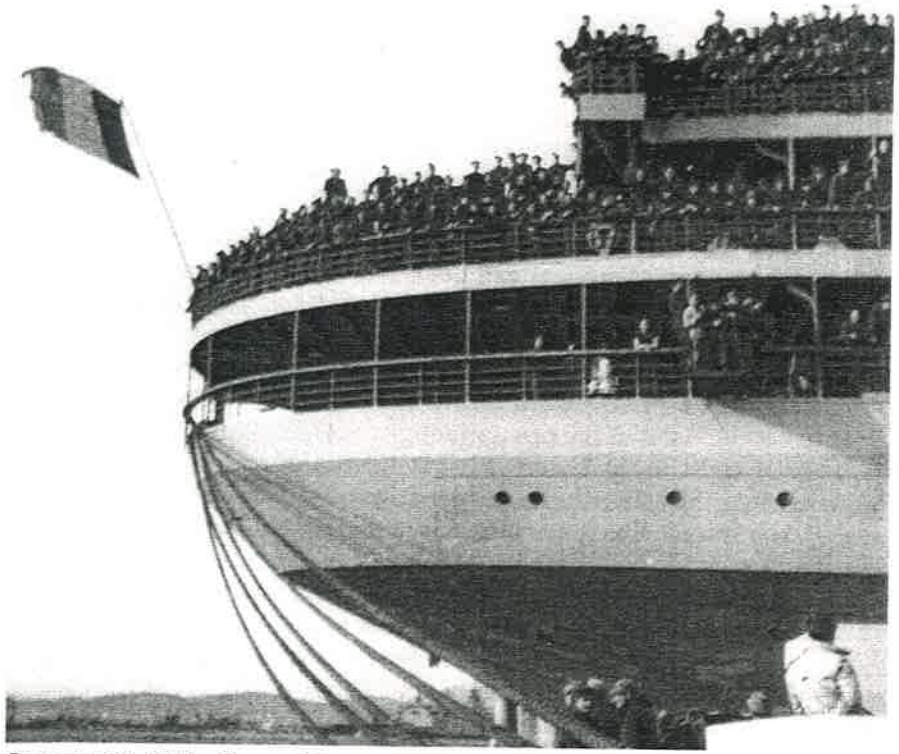
imperialism, Dewey clashed repeatedly with Gracey. Their personal battle came to a head late in September when Gracey would not let Dewey fly the American flag on the fender of his OSS jeep. On the way to Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon on September 26, 1945, Vietminh soldiers fired on the flagless jeep, killing Dewey instantly. Just before leaving for the airport, Dewey had written, "Cochin China is burning, the French and British are finished here, and we ought to clear out of Southeast Asia." When he learned of Dewey's death, Ho Chi Minh formally apologized. Gracey, to the contrary, remarked that Dewey "got what he deserved." A. Peter Dewey was the first United States soldier to die in Vietnam.

The Vietminh were also on the run in Tonkin, where Chinese troops removed the Vietminh from power and replaced them with a group favorable to the anticommunist Chinese leader Jiang Jieshi and wanting Vietnamese independence without communism. By the end of September, while British, French, and Japanese troops hounded the Vietminh in southern Vietnam, the Chinese reduced Vietminh-controlled territory in Tonkin. In just a month, Ho found himself dealing with all of Vietnam's enemies—the Chinese, French, and Japanese—as well as the British.

Although Great Britain was officially neutral about the French return to Indochina, most British officials were worried about their own empire. Insurgent nationalists were active in Malaya and Burma, and Mohandas Gandhi was steadily gaining power in India. When their responsibility for disarming Japanese troops ended in December 1945, the British withdrew from southern Vietnam. Each departing group of British-Indian troops was replaced by French soldiers wearing American fatigues, helmets, boots, and ammunition belts, carrying M-1 carbines, and driving Jeeps and Ford trucks. In Tonkin, the Chinese and French reached a formal agreement in February 1946: China would withdraw from Tonkin, and France would surrender the commercial concessions a Franco-Chinese treaty had granted in the 1890s. The last Chinese troops were out of Vietnam in October.

The French were back, and while most of Ho Chi Minh's colleagues opposed rapprochement, his political instincts dictated compromise. General Jacques Philippe Leclerc, temporary head of French military forces in Vietnam, also favored compromise. Even though he had 35,000 soldiers at his disposal, Leclerc had no enthusiasm for fighting an open-ended war against the Vietminh. Late in January, he toured the Mekong Delta and the Iron Triangle, a Vietminh stronghold twenty miles northwest of Saigon. "Fighting the Viet Minh," Leclerc decided, "will be like ridding a dog of its fleas. We can pick them, drown them, and poison them, but they will be back in a few days." On February 5, 1946, Leclerc remarked, "France is no longer in a position to control by arms an entity of 24 million people."



January 12, 1947—Some of the 8,000 French troops aboard the *Ile de France* prior to departure from Toulon Harbor for duty in Indochina. (*Courtesy, AP/Wide World Photos.*)

On March 6, 1946, the French and Vietminh negotiated the Franco-Vietminh Accords. France extended diplomatic recognition to Ho Chi Minh's regime—calling it a "free state . . . within the French Union"—and promised to hold free elections in the "near future" to determine whether Cochin China, as the southern part of Vietnamese territory had been called, would come under Ho's control. Ho agreed to have 25,000 French troops replace Chinese soldiers north of the sixteenth parallel and stay until 1951. Both sides consented to have a Vietminh delegation travel to Paris later in the year to work out details of the agreement. But when Ho Chi Minh went to Paris in the summer of 1946, he was in for a big surprise. Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu was the culprit.

After graduating from the French Naval Academy, d'Argenlieu had taken vows in the Carmelite Order in 1920 but then returned to active naval duty in 1940. In 1943 he became commander in chief of the Free French Naval Forces. D'Argenlieu was a devout Roman Catholic, a man who lived permanently in the past. D'Argenlieu believed that Adolf

Hitler's victory over the French had been a fluke, a brief pause in the reign of France as the premier nation on earth. Buoyed by the Allied victory in 1945, d'Argenlieu expected France to return to its former splendor. With that vision, he became high commissioner for Indochina in August 1945.

On June 1, 1946, the day after Ho Chi Minh sailed for Paris, d'Argenlieu created the Republic of Cochin China, a new, separate colony in the French Union. Ho Chi Minh felt "raped." Unification was as important to him as independence. In fact, the two were for him inseparable, not only because his nationalism extended to include a larger Vietnam but because northern Vietnam was overpopulated and poor, unable to feed itself, while the nutrient-rich Mekong Delta produced rice surpluses. To keep Ho Chi Minh away from the Vietnamese émigré community, French officials moved him out to Biarritz in southwest France. The conference was held out of the press limelight at the isolated Fontainebleau Palace. For eight weeks Ho tried to get France to recognize Vietnamese independence, but the French preferred total control over French colonies. Desperate for assistance, Ho contacted the United States embassy, promising to open up Vietnam to American investment and lease a naval base at Cam Ranh Bay in return for help in keeping the French out. Rebuffed, he remarked to an American reporter, "We . . . stand quite alone; we shall have to depend on ourselves." Before returning to Hanoi in mid-September, Ho Chi Minh signed a document in which France agreed to a unification referendum in Cochin China in 1947, but he had few illusions about France's real intentions. During his last meeting with Georges Bidault, the French prime minister, on September 14, 1946, Ho warned: "If we must fight, we will fight. You will kill ten of our men, and we will kill one of yours. Yet, in the end, it is you who will tire."

In October Ho was back in Tonkin. The battle for Vietnam began a month later over the collection of customs duties in Haiphong. The French insisted it was their right; the Vietminh insisted it was not. When gunfire erupted between Vietminh and French soldiers, d'Argenlieu decided to "teach the Viets a lesson." On November 23, after giving the Vietminh two hours to evacuate Haiphong, the French attacked guerrilla hideouts in the city. French infantry and armored units swept through Haiphong; French aircraft provided tactical air support; and the French cruiser *Suffren* unloaded a sustained artillery bombardment. When the day was over, much of Haiphong was rubble. Six thousand people, including a few Vietminh, were dead.

Four weeks later, the Vietminh retaliated in Hanoi, destroying the city's electrical power plant and assassinating several French officials. Ho Chi Minh fled the city and established new Vietminh headquarters in the jungle sixty miles from Hanoi, where he controlled several provinces with 40,000 Vietminh troops. General Etienne Valluy, who replaced Leclerc, announced that if "those gooks want a fight, they'll get

it." General Vo Nguyen Giap was obliging: "I order all soldiers and militia in the center, south, and north, to stand together, go into battle, destroy the invaders, and save the nation." The war was on.

Firmly in control of Tonkin's major cities, the French high command knew it would have to conquer the Red and Mekong River Deltas to deprive the guerrillas of their rice supplies and the mountains near the Laotian and Chinese borders to strip them of their sanctuaries. General d'Argenlieu's strategic approach seemed logical: Build isolated military outposts that the French termed hedgehogs, man them with crack troops, and roam into the countryside seeking out and destroying the Vietminh. Eventually, d'Argenlieu assumed, the Vietminh would run out of hiding places and be forced into a conventional set-piece battle, where superior French firepower could annihilate them. The French hoped to conclude a quick victory; otherwise, the war would be expensive, both politically and financially.

Among the greatest challenges facing French soldiers, and later their American counterparts, was the climate, especially in southern Vietnam. Beginning in September, monsoon winds hit central Vietnam from the northeast, blowing across the South China Sea, picking up enormous amounts of water, and dropping them on the countryside until early February. Rainfall averages 100 to 200 inches a year there. Meteorologists classify it as tropical monsoon, but French troops dubbed it "wet hell." Farther south, in the region of Saigon and the Mekong Delta, a tropical savanna climate prevails. Summers receive large amounts of rainfall, with temperatures and humidity hovering in the nineties. French soldiers on summer patrols, especially if they were working their way through swamps and wetlands, often joked that they could not tell where the waterline stopped and the air began. A remark in the mid-1940s by Jean Dubé, a French soldier stationed in Cochin China in the late 1940s, sums up the experience: "I know what those GIs are going through. It really didn't matter if we were wading through swamps or grasslands. We sweat so much we got just as wet in either place." The Vietnamese were not going to give the French a quick victory.

Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap prepared for guerrilla war. They assumed that France would not have the resources to stay for the long haul. French politics was already a quagmire, and socialists as well as communists were calling for an end to the war. A bloody guerrilla conflict of ambushes, booby traps, and assassinations, with high casualties but no set-piece battles—at least not yet—was Giap's strategy. While the French saw the war in military terms—defeating the Vietminh on the battlefield—Ho Chi Minh saw it in political terms: destroying the French will to continue.

Throughout 1948 and 1949 the French established their hedgehogs on Route 3 from Bac Ninh to Cao Bang, Route 18 from Bac Ninh to Haiphong, Route 5 from Hanoi to Haiphong, Route 1 from Hanoi to Lang

Son, and Route 4 from Cao Bang to Lang Son. In the Mekong Delta, they sought out the guerrillas in search-and-destroy missions. On the political front, the French had Bao Dai, whom they restored to the throne in 1946, sign the Elysée Agreement on March 8, 1949, which created the State of Vietnam as an independent nation but placed France in control of defense, finance, and diplomacy. France promised elections to incorporate Cochin China into a unified Vietnam and held them one month later. Convinced the elections were a sham, the Vietminh boycotted them. Only 1,700 people showed up at the polls, and they voted overwhelmingly to join the State of Vietnam. D'Argenlieu proclaimed that democracy had prevailed.

But in 1949 the war became part of a much larger global struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. From 1945 to 1948, anticommunist rhetoric had grown shrill in Washington. President Truman announced the Truman Doctrine in 1947 to provide $400 million in military and economic assistance to Greece and Turkey in the fight against leftist-backed guerrillas. The fall of Greece and Turkey, Truman argued, would threaten all the eastern Mediterranean and the Mideast. To save Western Europe, Truman launched the Marshall Plan in 1948, a $12.6 billion program of American economic assistance.

Three events in 1949 elevated anticommunism in the United States from fear to paranoia. In 1948, hoping to starve West Berlin into surrender, the Soviet Union had blocked the highway from West Germany to West Berlin. Truman responded with the Berlin Airlift, an unprecedented daily resupply of a city of two million people. Tension escalated well into 1949 until Moscow backed down. When the Soviet Union detonated an atomic bomb in 1949, a wave of fear swept throughout the United States. Finally, at the end of 1949, Mao Zedong and the Chinese communists drove Jiang Jieshi and the Chinese nationalists off the mainland out to the island of Taiwan.

Many Americans were convinced that an international communist conspiracy was set to take over the world from Moscow. Whenever communists caused any trouble anywhere, the Truman administration blamed Moscow. Late in 1948 the Republican Congressman Richard M. Nixon of California accused Alger Hiss, a Democrat and former State Department official, of being a communist. The trial, which resulted in Hiss's conviction for perjury, generated headlines throughout much of 1949. Early in 1950 Senator Joseph McCarthy, a Republican from Wisconsin, charged that 205 communists were working in the State Department. Congress passed the Internal Security Act in September 1950 requiring registration of communist and communist-front organizations. Communist subversives seemed to be everywhere.

Ever since President Franklin D. Roosevelt's pronouncements on the inherent problems of French imperialism, prominent Americans had at least been able to recognize the existence of Vietnamese nationalism.

But as the fear of communism increased, they subsumed the country's nationalism under Ho Chi Minh's communism, which they believed tied him inextricably to the Soviet conspiracy. They had no idea of the extent of Ho's political independence.

A few people expressed a different point of view. In Paris, General Leclerc repeated his conviction that "anti-communism will be a useless tool unless the problem of nationalism is resolved." Raymond Fosdick, a State Department expert on Asia, claimed that whether "the French like it or not, independence is coming to Indochina. Why, therefore, do we tie ourselves to the tail of their battered kite?" But Leclerc and Fosdick were lonely voices. Far more typical was Dean Acheson, Truman's secretary of state. In 1949 Acheson remarked that whether "Ho Chi Minh is as much nationalist as Commie is irrelevant. . . . All Stalinists in colonial areas are nationalists."

Out of that fear of Indochinese communism emerged the "domino theory," the belief that the fall of one country to communism would topple the next, as though in a row of dominos. For a time in the 1950s and early 1960s, it was central to the way Americans interpreted the world. It appeared as if the whole free world depended on the survival of French Indochina. If Ho Chi Minh succeeded in conquering Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China, Laos and Cambodia would succumb; then Thailand and Burma, Pakistan and India. Afghanistan, Iran, and the rest of the Middle East were sure to follow. Next communism would infect North Africa and the entire Mediterranean.

The dominos could fall in either direction. On September 20, 1951, during a visit to Washington, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, the commander in chief of French Indochina, described a chain of dominoes reaching from Tonkin to Europe: "Once Tonkging [sic] is lost, there is really no barrier before Suez. . . . The loss of Asia would mean the end of Islam, which has two-thirds of its faithful in Asia. The fall of Islam would mean upheavals in North Africa jeopardizing strategic defense bases situated there." American leaders preferred to describe a row of dominoes in the other direction. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles warned in 1953 that if "Indo-China should be lost, there would be a chain reaction throughout the Far East and South Asia," posing a "grave threat to Malaya, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand." Thomas Dewey, the Republican governor of New York, claimed that the "French are holding Indo-China, without which we would lose Japan and the Pacific." In 1965 Senator Thomas J. Dodd of Connecticut carried the domino theory to its extreme: "If we fail to draw the line in Vietnam we may find ourselves compelled to draw a defense line as far back as Seattle and Alaska, with Hawaii as a solitary outpost."

As Andrew Rotter and Gabriel Kolko along with other historians have pointed out, there was more to the domino theory than anti-Soviet

rhetoric and anticommunist paranoia. Communist expansion was no idle threat. The Philippines were already dealing with communist guerrillas, and in Malaya and Burma the British government faced similar threats. Radical insurgents in Indonesia were undermining the Dutch colonial regime. Political leaders in Australia and New Zealand were genuinely concerned about the prospects of a communist victory in Vietnam. The fall of Vietnam might topple Malaya, the Philippines, and Indonesia, and once Indonesia fell, so would Australia and New Zealand.

In strategic and economic terms, Southeast Asia was also thought to be critical to American interests. The fall of Southeast Asia would threaten the island chain stretching from Japan to the Philippines, cutting off American air routes to India and South Asia and eliminating the first line of defense in the Pacific. Australia and New Zealand could be isolated. The region was loaded with important natural and strategic resources, including tin, rubber, rice, copra, iron ore, copper, tungsten, and oil. Not only would the United States be cut off from those resources, but huge potential markets for American products were threatened.

The United States was particularly concerned about the relationship between Southeast Asia and Japan. Japan was notoriously poor in resources, and with China now in communist hands, one reliable source of raw materials for the Japanese economy was gone. If the Japanese economy stagnated, the nation's communists might gain power. One way to preserve the economic integrity of Japan was to effect an economic integration of Japan and Southeast Asia. But if Southeast Asia fell to communism, such an integration would be impossible, or so policy makers feared. A 1952 National Security Council memo specifically stated that concern: "In the long run the loss of Southeast Asia, especially Malaya and Indonesia, could result in such economic and political pressures in Japan as to make it extremely difficult to prevent Japan's eventual accommodation to the Soviet Bloc."

Washington even detected a connection between Southeast Asia and the survival of Western Europe. In 1949 Great Britain was still in the economic doldrums and dangerously low in dollar reserves. Recovery required huge capital investments, and the entire British empire needed to increase its exports to the United States. Southeast Asia was critical to that process. Before World War II a vigorous triangular trade had existed between Great Britain, the United States, and British Malaya, which had valuable rubber and tin assets. That trade needed to be revived. Nor could the French economy be restored to health as long as the war in Indochina was such a financial drain.

Throughout 1950 political events in Asia seemed to confirm American fears. Early in 1950, the Soviet Union and China extended diplomatic recognition to Hanoi, which for Dean Acheson revealed "Ho in his true colors as the mortal enemy of native independence in Indochina." The

United States responded quickly, confirming the Elysée Agreement by recognizing Bao Dai's State of Vietnam as an "independent part of the French Union." In February the National Security Council declared "that the threat of communist aggression against Indochina is only one phase of anticipated communist plans to seize all of Southeast Asia." On May 15, 1950, President Harry Truman announced his decision to supply $15 million in military assistance to France to fight the Vietminh.

At the time, Mao Zedong had decided to contest Joseph Stalin's status as leader of the communist world by fashioning his own image of the "Stalin of the East," the de facto leader of all communist parties in East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Vietnam provided the first opportunity to upstage Stalin and the Soviet Union. United States policymakers would not really appreciate the reality of the Chinese-Soviet split until the mid-1960s, but it first emerged in the early 1950s when the Soviet Union and the Chinese competed to win the loyalty of Ho Chi Minh.

In the race to keep the Vietnamese, armed, clothed, and fed, Mao enjoyed a distinct geographic advantage, one he began to exploit almost as soon as American aid started flowing to Vietnam. For Russians to send massive volumes of supplies, the goods would have to travel by sea. Goods from the heavily industrialized Soviet west had to be shipped by rail either to Vladivostok or the Black Sea and loaded on supply ships. From Vladivostok, the ships would make their way through the Sea of Japan and Straits of Molucca to the South China sea and the northern Vietnamese port city of Haiphong. From the Black Sea, Soviet ships bound for Vietnam had to sail west through the Bosporous and the Dardanelles straits into the Mediterranean, then through the Suez Canal to the Indian Ocean and from there to the South China sea and Haiphong. To give China the upper hand, Mao constructed multiple railroad lines connecting Guangxi and Guangdong provinces in southern China with trunk lines in northern Tonkin. The railroads allowed for massive shipments of supplies to the Vietminh.

When North Korea invaded South Korea in June 1950, the Truman administration became all the more convinced that the Soviet Union wanted all of Asia. Led by the United States, the United Nations pledged to defend South Korea. Besides sending troops to Korea, Truman increased the American commitment to France, sending more than $133 million in Indochina aid at the end of the year. He extended another $50 million for economic and technical assistance. A contingent of DC-3 Dakota aircraft landed in Saigon in June. Waiting on the runway with paintbrushes, the French enraged American pilots when they replaced the aircrafts' white star markings with the French tricolor insignia. Late in November, Chinese troops joined the Korean War, killing thousands of UN troops. To most Americans, the international communist conspiracy was well under way.

In Hanoi, Vo Nguyen Giap was not thinking about any international communist conspiracy. From Mao Zedong's writings on revolutionary warfare, Giap developed a three-stage formula for defeating the French. Beyond that, he had no passionate interest in the spread of communism.

During the first stage that the Vietminh strategist projected, the insurrectionists would just survive, avoiding confrontations until they built up their reserves. If they could achieve surprise and complete superiority, they would strike, but otherwise the Vietminh bided their time. Giap's fear of premature battle was not sentimental. He possessed a unique philosophy about death. "Every minute," he remarked to a French reporter, "hundreds of thousands of people die on this earth. The life or death of a hundred, a thousand, tens of thousands of human beings, even our compatriots, means little." What Giap did not want was an engagement that destroyed his fledgling army. Stage one characterized Vietminh operations in 1946 and 1947.

The second stage employed guerrilla tactics—ambushes, road destruction, hit-and-run attacks, and assassinations. At night the Vietminh placed booby traps along French patrol routes. Their favorite ones were sharpened bamboo "punji stakes" dipped in human feces or poison and driven into holes or rice paddies, or attached to bent saplings; hollowed-out coconuts filled with gunpowder and triggered by a trip wire; walk bridges with ropes almost cut away so they would collapse when someone tried to cross; a buried bamboo stub with a bullet on its tip, activated when someone stepped on it; the "Malay whip log," attached to two trees by a rope and triggered by a trip wire; boards studded with iron barbs and buried in stream beds and rice paddies. In 1948 and 1949 Vo Nguyen Giap's second stage was under way.

By 1949 Giap thought he was almost ready for the third stage. He wanted a real fight with the French Expeditionary Corps. Between 1945 and 1947, he had built the People's Army from a ragtag group of 5,000 to more than 100,000, most of them irregular troops but also including thousands of highly disciplined, well-trained Vietminh soldiers. Events in 1949 made the general offensive even more inviting. Mao Zedong's victory gave Giap a sanctuary at his rear. Vietnamese peasants constructed four roads from the Chinese border to staging areas, and Chinese and Soviet supplies began to arrive. By 1950 the Vietminh had five fully equipped infantry divisions, along with an artillery and engineering division. It was time for what Giap termed the "general counter-offensive." stage 3

Giap set his sights on the French outpost at Dong Khe. The hedgehog sat astride Route 4, a road the French considered the Vietminh "jugular vein" in northern Tonkin. They reasoned that control of Route 4 would cut Vietminh supply lines from China and stall their troop movements. French truck convoys supplied Dong Khe on a daily basis, but in early 1950 Giap blocked all shipments to the garrison. On May 26, 1950, with monsoon rains drenching the land and Vietminh infantry surrounding the outpost, he began the artillery bombardment. Two days later, thousands of Vietminh soldiers stormed the garrison. It fell on May 28. French paratroopers retook Dong Khe a few days later, but the Vietminh successfully attacked again on September 18. Early in October, they took Cao Bang, the northernmost city on Route 4, and over the next several months the French abandoned Lang Son, their southern outpost on Route 4, and Thai Nguyen, the city on Route 3 between Hanoi and Cao Bang. Vo Nguyen Giap killed or captured 6,000 French troops and eliminated the French presence all along the Chinese border.

The events at Dong Khe left French military planners with the wrong impression. In their final assault, the Vietminh had attacked in massive human wave assaults, infantry troops literally running into and overrunning the French barricades. The Vietminh sustained staggering casualties, but Giap was less concerned with the number of soldiers lost than with their success in achieving the military objective. From the battle of Dong Khe, the French erroneously concluded that in the future, the Vietminh would again employ human wave infantry assaults, as if that was tactical doctrine. That presumption rested on quicksand. In the future, the Vietminh would prove to be quite flexible in attacking fixed French positions.

Heads rolled in Hanoi and Saigon. France fired most senior officials and conferred joint military and political command on General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, who in December 1950 became high commissioner and commander in chief of Indochina. A hero of both world wars, de Lattre had an ability matched by his ego. Handsome, confident, and obsessed with victory, he rebuilt French outposts in the Red River Valley, betting that Vo Nguyen Giap, flushed with success, would push too far.

De Lattre was right. Giap wanted to drive the French back into Hanoi, so he decided to attack Vinh Yen, a reinforced garrison thirty miles northwest of the capital. De Lattre was ready. The Vietminh attacked but failed to overrun the base. Giap tried an attack up the Day River southeast of Hanoi but was repulsed again. He threw the Vietminh against Nam Dinh, a French garrison twenty miles south of Haiphong. Bernard de Lattre, the general's son, had orders to hold Nam Dinh at all costs. He died obeying his father. By the end of May 1951, 6,000 were dead and Vo Nguyen Giap retreated from Vinh Yen. The general returned to stage two.

De Lattre was barely able to savor the victories. He was terminally ill with stomach cancer and died seven months later in Paris. General Raoul Salan replaced him, but he was little more than a caretaker. De Lattre had created the Vietnamese National Army, on paper a 115,000-man force, to make it appear at least that Bao Dai's government was really fighting the communists. In the meantime, Giap replenished his divisions. At the end of May 1953 Salan was relieved of his command.

By that time the war was a bottomless pit. Since 1945 the war had cost France 3 dead generals, 8 colonels, 18 lieutenant colonels, 69 majors, 341 captains, 1,140 lieutenants, 9,691 enlisted men, and 12,109 French Legionnaires, along with 20,000 missing in action and 100,000 wounded. Saint-Cyr, the French military academy, was not graduating officers fast enough to replace the dead in Indochina. The military situation was even worse. From the Chinese border in northern Vietnam to the Ca Mau Peninsula on the South China Sea, the Vietminh controlled two-thirds of the country. Their army, including regular and irregular troops, numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and in the words of the journalist Theodore White, "has become a modern army, increasingly skillful, armed with artillery, organized into divisions." French control had been reduced to enclaves around Hanoi, Haiphong, and Saigon, as well as a strip of land along the Cambodian border.

Salan's replacement was Henri Navarre, a veteran of both world wars who believed French forces could bring the Vietminh to their knees within a year. Navarre had joined the French infantry in 1916 after graduating from Saint-Cyr as a cavalry officer. Except for duty in North Africa during World War II, his career was in army intelligence. Supremely self-confident, dictatorial, and righteously committed, Navarre was an instant celebrity in the French social circuits of Hanoi and Saigon. In both cities he outfitted himself with air-conditioned command posts complete with the best in French wine and cuisine. When he arrived in Saigon to assume his command, Navarre predicted an early end to the war: "Now we can see it clearly—like light at the end of a tunnel."

Navarre decided that French strategy needed an overhaul. After eight years of fighting, the French were no closer to winning than they had been back in 1946. The Vietminh were steadily growing, and Vo Nguyen Giap was preparing to widen the war into Laos. Navarre believed that France was wasting men and resources fighting scattered guerrillas in a conflict that had no end. The key to victory was conventional war. He would seduce the Vietminh into a major engagement where French firepower could annihilate them.

What became known as the Navarre Plan was actually an elaborate military scheme devised in Washington and Paris. Because American troops were tied down in Western Europe and Korea, the United States insisted that France, with massive financial and matériel assistance, take care of Indochina itself. The plan called for a large increase in the size of the Vietnamese National Army and nine new French battalions. Navarre proposed removing his troops from isolated outposts, combining them with the new French troops, and taking the offensive. He hoped to be able to use the Vietnamese National Army elsewhere in Vietnam.

In its first formulation, the Navarre Plan contemplated the Red River Valley as the setting for the massive battle. But in the fall of 1953, Vo Nguyen Giap countered with increased guerrilla attacks throughout the

February 1954—General Henri Navarre *(left)*, commander of French forces in Indochina, reviews the troops at an inspection of the camp Dienbienphu with Colonel Christian de Castries *(center)*, commander of the camp and General René Cogny *(right)*, commander of forces in North Vietnam. (*Courtesy, AP/Wide World Photos.*)

Red River Delta as well as an invasion of central and southern Laos. He also readied three Vietminh divisions for northern Laos. Already at the limits of their economic and military commitment, the French became obsessed with keeping the Vietminh out of Laos, where the Pathet Lao, a guerrilla force backed by the communists, was already causing enough trouble. Navarre began considering a new option—going after the Vietminh in western Tonkin along the Laotian border.

Navarre scoured the map looking for the perfect place and found it near Laos at the village of Dienbienphu. There Navarre would establish a "mooring point," a center of operations from which French patrols could go out into the hills in search of the Vietminh. A large French garrison at Dienbienphu would make it more difficult for Giap to ship supplies through Laos to southern Vietnam or invade Laos. Finally, Dienbienphu, was the center of Vietminh opium production; revenues from the drug traffic financed weapons purchases. Suppressing opium production, Navarre hoped, would cut Vietminh revenues.

Navarre was convinced that Ho Chi Minh would not be able to abide the French presence at Dienbienphu. In order to push ahead with his

plans for domination of Indochina, Ho would have to destroy the French garrison. Anticipating massive, human-wave assaults like the attack the Chinese had launched in Korea and the Vietminh at Dong Khe and Vinh Yen, Navarre planted the base in the center of the valley, with vast stretches of flat territory separating it from the neighboring mountains, where dozens of howitzers were aimed. Colonel Charles Piroth, the one-armed commander of French artillery, predicted that "no Vietminh cannon will be able to fire three rounds before being destroyed by my artillery." If the Vietminh attacked, they had to cross thousands of yards of open fields where French tanks, machine guns, and tactical aircraft would cut them to pieces. With complete air superiority, the French built an airstrip and thought they could hold out indefinitely, resupplying themselves by air from Hanoi.

Navarre wanted to double the size of the Vietnamese National Army to relieve the French Expeditionary Corps of its obligations to fight a nonstop war against Vietminh guerrillas. French advisers would remain in the countryside to work with the Vietnamese National Army in suppressing the guerrillas. At the same time, Navarre assembled a new, powerful army corps to occupy Dienbienphu and engage the Vietminh in battle.

But where would Navarre find the men and the money? In France the Indochina War was increasingly unpopular, swallowing men and matériel with no victory in sight. Conscription was out of the question; there was no way the government could get the necessary legislation through the French National Assembly. Public debate was already at a fever pitch. Instead, Navarre turned to the other colonies, putting together a polyglot army of French Legionnaires and volunteers from France, Lebanon, Syria, Chad, Guadeloupe, and Madagascar. For money Navarre looked to the United States. Ever since 1950, when Congress appropriated the first $15 million, American assistance had steadily increased. Navarre wanted even more, and the administration of Dwight Eisenhower was quick to agree. By the end of 1953 the United States was supplying Navarre with 10,000 tons of equipment a month, at an annual cost of $500 million. That amount increased to $1.1 billion in 1954, nearly 78 percent of France's war expenses. Navarre had money and men.

Navarre placed Colonel Christian de Castries in command of Dienbienphu. The aristocrat, horseman, and athlete Castries had won several European high jump and long jump championships in the mid-1930s. During World War II he made the transition from cavalry to armor and was wounded several times. The Germans captured him in 1941, but he escaped in 1944 and rejoined French fighting forces. Known to show off at parties by chewing glass, Castries declared that life was sweet if a man "had a horse to ride, an enemy to kill, and a woman in his bed."

Beginning in November 1953, Castries supervised the construction of

the base at Dienbienphu. He was immediately identifiable by his red cap, flaming red scarf, and riding crop in his hand. He put the main base at the center of the valley and then set up three major artillery bases: one three miles to the south, which he designated Isabelle; another, Béatrice, about a mile to the northeast; and a third nearly two miles to the north, which he called Gabrielle. Castries was supporting three mistresses by these names, and he wanted to immortalize them. Castries named other firebases and French posts after earlier conquests: Anne Marie, Francoise, Dominique, Eliane, Claudine, and Huguette. Castries manned the base with 13,200 paratroopers. In a radio broadcast on January 1, 1954, General Navarre announced that he expected "total victory after six more months of hard fighting."

Navarre's commander of the Tonkin theater was not so sanguine. René Cogny came from humble stock, but with scholarships he had graduated from Saint-Cyr in artillery and then earned degrees in political science and law. The Germans captured him in 1940, but he escaped in 1941, only to be captured again in 1943. He spent the rest of the war at the Buchenwald concentration camp, where torture left him with a permanent limp. In the eight years after his release, Cogny enjoyed a spectacular rise through the ranks of the officer corps, from captain to major general. He feared the Navarre Plan. He wanted to avoid battles in the highlands, except for minor skirmishes; maintain a permanent offensive against the Vietminh in the Red River Delta; and frequently raid enemy supply lines and infiltration routes. When he first heard about the plan from Navarre, Cogny remarked to his chief of staff: "Dienbienphu will become, whether we like it or not, a drain on manpower . . . as soon as it is pinned down by a single regiment. . . . The consequences of such a decision may be very serious."

From his post in the mountains above Dienbienphu, Vo Nguyen Giap was dumbfounded. The Navarre Plan represented a significant shift in French strategy, and he was in a quandary at first about how to deal with the change. His philosophy about such confrontations with the French had always been consistent: "Strike to win, strike only when success is certain. If it is not, then do not strike." Giap's biggest mistake, trying to overrun the French base at Vinh Yen in 1951, had made him more prudent and deliberate, more willing to wait until victory was certain. But he could not understand why the French had picked Dienbienphu. The roads were narrow and exposed; the Vietminh would never let supply trucks reach the valley; and Vietminh artillery would prevent supply aircraft from landing at the hastily constructed airfield. The valley was a wet bottomland of the Nam Yum River. After heavy rains the valley turned into mud and drained very slowly. French tanks would be immobilized. Any competent engineer or hydrologist could have taken a look at Dienbienphu and concluded that tank warfare would be difficult at best. Even in dry weather the ground was covered with heavy,

vined brush that would clog tank tracks. The French had also assumed that the Vietminh did not have any decent artillery pieces and that even if they did they would not be able to place them in the mountains above Dienbienphu. There were no roads up there for trucks to make deliveries. That was a gross misjudgment on the part of the French.

When Vo Nguyen Giap calculated the deficiencies of the French position, he concluded that Vietminh victory was certain. The terrain would destroy armor mobility; tanks would become stationary artillery pieces. By assaulting Gabrielle, Isabelle, and Béatrice in sequence, Giap could eliminate French artillery. He was also counting on his own artillery. In Korea the Chinese had captured hundreds of 105-mm howitzers and 120-mm potbellied mortars built by the Americans, and they were on their way. Giap intended to destroy the airfield and put Dienbienphu under siege. Nor was he worried about the vast open spaces between the mountain slopes and the French perimeter. He would dig hundreds of miles of tunnels and trenches from the mountain slopes toward the base, eliminating the French tactical advantage.

For years the French had waited for the set-piece battle in which their firepower would prevail, assuming, of course, that they would win such a contest. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, Raoul Salan, and Henri Navarre all prayed for the confrontation. Castries put it best in January 1954: "If he [the Vietminh] comes down, we've got him. It may be a tough fight, but we shall halt him. And we shall at last have what we have always lacked: a concentrated target that we can smash." The French were convinced that if Vo Nguyen Giap attacked Dienbienphu, the Vietminh would suffer a decisive defeat.

Navarre had completely underestimated Giap's ability to relocate the Vietminh. Slowly and steadily he did the impossible—he put four Vietminh divisions into the mountains surrounding Dienbienphu. Even though most of them had only cut-up rubber tires for shoes, he got twenty to fifty miles a day out of them, each carrying a rifle, a large bag of rice, clothing, a shovel, and a water bottle. When French aircraft bombed the small roads heading for Dienbienphu, Giap repaired them. Along Routes 13B and 41, he had 10,000 workers who restored roads within an hour of the attack.

By early March 1954 Vo Nguyen Giap had 50,000 combat-hardened Vietminh troops and another 50,000 support troops in place, along with 100,000 Vietnamese porters carrying supplies on their backs. General Navarre was confident that Giap would not be able to bring heavy artillery into battle, that French artillery and tactical air support would put him at a tremendous firepower disadvantage. Suddenly 105-mm shells began to rain on the airstrip at Dienbienphu, pockmarking it with craters and rendering it unsafe for supply landings. The French had expected Giap to move the artillery into place the way they did—on large trucks over visible roads. But he had disassembled each artillery

piece, organized thousands of porters to carry the elements to Dienbienphu, and then reassembled the artillery there.

The shelling on March 12 was just a preview. The main feature started at 5:00 p.m. the next day when Vietminh artillery exploded all over the French artillery bases. By midnight Vietminh troops had seized outpost Béatrice. The bombardment of Gabrielle began at dusk the next day. Nine hours later Gabrielle fell. The Vietminh sustained thousands of casualties, but in less than fifteen hours Castries had lost most of his artillery. Isabelle was so far south of the main base that in order to protect it Castries had to move a large troop contingent there. Instead of attacking, Giap left Isabelle alone, rendering useless the French troops there. The next day the Vietminh bombardment became so heavy that aircraft could no longer land. French soldiers could be supplied only by air, and on March 17, 1954, American and French pilots began flying C-119s and C-47s over Dienbienphu, dropping food, weapons, and ammunition to the besieged soldiers. That same day armed Montagnard tribesmen, allied with the French, realized their plight and fled Dienbienphu. France needed help.

On March 20, General Paul Ely, chief of staff of the French armed forces, flew to Washington for a meeting with President Dwight Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and Admiral Arthur Radford, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. A member of the West Point class of 1915—called the "Class on Which the Stars Fell" because 59 of its 164 graduates rose to the rank of brigadier general or higher—Ike was perhaps the best of the group. As commander of the European operations in World War II, he had earned a reputation for decisiveness, energy, intelligence, and skill in handling temperamental and egotistical individuals. Said FDR's press secretary of Ike: "To acquire these characteristics he worked constantly, sleeping only five hours a day . . . and laboring seven days a week and holidays. Chain smoking cigarettes, he had an inexhaustible supply of nervous energy." Once in the presidency, Eisenhower seemed more subdued. White House reporters recall not his energy and precise thinking but rather his mangled syntax and his fondness for golfing and bridge—a very intellectual game: Ike could remember all the cards of each suit as a game was played. But behind the mild facade Ike was still in charge. In foreign affairs, he made all the important decisions. Intellectuals and English teachers could fault his syntax, but as Fred I. Greenstein notes, Eisenhower "had geometric precision in stating the basic conditions shaping a problem, deducing their implications, and weighing the costs and benefits of alternative possible responses." As Ely talked, the geometry of Ike's mind was calculating.

The French general wanted to make sure that American assistance would continue under Eisenhower. Although he did not know how the communists could "continue to suffer the losses they have been taking . . . I don't know how they can stay in the battle," Ely readily admit-

ted that Dienbienphu was finished. He made no specific request for anything more than continued American financial support. When the meeting concluded, Eisenhower asked Radford to see whether the United States could offer some more assistance to the French. Without the knowledge of Eisenhower, Dulles, or even other joint chiefs, Radford with the assistance of American and French officers in Saigon was hatching a rescue plan.

Radford, a graduate of the Naval Academy in Annapolis, had commanded aircraft carriers in the Pacific during World War II. In May 1953, when President Eisenhower toured the Pacific and East Asia to assess the Korean situation, Radford was commander of naval forces in the Pacific. He spent some time with Eisenhower during the tour and impressed the president with his grasp of Asian affairs. Eisenhower named Radford chief of naval operations in 1953 and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. By that time Radford was a saber-rattling darling of the Republican right. A zealous convert to complicated weapons technology and air power, Radford had endeared himself to a number of conservative politicians during World War II when he said the only approach to the Japanese was "to kill the bastards scientifically." Infantry combat "was messy and wasted personnel." Strategic and tactical bombing was "precise and clean." Radford was convinced that Asia, not Europe, would be central to American foreign policy for the rest of the twentieth century. Late in 1953, when the president expressed concern about the defense budget, Radford became the author of the "New Look." Radford urged, and Eisenhower and Dulles accepted, the notion that instead of planning for a variety of military contingencies—strategic nuclear war, conventional war, limited nuclear war, and guerrilla war—the United States should plan for a war in which nuclear weapons would be used whenever they were strategically advantageous. Such an approach would be less expensive than a more comprehensive response system. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles used Radford's logic in his famous "massive retaliation" speech of January 12, 1954, when he threatened to use strategic nuclear weapons whenever and wherever the Soviet Union fomented rebellion.

When Radford learned of the desperate situation at Dienbienphu, he was eager to use air power. It was the perfect place, he thought, to try out the Eisenhower administration's "New Look" defense policy. He proposed Operation Vulture: the use of B-29s, based in the Philippines and accompanied by aircraft from the carriers USS *Essex* and USS *Boxer*, to knock out Vietminh artillery. Without artillery the Vietminh could not destroy the outpost. The airstrip could be repaired, and a full-scale resupply resumed. "We could have helped the French with air strikes," Radford's memoirs declare. "Whether these alone would have been successful in breaking the siege of Dien Bien Phu is debatable. If we had used atomic weapons, we probably would have been successful."

The proposal triggered an intense debate. The other chiefs of staff, especially General Matthew Ridgway of the army, were opposed. Fresh from his command of United Nations forces in Korea, Ridgway felt sure the bombing would fail to lift the siege and that only ground troops—seven to ten full divisions—could rescue Dienbienphu. The Korean War had already proven how difficult Asian land wars could be, and the terrain of Indochina was far worse, the stuff of which bloody, endless guerrilla wars are made. Eisenhower listened carefully to Ridgway; the two infantry commanders understood each other. Vice President Richard Nixon supported Operation Vulture. On March 13, the day the Vietminh overran Gabrielle, Nixon announced, "We have adopted a new principle. Rather than let the communists nibble us to death all over the world in little wars, we will rely in the future on massive, mobile retaliatory forces." In a press conference Nixon declared that there "is no reason why the French forces should not remain in Indo-China and win. They have greater manpower, and a tremendous advantage over their adversaries, particularly air power." Like Radford, Nixon was prepared to use atomic bombs to lift the siege.

Eisenhower listened to Radford. He listened to Ridgway and Nixon. Never threatened by conflicting viewpoints, Ike believed in the value of good advice and well-reasoned arguments. As Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's World War II chief of staff and close friend, described him: "One of his most successful methods in dealing with individuals is to assume that he himself is lacking in detailed knowledge and liable to make an error. . . . This was by no means a pose, because he . . . values the recommendations . . . he receives, although his own better . . . judgment might cause them to be disregarded." And so Eisenhower listened to opinions bold and cautious—and then he made his decision. He knew from experience that wars are seldom as neat as they seem in strategic papers, and that the "fog of battle" confounds the best laid plans. And the politics of the issue brought conflicting perils. The Republican right wing was making enormous political capital out of the claim that the Democrats had lost China, and he was not prepared to be blamed for losing Indochina. But at the same time, he perceived public skepticism about American involvement in Vietnam. The Korean armistice was just a few months old. Most Americans did not want another war in Asia. Eisenhower was intrigued with Radford's plan. He would not, however, go forward without the support of Congress and the British.

Congress was the president's first target. On April 3 he had Dulles and Radford try to sell the idea to a congressional delegation that included Senators William Knowland and Lyndon Johnson and Congressmen Joseph Martin and John McCormack.

Eisenhower was not asking for an immediate air strike. He was more cautious than that. What he wanted to know was whether the delegation would give him the discretionary authority to use American forces

if a Vietminh victory at Dienbienphu would lead to the fall of Indochina. The legislators were skeptical. They worried about what would happen if the bombing failed. Would ground troops be committed? They also were concerned about Washington's taking unilateral action. Why not coordinate an international effort to save Dienbienphu? The legislators did have one unequivocal answer for Ike: no more Koreas, where the United States had supplied 90 percent of the combat troops. John F. Kennedy added on the floor of the Senate: "No amount of military assistance in Indo-China can conquer an enemy that is everywhere and at the same time nowhere, 'an enemy of the people' which at the same time has the support of the people."

The debate in the administration and the reservations within Congress persuaded Eisenhower that American intervention would have to be contingent on securing cooperation from other North Atlantic Treaty Organization powers, and getting France to make plans for granting independence for its Indochinese colonies. That was going to take some time, time Dienbienphu did not have. Convinced that Operation Vulture was the only way of saving Dienbienphu, the French asked Eisenhower for an immediate air strike, leaving the question of joint allied military operations for later discussions. He summarily rejected the request, chastising Radford for misleading the French but agreeing to explore the possibility of subsequent American intervention if European allies would cooperate. Eisenhower asked Dulles to go to Europe and secure NATO support. Dulles set out to achieve what he called "United Action."

Dulles and Eisenhower made an odd couple. Compared to the warm, friendly president, the secretary of state seemed cold and distant. In fact, compared to almost anyone Dulles was cold and distant. The nation called Eisenhower "Ike," but no one called Dulles "Jack." The historian Townsend Hoopes describes Dulles as a "solid tree trunk of a man gnarled and durable . . . a rectangular brow and aquiline nose, a thin and drooping mouth, a strong jaw, the whole creating an effect of ultimate seriousness and at the same time of ultimate plainness." Proud of the history of foreign service in his family—a grandfather as secretary of state for Benjamin Harrison and an uncle in the same position for Woodrow Wilson—Dulles had been part of the Versailles peace mission in 1919, a Wall Street lawyer with clients across the globe, a delegate to the United Nations, and a lifelong student of foreign relations. As Eisenhower told reporters, there is "only one man I know who has seen *more* of the world and talked with more people and *knows* more than Dulles does—and that's me." Dulles, described as a "card carrying Christian," equated communism with all the sins of atheism. Once on hearing Jiang Jieshi and Syngman Rhee spoken of in unflattering terms, Dulles responded heatedly, "No matter what you say about them, those two gentlemen are modern-day equivalents of the founders of the church. They are Christian gentlemen who have suffered for their faith."

Travel was as much a part of John Foster Dulles's life as diplomacy and breathing. He used airplanes as other men used cabs. Now he began a dizzying round of shuttle diplomacy, traveling back and forth between Europe and the United States trying to line up allies. Back home the president tried to drum up public support for intervention, using the domino theory in an April 7 press conference: "You have a row of dominoes set up and you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. . . . The loss of Indochina will cause the fall of Southeast Asia like a set of dominoes." But while Eisenhower and Dulles were trying to line up the allies, General Ridgway torpedoed the idea. He was furious with Radford. Ridgway was convinced that Ike would not use atomic weapons; in 1945 he had advised Truman against employing them on the Japanese. Ridgway was right. At a meeting of the National Security Council in late April, when the issue came up again, the president finally interrupted a discussion with a frustrated outburst: "You boys must be crazy. We can't use those awful things against Asians for the second time in less than ten years. My God!" Ridgway also believed that conventional air strikes would not lift the siege. Intervention with ground troops would be inevitable. In a memo to President Eisenhower, Ridgway shared his misgivings: "How deep was the water over the bar at Saigon? What are the harbor and dock facilities? Where could we store the . . . supplies we would need? How good was the road network—how could supplies be transported as the fighting forces moved inland, and in what tonnages? What of the climate? The rainfall? What tropical diseases would attack the combat soldier?" Eisenhower understood. The next day Dulles informed Henri Bonnet, the French ambassador to the United States, that American intervention might not be forthcoming.

Operation Vulture and the larger proposal for United Action were compromised also by French intransigence. During the discussions with the French, Eisenhower became more and more frustrated. He complained that the French "want us to come in as junior partners and provide materials, etc., while they themselves retain authority in that region." In the previous months they had balked at the notion of United Action, fearing that French power would be subordinated in a multinational force. Nor were the French willing even to talk of independence for Vietnam. That, too, bothered Eisenhower, who wrote to a friend that France had employed "weasel words in promising independence . . . and through this reason . . . have suffered reverses that have been inexcusable." The French would not even cooperate with the Military Assistance and Advisory Group, an American mission sent to Vietnam in 1950 to coordinate United States economic and military aid. France wanted American money, not American advice.

Britain as well doomed United Action. The British thought Ho Chi Minh was a highly independent communist who would not let the Chi-

nese, any more than the French, take over his country. When Dulles predicted the apocalypse if Dienbienphu fell, the British calmly replied that the United States was viewing the situation through ideological blinders. Foreign Minister Anthony Eden predicted that India, Burma, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Japan would survive even if Ho Chi Minh took over Vietnam. Dulles left London empty-handed on April 14. Prime Minister Winston Churchill was relieved to see Dulles go. In his judgment, "Dulles is the only case of a bull I know who carries his china closet around with him."

Everything also went wrong at Dienbienphu. Navarre's plans to increase the size of the Vietnamese National Army failed miserably. The government of Bao Dai sent 94,000 draft orders late in 1953, but only 5,400 new soldiers reported for duty. The Vietnamese National Army never exceeded the 115,000 level, and by early 1954 the desertion rate reached nearly 4,000 men a month. In a country where nationalism, communist and noncommunist, ran very deep, the French plan to develop a highly effective army of colonial troops was incredibly naive. The idea of turning the war over to the Vietnamese was no closer to reality in 1954 than it had been in 1951 when General de Lattre created the Vietnamese National Army. Monsoon rains immobilized French tanks in the heavy mud and prevented resupply from Hanoi. French troops rationed food and water. The shovels Vietminh soldiers carried into Dienbienphu were as useful as their rifles. They dug trenches and tunnels. Twenty-four hours a day, day after day, antlike, tens of thousands of Vietminh extended the trenches, inching their way toward the French outpost, steadily reducing the French perimeter, eliminating the stretches of open space the French had relied on. By the end of April, the Vietminh outnumbered the French ten to one, and the French perimeter, which once had a circumference of fifteen miles, was reduced to a thousand-yard square.

As Vo Nguyen Giap closed the circle on Dienbienphu, the Geneva Conference convened in Switzerland. Conflicts of interest and personality abounded. John Foster Dulles did not want to be there at all and was committed to making sure that the Geneva Accords resulting from the conference did "not give one inch of territory to the Communists." At Geneva he behaved badly, "like a puritan in a house of ill repute," according to his biographer. Pham Van Dong, representing the Vietminh, wanted a complete political settlement leading to the withdrawal of French forces and establishment of a new, independent government under Ho Chi Minh. France only wanted a military ceasefire. Georges Bidault, who headed the French delegation, recognized that the fall of Dienbienphu would banish the French from the north, but he hoped to regroup in Cochin China and maintain the empire. Laos and Cambodia sided with Bidault. They were already dealing with internal communist rebellions and assumed that French withdrawal, combined with a Viet-