

## CHAPTER SEVEN DOMINOES

The end of the Second World War led to the breakup of the centuries-old British, French and Dutch empires in the Far East. The British, economically devastated by the War, left India in 1947 and, by the mid-1950s, after successfully defeating a long communist insurgency, had laid the groundwork for the independence of Malaysia. In 1949 Indonesia gained independence from the Dutch. France with its protectorates in Vietnam and Laos took longer to adjust to the end of empire.

Decolonisation was a painful experience for the European powers, and for many people in the colonies. But apart from the complaints of some die-hard imperialists (such as Winston Churchill), it had been recognised for some time that the writing was on the walls of empire.

Colonial power had been fatally weakened in the Far East by the fact of Japanese occupation. Japanese successes in the early years of the War completely undermined the idea of white, European supremacy, and acted as a spur to nationalist movements in the countries of Asia.

Both Presidents Roosevelt and Truman were openly contemptuous and distrustful of European imperialism. Even before the end of the War the United States had established contact with many of the new nationalist movements in the colonies of the Far East. In 1942 the OSS decided to extend its activities into as many Japanese-occupied areas as possible, and forged operational alliances with nationalists and communists fighting the Japanese. In 1943 the OSS considered working with Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese communist leader, who had successfully appealed to Vietnamese nationalism and organised a guerrilla army that was fighting the Japanese. As the war progressed, contact with Ho was made.

Once the colonial peoples rejected European overlords, the historian Hugh Brogan observed, "they could make it agonizingly expensive, in lives, credit and treasure, for any power which tried to keep them in subjection."<sup>1</sup> The British, after their experience of guerrilla warfare in Ireland in 1916-21, and with Ghandi's passive resistance national movement in India in the 1930s and 1940s, absorbed this truth and retired from the business of empire with some dignity. So did the Dutch. The French took a different path.

Unlike the British and the Dutch, the French viewed their colonies as an extension of the mother country -France - rather than as subject countries. So, for many Frenchmen, giving up their colonies was like giving up a part of France. After 1945, instead of handing over power to the people in their colonies, they sought to re-establish their pre-War supremacy. In Vietnam, the principal French colony in the Far East, this enabled Ho Chi Minh to present himself as the national leader who had fought the Japanese and was now fighting against French rule and for Vietnam's independence.

The contact with the OSS played an important part in Ho's tactics. By early

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1 Hugh Brogan, The Pelican History of the United States of America (Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1967), p. 672.

1945 the OSS "Deer Team" and Ho's forces were secretly working together in rescuing Allied pilots who had been shot down, and in sabotaging Japanese supplies and communications. The French were very suspicious of this collaboration, warning and complaining about it to the U.S. government, and the news of the collaboration between the OSS and Ho remained secret until 1971 when the Vietnam War was at its height. In 1945 the French attempted to reassert their authority in Vietnam through the puppet regime of the ex-Emperor Bao Dai in Saigon. In 1946, Ho announced the creation of the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam with Hanoi as his capital, and he began a guerrilla war with his Vietminh forces to unify the country under him. Ho had tried to obtain American recognition of North Vietnam, and had strong support in many quarters in Washington, not least among OSS men who had worked with him and others who felt that the United States should not support the old empires, but instead should support national movements and independent states. What swung American support away from Ho was the fact that he was a communist - indeed, he was a Moscow-trained revolutionary agitator who had worked in France and China as an agent - and in 1946 the civil war in China was reaching its climax with the prospect of a communist takeover there. In 1948 the Truman administration gave military support to the French in Vietnam as part of the U.S. effort to contain communist expansion.

For some of the OSS men who had fought alongside Ho during the War, the failure to build upon the good relations then developed with the Vietminh was disastrous. Archimedes Patti, the leader of the OSS-Indochina mission to Ho in 1945, believed that if President Truman had backed Ho instead of the French, Ho would not have turned to Mao Tse-tung and Moscow for support.<sup>1</sup> Though a communist, Ho might easily have become an "Asian Tito" and a *de facto* ally of the West. The course of Vietnamese foreign policy after 1975, when the communist government of unified Vietnam began to seek economic and political agreements with the West rather than the Soviet Union, and fought a border war with Red China, lends support to Patti's view.

U.S. support for the French, Mao Tse-tung's victory in China in 1949, and the worldwide cold war, ended any prospect of a change in American policy in favour of Ho. The prime objective of American policy during the Truman administration became the prevention of any further communist expansion anywhere in the world. In February 1950 the U.S. National Security Council stated that if Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos fell to the communists, then Thailand, Burma and Malaysia might follow. The "domino theory" was born.

There was a general assumption after China fell to Mao Tse-tung in 1949 that there was an inevitability to peasant communism in the Third World. South Korea was defended because it was a defensible place. So, too, Japan. But the crash of decolonisation suddenly put the whole of South East Asia into the melting pot at the same time. After China, it looked as if Indonesia might go, then Malaya and the other countries of Indochina. And then quite possibly India. The Dutch, French, and especially the British were very strong in their urging the U.S. to bankroll them in

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1 Archimedes Patti, Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980).

Indochina.

Behind the domino theory was the conviction that Moscow was the centre of a worldwide controlling network of every communist movement. Mao Tse-tung in China was seen as a puppet of Stalin, and Stalin was seen as being hellbent on world domination. This view was challenged by the China desk of the State Department which pointed to serious differences between Soviet and Chinese communism. But after 1949 and Mao's victory, this desk was a particular target for the McCarthy witchhunts and led to the departure from the State Department of most of the senior China hands. With them went any serious doubts within the U.S. policymaking establishment about Mao being Stalin's puppet. Not until a decade later was the view that Mao was a Soviet stooge challenged in Washington - this time by the analysts in the CIA. The departure of State's China hands prevented the vital internal debate so necessary for developing and fine-tuning policies in government, and had the effect of locking U.S. policy in the Far East into a hard cold war stance throughout the 1950s.

Eisenhower continued Truman's support of the French in Vietnam which, by 1954, amounted to \$1 billion a year: over three-quarters of the entire French military budget there. But it made little difference to the outcome of their war with the Vietminh. In May 1954 the French suffered a major defeat at Dien Bien Phu in north Vietnam: a strongly-fortified French mountain valley base was surrounded by Vietminh forces under the command of General Vo Nguyen Giap who overran the French defenders after a fifty-five day siege. This defeat finally convinced the French that their attempt to hold on to Vietnam was hopeless, and they agreed to peace talks with Ho. In July 1954 the Geneva Accords were signed by France and North Vietnam (the United States was not a party to the deal, and Foster Dulles made clear that the Eisenhower administration did not approve of it). Vietnam was provisionally divided in two at the 17th parallel. North Vietnam was Ho's; South Vietnam remained under Bao Dai who appointed Ngo Dinh Diem as prime minister. France agreed not to send additional troops and military supplies to the country. General elections were scheduled to take place in both parts of the country in July 1956.

Eisenhower's secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, was deeply dissatisfied with the Accords, condemning them as a French capitulation. He knew that Ho was the only Vietnamese leader who had fought the Japanese and the French, and thus was seen by his countrymen as a national leader. Time was needed to build-up a non-communist counterweight to Ho, another leader who could attract national support. So Dulles encouraged Diem in Saigon to take every step to delay the general elections: within a month of the Accords being signed, the CIA had predicted that Ho would probably win.

## EISENHOWER AND VIETNAM

The fear of constant communist expansion was at the heart of Eisenhower's Vietnam policy, but he was cautious about U.S. military engagement on the Asian mainland, especially after Korea. As a soldier he understood the nature of the guerrilla war that France had unsuccessfully fought in Vietnam. As President he recognised the danger

of spurring tens of millions of Red Chinese troops into action in Indochina. His caution was backed up by the CIA analysts who warned that the danger of Chinese involvement in support of Ho was real. An additional factor in Eisenhower's decision to support South Vietnam was that Ho's regime in the North was by no means popular with the North Vietnamese. Millions of people fled the North for the South after 1954. Eisenhower's overall policy gained broad support in Congress and in U.S. policymaking circles because the fact was that Moscow and Peking were supporting all manner of communist and nationalist movements around the world. What was not appreciated at the time was that Moscow and Peking were becoming rivals. Moscow supported Ho in Vietnam, for example, in large part because it did not want to see Peking grow more powerful.

Eisenhower ruled out direct U.S. military involvement in favour of continuing Truman's policy of supporting the Saigon government with money and supplies. He also agreed to send special advisers to help train and direct Saigon's efforts to withstand Ho, who was continuing his guerrilla war in the South. Colonel Edward Lansdale was sent to Vietnam in June 1954 as head of the Saigon Military Mission, working in association with the CIA, straight from his success against the Huks in the Philippines. Lansdale quickly decided that Diem was the strongest South Vietnamese leader, and he backed him fully. A year later, Bao Dai was deposed and Diem became president of the new Republic of South Vietnam.

The CIA agreed with Lansdale that Diem was the best anti-communist bet, the only figure on the South Vietnamese political scene behind whom genuine nationalist support could be mobilised. The CIA reported that Diem was "confronted with the usual problems of inefficiency, disunity, and corruption in Vietnamese politics," but that he had the character and ability to overcome these obstacles. Eisenhower and Dulles became convinced that this was so. But all along the dilemma in U.S. policy showed: it grated with America's image of itself that it should have been on the side of the old empires against a national independence movement. Ho being a communist was a key element in Truman's decision to support the French. And the fact that South Vietnam was not democratic, and that American policy was to delay democratic elections, also grated. Diem was offered U.S. aid on the following terms:

"The Government of the United States expects that this aid will be met by performance on the part of the Government of Vietnam in undertaking needed reforms (so that it will be) so responsive to the nationalist aspirations of its people, so enlightened in purpose and effective in performance that it will be respected both at home and abroad and discourage any who might wish to impose a foreign ideology on your free people."

Diem accepted Eisenhower's terms, and the United States in 1955 effectively replaced France as the protecting power in the South. With U.S. support, Diem refused to hold the 1956 elections.

Over the next five years the CIA became involved in a number of operations designed to strengthen Diem's rule in South Vietnam. The agency set up a \$25 million scheme with Michigan State University to train rural administrators, the national police and the civil guard. Drawing from his experience in the Philippines, Lansdale organised the first effort to undermine Vietminh support amongst the people of South Vietnam through "pacification": establishing strategic hamlets or

"agrovilles" in the countryside, protected by South Vietnamese forces, countering communist infiltration by guaranteeing security and the rule of law to villagers.

Diem, however, was not Magsaysay. His police and civil guard paid far more attention to the arrest and torture of anyone who opposed his regime than to the pursuit of "needed reforms" and the "aspirations" of the South Vietnamese people. The agrovillage system, which Diem promised to be the herald of land ownership reform, frequently aroused the discontent of the peasantry because, instead of securing peasant ownership of land, it was used to sustain the estates of the wealthy, old pro-French landlords.

Diem was an astute politician, and he calculated that with U.S. support he did not have to introduce extensive domestic reform. Instead, he thought, he could gain the support of the wealthy sections of South Vietnam and defuse discontent by appealing to rural conservatism and anti-communist national feeling. During the Eisenhower Presidency, with its fear of communist expansion, Diem's calculation worked. South Vietnam rapidly improved economically, and Diem proved to be an effective administrator. For a time, these factors compensated for the lack of democracy in the eyes of Washington, and U.S. attention on Vietnam diminished. This was to be the fatal weakness. By 1960 Diem had concentrated enormous power in the hands of himself, his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and his brother's wife. U.S. support for his regime had become automatic, but even the wealthy sections of South Vietnamese society were becoming increasingly resentful of Diem dictatorship and his family's power, while in the countryside communist promises of land reform were becoming more and more seductive. Ho Chi Minh saw his chance and formed the National Liberation Front, or Vietcong, to launch a full-scale guerrilla war against the South. By 1961 the CIA estimated that the Vietcong in the South numbered 10,000 and were receiving arms and supplies from China. But there were two other Far Eastern countries - Indonesia and Laos - that had caused more concern in Washington than Vietnam.

## INDONESIA

Vietnam was not the first "domino" at risk in the eyes of Washington. In the mid-1950s President Sukarno in Indonesia attracted the attention of the Eisenhower administration because of his attempts to court the Soviet Union and to involve communists in his government.

Indonesia is, essentially, a Javanese concept in which the Sumatrans, the Celebesi, and - perhaps - the Borneese have no particular identification. Under the Dutch, and continuing with independence in 1949, it was run for the benefit of its most populous component: Java. In Sumatra and Borneo there was considerable resentment with Java, and in Borneo especially there was also Christian discontent with Javanese Muslim supremacy.

In the elections of 1955, Indonesian communists won about one-quarter of the votes, and Sukarno argued that therefore one-quarter of the Cabinet should be communist too. Sukarno was not a communist, but he saw the Indonesian Communist Party as a way of counterbalancing his generals. He also was attracted to the communists because he wanted organisation in a disorganised society. And he was

moving away from democracy towards a personal dictatorship, what he called "guided democracy". This was enough to convince Eisenhower that Indonesia, the most populous country outside China in the Far East, would at the least become a Soviet communist ally if Sukarno remained in power. Eisenhower acted in the justified feeling that Sukarno was not merely a jerk -that was between him and his people - but a jerk ever more interested in communism. In November 1957 the CIA was ordered to aid rebel Indonesian colonels on the island of Sumatra, and to prepare a Guatemala-style coup to overthrow Sukarno.

The CIA gave the rebel colonels arms and organised B-26 bombers flown by contract pilots. A pornographic film was made by the CIA with a Sukarno look-alike in order to discredit him with his supporters. In February 1958, while Sukarno was on a visit to Japan, the colonels launched their attack. Sukarno, however, enjoyed strong support in Java, and his army remained loyal to him. CIA assessments of his resourcefulness and determination were shown to be way out. After five months the rebellion collapsed.

In victory, Sukarno played his hand skilfully. Although the U.S. had denied any involvement with the rebels, the CIA's support for them was public knowledge: a B-26 on a rebel bombing mission crashed, and the American contract pilot was captured. Instead of making propaganda from this, however, Sukarno pretended that the U.S. had not been involved, calculating - correctly -that there was more benefit to be had from Eisenhower's gratitude than from his continued hostility.

In the years that followed, U.S. economic aid to the Far East substantially increased, with the majority of it going to Burma, South Vietnam, and Indonesia. In 1965 the Indonesian army suppressed a Chinese communist backed coup attempt, slaughtering tens of thousands of Chinese and communists. In 1967, when the Indonesian military asserted their power, and took over the government, U.S. influence was applied to ensure that Sukarno was not assassinated.

Indonesia was the first major exercise of agency power in East Asia. It had trained raiding parties in Taiwan before, and had supply and training camps in Thailand for anti-communist groups from the countries of Indochina, but such activities were small compared to the direct coup attempt against Sukarno. But their effort in Indonesia provides a dismal record of failure: Sukarno, if anything, immediately grows in strength; worse, by playing up opposition to him the agency's activities made it easier for communists to attempt a coup in 1965. The big question was: would the agency learn from its mistakes and develop a finesse for operating in different countries and cultures? Or would it remain a coup-making machine designed to satisfy Presidents and policymakers in Washington?

## LAOS

When Eisenhower left office in January 1961, of all the "dominoes" in the Far East, Vietnam's neighbour Laos was causing the greatest concern. Laos had in many respects been more visible than Vietnam. The talk of war in 1960-61 was of world war over Laos. Eisenhower, as he left office, warned Kennedy that Laos was the major crisis in South East Asia. It looked as if it would be the place that fell before South Vietnam. It was much more terra incognita than Vietnam. It was the Kingdom

of One Million Elephants: the back of beyond.

The 1954 Geneva Accords had applied to Laos as well as Vietnam: it was agreed that the country should have a neutral coalition government that would favour neither the North Vietnamese supported communist Pathet Lao, nor the old pro-French ruling elite. However, as in Vietnam, the U.S. found that its support was necessary against the guerrilla activities of the Pathet Lao in order to buy time for non-communist Lao politicians and political groupings to gain strength. Between 1954 and 1961 the U.S. spent over \$300 million trying to keep the Pathet Lao at bay, most of which went to General Phoumi Nosavan, in all but name the dictator of Laos. As with Vietnam, U.S. policy was to support the strongest anti-communist leader to be found.

Phoumi Nosavan came into power with the support of the CIA. In 1958 the Pathet Lao won a majority of the seats in the Laotian Parliament and joined a coalition government headed by prime minister Souvanna Phouma. This sounded alarm bells in Washington and, as in Indonesia, the CIA was again ordered to intervene to prevent communist participation in government. Henry Heckscher, the CIA station chief in Vientiane, the Laotian capital, instigated the resignation of Souvanna Phouma and a reconstituted government under Phoumi Nosavan that excluded the Pathet Lao. Pathet Lao forces, which had been integrated in the national army following the Geneva Accords, rebelled and civil war ensued.

The role of the CIA in Laos reflected the secret reality of the agency's position in Washington. The State Department had formal responsibility for U.S. relations with Vientiane, but it was effectively excluded from policy in Laos. CIA station chiefs were often regarded as being more important than ambassadors, and this was the case with Henry Heckscher. The U.S. ambassador to Laos who had favoured adherence to the Geneva Accords and the coalition government of Souvanna Phouma, complained about Heckscher's actions: the ambassador was transferred.

From 1958 the U.S. secretly supported Phoumi Nosavan through the CIA while the Pathet Lao and neutralists received aid from Moscow. A temporary ceasefire was arranged between the Pathet Lao and Vientiane forces in 1961, but it proved impossible for all sides to agree on a coalition government. In May 1962 the Pathet Lao launched a major anti-government offensive, and rapidly controlled most of the country. Laos, in effect, became a province of North Vietnam, and the Vietcong used large parts of the country for supply routes to South Vietnam. The CIA was given the green light to organise and run a secret war, and it did so to considerable effect. Anti-communist government troops were trained and supplied, as were hill tribesmen. The calculation was that fighting in Laos would force the Vietcong to divert resources from their efforts in South Vietnam. By 1966, CIA officers controlled an army of 30,000 Laotian tribesmen that successfully harried Pathet Lao and Vietcong forces. Anthropological research by the Rand Corporation, perhaps the leading U.S. think tank, was used by the agency in their dealings with the tribesmen. Civil Air Transport, which had been used earlier by Lansdale in Vietnam, and Air America, a CIA proprietary company, supplied the tribes and, since opium was a major source of income for tribespeople, company planes - although never the CIA as such - were involved in the regional drugs trade. It was all part of fighting a guerrilla war within another culture, rather than trying (as the U.S. military did in

Vietnam) to impose U.S. political and social values, while simultaneously fighting a war.

The agency's involvement in Laos was a stark contrast to its involvement in Vietnam. It began with one remit - to prevent the country falling to the Pathet Lao - and found it had to develop another in order to perform. In consequence, the agency took on an imperial role. It became the single most powerful player in the country. It was acting with the full support of the President, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and to a lesser degree the State Department. It was a model of making the chain of command work effectively. If ever the CIA was imperium in imperio, Laos was the place. It was making the kinds of decisions in Laos that governments make.

There were, as a result, two Agencies: an imperial agency in Laos, and a brilliant bureaucratic agency in Vietnam. There was nothing proconsular about the agency in Saigon. In Laos, it was dominating and on the ground: it was war for a country, and several powers were stalking each other; the agency had armies and an air force, camps and airbases. In Vietnam, the agency was fitting into a mess. In Laos, it set the operating agenda.

#### DRAWING THE LINE

The first U.S. soldiers - Major Dale Buis and Sergeant Chester Ovnand - were killed in Vietnam on July 8, 1959, but war in Vietnam did not become a painful issue until Kennedy started drawing the line there. From the perspective of the early 1960s, it looked as if South East Asia would fall apart like wet paper unless the U.S. did something. Thailand was particularly weak: corrupt and unstable. Malaysia was having severe racial problems: Singapore was thrown out in 1965. It looked as if there was going to be a communist takeover in Indonesia and Laos, and a communist occupation of South Vietnam. There was a considerable case for stalling events by fighting in Vietnam.

But what did it mean, "Communism is growing!?" Had communist expansion been decided in Moscow or Peking? Policymakers in Washington had no real sense of what the mechanics of this were. They treated Ho as if he was a Chinese surrogate. They were thinking unrealistically, with the result that doctrines crumbled under test. This was the mirror image on the civilian side of the failure to define the military mission. It was simply not conceded that a person could be both a communist and a nationalist, and that what was at issue was the revival of intense nationalistic, not to say chauvinistic feelings in the countries concerned. Policymakers in Washington were reduced at one point to saying that South Vietnam was menaced by regionalism, to which Theodore Draper correctly said at the time that if the South Vietnamese government was menaced by regionalism, then it could not be much of a government. It was a problem that bedevilled the whole story of U.S. involvement: the only people the U.S. could find to support against communist insurgency were either dictators or faction leaders who could not command national support, or both.