



Eisenhower Stories

Dien Bien Phu

Early in his presidency Dwight Eisenhower made a tough decision about whether to send American troops to fight in Vietnam. America's ally in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, France, was struggling to retain its colonial empire in Indochina (the associated states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). Before becoming president, Ike had quietly urged the French government to grant independence to Indochina, but France had refused to withdraw

By the time Eisenhower became president in 1953, the communist insurgency against the French had become a fierce war. In 1952, President Truman had authorized \$60 million for support of the French military efforts in Indochina. In 1953, President Eisenhower increased that authorization six-fold because his advisors convinced him that, "it was the cheapest way to block the spread of communism in Southeast Asia." Again, he urged the French government to grant independence and withdraw from Indochina. When the French refused, Ike said their response was, "An example of the stupidity of men."

Then a bad situation got worse. Inexplicably, the French army built a huge fortified outpost deep in the jungles northwest of Hanoi in a valley called Dien Bien Phu. They sent 15,000 soldiers into the bastion, which could only be supplied by airplane.

The Vietnamese guerilla army, the Viet Minh, responded by hauling artillery and antiaircraft



Dien Bien Phu

guns into positions on the hilltops surrounding the valley fortress. In early 1954 they began to attack. When the French tried to fly in additional troops, the Viet Minh shot down the slow lumbering airplanes, and when the French tried to fly their wounded out, the Viet Minh shot them down as soon as they took off.

Trapped, the French government asked for help: for American aircraft carrier planes to bomb the hills surrounding Dien Bien Phu and for American military personnel to support the French combat troops on the ground. Ike personally wanted to support France, not for their adventure in Indochina, but because they were Allies in NATO

and he wanted the French government to endorse the European Defense Union then being debated throughout Europe. But his military experience led him to conclude that there "was just no sense in even talking about United States forces replacing the French in Indochina." At the same meeting of the National Security Council he said, "This war in Indochina would absorb our troops by divisions."

During the next three months the French situation became increasingly desperate. Every day the Viet Minh ring surrounding the fortress grew tighter. Eisenhower turned over ten additional B-26 light bombers to the French and even authorized sending 200 American mechanics to Vietnam to maintain the equipment he was sending, but these gestures had no effect on the battle raging in the valley.

Both Ike and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, believed that a communist takeover in Indochina would lead to a similar pattern of aggression against other Southeast Asian states. They would fall, Ike said, like a series of dominoes lined up close to each other. In such a manner Eisenhower predicted that all of Southeast Asia would become part of the communist block.

Eisenhower told his staff, “The United States just can’t throw its forces against the teeming millions of Asia.” But support for U.S. intervention came from Congress, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the National Security Council. During the last week in March and the first week in April 1954, the pressure on Eisenhower increased.

The President decided to cut off the movement for deeper involvement by stating clearly and precisely the conditions under which he would sanction sending American combat soldiers to Vietnam. He set out three preconditions: first, the troops would have to be from allied forces sent in approximately equal numbers by at least America, Britain, and Australia; second, the French would have to promise unconditional independence to the people of Indochina; and, third, the United States Congress would have to declare war.

Once his advisors and our leading allies saw these conditions, they realized Dien Bien Phu would fall. The Prime Minister of Great Britain, Winston Churchill, immediately announced that his country would send no troops to Indochina even though he believed that the British colony of Singapore was in danger. The tragedy of Dien Bien Phu ended a few weeks later with the surviving French troops surrendering to the forces of Ho Chi Minh. The next month in a conference at Geneva the parties agreed to a partition of Vietnam into a communist North Vietnam and independent South Vietnam pending elections to settle the governance issues. The French government brought all its remaining troops home.



President Eisenhower and Secretary of State Dulles at the Geneva convention in May, 1955 that divided the country into North Vietnam and South Vietnam

During the remaining years of his presidency, when pressured by his advisors to send combat troops to South Vietnam, Eisenhower would continue to adhere to the principles he set for intervention in the battle of Dien Bien Phu.

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