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Debating the Future of Indochina in 1945: Making Your Case

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Objectives

Rationale

"Making your case" is a skill that is valuable throughout life (and on standardized essay tests). A strong argument not only provides rationale for supporting one side of an issue, but also recognizes and addresses opposing points of view. Many students struggle to form convincing arguments because they are unused to looking at topics from different angles. As students enter adolescence, they begin to form strong independent opinions; it is an opportune time to begin building effective persuasive skills. This unit helps students develop these skills by putting them in the middle of an historical debate and requiring them to consider and write about various points of view.

Students in French classes are generally unaware of the role that France played in world events of the 19th and 20th centuries. France was a major player in the field of colonization, and a key United States ally. Students often seem to have the sense that the United States is the only force worth noting in history; this unit demonstrates how the United States is only one of many influences on international politics. In the context of a French class, we will focus especially on France and its involvement in world affairs.

French Indochina (now Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam) is an ideal region to focus on because several of my students are first- or second-generation Laotian immigrants. This gives at least a few of the students a more personal connection to the topic. The majority of my other students are of Puerto Rican descent, and many have some awareness of the tension between the U.S. and Puerto Rico regarding issues of ownership. This provides a hook for my students and brings them in toward the subject at hand. These ideas are complicated, and debating issues can be difficult, especially at younger ages; it is important that as many students as possible feel some connection before we even start. If students are in some way "attached" to the material, they are more willing to struggle through the frustration of organizing a persuasive argument.

Academic Setting

This unit was developed with a 7th- or 8th-grade French class in mind, but its topics and strategies are easily applicable to higher grade levels. The content matter is by no means limited to French classes, either; the international nature of the discussion makes the unit very relevant to social studies classes. The lessons were

designed with minimal reading and research required on the part of the students; teachers of higher-level classes may wish to expand the lesson to include more active research on the part of the debaters.

Unit background

Indochina is the region of Southeast Asia consisting of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. The region has been a center of conflict throughout history as kingdoms and countries struggled to set borders and define ownership among themselves and neighboring Siam (now Thailand) and China. This unit examines Indochina in the post-WWII era, just at the point of the Japanese surrender in August of 1945. The area is hotly contested at this point; France claimed Indochina as colonial land before the war, but lost authority as the French struggled during World War II. Japan stepped in to gain a stronger foothold on the Asian mainland while the Allied powers were focused on other regions. With the end of the war, the victorious United States joined the discussion of what to do with Japan's territories, and decided to divide the area among China and Britain, eventually returning the area to France, a long-time ally of the U.S.

Establishing the Region

Indochina was originally populated by tribal groups probably related to the Aborigines found in Australia. Waves of emigrants from India moved into the area in the 1st century and began to build up kingdoms that were largely interdependent. These kingdoms often worked together to resist Chinese invasions from the north and Siamese attacks from the west. 1 Khmer, the kingdom that is now Laos and Cambodia, became a central power in the 12th century, but by the late 1500s was a subordinate kingdom to Siam.

Annam (now Vietnam) was established as an empire around 1000 A.D. After centuries of struggle with China, Annam officially gained independence in 1427, but owed much of its cultural heritage to China, and in fact continued to pay annual tributes to the Chinese Emperor.2 Though independent, Annam saw a great deal of instability; uprisings and fractions continued to crop up until French colonization came to the region.3

Significant numbers of Europeans arrived in the region starting in the 1500s. Portuguese and Dutch entrepreneurs opened factories there during the 16th and 17th centuries, while Rome made a concerted effort to station missionaries in the area. France, in a period of great national expansion, took an interest in Indochinese missionary work in the mid-1600s, and soon became the leading influence in the area.

In the late 1700s, Vietnam was the site of a great deal of unrest, and in 1784 a claimant to the Vietnamese throne requested aid from France in his effort to reestablish his authority.4 French volunteers helped the prince, and then remained in the area to lead various public works projects, further enmeshing France in the affairs of the region.

By the mid-1800's, Christian missionaries were gaining local converts by the thousands. Many in the emperor's court immediately saw the conflict between Christian subjects and the Vietnamese government, which held to such traditions as a harem for the emperor. The emperor declared Christianity illegal and Vietnamese troops began the systematic arrest (and sometimes execution) of missionaries.5 France, as the primary missionary force in the area, stationed naval squadrons in the nearby waters, and trade between France and Vietnam slowed to a trickle. Tensions escalated in the region until, in 1851, Prince-President Louis Napoleon officially pledged more support for missionaries in the region and declared the conquest of Indochina a French national goal.6

A decade of battles followed, and in 1862 France and Vietnam signed a treaty giving France official control of

several Vietnamese provinces. The treaty was signed but not embraced by Vietnamese authorities; several rebellions followed, even as Vietnam continued to sign various treaties that affirmed French authority.7 Five years after conquering Vietnam, France signed a treaty with Cambodia, adding Cambodia to the French-protected region of Southeast Asia. In 1893, France pushed Siam out of eastern Laos, expanding French influence still further inland.8

French Indochina

On the whole, Vietnamese citizens never acquiesced to French rule. On top of the general sense of a loss of independence, the colonized peoples also faced great financial strain. The French government set extremely high taxes and provided little in return. A lack of finances forced schools to close, which particularly angered the Vietnamese, who "traditionally attach great importance to the acquisition of diplomas and degrees."9 Not surprisingly, opposition to French authority quickly organized.

As early as 1905, members of the scholar class in Vietnam formed groups to prepare Vietnam for independence. They focused particularly on building Vietnam's technical and industrial base by seeking assistance from, among others, Japan.10 This group also organized to educate the nation's youth into a generation who would be capable of leading an independent nation. Some of these youth even studied in Paris itself, particularly at the university level. During World War I, anti-colonialists saw their chance when French troops were called away from Asia into European action, but their rebellion was undermined and the French re-energized after 1918.11

Many Vietnamese continued what they saw as legal attempts to build their nation. In 1923, a citizen group sent a representative to France to demand freedom of press and the right to assemble, but Paris did not meet their requests.12 Demonstrators in Vietnam were routinely arrested, forcing resistance groups to go underground.

By the 1930s, many independence fighters had turned subversive, and some circles even turned to terrorism to publicize their cause. The National Party of Vietnam routinely blackmailed officials and assassinated those who opposed Vietnamese independence. Bombings became more commonplace. The Indochinese Communist Party, who also did not oppose violence as a means to an end, saw their membership increase rapidly throughout the decade.13 France responded to these new uprisings with a grand show of force; in the last three months of 1930 French troops and aircraft killed 10,000 civilians, and individuals associated with Vietnamese independence movements were captured and either imprisoned or executed.14

Japanese Occupation

After the fall of Nanking in 1937, the Chinese government retreated to Chungking. This move made the French-guarded railway from Indochina to Chungking the Chinese government's primary link to the outside world. Japanese leaders quickly identified the railway as crucial to the Chinese, but did not attempt to shut it down until 1940, when Germany invaded France. At that point, Japan ordered France to stop all trade between Indochina and China and installed a Japanese control commission to enforce the ban.15

French resources were strained as the German occupation took root in their homeland. The French Governor-General of Indochina had little choice but to step aside as Japan shut down the railroad and then proceeded to build military encampments in the region. The Japanese take-over was somewhat slow and relatively subtle. In September of 1940, a 2-day battle overwhelmed the French fighting forces, and the French government signed an agreement officially allowing Japanese troops to be stationed in the area.16 Aside from that

outburst of battle, there were few signs of aggression, so much of the native population was not immediately aware of the change of occupation. The local French emissaries, however, were quite conscious of Japanese action, and they did not approve. While emissaries would not outwardly resist Japanese forces, they did set up wireless contact with American intelligence agencies operating out of China; these links provided valuable information regarding Japanese troop movements.17

Meanwhile, Siam was also anxious to take advantage of French weakness in the area. Along the Laotian border, bombings and artillery fire became quite prevalent as Siam attempted to regain lost territories.18

The United States reoccupied the Philippines in 1944, making an allied invasion of Indochina a distinct possibility. By March of 1945, Japan was concerned enough to demand that all local French forces be placed under Japanese command, and all French resistance was actively put down and overwhelmed. Despite these efforts, it was clear to many that the end was near for the Japanese empire; it was simply a question of when.

Emperor Bao Dai, who had been raised in France so that he would be educated enough to lead an independent nation, began to organize. He worked to put together a respectable, independent government before the Japanese defeat, and any loyalty he may have had to France and the allies was given a secondary status in his efforts.19 He established a tax system and appointed a premier just before August of 1945, when Japan agreed to transfer administration to the Vietnamese government.

The Aftermath

Despite Bao Dai's efforts, Vietnam was in a difficult position at the end of World War II. Just prior to Japan's surrender, Vietnam was essentially in a state of anarchy. Communications and railways had been bombed out by allied troops, and the failure of the rice crop had caused a famine across the region. The rural population refused to pay taxes, while the middle classes renewed their devotion to meetings and demonstrations. The Vietnamese government had no established authority with which to fill the vacuum of power, and chaos ensued.20

As Bao Dai's premier accepted administrative duties from Japan, others in Vietnam also stepped in to govern. The Communist party, which had reorganized into the Viet Minh, immediately took over in Hanoi; other nationalist groups set up government seats in Saigon. Meanwhile, China had worked with the Viet Minh to set up a government as early as 1944, declaring an interest in eliminating Japanese and French influence so that Vietnam could gain true national independence -- with Chinese assistance.21

Bao Dai, seeing the fractured state of his country, became concerned that France would seize this opportunity and exploit the weakness of the Vietnamese government (or lack thereof). He abdicated authority to the Viet Minh in the hopes that the country would unify under their leadership.22 Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Minh leader, rallied his forces and began to build his nationalist revolution. In a speech, he quoted the Declaration of Independence as he listed his grievances against the French; meanwhile those who questioned the authority of the Viet Minh were arrested by armed gangs of "People's Committees" that sprung up across the countryside.23

Regional Interests

It is at this point that the debate over the fate of the region can be most engaging. There are several countries involved, each with various interests, loyalties and resentments over recent events. The year is 1945, and the aftermath of World War II needs to be settled.

Vietnam

At the point of the Japanese surrender, many groups in Vietnam have a vested and active interest in gaining independence for their country. The most significant group among the freedom fighters is certainly the Viet Minh, who are well-organized and led by the eloquent and well-educated Ho Chi Minh. American intelligence reports from the region indicate that "anti-French feelings are shared by 100 percent of the population in many areas,"24 and the independence fighters have become impossible to ignore. The Indochinese Communist Party, led by the Viet Minh, met in August of 1945 to establish its plan for freeing Vietnam from outside rule of any kind. This plan included disarming the Japanese and their puppets prior to the arrival of the Allies, and, when the Allies arrived, greeting them in a manner indicating the Viet Minh as the established governmental authority in Vietnam.25

The Viet Minh, also a substantial military force under General Vo Nguyen Giap, are resisting the colonial powers for a number of reasons. These are leaders who have been denouncing French rule for decades by this time, and who have repeatedly stated their concerns in international settings. At the heart of their arguments is the belief that the French are denying the Vietnamese their basic freedoms. As mentioned above, Vietnamese emissaries went to France requesting such rights as freedom of the press and the right to assemble, but these demands were soundly ignored in Paris.

Historically, Vietnam has struggled against China for independence; it is possible that this history has Ho Chi Minh reluctant to accept support from China if possible. In the summer of 1945, he does inform American officers that "if you do not help us achieve our goal, I know a country that will be only too glad to come to our aid."26 Indeed, China actively used Vietnamese Communist refugees during WWII as spies to gather intelligence on the Japanese occupation. Ho Chi Minh worked with China during that time, largely to gain access into Vietnam and to amass funding for his impending revolution.27 Despite Chinese backing of his independent government in 1944, Ho Chi Minh devotes much of his time and energy to enlisting American support for his vision.

Ho Chi Minh has good reason in 1945 to expect the full aid of the United States. In 1941, President Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill agreed on the Atlantic Charter, which stated that the two democracies "respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they wish to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them." 28 Throughout the war, Roosevelt continued to make periodic statements against colonialism, even when British officials distanced themselves from the Charter.29

During WWII, the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) cooperated with the Viet Minh because in the midst of the chaos, the Viet Minh was the one organized group that could aid the U.S. in rescuing downed airmen in the region.30 This cooperation extended to supplying the Viet Minh with weapons, which only strengthened Ho Chi Minh's faith in American support.31 This faith may have been shaken by a brief show of American support for French troops in March of 1945; the French soldiers were being routed by a Japanese pre-emptive strike, and Roosevelt's military leaders finally persuaded him to allow a drop of supplies to the French.32 Nevertheless, when the Japanese surrender, Ho Chi Minh is diligent in his efforts to win over every American officer who meets him, and he sends repeated missives to Washington, D.C. requesting help in building a constitutional government that will gradually eliminate French rule.33

In May of 1945, John Foster Dulles spoke on self-determination at the United Nations conference in San Francisco. Two months later, Ho Chi Minh met with OSS agents, noting that "your statesmen make eloquent speeches about helping those with self-determination. We are self-determined. Why not help us?"34 His need

for American assistance, he says, is due only to the fact that at this stage his country is very poor. He foresees complete Vietnamese independence within the next five to ten years if the United States will simply help Vietnam rebuild and develop its internal structure.35

France

At the point of the Japanese surrender, France is very eager to reclaim its status as a world power. As early as 1942, French officials expressed concern that the Atlantic Charter might be used to make French colonies into independent nations.36 After the allied victory in Europe, American agents reported that France was quietly allied with the British in an effort to reclaim Indochina as a French colony without allowing the U.S. any say in the matter.37 At the very least, France is struggling to rebuild as a nation after WWII, and the colonies, providing taxes and natural resources, are an excellent source for that effort. At most, de Gaulle is a vocal leader who sees the restoration of the pre-war French Empire as vital to rebuilding a sense of national pride and strength.

French officials at this time may also have an incomplete view of France's role in the region. French industry leaders, while still in control in Indochina, had primarily seen the colonized peoples in subservient roles such as servant and clerk; few had any dealings with the more educated scholar class. In reports to the homeland, therefore, many of these French citizens indicated that Vietnam could not function without the more enlightened French guidance to lead the way. 38 In May of 1945, in the midst of great unrest, the French ambassador to China spoke to his American counterpart about the beauty of the colonial relationship: "The real trusteeship is in our hearts. It is a mutual confidence which exists between Indochinese and French."39 Certainly any French official wanting to believe that colonization is at this point justified is able to find ample support in the annals of French colonial history.

Perhaps the main concern of the French regarding this region is that the United States is not a consistent ally. After the development of the Atlantic Charter, President Roosevelt frequently spoke against colonialism. The French were well aware of Roosevelt's hope for an international trusteeship to oversee Indochina's development, which was of course a direct threat to French control of the colony.40

Despite American assurances that the United States would support a return to France's prewar glory, support had in fact been lacking. In early 1945, the French garrisons in Indochina made plans to overthrow the Japanese occupiers and requested American assistance in transporting French troops. The United States determined that this action was not critical to the overall objective of beating Japan and declined to get involved.41 As France suffered heavy losses in March of 1945, American soldiers in the region were, much to their dismay, under official orders to remain neutral.42 As mentioned above, Roosevelt eventually resupplied French troops, but only after weeks of damage had been done. While France could certainly benefit from American support in this post-war era, de Gaulle remains highly suspicious of American motives with regard to Indochina.

China

Throughout the war, China was an incidental supporter of the Vietnamese independence movements. Initially, China saw the political refugees who landed in China as useful allies in spying on Japanese activity in Indochina. In return for intelligence information, China provided funding and protection for the rebel groups, among them the Viet Minh, as they repeatedly crossed the border into Vietnam.43 This alliance led to more official encouragement of the independence movements as the war came to an end.

On the record, China set a clear precedent of supporting Vietnam's efforts to gain independence. In 1944, Roosevelt met with Chiang Kai-shek, who agreed that an international trusteeship of the region was the ideal solution to the problem of Indochina.44 Also that year, China helped Ho Chi Minh develop a provisional government that officially declared its intention to oust both Japanese and French control of the region with the assistance of China.45 China is, at this stage, openly engaged in the affairs of Vietnam, but declares a desire only to help Vietnam build itself as a nation.

Off the record, of course, China has much to gain from having a hand in Vietnam's affairs. Though the armies in the region were disciplined in their behavior toward the Vietnamese, they did not hesitate, even at the highest levels, to take advantage of the economic opportunities in the region. Chinese currency was introduced in northern Vietnam "at an advantageous rate of exchange," while the confiscated war materials of the Japanese troops were sold off to supplement the soldiers' incomes.46 Thus, while the Chinese are supporting the Vietnamese struggle for independence after the Japanese surrender, they certainly have a more selfish stake in the region, as well.

United States

Toward the end of WWII, the United States made a profound effort to remain officially neutral in Indochina, leading to a curious array of mixed alliances. France and the United States are allies on paper, but as mentioned above, American support is at times inconsistent. At the same time, the United States gave aid to the Viet Minh during the war, as the Viet Minh were organized and knowledgeable about the region when American forces needed help recovering downed airmen and planning strategy. Five years of this confusion have led to a tangled policy regarding the region, and the alliances fostered during the war are now conflicting.

President Roosevelt's feelings toward colonialism were not a secret. Roosevelt stood by his Atlantic Charter whenever possible, and allowed his diplomats to assuage French colonial fears only when strategy dictated a need for the solid backing of the French.47 Roosevelt, writing to his secretary of state in 1944, indicated his opposition to returning Indochina to French rule, and outlined his hope for establishing an international trusteeship. In a strident assessment of the situation, he declares that "France has milked [Indochina] for one hundred years. The People of Indo-China are entitled to something better than that."48 Roosevelt felt British opposition to the trusteeship was only due to Britain's own colonial interests, and he stated a few months later that "the white man's rule [in Indochina] is nothing to be proud of."49

Roosevelt seemed particularly opposed to French involvement in Indochina. In discussions with his secretary of state, he pointed out that France had been in the region for "nearly one hundred years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning."50 Roosevelt's feelings toward the French were not helped by the fact that the French government had signed the agreement permitting Japanese troops to be stationed in Indochina, an act which led inevitably to the Japanese occupation.51 These concerns had led to Roosevelt's official position of neutrality regarding the area -- though he could not completely sever ties with France, he was not eager to support their bid to recolonize.

Roosevelt believed China did not want to take over Vietnam, resulting in a U.S.-China alliance with regard to the fate of Indochina. When Churchill questioned Chiang Kai-shek's motives in March of 1944, Roosevelt responded that Churchill, with "400 years of acquisitive instinct" in his blood, would not "understand how a country might not want to acquire land somewhere if they can get it."52

Naturally it is important to note that at the end of WWII, Roosevelt, the driving force behind the anti-colonial

sentiment in the U.S. government, is no longer the president. Harry S Truman has been installed in office, and his concerns are somewhat different. Truman may have worried about the outcome if Vietnam were left to its own devices; in light of the chaos erupting as the Japanese leave, it is fair to wonder if Vietnam can actually govern itself. Supporting independence may do more harm than good, regardless of any desire on Truman's part to fulfill his predecessor's wishes.

By the time of the Japanese surrender, Truman finds himself in a difficult bind. American diplomats in the region have warned him that anti-France sentiment is strong and that French efforts to destroy the nationalist movement will result in "bloody failure."53 At the same time, a State Department study of Communist activity in Southeast Asia finds that the Communists will likely be victorious if there is no outside intervention in the region. These Communist elements are viewed as dangerous and clearly opposed to American ideals such as democracy.55 If he is to be involved at all, Truman has the unpleasant choice of supporting independence -- and therefore Communism -- or supporting France, who will almost certainly lose in the long run.

Strategies

The unit opens with students describing all they know about the region of Southeast Asia. New Haven, like many communities around the United States, has a significant population of immigrants from Southeast Asia; this is an excellent opportunity for those students to share their understanding and be the experts in the room. Students are also invited to share any knowledge of colonies and colonization; it is important to have an understanding of what knowledge they bring to the table before starting.

This task can be done in a number of ways, including a full-class brainstorming session, or small groups mapping out their knowledge and questions on large pieces of paper to share with the class as a whole at the end of the session. One strategy I find effective is to have students silently come up to the board one or two at a time and write any knowledge or questions they have. At the end of the session (which can last as long as it needs to), the board is full of thoughts and ideas, which can then be discussed and explained as necessary. Often, this helps students think more clearly, because they aren't frantically trying to get the attention of the one scribe at the board, and the room feels more peaceful and open to their thoughts.

After consulting a map to gain an understanding of where our focus countries are located in the world, students read a brief passage about the history of the region (included under *Classroom Activities*) so that everyone starts on the same page. This passage is similar to the background written above, with an overview of who "owned" what, and when and where different countries come into play. The passage ends at the end of World War II, before any decisions are made about "rightful ownership."

Students then divide into teams to represent each country with an interest in the region. For my own purposes, countries include France, Vietnam, China, and the United States, but teachers may expand that list as discussed below in *Possible Adjustments* . Each team is given more historically accurate detail about their country's goals and interests, and as a team they brainstorm proposals about the fate of the region. Each team must come up with one proposal, based on their country's interests, for what should happen to Indochina. Remind students that this is a chance to be creative -- a unique proposal might be the best one.

Once proposals are presented to the class (with explanations of why the proposal is a good one), the teams

should meet individually again and look over the proposals. As a team, they should decide what they like and dislike about each proposal, then explain their positions in an organized debate moderated by the teacher. This gives teams a chance to voice their point of view more carefully. Teams then meet individually to decide how to vote. Votes need to be based on country goals, not on individual feelings about the matter. Each student must write an explanation of his or her vote, and it must be based on the goals of his or her team. ("We should leave Vietnam alone because it's mean not to" is not a valid explanation.) This explanation might also include reasons they did not vote for the other proposals. A homework assignment will be to describe what they feel will happen now that the proposal has passed.

Once a proposal is put in place, students will be faced with a crisis. This crisis may be a rebellion in the region, an economic problem, or perhaps a natural disaster. As much as possible, it needs to be based on the proposal that came out of the first vote. If the countries remain a colony, the actual rebellion that took place is the best crisis to handle; if Indochina is allowed to be independent, a humanitarian crisis such as a famine or a rebel uprising can stand in. To add to the authenticity of the debates, teams can be given a news release describing the crisis; if such an undertaking is too large, the crisis can simply be described to the students. Again students come to the table to address the situation, this time with less guidance. Again, they need to develop a strategy to handle the problem, and they need to consider the interests of their respective countries.

The crisis is handled with another discussion and vote. This time, however, each student is given another student's name at random, and s/he must explain the reasoning behind THAT vote. This may be followed with another news release describing what transpired as a result of the crisis management. (As students' proposals veer further away from historical fact, however, it may be increasingly difficult to formulate a news release that makes sense in the context of the debates.) Again, students must write a brief paragraph describing what they think will happen as a result of the proposal just passed.

Classroom Activities

The handouts included in this section were developed based on the research noted above, so I have not footnoted the handouts themselves. They are written in more colloquial language for less strenuous reading, and some details have been glossed over so students do not get bogged down. It may be helpful to have students answer basic content questions about the readings or to briefly outline their positions before beginning the task of developing a proposal, particularly with the younger students.

Handout One: Overview (2 pages)

Indochina

The countries now known as Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam were once considered one region called Indochina. Around the year 1000 A.D., the empire of Annam (which is now Vietnam) was established. For hundreds of years, China owned this empire, but eventually, in 1427, Annam became independent. Khmer, the kingdom that is now Laos and Cambodia, was developed in the 1100s.

Europeans got interested in this part of Asia around the 1500s. By the mid-1800s, European missionaries were converting thousands of native Indochinese to Christianity, and the Vietnamese emperor became concerned.

According to the Christian priests, some Vietnamese traditions were not acceptable to Christians, and the emperor worried that the Europeans were destroying his country's culture. He made Christianity illegal, and his armies arrested the priests and missionaries who stayed in his empire. Many of these missionaries were killed, and since most of the missionaries were French, France got involved.

French Occupation

France sent its navy into the waters off of Vietnam, and what started out as protection for the missionaries turned into an effort to take over the area completely. By the 1890s, France had conquered Indochina and declared it a colony. This was not unusual for that time; many countries took over other regions and countries without asking the residents what they wanted. For many years, this was just the way things worked, and not many people thought anything of it.

Indochina, however, was never a quiet colony for France. Right from the start, rebel groups were organizing themselves, trying to get France out of their country. With France in charge, Indochina became very poor; schools had to close down and much of the money in the area went to the French government. Vietnam was especially active in resisting French power. Many Vietnamese scholars organized peaceful rebel groups and tried to make their own government to replace the French. Other groups sent representatives to Paris to ask France to grant rights, such as freedom of press, to the Vietnamese people. The French government did not take these requests very seriously, and by the 1930s, the Vietnamese protesters were getting violent. Some terrorist groups started bombing French buildings and assassinating French officials.

Japanese Occupation

In World War II, Japan took over large parts of mainland Asia, but they left Indochina alone until 1940, when Germany invaded France back in Europe. It was too hard for France to defend their own country and Indochina at the same time, so when Japan asked to put troops in Indochina, France had to give in. (It also helped that Germany, which was on Japan's side, was running France.)

The Japanese were not really interested in Indochina; it was just a good place to keep troops and station headquarters. The French troops still there, however, were enemies of Japan, and they tried to fight the Japanese. The Japanese had a strong military and quickly put down any French fighters… but while this was keeping the occupiers busy, the Vietnamese were quietly getting ready for the end of the war. China helped one rebel group called the Viet Minh organize a government, while the former emperor of Vietnam, Bao Dai, was organizing his own government and appointing officials.

The End of the War

Just before Japan surrendered at the end of WWII, they gave their power to Bao Dai's government, but the Viet Minh were not satisfied. They felt they could do a better job running the country, so they declared their own government to be the *true* government of Vietnam. In the meantime, it seemed like no one was really in charge, and the country was falling apart. There was a famine in the region, so people were starving, and some smaller violent rebel groups were causing trouble, as well. Bao Dai, who worried that this confusion would give the French a chance to take over again, quickly agreed to let the Viet Minh government rule. Governments can't be built in a day, though, and not all the rebel groups wanted to let the Viet Minh run the show. Indochina was a mess, and decisions had to be made.

What should happen to Indochina now? Who gets to decide? Does France get the region back since they had it

before? Should Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia just be made independent countries with their own governments? Japan "owned" the region last -- since the United States beat Japan, should the U.S. now get the rights to the region? China helped Vietnamese rebels set up the government that's now in charge; should China be in control?

Handout Two: Point of View for Vietnam (2 pages)

Leader

Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the Viet Minh, who is very well-educated and speaks fluent English and French

Basic goals

Independence! You've been trying to get out from under French control for almost 100 years. You want to set up your own government, not live under some other country's rules. Another thing you don't want is for some other Vietnamese group to run your government -- you know that right now, you are the only people in your country organized enough to handle the job. Letting the emperor or someone else take charge would be a disaster, and France might come in and take over again while your country tries to get itself together.

The only problem is that right now, your country is a bit of a mess: there are still French and Japanese troops here and there, there's no government really in charge, and your country is very poor. You can have your country up and running in five or ten years, but you need some outside help to get started.

Other countries

France: Obviously, you don't like France one bit. These people took over your country and caused a lot of trouble doing it. You think French rule is the reason your country is poor, and because of France you lost a lot of schools, which you thought were very important. You tried to peacefully work with the French, but they just ignored you. They won't even give you the freedoms they give their own citizens! When you tried to take your country back, they sent you to China, not letting you come back to Vietnam, your own home. You want the French out of your country for good.

China: Before France came along, China ran your country for awhile. You're not exactly eager to let them be completely in charge, just in case they want to take over again. China has been helpful, though; they helped you set up your government and they've offered to help you become an independent nation. They might turn out to be a good friend to you. During World War II, China helped your rebel group by giving them money and protection when you snuck back into Vietnam; in return, you told China what the Japanese were doing in your country -- you were spies -- so you're on good terms with China right now. They are also a large and powerful country in Asia, so even if you don't completely trust them, you can't make an enemy of them. That could be dangerous for you.

United States: The U.S. is hard to figure out. During WWII, you helped the U.S. the same way you helped China -- when American pilots got shot down in your country, you helped the U.S. get them back, and you told the U.S. what the Japanese were up to. In return, the United States gave you weapons, so they seem to be friends. President Roosevelt, who just died, was also a big fan of making countries independent; he hated the whole idea of colonies, and he said so all the time.

You've got a lot in common with the U.S., too. The U.S. used to be a colony, and they fought for their freedom -- just like you! The Americans should definitely see that you just want the same thing they have.

There are a couple of problems, though. During WWII, when you were helping the United States, you noticed that sometimes the Americans would drop shipments of food and supplies to the French troops near you. You know that France and the U.S. have had good relations as long as the United States has been a country, so it's possible that friendship might be stronger than any American desire to help you. Also, since Roosevelt died, you aren't sure if the new president (President Truman) is as into getting rid of colonialism.

Still, how can the Americans *not* believe in you? You just want a declaration of independence and a constitution like theirs! They may be your best friends if you can win them over to your side.

Handout Three: Point of View for France (2 pages)

Leader

General Charles de Gaulle, who led the fight to win France back from the Germans. He is a loud, confident man who is proud to be French.

Basic goals

You want to get France back to the way it was before the war. You have managed to get your homeland in Europe back from Germany -- that was a tough fight that lasted nearly five years. Now you are ready to get your country back to the powerful place it used to be. Right now, you are low on money, and a good way to get money back is to get help from your colonies. Your goal is getting your colonies organized again; you have several colonies in Africa and in Asia, and now you are ready to be in charge again.

The great thing is that now you can go back to helping the Indochinese, so it's a good situation. Now that the Japanese are out of the way, you can help Indochina run their country, and you add some strength to your own country in the process. Everybody wins!

Other countries

Vietnam: Vietnam seems to think it has a government in place, but it's not the *real* government of Vietnam. It's just a group of rebels you kicked out a few years ago -- they think they can run the place, but they really can't. They aren't even worth talking to -- they're too disorganized and they have no experience with this sort of thing. They are crazy, violent men who have no business trying to lead a peaceful country. Because you've been in Vietnam for so long, you know the place better than anybody, so you are in a great position to take charge again and get things back to normal.

Vietnam is a beautiful place, but it cannot take care of itself. For years, your citizens who have been living in Indochina have sent back reports about the area. They have told you that the natives there are good people who make excellent workers, but that they are not very well educated. These people need you to help them run the country -- otherwise, they will just be a nation of poor, helpless peasants.

China: China was on your side during WWII, so they are friends of yours, but you aren't very close to them. You know China used to take over parts of Indochina all the time, so you might not want to let them get too involved. So far, they haven't caused any problems for you, but you don't necessarily trust them completely.

United States: It's hard to say what's going on with the U.S.! You have been friends with them since they first became a country -- in fact, you helped them get independence -- and in WWII, they were very important in helping you get your country back. Still, can you really trust them? Lately, it seems like they're against you

every time you turn around.

Roosevelt, the president who just died, was very loud about hating colonialism. He was always talking about how countries should be free and independent -- he just couldn't understand that you had a good relationship with your colonies. Of course, about 3 years ago, he did reassure you that he wanted to get France back to the way it was before the war started -- colonies and all. Did he mean it? When you tried to fight the Japanese in Indochina, Roosevelt didn't help you until about a month after most of your troops had been killed already… so he helped, sure, but not when you needed it most. Of course, Roosevelt has died… there's no telling if Truman, his replacement, feels the same way. Maybe Truman is on your side.

The United States is very powerful, so you can't just make an enemy of them. They are helping you rebuild and you need them -- but on the other hand, you can't really trust them in this matter. The United States used to be a colony, and they fought to be free, so they may be really eager to help other colonies do the same thing.

Handout Four: Point of View for China (2 pages)

Leader

Chiang Kai-shek, who led his country during WWII, which was a very hard time for China

Basic goals

You are willing to help Vietnam gain its independence; you don't really want the French involved in your part of the world anymore. There's just no reason for France to be here.

You don't really want to take over Vietnam yourself, but there is a lot to be gained for you if you can be in charge for just a little while, at least. Your country had a hard time of it in World War II, so it would be nice if you could build up your resources again. If you help Vietnam build its own government, you'll have access to their resources for a little while -- just long enough to get your own country back to its usual strong self.

Other countries

France: France was on your side during WWII, so they are friends of yours, but you aren't very close to them. There's no good reason for them to be mixed up in Asian business, so you don't want to let them get too involved. So far, they haven't caused any problems for you in particular, but you don't necessarily trust them completely. You know their whole goal here is to take over Indochina again and use it for their own good, sending all the money and resources out of Asia and into Europe, just like before.

Vietnam: Before France came along, China ran Vietnam for a long while, so you share a lot of culture with Vietnam. You understand them, and they understand you. They do seem to be a little out of control right now, so you're not exactly eager to let them be completely in charge, just in case the place falls apart completely. It would not be good for you to have a crazy, leaderless country so close to your own -- problems could spill over into China.

The current people in charge, the Viet Minh, have been helpful to you. They were sent out of Vietnam before WWII and wound up in your country. You gave them money, protection, and even some weapons to sneak back into Vietnam; in return, they told you what the Japanese were doing in Indochina -- they were spies for you -- so you're on good terms with the Viet Minh right now.

United States: The Americans were on your side during WWII, so, like France, they're friends of yours. You are better friends with the U.S. than you are with France, though; an American general helped you out a lot in World War II. Like with France, there's no good reason for the U.S. to be mixed up in Asian business, but you're willing to work with them a little more. First of all, you met with Roosevelt about a year ago and he told you about his idea for an international team to help Vietnam get itself organized as an independent country. You told him that was a great idea.

Unfortunately, Roosevelt just recently died, and you aren't sure what the new president, Truman, will say or do. He might be interested in helping Vietnam be independent, or he might be one of those Americans who wants to protect his friendship with France. It's possible he might take France's side in all this and help them take over Indochina again, but you hope not.

Handout Five: Point of View for United States (2 pages)

Leader

President Harry Truman, who has just become president because Roosevelt died while in office.

Basic goals

You just want to get this situation settled without losing any friends! France has been your friend as long as you've been a country, so you can't make them angry. At the same time, the last president (Roosevelt) really wanted to help Vietnam be independent; they are a colony the way the U.S. used to be a colony, and he wanted to help them get the same freedom we have. China seems to be on Vietnam's side, and you don't want to lose China's friendship, either -- they are some of your best friends in Asia, so you can't afford to lose them. Indochina is a mess right now, and since you won WWII, you have to help sort it out, but you want to be on everybody's side. If you make enemies, it could hurt you later.

Other countries

France: OK, the French have been your friends forever, so you can't just turn your back on them. When you needed help in the Revolutionary War, they were there for you; when they needed help in World War II, you came through for them. This is how it works.

The fact is, though, that France's interest in having colonies is not really something you agree with. Besides that, France owned Indochina for 100 years and it is this poor, starving region now. Obviously the French can't handle their colonial power very well. You don't want to leave France without your support, but at the same time, it's pretty clear that giving Indochina back to France wouldn't be the best thing for Indochina.

Besides all that, your sources have told you that the people of Indochina *really* hate the French. Even if France gets to "own" Indochina again, they will have to face a very angry group of Indochinese who will not put up with France for long. You've heard that if the French try to overthrow the Viet Minh, it will result in a "bloody failure." As France's friend, maybe you should protect them from getting into that mess.

China: China was on your side during WWII, so, like France, they're friends of yours. You sent an American general to help them out when they were getting beat in World War II. About a year ago, the leader of China met with Roosevelt, and Roosevelt talked about his idea for an international team to help Vietnam get itself organized as an independent country. China said that was a great idea, and so far you have no reason to distrust them.

Vietnam: Vietnam seems like a fine enough place; they aren't bothering you and all they want is to be free. What difference does it make to you? The main concern you have is that these Viet Minh people who are in charge are Communist. You do not like Communism, and you don't want it spreading around the world. Some other countries in Asia are already Communist and it's making you nervous. You know Communists aren't really "free" the way Americans are, so making Vietnam "free" with a Communist government wouldn't really make a lot of sense.

You did work with the Viet Minh when it was good for you, though. During WWII, they helped you find your airmen who got shot down over Indochina, and in return you gave them weapons. At that time, it was more important to win the war than to worry about who was Communist and who wasn't.

Right now, it does look like Vietnam is a mess, so you can't just leave it the way it is and tell them to figure it out. They need some help getting their country under control one way or another.

Assessment

Throughout the unit there are brief writing assignments, as described above, meant to help the students think through the rationale of their points of view:

Write a proposal
Explain your or another person's vote
Predict an outcome

Assessment may also be less formal; throughout the debate, the teacher may call a freeze-frame and ask students to explain what another participant is likely to be thinking at that moment.

The final writing assignment is more in-depth. Students will write a short paper supporting one of the proposals brought to the table in the course of the unit. The paper must include reasons to support the proposal, as well as reasons to disregard arguments against the proposal.

Possible Adjustments

There are several ways to adjust this unit for particular groups of students. Certainly, the most obvious is to require students to do the research themselves to determine and develop their positions. This would be ideal for classes of older students or for classes that are more research-oriented in nature. One way to introduce the unit, then, may be to show the episode of the PBS documentary *Vietnam: A Television History* titled "Roots of War." This starts everyone off on the same foot with a broad understanding of the region; from there, research can go down the different avenues relating to each country.

Another option is to involve other countries in the debate process. For the sake of time and organization, I narrowed my list to the four main players, but other countries also were involved on some level. Britain, also a colonial power, often aligned itself with France; in the actual outcome of the Potsdam Conference, Britain was the army appointed to control southern Vietnam while China managed the north. The twists and turns of British loyalties are very interesting at this point, as the newly-appointed Labour government strives to move

away from the old notions of empire-building.lv

The Soviet Union was a shadow player; officially, they were not involved in the region, but the United States saw the Soviet threat as an important component in Indochinese development. A class dealing with world history may wish to consider the role the Soviet Union played in decision-making, even when they were not directly invited to the table. Certainly, Laos and Cambodia have been given a short shrift in my treatment of the debates; other teachers may wish to include those countries in the debate, particularly if there are students in the class whose ancestry connects them to those areas.

French teachers at higher levels may have students capable of melding French language with the unit. Students may research vocabulary relevant to the debate or actually conduct research involving French-language sources. (Much of the information about the regional conflict is, for obvious reasons, written in French.) Students may write one or more of their position papers in French, and advanced French students may even conduct the debate itself in French.

Resources

Bibliography for Teachers

Published Works

Arnold, James R. *The First Domino* . New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1991.

Fall, Bernard B. *Street Without Joy* . Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Company, 1964.

Hamilton-Merritt, Jane. *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Karnow, Stanley. *Vietnam: A History* . New York: Penguin Books, 1983; revised 1997.

Lancaster, Donald. *The Emancipation of French Indochina* . New York: Octagon Books, 1974.

Scholl-Latour, Peter . *Death in the Ricefields: An Eyewitness Account of Vietnam's Three Wars, 1945-1979.* Trans. Faye Carney. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979.

Sullivan, Marianna P . *France's Vietnam Policy: A Study in French-American Relations.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978.

Internet Resources

Vietnam War Internet Project: http://www.vwip.org/vwiphome.html	
The American Experience: Vietnam Online, an internet companion to the PBS/WGBH series *Vietnam: A Television History* :	http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam

Reading List for Students

The first chapter of the Arnold book, above, is very accessible for high school students; aside from that, this unit is meant to stand alone and is not dependent on student reading materials.

Materials for Classroom Use

Vietnam: A Television History , Episode: “Roots of War,” a PBS/WGBH documentary in the American Experience series. Originally broadcast on PBS on October 4, 1983.

Notes

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1 Donald Lancaster, *The Emancipation of French Indochina* (New York: Octagon Press, 1974) 6.

2 Lancaster, 17.

3 Joseph R. Starobin, *Eyewitness in Indo-China* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1954) 28.

4 Lancaster, 29.

5 Lancaster, 33.

6 Lancaster, 33.

7 Lancaster, 48.

8 Lancaster, 55.

9 Lancaster, 67.

10 Lancaster, 73.

11 Lancaster, 74.

12 Lancaster, 77.

13 Starobin, 28.

14 Lancaster, 83.

15 Lancaster, 92.

16 Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy* (Harrisburg, PA: The Stackpole Company, 1964) 24.

17 Lancaster, 102.

18 Fall, 22.

19 Lancaster, 107

20 Lancaster, 117.

21 Lancaster, 115

22 Lancaster, 116

23 Lancaster, 121

24 James R. Arnold, *The First Domino* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991) 31.

25 Fall, 26. Fall is quoting Truong Chinh, the secretary general of the Indochinese Communist Party at the time, who published a short book on the meeting called *La revolution d'ao—t,* (Hanoi 1946).

26 Arnold, 32.

27 Lancaster, 111.

28 Joint Statement by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill, 14 August 1941, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, Diplomatic Papers 1941* , Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1958) 368.

29 Arnold, 21.

30 Arnold, 22.

31 Fall, 26.

32 Arnold, 28.

33 Arnold, 32.

34 Rene J. Defourneaux, "A Secret Encounter With Ho Chi Minh," *Look* , Vol. 30, No. 16 (9 August 1966), 32, (quoted in Arnold, 31).

35 Arnold, 31.

36 Arnold, 20.

37 U.S. Department of Defense, "Recent Developments in Relation to Indochina," 2 November 1944, in *United States-Vietnam Relations, 1945-1967* , Vol. 7 Part VB (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), 39.

38 Lancaster, 78.

39 Arnold, 29.

40 Lancaster, 125.

41 Arnold, 24.

42 Fall, 24-25.

43 Lancaster, 111.

44 Arnold, 21-22.

45 Lancaster, 115.

46 Lancaster, 126.

47 Arnold, 19-20.

48 Roosevelt to Stettinius, 24 January 1944, in *United States-Vietnam Relations* , Vol. 7, Part VB, 30.

49 Quoted in Edward R. Stettinius, Jr. *Roosevelt and the Russians: The Yalta Conference* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1949) 237.

50 Arnold, 21. Also discussed in footnote in Lancaster, 125.

51 Fall, 24.

52 Arnold, 22.

53 Arnold, 30.

54 Arnold, 30, 34.

55 Peter Scholl-Latour, *Death in the Ricefields: An Eyewitness Account of Vietnam's Three Wars, 1945-1979* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979) 24.