

# The Pentagon Papers

Gravel Edition

Volume 1, Chapter 5, "Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam, 1954-1960"  
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Excerpt

The Geneva powers were imprecise-probably deliberately indefinite-concerning who was to carry out the election provisions. France, which was charged with civil administration in the "regrouping zone" of South Vietnam, had granted the State of Vietnam its independence in June 1954, six weeks before the Accords were drawn up. Throughout 1954 and the first half of 1955, France further divested itself of authority in South Vietnam: police, local government, and then the Army of Vietnam were freed of French control, and turned over to the Saigon government. Concurrently, the U.S. began to channel aid directly to South Vietnam, rather than through France. The convolution of French policy then thrust upon the U.S. a choice between supporting Diem or the French presence in Indochina. The U.S. opted for Diem. By the time the deadlines for election consultations fell due in July 1955, South Vietnam was sovereign *de facto* as well as *de jure*, waxing strong with U.S. aid, and France was no longer in a position to exert strong influence on Diem's political actions.

As early as January 1955, President Diem was stating publicly that he was unlikely to proceed with the Geneva elections:

Southern Viet-Nam, since it protested the Geneva Agreement when it was made, does not consider itself a party to that Agreement, nor bound by it.

In any event, the clauses providing for the 1956 elections are extremely vague. But at one point they are clear--in stipulating that the elections are to be free. Everything will now depend on how free elections are defined. The President said he would wait to see whether the conditions of freedom would exist in North Viet-Nam at the time scheduled for the elections. He asked what would be the good of an impartial counting of votes if the voting has been preceded in North Viet-Nam by a campaign of ruthless propaganda and terrorism on the part of a police state.

As the deadline for consultations approached (20 July 1955), Diem was increasingly explicit that he did not consider free elections possible in North Vietnam, and had no intention of consulting with the DRV concerning them. The U.S. did not--as is often alleged--connive with Diem to ignore the elections. U.S. State Department records indicate that Diem's refusal to be bound by the Geneva Accords and his opposition to

pre-election consultations were at his own initiative. However, the U.S., which had expected elections to be held, and up until May 1955 had fully supported them, shifted its position in the face of Diem's opposition, and of the evidence then accumulated about the oppressive nature of the regime in North Vietnam. "In essence," a State Department historical study found, "our position would be that the whole subject of consultations and elections in Viet-Nam should be left up to the Vietnamese themselves and not dictated by external arrangements which one of the parties never accepted and still rejects." Secretary of State Dulles explained publicly that:

Neither the United States Government nor the Government of Viet-Nam is, of course, a party to the Geneva armistice agreements. We did not sign them, and the Government of Viet-Nam did not sign them and, indeed, protested against them. On the other hand, the United States believes, broadly speaking, in the unification of countries which have a historic unity, where the people are akin. We also believe that, if there are conditions of really free elections, there is no serious risk that the Communists would win.....

Thus, backed by the U.S., Diem obdurately refused to open talks with the Hanoi government. He continued to maintain that the Government of South Vietnam had not signed the Geneva Agreements and thus was not bound by them.

Our policy is a policy for peace. But nothing will lead us astray of our goal, the unity of our country, a unity in freedom and not in slavery. Serving the cause of our nation, more than ever we will struggle for the reunification of our homeland.

We do not reject the principle of free elections as peaceful and democratic means to achieve that unity. However, if elections constitute one of the bases of true democracy, they will be meaningful only on the condition that they be absolutely free.

Now, faced with a regime of oppression as practiced by the Viet Minh, we remain skeptical concerning the possibility of fulfilling the conditions of free elections in the North.

On 1 June 1956, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Walter Robertson, stated:

President Diem and the Government of Free Viet-Nam reaffirmed on April 6 of this year and on other occasions their desire to seek the reunification of Viet-Nam by peaceful means. In this goal, we support them fully. We hope and pray that the partition of Viet-Nam, imposed against the will of the Vietnamese people, will speedily come to an end. For our part we believe in free elections, and we support President Diem

fully in his position that if elections are to be held, there first must be conditions which preclude intimidation or coercion of the electorate. Unless such conditions exist there can be no free choice.

President Eisenhower is widely quoted to the effect that in 1954 as many as 80% of the Vietnamese people would have voted for Ho Chi Minh, as the popular hero of their liberation, in an election against Bao Dai. In October 1955, Diem ran against Bao Dai in a referendum and won--by a dubiously overwhelming vote, but he plainly won nevertheless. It is almost certain that by 1956 the proportion which might have voted for Ho--in a free election against Diem--would have been much smaller than 80%. Diem's success in the South had been far greater than anyone could have foreseen, while the North Vietnamese regime had been suffering from food scarcity, and low public morale stemming from inept imitation of Chinese Communism--including a harsh agrarian program that reportedly led to the killing of over 50,000 small-scale "landlords." The North Vietnamese themselves furnished damning descriptions of conditions within the DRV in 1955 and 1956. Vo Nguyen Giap, in a public statement to his communist party colleagues, admitted in autumn, 1956, that:

We made too many deviations and executed too many honest people. We attacked on too large a front and, seeing enemies everywhere, resorted to terror, which became far too widespread. . . . Whilst carrying out our land reform program we failed to respect the principles of freedom of faith and worship in many areas . . . in regions inhabited by minority tribes we have attacked tribal chiefs too strongly, thus injuring, instead of respecting, local customs and manners. . . . When reorganizing the party, we paid too much importance to the notion of social class instead of adhering firmly to political qualifications alone. Instead of recognizing education to be the first essential, we resorted exclusively to organizational measures such as disciplinary punishments, expulsion from the party, executions, dissolution of party branches and calls. Worse still, torture came to be regarded as a normal practice during party reorganization.