leading Socialists. It should be noted that in 1967, General Valluy drew the same conclusion:

What seems surprising today after twenty years of retreat, is first of all our reluctance to be liberal and that, in the midst of the year 1946, we opposed a nationalist movement although we had on several occasions proclaimed ourselves the champions of the right of all peoples to govern themselves. We did this in contradiction with the English example in India and Burma and persevered in a federative concept where the metropolitan preponderance was badly disguised.

This should be explained by the fear of creating a dangerous precedent for our African possessions, and also by the fear of economic eviction from Cochinchina, rich on several products.⁴¹

9.4 French Expectations

Since the French seem to have chosen to risk war in order to secure their interests, they must have had a reasonable hope that it was possible to do so by force. This was not evident at the time. On December 30, 1946, the Conservative Singapore newspaper Straits Times (British) commented:

The position in Indochina now is that France is on the verge of a full-scale colonial war - something that we hoped would never occur again in the history of Asia...Any colonial power which puts itself in the position of meeting terrorism with terrorism might as well wash its hands of the whole business and go home...Unless events take a very unexpected turn for the better, we are about to see a French army reconquer the greater part of Indochina, only to make it impossible for any French merchant or planter to live there outside barbed-wire perimeters thereafter. Whatever may be the solution of the problems of colonial Asia, this is not it.⁴²

As early as December 23, the Director of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs in the American Department of State warned

his superiors that "given the present elements in the situation, guerilla warfare may continue indefinitely."⁴³ The French decision-makers did not seem to realize this. They hoped and also believed that the Vietnamese population would change its attitude if shown in a dramatical way that France was intent on staying. The French placed great hopes in what some of them called a "psychological shock." Others thought that France by controlling Cochinchina, the port of Haiphong and the Chinese border would make it impossible to keep a guerilla in the field over a sustained period.

In August 1946, General Leclerc discussed a possible rupture, stating that this would make no difference in Cochinchina. If there were to be a change it would be to the better because it would give the French command greater freedom to pacify the country more rapidly. And if France controlled the rich Cochinchina, as well as some key positions in the North, the Vietnamese leaders would after some time be compelled to give up their present attitude.⁴⁴

General Valluy later related that in November 1946, something which until then had been taboo, suddenly became thinkable:

The temptation to use force did not any more seem doomed to failure...One could certainly win, and another government, without the Vietminh clique, might come to an understanding with us.⁴⁵

On December 12, 1946, General Morlière expressed much the same ideas that Leclerc had uttered in August. Morlière thought that a Vietnamese defeat in the military field would make the population grow weary, and that would induce it to seek new leaders, who would listen to the "voice of reason."⁴⁶

On December 10, Jean Sainteny told Saigon that Vietminh's recent edifice could be expected to come tumbling down at the first serious defeat, and he assured the American vice-consul that it would be possible to find new, yet independent leaders willing to form a government that would not be branded as a puppet.⁴⁷ On December 26, he felt that since December 19 the eyes of some undecided Vietnamese personalities had finally been opened. He assumed that France could elicit cooperation from unexpected quarters if she could convince such candidates for office that the Vietminh leaders would be definitely ousted. On this basis, Sainteny favored a pincers operation as a decisive blow against "the forces that the Hanoi government still disposes of."⁴⁸

On December 14, Colonel Le Pulloch, who spoke in the name of Valluy, promised the most important Paris officials that an immediate effort could lead to a favorable settlement before spring. The Vietnamese government would be unable to survive in the interior of the country because it lacked the means to finance a guerilla army.⁴⁹ The idea of the "psychological shock" seems to have dominated in Saigon. On December 17, 1946, Pignon affirmed that future development of Indochina could be considered with confidence once the team holding power in Hanoi had disappeared.⁵⁰ On December 31, d'Argenlieu asserted that the population was returning to Hanoi, exclaiming "Saved at last!" The flight of the government had caused "immense relief."⁵¹

In the aftermath of December 19, the moral indignation of Saigon was overshadowed by a general optimism. The military command prepared for large scale operations to be launched once reinforcements had arrived, and Pignon made up his strategy for the "psychological shock" of a Bao Dai solution which would be "capable of creating a movement sufficiently strong to oppose the Vietminh."⁵² Optimism

was not very pronounced in Paris, where the moral outrage was stronger (and of course more sincere as less was known of the background for December 19). Little is known about the reactions of government circles to the war. Cabinet members and government officials were probably uncertain and basically had to rely on the judgement of men on the spot.

In 1967, Valluy stated that the most important French miscalculation in 1946 had been to underestimate the adversary.⁵³ This cannot be explained by lack of information. The French had spent the period of cooperation studying the Vietminh and investigating possible alternatives quite intensely, and they had established an efficient intelligence network. As an example we may cite an intelligence report, dated December 24, 1946, on the strategy of the Vietnamese government. It is stated quite correctly that the Vietnamese were preparing for a war that was expected to last for several years. The command would keep its regular units in reserve and never engage them in large scale operations. This would only be done in the final stages of the conflict, when "international circumstances" and support from the Soviet Union would make victory certain.⁵⁴

It thus seems difficult to account for French optimism in the early phase of the war. Psychological factors and the need to convince Paris possibly held them back from a thorough and dispassionate analysis of the cost and risks entailed in a war, and of the chances for victory. Once war broke out, concern for prestige seems to have obliged the military commanders to repeatedly and almost ritually predict Vietminh's final defeat. Another possible explanation for the undue optimism may be found in the hope of Saigon that the Vietminh could be destroyed by the capture of its leaders. The planned "police action" in December was probably called off as a consequence of

warnings from Paris. When on December 20, the presidential palace fell after murderous fighting, the assailing troops must have been disappointed to find it empty. During the summer of 1947, the French launched an "operation Lea" combining paratroop drops with armoured columns penetrating deep into Vietminh territory in an attempt to capture the Vietnamese government. In one case, French paratroopers stumbled onto Ho Chi Minh's headquarters, and the Vietnamese were given such brief notice that the paratroopers found hot embers in the hut's fire and files, ready for signature, still on the table.⁵⁵

The French generally seem to have understood that the war in Indochina would be no ordinary war which could be won only by military means. But there is no reason to doubt that the French expected to defeat the Vietminh by a combination of military victories, psychological shocks and anti-Vietminh political solutions.

9.5 Inevitability?

Once a war has broken out, it will often be considered inevitable. In his memoirs, Giap interprets the war in Indochina that way by claiming that Ho Chi Minh had realized its inevitability when returning from Paris.⁵⁶ Sainteny later declared that "after the Haiphong affair, the chain of events was irreversible."⁵⁷ There are two ways of discussing the inevitability of a war, which often lead to opposite conclusions. On the one hand we may examine the points of conflict between the parties and ask whether they could have been solved without resort to violence. Such a method most often confirms the thesis of inevitability because matters seem so intractable. Alternatively we may examine the precise circumstances of the outbreak of war, ponder the elements of coincidence, and consider what factors must be changed

for another outcome to have resulted. We may then quite often be left with the impression that war could easily have been avoided.

Chapters one to five of this thesis seem to confirm the inevitability thesis by showing how both parties saw their agreements as steps on the way to further control. It seems that sooner or later open conflict must have resulted. On the other hand, chapter seven, discussing the outbreak of war in Hanoi, conveys the impression that if only timetables had differed slightly, very different scenarios could have ensued.

The issue that led to war was the conflict over the status of Nam Bo/Cochinchina. The French and Vietnamese positions on that point were incompatible. A compromise presupposed major concessions on the part of one or both sides. The following measures would have to be taken, separately or in combination: The Vietnamese would have to withdraw their forces from the South, and the French would have to recognize Vietnamese institutions in the South as part of a political solution. In 1946 neither party was prepared, under any condition, to make the necessary concession. The Vietnamese nevertheless had interest in upholding the cease-fire because peace in the South offered them the opportunity to strengthen their political organization. To the French, however, a cease-fire without Vietnamese withdrawal was unacceptable. The French were convinced that presence in Indochina depended on control with Cochinchina, and this applies for Moutet no less than d'Argenlieu. The French also insisted that Vietnamese institutions in the South were illegal. On this basis the cease-fire was in fact condemned once the French realized that the Vietnamese were not going to withdraw. On November 23, 1946, the Cominindo decided accordingly. Does this mean that the war inevitably had to spread to the North? On December 12, Morlière considered it a paradox

that French and Vietnamese representatives could have "dinners with toasts" in the North while a war was being fought in the South. Could such a paradoxical situation have lasted? Saigon wanted to extend the war to the North. Neither the French commander in the North nor the Vietnamese government desired such an escalation of the level of conflict. The attitude of Bidault's cabinet is not quite clear, but there is no doubt that Blum's cabinet was opposed to war. Both of the two actors ultimately responsible for the conduct of war were thus opposed to it. But for a fateful combination of French provocations, Vietnamese fears and generous elements of coincidence, the December 19 attack might not have occurred, and Ho Chi Minh and Blum would have received their respective telegrams. In such a situation it seems quite plausible that Ho Chi Minh would have been able to control his subordinates until Moutet arrived and negotiations could start. On January 4, 1947, while in Hanoi, Moutet declared that he would have been unable to achieve more even if he had arrived a fortnight earlier.⁵⁸ But this statement built on the assumption that December 19 was the result of premeditated aggression. If there had been no December 19, conversations between Ho and Moutet could have opened for several scenarios. Such talks would have given Ho Chi Minh the opportunity to draw international media's attention to the French aggressions in Haiphong and Langson, and Moutet would have discovered how Valluy overruled Morlière in the Haiphong affair. It is evident that if Moutet had made a deal with Ho Chi Minh allowing the return of Vietnamese forces to Haiphong and Langson, he would have met with serious opposition both in Saigon and Paris. That would perhaps have created an obstacle to the formation in January 1947 of the new French tripartite coalition cabinet under Paul Ramadier. Possibly Moutet and Blum would not have accepted such a political risk in the attempt to uphold a frail peace in Indochina. But certainly it cannot be excluded. The outbreak of the war in Indochina was hardly inevitable.

9.6 The Vicious Circle

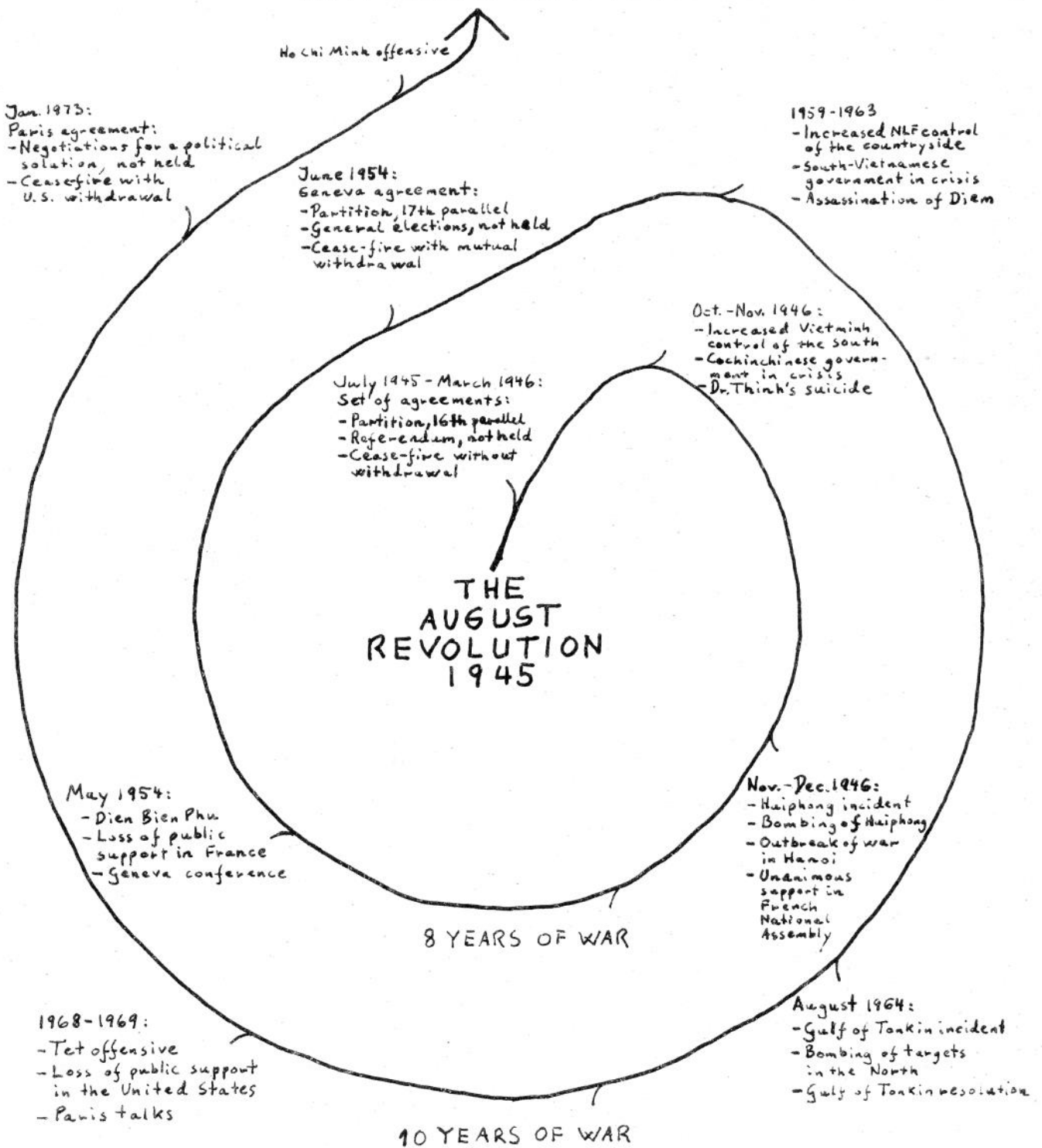
The thirty years of war in Vietnam can be seen as a vicious circle of actions, set in motion by the French in 1946, and repeated by the Americans in the sixties. The circular movement began with the partition of Indochina, decided at the Potsdam conference in July 1945 and reestablished in June 1954 at Geneva. The set of agreements of 1945/46 and the 1954 Geneva agreement rested on identical pillars: partition, referendum (general elections) and cease-fire. The 1945 partition at the 16th parallel was only meant as a preliminary arrangement for receiving the Japanese capitulation, by Chinese troops in the North and British in the South, but it led to a political partition into a French-controlled South and a Vietminh-controlled North. From March 1946, however, the French stationed garrisons in the North as well. The 1954 partition was also meant to be preliminary, but the 17th parallel became one of the most impenetrable borders found anywhere, even closed to normal post.

In 1946, the French refused to set a date for the promised referendum. In Geneva the Vietnamese thus made their signature conditional upon an agreed date for general elections. It was decided that elections were to take place no later than July 1956, but Ngo Dinh Diem, using the same argument as the French in 1946 (it was impossible to have free elections in a state of terror), refused to hold the elections.

The 1946 cease-fire lasted less than a month, and its major political effects were to strengthen Vietminh and the unionist groups in the South, and to cause an immediate crisis for the Cochinchinese puppet regime reaching a climax with Dr. Thinh's suicide. In 1954, the French pulled out of the North, and the Vietnamese accepted what they had refused in 1946; withdrawal from the South. This paved the way for Ngo Dinh Diem's U.S.-supported regime,

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which survived for nine years. From the late fifties, however, a new guerilla army, led by a Liberation Front (NLF) was supported by the North and increasingly gained strength. Diem's regime lapsed into a deep crisis, and in 1963 he was assassinated during a CIA-inspired military coup. After Dr. Thinh's suicide, there followed a month of quarrels over who should succeed him. After Diem's assassination, there were years of internal power struggles in the military junta. When the NLF was able to exploit this crisis and increase its control over the countryside, the Americans first reacted with campaigns similar to the ones that Leclerc and Nyo had made in 1945-46. When this did not solve the problem, the Americans reacted the same way as d'Argenlieu/Valluy in 1946. The crisis in the South precipitated a confrontation in the North. The November 20, 1946 firing at a French boat in Haiphong and the August 4, 1964 alleged attack on the American destroyer Maddox in the Gulf of Tonkin constitute the parallel excuses to justify bombing the North. In 1946, French nationalist fervor made it possible to obtain unanimous support in the National Assembly for appropriating funds for sending of reinforcements. In 1964 it was the American Congress that against the votes of only two senators adopted the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, authorizing the president to take "all necessary measures..."

On both occasions the war was escalated to all of Vietnam, and step by step the rest of Indochina was involved. First the French, later the Americans gradually discovered how difficult it is for an elephant to crush a tiger lurking in the jungle by day and only emerging by night. France fought for seven and a half years before the French public would have no more of it. The American public had more patience. In the Paris talks from 1969, ending in the 1973 agreement, much the same issues were at stake as at Fontainebleau and in Geneva. There was a new cease-fire, but the Vietnamese stuck to the line from 1946, refusing to

withdraw from the South. This time the agreement provided neither for referendum nor for elections. When in 1975 the Vietnamese launched a new offensive, the southern edifice came tumbling down at the first serious defeats. By the reunification of Vietnam the vicious circle was broken, but new wars were to come.

