Anglo-American Perspectives on Indochina in WWII

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"First catch your hare": Anglo-American Perspectives on Indochina during the Second World War

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During World War II, Britain and the United States differed over the postwar status of Indochina. 1 Although the United States made several strong statements about restoring the prewar possessions of the French Empire, the Americans, especially President Franklin D. Roosevelt, increasingly came to favour an international trusteeship guiding postwar Indochina to eventual independence. The British were not at first prepared to guarantee the complete restoration of the French Empire. With surprising slowness, the British did gradually sponsor the prompt return of French colonial authority in Indochina. British postwar planning had shown how dangerous a hostile or unfriendly France and French Empire could be to the security of the British Isles and British Empire. The British determination to reestablish the French connection coincided with a refusal by Roosevelt to enter any discussions about the postwar status of Indochina. The presidential silence only served to promote Anglo-French colonial interests. After Roosevelt's death, President Harry S. Truman did not challenge the return of French control in Indochina. Ironically, despite the earnest — but seldom expressed — American intentions to underwrite indigenous dreams of independence, the people of Indochina subsequently associated the United States with Western suppression of those dreams.

Two central themes dominated Anglo-American wartime deliberations about Indochina: one, the postwar status of the French colony; two, the larger question of France's future role in any international security system. 2 During these debates, British and American assessments did not follow consistent courses; they not only diverged from one another but also were internally inconsistent.


2 This paper will focus only on the interplay of these two themes, but several other issues, beyond the scope of this paper, influenced Anglo-American policies concerning Indochina. Some of these intertwining influences included territorial trusteeship, decolonization, relations with France, the personality of Charles de Gaulle, military events in Indochina, and the role of China, as well as two overriding general issues: military grand strategy and the politics of coalition diplomacy. Moreover, the subsequent postwar importance of Indochina should not lend undue emphasis to the relatively minor role Indochina played in Anglo-American relations from 1940 to 1945.
In the darkest days of 1940, the British diplomatic and military corps in the Far East desperately sought some accommodation with the French colonial administration in Indochina.1 Within one month after the fall of metropolitan France, the British Commander-in-Chief, China, Admiral Sir Percy Noble signed an agreement with the French Governor-General of Indochina, Admiral Jean Decoux, to refrain from hostile action against each other.4 As the Japanese influence spread southward, British officials tried both to cajole and to coerce cooperation from the beleaguered Decoux Administration, which had maintained its ties to Vichy France. For example, when Decoux, acting on Vichy orders, prohibited all exports to the British Empire on 5 October 1940, the British reaction was immediate and sharp. Admiral Noble, feeling that "now is the time to retaliate", recommended a complete embargo against Indochina, including the vital supplies of gunny bags from India.5 In London, similarly, Sir Frederick Leith-Ross, Chairman of the Economic Subcommittee of the Far Eastern Committee, presented the conclusion of his group that all British exports to Indochina end by 15 November 1940.6

The British also tried to persuade Indochina to resist Japanese encroachments. In a particularly revealing glimpse of colonial methods of control, Noble urged an easing of opium controls to aid Decoux "in keeping the Annamite population quiet." And Leith-Ross, too, backing away from his original harsh judgement, excluded the influential Bank of Indochina from the punitive British "Statutory List". The Bank, he explained, "is a semi-State Bank and the place occupied by it and its subsidiaries in the economic life of Indochina is so extensive that to specify it would be tantamount to treating the whole colony as an enemy."

In practice, however, each side circumvented the restrictions of the other. Secretly negotiating with the French at Singapore, Noble reported, "French realise only British victory can save them and ask us not to make things more difficult for them... Our general impression is that the combined effects of Allied successes against Italy and trade restrictions against Indo-China have brought Decoux to consider how far he can withdraw from [Vichy] anti-British policy which as far as he was concerned was born of bitterness of Oran and has been fostered by pressure of Japan and Armistice Commission." In December 1940, Noble agreed to a broadly based modus vivendi at

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1For a complete account of British policy decisions, memoranda, and events in Southeast Asia from Nov. 1940 to Dec. 1941, see the records of the Far Eastern Committee and its agencies, in CAB 96/1, Public Record Office, London (hereinafter referred to as PRO). See especially the reports of the British Consuls in Haiphong and Saigon, enclosed in FE(40)42, 5 Nov. 1940, CAB 91/1, PRO. See also C. K. Webster memorandum, "French Interests and Policies in the Far East", 7 Mar. 1941, Webster Collection, Vol. VIII (b) III/1, Imperial War Museum, London. Important documents taken from the files of Georges Catroux (French Governor General in Indochina until 1940) pertaining to the 1940 situation are in R. Bloom's memorandum, 27 Feb. 1945, Record Group 59 Records of the Department of State, 740.0011 PWj2· 1545, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereinafter referred to as SD).

2See the Noble-Admiralty correspondence and deliberations of the Far Eastern Committee leading up to the Noble-Decoux Agreement of July 1940, in CAB 96/1, PRO. For valuable accounts of Japanese expansion into Indochina, see James Morley, ed., The Faustful Choice: Japan's Advance into Southeast Asia, 1939-1941 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

3Noble to Admiralty, 5 Nov. 1940, enclosed in FE(40)42, 5 Nov. 1940, CAB 96/1, PRO.

4Leith-Ross memorandum, FE(40)7, 7 Nov. 1940, ibid.

5Noble to Admiralty, 28 Dec. 1940, FE(40)106, 30 Dec. 1940, ibid.

6FE(40)7, 7 Nov. 1940, ibid. He warned, "Action against the Bank, therefore, raises both political and economic issues of some importance." Shortly thereafter, the Ministry of Economic Warfare argued, "It would, however, be anomalous to forbid British subjects to have dealings with Indo-China and yet not to treat Indo-China as an enemy destination for contraband and enemy export purposes." See Ministry of Economic Warfare memorandum, FE(40)59, 18 Nov. 1940, ibid.
Singapore with Captain Jouan, Decoux's Naval Chief of Staff. The British Commander believed that mutual interests would carry the British and French to an enduring arrangement. Nevertheless, he also warned, "If we are too uncompromising there is yet danger that they may be forced into the arms of Japan." 9

Before Pearl Harbor, Americans, unlike the embattled British, felt less concerned about developments in Indochina. But Anglo-American policies coincided on the need to bolster the Decoux Administration. After discussing the matter with Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles, Nevile Butler (British Embassy in Washington) informed the Foreign Office of the American attitude. Butler declared, "Welles made it fairly clear that he now thinks a practicable and useful step towards stabilizing the Far Eastern position is to strengthen the French will to resist in Indo-China."10

Throughout the war, American views on postwar Indochina wavered between two extreme assessments. On several occasions through mid-1943, the United States undertook binding commitments to restore the French Empire. Welles promised the return of France's authority over all her prewar possessions publicly11 in April 1942 and again privately12 to British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden the next year. Another State Department officer, Ray Atherton, affirmed the principle of complete French restoration in a letter dated 14 October 1941 to the Vichy Foreign Minister, Rene Pleven.13 President Franklin D. Roosevelt emphasized the American guarantee in a December 1941 letter to Marshal Henri Philippe Petain.14 Moreover, in another letter to the Vichy Premier on the day of the North African invasion (Operation TORCH), Roosevelt declared, "I need not tell you that the ultimate and greater aim is the liberation of France from the Axis yoke."15

Perhaps the most explicit statements of American intentions emerged in two letters from Robert Murphy, the President's Personal Representative, to French General Henri Giraud during preparations for TORCH. Murphy pledged:

I am able to assure you that the restoration of France in its complete independence, in all its grandeur and the extent it possessed before the war, in Europe as well as

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9FE(40)106, 30 Dec. 1940, ibid. See also FE(41)1, 2 Jan. 1941, CAB 96/2, PRO; FE(41)6, 4 Jan. 1941, CAB 96/3, PRO; FE(41)46, 19 Feb. 1941, CAB 96/3, PRO; War Cabinet memorandum, "Japanese Intentions in Indo-China", WP(41) 154, 6 July 1941, CAB 66/17, PRO.
12See Eden's report of his visit to the United States, WM(43)53, SSF (Secretary's Standard File—Confidential), 13 Apr. 1943, CAB 65/38, PRO; Cordell Hull memorandum, 27 Mar. 1943, folder "Eden's convs. March '43", Record Group 59 Harley Notter Files, Box 284, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereinafter referred to as Notter Files).
13Atherton to Pleven, as quoted in Eden to Lord Halifax, 29 Dec. 1943, FO 371.35921, F 6056/1422/61, PRO. Hereinafter all British archival records of the Foreign Office (FO 371 series), the PREMIER (or Prime Minister) Papers (PREM), War Cabinet Papers (WP), War Cabinet Minutes (WM), the minutes and memoranda of the British Chiefs of Staff (COS), and all CAB citations refer to the PRO.
14Roosevelt to Petain, 27 Dec. 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, President's Secretary's File (hereinafter referred to as PSF), folder "France 1941", Box 41, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York (hereinafter referred to as FDRL).
15Samuel I. Rosenman, ed., The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 13 vols. (New York: Random House, 1938–1950), XI, 455–57. Hereinafter referred to as Rosenman, Public Papers and Addresses. For a similar guarantee by General Mark Clark to the French Vice Premier, Admiral Jean Darlan, 22 Nov. 1942, see their correspondence in the Mark Clark Papers, Box 1, Archives-Museum, the Citadel, Charleston, South Carolina (hereinafter referred to as Mark Clark Papers).
overseas, is one of the war aims of the United Nations. It is understood that French sovereignty will be re-established, as soon as possible, in all the territories, continental and colonial, over which the French flag flew in 1939. 16

Yet, as the war progressed, these early American assurances eroded noticeably under the gradual determination in Washington, although conceptualized vaguely, to establish some form of international control over most colonial areas, particularly within the French Empire and most especially Indochina. At the Casablanca Conference, Roosevelt reproached Murphy for going too far with the guarantees to the French. "You overdid things a bit," he told the Ambassador, "your letter may make trouble for me after the war." Murphy later stated, "That was the first indication to me that Roosevelt was planning to encourage extensive reductions in the French Empire." 17 The changes Roosevelt had in mind for Indochina centered on the trusteeship system. His motives flowed from several sources, including a personal dislike for Charles de Gaulle 18 and an intuitive feeling that France would plunge into civil war after the Allied liberation. 19 But Roosevelt especially criticized the record of French colonial rule in Indochina. He pointed out to his sympathetic Secretary of State Cordell Hull that after "nearly one hundred years" under French control, the people of Indochina "are worse off than they were at the beginning." 20 Despite his strong humanitarian and anti-imperialist impulses, however, Roosevelt never brought this fuzzy concept into focus. He generally envisioned some sort of international trusteeship in Indochina, "which would have the task of preparing the people for independence within a definite period of time, perhaps 20 to 30

16See the texts of two Murphy letters to Giraud, n.d., enclosed in Eden to Churchill, 4 Feb. 1943, FO 371.36427, L 1487/1266/69. Murphy forwarded copies of these letters carrying dates of 26-27 Oct. 1942 in a letter to Cordell Hull on 22 Mar. 1943 (folder "S France", Box 78, Notter Files), but warned of discrepancies in the dates because the undated draft copies were shown to Giraud while the General was secretly in France. For more on various American pledges about the French Empire, see Robert Murphy, Diplomat Among Warriors (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1964), pp. 119-23 (hereinafter referred to as Murphy, Diplomat); Cordell Hull, The Memoirs of Cordell Hull, 2 vols (New York: Macmillan, 1948), II, 1597-1601; see also General Mark Clark's memorandum of his meeting with French military officers (led by General Mast) in North Africa about the forthcoming invasion in Nov. 1942. The two officers and their staffs discussed the draft Murphy letters and made some revisions. (Mark Clark memorandum, 30 Oct. 1942, Mark Clark Papers, Box 2.)

17Murphy, Diplomat, p. 168. Welles interrupted a meeting Hull was having with Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson and Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox to deliver a message from Roosevelt disavowing the pledges made by Murphy. See Stimson memorandum, 29 Dec. 1942, Henry L. Stimson Papers, Box 171, Sterling Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut (hereinafter referred to as Stimson Papers).

18See, for example, the comments of Brendan Bracken (Minister of Information) in an interview with William R. Crozier, 1 July 1943, in the William R. Crozier Papers, folder "B. Bracken", Box 1, Beaverbrook Library, London; also, Murphy, Diplomat, p. 102; Lord Moran, Winston Churchill: The Struggle for Survival (London: Constable, 1966), p. 224 (hereinafter referred to as Moran, Churchill). Secretary of State Cordell Hull, too, held a strong dislike for de Gaulle, whom he once described as a "little squirt" built up by the British. Hull's outburst to an astonished Hamilton Fish Armstrong is recorded in Michael Wright (British Embassy in Washington) to Neville Butler (Foreign Office), 19 July 1943, FO 371.35994, Z 829): 2/17 (on 29 July J.G. Tahourdin in the Foreign Office attached his comment: "Frightening").

19Roosevelt frankly described this feeling to the French Ambassador Henri Hoppe

years". At the Cairo conference, the President described for General Joseph W. Stilwell a three-member supervisory commission (American-British-Chinese); later, at Yalta, however, Roosevelt pictured an international trustee agency involving "a Frenchman, one or two Indo-Chinese, and a Chinese and a Russian, because they are on the coast, and maybe a Filipino and an American — to educate them for self-government".

Several State Department studies attempted to clarify the President's vague ideas about postwar Indochina. Like Roosevelt, most State Department officers charged the French with negligent colonial rule. Economist Melvin Knight, for example, traced the economic history of French Indochina and concluded, "It does not seem immoderate to state that French colonial economic policy since 1892 has been unfortunate." Isaiah Bowman considered several possible systems for Indochina, such as independence or a condominium, but finally settled on a recommendation for a multinational agency monitoring a post-war French administration in Indochina. Arriving at similar conclusions, the Postwar Policy Committee decided that such an international arrangement "would probably make for more conscious planning by the French, for a more rapid democratization of the French Indo-Chinese government, would in all probability be acceptable to the French, and would likewise go far to satisfy liberal opinion throughout the world".

The Territorial Subcommittee of the Postwar Policy Committee tried to reconcile the American guarantees about the restoration of the French Empire with the growing consensus (in mid-1943) inside the postwar planning section of the State Department.
in favour of the principle of international accountability for French rule in Indochina. For example, one member, Rupert Emerson, advocated the development of regional supervisory machinery for Southeast Asia. He felt the need to explain to the other members of the Territorial Subcommittee: "Particularly if it were made generally applicable, there is no reason to think the establishment of international guarantees [accountability] would be in violation of the American pledge to secure a restoration of French sovereignty." 

By 1943, therefore, American views on Indochina had shifted from an unequivocal commitment to reestablish French authority to a vague concept touching on the principle of international accountability. The British, meanwhile, were pursuing a different course.

Curiously — given the mutual colonial connection — the British, initially, would not guarantee the restoration of the French Empire. In fact, the American assurances about doing so bothered British officials, who preferred — at least temporarily — to leave the question open. Robert Murphy's sweeping pledges had committed the United Nations coalition rather than just the United States. The British, like Roosevelt, had not been consulted beforehand. Criticizing the two letters from Murphy to Giraud, Eden declared, "The inherent vice about these documents is that although signed by the President alone [sic] they purport to commit H.M. Government as well as the U.S. Government." London apparently expected a peace conference to settle the postwar status of some (i.e., non-British) colonial territories. From Cairo, Prime Minister Winston Churchill cautioned the War Cabinet not to "prejudge" the status of Indochina, or even the Netherlands East Indies. Three weeks later, when Eden recommended that definite decisions about some of the French colonies should await the peace conference, Churchill replied, "I agree."

The question of restoring the French Empire particularly troubled the British. It appeared on the one hand that American officials seemed content with the idea of reestablishing the prewar imperial interests of the French — who had surrendered in 1940. On the other hand, the Americans seemed intent on breaking up the colonial arrangements of the British — who had stood alone in that dark stage of the war. But some of the British annoyance dissolved when it became evident that the President's mind was turning away from complete French restoration. Shortly after Roosevelt had rebuked Murphy at Casablanca, the British Ambassador in Washington, Lord Halifax, confided to Churchill, "no one seems quite to know where Murphy got his 'complete restitution and restoration' letter for Giraud... The President looks like he is getting himself into a bit of a jam with the promises that Murphy seems to have made to Giraud..."

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28See minutes of Territorial Subcommittee Meeting #55, 5 Nov. 1943, and Meeting #56, 12 Nov. 1943, folder "Mins 50–59", Notter Files, Box 42.
29Eden to Churchill (in Algiers), 4 Feb. 1943, FO 371.36247, Z 1487/266/69. Eden wanted the American pledges "annulled or wholly recast".
about the complete restoration of all French territory, etc." Halifax, moreover, reassured Churchill that "all your statements have been more general."

Two months later, Eden recounted for the Cabinet a revealing episode during his recent visit to Washington. Roosevelt was describing his sketchy ideas for an international trusteeship in Indochina when Sumner Welles interrupted with a reminder about the binding American commitments to the French. The President, somewhat surprised at this news, indicated his own impression that the pledges applied only to French possessions in Africa.

After the first flurry of sweeping guarantees, American statements about the French Empire in general and Indochina in particular remained relatively subdued until the 1943 summit meetings at Cairo and Tehran. In his conversations with Chiang Kai-shek (November 23) and Joseph Stalin (November 28), Roosevelt contented himself with eliciting from those two leaders at least what he considered preliminary endorsements of his vague soundings about a trusteeship for postwar Indochina. And, when Hull reported in February 1944 that the French were assigning an expeditionary force under General Roger Blitzrot at New Delhi, Roosevelt seized the occasion to illuminate his intentions by directing that no French forces should be used in the liberation of Indochina.

Throughout 1944, the President kept a stone silence on the subject. Despite overtures from Lord Mountbatten (Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia Command), the British Chiefs of Staff, the Foreign Office, and the State Department, Roosevelt offered no response except a curt comment in late August that he would discuss the matter with Churchill at the Second Quebec Conference (OCTAGON). But even then the two leaders remained strangely silent about both French participation in the war against Japan and the postwar status of Indochina.
In August 1944, the British announced that a small French military staff under Blaizot would be invited to pay a "temporary" visit to Mountbatten's headquarters in Kandy, Ceylon. On five separate occasions American officials in Ceylon (Max Bishop and Robert L. Buell) asked for instructions about the awkward status of the arriving French; each inquiry met presidential silence. Nor did the White House ever answer Hull's lengthy memorandum of September 8, outlining the full story of French requests for a military role in the Far East. And the frustrated State Department could only advise the Office of War Information (OWI) to say nothing about the French presence at Kandy.38

On three occasions, Roosevelt did at least consent to reply to overtures about Indochina. OWI Director Elmer Davis went directly to the White House with his dissatisfaction over the feeble State Department recommendation not to broadcast anything about the Blaizot Mission. But Roosevelt essentially repeated his original instructions. He ordered Davis to limit coverage only to "factual news reporting" and to avoid entirely the subject of French rule in Indochina.39 A second opportunity for presidential comment arose on the eve of the 1944 election. Under Secretary of State Edward R. Stettinius, Jr. submitted a lengthy memorandum about the evolving situation in Indochina. Stettinius called attention to three key issues: (1) the French desire to participate in the war against Japan; (2) the continuing frustration of Elmer Davis over coverage of Southeast Asian developments; and (3) the concern of OSS (Office of Strategic Services) Chief William Donovan that all the colonial powers in Southeast Asia were, in Donovan's words, "foreclosing the Americans from any voice in policy matters". The President replied on 3 December 1944. He told Stettinius (who would replace Hull in mid-November) to make clear that "we must not give American approval to any French military mission". Roosevelt directed that "all our people in the Far East" make no decisions with anyone, "especially the French". Insisting that the United States expected to be consulted on postwar arrangements for Southeast Asia, Roosevelt added, "we have made no final decisions on the future on Indo-China".40

A few weeks after the election, Halifax presented a third occasion for Roosevelt to expand his views when the Ambassador delivered a British aide-memoire. The British recommended once again that the United States Government approve several pending French requests. The British also urged Roosevelt not to veto their decision that Mountbatten begin "pre-occupational activities" in Indochina. The White House, uncharacteristically, reacted immediately. Roosevelt instructed Secretary of State Stettinius the next day:

It should be called to the attention of our British friends that Mr. Churchill and I did not officially recognize the French Military Mission at SEAC and furthermore, I

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38See the summaries and extracts in A.L. Moffat memorandum, 10 Nov. 1944, SD 740.0011PW/11-1044; Sterndale Bennett memorandum, COS (45) 320 (0), 8 May 1945, CAB 80/94; State Department memorandum, 12 Jan. 1945, RG 43, folder "Vincent", Tab "Indochina", Box 8. See also the testimony of A.L. Moffat, Hearings... Causes, Origins and Lessons of the Vietnam War, pp. 161-205.
39Moffat memorandum, 10 Nov. 1944, SD 740.0011PW/11-1044.
40See Stettinius to Roosevelt, 2 Nov. 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, PSF, folder "Indochina", Box 55, FDRL; Roosevelt to Stettinius, 3 Nov. 1944, SD 740.0011PW/11-2444. Donovan is quoted in the Moffat memorandum, 10 Nov. 1944, SD 740.0011PW/11-1044; see also Donovan to Roosevelt, 10 July 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, PSF, folder "OSS Reports July 1944", Box 168, FDRL. The French had been preparing plans to participate in the war against Japan, especially in Indochina, for over a year. See, for example, the detailed French plans, including specific unit assignments, in a 1943 strategic staff study by a French officer (Lt. Col. Héré), enclosed in Brigadier General A.K. Kingman (U.S. Army, Chief of the French Training Section) to Lieutenant General Mark Clark, 24 Aug. 1943, Mark Clark Papers, Box 2.
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have made no agreement, definite or otherwise, with the British, French or Dutch to retain their Far Eastern colonial possessions.41

Thus, whether for reasons of health, or buoyant optimism about the benefits of the unconditional surrender policy, or a desire not to complicate further the presidential campaign, Roosevelt refused to pursue the issue of Indochina throughout 1944. The Rooseveltian reluctance, furthermore, coincided that year with the liberation of metropolitan France, the growth of French suspicions about American postwar designs, a general coalescence of the colonial powers, and, especially, a developing Franco-British entente.

A key element in the gradual warming of Franco-British relations flowed out of British planning about the postwar world. It required no great leap of logic to move from the need of the Allies for strategic bases and other facilities throughout the French Empire during the war to the concept of international facilities accorded to a postwar global security organization (the nature of which was already attracting much attention by 1943). And herein lay the importance of the French connection for British planners.

In September 1943, Linton Harry Foulds presented one of the first thoughtful British proposals for the full restoration of former French possessions. Foulds, a Foreign Office official, recommended that both the French and British offer Washington postwar facilities for American bases throughout their empire. Foulds argued that this arrangement promoted an enduring American commitment to collective security and encouraged Franco-British cooperation. "Such cooperation," he explained, "will presumably be a vital factor in our postwar policy and it would be seriously jeopardized if it could be represented to the French that we have willingly connived at a plan to despoil their Empire during their period of temporary weakness." Foulds feared that a hostile France might build "a continental European block in contra-position to a group formed by the United States and the British Commonwealth". To avoid this historical British nightmare, Foulds wanted to emphasize to the French their "sense of common interest" with Great Britain as "an overseas Colonial Power".42

Eight months later, the British Post-Hostilities Planning Subcommittee arrived at similar conclusions. "During the course of our examination of various post-war questions, we have been impressed by the frequency with which our relations with France appear to be a most important factor in determining our future strategic position," the group, headed by Gladwyn Jebb, reported. Calling attention to the global proximity of French and British possessions as well as the "major British interests" of facing no hostile power across the Channel, the Subcommittee concluded, "We consider it strategically essential... that our policy should aim at maintaining a strong and friendly France or that, if she remains weak she should at least be friendly." The strategic

41See Stettinius to Roosevelt, 23 Nov. 1944, and Roosevelt to Stettinius, 24 Nov. 1944, both in SD 740.0011/PW/11-2444. For the text of the British aide-memoire, 22 Nov. 1944, see Halifax to Stettinius, 23 Nov. 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, PSF, folder "Indo-China", Box 55, FDRL. The President later told Stettinius, "I still do not want to get mixed up in any Indo-China decision. It is a matter for postwar. By the same token I do not want to get mixed up in any military effort toward the liberation of Indo-China from the Japanese." Roosevelt to Stettinius, 1 Jan. 1945, SD 740.0011/PW/1-145. In his diary, Stettinius quoted this message, observing that there was much discussion at the time about French sabateurs entering Indochina. See Vol. 11, Sect. V, 2, 21-22, RG 59 Records of the State Department: Stettinius Diaries: 1 Dec 1944-3 July 1945, 8 vols., National Archives, Washington, D.C.

42Foulds memorandum (and attached minutes), 7 Sept. 1943, FO 371.35921, F 4646/1427/61. Foulds warned, "A France hostile to ourselves might well be able to supplement her own strength by diplomatic connexions of a traditional kind, e.g., a revival of the French-Czechoslovak-Soviet bloc."
interdependence of French and British interests, consequently, dictated closer postwar cooperation. The report stressed in particular the Far Eastern implications: "Our experience in this war has already led His Majesty's Government to decide that it will pay us to maintain not only a friendly but also a strong France in the Pacific, especially in Indo-China."

Unquestionably, therefore, British perceptions of imperial interests shifted. The early hesitancy in London towards the French -- almost inexplicable given their common interests -- changed to cordial cooperation. Churchill's reluctance to champion the French cause should be considered in connection with his desire not to antagonize Roosevelt, and at the same time, not to create any ill-feeling against the French. "I am a little shy of overburdening the President", Churchill typically explained to the British Chiefs who were urging him to intercede for American aid to Indochina. "I hear he is very hard pressed and I like to keep him as much as possible for the biggest things." In fact, the Prime Minister held a strong admiration for France. At a Paris luncheon in November 1944, Churchill, with one eye undoubtedly on the United States, proclaimed, "For more than 35 years I have defended the cause of friendship, comradeship and alliance between France and Great Britain. . . . It is a fundamental principle of British policy that the alliance with France should be unshaken, constant and effective." And, of course, the views of the Prime Minister on the benefits of colonialism were internationally famous (or notorious).

Twice in 1944 the War Cabinet approved proposals by Eden to support the return of Indochina to France on the understanding that the French would accept all security provisions required by an international organization. And three months prior to D-Day, Sir Maurice Peterson (Head of the Far Eastern Department, Foreign Office) explained to the British Chiefs that Foreign Office support for a greater French role in the war stemmed from "the desirability that France should be strong and friendly to us in Europe and that a friendly French policy should be reflected in the French overseas Empire".

In his important 1943 memorandum, Linton Harry Foulds had argued that if the French, like the British, accepted international arrangements or facilities in their colonial areas, then the United States could never justify extraordinary restrictions on French sovereignty. Foulds believed that "the reputation of the United States for disinterestedness would be severely damaged if they were to treat France in a manner markedly different from that adopted towards the rest." His clear implication was that no British
Anxfo-American Perspective on Indochina territory would be lost, and, therefore, the other colonial empires would have to remain intact.

Increasing exposure to American resistance to restoring French colonies sparked serious concern within the Foreign Office. In December 1943, for example, Victor Cavendish-Bentick protested, "I trust that we shall not allow ourselves to quarrel with the French... for the benefit of a United States President, who in a year's time may be merely a historical figure." Cavendish-Bentick recognized the hidden threat to all colonial powers in Roosevelt's indictment of the French record in Indochina. He warned that "the Dutch and British may later be told that oil reserves in NEI and Borneo haven't been properly developed or that rubber in Malaya or the education of natives don't meet 'Washington standards' and that these territories should be placed under 'United Nations trusteeship' (perhaps with U.S. oil and rubber controllers)." Emotional invective aside, this line of reasoning struck a responsive chord for British planners. The colonial powers had to stick together, even at the risk of threatening Allied unity after the war. Hypothesizing an unthinkable situation for His Majesty's Government, Jebb's Post-Hostilities Subcommittee in January 1944 concluded that the British could not alienate France just to obtain American support "since to do so would be to ensure against one danger at the cost of exposing ourselves to another, more immediate and vital to the empire as a whole" (i.e., a hostile France and French possessions challenging Great Britain and British possessions). Thus, the bedrock case for imperial interest largely dictated British policy towards the Gaullists in the latter stages of the war — a rationale fully appreciated, if deprecated, in the United States.

Throughout the war, Indochina represented much more of a political concern to the Allies as a pawn in coalition diplomacy rather than providing any actual military significance in contributing to the defeat of Japan. In fact, the French forces under Admiral Decoux engaged the Japanese on only two occasions — both unsuccessful. The first came on 22 September 1940 when Japanese troops, moving across the Tonkinese border, attacked Lang Son and Dong Dang. After a brief flurry, all French resistance crumbled within three days. The second episode, coincidentally in the same area, followed the Japanese military coup of 9 March 1945, which overthrew the last vestiges of Decoux's nominal authority.51

Military operations to reclaim Indochina languished barely out of the planning stage at the end of the war. Even these early strategic plans, however, had heightened Anglo-American tensions. The apparently simple decision of what military theater would incorporate Indochina, for instance, erupted into an Allied cause célèbre.

The 1942 arrangements for the short-lived ABDA (American-British-Dutch-Australian) Command had allocated responsibility for both Indochina and Thailand

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4See Cavendish-Bentick minute, 22 Dec. 1943, attached to Halifax to Eden, 19 Dec. 1943, FO 371.35921, F 6656, 1422/61. The anxious Halifax had suggested "putting the brake on" the mounting American anti-colonial rhetoric. For other similar comments by Cavendish-Bentick, see his minutes 15 Sept. 1943 (FO 371.35921, F 4871/1422/61) and 30 Oct. 1943 (FO 371.35921, F 5668, 1422/61). In the latter minute, he endorsed the French request for membership in the London Pacific War Council, but he said, "we should have to dispense with the ornamental presence of a Filipino as I do not believe that we stock one here." And in the same minute, he described the projected French Far Eastern force as "a heterogeneous collection of black men." Cavendish Bentick had served in the Foreign Office since 1919.

(Siam) to Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. This nominal authority languished almost academically until QUADRANT created the South East Asia Command (SEAC) under Lord Mountbatten in 1943. But the exact boundaries between SEAC and the China Theater remained unclear, for, as General George C. Marshall informed General Joseph W. Stilwell, Mountbatten's new command included Thailand and "subject to further check, possibly Indo-China".

To ease the problem of "face" for Chiang Kai-shek caused by the partial stripping of his command responsibilities, Mountbatten visited the Generalissimo. He astutely arranged an informal gentlemen's agreement, which, in the delicate phrasing of an American observer, General Brehon Somervell, affirmed that "the boundaries between the two theaters are to be decided at the time in accordance with the progress of advances the respective forces made" in Indochina and Thailand. Mountbatten later reported to Roosevelt, "I pointed out what a young and relatively inexperienced officer I was for such a high appointment but if I could feel that I could lean on his vast wisdom and experience for help and advice that it would be of the greatest help to me... This line went over very well with him." The gentlemen's agreement clearly benefited France by foreshadowing a British takeover in Indochina (through SEAC), for, as Mountbatten later pointed out, he knew Chiang Kai-shek "hadn't got the capacity" to occupy Indochina or Thailand.

Roosevelt did little to clarify his views on postwar Indochina before his death. At Yalta, he merely made a passing reference during a private conversation with Stalin on 8 February 1945 to the amputation of the country from the French Empire. Participants at the next day's plenary session virtually eliminated any chance of that by deciding that the concept of international trusteeship applied only to (a) existing League of Nations mandates, (b) ex-enemy territory, and (c) other imperial powers who voluntarily offered their colonies for such arrangements. For all the controversy that persists about the Crimea Conference, this overlooked decision, which limited the concept of trusteeship, contributed greatly to the turmoil over Indochina in the next three decades.

After Yalta, the President still advocated a trusteeship of some kind for the protection of the people of Indochina. He told Charles Taussig that French control could possibly resume if the French promoted eventual independence for Indochina; significantly, Roosevelt stressed that self-government was not a satisfactory substitute for indepen-

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33 Mountbatten to Roosevelt, 23 Oct. 1943, PREM 3-90/3.
34 Mountbatten interview with the author, 2 Aug. 1973, London; Mountbatten, Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia, 1943-1945 (London: H.M.S.O., 1951) [written 31 July 1947], see the text of "Agreement With the Generalissimo" at Appendix D. Minutes of the Mountbatten-Generalissimo meetings, 16-22 Oct. 1943, may be found in AR 23/2247, PRO. The original view of the British Chiefs was that Siam (Thailand) and Indochina would be included in the SEAC boundaries. See COS(43)310(0), 16 June 1943, CAB 80/70; also Foreign Office memorandum, "South East Asia Command: Boundaries", COS(43)702(0), 10 Nov. 1943, CAB 80/76.
36 FURS, Yalta, 1945, pp. 844-45, 856-59, 935, 944-47, 977, Alger Hiss played a key role in framing the language of the agreement.
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ience as the declared goal. Later, the State Department, acting on Roosevelt’s instructions, pigeon-holed a French request for an agreement that affirmed French authority over civil affairs in Indochina after liberation. But the original sweeping vision, born of the highest idealism and crippled by the lack of bold formulation, could not long endure, especially with the removal of its creator.

After Roosevelt’s death and with the accelerating pace of events in Europe, the French intensified their efforts to take a prominent part in the war against Japan. Moreover, London became less hesitant about openly promoting the French cause. The British Chiefs effectively forced the American hand by announcing their authorization for the dispatch of the French Corps Leger d’Intervention to the South East Asia Command. Although the American Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that “the use of French forces in that theater has relatively little if any value”, Acting Secretary of State Joseph C. Grew advised President Harry S. Truman in mid-May that the United States was preparing “to help all we can” in the French requests. Truman declared shortly thereafter to French Ambassador Henri Bonnet that the United States welcomed in principle the French offer of two divisions, provided the units were integrated with “present and planned operations”. In short, Truman did not challenge the French return.

Roosevelt’s trustee concept was further undermined at the Potsdam Conference, which agreed to divide Indochina at the Sixteenth Parallel for military purposes. Occupation-liberation responsibilities were divided between Chiang Kai-shek in the north and Mountbatten in the south. The British, consequently, could help the French resume control in Indochina. At the time, the American Ambassador in China, Patrick J. Hurley, described this fateful decision to dissect the country as “purely an expedient operational matter”. Later, Mountbatten, enlightened by thirty years of retrospect, dismissed that historic boundary as “crazy”. Ironically, Mountbatten recalled that this

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59Grew to Truman, 16 May 1945, SD 740.001/IPW/5-1645.

60See the report of this Truman–Bonnet conversation in Matthews to State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee, 23 May 1945, SD 740.001/IPW/5-2345. For more on the attitude of the Truman Administration, see Sterndale Bennett memorandum, COS(45)120(0), 5 May 1945, CAB 80/94; COS(45)352(0), 22 May 1945, CAB 79/80; Grew memorandum of conversations with May 1945, CAB 80/94; COS(45)135, 24 May 1945, CAB 79/80; Grew memorandum of conversations with Bonnet, 13 June 1945 (SD 740.001/IPW/6-1345) and 19 May 1945 (Joseph C. Grew Papers, Vol. 7, folder 16, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts). For a 1945 report on some of the French military activities (Mission 5) in Southeast Asia, see General Jean Sainteny, Histoire d’une paix manquée Indochine, 1945–1947 (Paris: Fayard, 1967), pp. 253–59.


Potsdam decision emerged from a twofold purpose to pay posthumous homage to the ideas of Roosevelt and to appease Chiang Kai-shek.63

The British displayed a nervous acceptance of these events. Sir Horatio Seymour, British Ambassador in China, and Mountbatten fired off separate warnings about potential friction. The Foreign Office was worried about the overall British position in Southeast Asia. John Sterndale Bennett, Head of the Far Eastern Department in the Foreign Office, explained to the British Chiefs, “Unfortunately, we must recognize that the mere presence of our forces in Indo-China may involve us in difficulties with the Americans, Chinese, or French depending on the policy we pursue.” He pointed out that if the British suppressed anti-French activities by the native revolutionaries “we shall open ourselves to attack from American anti-Imperialist opinion and no doubt from the Chinese, whereas a policy of complete non-intervention in domestic affairs would no doubt be interpreted by the French as a further step towards our alleged long-term objective of pushing them out of their colonial territories.” While agreeing with the French that “the first troops in Indo-China should be white troops with modern equipment”, the Foreign Office believed that “the first aim” of British policy should be the substitution of French forces for the British forces in southern Indochina.64 General Sir William Slim later warned, “The real and underlying danger is that the situation may develop so that it can be represented as a West Versus East set-up. I need not point out how extremely dangerous this may be.”

In summary, to the extent that Indochina was talked about at all from 1940 to 1945, neither British nor American policies held steady. After Pearl Harbor, the apparent Anglo-American unity to bolster the Decoux Administration and to try to stabilize the situation in Southeast Asia vanished. Washington then sought to encourage the French with frequent guarantees about restoring the prewar French Empire. London, however, remained reluctant to join in such sweeping commitments, preferring to keep all options open regarding postwar issues. At this stage, Churchill discouraged postwar planning, which he considered a distraction to the business of winning the war. “I hope that these speculative studies will be entrusted mainly to those on whose hands times hangs heavy”, Churchill told Eden, “and that we shall not overlook Mrs. Glass’s Cookery Book recipe for Jugged Hare — First catch your hare.”

In 1943, Roosevelt made known his general notion about an international trusteeship for Indochina. The President based his scheme on his perception of an unsatisfactory French record there. The British, of course, realized the disturbing implications of this

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64 Seymour to Foreign Office, 4 Oct. 1945, FO 371.46214, F 7861/186/10; Mountbatten to Foreign Office, 7 Jan. 1945, COS(45)664(0), 21 Jan. 1945, CAB 80/91; also COS(45)217, 28 Sept. 1945, extracted in FO 371.46214, F 7927/186/10; Admiral Sir James Somerville to Mountbatten, 27 Mar. 1945, Admiral Somerville Papers, folder 9/2, Churchill College, Cambridge University; Sterndale Bennett memorandum, COS(45)520(0), 22 May 1945, CAB 80/94; Prime Minister Attlee memorandum, COS(45)579(0), 12 Aug. 1945, CAB 80/96.
65 Sterndale Bennett to the British Chiefs of Staff, 25 Sept. 1945, COS(45)589(0), 3 Oct. 1945, CAB 80/97.
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reasoning for all colonial powers, but Churchill decided against a showdown with Roosevelt while the fighting continued. Nevertheless, from 1943 to 1945 British planners, with surprising slowness, came to realize that close relations with France stood as a basic security requirement for British interests. This perception was not unusual, despite all the talk about a "special relationship" with the United States, for, the traditional priority in British foreign policy had always been concerned with power alignments directly across the English Channel. Consequently, the British became increasingly willing to champion general French causes, especially the return of French colonial control in Indochina. In Washington, meanwhile the lack of effective planning and presidential irresolution betrayed whatever value the concept of trusteeship for Indochina ever contained.

Unwilling to address urgent political problems until the last shot was fired, Roosevelt virtually surrendered the considerable leverage enjoyed by the United States earlier in the war. "The United States expected to be consulted on any arrangements as to the future of Southeast Asia", Roosevelt announced, but then he rejected all overtures from London and Paris for negotiations on the topic. And the State department, divided and awkwardly placed because of the determined White House silence, nevertheless, stoutly defended presidential policy of espousing no policy about either French participation in the war against Japan or the postwar status of Indochina. Despite its numerous memoranda and meetings about trusteeship and Indochina, the divided State Department never presented an analysis on the need for resolute action convincing enough to prevent the gradual foreclosing of American options by accelerating events in metropolitan France and Southeast Asia. Electoral pragmatism notwithstanding, the long-term interests of the United States demanded measures to guard against a relapse into prewar parochialism, for, otherwise, what enduring remedy lay in military victory?

The strengthening bonds among the colonial powers, symbolized by the de Gaulle-Churchill meeting within a week of the 1944 American election, threatened to make a mockery of the enormous wartime sacrifices. Moreover, there was an appalling lack of appreciation for the mushrooming force of Asian nationalism. Instead of pointing to the urgency of the need for action, however, the State Department obediently passed along the unexplained - and unchallenged — presidential directives of delay and irresolution. The dangerous passivity that plagued American policy had not sprung from misunderstandings or distracting preoccupations, but — and here is the real tragedy — had been consciously developed at the highest levels. Thus, while entertaining idealistic hopes of independence for the people of Indochina, the United States, by its "non-policy of determined drift", ironically contributed to the undermining not only of those hopes but also of indigenous aspirations throughout Southeast Asia. And in a tragic twist, the United States became identified with Western suppression. The blurred distinction

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*Roosevelt to Stettinius, 3 Nov. 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, PSF, folder "Indo-China", Box 55, FDRL.

*See, for example, the testimony of Abbot Low Moffat before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Hearings ... Causes, Origins, and Lessons of the Vietnam War, pp. 161-65. At a meeting of the American delegation during the San Francisco Conference, Nelson Rockefeller inquired if the United States had ever intended to place all dependent areas under trusteeship. Leo R. Pasvolsky replied that there had never been any serious plans to do so, "although there had been some 'wild' ideas concerning a complete trusteeship system"; See Minutes of Commission II Meeting, 20 June 1945, folder "Drafting Book -- II", Notter Files, Box 275. For more on the related issue of trusteeship, see folder "United Nations". For Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, PSF, Box 188, FDRL; Taussig Papers, folder "Trusteeship — Background Material Before San Francisco", Box 59, FDRL; also the excellent study by Wm. Roger Louis, *Imperialism at Bay -- The United States and the Decolonization of the British Empire, 1941-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
between American good intentions and the calamitous events in the next three decades grew more academic to embattled Asians seeking to fix responsibility for the bloody course of postwar history.
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