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March 17, 1954

### MEMORANDUM FOR THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE, NSC

Subject: Military Implications of the U.S. Position on Indochina in Geneva

1. The attached analysis and recommendations concerning the U.S. position in Geneva have been developed by a Subcommittee consisting of representatives of the Department of Defense, JCS, State, and CIA.
2. This paper reflects the conclusions of the Department of Defense and the JCS and has been collaborated with the State Department representatives who have reserved their position thereon.
3. In brief, this paper concludes that from the point of view of the U.S. strategic position in Asia, and indeed throughout the world, no solution to the Indochina problem short of victory is acceptable. It recommends that this be the basis for the U.S. negotiating position prior to and at the Geneva Conference.
4. It also notes that, aside from the improvement of the present military situation in Indochina, none of the courses of action considered provide a satisfactory solution to the Indochina war.
5. The paper notes that the implications of this position are such as to merit consideration by the NSC and the President.
6. I recommend that the Special Committee note and approve this report and forward it with the official Department of State views to the NSC.

G. B. Erskine  
General, USMC (Ret)  
Chairman, Sub-committee  
President's Special Committee

*Military Implication of U.S. Negotiations on Indochina at Geneva*

### I. PROBLEM

To develop a U.S. position with reference to the Geneva Conference as it relates to Indochina, encompassing the military implications of certain alternatives which might arise in connection with that conference.

## II. MAJOR CONSIDERATIONS

A. The Department of Defense and the JCS have reviewed NSC 5405 in the light of developments since that policy was approved from a military point of view and in the light of certain possible courses of action as they affect the Geneva Conference. These are:

1. Maintenance of the status quo in Indochina.
2. Imposition of a cease-fire in Indochina.
3. Establishment of a coalition government.
4. Partition of the country.
5. Self-determination through free elections.

B. The Department of Defense and the JCS have also considered the impact of the possible future status of Indochina on the remainder of Southeast Asia and Japan and have considered the effect which any substantial concessions to the Communists on the part of France and the Associated States would have with respect to Asian peoples as a whole and U.S. objectives in Europe.

C. Indochina is the area in which the Communist and non-Communist worlds confront one another actively on the field of battle. The loss of this battle by whatever means would have the most serious repercussions on U.S. and free world interests, not only in Asia but in Europe and elsewhere.

D. French withdrawal or defeat in Indochina would have most serious consequences on the French position in the world; the free world position in Asia; and in the U.S. on the domestic attitude vis-a-vis the French. It would, furthermore, constitute a de facto failure on the part of France to abide by its commitment in U.N. to repel aggression.

E. Unless the free world maintains its position in Indochina, the Communists will be in a position to exploit what will be widely regarded in Asia as a Communist victory. Should Indochina be lost to the Communists, and in the absence of immediate and effective counteraction by the free world (which would of necessity be on a much greater scale than that required to be decisive in Indochina), the conquest of the remainder of Southeast Asia would inevitably follow. Thereafter, longer term results, probably forcing Japan into an accommodation with the Communist bloc, and threatening the stability and security of Europe, could be expected to ensue.

F. As a measure of U.S. participation in the Indochinese war it is noted that the U.S. has since 1950 programmed in excess of \$2.4 billion dollars in support of the French-Associated States operations in Indochina. France is estimated to have expended during the period 1946-1953 the equivalent of some \$5.4 billion. This investment, in addition to the heavy casualties sustained by the French and Vietnamese, to say nothing of the great moral and political involvement of the U.S. and French, will have been fruitless for the anti-Communist cause if control of all or a portion of Indochina should now be ceded to the Communists.

## III. FACTS BEARING ON THE PROBLEM

A. NSC 5405, approved January 16, 1954, states U.S. policy with respect to Indochina.

B. The French desire for peace in Indochina almost at any cost represents our greatest vulnerability in the Geneva talks.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

For the views of the JCS see Tab A.

#### V. CONCLUSIONS

A. Loss of Indochina to the Communists would constitute a political and military setback of the most serious consequences and would almost certainly lead to the ultimate Communist domination of all of Southeast Asia.

B. The U.S. policy and objectives with respect to Southeast Asia as reflected in NSC 5405 remain entirely valid in the light of developments since that policy was approved.

C. With respect to possible alternative courses of action enumerated in paragraph IIA above, the Department of Defense has reached the following conclusions:

1. *Maintenance of status quo in Indochina.* It is highly improbable that a Communist agreement could be obtained to any negotiated settlement which would be consistent with basic U.S. objectives in Southeast Asia in the absence of a very substantial improvement in the French Union military situation. This could best be accomplished by the aggressive prosecution of military operations.

2. *Imposition of a cease-fire.* The acceptance of a cease-fire in advance of a satisfactory settlement would in all probability lead to a political stalemate attended by a concurrent and irretrievable deterioration of the Franco-Vietnamese military position.

3. *Establishment of a coalition government.* The acceptance of a settlement based upon this course of action would open the way for the ultimate seizure of control by the Communists under conditions which would almost certainly preclude timely and effective external assistance designed to prevent such seizure.

4. *Partition of the country.* The acceptance of this course of action would represent at the least a partial victory for the Viet Minh and would constitute a retrogressive step in the attainment of U.S. policy and would compromise the achievement of that policy in Southeast Asia.

5. *Self-determination through free elections.* Many factors render the holding of a truly representative plebiscite infeasible and such a course of action would, in any case, lead to the loss of the Associated States to Communist control.

#### VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. That the U.S. and U.K. and France reach an agreement with respect to Indochina which rejects all of the courses enumerated above (except No. 1 on the assumption that the status quo can be altered to result in a military victory) prior to the initiation of discussions on

Indochina at Geneva. Failing this, the U.S. should actively oppose each of these solutions, should not entertain discussion of Indochina at Geneva, or having entertained it, should ensure that no agreements are reached.

B. If, despite all U.S. efforts to the contrary, the French Government elects to accept a negotiated settlement which fails to provide reasonably adequate assurance of the future political and territorial integrity of Indochina, the U.S. should decline to associate itself with such a settlement and should pursue, directly with the governments of the Associated States and with other Allies (notably the U.K.), ways and means of continuing the struggle against the Viet Minh in Indochina without participation of the French.

C. The Special Committee has reviewed the findings and recommendations of the Department of Defense and considers that the implications of this position are such as to warrant their review at the highest levels and by the National Security Council, after which they become the basis of the U.S. position with respect to Indochina at Geneva. The Special Committee recognizes moreover that certain supplementary and alternative courses of action designed to ensure a favorable resolution of the situation in Indochina merit consideration by the NSC. These, and the Special Committee recommendations with respect thereto, are:

1. *The political steps to be taken to ensure an agreed U.S.-U.K.--French position concerning Indochina at Geneva.* That the NSC review the proposed political action designed to achieve this objective with particular attention to possible pressure against the French position in North Africa, and in NATO, and to the fact that discussions concerning implementation of course 2 and 3 hereunder will be contingent upon the success or failure of this course of action.

2. *Overt U.S. involvement in Indochina.* That the NSC determine the extent of U.S. willingness, over and above the contingencies listed in NSC 5405, to commit U.S. air, naval and ultimately ground forces to the direct resolution of the war in Indochina with or without French support and in the event of failure in course I above. That in this connection the NSC take cognizance of present domestic and international climate of opinion with respect to U.S. involvement and consider the initiation of such steps as may be necessary to ensure worldwide recognition of the significance of such steps in Indochina as a part of the struggle against communist aggression.

3. *The development of a substitute base of operations.* That the NSC consider whether this course of action is acceptable as a substitute for 1 and 2 above and recognizing that the hope of implementation thereof would be one of major expenditure and long-term potential only.