

Eisenhower on Strategic Defense

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who took office in January 1953, was faced immediately with demands from the French, and from the synarchist circles within his own administration and military, to deploy militarily into Vietnam in defense of the French colonial forces, against the war of independence led by the Viet Minh under Ho Chi Minh. Eisenhower provided support to the French, but refused to intervene. When the French under General Henri Navarre chose to make a stand at the isolated valley outpost of Dien Bien Phu, Eisenhower wrote: "Finally, they came along with this Dien Bien Phu plan. As a soldier, I was horror-stricken. I just said, 'My goodness, you don't pen troops in a fortress, and all history shows that they are just going to be cut to pieces. . . . I don't think anything of this scheme.'"

Militarily, Eisenhower accepted the "domino theory," and knew what it would take to win such a colonial war, but he also knew the consequences: "If they [the French] quit and Indochina falls to the Commies, it is easily possible that the entire Southeast Asia and Indonesia will go, soon to be followed by India. That prospect makes the whole problem one of interest to all. I'd favor heavy reinforcements to get the thing over at once; but *I'm convinced that no military victory is possible in that kind of theater.* Even if Indochina were completely cleared of Communists, *right across the border is China, with inexhaustible manpower.*"



Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower with U.S. troops in France in 1944.

Encouraged by the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "air-power" advocate Adm. Arthur W. Radford, to both defend the French and wage a "preventive" war against China, Eisenhower said: "If the U.S. took action against Communist China, there should be no halfway measures or frittering around. The Navy and Air Force should go in with full power, using new weapons, and strike at air bases and ports in mainland China," adding that this would likely lead to war with Russia as well. Eisenhower told Radford: "I want you to carry this question home with you. Gain such a victory, and what do you do with it? Here would be a great area from Elbe to Vladivostok, torn up and destroyed, without government, without its communications, just an area of starvation and disaster. I ask you what would the civilized world do about it? I

repeat there is no victory except through our imaginations.”

‘No Such Thing’ as Preventive War

Asked at a press conference to comment on the idea of preventive war, Eisenhower responded: “I don’t believe there is such a thing; and, frankly, I wouldn’t even listen to anyone seriously that came in and talked about such a thing.” He was asked, if his answer was based on military or moral considerations? “It seems to me that when, by definition, a term is just ridiculous in itself, there is no use in going any further,” Eisenhower replied.

On unilateralism: “To go in unilaterally, in Indochina or other areas of the world which were endangered, amounted to an attempt to police the entire world. If we attempted such a course of action, using our armed forces and going into areas whether we were wanted or not, we would lose all our significant support in the free world. We would be everywhere accused of imperialistic ambitions.”

Eisenhower accused the French of using “weasel words in promising independence; and for this one reason as much as anything else, [they] have suffered reverses that have been really inexcusable.” He further accused the French of alienating even the non-communist Vietnamese, in the same way the British had lost the War of American Independence by treating the majority of Loyalist Americans as “colonials and inferiors.”

Quotes taken from: Decision Against War, Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, by Melanie Billings-Yun; and Eisenhower: Soldier and President, by Stephen E. Ambrose.

—Gail Billington