

VALLEY OF DEATH

The Tragedy at Dien Bien Phu
That Led America into the Vietnam War

Ted Morgan



R A N D O M H O U S E

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My Battle of Algiers

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That Led America into the Vietnam War

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TED MORGAN

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This book is for the soldiers who were sent to die in battle by politicians who have never seen combat.

Preface

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In January 2008, my wife, Eileen, and I took a Vietnam Airlines flight from Hanoi to Dien Bien Phu, the site of the 1954 battle that ended French rule in Indochina. Our two-engine turboprop, made by Aérospatiale to land on short runways, was reminiscent of the U.S.-built Dakotas that the French had used to supply the base more than half a century ago, so that we had a sense of traveling backward in time as well as forward in space. The 187-mile flight took an hour (as against an hour and a half by the Dakotas), over a thick layer of cumulus clouds, until the altitude dropped to reveal rough-hewn mountains, bare-topped and covered with trails leading to hamlets buried in deep ravines.

Swerving to the right, the plane descended over a long valley of rice paddies as smooth and even as golf greens, surrounded by low mountains on three sides and broken up by clusters of dwellings. The spacious valley seemed anomalous in such a craggy landscape only twenty miles from the Laotian border. At first sight it was understandable that the French had built an air-ground base there, for if the Vietminh had attacked en masse over the plain, ten miles long and five wide, they would have been massacred.

Our plane landed on what had been the French airstrip, now enlarged and made of concrete instead of perforated steel strips, which some inhabitants had recovered to use as fencing for their gardens. At the unassuming, whitewashed airport, clusters of relatives were waiting for arriving passengers. The twice-daily flights seemed to be something of an event in this isolated outpost, which took sixteen hours to reach by road. A young woman we struck up a conversation with told us she wanted to practice her English because she was studying to be an air traffic controller, which seemed a likely profession in this remote locale, still heavily dependent, as it had been during the battle, on transportation and supply by air.

In 1954, the civilian population of Dien Bien Phu was negligible. Today the town itself has a population of nine thousand, while the valley accommodates six times that number. Rows of women wearing conical straw hats can be seen bent over in the paddies, ankles deep in water, picking rice shoots by hand as they have for centuries. If there is such a thing as military archaeology, Dien Bien Phu is an example of it, for some of the battle sites have been maintained as memorials, while others were obliterated to make way for housing and planting.

Our decrepit hotel was on May 7 Avenue (the date of the French surrender), a four-lane thoroughfare with a well-lit median, though there is little traffic after dark. The avenue was crowded with open-fronted, narrow shops that spilled out onto the teeming life of the sidewalks, so that the pedestrian had to thread his way past the parked motorbikes, spare tires, cases of soft drinks, piles of burlap bags, people eating on the ground from their rice

bowls, and dogs rummaging through rubble. Side by side in their cramped spaces, the stores were like a horizontal but decaying department store, selling hardware, construction materials, furniture, cell phones, jackets of imitation leather, and on one block nothing but wedding dresses. Another block was reserved for barbers, who had set their chairs under shade trees and affixed large mirrors to a grated wall. Once they had placed their scissors and combs on low tables, they were in business—unless it rained. One block was lined with lottery ladies, seated behind folding tables, where the tickets were gathered in neat piles by denomination, or spread out like a fan. They recorded every transaction by hand in their account books.

Farther along the avenue a vast outdoor market unfolded, where Meo tribeswomen came down from the mountains, wearing their black costumes and multicolored cummerbunds, their thick black hair in topknots, to sell products ranging from the mundane to the exotic—oranges and tiny apples, indigenous roots, scrawny live turkeys in cages, elixirs in large jars containing snakes and lizards, or filled with dead bees floating in a murky liquid.

History creates its own geological layers, entombing the carnage of warfare under a bustling town. The scenery of battle—the man with a bandaged head being dragged under the arms by two others, the exploding shells forming craters, the staccato crackle of automatic fire drowning out shouts of command, the attacks and counterattacks barely visible through smoke-saturated air, and the knowledge that human life is incidental to both victory and defeat—is all submerged, along with the decayed bodies of the fallen. Now the civilian population attends to its daily needs, so that it never occurs to the children playing hopscotch, or to the mothers haggling over the price of an orange, or to the peasants carrying improbable loads at both ends of a bamboo pole balanced on their shoulders, that with every step they are treading on the fallen who have fertilized the soil.

The panoply of normalcy, with its tidy pleasures and habits, its twin concerns of health and wealth, has superseded the determination and spirit of sacrifice of the combatants who fought and died for a cause they believed in: for the Vietminh, independence from colonial rule; for the French, the pride of the career soldiers doing their job well enough to maintain that rule. The men who survived the battle, which lasted fifty-six days and nights and the captivity that followed defeat lived through a time of such unimaginable suffering when every day they saw their comrades killed and wounded, their grief mitigated by the adrenaline rush of remaining alive, that everything they returned to seemed pointless and insipid. One of the outstanding paratroop officers who fought there, Major Pierre Tourret left the army in disgust after Dien Bien Phu, and found it hard to adjust to civilian life. “Peace is hell” became his catchword, which did not stop him from living into his eighties, preserved in vinegar.

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The point of our visit was to study what was left of the French base, in order to form a clearer idea of how this great airborne battle was fought. When the first troops were dropped in on November 20, 1953, the rationale for the base was threefold: to block the advance of Vietminh troops heading toward Laos; to draw their troops away from the Tonkin (or Red River) Delta, where they seemed to be preparing an offensive; and by

providing the base with artillery, tanks, and fighter-bombers, to draw the Vietminh into attacking where they were likely to suffer severe losses.

Eight centers of resistance (CRs) were built in the entrenched camp, all with women's names, on both sides of the Nam Yum River, which provided drinking water. The river was spanned by a Bailey bridge that is still in use. The airstrip was close by, as were the pits for the 155mm cannon and the tanks. By December 17, the base was operational.

Our guide to what remained of the base was Nguyen Tien Manh (known as Mike), a slight but athletic forty-one-year-old native of Dien Bien Phu. Round-eyed with a pencil mustache and an easy smile that revealed gaps in his teeth, he was familiar with the base's layout, for his uncle had fought at Dien Bien Phu and had told him that Vietminh losses were far greater than those admitted to. Mike had learned his English during four years in the Vietnamese army, but since his teacher was a fellow soldier, I found his accent hard to decipher, though Eileen did much better. Mike recruited a four-wheel-drive Toyota and a driver to reach the strong-points, on many of which only a marker remained. We explored them over a period of four days, starting with Eliane 2. Preserved as a memorial, it was not the highest, but it was the most massive and elaborate, looming like a mastodon over the center of town, behind May 7 Avenue. It was three-sided, with two steep sides and one gentle slope known as the Champs-Élysées, where Vietminh assaults had been mowed down by French machine guns. In some places, the four rows of barbed wire that had surrounded it were preserved, which reminded me of James Dickey's comment: "All that is needed to understand World War I in its philosophical and historical meaning is to examine the barbed wire—a single strand will do—and to meditate on who made it, what it is for, why it is like it is." The similarities between World War I and Dien Bien Phu were obvious: trench warfare and barbed wire.

Eliane 2 was the site of the residence built by the former French provincial governor and his fortified masonry cellar, used by the defenders as their command post, had been maintained, as had the French gun emplacements and trenches, cemented to prevent erosion. At the summit, a damaged French tank presided as a forlorn symbol of Vietminh victory, near a marble monument giving the names of the units that finally took the strongpoint. As Eileen photographed the tank, a group of Vietnamese army officers happened by. When she asked them to pose in front of the tank, they cheerfully complied.

Of the other Elianes, two had been cut back for housing, and only Eliane 1 and 4 were still intact, though they were now overgrown with high bushes, and were so steep that I wondered how the Vietminh could have climbed them while firing and cutting through the barbed wire. At the top, there were markers, again giving the dates of their downfall and the units that took them.

North of the Elianes rose Dominique 2, the highest of the strongpoints at 1,650 feet, with a flat top and a good view of the entire battlefield and the mountains beyond, where General Vo Nguyen Giap's divisions were hidden. This was another essential hill that had to be held, and again it was so steep that one wondered how Giap had managed, although Mike sprinted up it like a cross-country runner.

From the Dominiques, on a winding, muddy road, it was about half a mile to the northernmost CR, Béatrice, with its four positions on three hills separated by gullies

Located between a marshy loop of the Nam Yum and RP41, a twisting mountain road which followed the river eastward, Béatrice guarded access to the valley from the northeast, between the river and the road. Positioned midway from the right flank of Gabrielle and the left flank of Dominique, it was supposed to protect both and was manned by a unit of elite Legionnaires.

The hills, cleared of undergrowth during the battle, were now once again mantled with thick bushes and trees. A concrete stairway had recently been built up the steepest hill, at the top of which the deep concrete bunkers of the Legionnaires remained intact, and there was a carved pink stone memorial showing the heroic Vietminh fighters. It was on Béatrice that one of Giap's men was killed when he blocked the aperture of a machine-gun emplacement with his body, or so Mike told us.

The northernmost CR of Gabrielle was reached after a steep five-hundred-yard hike from the road. The sandbag fortifications still piled there were a reminder that the strongpoint held by Algerian fusiliers had been carelessly built.

Directly across from Gabrielle there was a meticulously tended Vietminh cemetery. The long rows of tombstones were unmarked, but families who arrive with bouquets are shown a registry of names and the corresponding locations of the graves. Fifty-four years after the battle, the six hundred graves were freshly flowered.

Having covered the eastern and northern perimeters, we explored those to the west. Of the four connected hills forming Anne-Marie, one remained. The others had been razed to build an elementary school with a walled courtyard. The remaining hill was a reddish sandstone, with deep gullies and little vegetation. Several sides were nearly vertical, but one of the slopes was gentle enough to climb. From the top you could see the forest to the west from which the Vietminh had attacked.

As we descended from Anne-Marie, schoolchildren ran out of the courtyard and surrounded us, smiling and saying hello. They were neatly dressed and healthy-looking (one rarely sees an overweight Vietnamese), and eager to be photographed. To see a schoolyard filled with bright, contented children where a bloody battle had once been fought was a pleasant surprise.

To reach the five strongpoints of Huguette, built to protect the airstrip, we had to drive around the extended runway along a back road lined with wrecks of French guns and armored vehicles, the debris of battle, in front of which a small but busy outdoor market drew crowds of shoppers. Off the road we came to rice paddies where the Huguettes had been. There was nothing left but a damaged tank, its 75mm cannon disconsolately drooping, and the customary marker.

To get to the tank we had to cross several paddies over one-foot-wide glutinous berms separating one paddy from the other. The man working the paddies, who wore a pith helmet, showed us the way. Eileen stayed on terra firma while Mike sped along in the lead and I fell behind, lurching like a tightrope walker. The man with the pith helmet helped me keep my equilibrium. At one point he took my hand and studied it palm-down. When he saw the liver spots, he asked how old I was. I said seventy-five. "This old, old man," the paddy farmer exclaimed. We reached the mangled tank and the marker explaining where and how it had been hit. We had a good view of the airstrip and the lawn that bordered it

where water buffalo grazed. Mike explained that they served the purpose of lawn mowers.

Heading south toward the last outpost, Isabelle, the valley broadened into green acres of rice shoots. This was flat land where the tanks of Isabelle could best maneuver. On the way, we passed a carved stone monument to the inhabitants of Noong Nhai, a hamlet where on April 25, 1954, French bombers killed 444 civilians, most of them women and children. The French said it was a mistake. The Vietnamese say it was in reprisal because the male inhabitants were fighting in the Vietminh ranks. The monument depicted the contorted faces of the victims.

Of the important outpost of Isabelle, the last to surrender, nothing remained but a marker. With a garrison of two thousand men defending five strongpoints, Isabelle was built on flat ground, but it was well constructed and well armed with one third of Dien Bien Phu's artillery and tanks.

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Having covered all of Dien Bien Phu's strongpoints, there were two final but essential battle sites to examine: the bunkers where the generals who commanded the rival armies had planned the strategies that led to the French surrender.

Giap's had been dug into a mountain twenty-five miles northwest of Dien Bien Phu. Castries' was a deep fortified trench at the center of the headquarters post. Both had been maintained by the Vietnamese as they were during the battle.

Castries' bunker, a short distance from the Bailey bridge, was all that remained of the crowded Claudine center of resistance, except for wrecked tanks and artillery, and shell craters filled with garbage. One of the destroyed 105mm howitzers had a marking that said USA 1943.

Rising a few feet aboveground was a sixty-foot-long and twenty-four-foot-wide roof, a semicircle of corrugated steel, able to withstand mortar and 105mm shells. The roof was surrounded by a ten-foot-deep trench. Near the bunker stood a bas-relief of Castries bareheaded and bowed, with his hands clasped in front of him, surrendering on May 7, 1954.

Steep steps led down to a narrow entrance. The seven-foot-high ceiling was made from perforated steel strips used for the runway. A series of rooms opened on both sides of the central aisle. The walls were made of heavy lumber covered with bamboo. In one room Castries slept and kept a bathtub. There was no toilet or running water, but water was brought in from outside. In another room stood a folding table where Castries ate and in the evening played bridge with his staff officers. Here he also kept his wine cellar, for which the bunker was the right temperature.

Other rooms were used for his office and for staff meetings. Some of the maps drawn up during the battle were still on the walls. Aside from positional maps, there was a "Map of Losses," with separate columns for the killed, the wounded, and the unaccounted for. The troops were divided by "Races: European, North African, African, Autochtones [Vietnamese], and Legionnaires," as if the Foreign Legion were a race apart; the majority were in fact German.

In the “First Period,” from November 21, 1953, to March 12, 1954, a time of skirmishes before the real battle began, there were 151 killed, 797 wounded, and 89 unaccounted for, a total of 1,037.

In the “Second Period,” from March 13 to May 5, two days before the surrender, there were 1,142 killed, 4,436 wounded, and 1,605 unaccounted for, a total of 7,183. Many of the latter were deserters known as the “Rats of Nam Yum,” who improvised shantytowns on the high banks of the river and survived by scavenging supplies dropped by parachutes and stripping neglected corpses.

Our visit to Giap’s bunker was particularly evocative. The road, RP41, was being widened, and construction was well under way, though we drove through rain-rutted stretches of dirt to pavement and back again, bumping over mounds of asphalt used for resurfacing. In the valley below, houses on stilts bordered the river and white birds flew over cassava fields. Rice paddies had been dug into the sides of mountains in terraces defying gravity. Mike pointed out a narrow path on the other side of the valley, dug by hand into the mountain, where hundreds of coolies had pulled heavy weapons to their emplacements in 1954.

As we reached Giap’s headquarters, the road improved and we entered a forest where cutting down a tree could lead to arrest, for it was a designated ecological and historical zone. At the base of the hill stood a guardhouse, where a steep pebble-cemented path rose to the bunker, across a series of three-log bridges with no railings over gurgling streams. Mike thought the climb would be too much for Eileen, and she stayed behind against her better instincts.

At the top of the hill stood a modest house with a thatched roof and walls, and windows that closed with wooden panels. On entering, there was a cot on the left for a sentry and another on the right for Giap. In the main room stood a long bamboo table for briefings with a bench on each side made of split bamboo trunks. Farther on, near a thin torrent, were houses on stilts, where the headquarters staff and the Chinese advisers were barracked. A sixty-foot-long dormitory was fitted with bunk beds for soldiers.

The heart of the headquarters was a three-hundred-yard-long tunnel cut into the side of the mountain. Not unlike Castries’ bunker, it had offices and rooms for staff meetings, with electricity, and a transmission center that had a direct link to China. In the kitchen, two clay stoves were equipped with exhausts that blew out smoke horizontally so it could not be seen from above.

French planes were unable to locate Giap’s well-hidden headquarters, and it was never bombed. The meeting rooms in the tunnel had maps on the walls showing the locations of Vietminh units, artillery, and anti-aircraft emplacements, as well as detailed maps of the French strongpoints. But there was no summary of Vietminh losses, like the precise accounting in Castries’ bunker. Giap was secretive regarding casualties, which the French estimated at twenty thousand.

In the meantime, Eileen, still at the foot of the hill, noticed two couples in their sixties coming down followed by four young local girls. She asked one of the women if the climb was difficult. “My husband has bad knees and here he is. The girls helped and we gave them a fifty-dollar Indonesian note.” Bad knees maybe, Eileen thought, but the husband

looked like a wrestler, bald and thick through the chest. The other man was slighter, an aging preppy in his blue button-down oxford shirt and khakis. He asked Eileen where she was from. New York, she said. "You've come halfway around the world to see this," the man said, "and we're the victors here." The bald man said, as if apologizing for his friend, "It's all over. We have peace now."

The bald man's wife said, "Take the kids. They'll get you there." The oldest girl, about twelve, whose name was Fong, told Eileen, "You come to Giap's, you come," and they started up the hill, holding her hands and laughing, then gripping them as they helped her across the five bothersome log bridges. They were so young, Eileen thought, but their hands were already calloused. And they were so guileless and cheerful that she trusted them to keep her out of the mountain streams. And soon she joined Mike and me in Giap's tunnel. More for fun than profit, the girls operated an informal ferry service up the hill.

The button-down man was right, when he said, "We're the victors here." A people's army of Vietnamese peasants had crushed renowned battalions of combat-tested professional soldiers. Our reason for touring the base was to get a clearer idea of how a contained battle in a remote valley on the Laotian border ended French colonial rule in Indochina. A clearer idea of this ancient land of jungles and mountains, whose tectonic shocks were caused not by the earth's drift but by repeated invasion, and whose people were put into peonage not by natural disasters but by the whim of the colonizer. Dien Bien Phu, however, was but the final act in a long chain of events, the culmination of a protracted war that began in June 1940 with the fall of France.

On the day we left, we were waiting for the afternoon plane from Hanoi at the crowded airport when it started to rain. They announced a delay in the incoming flight that would take us out. Deep apprehension seized us. We did not want to stay one minute longer than we had to. No one wants to be stuck in a place where they don't belong. We sweated out the two-hour delay. But in those two hours we began to feel what every French soldier there had felt once the base was encircled and could only be reached by parachute drops—the insurmountable dread of entrapment.

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Author's Note

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My interest in the Indochina war goes back to 1956, when I was serving in the French army. I was a conscript named Sanche de Gramont, a second lieutenant. The two sergeants in my colonial infantry platoon outside the Algerian town of Medea had fought in northern Vietnam and were fond of reminiscing. In 1957 I was transferred to Algiers, where I served on the staff of the paratroop commander General Jacques Massu, another Indochina veteran. I met Marcel Bigeard, one of the major figures of Dien Bien Phu, and Yves Godard, a battalion commander in northern Vietnam. They both said, "We lost Indochina, we're not going to lose this one." But they were going against the tide of history.

In 1963 I was sent to Saigon by the *New York Herald Tribune* to cover the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem. Arriving cold, I was befriended by two outstanding reporters: David Halberstam, with whom I had covered the Katanga war in 1961, and Robert Shaplen, a Southeast Asia veteran who wrote for *The New Yorker*. It happened that Shaplen was in love with my cousin, Marguerite de Gramont, who shuttled in and out of Saigon bringing medical supplies to the Vietnamese. In 1966 I was living in Paris and ran into Halberstam, whom I invited to dinner. He brought along Bernard Fall, who had just published *Hell in a Very Small Place* and was generous with his insights. Fall was off to Saigon the next day, to cover the American war. Not long after, he was killed on a patrol with U.S. troops.

In 1967 and 1968, when I was writing for *The New York Times Magazine*, I met two of the top figures at the Geneva Conference that followed the defeat at Dien Bien Phu: Pierre Mendès France and Georges Bidault. Mendès France had become prime minister after the defeat at Dien Bien Phu and ended the deadlock at Geneva. In 1967, after many ups and downs, he was running for a parliamentary seat in the mountainous Isère Department where it's subzero in the winter. It's thanks to Mendès France that I'm deaf in one ear. Every profession has its occupational hazards, and I caught otitis following him around stumping in the mountains.

As for Bidault, he had been foreign minister during the battle, and head of the French delegation at Geneva, until Mendès France became premier in June 1954. When de Gaulle came to power in 1958, Bidault turned against him and was charged with conspiracy. When I interviewed him in 1968, he was living in Belgium, still fiery and unrepentant.

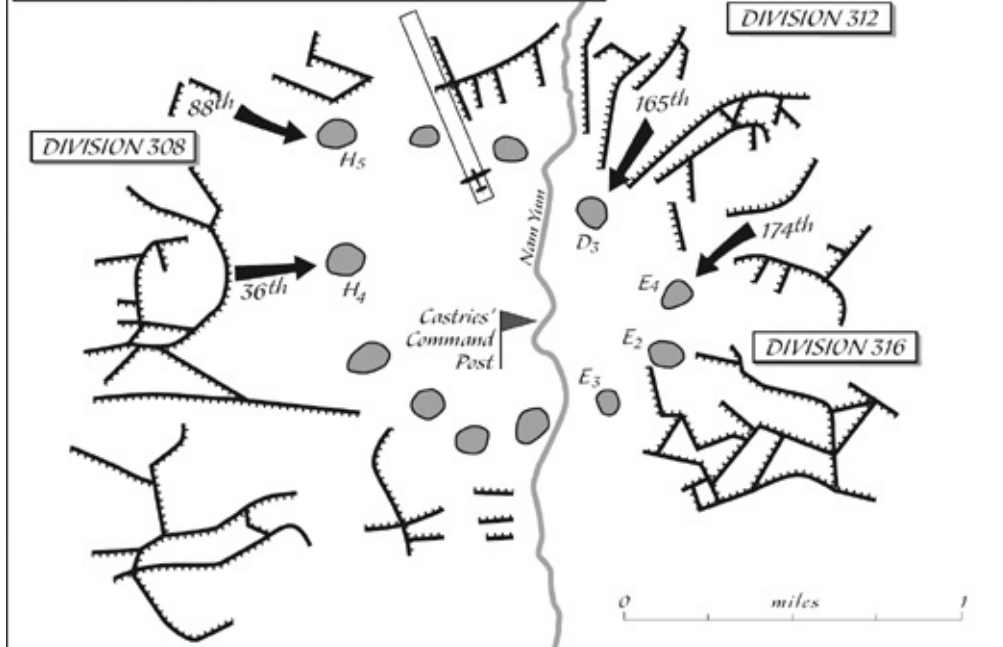
When Rob Cowley, the military historian and editor, asked me to write a book on the battle, I started looking at sources. I found that in France there was a vast literature of regimental memoirs, collections of letters home, and personal reminiscences that had been published in the last ten years. In Hanoi, I found many volumes by Vietminh participants available in French. In Dien Bien Phu, photographs of the battle from the Vietminh side were on sale at the Military History Museum. Much new information has also come out in

the United States on America's involvement in the battle, and on China's support of the Vietminh; the message traffic of the Chinese and Soviet delegations at Geneva has also been released. I felt that this wealth of fresh material justified a new account of the battle.

The Indochina Peninsula in 1953



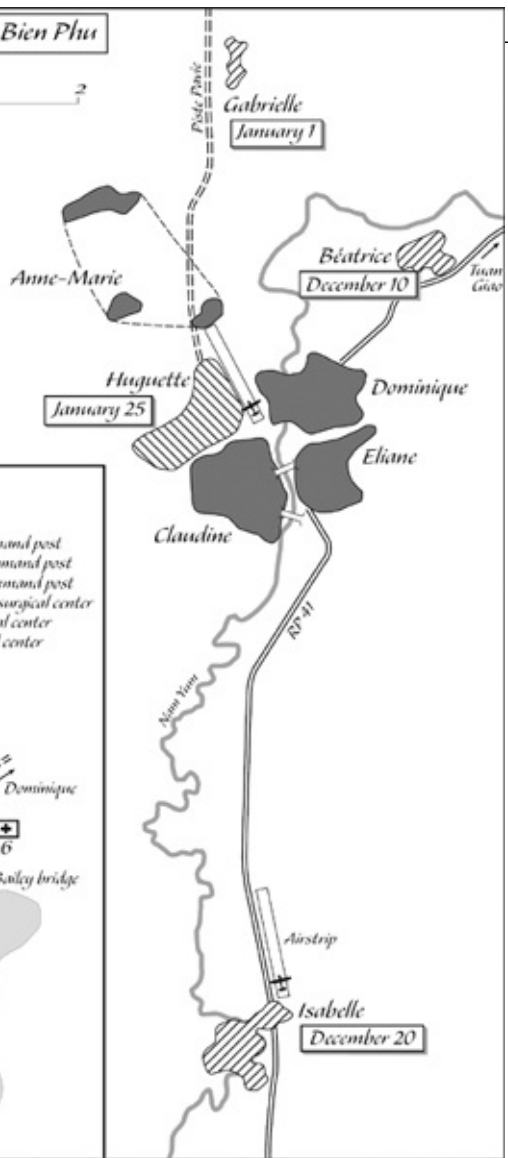
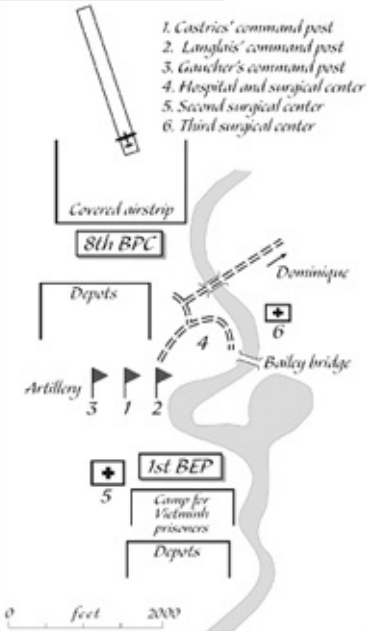
The Capture of Dien Bien Phu in May 1954



The Strongpoints of Dien Bien Phu

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Central Strongpoint



ACT I

The First Partition of Vietnam

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Sometime or other, before the day is over, just as a matter of fact in straightening myself out, I'd like to try and find out just what it was, and why it was, that Indochina seemed to move from an idea which President Roosevelt had when he was alive that the French were not going to end up back in Indochina, and then sometime or other in 1945 they ended up. I don't know how they got there or what happened or what was done.

DEAN ACHESON, May 15, 1954, at the Princeton seminar he conducted after leaving the State Department

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THIS ALL BEGAN when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt initially decided not to run for his third term in 1940. On May 8, Assistant Secretary of State Adolf Berle wrote in his diary: "It is understood that Roosevelt, unless the situation changes, will wait until the last minute and then issue a statement in favor of Mr. Hull." FDR was planning to endorse Secretary of State Cordell Hull for the nomination in July at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, before retiring to the life of a country gentleman in Hyde Park.

He had a compelling reason not to run, as he told the Nebraska senator George Norris: "I am tied down to this chair day after day and month after month. I can't stand it any longer. I can't go on with it." He was only fifty-eight, but he was exhausted, imprisoned in his wheelchair, his withered legs the size of the crutches he used to get in and out of cars, and he smoked too many cigarettes. He spoke with enthusiasm about moving his papers to Hyde Park, where he would write twenty-six articles for *Collier's* at \$75,000 a year. He told his visitors that he'd had enough and Hull was the man.

By mid-May, however, the panzers had crossed the Meuse, demolishing the fortification that extended the Maginot Line. On May 16, Berle revised his appraisal: "I really think the question of whether Mr. Roosevelt will run or not is being settled somewhere on the banks of the Meuse River ... He does not want to run unless circumstances are so grave that he considers it essential for the country's safety.... My private opinion is that circumstances are drafting him.... They are very likely to give us another four years for the President breaking with the two-term tradition.

In early June, FDR's outspoken secretary of the interior, Harold Ickes, told him that Hull would make a poor candidate and a poor president. FDR said that Hull would be a different kind of president: It should not be forgotten that Woodrow Wilson had known nothing about government prior to his election. Others told FDR that Hull was inept and that his wife, Frances, was Jewish. But at a White House banquet, the president sat next to her and told her to get used to such affairs.

The unexpectedly swift fall of France changed Roosevelt's mind. By mid-June, Marshall

Henri Philippe Pétain formed a government and asked Hitler for an armistice. If the French had stopped the Huns, the war might have ended, but England was next, which meant the continuation of American involvement. The issue now was democracy against fascism.

As late as June 20, however, FDR assured Hull that he backed him. Finally, on July 3, after the Republican Convention, which nominated Wendell Willkie, FDR told Hull he was running. Hull said he understood. On July 16, at the Democratic Convention, Senator Alben Barkley of Kentucky read a letter from the president saying he wanted to retire. Cries of "We want Roosevelt" arose, and on July 17, FDR was overwhelmingly nominated. He developed a pronounced animus against France, which he thought did not deserve to keep her colonial empire.

The Commissary Line

Among the war's unforeseen chain of events, who could have imagined that the fall of France in June 1940 would be one of the decisive factors in the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941. By 1938, in its war with China, the Japanese had taken Canton, the major port and trading center of South China, while Chiang Kai-shek had retreated westward to Chungking. Canton was up the Pearl River from Hong Kong, with the Indochina port of Haiphong five hundred miles to the west. It was at Haiphong that the bulk of Chiang's military supplies arrived. From the port, they were loaded onto the French-built Haiphong railroad, which lumbered northward across the Chinese border to the old walled city of Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. It was vital for the Japanese to choke off Chiang's supply line.

Japan cast an angry eye toward Indochina, which allowed unfettered transit. The French colony was but a minor appendage to the south of the immense Chinese landmass, with a five-hundred-mile border with China and a thousand-mile coastline, seemingly glued as an afterthought to the Southeast Asian subcontinent of Burma and Thailand. To this barbed-shaped tail of China now known as Vietnam (the bells being Tonkin and Cochinchina, with the bar of Annam at one point only thirty-one miles wide), were added Laos and Cambodia. In all, an area about the size of Italy, mostly mountains and jungle, except for two fertile deltas, the Red River in the north and the Mekong in the south. These rice-rich floodplains provided the staple for twenty million natives, known as Annamites, while fifty thousand French *colons* skimmed the cream off an economy based on rubber, coal, tin, and tungsten.

There is a Japanese saying that crisis and opportunity are a couple. In September 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland, Japan saw an opportunity. The Japanese complained to the French about the shipment of war matériel from Haiphong to Kunming to support the Chiang regime. The French replied that since war had not been declared between Japan and China, shipments would not be halted. To show their displeasure, the Japanese bombed the railway line.

By June 1940, when panzer divisions were advancing on Paris, about 10,000 tons of war supplies were being shipped monthly from Haiphong to Kunming, and a backlog of 125,000 tons were piled up in the port's warehouses. As France collapsed, Marshal Pétain asked for an armistice on June 16. Three days later, the Japanese government presented the French

ambassador in Tokyo with a demand that all shipments of war matériel from Haiphong cease and that a Japanese control commission be allowed into the port to ensure compliance.

The governor-general of Indochina, who had to respond to the Japanese demand, was General Georges Catroux, a distinguished officer who had fought in World War I. In 1940, Catroux was anti-German and pro-British, but when he asked for help from the British, the silence was deafening. He had no choice but to submit to the Japanese. Vichy's puppet government dismissed him in July, not because he had given in but because he was considered disloyal.

Pétain replaced Catroux with an obedient sailor, Admiral Jean Decoux, anti-British with fascist tendencies, who considered the Annamites a subject people. Just as Pétain collaborated with the Nazis in France, Decoux gave in to Japanese demands on Indochina. The Japanese occupation was incremental. On August 1, 1940, they demanded the right of transit for their troops throughout Indochina, the use of airfields, and an economic agreement that turned out to be somewhat one-sided. Each time Vichy submitted to Japanese demands, new ones were made, much like a kidnap-and-ransom scheme. On September 22, 1940, a revised agreement provided for more Japanese airfields in Tonkin; permission to station 6,000 troops; and the right of transit of up to 25,000 troops through Tonkin to China. On September 27, Japan signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy, which tied its operations in the Pacific with theirs in Europe to form the Axis.

Indochina was the first of many colonies occupied by the Japanese in Southeast Asia, a part of a secret program adopted in October 1940 called the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere. *Co-prosperity* meant that the Japanese plundered the raw materials of the lands they invaded, among them Malaya, Singapore, British Borneo, the Dutch East Indies, the Philippines, Siam, and Indochina. But since Indochina was ruled by the Vichy regime, while the other colonies were governed by the British, the Dutch, or the Americans, the Japanese allowed the French administration to remain in place. France was tractable and saved Japan from employing their already stretched manpower in occupation duties.

The Japanese army called Indochina a “commissary line,” which meant that its troops in China could be supplied from there, and also that the rice from Indochina would be used to feed them, while Japanese vehicles would roll on Indochinese rubber. Thus, in late 1940, the Japanese confiscated facilities necessary for the pursuit of war, from coal mines to rubber plantations to lumber factories. Vichy did not protest, for its aim was to maintain the colonial status quo until the war was over.

We Mustn't Push Japan Too Much

In Washington, FDR's cabinet was divided over the president's Japan policy. His secretaries of war, the interior, and the treasury—respectively Henry Stimson, Harold Ickes, and Henry Morgenthau—were opposed to letting Japan buy U.S. oil, scrap iron, and steel. His secretary of state, Cordell Hull, as well as Hull's number two, Sumner Welles, were involved in delicate negotiations with the Japanese, which could be disrupted by bans on exports. The other three felt that the president was “coddling the Japs.”

In July 1940, Ickes noted in his diary that the “glacially lofty Sumner Welles objected

strenuously to putting petroleum products and scrap iron on the list for licenses.” Ickes was irate. This was a time when oil for Spain was being transshipped to German U-boats right at the Spanish docks, while Japan had contracted for all the airplane gasoline on the Pacific coast for immediate delivery. Stimson warned FDR that the Japanese were trying to corner the aviation-fuel market.

On August 16, FDR told Morgenthau that “we mustn’t push Japan too much or she’ll take the Dutch East Indies,” which had plenty of oil. But Ickes pointed out that if the Japanese came in, the Dutch would blow up their wells and refineries. Morgenthau kept himself informed on Indochina, where the French had caved in by signing a pact on September 2 that allowed Japanese troops to move in. Morgenthau noted in his diary: “Hull is out on a limb. He has twice scolded Japan if she goes into Indochina.”

When the Japanese signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy on September 27, calling it a defensive alliance, Hull said: “That’s like Jesse James and Cole Younger going into an alliance for self-defense.” He seemed to be firming up.

But Hull still held back on interdicting scrap iron to Japan. He said the situation was delicate and the Japanese might take over Indochina at any time. Ickes felt that by selling them oil and scrap “we have made it possible to continue their career of aggression.”

Finally, on September 29, 1940, FDR embargoed shipments of steel and scrap iron. But oil was still flowing. Morgenthau thought it was too little, too late. Ickes was convinced that Hull wouldn’t do anything about oil until his hand was forced. Hull was “useless,” Ickes wrote in his diary.

After FDR’s election to a third term, Ickes was named petroleum coordinator for national defense. He was increasingly incensed that the United States was shipping oil and gasoline to Japan while rationing “our own people.” On June 8, 1941, he told the president that the press was raising hell. FDR said, “Give Cordell a few more days.” Ickes felt that Hull was being gulled by the Japanese.

On June 22, Ickes learned that more than two thousand barrels of lubricating oil were being sent to Japan aboard one of their tankers, which was docked in Philadelphia, at a time when U.S. plants could not meet their own needs. Ickes boiled over, and had the shipment held up. FDR “pinned my ears back,” he wrote in his diary, for not consulting with the State Department. The president told Ickes that the United States and Japan were engaged in delicate negotiations. Furthermore, he saw oil as an integral part of foreign policy, not to be messed with by Ickes.

By this time, Hitler had invaded Russia, forcing Japan to make a difficult decision. Should they also attack Russia, from the Siberian side, or should they prepare to invade the colonies of Southeast Asia, using Indochina as an advance base, so they could assure their supply of raw materials in case of war with Britain and the United States? In his ongoing talks FDR was aware of the disconnect between the Japanese government, still working through diplomacy, and the Imperial Army, which was preparing for war. On July 1, 1941, he informed Ickes that “the Japs are having a real drag-down and knock-out fight among themselves ... trying to decide which way they are going to jump—attack Russia, attack the South Seas ... or whether they will sit on the fence and be more friendly with us... It is terribly important for the control of the Atlantic for us to help keep the peace in the Pacific. I simply have not got

enough Navy to go around—and every little episode in the Pacific means fewer ships in the Atlantic.” At this point, FDR was still trying to avoid war with Japan. But in July the situation changed dramatically.

Those Two Fellows Looked Like a Pair of Sheep-Killing Dogs

On July 20, 1941, FDR received some alarming information, thanks to the magic intercept and told Ickes: “I would not be surprised if Japan should invade Indochina tomorrow. From Indochina, Japan could strike either at the Dutch East Indies or at Singapore or Burma. If they should strike successfully at Burma, it would mean the closing of the Burma Road, which is the last means of getting war supplies into China.”

“Once again I raised the question of shipping oil to Japan,” Ickes noted. “The president indicated that if Japan went overboard, we would ship no more oil.... We have gallantly pursued our appeasement toward Japan to the furthest possible point.”

But FDR knew what Ickes did not—that on July 12, the Japanese ambassador to Vichy had presented new demands: the permission to dispatch land, sea, and air forces to southern Indochina; the occupation of eight air and two naval bases there; and the withdrawal of some French garrisons, their bases be occupied by the Japanese. Hull told the British ambassador to the United States, Lord Halifax: “They are now in possession of the whole of France’s strategic province, pointing like a pudgy thumb towards the Philippines, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies.” FDR made one final stab at keeping the Japanese out of the south. On July 23, Sumner Welles told Japan’s ambassador to the United States, Kichisaburo Nomura that Japanese oil would be embargoed, since there was no basis for further talks. Nomura replied that an embargo of oil would “inflame Japanese public opinion.” On July 24, FDR asked Nomura to withdraw Japanese troops from Indochina, which would then be regarded as neutral. The State Department denounced the Japanese invasion of the south as a move to establish bases for further conquests.

The president, who had been assistant secretary of the navy during World War I, loved to look at maps, and when he looked at a map of Southeast Asia he saw at once that Japanese bases in southern Vietnam were launching pads to attack Singapore, Sumatra, and Borneo and threaten the Philippines.

On July 26, FDR froze all Japanese funds, to take effect August 1. Between July 1940 and July 1941, the United States had exported (to Japan and others) four million barrels of high octane gasoline and ten million barrels of oil. In a single week in Los Angeles, Japanese tankers loaded four hundred thousand barrels. As of August 1, 1941, they would be unable to pay for more imports.

On July 27, Ickes noted in his diary: “Apparently France has been bluffed into letting Japan in effect take over Indochina. The reason given publicly was that Indochina required defense from the rapacious English, and since she was not in a position herself to defend Indochina, Japan was requested to go in to perform that Christian and charitable task.”

Ickes wondered if FDR would fully enforce the freeze. “The president still unwilling to draw the noose tight,” he wrote. “He thought it might be better to slip the noose around

Japan's neck and give it a jerk now and then." On August 3, he received a call from Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who told him that FDR had signed the order barring the sale of high-octane aviation gasoline to the Japanese. Ickes was gratified that Hull was now taking a tougher line. Hull was saying that "nothing would stop them except force."

On December 3, FDR told Morgenthau that "he had the Japanese running around like a lot of wet hens, after he had asked them why they were sending so many military, naval, and air forces into Indochina." The wet hens, however, had decided in September that if the demands were not met in Washington, they would go to war. In mid-October, the warmongering Hideki Tojo was named prime minister.

On Sunday, December 7, 1941, Ickes attended the 2 P.M. cabinet meeting, where FDR said he had queried the Japanese regarding troops in Siam and along the Burma Road. "We are asked to believe," Ickes noted, "that Japan has troops in Indochina with the consent of the Vichy government and is anxious to guard against an attack by China.... It is suspected that Japan has many more troops in Indochina than the Vichy government agreed to be sent there. I believe the number agreed upon was 25,000."

Later that day the news came that the Japanese still had enough aviation gasoline to bomb Pearl Harbor, killing 2,344 Americans and sinking or damaging at anchor all those battleships named after states—among them the *Arizona*, the *Nevada*, the *Pennsylvania*, the *Tennessee*, the *West Virginia*. Fortunately they missed the carrier fleet, which was out to sea.

In 1941, Cordell Hull was seventy and not a well man. He suffered from diabetes and tuberculosis, and was often absent in times of crisis. On November 27 and 28, and again from December 1 to 3, he was bedridden. But on December 7 at 2 P.M., he was sitting in his office awaiting the arrival of two Japanese envoys. For months he had been engaged in hollow negotiations with the special envoy Saburo Kurusu and Ambassador Nomura, patiently listening to their lies, as they lavished upon him assurances of good faith. They were sitting in his office when FDR phoned with news of the attack. Finally Hull's anger exploded and he called them "scoundrels and pissants." He told them: "In all my 50 years of public service I have never seen such infamous falsehoods and distortion." He told Lord Halifax the next day, "Those two fellows looked like a pair of sheep-killing dogs."

I Never Received a Greater Shock

There was no attempt by the Japanese to occupy any part of Hawaii, which was twice the distance from Japan as it was from San Francisco. The objective was to destroy the U.S. fleet, giving Japan a freer hand to establish a defense perimeter in the Pacific that stretched southward from Burma and Malaya, across the four-thousand-mile-long barrier of the Dutch East Indies and northward to the Philippines.

The answer to the president's question of why the Japanese were sending so many forces to Indochina was, in the words of a Japanese general, that it was "the pivot point of a folding fan" to attack Southeast Asia. Their aim was to expel the British, the Dutch, and the United States from their colonies and protectorates. Faced with the prospect of economic isolation, not only would they control the raw materials in these oil-and-rubber-rich possessions but

they would launch an “Asia for the Asians” movement. Only the French would be allowed to remain, governed by the collaborationist Vichy regime.

The lightning offensive that followed Pearl Harbor threw the Allies into confusion. It was no spur-of-the-moment operation. The Japanese had been training and preparing for several months. They seemed suddenly to be all over the Pacific, with a mighty array of battle-ready troops, ships, and planes. Their principal advance base was Indochina, where they had massed their troops, docked their ships, and parked their bombers, within range of Malaya and Burma.

A few days after Pearl Harbor, from bases on nearby Taiwan, the Japanese invaded the northernmost major island in the Philippines, Luzon. General Douglas MacArthur held out on the southernmost island of Mindanao until March, and then left for Australia. The Japanese aim was to expel the Americans from the South Pacific and protect their eastern flank.

Next came the assault on the British. On December 6, a large Japanese naval force steamed out of Saigon into the South China Sea toward Malaya's eastern coast and the troops came ashore in landing craft at the undefended town of Singora. In the meantime, the 22nd Air Flotilla, based near Saigon, took off with eighty-eight bombers on December 9 and found the British fleet off Singapore. They sank the *Repulse* and the *Prince of Wales*, the fleet's prize battleships. A thousand crew members were lost. When he got the news, Churchill later wrote, “in all the war I never received a greater shock.”

On December 18, three Japanese divisions, based on nearby Formosa, attacked the island of Hong Kong, off the coast of China. The British and Canadian garrison held out for a week but ran out of water and surrendered on Christmas Day.

In early 1942, the Japanese landed three divisions and proceeded down the long Malaya neck toward Singapore at the tip, beating the outgunned and outmaneuvered British and Australians back with a mixture of tank attacks and jungle fighting. The British fortress was on an island separated by a narrow strait. The British, expecting seaborne attacks, were not prepared for an assault on the land side. The big guns were pointed at the sea in fixed emplacements, and there were no fortifications or cannons landward. “I saw before me,” Churchill later wrote, “the hideous spectacle of an almost naked island.” Only a moat half a mile wide separated the British defenders from the Japanese.

In February the Japanese came out of the jungle before the fortress, which was crowded with an army of eighty-five thousand, the garrison plus the troops that had been beaten back. Their long retreat and the shocking conditions inside the fortress and the city behind it led to low morale. They were running out of food and water, disease was spreading, and the city streets were piled with unburied dead. On February 14, the tragic devoir of demolition began. The big guns and anti-aircraft guns were destroyed, and the aviation-gasoline dumps were blown up. On February 15, Singapore surrendered. This was called the greatest disaster in British history since Yorktown.

The domino theory applied to the Japanese offensive. It was only a few miles across the Strait of Malacca from Singapore to Sumatra. Once Singapore fell, the Dutch East Indies were next.

With every advance, the Japanese consolidated their gains by establishing air bases from

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