

The Vietnam War was a watershed moment in American history, and the role it played in the Cold War is as little understood today, as when the war ended fifty years ago. So, it is now timely to take an in-depth look at that Cold War role.

VIETNAM: RIGHT? or WRONG?

By J. Randolph Maney Jr.

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VIETNAM

RIGHT? OR WRONG?

J. RANDOLPH MANEY, JR.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Setting

At the end of World War II France thought French Indochina, as constituted in 1940, would be returned to them as a colony. This, however, created a problem because President Franklin D. Roosevelt had previously said he did not believe French Indochina should be returned to France as a colony, an opinion he repeated at the Cairo Conference in December 1943.^{xix}



But, at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Roosevelt partially changed his position and proposed, instead, that France be made trustee of Indochina “with the proviso that independence was the ultimate goal.”^{xx} This modification, however, did not satisfy Charles de Gaulle, Chairman of the Provisional French Republic, who, upon learning of Roosevelt’s position, sent him the following communiqué on March 13, 1945:

If the public here [in France] comes to realize that you are against us in Indochina there will be terrific disappointment, and nobody knows to what that would lead. We do not want to fall into the Russian orbit, [in Europe] but I hope you do not push us into it.^{xxi}

A few weeks after Roosevelt received de Gaulle’s communiqué, he also received a Secret report from the OSS (Office of Strategic Services - - precursor to the CIA) warning him about the threat posed by a rapidly rising Russian Empire. In this April 2, 1945, report Roosevelt was informed that:

Russia [would] emerge from the present conflict [World War II] as by far the strongest nation in Europe and Asia---strong enough, if the United States should stand aside, to dominate Europe and at the same time to establish her hegemony [dominance] over Asia. Russia’s natural resources and manpower are so great that within relatively few years she can be much more powerful than either Germany or Japan has ever been. In the easily foreseeable future Russia may well outrank even the United States in military potential.^{xxii}

Ten days later Roosevelt died.

Upon Roosevelt's death, Vice President Harry S. Truman became president of the United States. Among the many matters sitting on Truman's desk when he assumed office was the "de Gaulle/Indochina problem," which was aggravated by the fact the French Communist Party was France's largest and most militant political party,^{xxiii} making it quite possible France could fall into the "Russian orbit" if pushed.

There was also a problem in Asia where Nationalist China (America's "forgotten ally" in the Pacific) "wanted an independent Korea and Vietnam to be [governed] under a joint Sino-American tutelage."^{xxiv} This was further complicated because Roosevelt, after first promising Manchuria (now northern China) to Nationalist China, instead handed it over to Russia at the Yalta conference in return for Stalin's promise to join in the war against Japan if Germany should surrender.^{xxv} In spite of, or maybe because of, these competing demands Truman decided that U.S. policies in Indochina would be dictated by military needs.^{xxvi} Therefore, he left decisions regarding territorial control of Southeast Asia to the Combined Chiefs of Staff of the allies in the Pacific (the United States, Great Britain and Nationalist China).^{xxvii}

On May 8, 1945, Germany surrendered to end World War II in Europe and two months later, with the threat of a ruthless Stalin* on his mind, Truman, traveled to Potsdam, Germany to participate in the "Potsdam Conference" that opened on July 7, 1945.^{xxviii}

Traveling to Potsdam, where territorial control of post-war Europe would be under consideration, Truman knew the Soviet army occupied most of Eastern Europe and he knew he would not be able to change

* Stalin was, indeed, ruthless. He presided over the starvation of over 3.5 million Ukrainians between 1931 and 1934 during the *Holodomor* (a word derived from the Ukrainian words for hunger - - *holod* and extermination - - *mor*). In addition, he liquidated a million people who opposed his policies and sent ten million others to forced labor camps.

the borders where “the Red Army stood.” He also knew he would not be able to revisit agreements made at Yalta.^{xxix} He, therefore, had two goals in mind.

First, Truman wanted to ensure that Russia kept its “Yalta promise” to join in the war against Japan. General Dwight D. Eisenhower on the other hand, did not think America should give the Russians anything for their assistance in the Pacific* as he, unlike General Douglas MacArthur, thought their help was no longer needed. Therefore, on July 20, 1945, Eisenhower advised Truman not to invite Russia into the war in the Pacific.^{xxx} This advice, however, came two days too late.

Secondly, Truman wanted to dismantle Germany on his, instead of Stalin’s terms,^{xxxi} because he believed Stalin had his eyes set on taking control of Germany.

As Stalin was travelling to Potsdam, he was thinking about the twenty-seven million Russians killed during World War II,^{xxxii} leaving him of the opinion he was entitled to the territory on which his Army stood and more. Consequently, when Stalin got to Potsdam he refused to budge on most issues, causing post-war Europe to tilt toward Russia.

At Potsdam, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, Soviet Generalissimo Stalin and President Truman presided over a gathering that would change post-World War II borders. It was said that Truman and Churchill “made the big concessions because they had little choice—Russian occupation of Eastern Europe was indeed a fait accompli... and because they hoped to achieve harmony with Stalin.”^{xxxiii}

* Eisenhower thought that no power on earth could keep the “Red Army” out of (the war against Japan) unless victory came before they could get in.

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While Stalin did not concede much at Potsdam, Truman did convince him to partition Germany into four zones of military occupation (the American, British and French zones in the West and the Soviet zone in the East) ^{xxxiv} This configuration, Truman believed, would make it difficult for Russia to take control of Germany (and it did).



Furthermore, Stalin agreed at Potsdam to partition the city of Berlin (located deep in East Germany) into the Soviet (Eastern) and allied (Western) zones.^{xxxv} In addition to reshaping European borders at Potsdam, decisions were also made about post-war Asia, where the war continued. Decisions were being made before the war's end in Asia because, in spite of Japan's resolve, the major allies in the Pacific (Nationalist China, Great Britain and the United States) were becoming more optimistic about the final outcome.

Optimism was beginning to run high on Truman's part because on the eleventh day of the Potsdam Conference, July 18, 1945, Russia agreed to join the war against Japan no later than August 15, 1945, supposedly with no strings attached.^{xxxvi} Truman's optimism further increased three days later on July 21 when he received a coded message advising him of the first successful nuclear test at Los Alamos, New Mexico.^{xxxvii} This was also good news to the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General George C. Marshall, who thought an invasion of Japan would result in 250,000 American deaths,^{xxxviii} other estimates ran as high as a million.^{xxxix} After considering Marshall's concerns and other matters Truman, on July 25, 1945, ordered the use of "the bomb" if necessary.^{xl}

However, prior to dropping this bomb the Pacific allies called upon Japan to unconditionally surrender or face "utter devastation of the Japanese homeland."^{xli} This "Declaration" or demand was delivered on July 26, 1945, over the airwaves and in leaflets dropped on ten cities, including Tokyo.^{xlii} Early on July 27, 1945, the Declaration was heard by the Japanese on the radio and, after an all-day cabinet meeting, Japan's prime minister rejected its terms; calling them beneath contempt.^{xliii}

Upon Japan's defeat, if it came to pass, the Combined Chiefs of Staff of the allied commands in the Pacific decided at Potsdam that, what

was formerly French Indochina would for “operational purposes” be divided at the 16th parallel with Japan surrendering the northern half to China and the southern half to Great Britain.^{xliv} This provision was set forth in General Order No. 1.

Japan’s options began to narrow when an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945.^{xlv} With no surrender forthcoming, a second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki on August 8, at which point the Soviets, anticipating Japan’s surrender, jumped into the War in the Pacific on the same day.^{xlvi} On August 10, 1945, Japan advised it would accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration if their Emperor could remain the Sovereign.^{xlvii}

In a cable to Washington on the evening of August 10, Great Britain agreed to accept Japan’s terms; on August 11, Nationalist China and, reluctantly, Australia agreed. However, “(t)he Soviets appeared to be stalling in the hope of having some control over Japan and to drive further into Manchuria.”^{xlviii}

Indeed, while waiting for Japan’s official surrender, Stalin, a day after joining the war in the Pacific, began marching through Manchuria toward Korea with two Army Divisions.^{xlix} The United States, with its closest troops on Okinawa 600 miles away, could only watch as Russia gobbled up this territory.¹

To address this immediate “Russia problem” the War Department held emergency meetings on August 10 and 11. After these meetings Washington recommended (to Russia) that Japan surrender that part of Korea south of the 38th parallel to the U.S. and that part north of the 38th parallel to Russia; Russia (surprisingly) accepted.^{li}



Stalin probably accepted the compromise in Korea because he wanted to save his army for a planned invasion of Japan. However, “pressure from Truman—and the implicit threat of the atomic bomb—caused Stalin to reverse course just...before his scheduled invasion, and

northern Japan was spared the fate of North Korea in the postwar years.”^{lii}

After being informed that its Emperor could remain as Sovereign, Japan surrendered^{liii} on August 14, 1945. The surrender documents, however, were not finalized until signed on September 2, 1945, during a ceremony aboard the USS Missouri where the previously agreed upon terms of Japan’s surrender of Korea were formalized in General Order No. 1.^{liv}

With the assistance of General MacArthur, exiled patriot Syngman Rhee (69) was brought back to South Korea in October 1945, to help rule the country.^{lv} Also in 1945 the guerilla chieftain, Kim II Sung,^{*} was handpicked by the Soviets to become North Korea’s head of state.^{lvi}

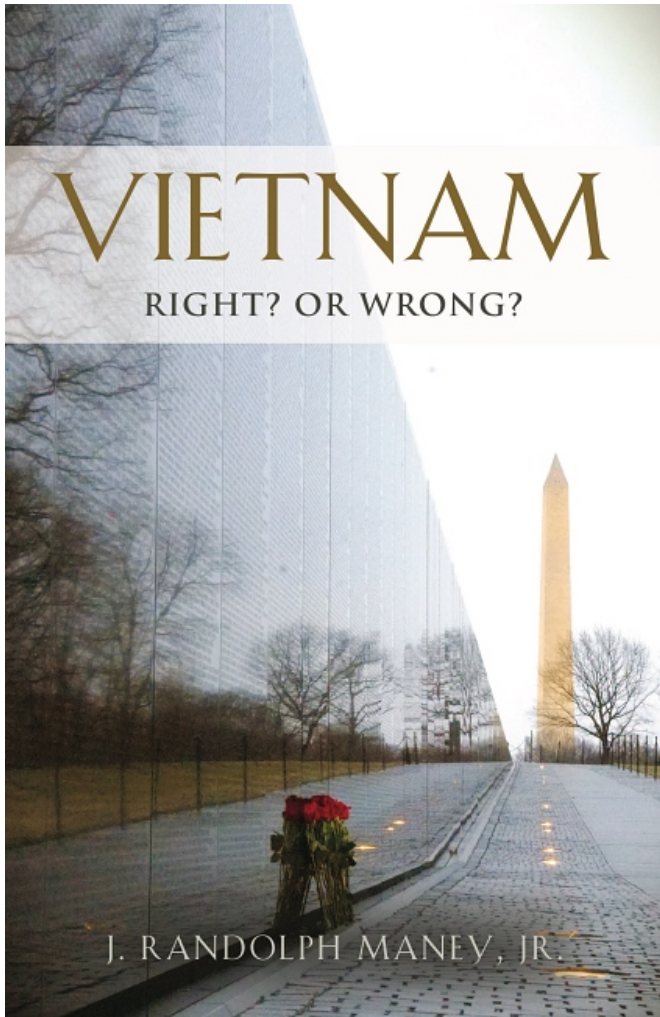
On October 24, 1945, fifty different countries officially established the United Nations,^{lvii} but this did not necessarily mean all these countries would cooperate with each other, and they did not. In February 1946, for example, the U.S. State Department asked the Charge d’ Affaires of its embassy in Moscow, George Kennan,^{**} why the Soviet Union was opposing the recently formed World Bank and International Monetary Fund.^{lviii}

On February 22, 1946, Kennan responded to this inquiry with a 5,000-word telegram, the so-called “Long-Telegram.” In this telegram he advised, among other things, that the:

...Basic Features of Post War Soviet Outlook, as Put Forward by Official Propaganda Machine, Are as Follows:

* Kim II Sung was the grandfather of Kim Jung-Un, North Korea’s current head of state.

** Keenan had lived in Moscow before and after World War II.



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