

# Franklin D. Roosevelt and the French loss of Indochina, 9 March 1945

**By Stein Tønnesson**  
**International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO)**

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## Introduction

Although France did not have to leave Vietnam until 1954-56, and then retained significant influence in Cambodia and Laos, the first French loss of Indochina took place on 9 March 1945. Like the indigenous administration in Thailand the French colonial regime had maintained control of Indochina during the greater part of the Pacific war, in collaboration with Japan. After the Japanese had struck against the French colonial regime on 9 March, most French officers and officials were taken prisoner, while parts of the colonial army fled to China. Without the Japanese 9 March coup, the French administrators would still have been in place when Japan surrendered. No 'August revolution' would then have occurred, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam would not have been established. Instead, the French colonial government would have been temporarily confirmed in its functions by General de Gaulle, who would quickly have replaced it with a new one. The Indochinese communists would then probably have sought some sort of cooperation with de Gaulle, and would not have launched their insurrection until 1947-48. In that case, the history of French Indochina might have resembled that of British Malaya.

It was the Japanese who detached Indochina from French colonial rule, but Indochina's liberation from France and its placement under an international trusteeship was also one of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's principal war aims. He went on record many times during the war with negative statements about French colonialism in Indochina, and he made known his desire to set up an international trusteeship in a transition period to independence. Roosevelt made his intentions so clear on this point that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill refrained from actively supporting the French position, although the British Foreign Office tried to make him do so.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945*, a study published in 1991, the present author explored the possibility that Roosevelt could have intentionally provoked the Japanese coup against the French by launching deception operations leading Japan to fear a US invasion of Indochina.<sup>2</sup> No clear proof was found, only circumstantial evidence, so it remained only a hypothesis. In September 1992, this author laid out a cruder version of it in a paper presented to the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) conference in Hyde Park.<sup>3</sup> The paper was not well received. The SHAFR organizers included it in a panel where another historian tried

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<sup>1</sup> D. Cameron Watt, 'Britain, America and Indo-China, 1942-1945', essay in D. Cameron Watt, *Succeeding John Bull, America in Britain's Place, 1900-1975*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984, pp. 194-219.

<sup>2</sup> Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945. Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War*. London: SAGE, 1991 (see particularly chapters 4-7).

<sup>3</sup> Stein Tønnesson, 'Did FDR provoke the Japanese coup of 9 March 1945? Paving the Way for Ho Chi Minh.' Unpublished paper presented at the SHAFR conference in Hyde Park, New York, June 1992.

to argue the well-known controversial hypothesis that Roosevelt had advance knowledge of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and did nothing to prevent it because he needed a reason for joining the war against Germany. The discussants on the panel vigorously attacked both papers for making allegations about Roosevelt without any solid basis in facts. Since their papers were presented and discussed in Roosevelt's own home at Hyde Park, right in front of his bust, and with an intensely skeptical audience, the effect on this author was sobering. He made no effort to get his paper published afterwards.

The fact that Roosevelt had advance knowledge of the Japanese plans for a coup against the French in Indochina, and the hypothesis that he actively pushed Japan towards its execution by conveying the impression that US forces were preparing an invasion of Indochina, has been largely ignored since 1991. There are two exceptions. David Marr, whose *Vietnam 1945* was published in 1995, commented: "Indeed, it is possible that Roosevelt viewed these air assaults [a US carrier-based raid of the Indochinese coast on 12 January 1945], together with various covert deception efforts under way, as a device to trigger Japanese elimination of the French in Indochina."<sup>4</sup> Richard Aldrich, in his study *Intelligence and the War Against Japan*, published in 2000,<sup>5</sup> mentions the Tønnesson hypothesis and Marr's support for it, but then expresses doubt: "Intention does not prove effect", he claims, and adds that the Japanese coup was probably a reaction to French activity in Indochina, with support from the British SOE, more than to anything the Americans did.

On the background of the general lack of scholarly interest, Marr's cautious support, and Aldrich's two objections, it seems appropriate for the originator to revisit his hypothesis. By reappraising the evidence, and adding some new, this paper will first examine the connection between US actions and the Japanese coup, then discuss if this connection was foreseen and exploited by President Roosevelt, and finally address three main counter-arguments to the hypothesis.

### **The motive for the Japanese coup**

The first question is why Japan launched its attack on the French forces in Indochina on 9 March 1945, and if this had anything to do with US actions. The operation code-named *Meigo Sakusen* (Bright Moon) had been planned for a long time, but at various intervals the Imperial General Headquarters in Tokyo had impressed upon the government a decision to let the French Vichy regime continue to administer the

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<sup>4</sup> David Marr, *Vietnam 1945. The Quest for Power*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995, p. 269.

<sup>5</sup> Richard J. Aldrich, *Intelligence and the War Against Japan. Britain, America and the Politics of Secret Service*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000, pp. 340-341.

colony for just a little longer. In January 1944, despite opposition from the more ideologically inclined foreign minister Shigemitsu Mamoru, a liaison conference of the Cabinet and the Imperial General Headquarters had decided to adhere to the established policy of cooperation with the French. A coup de force should be executed only if the situation made it absolutely imperative.<sup>6</sup> This saved Japan much cost and effort.<sup>7</sup>

Later in the year, the Japanese ambassador to Hanoi asked Tokyo what would happen if the Vichy government ceased to function, but received no reply before the actual downfall of Vichy in late August.<sup>8</sup> After Vichy had disappeared, there were new talks of launching a coup, but the Imperial General Headquarters continued to insist on preserving the existing order.<sup>9</sup> Japan's Supreme War Council adopted a standby plan for a military takeover, to be executed in case of emergency, but on 14 September 1944, a top-level conference in Tokyo decided to maintain status quo, provided the French continued to cooperate.<sup>10</sup> The reasons invoked by the military leadership in Tokyo were the need to concentrate on operations elsewhere, and that it would be impossible to dispatch necessary Japanese administrative personnel to Indochina.

Two factors contributed to modifying Tokyo's attitude in late 1944 and early 1945. The first was the Allied occupation of Paris in August 1944 and the withdrawal of the Vichy regime to Siegmaringen, and the second was the changing strategic situation in Southeast Asia, with the battle for the Leyte Gulf in October 1944, which made it possible for the US to launch operations against the countries surrounding the South China Sea. The Japanese soon learned from their intelligence services that the French Governor General in Indochina was trying to make contact with de Gaulle.<sup>11</sup> They may also have known that the commander of the French colonial army had been chosen by de Gaulle to lead a French 'resistance' with a mission to take action against the Japanese in case of an Allied invasion. However, what Japan had reason to fear was not the French colonial forces in themselves. Their moves were monitored by the

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<sup>6</sup> Sachiko Murakami, *Japan's Thrust Into French Indochina 1940-1945*, PhD thesis, 1981 (University Microfilms 81-27944), pp. 497-9. Louis Allen, 'The Japanese Coup of 9 March 1945 in Indo-China', *International Studies*, No. 1, 1985, Suntory Toyota International Centre for Economics and Related Disciplines, London School of Economics and Political Science, pp. 8-10.

<sup>7</sup> The latest such decision was made in Tokyo on 28 December 1944. A detailed plan for an operation against the French regime had been prepared, but it was decided to postpone its execution. Allen, 'The Japanese Coup', pp. 14-15, 20, Murakami, *Japan's Thrust*, p. 504.

<sup>8</sup> Allen, 'The Japanese Coup', p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Murakami, *Japan's Thrust*, p. 502. Allen, 'The Japanese Coup', p. 11, 15. Kiyoko Kurusu Nitz, 'Japanese Military Policy towards French Indochina during the Second World War: The Road to the Meigo Sakusen (9 March 1945)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, Sept 1983, pp. 328-353 (see p. 338).

<sup>10</sup> Murakami, *Japan's Thrust*, p. 503. Nitz, 'Japanese Military Policy', p. 337. Masaya Shiraishi, 'La présence française en Indochine – 1940-1945', in Paul Isoart, *L'Indochine française, 1940-1945*, Paris, PUF, 1982 p. 228.

<sup>11</sup> US War Department intercept of diplomatic message from Tokyo to Saigon, 15 November 1944. Many thanks to US historian of cryptology Robert J. Hanyok for providing a copy of this document.

Japanese, and the weak French colonial army, with native troops whose loyalty was in doubt, would have no hope of winning a confrontation with the much better trained and equipped Japanese. The real Japanese fear was that the French would assist allied operations, either British actions from the Southeast Asian theatre, a Chinese invasion through Guangxi or Yunnan, or a US landing from the sea. The British were parachuting arms and small groups of special forces into the mountainous areas of Indochina, but it would take a long time before they had any hope of launching more than small-scale guerrilla operations in Indochina. The Chinese were planning operations into northern Indochina, but were known by the Japanese to have little capacity for offensive operations. They had just suffered enormous setbacks during the Japanese *Ichigo* offensive. The most immediate danger, therefore, was an invasion of the coast by superior US forces. What really counted in Tokyo's calculations was therefore its assessment of US strategy, how likely it was that the United States would target Indochina after the occupation of Luzon, starting on 9 January 1945. Tokyo weighed the likelihood of an invasion of Indochina against other possible invasion targets such as the Chinese coast, Taiwan, Iwo Jima and the Ryukuyus (Okinawa).

After the battle of the Leyte Gulf 24-26 October 1944, where the Japanese Navy lost most of its ships, and thereby the possibility of supplying its army in Luzon, a top-level meeting in Tokyo discussed, on 28 October, whether or not the French should be toppled in Indochina. The meeting decided to postpone the decision while speeding up military preparations.<sup>12</sup> The Japanese Prime Minister requested the army to conduct a rapid takeover, but the Supreme Command was unwilling to conduct operations in Indochina while still engaged in the battle of the Philippines. Throughout November and most of December 1944, the Imperial General Headquarters insisted on deferring the Indochina decision. Locally, however, discrete and elaborate preparations were made for swift action. A special espionage agency was created for the sole purpose of reporting on French officers, and two army divisions were ordered to move into Tonkin from China. Tokyo endorsed the *Bright Moon* coup plan on 28 December 1944, but still made no decision to actually execute it.<sup>13</sup>

The decision to carry it out was only taken on 17 January, when the Imperial General Headquarters instructed its new military commander in Indochina, Lt General Tsuchihashi Yuitsu, to make the final preparations for executing *Bright Moon*, and prepare for a drawn out resistance struggle against an expected US invasion. Tsuchihashi should not try to repel the invading forces, but establish positions in the Indochinese interior from which he could harass the Americans after they had seized

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<sup>12</sup> Murakami, *Japan's Thrust*, p. 504.

<sup>13</sup> Allen, 'The Japanese Coup', p. 14-15, 20. Murakami, *Japan's Thrust*, p. 504.

the coastal areas. Huge amounts of provisions were stocked in the Indochinese highlands, to sustain a drawn-out struggle.

The 17 January decision was no doubt triggered by the massive raid that US Admiral William F. Halsey undertook against the Indochinese coast on 12 January 1945, three days after General MacArthur's invasion of Luzon. Halsey for the first time took his fleet through the Luzon Strait into the South China Sea, employed no less than three carrier groups along the coast of Indochina, and sank much of the local naval and merchant fleet. The action looked like a preparatory raid for an invasion.<sup>14</sup>

No decision to launch a coup is absolutely final, of course, until the very last moment. An order may always be withdrawn. When Halsey's task force left the South China Sea again after the raids, and US naval forces attacked Iwo Jima on 19 January, some Japanese decision makers argued that a US invasion of Indochina was not very likely after all. The Japanese Ambassador to Hanoi suggested that the planned attack be postponed, but the Japanese Foreign Minister, arguing that an invasion was still possible, urged the government to remain on course. The Japanese Supreme War Council confirmed its 17 January decision in meetings on 1 February, and again on 26 February. It now scheduled the coup for the first ten days of March, leaving the choice of the exact date to Tsuchihashi.<sup>15</sup>

It seems clear from the above that the French loss of Indochina on 9 March 1945 was caused by a decision in Tokyo that was triggered by Halsey's 12 January raid. The raid convinced Tokyo that the danger of an Indochina invasion was acute. The connection between a US action and the Japanese decision has thus been established. The question is now if the connection was also intentional, if anyone in the USA understood the effect that Halsey's raid would have on the Japanese, and if this had any impact on the US decision to launch the raid. Did the Japanese misperception of US strategy have anything to do with President Roosevelt's desire to liberate Indochina from French colonialism?

### **Was Roosevelt directly involved?**

The strength of Roosevelt's desire to liberate Indochina from France and establish an international trusteeship is well known. It has been discussed by a number of historians, who have tried to gauge the foundations of Roosevelt's anti-French and

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<sup>14</sup> Murakami, *Japan's Thrust*, p. 508. Shiraishi, 'La présence française', p. 229, note 45, and p. 230, note 48. Halsey's raid also led to speculations in the press. On 21 January, the Australian *Sunday Telegraph* printed a story by its New York correspondent: "Military observers believe that the Japanese-held French colony will become the main gateway to the re-conquest of East Asia." Monmayou (Canberra) to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, 21.1.45, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (Paris), file 'Asie 1944-1955, dossiers généraux', box 155, and 'Indochine', box 29.

<sup>15</sup> Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945*, p. 220.

anti-colonial fervor and have launched competing theories about why Roosevelt did not or could not realize his aim.<sup>16</sup>

What has been lacking in most accounts, is appreciation of Roosevelt's penchant for mixing political plans with military strategy. Just like Churchill, he juggled with invasion plans, tried to figure out their political consequences, and well understood the utility of strategic deception. Roosevelt is therefore likely to have seen his plans for Indochina in the light of how the war against Japan was being pursued. If the French administration in Indochina, which had remained loyal to Vichy until its demise in the autumn of 1944, was going to remain in place, then it would be difficult to liberate the colony from France. If, however, Indochina were taken over fully by Japan before the end of the war, and then liberated by Allied forces, the US and China would have a much greater leverage in Indochina. One of Roosevelt's war aims was to foster a strong nationalist China. If Japan took over Indochina, then US-supported Chinese forces could attack the Japanese across the Indochinese border, without bothering about French attitudes, and China could enhance its regional position after the war. Those who have written about Roosevelt's Indochina policy have too easily dismissed his plans for Indochina as 'brave talk and bonhomie',<sup>17</sup> and concluded that he gave up his attempts to strengthen China, and his opposition to French rule of Indochina, in the final stage of his life – the very moment when Japan fulfilled his desire to see the French colonial regime being dismantled.

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<sup>16</sup> The main contributions to the long debate about FDR and Indochina during and after the American war in Vietnam are listed here in chronological order: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Bitter Heritage. Vietnam and American Democracy 1941-1966*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1967. Edward R. Drachman, *United States Policy Toward Vietnam, 1940-1945*, Cranbury NJ, Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1970. Gary R. Hess, 'Franklin Roosevelt and Indochina', *Journal of American History* LIX, Sept. 1972, pp. 353-368. Joseph M. Siracusa, 'The United States, Viet-Nam and the Cold War: A Reappraisal', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 5, 1974, pp. 82-101. Walter Lafeber, 'Roosevelt, Churchill and Indochina: 1942-45', *The American Historical Review*, No. 80, Dec. 1975, pp. 1277-1295. Gary R. Hess, 'United States Policy and the Origins of the French-Viet Minh War, 1945-46', *Peace and Change*, Vol. 3, 1975, nos. 2 & 3, Summer/Fall, pp. 21-33. Christopher Thorne, 'Indochina and the Anglo-American Relations 1942-45', *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 45, Feb. 1976, pp. 73-96. Russell H. Fifield, 'American Policy Toward Indochina during the Second World War, Some Tentative Conclusions', in James E. O'Neill & Robert W. Krauskopf (eds.), *World War II, an Account of its Documents*, Wash. DC, Harvard Univ. Press, 1976, pp. 59-70. William Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay, 1941-1945, the United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977. George C. Herring, 'The Truman Administration and the Restoration of French Sovereignty in Indochina', *Diplomatic History* No. 1, 1977, pp. 97-117. Christopher Thorne, *Allies of A Kind, the United States, Britain and the war against Japan, 1941-1945*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1978. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, NY, John Wiley & Sons, 1979. William J. Duiker, 'Les Etats-Unis et l'Indochine française, 1940-1945', in Paul Isoart (ed.), *L'Indochine Française, 1940-1945*, Paris, PUF, 1982, pp. 177-214. D. Cameron Watt, 'Britain, America and Indo-China, 1942-1945', essay in D. Cameron Watt, *Succeeding John Bull, America in Britain's Place, 1900-1975*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984, pp. 194-219. Gary R. Hess, *The United States' Emergence as a Southeast Asian Power, 1940-1950*, NY, Columbia Univ. Press, 1987. Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu, 1941-1954*, NY, W.W. Norton, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> e.g. Thorne, 'Indochina and the Anglo-American Relations 1942-45', pp. 95-96.

By early 1945, of course, Roosevelt had no way of knowing either that he himself would die that April or that the war against Japan would end in August. Although he may have envisaged the utilization of the nuclear bomb, Roosevelt probably expected the war to go on for at least another year. He was well aware that the main battles would be fought in the Japanese homeland, but he had also foreseen a series of offensives by US-supported Chinese forces in China that would also target Indochina.

Now, what evidence exists to underpin the hypothesis that Roosevelt intentionally pushed Japan towards the execution of the 9 March coup?

### *1. Roosevelt's invasion plan*

In October 1944, shortly after having met Churchill in Quebec, Roosevelt replaced the commander of the US forces in China, General Joseph W. Stilwell, with General Albert C. Wedemeyer. It has often been claimed that at this point, Roosevelt retreated from his policy of furthering China's role in the war, and that China became a sort of holding theatre.<sup>18</sup> There is evidence, however, that Roosevelt actively sought for new ways of bolstering up China, and that he saw a connection between this aim and his desire to detach Indochina from France. On 18 October 1944, the same day as he decided to recall Stilwell, a note passed from the White House to the U.S. military planners: "President wishes that a study be made of possible use of Indo China as a substitute for the Burma supply route. Get study for Admiral Leahy."<sup>19</sup> What Roosevelt had in mind, was to occupy Tonkin and supply Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese forces on the railroad from Haiphong to Kunming.

The Joint Planning Staff handled the request as a matter of priority, but instead of circulating regular Planning Staff papers, reports were sent as memoranda to Admiral Leahy. After only three days, the Planners completed a preliminary version of a study on Indochina as a substitute for the Burma supply route. The final study was handed over to Admiral Leahy amidst the euphoria of the victory in the battle for Leyte Gulf, 24-26 October 1944. In order to avoid the monsoon, the invasion of Tonkin was scheduled for not later than early March 1945; the whole operation was to begin 20 days earlier with the capture of Hainan island. In the preparatory phase for the planned attack on Hainan, heavy air attacks were to be carried out against that island, against the Japanese installations in southern China, and along the Indochinese coast.

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<sup>18</sup> Barbara W. Tuchman, *Sand Against the Wind. Stilwell and the American Experience in China 1911-45*, London, Macmillan, 1971, pp. 491, 508. LaFeber, 'Roosevelt, Churchill, and Indochina', p. 1290. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam*, p. 43. Louis, *Imperialism at Bay*, p. 356.

<sup>19</sup> On 17 October, 'AJM' received the note from Leahy and, the following day, forwarded it to 'JLC', US National Archives, Record Group 218, Combined Chiefs of Staff 401 (10-11-44).



The Joint Staff Planners loyally produced the plans requested by the President, but since the Joint Chiefs were deeply committed to a military strategy leading directly to the Japanese homeland through the occupation of Okinawa, the Planners did not hide their skepticism to the President's idea: "We believe that the Japanese would welcome such an Allied operation as a means of forcing the commitment of considerable Allied forces on the mainland of Asia, thus diverting them from being a potential threat against the Japanese Homeland .... it is concluded that operations in Indo-China would mean a cost of at least 6 months delay in the invasion of Japan proper. These operations are, therefore, not in consonance with our agreed strategy for the prosecution of the war against Japan."<sup>20</sup> Roosevelt received this discouraging advice a week after he had made his long overdue decision to recognize de Gaulle's French government. He had also then grudgingly yielded to the decision of the Dumbarton Oaks Conference to give France a fifth seat in the Security Council for the planned United Nations organization. Still Roosevelt could hope to deny France a say in Asian affairs.

Despite the warning from the Planners, the President did not give up his invasion idea. Further plans were made, but in the last months of 1944, Roosevelt entrenched himself and his administration in a 'do-nothing' attitude as far as Indochina was concerned. There is no evidence to indicate that the invasion plan was changed into a deception plan. The lack of such evidence, however, does not exclude the possibility that the President could orally have instructed some of his closest collaborators or key commanders, such as his Chief of Staff Admiral William D. Leahy, OSS Director William J. Donovan, and perhaps the commander of the US Pacific Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, to make certain moves that would encourage Japanese fears of a US Indochina invasion.

## *2. The 'do-nothing' attitude*

If Roosevelt continued to ponder the possibility of a Tonkin invasion, or if he hoped that the Japanese would make a move against the French, then it made sense to prevent US services from committing themselves to any kind of cooperation with French services. And yes, on 16 October 1944, two days before he commissioned the invasion plan, Roosevelt already directed the Secretary of State to "do nothing in regard to resistance groups or in any other way in relation to Indochina. You might

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<sup>20</sup> Joint Logistics Plans Committee Directive 'Indo China as a Substitute for the Burma Supply Route', J.L.F.C. 28/3/D, 21.10.44 and Memo for the Joint Chiefs of Staff Secretary with enclosure 'Indochina as a Substitute for the Burma Supply Route, Report by the Joint Staff Planners' and a draft 'Memorandum for the President from Admiral Leahy', 30.10.44 (documents delivered to Adm. Leahy on 31.10.44), US National Archives, Record Group 218, Combined Chiefs of Staff 401 (10-11-44).

bring it up to me a little later when things are a little clearer.”<sup>21</sup> Two months later, in December 1944, Roosevelt was subjected to pressure from the State Department, who in turn was under pressure from the British Foreign Office, to allow US services to assist the Franco-British effort to supply the French ‘Resistance Movement’ in Indochina. Roosevelt, however, stuck to his ‘do-nothing’ attitude and declared on New Year’s Day: “I still do not want to get mixed up in any Indochina decision. It is a matter for post-war. By the same token, I do not want to get mixed up in any military effort toward the liberation of Indochina from the Japanese ... From both the military and civil point of view, action at this time is premature.”<sup>22</sup>

Why did he not want to be mixed up in any military effort toward the liberation of Indochina when he himself had asked for an Indochina invasion plan? The difference is clear. In October he thought of a US sea borne invasion to bolster the position of Chiang Kai-shek. On New Year’s Day, he referred to Franco-British efforts. Roosevelt probably wanted to wait and see what happened inside Indochina. If the Japanese attacked and defeated the French colonial army, then Indochina would become a territory ruled directly by the enemy. As such it could be liberated later by Sino-American forces. The morally and politically difficult operation of eliminating the French colonial regime would then have been left to Japan. No evidence exists to suggest that this was on the President’s mind, but it does not seem improbable.

### *3. The lack of regular deception*

In 1944 and 1945, US military strategists devoted considerable energy to fabricating strategic deception plans, and also diversionary attacks, but until the summer of 1945, Indochina was not targeted in any of the deception plans now kept in the files of the US Navy. This is despite the fact that naval deception planners considered Indochina a promising target. Military intelligence had revealed that the Japanese feared an invasion of Indochina. US naval deception planners wanted to reinforce the Japanese fears through deception. Still, Indochina was not included in any of the regular deception plans. The staff who produced the deception plans were apparently told, like everyone else, to do nothing with regard to Indochina.

In late November 1944, Admiral Nimitz developed a ‘cover plan’ for his future operations in the Pacific (the invasion of Iwo Jima) and suggested to activate the French in Indochina, as well as some OSS teams, against the Japanese. Neither of

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<sup>21</sup> William D. Leahy, *I Was There, the Personal Story of the Chief of Staff to Presidents Roosevelt and Truman* Based on his Notes and Diaries Made at the Time, NY, Whittlesey House, 1950, p. 319. Notes from conference Leahy-FDR-Marshall, 16.10.44, Leahy Diaries, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, MicroFilm-Reel 3. Roosevelt to SecState, 16.10.44, US National Archives, Record Group 59, 851G.00/10-1644 and Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1944, Vol. III, p. 777.

<sup>22</sup> Memo from FDR to Stettinius, 1.1.45, *FRUS* 1945, Vol. 6, p. 293.

them needed to know that this was part of a 'cover plan', said Nimitz. However, when the 'cover plan' was adopted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 20 December 1944, the whole section on Indochina had been deleted.<sup>23</sup>

In mid-January 1945, one naval deception planner in Washington repeatedly inquired why no cover plans had been developed to exploit Japanese apprehensions regarding US intentions toward South China and Indo-China. It was apparent, he argued, that an opportunity for exploitation of deception presented itself, and if such plans did not already exist, the Joint War Plans Committee should be directed to prepare them. The best would be to publicly announce the planned use of French forces in Indochina. If this was impossible, "carefully placed rumors to the effect that such employment was under consideration, would help to achieve the same object." His suggestions cannot have been positively received, for within two weeks, he repeated his proposal twice. Recent Japanese movements indicated that Tokyo was apprehensive of an Allied attack against Indochina, he argued; why was this fact not exploited? The President's recent prohibition against operations in Indochina could not, he felt, include cover plans: "In short, should the Japanese deploy their forces in expectation of an invasion of Indo-China, that is their fault".<sup>24</sup> Apparently his superiors turned a deaf ear to the proposal. No cover plan was adopted by the Navy. Could the reason be that deception was carried out on a higher level?

#### *4. The currency request*

Among French decision makers on all levels there were a lot of rumors in late 1944 and early 1945 that the Americans were about to invade Indochina, and General de Gaulle issued secret instructions to the French Indochinese Army for what to do in the event of a US landing. Many of the rumors were based on reports from a military attaché in Kunming who was in close contact with local US services.<sup>25</sup>

The French rumors were also stimulated by a request the French government received in December 1944, for 3 million Indochinese piasters, to be used by the OSS. The French hesitated, but in late January 1945, the ambassador to Washington was approached by a representative of the US Department of Finance, who urged him to obtain a rapid decision on the matter. The French government then dispatched an initial sum of 500,000 piasters, but asked in return some insight into US operational

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<sup>23</sup> 'Cover Plans for Detachment, Iceberg, and Subsequent Operations in the Pacific Ocean Areas during 1945', Nimitz to King, Serial 0001011, 21.11.44, US National Archives, Record Group 218, Geographic Files, Box 688, fld. CCS Pacific Ocean Area (12-1-44). 'Detachment' and 'Iceberg' were the codenames for the landings on Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

<sup>24</sup> Memoranda from D.E. Fairbanks, Jr. to Adm. Duncan, 4.1.45, 13.1.45, 15.1.45, Naval Historical Center (Wash. D.C.), Strategic Plans Records, Box 157, fld. C-2 (2).

<sup>25</sup> Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution*, pp. 199-204.

planning, a request which led to nothing.<sup>26</sup> However, on 15 March – a week after the Japanese coup – the French were informed that the currency request had become obsolete. It “was not made in connection with any specific military operations, but rather was made for the purpose of providing US aviators with sums of local currency for emergency use in the event of being forced down in enemy-held Indo-China territory”, the US memorandum explained. How many aviators did the US expect to lose over French Indochina? 500,000 piasters would be enough to supply at least 1,000.<sup>27</sup>

One wonders if someone calculated with the effects the currency request could have on the French. After Roosevelt had passed away, a regular deception plan for a fictitious assault on Indochina was finally produced. One of the measures suggested was: “Arranging for proper currency”.<sup>28</sup>

### 5. *Black radio*

A method often used in deception was to spread false rumors through planted news items in the press and black radio. In late February, while Roosevelt was on his way home by sea from the conference at Yalta, OSS Director Donovan went to Hawaii, apparently to discuss a ‘black radio’ project with Admiral Nimitz.<sup>29</sup> On 3 March, Donovan returned to Los Angeles, and that same day, which was six days before the Japanese coup, a false report was broadcast out of San Francisco, indicating that the Japanese had disarmed the French in Indochina. The fake news was printed in a

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Procès-verbal de la séance du 17 décembre du Comité d’Action’, Centre des archives d’outre-mer (Aix-en-Provence), file ‘Conseiller Politique’, box 189; and Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (Paris), file ‘Asie 1944-1955, Indochine’, box 42. Bonnet to MAE, No. 607-608, 30.1.45; MAE to Bonnet, No. 1028-1029, 16.2.45, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (Paris), file ‘Asie 1944-1955, Indochine’, box 29. Memo from Vice-Admiral Fénard, 12.2.45 and answer from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, signed Leahy 15.3.45, US National Archives, Record Group 218, CCS 123 Indo-China (2-12-45).

<sup>27</sup> Leahy to Fénard, 15.3.45, US National Archives, Record Group 218, CCS 123 Indo-China (2-12-45). See also Bonnet to Bidault, No. 393, 21.3.45, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (Paris), file ‘Asie 1944-1955, Indochine’, box 30. In 1989, when Tønnesson during a personal conversation told former OSS officer Archimedes L. Patti about the currency request, Patti said this was ludicrous since the OSS had factories where it could produce all the piasters it wanted.

<sup>28</sup> JWPC 190/14/M (Revised), 9.6.45, US National Archives, Record Group 218, Box 294, folder CCS 385 Pacific Theater (4-1-43), Section 4, also in Record Group 165, ABC 381 Japan (15 Apr. 43), Section 1-B.

<sup>29</sup> According to Donovan’s biographer, A.C. Brown, his movements in late February and early March were ‘troubling’. On 26 February, he told his secretary that he went to Hawaii; on 5 March he was home again for dinner in Washington. Brown thinks the mystery of his whereabouts in the intermediate period ‘suggests his involvement in very secret activities’ and has it that he did not go to Hawaii, but had secret contacts with the German High Command somewhere in Europe. A.C. Brown, *The Last Hero: Wild Bill Donovan*, pp. 733-734. However, according to Lawrence C. Soley, Donovan actually did go to Hawaii on 26 February, to discuss a ‘black radio’ project with Admiral Nimitz. On 3 March, Donovan landed in Los Angeles: Lawrence C. Soley, *Radio Warfare. OSS and CIA Subversive Propaganda*, NY, Praeger, 1989, pp. 185, 194 (note 70).

sufficient number of newspapers to make the French newspaper *Le Figaro* announce in its 7 March issue that the rumors lacked all foundation.<sup>30</sup>

## 6. 'Magic'

When assessing the means at the President's disposal, one must remember that US signal intelligence analysts had long since broken the Japanese diplomatic and military codes. Both Churchill and Roosevelt had been avid readers of 'Magic' intercepts since the early phase of the war.<sup>31</sup> In late 1944 and early 1945, it took an average of 48 hours for intercepted raw material to get back to Washington,<sup>32</sup> where it was processed by an army of translators and analysts, who produced summaries of the main developments. Through such intelligence the US could follow in detail how Japan was preparing the 9 March coup. Towards the end of 1944, Japanese dispatches indicated a crisis in the relationship between the Japanese Army and the French administration. The Japanese seriously feared a US invasion and did not trust that the French would remain loyal or neutral.<sup>33</sup> A Japanese Navy message was intercepted on 17 January stating as a "fact that landings in Indo-China by Allied forces are imminent".<sup>34</sup> In late January, it was "reliably reported" that Japanese military attachés had been informed by the Army General Staff in Tokyo on 27 January that the Allies "would probably use part of their strength for operations against French Indo-China".<sup>35</sup>

An intercepted diplomatic cable revealed that the commander of the French colonial army, General Eugène Mordant, called on Field Marshal Terauchi Hisaichi, Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Southern Army, on 31 January, and that he claimed an invasion of Indochina by American and British forces was "wholly unlikely". Terauchi said he differed with Mordant "in interpreting the trend of the war", but that he could not be more specific.<sup>36</sup> Ten days later, a summary of intercepted diplomatic messages noted that "the Japanese have become increasingly

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<sup>30</sup> The OSS had chosen San Francisco as the site for their 'black radio' transmitter because it was the 'gateway to the Pacific': Soley, *Radio Warfare*, p. 186. *Le Figaro* does not give the name of the news agency responsible for the rumour. It just says it came from a 'foreign source'. Japanese Foreign Ministry files refer to the same false report, monitored from a broadcast out of San Francisco on 3 March: Ralph B. Smith, 'The Japanese Period in Indochina and the Coup of 9 March 1945', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1978, p. 280.

<sup>31</sup> David Stafford, *Roosevelt & Churchill. Men of Secrets*. London: Abacus, 2000, pp. 118-120.

<sup>32</sup> SRH-200, Record Group 457, US National Archives (USNA), Record Group 457, SRH-200.

<sup>33</sup> 'Recent Political Developments in French Indo-China', PSIS 400-6, 6.4.45, USNA, Record Group 457, SRH-095. This report is a summary of Japanese dispatches intercepted in the period 9.11.44 to 15.3.45.

<sup>34</sup> SRS 306, 20 January 1945, Magic Far East Summaries, Box 4, Record Group 457, USNA.

<sup>35</sup> Memorandum for F.11, sign. W.J. Sebald, 30.1.45, Naval Historical Center, Strategic Plans File, Box 161, folder 'Intelligence 1-1(2)'. See also Diplo Magic Summary No. 1010, 29 January 1945, Box 13, Record Group 457, USNA.

<sup>36</sup> No. 1055, 13.2.45, Diplo. Magic Summaries, Box 13, Record Group 457, USNA.

concerned over the possibility of Allied landings in Indo-China and have been taking various measures – and thinking about others”.<sup>37</sup> Radio messages intercepted on 10 February discussed the possibility of “inventing” some pretext for a coup against the French. US intelligence also reported disagreements between Japanese diplomats wanting to proclaim Vietnam’s independence and the Army preferring to maintain French Indochina’s administrative system after having disarmed the French.<sup>38</sup> On 21 February, a summary of Magic intercepts reported the Supreme War Council’s 1 February decision to take military control of Indochina, and that the timing would be made known to the relevant authorities after 20 February.<sup>39</sup> Then there were reports of hesitation in Tokyo to give its final authorization. The view had been expressed that there were “few basic reasons” for the decision, but since it had been made in January, it ought to be carried out.

Through these Magic intercepts, US services learned of the Japanese intention to give the French Governor General two hours to consider an ultimatum before taking action.<sup>40</sup> On 22 February, a Japanese official in Saigon advised Tokyo that, although the local military believed the likelihood of an Allied attack to have diminished considerably, they were nevertheless going ahead with their plans “as scheduled”.<sup>41</sup> On 1 March, the US could reveal that a decision had been made as to the wording of the proclamation to be made at the time of action, and on 3 March, the Japanese Foreign Minister informed the Japanese ambassadors to Moscow, Berlin and Siegmaringen (the former Vichy regime) that “we have decided to resort to force of arms” in French Indochina. On 5 March, another Magic summary confirmed that the Japanese Supreme War Council on 1 March had “made the final decision to take control of French Indo-China unless the Government General should agree to certain Japanese demands.”<sup>42</sup> Through its intercepts, the US services were now able to quote the whole text of the ultimatum that the Japanese commander in Indochina was going to hand over to the French Governor General.<sup>43</sup> The heading for the Magic Summary of 9 March 1945 was: “Showdown in Indo-China expected today”.<sup>44</sup> After the fact, Magic intercepts rendered a summary of the Japanese ambassador’s own minutes of

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<sup>37</sup> Summary No. 1053, 11 February 1945, Box 13, Diplomatic Magic Summaries, Record Group 457, USNA.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Recent Political Developments in French Indo-China’, PSIS 400-6, 6.4.45, US National Archives, Record Group 457, SRH-095, pp. 10-11.

<sup>39</sup> No. 1063, 21.2.45, Diplo. Magic Summaries, Box 13, RG 457, USNA.

<sup>40</sup> No. 1068, 26.2.45, Diplo. Magic Summaries, Box 13, RG 457, USNA. By 1992, pages 8-10 of this summary were not releasable, probably because they cited intercepts from French radio communications. These may be releasable now.

<sup>41</sup> No. 1070, 28.2.45, Diplo. Magic Summaries, Box 13, RG 457, USNA.

<sup>42</sup> No. 1071, 1.3.45, No. 1073, 3.3.45 and No. 1075, 5.3.45, Diplo. Magic Summaries, Box 13, RG 457, USNA.

<sup>43</sup> Doc. H-171612, 3.3.45, quoted in ‘Recent Political Developments in French Indo-China’, PSIS 400-6, 6.4.45, US National Archives, Record Group 457, SRH-095.

<sup>44</sup> No. 1079, 9.3.45, Box 13, Diplo. Magic Summaries, RG 457, USNA.

his 9 March meeting with the French Governor General, when handing over the ultimatum: “I mentioned the present war situation and stated that an American landing in French Indo-China was becoming increasingly imminent, but he argued that, with the approach of the monsoon season, no immediate landing would be attempted.”<sup>45</sup>

It is not known if such news were communicated to President Roosevelt while he was away on the *USS Quincy* at the Malta and Yalta conferences (23 January–28 February 1945). However, after his return, he must have been informed. On 3 March, Donovan also came back from his mission to Hawaii. There is no indication that anything was done to warn the French of what was about to happen.

### *7. 8 March meetings in the White House*

On 8 March, the day before the Japanese coup, Roosevelt gave audiences in the White House to his ambassador to China, Patrick Hurley, and the commander of the China theatre forces, General Albert C. Wedemeyer. Unfortunately no records have been found of these meetings, so we have to rely on Hurley and Wedemeyer’s memoirs and some second-hand reports.<sup>46</sup> These sources (as well as Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution*) claim that the meetings took place on 7 March, but the White House log book shows that Roosevelt rested at Hyde Park from 4 to 7 March, and arrived at the White House in the morning of 8 March to meet Hurley and Wedemeyer at 12.30 a.m. This was less than twenty-four hours before Japan launched its coup, and since the US had detailed advance knowledge of the plan through Magic intercepts, Roosevelt is bound to have known. Hurley tried to speak to him about the Kuomintang-communist conflict in China,<sup>47</sup> but according to Hurley, Roosevelt’s mind seemed to be elsewhere. He listened with apparent attention to what Hurley had to say, but when he spoke, it was not about China, but Indochina. General Wedemeyer did not get much further in attempts to discuss the Chinese situation. The President ordered him not to hand over supplies – any supplies at all – to French forces operating in Asia. He and Stalin had agreed that Indochina required a trusteeship, not colonization, he said. National independence was the wave of the future – not empires, not spheres of influence. These were Roosevelt’s instructions, given at a moment when he must have known that Japan was about to strike. While this does not prove that Roosevelt

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<sup>45</sup> No. 1088, 18.3.45, Box 14, Diplo. Magic Summaries, RG 457, USNA.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Schaller, *The U.S. Crusade in China, 1938-1945*, NY, Columbia Univ. Press, 1979, pp. 216-217. Jim Bishop, *FDR’s Last Year. April 1944–April 1945*, NY, William Morrow, 1974, p. 491. See also Albert C. Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer Reports!*, NY, Henry Holt, 1958, p. 340, and Drachman, *United States Policy*, p. 84.

<sup>47</sup> The staff of the US embassy in Chongqing was just then revolting against Hurley’s pro-Chiang Kai-shek policy and recommending more contact with the Chinese communists, so Hurley badly needed the President’s support (which he got). See Warren I. Cohen, *The U.S. Response to China*, NY, Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 145-146.

himself had done anything to encourage the Japanese coup, it does in firm the allegation made by some historians that he at this stage had given up his opposition to French rule of Indochina.

If Roosevelt *had been trying* to push the Japanese towards executing its coup plan, then the most effective tool would have been Admiral Halsey's 12 January raid. In the White House, that same 8 March, Roosevelt also received Admiral Halsey for lunch, to award him a Congressional Medal of Honor. After luncheon the President took Halsey to his office and told him a number of things which Halsey later said to his biographer were "so secret that I would have preferred not to know them". One was Russia's pledge to declare war on Japan: the others, said Halsey, "are still secret".<sup>48</sup>

On 9 March, before receiving the news of the Japanese coup, Roosevelt welcomed a group of French journalists to the White House, including the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre: "Le président dit aux journalistes français son amour de notre pays", wrote Sartre in *Le Figaro* on 11 March 1945.

#### *8. The silence of the files*

In the White House files that are held at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, there is a curious scarcity of documents related to the 9 March coup. The archives include reports from the OSS to the President about the risk that the fighting between the French and Japanese in Indochina might spill over to Thailand, but they do not include any reports on events in Indochina itself. Given Roosevelt's particular interest in Indochina, this is curious.

In conclusion to this subchapter, it must be recognized that no proof has been found that Roosevelt deliberately provoked the Japanese coup. The evidence is at best circumstantial. Moreover, there are also some facts indicating that the Japanese 9 March coup may not after all have resulted from a Roosevelt ploy.

### **The counter-arguments**

"Intention does not prove effect", Aldrich stated as a critical comment on the Tønnesson hypothesis.<sup>49</sup> This is certainly true. The problem is to find out if Roosevelt's intention to end French colonial rule in Indochina had anything to do with

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<sup>48</sup> James M. Merrill, *A Sailor's Admiral. A Biography of William F. Halsey*, NY, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976, p. 210. For some reason, Admiral Halsey later found the fact that the bombing had been based on French intelligence 'embarrassing in a way': Milton E. Miles, *A Different Kind of War*, New York, Doubleday, 1967, p. 424, quoted after William H. Wainwright, *De Gaulle and Indochina 1940-1945*, PhD thesis, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, 1972, p. 973.

<sup>49</sup> Aldrich, *Intelligence and the War Against Japan*, pp. 341.



the US actions that provoked the Japanese decision to launch the coup. There are three links in this chain, and it is both possible to claim that the Japanese decision did not result from US actions, and that the US actions did not result from Roosevelt's intentions.

Aldrich argues that the Japanese decision did not result from US actions. The Japanese coup of 9 March 1945 was caused by French action inside Indochina in cooperation with British services, not anything the USA did from the outside. The Japanese coup "was probably a reaction to French activity, especially the growing volume of SOE [British Special Operations Executive]-backed flights by the French secret service from India". Cryptology historian Robert J. Hanyok, who has studied a number of Communication Intelligence (COMINT) documents in US War Department archives, holds the same view. These documents show, he says, that the Japanese were aware of the French colonial government's attempts to enter into contact with de Gaulle, and that the Japanese took action to forestall a French uprising.<sup>50</sup>

The present author has not done research in Japanese archives, but secondary literature based on such research, as well as several Magic intercepts, do show that Japan was seriously concerned by the danger of a US invasion in January 1945, that this played a significant role in the calculations leading to the decision to launch the coup, and that the key decision was made on 17 January, under the immediate impression of Halsey's raid. A few weeks later, some Japanese officials (including the Ambassador to Indochina) argued that the operation now ought to be called off, since the danger of an invasion had diminished. This indicates that the main Japanese concern was a possible US invasion, not independent French action or French action in cooperation with the British. It would take a long time before the British had any capability to launch large-scale operations against Indochina, and the French were unlikely to take independent action except in case of an Allied invasion. If they did so, they would be quickly defeated, and they could not calculate with the loyalty of the indigenous populations.

The other counter-argument is more difficult to refute. No evidence has been found to prove that Halsey's raid of the Indochinese coast had a deceptive purpose or that Roosevelt had advance knowledge of it. The purpose of the raid was to sink some of Japan's few remaining larger warships. Since Halsey's raid was the decisive factor in convincing the Japanese Supreme War Council to authorize the 9 March coup, the purely military purpose of the raid appears to indicate that the causal connection between US actions and the Japanese coup had no connection with Roosevelt's desire to liberate Indochina from France. This argument must be examined in detail in order

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<sup>50</sup> Letter from Robert J. Hanyok to the author, 31.7.97.

to establish if the raid could have had a deceptive purpose or in any way result from Roosevelt's policy.

Admiral Halsey served under Admiral Nimitz as commander of the Third Fleet. After the battle for Leyte Gulf in October 1944, Halsey started to consider a raid into the South China Sea, where the Japanese Navy had reigned supreme since the beginning of 1942. Initially, nothing was mentioned about Indochina in the operation order.<sup>51</sup> The intention was to strike against Taiwan and northern Luzon, not Indochina, but the task force was also expected to seize any chance to "destroy and neutralize Naval forces threatening the operation". The US knew that the Japanese Navy's "2<sup>nd</sup> Diversion Attack Force", which comprised the two carriers *Ise* and *Hyuga*, was in the Singapore area. It was now feared that it might sail eastward to attack the forces of General MacArthur while undertaking the invasion of Luzon, an operation scheduled to begin on 9 January.

On 28-29 December, while on his way back to Pearl Harbor from a conference with MacArthur, Admiral Nimitz stopped at Ulithi to discuss the planned raids in the South China Sea.<sup>52</sup> There is no basis for speculating that Nimitz should have brought special instructions from the President to raid the Indochinese coast, but Halsey's operation order was now changed in a way that opened up the possibility of an operation in that direction. The purpose was to destroy the Japanese 2<sup>nd</sup> Diversion Task Force, in case it were to sail into the South China Sea from Singapore: "Approval was given to Admiral Halsey's request to enter the China Sea if major Japanese fleet units were sighted."<sup>53</sup> On 30 December 1944, the same day as Halsey's task force departed Ulithi (and the day before Roosevelt repeated his instructions for a do-nothing attitude), a reconnaissance plane reported to have spotted a Japanese task force built around two battleships and a seaplane tender at Cap St. Jacques (*Vung Tau*) just outside Saigon. Before bombers could be sent to strike the target, the Navy signaled that the ships had pulled out.<sup>54</sup> This might indicate that the Japanese were preparing to move naval forces from Singapore to Indochina.

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<sup>51</sup> Operation Order No. 5-44, serial 00017, 27.12.44, Naval Historical Center, Second Carrier Task Force, Pacific. Task Force 38 was under the command of Vice Admiral J. S. McCain.

<sup>52</sup> E.B. Potter, *Nimitz*, Annapolis MD, Naval Institute Press, 1976, p. 351.

<sup>53</sup> Entry for 28 December 1944, War Diary Third Fleet, Box 37, Halsey Papers, Naval Historical Foundation Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC. Also CINCPAC (Nimitz) to COM3RDFLT (Halsey), 28 December 1944, Command Summary FADM Nimitz' gray book), 1.1.45-1.7.45, Naval Historical Center, Washington (NHC). See also GenHq SWPA to War Dept, CX 54015, 19.12.44, folder O-9, Box 165, Strategic Plans Records, NHC.

<sup>54</sup> "On 30 December a B-22 reconnaissance plane had spotted a fat target at Cape St. Jacques in Indo-China, a Jap task force built around two battleships and a seaplane tender. LeMay [Major General Curtis E. LeMay, Commander of the 21st Bomber Command] had hurriedly ordered forty-nine B-29's to be loaded with eight 1,000-pound bombs each and had them on the line when the Navy signaled that the ships had pulled out." Craven & Cate, *The Army Air Forces*, p. 155.

On 2 January, signal intelligence showed that the commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Diversion Attack Force remained in Singapore, but a fragmentary message on 7 January suggested that he planned to take it to Indochina. One analyst doubted this, saying the evidence was “extremely weak”.<sup>55</sup> However, on 9 January, it was reported with certainty that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Diversion Attack Force had been ordered to leave Singapore that same day and proceed via Cap St. Jacques (Vung Tau) to Camranh Bay on the east coast of Indochina. The force would be due at Cap St. Jacques on the 11<sup>th</sup>, and would henceforth rendezvous with another force at Camranh Bay, where it was to ‘stand by’.<sup>56</sup> A Magic summary, dated 11 January, went even further, saying the 2<sup>nd</sup> Diversion Task Force had “left Singapore for Camranh Bay in the afternoon of 9 January and was scheduled to rendezvous at Camranh Bay, with three or four destroyers, probably on 12 January”.<sup>57</sup>

By 8 January, Halsey’s task force remained east of Luzon. On 7 January he had signaled his intention to strike against Taiwan on the 9<sup>th</sup>. Nimitz had concurred, but had added that he assumed Halsey would also “take any favorable opportunity to destroy enemy heavy ships”.<sup>58</sup> On the 9<sup>th</sup>, the task force raided the Taiwan airfields as scheduled, and then reported that it would proceed that same night through the Luzon straits for five days of operations in the South China Sea. “I had always wanted,” Halsey would recount later, “to raid the China Sea area ever since I took command of the fleet.”<sup>59</sup> Now, in the hope of sinking *Ise*, *Hyuga* and their many accompanying ships, Halsey decided to sail straight across the South China Sea to Indochina: “Sightings indicated that the *Ise* and *Hyuga* had departed from Singapore. Commander Third Fleet’s annex 1 to his Operation Plan 25-44 was placed into effect”.<sup>60</sup> Thus, on 12 January, a dozen carriers with about 400 aircraft appeared off Indochina, launching vigorous strikes along the whole coastline from Saigon to Qui

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<sup>55</sup> CFRUPAC 072036, Box 290, SRN 234.063-234.293, Japanese Naval Messages, Record Group 457, USNA.

<sup>56</sup> FRUPAC 080804/080809, SRN 234196, Japanese Naval Messages, Box 291, Record Group 457, USNA, contains a version which leaves much open to interpretation. The identity of the Force concerned is not certain, and the place to ‘stand by’ is only “possibly Camranh Bay”. A new translation, dated 9 January, is much more definitive, and positively identifies an order for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Diversion Task Force to move from Singapore to Cap St Jacques and Camranh Bay: Magic Far East Naval Section summary Nos. 312-313, 9 January 1945, SRS 295, Box 4, Magic Far East Summaries, Record Group 457, USNA.

<sup>57</sup> SRS 297, Box 4, Magic Far East Summaries, Record Group 457, USNA. See also JNS 314, 11.1.45 (with a map showing the scheduled run of 2<sup>nd</sup> Diversion Attack Force, and JNS 315, 12.2.45, with a summary of the messages cited above, also in Magic Far East Summaries, RG 457, USNA.

<sup>58</sup> Com 3rd Fleet to CINCPAC, NCR 9143 and CINCPAC to Com 3rd Fleet, NCR 9420, both 7.1.45, Naval Historical Center, Strategic Plans Records, Box 165, fld. O-9.

<sup>59</sup> Com 3rd Fleet to CTF 94, NCR 293, 9.1.45, Naval Historical Center, Strategic Plans Records, Box 165, fld. O-9. Merrill, *A Sailor’s Admiral*, p. 203.

<sup>60</sup> Entry for 9 January 1945, War Diary Third Fleet, Box 37, Halsey Papers, Naval Historical Foundation Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Nhon. Halsey's orders were: "You know what to do. Give them hell. God bless you all."<sup>61</sup>

However, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Diversion Task Force was not given hell at this time since, as a matter of fact, it remained at Lengga Roads near Singapore.<sup>62</sup> The US intelligence had been false: "Camranh Bay had negligible targets and no heavy surface units were sighted so that Task Group 34.5 reluctantly rejoined the carrier groups".<sup>63</sup> Halsey later reported that "Task Group 34.5 was off Camranh Bay to destroy enemy heavy units expected there, but none were found, although diligent search was pressed by Task Force 38 planes to maximum search radius."<sup>64</sup> When deprived of their main target, Halsey's forces instead sank 44 smaller ships, including the French cruiser *La Motte-Piquet*. This was no small achievement, but from a US strategic perspective, sinking 44 small ships did not warrant sending such a formidable force so far from its operational area.<sup>65</sup> Still it would be far-fetched to speculate that the false intelligence had in any way been 'planted', and that the real purpose of the raid was to deceive Japan into believing that a US invasion of Indochina was imminent – although this was the effect. The telegrams preserved in US naval archives give no reason to doubt that the naval intelligence analysts truly believed that the *Ise* and *Hyuga* had sailed to Camranh Bay.<sup>66</sup>

After the raid, Halsey's task force proceeded northwards to strike against Hainan and Hong Kong on the 14th, sailed east to sweep Taiwan a second time on the

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<sup>61</sup> Entry for 11 January 1945, War Diary Third Fleet, Box 37, Halsey Papers, Naval Historical Foundation Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

<sup>62</sup> "2<sup>nd</sup> Diversion Attack Force... apparently remained in the Singapore-Saigon area on 12 Jan." JNS 316, 13.1.45 (SRS 299), Magic Far East Summaries, RG 457, USNA. "All available intelligence indicates that ... Ise Hyuga Force in vicinity Lingga Singapore". CINCPAC to COMINCH, 161836 (16.1.45), page 2972, Command Summary, FADM Nimitz (gray book) 11.45-1.7.45, NHC.

<sup>63</sup> Entry for 12 January 1945, War Diary Third Fleet, Box 37, Halsey Papers, Naval Historical Foundation Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

<sup>64</sup> Report on the operations of the Third Fleet, 30 December 1944 to 23 January 1945, Box 37, Halsey Papers, Naval Historical Foundation Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

<sup>65</sup> "Indo China Saigon to Cape Saho under attack. Complete surprise. Air opposition negligible. Ise Hyuga not located. Shipping score already heavy. Convoy with CA CL and DD just reported": Com 3rd Fleet to CINCPAC, CINCSWPA, COMTASKFOR 77, NCR 4658, 12.1.45, Naval Historical Center, Strategic Plans Records, Box 165, fld. O-9. Map of operations in Samuel E. Morison, *History of U.S. Naval Operations in World War II*, Vol. XIII, Oxford Univ. Press, 1959, p. 166. Halsey later justified the action by stating: "This was one of the heaviest blows to Japanese shipping of any day of the war and it appeared that the Japanese supply routes from Singapore, Malaya, Burma, Borneo, and the Dutch East Indies were severed at least temporarily". Merrill, *A Sailor's Admiral*, p. 204.

<sup>66</sup> An 'Estimate of Japanese Naval Forces – period ending January 13, 1945' says the 2<sup>nd</sup> Diversion Task Force had departed Singapore on 9 January, that it was "presumably bound for Saigon and Camranh Bay", but was now "not believed to be far from the comparative safety of Lingga Anchorage". US Navy Estimated Disposition of Japanese Fleet, etc 2.12.44-3.8.45, SRMN-027, Record Group 457, USNA. One month later, on 10 February, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Diversionary Attack Force left Singapore with cargoes of aviation fuel for the Japanese homeland. The two ships would be heavily damaged or sunk at Kure harbor between 24 and 28 July 1945. "Enemy Combat Ship Losses 1. Aug 45", SRH-104, RG 457, USNA.

15th, and then returned east of the Luzon strait where, on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, it attacked the target of a *real* invasion plan: Okinawa.<sup>67</sup> This did not mean, however, that the Americans left Saigon completely in peace. In late January and early February, B-29s from the 20th Air Force twice radar-bombed the city.<sup>68</sup>

No evidence has been found to indicate that Halsey's raid of the Indochinese coast had a deceptive purpose, although this was the case for the strikes against *Taiwan*. Their deceptive purpose was stated openly in the planning documents, but there either was no deceptive purpose behind the operations against Indochina, or they were concealed.

One further counter-argument against the Tønnesson hypothesis must also be mentioned. The 9 March coup happened towards the very end of Roosevelt's life. His health had been rapidly deteriorating since his fourth election to the Presidency in November 1944. George McKee Elsey, who was a Naval Reserve Officer in the White House Map Room, finds it impossible to imagine that the ailing Roosevelt could have carried out a sophisticated deceptive ploy. Elsey cannot recall one single visit by Roosevelt to the Map Room after his return from Yalta. The staff knew his views and intentions only through his aids, notably Admiral Leahy.<sup>69</sup> Hurley and Wedemeyer, when they met the President on 8 March, were both shocked by his physical appearance. His capacity for reading and listening had been drastically reduced. His personal advisor Harry Hopkins had felt already at Yalta that the President took in just half of what went on around the table.<sup>70</sup> Elsey may be right. It is perhaps not very likely that a President in such bad health should have come up with, or carried through, a sophisticated ploy to liberate Indochina from France by deceiving Japan.

But then perhaps the ploy did not require much effort. A few words of instruction to Leahy, Donovan and Nimitz would have been enough. In October 1944, when Roosevelt asked for a Tonkin invasion plan, he probably meant it seriously. He must have been disappointed when the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended against it, and probably asked them to study it further.<sup>71</sup> After this he simply enforced a 'do-

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<sup>67</sup> S. Woodburn Kirby, *The War Against Japan*, Vol. IV, *The Reconquest of Burma*, London, HMSO, 1965, p. 95. Morison, *History of U.S. Naval Operations*, pp. 157-174. Merrill, *A Sailor's Admiral*, pp. 205-206. The French later praised themselves for having furnished the intelligence that made the precision bombing in Indochina possible, but complained that their own ships had been destroyed: Paul Isoart, *L'Indochine française, 1940-1945*, Paris, PUF, 1982, p. 42. Claude Hesse d'Alzon, *La présence militaire française en Indochine 1940-1945*, Paris, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (SHAT), 1985, p. 196. Wainwright, *De Gaulle and Indochina*, pp. 139 (note 21), 163.

<sup>68</sup> Craven & Cate, *The Army Air Forces*, pp. 159-161, 415.

<sup>69</sup> Letter From G. M. Elsey to the author, 14.3.89. See also George M. Elsey, 'Some White House Recollections, 1942-45', *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 12, No. 3, Summer 1988, pp. 547-608.

<sup>70</sup> Stafford, *Roosevelt & Churchill*, p. 284.

<sup>71</sup> A more modest version of the plan, aiming for the capture of Hainan that Spring in anticipation of further operations at some later stage, was finalized on 2 January 1945 and circulated to Nimitz, MacArthur and Wedemeyer for comment. Joint War Plans Committee, 'Appreciation and Outline Plan of

nothing' attitude. This may have resulted from a feeling that he had run out of options. He was not yet willing to give up the trusteeship plan, or his desire for closer Sino-American cooperation, but could not really see how to realize his ambitions. Then came Halsey's raid and realized them for him. And he learned through Magic how it happened. On the basis of the available evidence, Halsey's raid does not seem to have resulted from anything the President did. Thus the connection between intention and effect has not been sufficiently established. Roosevelt is very likely to have been informed, through Magic, of the effect that Halsey's raid had on Japan's decision, but nothing indicates that he himself gave the active push.

## **Conclusion**

The French loss of Indochina on 9 March 1945 had a great impact on Vietnamese and world history. At this late stage of the Pacific War, Japan had no intention of setting up a proper administration in Indochina. A power vacuum therefore emerged in most parts of the former French colony. The kings in Hue, Phnom Penh and Luang Phrabang were confirmed in their functions, and new pro-Japanese governments were established. They held little real power. The power vacuum, in combination with exasperation created by a terrible famine, paved the way for the rapid spread of the Viet Minh movement so its leaders could seize power in the 'August Revolution' in Hanoi, Hue and Saigon. This in turn provided legitimacy to President Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and allowed it to build the forces needed to defeat France, with Chinese help, in the First Indochina War. The 'August Revolution' could not have happened if there had not been a 9 March coup. With a stroke, the French administrators, the French Colonial Army and the French-led militia disappeared.

The causal connection between Halsey's raid of the Indochinese coast on 12 January and the Japanese coup on 9 March seems well established. However, the assumption that Halsey's raid had its origin in Roosevelt's Indochina policy remains speculative. It has no basis in available sources. As long as no new evidence is found, for instance in Halsey's files (which have not been consulted by this author), we must assume that the real reason for the 12 January raid was the mistaken belief that a strong Japanese force could be destroyed at Camranh Bay. The fact that the raid provoked the Japanese decision to carry out the 9 March coup was therefore probably not intentional, although it did *reflect* Roosevelt's desire to liberate Indochina from French colonialism.

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Operations against Hainan Island', J.W.P.C. 289/1, USNA, RG 218, CCS 381 Hainan Island (10-30-44). Minutes of JPS 186th Mtg., 17.1.45, USNA, RG 218, CCS 381 Hainan Island (10-30-44). See also Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution*, p. 178.

One of President Roosevelt's biographers has called him "The Juggler".<sup>72</sup> Roosevelt played politics and military strategy, enjoyed the game, and kept his cards close to his chest. Still, the chain of events that led to the first French loss of Indochina does not seem to have been a game controlled by Roosevelt. Instead it consisted of two miscalculations. First, the US Navy mistakenly thought there was a fat Japanese target at Camranh Bay, and sent a huge carrier force to sink it. Then Tokyo mistakenly took this as a sign that a US invasion of Indochina might be imminent, and decided to topple the French regime there. An accident of history? Perhaps. It would be nice to know the secret that Roosevelt confided to Admiral Halsey after their 8 March luncheon.

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<sup>72</sup> Warren F. Kimball, *The Juggler. Franklin Roosevelt as Wartime Statesman*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Sent to Mark Lawrence, Department of History, University of Texas, Austin, TX,  
78712-0220, USA, on 14 October 2002.