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Abstract

“Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.” Dwight D. Eisenhower’s remarks at a conference on National Defense in 1957 reflected the philosophy behind his national security system: his dedication to preparation and proper planning. One of Eisenhower’s most regularly used, structured tools for proper planning was the National Security Council (NSC). The Council was an organization comprised of high-ranking members of government, chaired by the president, which was designed to provide the president with the information and coordination needed to shape intelligent policy. The Council itself was not created by Eisenhower, but was part of the National Security Act of 1947, along with the Central Intelligence Agency and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Council’s stated goal was “to provide for the establishment of integrated policies and procedures for the departments, agencies, and functions of the Government relating to the national security.” The National Security Act was flexible; it provided presidents with great discretion in operating the council. Eisenhower crafted the NSC for his needs. In the words of Eisenhower’s first Special Assistant for National Security, Robert Cutler, “Eisenhower wished the council mechanism made over into a valuable tool for his constant use.”

Keywords

Dwight D. Eisenhower, National Security Council, National Security Act of 1947, Dien Bien Phu

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“Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.”¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower’s remarks at a conference on National Defense in 1957 reflected the philosophy behind his national security system: his dedication to preparation and proper planning. One of Eisenhower’s most regularly used, structured tools for proper planning was the National Security Council (NSC). The Council was an organization comprised of high-ranking members of government, chaired by the president, which was designed to provide the president with the information and coordination needed to shape intelligent policy. The Council itself was not created by Eisenhower, but was part of the National Security Act of 1947, along with the Central Intelligence Agency and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.² The Council’s stated goal was “to provide for the establishment of integrated policies and procedures for the departments, agencies, and functions of the Government relating to the national security.”³ The National Security Act was flexible; it provided presidents with great discretion in operating the council.⁴ Eisenhower crafted the NSC for his needs. In the words of Eisenhower’s first Special Assistant for National Security, Robert

¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower Remarks at the National Defense Executive Reserve Conference, 14 November 1957, *Public Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower 1957*, 817-820, Quotation courtesy of Daniel Holt.

² Phillip Henderson, *Managing the Presidency: The Eisenhower Legacy- From Kennedy to Reagan* (Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1988), 71-72.

³ National Security Act of 1947, Section 2, in Henry M. Jackson, ed., *The National Security Council: Jackson Subcommittee Papers on Policy Making at the Presidential Level* (New York, Washington, and London: Frederick A. Praeger, publishers, 1965), 295.

⁴ Section 101(D) states that: “The Council shall, from time to time, make such recommendations, and such other reports to the President as it deems appropriate or as the President may require,” in *ibid.*, 298.

Cutler, “Eisenhower wished the council mechanism made over into a valuable tool for his constant use.”⁵

Beginning with Fred Greenstein’s seminal *The Hidden-Hand Presidency*, which studied Eisenhower’s leadership with a more critical eye, Eisenhower and his approach to governance have been reappraised. The NSC is a key example.⁶ Prior to the advent of Eisenhower revisionism, Eisenhower’s NSC was often criticized, beginning with a Congressional Commission initiated by Senator Henry Jackson in 1959.⁷ This study criticized the NSC for being too complex, a paper mill filled with vast numbers of pages of planning, all of which were, in the Jackson committee’s view, compromised to the point of uselessness by ironing out disagreement. Another major complaint was that the policy papers were useless in emergency situations, as the Planning Board took too long to study and prepare them.⁸ The NSC was seen as being far too structured to deal with rapidly developing, changing threats. In his presidential campaign in 1960, John F. Kennedy used this report to attack the “paper mill” of the NSC; he explained in a letter to Jackson that he wanted to “simplify the operations of the national security council.”⁹ The NSC’s bureaucratic nature was also attacked for preventing proper communication and cooperation among various departments. It was said that department representatives were isolated in a group where there was no effective back-and-forth but rather “agreement by exhaustion.” Eisenhower was also accused of using the NSC apparatus to deflect

⁵ Robert Cutler, *No Time for Rest* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, and Company, 1965), 295.

⁶ Greenstein’s *Hidden Hand Presidency* does not deal with the NSC as such, but his work *How Presidents Test Reality*, coauthored with John Burke, goes deeper into National Security decisions. Phillip Henderson’s *Managing the Presidency* provides both background and contextual studies of Eisenhower’s NSC and the use he put it to. Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman’s *Waging Peace* offers a very good account of National Security operating policies. Bowie himself was a representative of the State Department on the Policy Planning Board of the NSC from 1953-1957.

⁷ Henry M. Jackson, introduction to *The National Security Council*, x.

⁸ Jackson, *The National Security Council*, 8.

⁹ David J. Rothkopf, *Running the World The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 79; Kennedy quote from Jackson, introduction to *The National Security Council*, xiii.

criticism from himself.¹⁰ It is important to note, though, that these criticisms mainly came from people outside the system. Those on the inside stress that Eisenhower was the ultimate decider of issues, who demanded the representation of alternate points of view. Cutler explained that the Council was, for Eisenhower, “a vital mechanism to assure that all sides of an issue would be known by him before coming to his decision.”¹¹ Cutler stressed that “the Council’s role is advisory. It makes recommendations to its statutory chairman, the President of the United States; it does not decide.”¹²

The issue raised by these opposing viewpoints on the Council ultimately focused upon this question: was the NSC capable of flexibility, or was it a repressive organization that squashed debate? It appeared upon reappraisal that despite the NSC’s formal structure, it allowed a great deal of flexibility. The NSC provided a forum for multiple voices and multiple options, giving not only advice to the president, but enabling participants to know the president’s and each other’s viewpoints.¹³ Eisenhower did not envision the NSC as his only source of information or advice. Throughout his presidency, Eisenhower would establish such committees or groups as he felt necessary to handle a particular problem. These groups were independent of the NSC, but were capable of acting in cooperation, such as the Solarium Project which led to the “New Look” in national security policy. Eisenhower would also regularly engage in informal meetings with his subordinates, supplementing the formal procedures of his national security mechanisms. He used these informal means to such an extent that some scholars have even suggested that the NSC became essentially a façade during Eisenhower’s time in the White

¹⁰ Stanley L. Falk, “The NSC Under Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 79 (September 1964): 403-434; reprint in Karl F. Inderfurth and Loch K. Johnson, eds., *Fateful Decisions: Inside the National Security Council* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43 (page citations are to reprint edition. Portion dealing with Kennedy is omitted); Henderson, *Managing the Presidency*, 71.

¹¹ Cutler, *No Time For Rest*, 366.

¹² *Ibid.*, 295.

¹³ Henderson, *Managing the Presidency*, 81.

House. Amy Zegart, of UCLA, notes that “Eisenhower made organizational choices that gave public preeminence to Cabinet-centered policy making [including forums such as the NSC] but also worked behind the scenes to presidentialize, personalize, and centralize the system,” suggesting that the token use of the NSC that would occur under Kennedy started with Eisenhower.¹⁴ However, these informal means were used in conjunction with the NSC, not at the expense of the NSC. Creating an informal apparatus did not, simply by existing, undercut the importance of the Council to presidential decision-making. The National Security Council of Dwight D. Eisenhower was designed to provide the president with the best advice available, and therefore exercised an influential role in the Eisenhower White House. The discussions in the Council and the recommendations made, however, were part of a larger structure mixing formal and informal processes in determining national security policy.

Perhaps the best way to understand the NSC and Eisenhower’s use of it in conjunction with other avenues of advice is in specific examples. An especially important and relevant one is the decision that faced the Council in March and April of 1954, concerning the besieged French forces at Dien Bien Phu in Indochina. France’s war in Indochina was a situation Eisenhower had inherited from the Truman administration. The ultimate decision not to intervene, but to continue supporting elements in Vietnam and the other Indochinese states, would affect the U.S. for years to come. The decision came at a relatively early period in Eisenhower’s presidency, when the operation of the NSC and its machinery were relatively new since the various members were settling into their roles. Examination of the decisions regarding Dien Bien Phu thus provides insight into the eternal questions of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. It also illuminates the early, formative stages of a body which played a key role in policy during the Eisenhower

¹⁴ Amy B. Zegart, *Flawed by Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JCS, and NSC* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 83.

administration years and how that body acted in concert with other elements of Eisenhower's leadership.

Part I

Before grappling with a specific case, it is best to examine what Eisenhower's NSC was intended to be, and who had a hand in making it that way. First, how was the Eisenhower NSC impacted by the prior administration? The first suggestions of an organization like the NSC appear in a report in 1945 to the Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, from Ferdinand Eberstadt, a policy advisor working in the War Production Board. In the letter Eberstadt discusses, among other things, the need for a coordinating body. This suggestion would eventually gestate into the NSC in 1947. Under the Truman administration, the NSC was used on an occasional basis.¹⁵ Truman participated sporadically in the Council after its inception, attending eleven of the almost sixty meetings held before the outbreak of the Korean War. Initially, meetings were held every two weeks, but became more uneven as time went by. The Council also increased in size. Though Truman began to use the Council apparatus more once the Korean War broke out, it retained its role of being an adjutant to proceedings, rather than a place where policy was formulated.¹⁶ The NSC at this time lacked its own formal staff, but it did form an ancillary body in the Psychological Coordinating Board, to separate and discuss the large numbers of psychological operations proposed to be carried out against Cold War targets. Proposed in December of 1947, it began producing papers in September of 1948.¹⁷ When evaluating the Council, Eisenhower and his subordinates recognized some useful ideas. As

¹⁵ Douglas Kinnard, "President Eisenhower and the Defense Budget," *Journal of Politics* 39, no.3 (August, 1977), 599. Academic Search Premier. Accessed 6 December 2008.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?Direct=true&db=aph&AN=4816322&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁶ Rothkopf, 57-60. For a more in-depth, yet relatively brief, account of Truman's NSC, see John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 27-56.

¹⁷ Prados, *Keepers of the Keys*, 51.

Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman noted in their study of Eisenhower's system, "Eisenhower intended to modify and improve upon Truman's foundation, not obliterate it."¹⁸

The Eisenhower National Security Council came from Eisenhower's respect for the need of reliable intelligence and reliable processing of that intelligence in decision-making. As one NSC member explained, "An integral and in fact basic element in the formation of national security policy is the latest and best intelligence bearing on the substance of the policy to be determined."¹⁹ Once the Eisenhower administration entered the White House, the Council took steps that resulted in the adoption of "uniform and customary procedure," in which there were two to three hour meetings held most frequently on Thursday, with formal planning papers discussed; each of which had a financial appendices for any policy costs, an opening CIA brief given by CIA Director Allen Dulles, and minimum attendance for vigorous discussion.²⁰ The National Security Act of 1947 put fixed membership at the President, the Vice-President, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense.²¹ Eisenhower added the Director of the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization, and regularly invited the Secretary of the Treasury and the Budget Director. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the CIA Director were also present as advisors, as were any officials who were needed for a particular order of business, such as the Attorney General or the Chairman of the Atomic energy commission.²² At the heart of this grouping was Eisenhower's desire for information to be more available; he wanted the

¹⁸ Richard H. Immerman and Robert R. Bowie, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 73. Bowie, it should be noted, was with the State Department during the time this paper is concerned with. As such, he appears as both an author and participant.

¹⁹ Robert Cutler, *Intelligence as a Foundation for Policy*, 59, in Andrew J. Goodpaster Collection, Box 15, Folder 16, George Marshall Foundation, Lexington, Virginia.

²⁰ Cutler, *No Time For Rest*, 296-299.

²¹ Rothfokp, *Running the World*, 4.

²² Falk, "The NSC Under Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy," 41.

information at his disposal and at the disposal of the people most directly related to carrying out national security.

The Eisenhower NSC did away with the Psychological Operations Board, and created two ancillary organizations, the Planning Board and the Operations Coordinating Board. Also new was the position of Special Assistant for National Security Affairs. The assistant determined the Council's agenda, briefed the President, and supervised the operations of the Council and NSC staff, and coordinated the various people and departments involved. All the people involved in the NSC were, by Eisenhower's logic, expanding their own knowledge and ability, and not just informing him. Eisenhower, "always insisted that government cannot function properly if anybody who's in an important position is confined merely to his own . . . particular field of interest."²³ The agenda of the Council was determined by the Special Assistant.

Important for any understanding of Eisenhower's NSC is his first Special Assistant for National Security, Robert Cutler, a banker from Boston who worked as a staff officer in World War II. According to Cutler's successor, a Texas lawyer and businessman named Dillon Anderson, "The President's concept of the National Security Council and the use he wanted to make of it was the work of Robert Cutler."²⁴ In an article published during Cutler's tenure as special assistant, he was described by the qualities most apparently visible about him: an affable good nature and a sense of humor. However, insiders knew that he was, "a key figure in . . . the transforming of the National Security Council into the most important policy-making agency this

²³ Dwight D. Eisenhower, interview with Philip A. Crowl (Gettysburg, PA, 28 July 1964) for *John Foster Dulles Oral History Project* (Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ: Wilmington Scholarly Resources, 1994), microfilm, reel 4, 13-14.

²⁴ Dillon Anderson, interview with James Luter (Houston, 30-31 December 1969), 16, in *Archive of Letters and Papers Relating to Dillon Anderson and his Long-Term Relationship with Eisenhower*, Box 4, Folder 14, Special Collections, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

country has ever known.”²⁵ Though erring in regards to the NSC as being a policy making agency, the magazine does properly describe Cutler’s importance in setting the Council’s agenda and his general unobtrusiveness in performing that role and remaining a neutral figure. “[Cutler is] extremely aware that his effectiveness depends upon suppressing any urge for personal power and remaining in the background.”²⁶ Cutler himself would explain later that, “My job was to administer, to serve, to get things done, to be trusted,” but he had, “no independent status,” as he acted for the president in organizing the NSC and managing the various policymakers’ opinions without betraying his own personal thoughts.²⁷ Cutler was to provide the essential staff work. Eisenhower, as Cutler noted, “was accustomed to good staff work.”²⁸ Cutler knew well what his role was, as he had been instrumental in determining how the NSC would run at the beginning of Eisenhower’s administration.

In a meeting at the Commodore Hotel with his transition team on January 12 and 13, 1953, Eisenhower focused on national security as a key issue. At this meeting, Eisenhower announced Cutler as the Special Assistant for National Security and the point man in adjusting the NSC for Eisenhower’s purposes. Cutler had served as Eisenhower’s NSC expert during the campaign, as he had previously worked on the Psychological Study Board as its deputy and had been the assistant to James Forrestal while the latter had been the Secretary of Defense.²⁹ Cutler began a sweeping look at Council operating procedures, meeting with, among others, George Marshall, Ferdinand Eberhardt, and the NSC Executive Secretary James Lay, who would be

²⁵ Samuel Lubell, “Mystery Man of the White House,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 2 June 1954, vol. 226, 32, p.27. Academic Search Premier. Accessed 6 December 2008.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=19380304&site=ehost-live>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁷ Cutler, *No Time For Rest*, 315.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 300.

²⁹ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 85-86.

asked to stay on.³⁰ Based on the advice he received, especially from George Marshall, Cutler resolved that policy papers should clearly spell out alternatives and include disagreements among staffers, that the NSC would need a full time senior staff, that there should be a presidential presence whenever possible, and there needed to be a member of the White House to run herd on the various departments, which would be his role as Special Assistant.³¹ With these ideas in mind, Cutler would oversee the creation of the Planning Board and the Operations Control Board.

The Planning Board would play a vital role in the operation of the Council, as it was the place of the preparatory work. What would be discussed at Council meetings was determined by the Planning Board. As they drafted policy papers, they were not expected to iron over their disagreements, but rather include dissenting opinions in the paper to the Council.³² In attendance would be Cutler as chairperson, a CIA deputy director, a representative of the Joint Chiefs, and whatever representatives of whichever department had interest or expertise pertaining to a specific issue.³³ The Joint Chiefs' representative was in a curious position. Cutler explained that, "The Chiefs . . . are like the College of Cardinals. They are a different body than anything else in the world." He continued that, as a matter of protocol, "[They] cannot formally give an opinion on a paper until the paper is in final, formal form and has been circulated to the members. We often know very clearly . . . how the Chiefs will react . . . but we do not get it in writing until they see the paper has been sent to the Council members."³⁴ Despite any protocol or

³⁰ Rothkopf, *Running the World*, 66.

³¹ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 86-88.

³² Thomas Preston, *The President and His Inner Circle: Leadership Style and the Advisory Process in Foreign Affairs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 68.

³³ Cutler, *Intelligence as Foundation for Policy*, 67; Henderson, *Managing the Presidency* 77.

³⁴ Robert Cutler, "Selected Testimony: The National Security under President Eisenhower," in Jackson, *The National Security Council*, 115. While Cutler does not explain why this is the case in his testimony, rather presenting it as a fact of life, it would be sensible as a means of obtaining a variety of opinion. If the Joint Chiefs

departmental difficulties, all those who attended were described by Cutler as being “highly qualified” representatives who had direct access to the head of whichever agency or department they represented.³⁵ This was a change from previous practice, where without the Planning Board, the Council members themselves advocated policies. Eisenhower explained that, “You council members . . . simply do not have enough time to do what needs to be done in thinking out the best decisions regarding the national security . . . Someone must therefore do much of this thinking for you.”³⁶ In addition to the Planning Board’s effect on the Council members themselves, it also provided interaction for the different department members. Cutler explained that, “More important than *what* is planned is that the planners become accustomed to working together on hard problems, enabling them . . . to arrive more surely at a reasonable plan of policy.”³⁷

The plans formulated by the Planning Board would go up what would be described as “Policy Hill,” with Eisenhower and the NSC at the top, where the proposals were discussed, modified, or combined.³⁸ These papers required advanced planning, with typically two or three sessions used to work up a draft.³⁹ The Planning Board met with greater frequency than did the NSC proper; rather than one meeting a week, they met three times a week during Eisenhower’s first term and two times a week in the second. Cutler explained that for his first three-and-a-half year stint, he was the chair of some 504 Planning Board sessions.⁴⁰ This process was geared more toward long-range policy planning. Taking such time to iron out policy statements could be

gave their opinion before the final draft was created, it could impact the ultimate independent conclusions upon which the Chiefs would comment later.

³⁵ Cutler, *No Time For Rest*, 296

³⁶ Memorandum of Discussion at 137th Meeting of the NSC, 19 March 1953, NSC Series, Dwight D Eisenhower as President of the United States, 1953-1961 (Ann Whitman File), Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas, in Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 91.

³⁷ Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 297.

³⁸ Prados, *Keepers of the Keys*, 63.

³⁹ Cutler, *No Time for Rest*, 307.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 312-313.

cumbersome. However, the Planning Board did have the ability to work intensively when needed. According to Cutler, for an unidentified Asian crisis, the Planning Board met three successive days, working a total of twenty-five hours to come up with a new draft.⁴¹ After chairing the Board and coordinating the process, Cutler would then be charged with the duty of presenting the papers to the council and emphasizing any splits that had occurred during the drafting process.⁴²

With the Planning Board controlling input into the Council, the Operations Control Board handled the results of Council meetings. It was formed September 2, 1953, both to coordinate the activities of the departments involved in NSC decisions and to report on any progress. It replaced the old Psychological Operations Board, to provide coordination for more than just psychological operations.⁴³ While a statutory body, it was not officially part of the NSC system until an executive order February 25, 1957. Though it had formal meetings, most of the business was conducted over luncheons with representatives of the various agencies involved. It was a curious mix of formal and informal arrangements. It never quite lived up to what Eisenhower and Cutler hoped it would be, and was continuously adjusted throughout the administration. The Planning Board and OCB were both supplemented by the NSC support staff, was not made up of appointees but rather career individuals who helped preserve what historian Phillip Henderson, in his study of Eisenhower's leadership, identified as "institutional memory," the maintenance of continuity among various administrations. In explaining how the council worked, Cutler identified the ideal way in which these bodies interacted to advise the president. For example,

⁴¹ Ibid., 312. Unfortunately, Cutler did not disclose many details in his memoir about actual NSC meetings or situations. Identifying the situation he referred to as being in Southeast Asia sometime during the Eisenhower administration is as specific as he ever is. It is possible that he refers to Dien Bien Phu, as it was the most significant South Asian event during his first term as Special Assistant. However, there is no way to say for certain.

⁴² Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 93.

⁴³ Henderson, *Managing the Presidency*, 86-88. Prados notes that the lunches saw the most secret business, as no minutes or formal records were kept of the proceedings, *Keepers of the Keys*, 73.

discussions in regards to circumstances in a theoretical country Cutler called “Ruritania” would be scheduled months in advance of the NSC meeting addressing the problem. There would be three to five sessions devoted to that item, with factual and analytical statements prepared. A draft would be written, torn apart, and continuously rewritten. Cutler explained that they sought agreement on the correctness of facts, while there would be divergent opinions in analysis. The Council members would receive the Planning Board document ten days ahead of time, and the Joint Chiefs would be asked their opinions.⁴⁴ This process reinforced the fact that the NSC machinery worked best in terms of long-range planning on situations that would be fairly static; it was not a perfect system. Cutler himself acknowledged this: “it is certainly true that human beings are fallible and that the instruments which they create are always susceptible of improvement. The mechanism which I have described, and is in operation, can and will be improved as time goes on.”⁴⁵

While Robert Cutler reformed and refined the machinery of the National Security Council, it was accepted and implemented because it reflected how Eisenhower felt about proper advisory systems. “There was no doubt,” Dillon Anderson explained, “who was running the show.”⁴⁶ Eisenhower’s influence could be seen in the orderly, formal structures of the system. “No American president believed more strongly in an orderly system for strategic planning and policy making, and that a well-conceived organization was essential for such a system.”⁴⁷ Many noted that no president came into the White House with more experience in efficiently running large bureaucratic bodies than Dwight D. Eisenhower. “Eisenhower knew how to run a staff and

⁴⁴ Cutler, *Intelligence as Foundation for Policy*, 68-71.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁶ Dillon Anderson, interview with Richard D. Challenger (Houston, TX, 13 June 1966) in *John Foster Dulles Oral History Project* (Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ: Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), microfilm reel 1, 17.

⁴⁷ Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 83.

make it work to his liking.”⁴⁸ Phillip Henderson, however, made a key distinction that the National Security Council was not organized along precisely military lines.⁴⁹ The key was that Eisenhower learned the value of organization and how to work with subordinates during his years with the military, but this did not translate directly to the civilian world. He recognized that his cabinet and staff were mostly civilians. He set up clear lines of authority on staff matters to be sure, but was not rigid in methods of receiving advice. Thomas Preston, in his study of presidential leadership methods, noted that “although characterized by elaborate formal structures, Eisenhower’s advisory system incorporated an unusual mix of formal and informal channels of advice.”⁵⁰ From his experience with the politics of high command, he was more than able to use his informal channels with statesmen as well as soldiers.

The person he most communicated with in both formal and informal settings was John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State. The President’s Staff Secretary, General Andy Goodpaster, reported that Eisenhower told him that, “[he] knew the inside of Foster Dulles’ mind the way he knew the inside of his own mind.”⁵¹ Eisenhower himself reported that he would sometimes talk to Dulles as many as eight to ten times a day on the phone, depending upon what was happening in the world, and at the end of the day Eisenhower and Dulles would occasionally meet for drinks and discuss business and personal subjects.⁵² However, it was not only Dulles who had the ability to communicate so directly with the President. Eisenhower’s Chief of Staff, Sherman Adams, reported that Eisenhower had a policy of being open to any “reasonable” member of the

⁴⁸ Rothkopf, *Running the World*, 65.

⁴⁹ Henderson, *Managing the Presidency*, 17-21.

⁵⁰ Preston, *The President and His Inner Circle*, 67.

⁵¹ Andrew Goodpaster, interview with Richard D. Challenger (Washington, DC, 11 January 1966), in *John Foster Dulles Oral History Project* (Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ: Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), microfilm reel 5, 33.

⁵² Eisenhower, Princeton interview, 28. Unfortunately, no memos or records of these meetings were regularly kept, though Dulles or Eisenhower would occasionally mention in the diaries what was said.

executive as long as he was not currently occupied, though Adams did acknowledge that only Dulles regularly took Eisenhower up on the offer.⁵³ This personal communication was aided by Eisenhower's interpersonal skills. He was very approachable, helping inspire great loyalty in his staffers. George Kennan would note that, "Eisenhower was . . . charming and disarming . . . he was a very good talker," who could, "put you off[guard] with his charm."⁵⁴ Dillon Anderson reported that Eisenhower was, "without trying to do so" an extremely charismatic person.⁵⁵ He placed a great deal of trust in his individual staff members to do their jobs. The only frustrations that he reportedly had with major cabinet officials occurred when an official did not act with the independence he expected, notably in the case of the Secretary of Defense, Charles Wilson. Arthur Radford, the Joint Chiefs Chairman, explained, "the president was annoyed with Mr. Wilson's approach to some things . . . He would give you the impression he was beating around the bush. The President was used to men who made a very direct answer." Adams observed that that, "Mr. Wilson . . . discombobulated the President by his detailed discussions about his Department [issues] . . . [That Eisenhower] thought he ought to have taken a stand on himself- [and] not bothered him about it."⁵⁶ This structure that Eisenhower built up, mixing the formal and the informal, was in its early days in January of 1954. At this time, the crisis at Dien Bien Phu began to develop a long-simmering situation in Indochina into a new hot spot in the Cold War.

Part II

⁵³ Sherman Adams, interview with Richard D. Challenger (Lincoln, NH, 15 August 1964), in *John Foster Dulles Oral History Project* (Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ: Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), microfilm reel 1, 5

⁵⁴ George Kennan, "Oral History with George F. Keenan." Interview by Louis Fischer (23 March, 1965) from the John F. Kennedy Library; reprint in T. Christopher Jespersen, ed., *Interviews with George Keenan* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 99.

⁵⁵ Anderson, Luter interview, 5.

⁵⁶ Arthur Radford, interview with Philip A. Cowl (Washington, D.C, 8 May 1965), in *John Foster Dulles Oral History Project* (Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ: Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), microfilm reel 10, 10; Adams, Princeton interview, 8.

In January of 1954, France had been fighting for over eight years in Indochina, having reentered the nation following World War II in late October of 1945. The French fought the communist Vietminh. By 1950, President Truman and his policy advisors agreed that Indochina was the key to holding Southeast Asia. From 1950-52, the U.S. spent fifty million dollars in aid to the French, and in the fiscal year of 1953, one third of France's war costs were paid for by the United States.⁵⁷ Relations were strained as the United States demanded that the French decolonize. The French insisted that Indochina at least be kept in the French Union, and they kept delaying independence for the Associated States of Indochina, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The military support to the French continued under Eisenhower, and in mid-1953, Henri Navarre was appointed to the command of French forces in Vietnam. His plan was to enlist broader support among the indigenous population while marshalling French forces for a 1955 assault.⁵⁸ On November 20, 1953, Navarre launched Operation Castor and took control of the air strip of an administrative area called Dien Bien Phu, located in a valley in northern Vietnam.⁵⁹

Meanwhile, Eisenhower had put together a group to adjust U.S. Security Policy. Called the Solarium Project, its members produced what would be known as NSC 162/2, a plan which became known as the New Look. It reduced conventional forces in favor of massive retaliatory capabilities. NSC 162/2 would contain an interesting note on Indochina: "certain other countries, such as Indo-China . . . are of such strategic importance to the United States that an attack on

⁵⁷ Timeline in, James Arnold, *The First Domino: Eisenhower, the Military, and America's Intervention in Vietnam* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 39; Policy in, George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York, Chichester, Brisbane, Toronto: John Wiley and Sons, 1979), 11; money in *ibid.*; 17 and David L. Anderson, *Trapped By Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-196* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 15.

⁵⁸ Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam, the Battle that Doomed the French Empire and Led America into Vietnam* (Cambridge: De Capo Press, 2004), 209.

⁵⁹ For a full account of Operation Castor and the planning involved, see Windrow, *The Last Valley*, 233-253. Another blow by blow account is in John Nordell, *The Undetected Enemy: French and American Miscalculations at Dien Bien Phu, 1953* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), pp.3-18.

them probably would compel the United States to react with military force either locally at the point of attack or generally against the military power of the aggressor.”⁶⁰ There were U.S. advisors in Indochina at this time. Lt. General John W. O’Daniel and his staff had returned to Vietnam after a visit the previous summer. His conclusion, reported to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was that “real military progress in implementation of the ‘Navarre Plan’ is evident . . . prospects for victory appear increasingly encouraging.”⁶¹ Admiral Arthur Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared in an address given December 2, 1953 that there was hope for victory in Indochina.⁶² Not all readers were happy with O’Daniel’s report. Army Chief of Staff Matthew Ridgway, while not concerned about Dien Bien Phu at the time, found O’Daniel to be overly-optimistic.⁶³ Eisenhower himself was disgusted with the situation at Dien Bien Phu. “As a soldier,” he would explain, “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.’”⁶⁴ By January of 1954, the French were in Dien Bien Phu, their opponents, the Vietminh, around them, and the United States had invested a substantial amount of money to save the “key” in Southeast Asia.

Early in January, the 179th meeting of the National Security Council was held, which discussed a policy paper prepared on Indochina, NSC 177 and its Special Annex, which concerned intervention possibilities. At the time, the military situation remained steady. The French were only “somewhat disturbed” about Dien Bien Phu. Allen Dulles, director of the CIA, put forth the proposition that the loss of Dien Bien Phu would not be a large military victory for

⁶⁰ NSC 162/2, 30 October 1953, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952-1954*, vol. 13, Indochina, pt. 1, 584 (Hereafter cited as *FRUS* with date and volume number).

⁶¹ “Report of U.S. Joint Military Mission in Indochina,” in Nordell, *The Undetected Enemy*, 86.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 141

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 150

⁶⁴ Eisenhower, Princeton interview, 25.

the Vietminh, but a political one.⁶⁵ Richard Nixon's contribution to the meeting were mainly political, as he warned that the French intended to keep the Vietnamese in the French Union, while the Vietnamese desired independence, noting that, "the essence of the problem is political."⁶⁶ Radford established his position early, warning that all that could be done to prevent defeat at Dien Bien Phu should be done, noting that as commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet he had drawn up plans to aid the French with air power.⁶⁷ When talk began drifting over to combat operations, Cutler broke in with the note that nothing in NSC 177 addressed combat unless the Chinese became involved.

The meeting demonstrated three significant characteristics of the NSC. First, Cutler steered the conversation to specifically refer to papers discussed, and not expand beyond them. Eisenhower, however, desired to continue discussion. He floated the idea of giving the French a group of airmen without U.S. insignia. This shows both how the formal structure of the NSC could focus on a particular subject while Eisenhower could work beyond that structure on a point he felt particularly important.⁶⁸ A second characteristic revealed in the 179th meeting was Eisenhower's active contribution. While he would later discuss airmen, he first stated that, in regards to intervention with ground troops, "I can not tell you . . . how bitterly opposed I am to such a course of action. This war in Indochina would absorb our troops by divisions!"⁶⁹ In making this statement after preliminary remarks by Radford, Eisenhower demonstrated what

⁶⁵ Memorandum of Discussion of the 179th Meeting of the NSC, Friday, 8 January 1954, *FRUS, 1952-1954*, vol. 13, pt.1, 947-948

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 948-50. Nixon had, just the year before, taken a state trip through Asia. He did not leave with a good impression of the French, seeing Vietnam as being in "deplorable condition," but nevertheless in greater danger of "[falling] like a husk before the fury of the communist hurricane if the French withdrew." Richard Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), 125.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 953.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 952-53.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 949. Anderson claims that Eisenhower's discussions of airmen later with this statement demonstrate ambivalence, in *Trapped by Success*, 24, yet Eisenhower as a commander would and did very clearly distinguish between Ground and Air forces.

Greenstein and Burke call his, “persistent impulse to think in terms of consequences.”⁷⁰ Finally, the meeting demonstrated the long-term process of the Council, as no decisions were ultimately reached on NSC-177. The Special Annex, considered very sensitive, was ordered destroyed.⁷¹

The next week, discussion continued in regards to the French in Indochina and Dien Bien Phu. In discussing NSC-177, the council discussed its language; Dulles objected to a point in the paper positing that the loss of Indochina would severely damage France’s world position. He stressed that the NSC should only be concerned with the U.S world position. Cutler agreed to make the change, and NSC 177 became NSC 5405 and was officially promulgated to the OCB.⁷² The planning paper opened with a clear premise: “communist domination, by whatever means, of all of Southeast Asia would seriously endanger in the short term, and critically endanger in the long term, United States security interests,” noting that the primary threat came from internal subversion.⁷³ It called for aggressive military, political, and psychological operations to be carried out against the Vietminh, and for the further development of indigenous armed forces that would eventually be capable of maintaining internal security.⁷⁴ It also suggested “reiterating” to the French that, “in the absence of marked improvement in the military situation there is no basis for negotiation with any prospect for acceptable terms.”⁷⁵ This referred to fears the France would accept a cease-fire. In the event of Chinese intervention, the paper suggested use of naval and air forces, with land forces to be considered when a crisis occurred, providing an official NSC view on action for Indochina.⁷⁶ The paper was not, however, without some

⁷⁰ Fred I. Greenstein and John P. Burke, *How President’s Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam, 1954 and 1965* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989), 61.

⁷¹ 179th Meeting of the NSC, *FRUS, 1952-1954*, vol.13 pt. 1, 954.

⁷² Memorandum of Discussion at the 180th Meeting of the NSC, Thursday, 14 January 1954, *ibid.*, 962-963.

⁷³ Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary: NSC 5405, 16 January 1954, *ibid.*, 971.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 974.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 975.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 975-976.

problems. NSC 5405 had not made provisions for the possibility of the French and Indochinese forces failing to provide infantry. It advised unilateral action against targets in China if China intervened, but had no recommendations or options in terms of the ground conflict in which the United States might need to engage.

NSC 5405 included advice to continue attempts to encourage the French to follow U.S. advice, while the French asked for more supplies. The U.S. position, despite its supplier-status, was weak, “because of the overriding importance given by Washington to holding the Communist line in Indochina, the French, in being able to threaten to withdraw, possessed an important instrument of blackmail.”⁷⁷ As long as the United States saw both a vital need to hold Indochina and a need to keep U.S. troops out of that area, the French could ask for a great deal of material aid. While mulling over the situation, Eisenhower on January 18 privately met with a group of men who would become his special committee for Indochina. He had been unhappy with the Planning Board’s effort, for to him it lacked clear action and alternatives.⁷⁸ The creation of ad hoc groups for a specific topic was a means Eisenhower had used before, such as when the New Look was formulated. Cutler, after Eisenhower left office, explained that ad hoc groups were valuable “for the introduction of fresh ideas and points of view other than those generated within the government.”⁷⁹ The group selected (Radford, Allen Dulles, Undersecretary of State Walter Bedell Smith, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roger Keyes, and C.D. Jackson, a White House advisor) was able to meet outside the NSC apparatus to bring in fresh ideas. They met first to discuss strategy and the additional aid the French requested: twenty-two B-26 bombers

⁷⁷ Michael Gravel, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. I (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 79

⁷⁸ Greenstein and Burke, *How President’s Test Reality*, 36-37.

⁷⁹ Cutler, in Jackson, *The National Security Council*, 129.

and 400 airmen.⁸⁰ When Keyes questioned if mechanics would be tantamount to ground forces, Smith and Radford agreed that it would not be. Both affirmed that they did not support ground forces. Radford felt only air intervention would be needed.⁸¹

The Indochina Committee recommended to the president that twenty-two B-26s be given, along with 200 U.S. Air Mechanics through the Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG). Part of their instructions was that they did not have to use the OCB to carry out their recommendations,⁸² which amounted to telling them not to use the OCB. The OCB at this point, was, after all, relatively new, only having been formed in September and not yet incorporated in the NSC structure. Radford's recommendations were made despite his lack of faith in the French. He would later explain that, "most of [The French Commanders] . . . did not impress me. . . . I had no confidence in French military planning or military execution."⁸³ While that statement was made years after Dien Bien Phu, Radford was worried early on about a French defeat, indicating at least a partial worry about French reliability. Yet, large amounts of aid continued to flow into Indochina. Eisenhower agreed with the recommendations, with the only changes being that the 200 MAAG mechanics be rotated out by June 15, 1954 at the latest.⁸⁴ This committee encapsulated Eisenhower's ability to supplement the National Security Council if he felt it had not given him the number of options he wanted. The Special Committee grappled directly with keeping the French in Vietnam and strengthening them. When dissatisfied with his machinery,

⁸⁰ Melanie Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War: Eisenhower and Dien Bien Phu, 1954* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 25.

⁸¹ Memorandum for the Record, Meeting of President's Special Committee on Indochina by C.H. Bonesteel, 29 January 1954, 30 January 1954, in Gravel, ed., *Pentagon Papers*, p.444

⁸² *Ibid.*, 446.

⁸³ Radford, Princeton interview, 47.

⁸⁴ Memorandum to the Deputy Secretary of Defense (Kyes) to the Secretary of Air Force (Talbot), 29 January 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1007.

he “expanded the advisory process by ordering the creation of a new means of study and deliberation.”⁸⁵

The situation at Dien Bien Phu itself remained fairly stable going into February. John Foster Dulles was preparing to go to Berlin to take part in a conference that would, among other things, determine if Indochina would be on the agenda for the Geneva Conference scheduled to begin at the end of April. Discussion in February focused on Indochina as a whole, and ways to increase the growth of indigenous forces. Eisenhower noted that a religious issue could unite people, with a Buddhist leader providing an anti-communist rallying point.⁸⁶ Discussion continued, with Nixon noting the Bao Dai, the emperor of Vietnam, did not fit the bill for an inspirational leader. Dulles noted that there were 1.5 million Roman Catholics in Vietnam who might be enlisted in the struggle. In the end, it was decided that more, and hopefully better, officers of the United States Information Service be sent to Vietnam.⁸⁷ Eisenhower was, in the context of discussion in the NSC, more than willing to suggest new and unconventional ideas in the Council, ideas which often did not lead to a specific action. Nixon noted that, “[Eisenhower] could be very enthusiastic about half-baked ideas in the discussion stage, but when it came to making a final decision, he was the coldest, most unemotional man in the world.”⁸⁸ While still keeping in mind the spiritual side of the conflict, noting in a later meeting that, “the mood of discouragement [in Vietnam] came from the evident lack of a spiritual force among the French

⁸⁵ Greenstein and Burke, *How President's Test Reality*, 62.

⁸⁶ It was pointed out to Eisenhower that, unfortunately, Buddha was a pacifist.

⁸⁷ Memorandum of Discussion at the 183rd Meeting of the NSC, Friday, 4 February 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1013-1017.

⁸⁸ Richard Nixon, *Six Crises* (New York, 1962), 158-59, quoted in Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, 90.

and the Vietnamese, Eisenhower kept his decisions realistic, sending more propaganda officers rather than trying to start a spiritual revolution.⁸⁹

In February, the main focus of the Eisenhower administration in foreign affairs was not chiefly Indochina, but rather Berlin. The administration was worried that the conference would put Indochina on the agenda, and was also concerned any attempt to prevent placing Indochina on the agenda would result in a French backlash which would threaten the proposed European Defense Community Treaty; the U.S. greatly desired support for this treaty. After having invested so much into Indochina, the U.S felt betrayed when Indochina was placed on the agenda.⁹⁰ With a developing situation depending upon adaptable diplomacy, Eisenhower coordinated with John Foster Dulles abroad. Dulles warned that Indochina was interwoven with the EDC. He opined that, “this political exertion on our part against [the] conference carries moral obligation to continue to sustain military effort,” because if the talks were not held and the U.S. did not provide aid, the negative effect on Franco-American relations would sink the EDC.⁹¹ Upon returning from Europe and reporting to the NSC, Dulles explained that the French would not press hard at the Conference Table unless there was a “substantial military disaster.”⁹²

The Special Committee for Indochina made another report at the beginning of March., which urged the continued strengthening of indigenous forces, the recruitment of aid from foreign countries, the strengthening the French Foreign Legion, the augmentation of the MAAG,

⁸⁹ Memorandum of Discussion at the 184th Meeting of the NSC, Thursday, 11 February 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol. 13, pt.1, 1038.

⁹⁰ Arnold, *the First Domino*, 130; Gary R. Hess, “Redefining the American Position in Southeast Asia: The United States and the Geneva and Manila Conferences,” in Lawrence S. Kaplan, Denise Artaud, and Mark R. Rubin, eds. *Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954-1955* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1990), 125.

⁹¹ John Foster Dulles, Berlin, to Dwight D. Eisenhower, Washington, 9 February 1954, The Presidential Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower, Anne Whitman File (Reproduced from Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas), Box 9, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.

⁹² Memorandum of Discussion at the 186th Meeting of the National Security Council, Friday, 26 February 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1080-81.

and psychological warfare operations. If that plan failed, the committee recommended considering direct military intervention.⁹³ While Eisenhower would have been considering this advice, the NSC was also focused on Indochina, with Dien Bien Phu relatively secure. Harold Stassen, director of the Foreign Operations Administration, reported at the 187th NSC meeting that, after visiting Vietnam, he “had a strong feeling that the military situation was a great deal better than we had imagined,” and that the French position was so strong they hoped to be attacked.⁹⁴ While not mentioning any reservations in the Council meeting, Eisenhower’s record with regards to Indochina action would suggest that he was not particularly optimistic. He had made his general position clear in January, with his warning that forces would be swallowed in the Vietnamese jungles. After his presidency, Eisenhower explained that he felt from the beginning that the French plan was “just silly.”⁹⁵ To this point, the NSC had not played a decisive role in determining policy in regards to Indochina. Radford and the committee, along with Dulles in Europe, counseled Eisenhower independent of the Council. The situation had not been an emergency one yet, either. That would change, as on the afternoon of March 13, the assault on Dien Bien Phu finally began.

Part III

Initially, the role of the NSC remained limited. On March 18 it was reported that the situation at Dien Bien Phu was relatively steady, with intelligence estimates giving the French a 50-50 chance of holding Dien Bien Phu. No action was ultimately decided, and the Planning Board was not tasked with drawing up any plans for the situation.⁹⁶ The next meeting, however,

⁹³ Report by the President’s Special Committee on Indochina, 2 March 1954, *ibid.*, 1110-1116.

⁹⁴ Memorandum of Discussion at the 187th Meeting of the NSC, Thursday, March 4, 1954, *ibid.*, 1093.

⁹⁵ Eisenhower, Princeton interview, 26.

⁹⁶ Memorandum of Discussion at the 189th Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, March 18, 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1132-33.

carried greater significance. The JCS had urged the council to examine the question of U.S. commitment in a report to the Council, which prompted Eisenhower to order Cutler to examine the situation with the Planning Board; Eisenhower stated explicitly that he wanted options including ground forces. Allen Dulles noted that the situation had improved for the French somewhat, though noting that the French could not support Dien Bien Phu because they did not control the roads in the surrounding countryside, or anywhere near the area. This led Eisenhower to comment, “if the point had been reached when the French forces could be moved only by air, it seemed sufficient indication that the population of Vietnam did not wish to be free from Communist domination.”⁹⁷ However, he later observed that, “The collapse of Indochina would produce a chain reaction which would result in the fall of Southeast Asia to the communists,”⁹⁸ indicating his belief in the domino effect of one country’s fall to communism taking others with it. With these two frames of action in mind, the Planning Board was directed to look also at both unilateral and multilateral reaction. Another worry was the reaction of China to intervention. When Charles Wilson raised the question, Cutler turned the Council’s attention back to NSC 5405, and its recommendation of U.S. strikes against China in the event of Chinese intervention. The NSC calm observance during the March 18th meeting had been replaced in the March 25th meeting with an actively probing group. The change between the two meetings had not been the result of any change in the battle at Dien Bien Phu, however. The Council was deeply affected in the time between the two meetings by the arrival of the French Chief of Staff, Paul Ely, who accented the graveness of the situation.

Ely arrived in Washington in late March, and on the night of the 20th he dined at Radford’s home, along with General Jean Etienne Valluy, the head of the French Mission to the

⁹⁷ Memorandum of Discussion at the 190th Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, March 25, 1954, *ibid.*, 1164.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1167-1168

United States. Also present were Richard Nixon, Allen Dulles, Army Chief of Staff Matthew Ridgway, and Douglas MacArthur II. They discussed the situation at Dien Bien Phu, during which time Ely confessed that the loss of Dien Bien Phu, while not a military disaster, would wreck French morale. He indicated that the major French problem was lack of combat aircraft. Ely requested forty more B-26s, along with 800 G-12 Type parachutes to deliver supplies to the isolated fortress.⁹⁹ Radford later expressed some frustration at the French desire for more parachutes, believing that the way the French employed them was part of a “terribly inefficient military operation.”¹⁰⁰ The memo which was drawn up by Radford’s secretary reported that the meeting ended after a short discussion following the French request of supplies. One of the participants, however, recorded events slightly differently. General Ridgway drafted a memo in which, at the end of the meeting, Radford wanted to confirm with Ely that, “what you really need them for success is more air power.” Ridgway recorded that he responded immediately, stating, “the experience of Korea, where we had complete domination of the air and a far more powerful air force afforded no basis for thinking that some additional air power was going to bring decisive results on the ground.”¹⁰¹

Lacking other accounts of the meeting, it is impossible to know with any certainty how the actual meeting ended. The fact that Radford’s secretary did not record this could simply indicate that it was considered immaterial. Whatever was actually said, the fact that Ridgway deemed it important enough to record indicates the early disagreement that would emerge among the Joint Chiefs and their Chairman. The incident also indicates that Radford desired intervention and that the French may have been aware of it. In a meeting of the Joint Chiefs on March 26,

⁹⁹ Memorandum for the Record by Captain G.W Anderson, USN, Assistant to the Chariman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Radford): Conversations with General Paul Ely, 21 March 1954, *ibid.*, 1138-40.

¹⁰⁰ Radford, Princeton interview, 52.

¹⁰¹ Memorandum of Conversation at Home of Adm. Radford, evening of 20 March, 22 March 1954, Matthew Ridgway Papers, Box 78, Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA.

Radford noted that Ely's report had made him pessimistic and increased his urgency for intervention. In hindsight at least, he also realized it would not mean one quick strike, but a more committed U.S. position, explaining that, "we would have been in the war, and it would have been the beginning of a series of actions."¹⁰²

Ely's visit, in addition to strengthening Radford's view that United States intervention was required to save the situation in Indochina, became the root of a misunderstanding that would deeply affect the situation. In later years, Radford was careful to note that there had been a miscommunication between him and Ely, one which he stressed was not his fault. "I had discussed with Ely, and I'm sure I told him that I thought we could do a certain thing. When I talked to him he understood, or should have understood - and I think he did - that this was a discussion of possibilities."¹⁰³ Ely came out of their meetings with a surer feeling for U.S. aid. Some versions even have Radford offering the French the use of nuclear weapons as part of a conventional arsenal.¹⁰⁴ Radford had in the past urged the use of atomic weapons against China.¹⁰⁵ Radford himself denied recommending any specific action, but noted, "If we had used atomic weapons we probably would have been successful. We had atomic weapons we could have used."¹⁰⁶ MacArthur informed Dulles in April that Radford learned from a Pentagon study group that three tactical nuclear weapons could smash the Vietminh effort at Dien Bien Phu. Radford apparently wished to ask for French permission to use nuclear ordinance in Indochina if

¹⁰² Substance of Discussions of State-Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting at the Pentagon Building, March 26, 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1169; Radford, Princeton interview, 46.

¹⁰³ Ibid..

¹⁰⁴ Billings-Yun, *Decision Against War*, 35.

¹⁰⁵ George C. Herring and Richard H. Immerman, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu: 'The Day We Didn't Go to War' Revisited," *Journal of American History*, 71, no. 2 (September 1984); reprint in Walter L. Hixson, *The United States and the Vietnam War: The Roots of the Vietnam War* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000), 236. (Page citations are to reprint edition)

¹⁰⁶ Radford, "Interview," 46.

the U.S. intervened. MacArthur judged this as very dangerous.¹⁰⁷ The matter was dropped. In a March 22, Ely, Nixon, and Radford discussed the details of a possible operation, wherein hundreds of American aircraft would attack Vietminh positions. Ely later claimed that Radford was enthusiastic about the plan and, “intimated that he had Eisenhower’s support.”¹⁰⁸ Radford claimed that he emphasized that there would need to be governmental approval. It is possible that neither man was being disingenuous; misunderstandings may have arisen due to language difficulties as they had no interpreter.¹⁰⁹ Whatever the case, there was no agreement. The French were confident, however, that if they asked, the Americans would respond favorably. They called the Operation *Vatour* (Vulture) and included it in their planning.¹¹⁰

The rest of the Joint Chiefs, meanwhile, did not agree with Radford in regards to intervention and, in the case of Ridgway, the nature of the JCS apparatus itself. Some of the disagreement was relatively minor. For example, Radford suggested in a meeting with Ely that C-119 Cargo Planes be used to drop napalm on enemy positions.¹¹¹ However, the Commander of the Far East Air Force (COMFEAF), recommended earlier that they not be used for that purpose, stating that “aircraft loaned to the French . . . are primarily for airlift purposes. The use of these same aircraft for combat purposes might well generate a requirement for additional aircraft which FEAF would like to avoid if possible.”¹¹² Radford called the Chiefs together to ask whether they should recommend to the President and the NSC that the United States should

¹⁰⁷ Memorandum by the Counselor (MacArthur) to the Secretary of State, 7 April 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1271.

¹⁰⁸ Immerman and Herring, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu,” 236.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 236.

¹¹⁰ Laurent Cesari and Jacques de Folin, “Military Necessity, Political Impossibility: The French Viewpoint on Operation Vautour,” trans. Mark R. Rubin, in Kaplan, Artaud, and Rubin, *Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations*, 109.

¹¹¹ Memorandum of Conversation, by William R. Tyler of the Office of Western European Affairs, 23 March 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1143.

¹¹² COMFEAF, Tokyo, to Chief MAAG, Saigon, 19 March 1954. Nathan Twinning Papers, Box 99, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Excerpts of files are courtesy of Daun Van Ee.

intervene through an airstrike. Radford himself recommended this action, but the rest of the Joint Chiefs did not.¹¹³ All sent back reactions that were essentially negative. The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Robert Carney, was the most ambiguous, stating that Indochina should be saved if possible, but he was not prepared to say the strike would be decisive. Nathan Twining, the Air Force Chief, gave his answer as a qualified “yes,” dependent on whether or not the French allowed for a U.S. command of Air Forces under a French Theater Commander, a greater role in training the indigenous forces for the U.S, and true Vietnamese sovereignty first. Given that Twining’s conditions were extremely unlikely to have been met, he was essentially a “no.”¹¹⁴ Lemuel Shepherd, commandant of the Marine Corps, was a clear “no,” stating that “Air intervention in the current fighting in Indochina would be an unprofitable adventure,” that would not turn the tide of the battle, nor would it contribute to French victory in Indochina elsewhere, nor would it deter communists. The United States would be in a situation where it would have to admit failure or use ground forces, both of which were, to Shepherd, unacceptable.¹¹⁵ Ridgway was the most strident “no.” He questioned whether it was even proper for Radford to put the question to them. The Joint Chiefs were, after all, not even supposed to comment on policy to the NSC until formal drafts went through the Planning Board. To go to the president preemptively to create policy was questionable. Ridgway noted that the issue “was clearly outside the proper scope of authority of the JCS. This body was neither charged with formulating foreign policy, nor of advocating it, unless its advice was specifically sought by the president, or the Secretary

¹¹³ Radford to Wilson, 31 March 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1198-1199.

¹¹⁴ Memorandum by the Chief of Naval Operations (Carney), 2 April 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1 1222; Memorandum by the Chief of Staff, United States Air Force (Twining) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Radford), 2 April 1954, *ibid.*, 1222

¹¹⁵ Memorandum by the Commandant of the United States marine Corps (Shepherd), 2 April 1954, *ibid.*, 1223

of Defense. To do otherwise,” Ridgway warned, “would be to involve the JCS inevitably in politics.”¹¹⁶

Possibly as a result of his regular interaction with the NCS, Radford had no difficulty recommending what he believed was an urgently needed course of action. He felt that Ridgway was a good field commander, but depended too much on his staff, later claiming that, “he wasn’t an independent thinker.”¹¹⁷ Ridgway, beyond his problems with the propriety of the request, was deeply opposed to a strike at Dien Bien Phu on military grounds. He made his feelings known in his memoranda. The disagreement would leave a strong enough impression on Ridgway that when he retired, his letter to Wilson clearly referenced Dien Bien Phu and Radford’s request for support in advising intervention. With regard to recommending action to the president and NSC when unsolicited, Ridgway said that “I have not been convinced that this is a proper role for a military leader.”¹¹⁸ He continued that, strategically speaking:

I am opposed to the overemphasis of any military force where dependence on that force exceeds its capabilities. . . . The army has no wish to scrap its previous experience in favor of unproven doctrine, or in order to accommodate enthusiastic theorists having little or no responsibility for the consequences of following the courses of action they advocate . . . Nothing currently available . . . reduces the essentiality of mobile, powerful ground forces, the only forces which can seize the enemies’ land and the people living thereon, and exercise control over both.¹¹⁹

The Joint Chiefs were not the only military men who made their views known. Other military officers expressed clear views against intervention. For example, Admiral A.C Davis, Director of the Office of Military Affairs in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, explained that, “The U.S

¹¹⁶ Memorandum by Chief of Staff, United States Army (Ridgway), 2 April 1954, *ibid.*, 1220.

¹¹⁷ Radford, Princeton interview, 25-27.

¹¹⁸ Matthew Ridgway, Washington, D.C, to Charles Wilson, Washington, D.C, 27 June 1955, Matthew Ridgway Papers, box 16, p.8, Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10

should not be self-duped into believing the possibility of partial involvement such as ‘naval and air units only.’ One cannot go over Niagara falls in a barrel only slightly. . . . It is difficult to understand how involvement of ground forces could be avoided.”¹²⁰ Radford continued to advocate intervention.

Dulles was much more ambivalent about intervention, and less willing to express his opinion to foreign representatives than Radford was. He met with Radford and Ely in his office on March 23, the main topic of conversation was U.S. reaction to potential Chinese intervention. In his memorandum of the meeting for the President, Dulles proffered the view that “if the United States sent its flag and its own military establishment-land, sea, or air- into the Indochina war, then the prestige of the United States would be engaged to the point where we would want to have a success.”¹²¹ With such a complicated question, Dulles put off answering Ely until he could consult with the President, demonstrating a difference between him and Radford; Radford’s desire to intervene was apparently communicated to Ely.

Dulles would also utilize NSC resources. The same day he met with Ely, he received a report from Robert Bowie on the extent of Chinese intervention, who were providing supplies of ammunition and cannon, and 2,000 Chinese soldiers manning artillery and anti-aircraft pieces.¹²² Enclosed with Bowie’s letter was a letter from Charles Stelle, also of the Policy Planning Board, warning that if the Tonkin Delta fell, Communist forces would have a clear way into Southern Indochina and Thailand, warning that, “countries in the Far East, South Asia, and elsewhere in the world would be encouraged to adopt policies of accommodation to communist pressures and

¹²⁰ Quoted in Gravel, ed., *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. I, p. 89.

¹²¹ Memorandum by the Secretary of State to the President, 23 March 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1143.

¹²² Memorandum by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Bowie) to the Secretary of State, 23 March 1954, *ibid.*, 1145-1146.

objectives.”¹²³ Dulles would use these materials in a speech for the Press Club, warning of the 2,000 communist Chinese Bowie mentioned and the danger to the “entire Western Pacific area,” echoing Stelle’s sentiments.¹²⁴ Dulles, like Eisenhower, was in the loop of the NSC. He discussed with Eisenhower the situation the day after receiving the reports from Bowie and Stelle. At this meeting between him and Dulles, Eisenhower expressed his own opinion on the situation. Dulles reported that

The President said that he agreed basically that we should not get involved in fighting in Indochina unless there were political preconditions necessary for a successful outcome. He did not, however, wholly exclude the possibility of a single strike, if it were almost certain this would produce decisive results.¹²⁵

In consultation with Dulles, but after receiving NSC information, Eisenhower had decided that wholesale intervention would probably not go forward unilaterally. This was in keeping with his desire to avoid combat troops in the jungles of Vietnam. The NSC was used as it was supposed to be used: a tool for gathering options and information, along with consultation with men like Dulles. Nixon would note later that, in meetings with the NSC, the Cabinet, or congressional leaders, Eisenhower would “always go back to his office to reflect on what he had heard before deciding.”¹²⁶

During this time, the Planning Board demonstrated both its ability to react quickly in a crisis and its institutional memory. A Special Annex was prepared detailing contingencies for U.S. action. This was the Annex that had been prepared for NSC 177, and ordered destroyed. It

¹²³ Memorandum by Charles C. Stelle of the Policy Planning Staff, 23 March 1954, *ibid.*, 1147.

¹²⁴ Press Club Speech, John Foster Dulles, 29 March 1954, 2-3, John Foster Dulles Papers, Box 82, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.

¹²⁵ Memorandum of Conversation with the President, 24 March 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1150.

¹²⁶ Richard Nixon, *In the Arena* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 293.

would appear that at least one copy was preserved, as it was quickly taken and readjusted for current circumstances. The first contingency covered the possibility that without U.S. aid, France would be forced to withdraw from Indochina. It said that if direct U.S. aid was judged to be meaningful, intervention would be further studied, but would focus on full independence for the Associated States, a continuing policy of arming indigenous forces, and seeking U.N. aid. The second contingency, if the United States offered to intervene but the French withdrew regardless of such an offer, meant that the United States could either accept the loss of Indochina or choose one of four options. Option A would be to urge the French to stage a coordinated withdrawal as the U.S. utilized ground forces, Option B called for using ground forces to only hold French hard points while training indigenous forces, Option C would be the use of naval and air power alone while training the indigenous forces, and Option D was to provide no direct support, only training. The Planning Board noted that these contingencies were valid under certain circumstances only: no renewal of the Korean War, no intervention by the Soviets or Chinese, and no expansion of the combat theater outside Indochina.¹²⁷ It also warned that Option A, and to a lesser extent B, would force “major alterations in fiscal and budgetary programs . . . and a reversal of policy planning to reduce the size of the U.S. Armed Forces.”¹²⁸ Option A had a further drawback, as it was estimated that seven divisions would be necessary to successfully conduct operations, while only five were available under current deployments.¹²⁹ With these options in mind, the NSC met April 1. Radford argued for immediate intervention, or the situation would be untenable.¹³⁰ Eisenhower told Radford that he understood the rest of the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not support air intervention. When Radford brought up his urge for action

¹²⁷ Special Annex on Indochina, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1 1182-1186.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1186

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Memorandum of Discussion at the 191st Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, April 1, 1954, *ibid.*, 1200-1201.

later, Eisenhower let the matter drop, but said that he wanted to meet with certain members of the NSC afterward. No official action was adopted other than further review.¹³¹ Radford and Dulles were to meet with Congress a few days after this meeting to brief them on the situation and request authority for unilateral aid if Eisenhower deemed it necessary. In a conversation with Eisenhower, Wilson, and Radford Eisenhower, Dulles told Eisenhower that he believed that Radford wanted Congressional approval to actually intervene, whereas he, Dulles, wanted to use the possibility of intervention as a deterrent.¹³²

At a meeting with Congress to secure the ability to intervene, Dulles and Radford found that the feeling was unanimous among the senators that “we want no more Koreas with the United States furnishing 90% of the manpower.” He added that, while only air intervention was currently being considered, “once the flag was committed the use of land forces would inevitably follow.”¹³³ Radford, when asked if a direct air attack would change the situation, said that it would have three weeks before, but not at the moment. This would have placed the best time for air intervention, according to Radford, about four days before Ely had even arrived in Washington.¹³⁴ That same day, Bowie expressed to Dulles that the NSC needed to reach a decision as to whether or not intervention was even desired, and if so, how the U.S. would go about planning such intervention and securing Congressional support, and an invitation from France and the Associated States to intervene.¹³⁵ Bowie’s comments represented part of the frustrations that the NSC was not as quick to respond as desired, though in fact the decisions regarding ground forces appear, from Eisenhower’s personal meetings and comments, to have

¹³¹ Ibid., 1202 Unfortunately, no formal records exist of the meeting that occurred afterward, but given the kinds of discussion going on in the Council, it is at least probable that Air Intervention is what was discussed.

¹³² Memorandum of Conversation by the Secretary of State, 2 April 1954, *ibid.*, 1211.

¹³³ Memorandum for the Files of the Secretary of State, 5 April 1954, *ibid.*, 1225.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1226.

¹³⁵ Memorandum by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Bowie) to the Secretary of State, 5 April 1954, *ibid.* 1246.

already been decided in the negative. A single air strike remained a possibility. Eisenhower apparently kept that decision to himself and Dulles, and continued to receive counsel as to intervention and kept that possibility publicly on the table.

Eisenhower would soon have to face the consequences of that fact, as the French concluded that only Vulture could save the situation. Valluy had requested that the United States carry out Operation Vulture on April 4.¹³⁶ Eisenhower was annoyed that Radford had told the French during Ely's visit he would do his best to see that the U.S. carried out the operation. He told Dulles that, "[Radford] should never have told [a] foreign country he would do his best because they then start putting pressure on us."¹³⁷ As a man who prized his own counsel, Eisenhower clearly did not like the idea of one of his subordinates discussing their counsel outside the U.S. government. Radford may have known Eisenhower's displeasure, as he wrote to Dulles after the U.S. decided not to intervene that there was some kind of mix up and that he, "suspect[ed] the French of political machinations later to justify their actions," possibly to deflect any condemnation of his own actions.¹³⁸

All these factors led to the April 6 meeting of the National Security Council, which was held earlier than usual, on a Tuesday, in view of the deteriorating situation in Indochina. This meeting proved the most important meeting regarding Dien Bien Phu. After the initial discussion of the situation, Cutler pointed out that the Planning Board paper promulgated March 29, in addition to spelling out contingency actions, noted that regardless of Dien Bien Phu, the contest in Indochina had yet to be decided. Wilson, Radford, and Allen Dulles all disagreed, feeling the

¹³⁶ Immerman and Herring, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu," 242.

¹³⁷ Memorandum of Presidential Telephone Conversation, 5 April 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1241.

¹³⁸ Memorandum by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Radford) to the Secretary of State, 10 April 1954, *ibid.*, 1304.

Planning Board report was too optimistic. Eisenhower expressed his belief that the fall of Dien Bien Phu could not be considered a military defeat, as the French had already inflicted 10,000 to 20,000 casualties upon the Vietminh. He did not understand why the French did not send a relief column in force to the besieged area, echoing his continuing frustration with the French command performance. Following Congress's recent reaction, Eisenhower pointed out that, "there was no possibility whatever of U.S. unilateral intervention in Indochina, and we had best face that fact."¹³⁹

Dulles agreed that unilateral action support would be impossible. From the discussions emerged the desire to seek British involvement and prepare an organization similar to NATO in the region to prevent its total fall to Communism, a policy Dulles called "United Action." While not directly stated, Eisenhower made it clear that unilateral intervention was unlikely:

The President expressed his hostility to the notion that because we might lose Indochina we would necessarily lose all the rest of Southeast Asia . . . the President expressed warm approval for the idea of a political organization which would have for its purpose the defense of South-east Asia even if Indochina should be lost.¹⁴⁰

Though a deviation from the Domino theory, the argument justified the lack of U.S. commitment in the region Eisenhower desired.¹⁴¹ Stassen recommended a midway course between intervention and allowing Indochina to fall. He suggested establishing a South Vietnamese nation with a regional defense treaty built around it. Radford, still wholly supporting the Domino theory, objected that it would cause a negative chain reaction. The Secretary of the Treasury, George Humphrey, noted that if elections were held, South Vietnam could well go Communist,

¹³⁹ Memorandum of Discussion at the 192nd Meeting of the National Security Council, Tuesday, April 6, 1954, *ibid.*, 1253.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1257.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1253-1255.

though Eisenhower rebuked him, stating, “no free government had yet gone communist by its own choice.” Eisenhower concluded his discussion with Humphrey with the decision that, “we are not prepared now to take action with respect to Dien Bien Phu . . . but the coalition program for Southeast Asia must go forward as a matter of the greatest urgency.” Responding to Treasury Secretary George Humphrey’s concerns that the U.S. was embarking on a policy of trying to intervene wherever there were communist governments, Eisenhower explained that “in certain areas at least we cannot afford to let Moscow gain another bit of territory.” Eisenhower expressed his feeling that Indochina was not a place the U.S. should take action in at the moment, but noted that if a regional defense group went forward, “the battle is two-thirds won.”¹⁴² While agreeing that external and internal communist subversion was unacceptable, Nixon also pointed out that the U.S. had to avoid the political weight of appearing to be imperialists in the mold of the French and the British. The decision was reached to focus on creating an organization with the French, British, and local countries for regional defense. This was to be done in conjunction with an accelerated plan for Associated State independence.¹⁴³

The April 6 meeting of the NSC was vital because it was there that Eisenhower made clear to the NSC his decision that the United States would not engage in unilateral intervention in Indochina, but rather would seek to create an alliance system in Southeast Asia to compensate for the possible fall of Indochina in the wake of Dien Bien Phu. Multilateral intervention remained a possibility, but only if the British were involved. This proposal offered several advantages. It required much less U.S. manpower on the ground. It would insure that if the U.S. intervened it would not appear colonialist. It might have rendered intervention unnecessary. Immerman and Herring note that, in policy considerations was the fact that, “the mere

¹⁴² Ibid., 1261.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 1264-65.

establishment of such a coalition accompanied by stern warnings to the Communists might be sufficient to bolster the French will to resist,” though ultimately United Action would provide the best conditions for the U.S to intervene if necessary.¹⁴⁴ This ultimate decision had resulted from both the NSC machinery and Eisenhower’s informal discussions. He had, in his talks with Dulles, established beforehand that he believed unilateral intervention would never be accepted. Even Dulles only wished to obtain its possibility as a threat. The Special Index of NSC 177/5405 warned that intervention would play havoc with U.S. forces and their ability to act around the globe, a disruption Eisenhower was not prepared to cause if Indochina’s fall did not mean the fall of all of Southeast Asia. After all, if he had invested in unilateral intervention, the U.S. would have been forced to shift divisions to leave two more open and lack a strategic reserve, or the fill the extra divisions by recruitment or a draft.

In the meeting, Eisenhower demonstrated his habit of introducing and discussing apparently unplanned ideas, like a regional defense pact, which gained traction and became U.S. policy. However, it would appear that Eisenhower had part of the United Action idea in mind, as prior to the meeting; Eisenhower had written Churchill to gather support for the French. He told Churchill that if Indochina fell, in his view, Thailand, Burma, and Indonesia would be hard “to keep out of Communist hands,” quite at odds with the conclusions Eisenhower had reached privately.¹⁴⁵ He told Churchill that the best way to aid the French would be the establishment of an “ad hoc grouping or coalition composed of nations which have vital concern in the checking of Communist expansion in the area.”¹⁴⁶ This correspondence revealed that Eisenhower was being discreet, both with the Council, in not telling them how far along his thinking was in

¹⁴⁴ Immerman and Herring, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu,” 238.

¹⁴⁵ Eisenhower to Churchill, 4 April 1954, in Peter G. Boyle, ed., *The Churchill-Eisenhower Correspondence, 1953-1955* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 136.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 127-38.

regards to action with allies, and to his allies, with whom he did not share his own conclusions. Despite this, the Council does not seem to have been irrelevant. Eisenhower actively engaged the Council members regarding policy and suggested that he was testing out his own thinking using the Council process. In the meeting he found support for his ideas and a chance to discuss them in greater detail.

At this point, policy had been essentially decided, and further workings and re-workings would be of a more informal nature. As Greenstein and Burke explain,

The shift to informal deliberation occurred because the problems confronting the administration in Southeast Asia in this period [following the April 6 meeting] were largely operational. The NSC as a policy planning body was not an appropriate instrument for supervising negotiations with Congress or allied nations.¹⁴⁷

After this meeting, Dulles and then Radford would depart for Europe to try and iron out the policy decided upon in the April 6th session. Dulles reported that the British were hesitant to act before Geneva as they were fearful of a ground war and did not believe Indochina's fall would lead to the fall of all of Southeast Asia.¹⁴⁸ This was, of course, also Eisenhower's private view. Dulles remained Eisenhower's chief personal advisor, while Radford was clearly still too interventionist for Eisenhower's taste.¹⁴⁹ Dulles had departed for Europe on April 10, and would remain there for three weeks. He managed to secure from Eden an agreement to participate in a conference of powers before Geneva to discuss positions going into the talks. In Paris, his next destination, Dulles tried to convince the French to support United Action and not give in at Geneva. These plans were dropped, however, when the British pulled out of the conference of

¹⁴⁷ Greenstein and Burke, *How President's Test Reality*, 101.

¹⁴⁸ The Secretary of State to the President, Telegram 13 April 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1322-23. Dulles also mentioned that, according to the leftist British paper *The Daily Worker*, he was the most unwelcome visitor to England since 1066.

¹⁴⁹ Greenstein and Burke, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 101.

allied powers before Geneva.¹⁵⁰ The French Foreign Minister, Georges Bidault, would later claim that in his desperation for action, Dulles offered him the use of three atomic bombs. This is unsubstantiated by any other sources and seems quite unlikely given how far outside Dulles' authority such an offer would have been; furthermore Dulles' previous behavior does not hint that he would take such a step.¹⁵¹

Meanwhile, Radford arrived in England, where he met with England's Foreign Minister Anthony Eden and Ely. Ely stressed that Operation Vulture had to be carried out. Radford reported that, "[Ely] was surprised that I had not heard about [Operation Vulture] before. He went on further to say that this indicated a lack of close contact between the Americans and the military in Indochina which distressed him."¹⁵² Ely had not caught the drift that only multilateral intervention was an option. After the British pulled out of the Pre-Geneva meeting, Radford recounted that "[Eisenhower] indicated that I had frightened the British by my hard words or something - I don't know what they could have been. For my part I think Eden was a rather weak sister. He gave us the impression in Paris . . . that he was going to work with us."¹⁵³ Also during this time, possibly adding to English fear, was the fact that Richard Nixon had answered hypothetical press questions in regards to Indochina and mentioned that the U.S. might have to intervene, which disturbed both the American public and possibly the British.¹⁵⁴

It was eventually made clear to the U.S. representatives in England that the British would not support United Action. On April 23 and 24, Dulles continued to try and obtain Eden's agreement with United Action while turning down another French request for U.S. air

¹⁵⁰ Immerman and Herring, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu," 243-44.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁵² Memorandum for the File by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Radford), 24 April 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.1, 1397.

¹⁵³ Radford, Princeton interview, 45.

¹⁵⁴ Immerman and Herring, "Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu," 243-44.

intervention.¹⁵⁵ At a dinner Radford had with Winston Churchill, Radford gained the impression that “Sir Winston was presently unprepared to participate in collective action.” This Radford reported at the next NSC meeting upon his return to the United States, April 29.¹⁵⁶ According to Radford’s later accounts, Churchill made it clear that the United Kingdom would not help the French maintain their empire at the risk of nuclear war, after having lost so much of the British Empire already.¹⁵⁷ Churchill had made his worries about the bomb known earlier, writing to Eisenhower in March, writing, “There is widespread anxiety here about the H-bomb.”¹⁵⁸ Radford, who had in the past expressed a desire to use nuclear weaponry in Indochina, suggested that his presence was perhaps not beneficial. Eden, for his part, was suspicious of U.S. motives. During the Geneva Conference, he commented that, “all the Americans want to do is to replace the French and run Indochina themselves. They want to replace us in Egypt too. They want to run the world.”¹⁵⁹

With the British out of the picture, the NSC briefly looked at unilateral intervention again. Stassen declared that some final decision reaching Indochina had to be reached, and he urged that the U.S. “go to the limits.” Stassen and Eisenhower then engaged in one of the most extensive back-and-forths on record concerning Indochina. Eisenhower expressed his doubt and argued that if the United States went in after the French, it would appear as though the U.S. were colonizers. Stassen argued that the United States had to act like a world leader. “Without allies and associates,” Eisenhower explained, “the leader is just an adventurer like Genghis Khan.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 246.

¹⁵⁶ Memorandum of Discussion at the 194th Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, 29 April 1954, *FRUS, 1952-1954*, vol. 13, pt. 2, 1435.

¹⁵⁷ Immerman and Herring, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu,” 248.

¹⁵⁸ Churchill to Eisenhower, 29 March 1954, in Boyle, *Churchill-Eisenhower Correspondence*, 131.

¹⁵⁹ Evelyn Shuckburgh, *Descent to Suez: Diaries, 1951-56* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1986), 187, in Peter G. Boyle, ed., *The Eisenhower-Eden Correspondence, 1955-1957* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 18.

¹⁶⁰ “194th NSC Meeting,” *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.2 1440.

Stassen countered that the U.S. could depend upon Thailand, Australia, and New Zealand. Eisenhower expressed his belief that intervention in Indochina would result in a Chinese attack in Korea, and that investing in places like Vietnam would be “playing the enemy’s game-getting ourselves involved in brushfire wars in Burma, Afghanistan, and God knows where.”¹⁶¹ Stassen replied that brushfire wars in the future could be avoided by making it clear that general war would result from any Communist intrusion into any part of the world not currently under their control. For Stassen, the only war would then be in Indochina, where, as it already had communists in it, such a policy would be inapplicable. Eisenhower had already laid out his thinking on this subject outside the Council. On April 26 he had written to his friend (and Supreme Allied Commander in Europe) Al Gruenther, in which Eisenhower observed that the loss of Dien Bien Phu was not necessarily the end of the war in Indochina, and that a concert of nations in the area, such as NATO, would be best, as then, “we possibly wouldn’t *have* to fight.”¹⁶² With his thinking already laid out, Eisenhower was unlikely to change his mind unless he heard a convincing argument against those points. While Eisenhower listened to Stassen and allowed him to have his say, in the end he told the council that intervention with ground forces would not be deployed unilaterally, and that the United States policy without the British would be to continue to organize regional defense and await the return and report of Dulles on the diplomatic situation.¹⁶³

After the decisions of April 6 and April 29 in the Council, there was little to do but to wait for Dien Bien Phu to fall and try to minimize the damage. Cutler sent Smith a letter, discussing the general situation and the possible use of “new weapons,” i.e. nuclear weapons, but

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1441

¹⁶² Dwight Eisenhower, Washington, to Alfred Gruenther, Brussels, 26 April 1954, *FRUS 1952-1954*, vol.13, pt.2, 1419-1421.

¹⁶³ 194th NSC Meeting, *ibid.*, 1445

nothing would ever come of it.¹⁶⁴ Dulles returned to the White House May 5 and, after discussing the situation at length, agreed that the “conditions [in Indochina] do not justify U.S entry into Indochina as a belligerent at this time.”¹⁶⁵ At the next day’s NSC meeting, Dulles shared that assessment with the Council members. They agreed to accept a British proposal of organizing a five power staff agency consisting of the U.S., Britain, France, Australia, and New Zealand, to see to the defense of Southeast Asia. This would be supplementary to continued efforts to form a regional grouping. Allen Dulles’s intelligence report made it clear that Dien Bien Phu was in its death throes.¹⁶⁶ The next day, Dien Bien Phu surrendered, after suffering immensely since the beginning of March. Thousands of French soldiers had perished, and thousands more would die in enemy captivity. The Vietminh had accepted staggering casualties to win their political victory. The next day, the NSC would focus on the defense of the Tonkin delta at the 196th NSC meeting, while also focusing on preserving the EDC, which would eventually fail, and convincing France into internationalizing the conflict.¹⁶⁷ The next battle that was shaping up would be a diplomatic one at Geneva, where the State Department would take a lead on trying salvage the situation. Eisenhower ordered further study for Indochinese intervention, looking at economic warfare plans, U.N intervention, and independence for the Associated States, but ultimately concluded, with Dulles, that the U.S. simply could not do it alone.¹⁶⁸

Part IV

¹⁶⁴ Memorandum by the Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Cutler) to the Under Secretary of State (Smith), *ibid.*, 1445-1448.

¹⁶⁵ Memorandum of a Conference at the White House, 5 May 1954, *ibid.*, 1469.

¹⁶⁶ Memorandum of Discussion at the 195th Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, May 6, 1954, *ibid.*, 1492.

¹⁶⁷ Memorandum of Discussion at the 196th Meeting of the National Security Council, Saturday, May 8, 1954, *ibid.*, 1505-1511.

¹⁶⁸ Memorandum by the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council (Lay) to the Secretary of State, *ibid.*, 1581-1582; Memorandum of Conversation by the Secretary of State, 19 May 1954, *ibid.*, 1583.

In the first five weeks after Dien Bien Phu, intervention appeared on the surface to be an option, with Eisenhower and Dulles even going so far as to draft a Congressional resolution for intervention. However, as negotiations dragged on, a final agreement was reached in July of 1954 which partitioned the country into North and South Vietnam, provided for the withdrawal of the French, and set elections for 1956 to reunify the country. While denounced at home for being a concession, it was in some ways pleasing to the Eisenhower administration. South Vietnam could be built into a bulwark against communism, while French colonialism would hopefully no longer be the troublesome issue that it had been.¹⁶⁹ The Eisenhower administration found a leader in Ngo Dinh Diem, though its man on location, Joe Collins, reported that he doubted Diem's capacity to lead the country. Nevertheless, Diem remained in power, and Collins focused on trying to address Vietnam's modernization needs.¹⁷⁰ Dillon Anderson, who became Eisenhower's second Special Assistant for National Security in 1955, explained that the decision was made to insure stability. "[Eisenhower] was the one who made the decision to recognize and back Diem. . . . I knew how he felt about getting into a land war out there . . . he wasn't going to do it there or anywhere else on the continent of Asia."¹⁷¹ Anderson would leave his position after a year, but would be a member of a commission sent to evaluate the Mutual Aid programs the U.S. established in Southeast Asia, thereby fulfilling Cutler's idea of having outside groups conduct the study of operations to provide fresh perspective. While suggesting some personal misgivings about economic aid, Dillon's report on Vietnam was upbeat. South Vietnam was, "a nation acknowledged to be the Free World's strong anchor on the Southeast Asia Mainland," and that the process of equipping and training indigenous forces continued, and that aid would be

¹⁶⁹ Herring, *America's Longest War*, 37-41.

¹⁷⁰ Anderson, *Trapped By Success*, 95.

¹⁷¹ Anderson, Luter interview, 31.

required for Vietnam to be fully independent.¹⁷² The United States was preparing to be in Vietnam as long as it needed to be in a supporting role.

During the crisis at Dien Bien Phu, Eisenhower's National Security Council played an important part in Eisenhower deliberations, but was augmented by the ad hoc and informal means of advice that Eisenhower created or sought out. After the April 6th meeting of the NSC, unilateral intervention was taken off the table due a combination of factors. The Special Annex, with its warnings on the effect that committing ground forces would have on the U.S. defense posture reinforced Eisenhower's own fears of ground troops in Vietnam being absorbed "by divisions." His discussions with Dulles indicated that both men were at least wary of Indochina. By the time of the April 1 NSC meeting, Eisenhower knew when Radford urged air intervention that the rest of the Joint Chiefs were not in agreement. With unilateral intervention discarded, the focus turned to multilateral efforts. After those failed to find support, there was no real attempt to organize unilateral intervention again except for Harold Stassen's vehement arguments. It has been suggested that Eisenhower never intended for multilateral intervention to work, but he wanted the British to take the blame for non-intervention. Nixon noted in his memoirs that, "[Eisenhower] seemed resigned to doing nothing at all unless we could get allies . . . and he did not seem inclined to put much pressure on to get them to come along."¹⁷³ The British certainly felt that blame was being shifted onto them.¹⁷⁴ Some Eisenhower revisionists, such as Melanie Billings-Yun, conclude that, "[Eisenhower] succeeded in laying the blame on America's allies,

¹⁷² Ibid. 25; Reports of the Effect of Mutual Aid Treaties on Burma, the Phillipines, Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, 7 February 1959, Box 2, Folder 2, 1 (Each country numbered separately); Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁷³ Nixon, *Memoirs*, 151.

¹⁷⁴ Greenstein and Burke, *How President's Test Reality*, 81.

particularly Britain, for his decision not to intervene in Indochina prior to the Geneva conference.¹⁷⁵

It appears that Dulles desired the option of multilateral intervention. His sister recounted that, after having thought he had worked out some negotiation with the British, Dulles claimed that “Eden had double-crossed me. He lied to me . . . about our intervening in Indochina,” once that option fell through.¹⁷⁶ Like Dulles, Eisenhower may have wanted to retain the possibility of multilateral intervention, at least to stave off Indochina’s fall, ideally without any direct action. Eisenhower liked to have options, and if it came down to an emergency, he would have preferred, no doubt, to have the British-U.S. intervention as an option. As he made clear to Gruenther, Eisenhower thought the very possibility of multilateral intervention might prevent its necessity. He and Dulles, in their discussions, did seem personally frustrated with the French and the British lack of cooperation.¹⁷⁷ Eisenhower’s openness to various possibilities, the continued efforts at international cooperation, his agreement to the five power staff for Indochina, and his rebuke of Radford for scaring the British off would indicate that he did want the option of intervention with the British. If not, than he was certainly keeping his cards close to his chest. As Greenstein and Burke note, however, Eisenhower’s innermost thoughts “are bound to be elusive.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ Billings-Yun, 148. For alternate view, see Greenstein and Burke, 109-112, for an analysis of the political circumstances and why multilateral intervention failed.

¹⁷⁶ Eleanor Lansing Dulles, interview with Philip A. Crowl (McLean, VA and Washington D.C, 26 March 1965-22 April 1965-19 October 1965), in *John Foster Dulles Oral History Project* (Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ: Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1994), microfilm reel 3, 133-134. This statement must be taken with grain of salt, as the timeline is a bit confused. Mrs. Dulles seemed to think John F. Dulles said this in the beginning of April, at which point there would have been no talk with the British at all about United Action and no rejection by Eden. It would suggest, however, that Dulles had some kind of disappointment in Eden.

¹⁷⁷ Memorandum of Conversation with the President, 5 May 1954, *FRUS 1952-54*, vol.13, pt.2, 1466-1470.

¹⁷⁸ Greenstein and Burke, *How Presidents Test Reality*, 105.

With the greater revisionism accompanying Eisenhower, his decision to avoid involvement in Vietnam has drawn much applause in light of later U.S. difficulties there. Some scholars, however, consider Eisenhower's administration the father of the Vietnam War.

Summarizing the latter view, Robert McMahon explains that,

The Eisenhower administration grievously misunderstood and underestimated the most significant historical development of the mid-twentieth century—the Force of Third-World Nationalism. This failure of perception . . . constituted a major setback for American diplomacy.¹⁷⁹

George Herring clearly falls into a less appreciative camp, noting that in the case of South Vietnam, “had it looked all over the world, the United States could not have chosen a less likely place for an experiment in nation building.”¹⁸⁰ Herring further argues that, “lacking an acute knowledge of Vietnamese culture and history . . . the Americans seriously underestimated the difficulties of nation-building in an area without any real basis for nationhood.”¹⁸¹ The Eisenhower administration entered the White House, “confident that new methods or the more persistent application of old ones could turn a deteriorating situation around.”¹⁸² When the United States allowed Diem to cancel the election to reunite Vietnam in 1956, the Eisenhower administration, according to Richard Immerman, “signaled that diplomacy- and international law- were not substitutes for force. Soon it would find itself trapped by its own logic in summoning that force.”¹⁸³ Edward Cuddy argues that Eisenhower played, “arguably the most

¹⁷⁹ Robert J. McMahon, “Eisenhower and Third World Nationalism: A Critique of the Revisionists,” *Political Science Quarterly*, 101, no.3, 457. Academic Search Premier. 6 December 2008.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=5044972&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁸⁰ Herring, *The Longest War*, 47.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸³ Richard H. Immerman, “The United States and the Geneva Conference of 1954: A New Look,” in Hixson, *The United States and the Vietnam War*, 274.

crucial role of all presidents,” in U.S. involvement in Vietnam, arguing that SEATO was a “toxic blend of cold war ideology and distorted history.”¹⁸⁴

These scholars present strong cases, especially regarding the misunderstanding of third world nationalism. Eisenhower’s whole policy apparatus supported a continuation of arming indigenous forces and fostering Vietnamese nationalism, convinced that the strategy that had been tried since the Truman administration would succeed as long as it was done right, ignoring the reality that the nationalists were fighting for the Vietminh. Even recognizing that there was no strong, unifying figure as was found in Korea, Eisenhower hoped that a policy of what would be known as Vietnamization would succeed in preventing the necessity of direct U.S. intervention. However, even if he clearly misunderstood third world nationalism, he was resolutely anti-colonial. He and the whole NSC were frustrated by French Colonialism. Eisenhower did not want to engage in a war in Vietnam. While he tried to build an indigenous force, he never committed U.S. ground troops in actual combat that would tie the U.S. to Vietnam irrevocably and require outright victory. He had come to the conclusion in the National Security Council, based on the advice he received and his own observations that Indochina could fall without taking all of Southeast Asia with it. Dillon Anderson would note that

Eisenhower never let one of those things [like Vietnam] get to the point where we had ourselves committed to an outright confrontation . . . he never let our national commitments get to a point where we couldn’t distance it. . . . He tempered our action with what we could do successfully.¹⁸⁵

Whether or not he created a situation in which future presidents could become entangled in the maw of Vietnam will be always be a debatable point. Eisenhower, however, avoided committing

¹⁸⁴ Edward Cuddy, “Vietnam: Mr. Johnson’s War, or Mr. Eisenhower’s?” *The Review of Politics* 66, no. 4 (Autumn, 2003), 352. JSTOR. Accessed 6 December 2008. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1408716>.

¹⁸⁵ Anderson, Luter interview, 37.

the U.S. to Vietnam and it seems unlikely that he would have deployed actual combat forces, due to his thoughts dating back to the beginning of the Indochinese crisis.

The example of Dien Bien Phu provides a look into the National Security Council in its early days. It was still finding its exact tone. Eisenhower was occasionally unhappy with the Planning Board. The OCB was not used in any meaningful way, and would not even be part of the NSC for another four years. It did not lead to immediately decisive solutions. Frequently during Dien Bien Phu, matters were tabled until the next session. Eisenhower in general was, “not characterized by the rapid, decisive decision-making style of less complex leaders like Truman and Lyndon Johnson.”¹⁸⁶ Immerman and Herring argue that the NSC was of peripheral importance to the decisions at Dien Bien Phu and “lagged behind the unfolding events in Indochina.”¹⁸⁷ Eisenhower, after all, made his important decisions outside the Council, such as reaching the determination that ground forces would not be needed and that the British would have to support any intervention. However, those decisions themselves were made in the context of informal advice, previous NSC meetings, and NSC policy papers spelling out his alternatives, such as the Special Annex warning of the effect intervention would have on America’s manpower reserves. Eisenhower was able to use what he needed from the NSC, and he set up other methods of gathering advice and information, either from ad hoc groups or his personal communications, when he felt he needed it. In particular, private meetings with Dulles had a great individual effect on policy.

In the end, the NSC, despite some of its difficulties, would prove a vital forum in which Eisenhower would make decisions; even when ideas were already formulated, he tested them with the Council, not letting them know his own thoughts. His desire to have the meetings so

¹⁸⁶ Preston, *The President and his Inner Circle*, 77.

¹⁸⁷ Immerman and Herring, “Eisenhower, Dulles, and Dienbienphu,” 251.

regularly in the first place and his continuation of those meetings indicated that he placed great value on the Council's uncolored opinions. The Planning Board provided plans that were the basis of discussion both in and out of Council. It was ultimately a formal mechanism that Eisenhower used that could be allowed adaptability and did not restrict debate or information. It was also not a rule by committee. Eisenhower decided matters for himself, but did so after receiving the best advice he could from the relevant members of the Council. Even if he disagreed with a Council member, as was the case with Stassen, he engaged in vigorous debate, defended his position and listened carefully to others. The NSC was helpful in anticipating consequences and acting for the best benefit of the United States. Robert Cutler, testifying before the Jackson Subcommittee after Eisenhower left office, told the Congress, "to give a President a tool he can use for his own use is the reason why the National Security Act seems to me a major triumph of our national legislature."¹⁸⁸ For Cutler, it could be called a triumph because he felt that Eisenhower's NSC had in its eight years contributed greatly to Eisenhower's efforts to form intelligent national security policy to challenges like those posed in Vietnam. In the end, while heavily invested in Vietnam, before and after Dien Bien Phu, Eisenhower's formal and informal channels of communication convinced him both that commitment to Dien Bien Phu would negatively impact the United States, and that Indochina was not an area which the U.S. absolutely had to defend to prevent Southeast Asia's fall to communism. As such, he decided to avoid coming to a point in which the U.S. would be committed to war. While not perfect, and not the exclusive foundation of advice by any means, Dwight D. Eisenhower's National Security Council played a vital role in providing well thought out policy for the United States during Eisenhower's administration.

¹⁸⁸ Cutler, in Jackson, *The National Security Council*, 119.