

VIETNAM'S UNHELD ELECTIONS:

The Failure to Carry Out the 1956 Reunification
Elections and the Effect on Hanoi's Present Outlook

by Franklin B. Weinstein



DATA PAPER: NUMBER 60
SOUTHEAST ASIA PROGRAM
DEPARTMENT OF ASIAN STUDIES
CORNELL UNIVERSITY, ITHACA, NEW YORK

PRICE: \$2.00

JULY 1966

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THE CORNELL UNIVERSITY SOUTHEAST ASIA PROGRAM

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PREFACE

At a time when North Vietnam's reaction to the policies of the United States is of such great importance to Americans, it is incumbent that every effort be made to understand the effect that past American actions have had on the Hanoi leaders. This study helps clarify the often misrepresented events surrounding Hanoi's unsuccessful efforts to bring about the reunification of Vietnam through the elections prescribed by the Geneva Agreements for 1956. Through its examination of these events it provides insights helpful to a better appreciation of both North Vietnam's current attitudes toward the United States and its approach to a peaceful settlement. Since the North Vietnamese leaders are convinced that Saigon, with Washington's encouragement and backing, was responsible for thwarting the Geneva plans for Vietnam's reunification, they are likely to reject any offers of negotiations by the United States which are predicated on the assumption that the war is one of aggression from the North.

Mr. Weinstein, a member of the Cornell Southeast Asia Program, has, in my judgment, carried out his research into this issue further than any other scholar who has written on the subject. I believe that his findings will contribute to a better understanding of Hanoi's attitude towards the present war and the role of the United States in Vietnam.

George MCT. Kahin
Director
Southeast Asia Program

Ithaca, New York
25 July 1966

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I. INTRODUCTION

The events surrounding the failure to hold the Vietnamese reunification elections scheduled for 1956 have been subject to the most grotesque distortion. Perhaps it should not be surprising that strong Diem partisans have insisted that Ho Chi Minh prevented the holding of elections. One such writer has argued that elections failed to take place because Ho was "never prepared to accept anything resembling the free elections concept involving international observers or monitors, as envisaged by the Geneva Agreements."¹ Another blandly asserts: "When the Communist North refused to hold free elections, Diem proclaimed the Republic of Vietnam."² It is, however, simply impossible to find any evidence that Ho ever questioned the right of the International Control Commission (ICC) to supervise the elections or that he in any other way "refused" to hold free elections.

Nevertheless, the effort to blame Ho for the failure to hold elections is not confined to a fringe of fervent Diem admirers. William P. Bundy, Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East, has sought to expose the "myth" that the Diem government, supported by the US, obstructed the holding of elections called for by the Geneva Agreements. According to Bundy, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) repeatedly called for free elections "in its propaganda," but when the issue arose "concretely" in 1956 the DRV "made no effort" to respond to the call of the Geneva Conference co-chairmen.³

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1. Marguerite Higgins, Our Vietnam Nightmare (New York: Harper, 1965), pp. 10-11. Miss Higgins believes that the US made a grave mistake in permitting the 1963 overthrow of Diem.
 2. Anthony T. Bouscaren, The Last of the Mandarins: Diem of Vietnam (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1965), p. 53.
 3. William P. Bundy, "South Viet-Nam: Reality and Myth," speech delivered before the Dallas Council on World Affairs, Dallas, Texas, 13 May 1965. Bundy is apparently referring to the co-chairmen's 8 May 1956 letter inviting "the authorities in both parts of Viet-Nam" to transmit to the Co-Chairmen "their views about the time required for the opening of consultations on the organization of nation-wide elections and the time required for the holding of elections." The text of the letter is in Documents Relating to British Involvement in Indochina, 1945-1965 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1965), [Cmd. 2834].

Bundy's allegation is easy to refute, for the DRV's response to the 1956 message of Britain and the USSR is a matter of record.⁴ Lest Bundy's statement be dismissed as merely the result of a regrettable oversight, the words of other State Department officials should be consulted. Addressing himself to the "charge that the United States violated the 1954 Geneva accords by not supporting elections in 1956," U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, has offered this version of the failure to hold elections:

In 1955 and 1956 the South Vietnamese Government maintained that it would agree to such elections if they were genuinely free and internationally supervised throughout Vietnam and not just in South Vietnam. The United States, although not a party to the Geneva accords, consistently favored genuinely free elections under UN supervision, as has been our consistent provision and that of most members of the UN with respect to Korea. It was clear, however, in 1956 that no more than any other Communist government was the Hanoi government prepared to allow such elections, and accordingly the elections were not held. Thus it is a travesty on the truth to allege that the present situation was brought about by the failure of the South to carry out the 1954 accords. In fact, it was the North that was not willing to submit itself to the test of free elections under international control.⁵

It is ironic that Johnson, whose description neither is nor can be supported by evidence, should speak of a "travesty on the truth."

Though the incredible amount of misrepresentation on the subject of elections in Vietnam is itself cause for concern, there is another type of argument which is more disturbing. Some informed commentators have sought to dismiss the whole question by saying that the idea of elections was always unrealistic, even "fraudulent." Because no Communist state has

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4. For a report of the DRV's reply, see The Times (London), 16 July 1956. Besides answering the co-chairmen's letter, Pham Van Dong dispatched on 11 May a letter to Ngo Dinh Diem calling for consultations on elections. Diem did not respond to the offer. For the text of Dong's letter, see Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 12 May 1956.
 5. Address by U. Alexis Johnson before the Canadian Club of Montreal at Montreal, Canada, on 14 March 1966, in Department of State Bulletin, LIV, no. 1397 (4 April 1966), 530.

ever conducted a free election, one has argued, it is unrealistic to attach great importance to the elections set for 1956.⁶

It is a serious mistake to dispose of the history of the Geneva Agreements' election provision in this manner. If it is, as government spokesmen affirm, so very important that the US position be made patently clear to its Communist adversary, it can hardly be less essential that the US make every effort to understand the mind of its opponent. Whether the war in Vietnam is seen as an attempt by North Vietnam to conquer the neighboring country of South Vietnam or as a justifiable effort by partisans of north and south to insist on the unity of their country recognized by all at Geneva, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the failure to hold elections was closely related to the later resumption of violence. Thus, the question of elections in Vietnam deserves serious attention not merely as a matter of setting the record straight; an appreciation of the history of elections and the DRV's efforts at "peaceful reunification" of Vietnam is vital to any understanding of how the present war began and how Hanoi perceives its character today. The role of Hanoi's adversaries and allies in the process by which the promised elections were undermined also helps illuminate the DRV's understanding of the international context of the war and ultimately of the international position of the DRV.

6. See Robert A. Scalapino's remarks in "Excerpts from National Teach-In on Viet-Nam Policy," 15 May 1965, in Marcus G. Raskin and Bernard B. Fall (eds.), The Viet-Nam Reader (New York: Random House, 1965), p. 300.

II. THE AGREEMENT TO HOLD ELECTIONS

From the outset both the Viet Minh and the French-sponsored Bao Dai regime proclaimed their support of two fundamental principles--the indivisibility of Vietnam and the use of general elections to establish a unified government for the country. It had been evident in late April 1954 that neither the Communists nor the French had any desire to discuss the partition of Indochina as the basis for a solution.⁷ The Viet Minh reportedly preferred a coalition government composed of representatives of the French-sponsored State of Vietnam and Viet Minh elements. They expected that such a coalition government would conduct elections which, in the prevailing atmosphere of Viet Minh victory over the French, would give Ho Chi Minh's followers overwhelming support throughout Vietnam.⁸

The proposal to hold nationwide elections first was made at Geneva on 10 May 1954 by Pham Van Dong, head of the Viet Minh delegation. Two days earlier French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault had proposed a cease-fire accompanied by withdrawal of military forces into assembly zones. Though he had admitted that elections would have to be held eventually, he felt that such a political settlement should be considered only at some indefinite date.⁹ Dong, however, insisted that a political solution through elections should be made the Geneva Conference's concern. Dong's plan, which envisaged a military regroupment similar to that advocated by Bidault, called for free general elections to be organized by Advisory

7. On the State of Vietnam's efforts to extract from each of the three major Western powers at Geneva a commitment against partition, see New York Times, 2 May 1954. The US, at the start of the Geneva Conference, was adamantly against partition. (By the end of May, however, it had decided that partition was the best settlement France could hope for under the circumstances.) The French considered partition unsatisfactory in light of their responsibilities to the three Associated States. The British, however, considered temporary partition a promising approach, based on the assumption that it was better to save part of Indochina by cutting off the "diseased limb." See Ngo Ton Dat, "The Geneva Partition of Vietnam and the Question of Reunification During the First Two Years" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1963), pp. 114-119. See also New York Times, 26 May 1954.

8. New York Times, 28 April 1954.

9. New York Times, 11 May 1954 and 24 June 1954.

Conferences representing the authorities on both sides. The Advisory Conferences were to meet "under conditions of securing freedom of activity for patriotic parties, groups and social organizations," and the subsequent elections would be supervised by local commissions.¹⁰ The Western powers, which had hoped that the DRV would be satisfied with a cease-fire based on the existing holdings, were dismayed at Dong's having made a cessation of hostilities dependent on the simultaneous acceptance of political provisions which could be expected to bring DRV control to the rest of Vietnam.¹¹

The State of Vietnam delegation rejected Dong's proposal. The position of Bao Dai's state, enunciated on 12 May, was that a cease-fire without regroupment should be declared and an election held under UN auspices, but only after Bao Dai's authority over all Vietnam had been explicitly recognized and State of Vietnam control established throughout the country.¹² The State of Vietnam proposal explicitly rejected any sort of partition, "direct or indirect, definitive or temporary, de facto or de jure." The Saigon regime believed that any settlement would have to involve the destruction of the Viet Minh political and military apparatus and should include safeguards against the Viet Minh's continuing its struggle by legal means after disarmament.¹³ The extreme character of the State of Vietnam proposal suggests that the Bao Dai regime was not seriously interested in a cease-fire. Saigon's apparent suspicion that any form of military regroupment might lead to partition was reflected in its proposal for a cease-fire based on the present positions. Yet, Prince Buu Loc, premier of the State of Vietnam, two months earlier had described such a cease-fire as "impractical" because the rival forces were too scrambled together to permit its implementation.¹⁴ In any case, there is no evidence that the State of Vietnam recommendation ever received serious consideration.

10. New China News Agency dispatch, 10 May 1954.

11. New York Times, 16 May 1954.

12. The text of the State of Vietnam proposal is in Cmnd. 2834. On the next to last day of the conference, the State of Vietnam delegation circulated a new plan for a cease-fire with small regrouping areas and the placing of the entire country under UN control until security was sufficient for elections. This proposal was not taken seriously. New York Times, 20 July 1954 and 19 July 1954.

13. New York Times, 2 May 1954.

14. New York Times, 2 March 1954.

Although the Western powers were somewhat pessimistic following Dong's proposal, hopes soon were revived when the conference reached agreement on the principle that it should work for a military armistice before discussing the details of a political settlement.¹⁵ The only noteworthy early progress with respect to a political settlement was Soviet Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov's proposal on 14 May that the elections might be supervised by a commission of neutral nations.¹⁶ This was an important advance, for it removed the question of elections in Vietnam from the category of similar proposals made by the Communists for elections in Korea and Germany without international supervision.

On 25 May Pham Van Dong suggested that opposing forces might be withdrawn into large zones. The earlier Bidault and Dong proposals had not generally been considered tantamount to partition, because the assumption was that there would be a series of several regroupment zones¹⁷ thus making it unlikely that a political division could be inferred. But Dong's large zone plan evoked violent outcries from the State of Vietnam representatives, who denounced the proposal as a plan to destroy the country's unity.¹⁸ The DRV insisted with vehemence on the integrity of Vietnam but argued that a cease-fire could not effectively be maintained without a regroupment of military forces into distinct areas. As the DRV's Hoang Van Hoan put it, "zonal readjustment" was essential to enforce a cease-fire, but it was "only a temporary measure which will pave the way for the realization of our territorial and political unity by means of free and democratic elections. Allegations that we want to partition the national territory will certainly not be able to withstand the facts of reality."¹⁹ Radio Peking accused the State of Vietnam delegate of deliberately confusing zonal readjustment with partition.²⁰

The question of a political settlement returned with a jolt on 8 June when Molotov announced that the Soviet government considered it necessary "to examine without further delay the political questions." Molotov stressed that the Geneva

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15. Anthony Eden, Full Circle (London: Cassell, 1960), p. 133.
 16. New York Times, 16 May 1954.
 17. New York Times, 24 June 1954.
 18. France-Asie, 6 June 1954. See also New York Times, 26 May 1954.
 19. New China News Agency dispatch, 31 May 1954.
 20. Ibid.

Conference could not "keep silence" on the question of elections for Vietnam.²¹ Following Molotov's speech the DRV renewed its call for elections "as soon as possible" after the termination of hostilities, strongly supporting Molotov's insistence that the political questions must be settled simultaneously with military ones.²² In raising the question of a political solution to the same level as the cease-fire, Molotov had made it clear that Dong's May 10 demands would be supported and, in so doing, he reduced Bidault's policy to a bankruptcy. Shortly afterwards, Bidault's prime minister, Joseph Laniel, was voted out of office.

On 24 June it was reported that France's new prime minister, Pierre Mendes-France, had met with Chou En-lai at Bern and agreed that the Geneva Conference must reach a political settlement as well as a cease-fire. It was agreed that regardless of the respective areas held by each side under an armistice, a unified government must be established based on all-Vietnam elections.²³ The Chinese apparently understood Mendes-France to have agreed to elections within 18 months.²⁴ Five days later Chou was in New Delhi, where it was reported that any political partition of Vietnam would be unacceptable to either Nehru or the Chinese premier.²⁵ It was generally understood that the Communists were determined to win all of Vietnam.²⁶

Clearly worried about the concessions Mendes-France appeared willing to make, the US obtained British agreement on the text of a joint message sent to France on 29 June. The communiqué stated the willingness of the two countries to respect an armistice which fulfilled seven points, one among which was: "Does not contain political provisions which would risk loss of the retained area to Communist control."²⁷

21. New York Times, 9 June 1954 and 13 June 1954.

22. New China News Agency dispatch, 17 June 1954.

23. New York Times, 24 June 1954.

24. New China News Agency dispatch, 18 July 1954. According to this dispatch, "The French delegation originally proposed 18 months after an armistice for the elections." That Chou understood Mendes-France at Bern to have agreed to early elections is also reported in New York Times, 18 July 1954.

25. New York Times, 29 June 1954.

26. Ibid.

27. Eden, Full Circle, p. 149.

Mendes-France, trying to persuade Dulles to return to Geneva on 12 July, insisted that Dulles' suspicion that he would depart from the seven points was wholly unjustified.²⁸ Accordingly, the French toughened their position and refused to agree to any definite date for the elections. On 16 July it was reported that France, backed by the US, was determined not to fix an election date, even if the Communists made it the price for agreeing to an armistice.²⁹ Although the British doubted that France would be able to induce the Communists to agree to an armistice if that determination held,³⁰ the question of setting a date for elections remained until 18 July an area where compromise was reported impossible.³¹ By then the Communists, who had insisted on elections within six months, were willing to wait a year.³² At this point Mendes-France, having just reached agreement with the Communists on the composition of a supervisory commission, made clear that he was prepared to compromise on the election question. The Communists were believed willing to accept an 18-month delay, and the French reportedly hoped they could get that period lengthened to two years.³³ After two more days of bargaining, during which France proposed two years and the DRV held out for 18 months, agreement was finally reached on the afternoon of 20 July that reunification elections would be held in two years.³⁴

By far the most important concession made by France at Geneva was Mendes-France's decision to agree to a specific date for elections. Radio Moscow rightly described the setting of a date for elections as "of enormous political importance."³⁵ The Communists' achievement meant the difference between a military division with prospects of complete control within two years and a partition with a vague prospect of elections which, like the comparable prospect in Korea, might never materialize.³⁶ It is not hard to understand why France felt compelled

28. Ibid. pp. 156-157.

29. New York Times, 16 July 1954.

30. Ibid.

31. New York Times, 18 July 1954.

32. New China News Agency dispatch, 18 July 1954.

33. New York Times, 19 July 1954.

34. Eden, Full Circle, p. 159.

35. Soviet Home Service, 22 July 1954.

36. This is the comparison drawn in New York Times, 18 July 1954, at a time when it was thought that the DRV would get only the latter.

to make such a great concession, Mendes-France's assurances to Dulles notwithstanding. The Communists had made it abundantly clear that they simply would not accept a truce without a political settlement, i.e., a fixed date for elections. Besides France's general war-weariness, the rapid deterioration of the military situation in Vietnam put strong pressure on Mendes-France to accede to DRV demands and thereby facilitate a settlement. If it seemed likely that France would lose all of Vietnam militarily,³⁷ the prospect of a political settlement which at worst would produce the same result must have seemed reasonable. Furthermore, the DRV, under pressure from Molotov and Chou En-lai, had progressively reduced its demands on several important issues, most notably by abandoning its original proposal of "zonal readjustment" at the 13th parallel (which would have corresponded to the actual military situation) and settling for the 17th parallel, a considerable loss of hard-won territory. The DRV made those concessions only because of the promise that elections would be held in 1956.³⁸

It is reasonable to ask why the DRV, with military victory apparently in sight, was willing to concede so much in exchange for the promise of elections. The DRV clearly was unhappy about the concessions it was forced to make.³⁹ Much

37. In mid-May some "admittedly pessimistic" Western sources had predicted Viet Minh control of all Vietnam within "a few months," barring US intervention (which, of course, carried its own risks of internationalizing and expanding the war). New York Times, 16 May 1954. Ten days later it was admitted by US officials that the military situation was slipping faster than had been expected. New York Times, 26 May 1954. By the start of July, the French had retreated from the entire southeastern quarter of the Red River delta, a "loss far worse than Dien Bien Phu." New York Times, 4 July 1954.
38. Philippe Devillers, in a lecture at Cornell University, 13 December 1965. On the point that the setting of the date for elections was in exchange for the DRV's concessions on the armistice line, see Jean Lacouture et Philippe Devillers, La fin d'une guerre (Paris: editions du seuil, 1960), p. 268.
39. Ibid. As the New York Times, 25 July 1954, put it: "Viet Minh leaders are not entirely happy about the peace settlement in Vietnam. A number of members of the Viet Minh delegation have declared openly that pressure from Chinese Communist Premier Chou En-lai and Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav M. Molotov forced their regime to accept less than it rightfully should have obtained here."

has been made of the pressure exerted by Chou and Molotov,⁴⁰ both of whom were more interested in preventing the war's expansion than in maximizing the DRV's gains.⁴¹ But the influence of the major Communist powers, great though it was, probably could not have forced the DRV to give up its hard won gains without a good prospect of retrieving them. The DRV undoubtedly understood that a refusal to compromise would have made a settlement impossible and might well have brought US military intervention as the Viet Minh pressed close to total military victory.⁴² But the possibility of winning the country through elections subject to international supervision must have seemed one that US power could not prevent. A victory through elections must also have appealed to the DRV as a way of gaining its objectives without paying the costs of continued war. Finally, the DRV leaders probably saw the cession of territory to the French and the delay until elections as an unavoidable device to enable France to save face. Confident of electoral victory, the DRV had made a bargain which, if less than what had been expected, nevertheless seemed to promise the ultimate achievement of the DRV's aims.

What the DRV got with respect to elections was embodied in Paragraph Seven of the conference's Final Declaration, issued on 21 July 1954. The election provision also was recognized in Article 14 of the Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities, signed by the military commands of France and the DRV as the competent authorities in the two zones. The relevant portion of the Final Declaration reads as follows:

7. The Conference declares that, so far as Viet-Nam is concerned, the settlement of political problems, effected on the basis of respect for the principles of independence, unity and territorial integrity, shall permit the Vietnamese people to enjoy the fundamental freedoms, guaranteed by democratic institutions established as a result of free general elections by secret ballot. In order to ensure that sufficient progress in the restoration of peace has been made, and that all the necessary conditions obtain for free expression of the national will, general elections shall be held in July, 1956, under

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40. See Harold Hinton, Communist China in World Politics (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), pp. 250-254. See also New York Times, 25 July 1954.
41. See New York Times, 25 April 1954, and Ngo Ton Dat, "Geneva Partition and the Question of Reunification," p. 296.
42. US officials had made it clear that if the DRV insisted on extreme terms, the US would have to consider seriously military intervention. See New York Times, 26 May 1954.

the supervision of an international commission composed of representatives of the Member States of the International Supervisory Commission, referred to in the agreement on the cessation of hostilities. Consultations will be held on this subject between the competent representative authorities of the two zones from 20 July 1955 onwards.⁴³

It is clear that the Final Declaration made an unconditional promise of elections by July 1956 and directed that consultations⁴⁴ about elections begin after one year. Fundamental freedoms, according to the declaration, were to be guaranteed by democratic institutions established as a result of the elections. There was absolutely no suggestion that democratic institutions had to exist before the elections could be held; on the contrary, the declaration clearly stated that the elections were to precede the establishment of such institutions.⁴⁵ Similarly, the declaration held that a purpose of the elections was to ensure the existence of necessary conditions for free expression of the national will. There is no basis for assuming that those conditions had to precede the election which was itself designed to ensure their existence.⁴⁶

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43. My underlining. The text of the Final Declaration is available in Raskin and Fall (eds.), The Viet-Nam Reader, pp. 96-99.
44. The Geneva Conference's failure to specify details of the proposed elections is probably at least partially attributable to the lack of time remaining after the agreement on elections late the afternoon of 20 July. No one was eager to raise any new issues for debate at this stage.
45. The conference could not have expected the existence of democratic institutions before the elections, inasmuch as the southern zone was explicitly to remain under colonial French civil and military administration.
46. Exemplary of the manner in which parts of this provision have been quoted out of context to make the elections dependent on preconditions is this passage from an editorial in New York Times, 6 April 1956: "The plain fact is that neither the truce commission nor the signatories to the Geneva Agreement have as yet established in North Vietnam the essential conditions provided by the agreement for a 'free expression of the national will....' In these circumstances, Mr. Diem ... is duty-bound to reject the proposed elections until the necessary conditions for freedom have been established in the North."

The declaration received the verbal assent of all participants except the State of Vietnam and the US, but the latter did declare its intention not to threaten or use force to undermine the Geneva Agreements and to continue to seek reunification through free elections (though under UN supervision).⁴⁷ The State of Vietnam issued a declaration protesting against the conditions of the agreement and reserving "full freedom of action in order to safeguard the sacred right of the Vietnamese people to territorial unity, national independence and freedom."⁴⁸ The State of Vietnam statement specifically protested the fixing of a date for elections without its consent.

Because the Final Declaration was denounced by the State of Vietnam and received only verbal assent,⁴⁹ some have questioned whether it is legally binding.⁵⁰ With respect to the State of Vietnam's insistence that France had no right to set a date for elections, Mendes-France simply reasserted that the French High Command had "acted within the framework of its competency and its attributions."⁵¹ The State of Vietnam's objection was largely ignored because, as stated in the armistice agreement, "Pending the general elections which will bring about the reunification of Vietnam, the conduct of civil administration in each regrouping zone shall be in the hands of the party whose forces are to be regrouped there in virtue of the present agreement." That France was in fact the sovereign authority in non-Communist Vietnam seems evident. Some have been misled by the conclusion of a "treaty of independence" between France and the State of Vietnam on 4 June 1954.⁵² The treaty proclaimed France's recognition of

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47. The text of the US statement is in Ngo Ton Dat, "Geneva Partition and the Question of Reunification," pp. 464-465.
48. Text in ibid., p. 466.
49. The declaration was unsigned because Chinese insistence that all countries at the conference, including the unwilling US, give written assent threatened to wreck the settlement at the last moment. Molotov and Eden agreed that the declaration should have a heading which listed all the participants, thus eliminating the problem of signature. Eden, Full Circle, p. 160.
50. The reasons for doubting the validity of the Final Declaration are spelled out in Ngo Ton Dat, "Geneva Partition and the Question of Reunification," pp. 315-318.
51. Ibid., p. 268.
52. Text of the treaty is in ibid., p. 452. A treaty associating Vietnam with the French Union also was initialed on the same date.

the State of Vietnam as a "fully independent and sovereign State." It also stipulated that the State of Vietnam would assume all rights and obligations concluded by France with respect to Vietnam. The treaty of independence was to take effect on the date of signature. On 4 June the treaty was initialed, but not signed; the treaty was not to be signed until supplementary accords concerning the juridical, military, economic, and cultural relations had been completed.⁵³ Premier Laniel stated that in putting his initials to the treaty, he intended publicly to demonstrate "the intention of the Government of France to complete the granting of Vietnamese independence."⁵⁴ There was no suggestion that the State of Vietnam already was independent. Thus on 14 July it was reported that the US was urging the establishment of a fully independent Vietnamese government.⁵⁵ On 23 July, after the signing of the Geneva Agreements, Secretary Dulles announced that Mendes-France had directed the completion of "precise projects for the transfers of authority which will give reality to the independence which France has promised."⁵⁶ It is clear that at the time of Geneva, independence was but a promise, not a reality, for the State of Vietnam. There was thus good reason for the Geneva Conference's assumption that France, not the State of Vietnam, was the competent authority in the area.

In view of France's "promise" of independence, there was some prospect that the Saigon government might in fact become sovereign within the two-year period before the fulfillment of the Geneva Agreements. The Agreements took this into

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53. New York Times, 5 June 1954. The treaty seems never to have been signed. The absence of any report that the treaty was ever signed is noted in Coral Bell, Survey of International Affairs, 1954 (London: Oxford University Press under the auspices of Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1957), p. 85. On 16 September 1954 France handed over "most of her remaining civil powers" in Vietnam. Gen. Paul Ely, described as France's "civil and military chief in Indochina," then relinquished control of the police, justice, and security departments as well as public utilities. New York Times, 17 September 1954. France held control of the State of Vietnam's defense, monetary, and tariff policies until 1955.
54. New York Times, 5 June 1954.
55. New York Times, 14 July 1954.
56. See Allan B. Cole (ed.), Conflict in Indo-China and International Repercussions, A Documentary History, 1945-1955 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956), p. 177.

account. Article 27 provided that "the signatories and their successors in their functions"⁵⁷ were bound to fulfill the obligations undertaken at Geneva. Inasmuch as the 4 June treaty between France and the State of Vietnam had explicitly stipulated that upon acquisition of independence the Saigon government would assume all rights and obligations undertaken by France with respect to Vietnam, there seemed to be no question that the State of Vietnam would be bound by the Agreements in the event of a French withdrawal. Thus, whatever legal objections have been raised since, it is clear that the understanding at Geneva was that elections would unconditionally be held by 1956, and that in the south France, or her successor, would be responsible for administration until the elections were held and hence, by implication, for assuring that the elections were in fact held.

It is important to emphasize that the basic underlying fact about the circumstances in which the election provision was adopted was the expectation that the Viet Minh would win the election. There was virtually no doubt that Ho Chi Minh would have been the overwhelming victor of a free election held at or shortly after the time of the Geneva Conference.⁵⁸ Even in areas controlled by the State of Vietnam, a combination of nationalism, hatred of the French, and the "appeal of Ho's propaganda" was expected to be decisive.⁵⁹ Eisenhower has acknowledged that he did not know a single person knowledgeable about the situation in Vietnam who denied that Ho Chi Minh might well have won 80% of the votes in an election

57. It is noteworthy that this provision refers to successors in their functions, which suggests that the Agreement is speaking of de facto realities, not political formalities.
58. AP correspondent William L. Ryan estimated that Ho would get 75% of the vote if elections were held immediately. New York Times, 23 April 1954. Thomas J. Hamilton reported in the New York Times, 4 July 1954, that experts on Indochina agreed that Ho would win any election held within a year. The French were reported as believing that if the elections were delayed for over a year, the results might be "less one-sided." New York Times, 24 June 1954. Even with a delay of two years, however, the Viet Minh was considered likely to win the elections. See the report by Hamilton in New York Times, 25 July 1954.
59. The New York Times, 23 April 1954. Philippe Devillers estimates that Ho would have won 80% of the votes in the south in an election held in 1954. Lecture, Cornell University, 13 December 1965.

held in 1954.⁶⁰ This, of course, explains the DRV's eagerness for early elections and its willingness to relinquish territory in exchange for the promise of elections. Similarly, it explains the State of Vietnam's unwillingness to agree to the setting of a date for elections.

The State of Vietnam's recognition of its weak position in a political contest also helps explain an interesting paradox. The Bao Dai state's representatives had been adamant in asserting that Vietnam must not be divided into two states, and yet they insisted on regarding the Geneva settlement as such a partition.⁶¹ Neither the Geneva Agreements' explicit statement that the demarcation line in no way constituted a political boundary, the French government's pledge to support the territorial integrity of Vietnam,⁶² nor the DRV's vehement insistence on the integrity of Vietnam and its denial that partition had occurred⁶³ could convince Saigon that the country was still a political unity. It seems strange that the government which had most strongly defended

60. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Mandate for Change; The White House Years, 1953-1956 (New York: Signet Edition, 1965), p. 449.

61. For example, see the statement of Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Hinh, broadcast over Radio Saigon, Vietnam Home Service, 23 July 1954. Tran Van Do, the State of Vietnam foreign minister, previously had insisted that the plan being worked out by the conference would amount to partition. New York Times, 19 July 1954.

62. In Cmnd. 2834.

63. See, for example, Pham Van Dong's statement to the final session of the Geneva Conference, broadcast over Radio Moscow, 22 July 1954; Vo Nguyen Giap's order of the day asserting that the military division was only temporary, New York Times, 26 July 1954; and Ho Chi Minh's statement of 22 July 1954 broadcast over Radio Peking. As Ho put it: "The demarcation of the military zones ... is just a provisional measure to be taken to restore the peace and realize the reunification of the nation by means of general elections. The demarcation line does not mean the political and territorial borderline. North, Central and South Vietnam are unseparable parts of our nation's territory." Perhaps the best statement is this one: "Our compatriots should not be deceived by the lying propaganda of the American imperialists and the French warmongers and should not think that the zonal readjustment implies a 'division of the country.'" Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 5 August 1954.

Vietnam's integrity should be the one to declare that partition had in fact occurred. But it is not so odd that the State of Vietnam, ardent supporter of Vietnam's integrity, was in fact prepared to sacrifice that unity to build the basis for a legal justification for its own survival. Though it of course blamed the destruction of Vietnam's integrity on the Viet Minh's "sell-out" to Chinese and Soviet pressure,⁶⁴ the Saigon government itself, by its insistence that the country had been divided and its failure to recognize the provision for reunification elections, laid the framework for its later effort to foster the notion that the 17th parallel was a political boundary. For the State of Vietnam, the risk of elections was too high a price to pay for Vietnam's unity.

Another noteworthy aspect of the circumstances in which the agreement to hold elections was reached was the DRV's rejection of the US and State of Vietnam position that free elections could be assured only if supervised by the UN. From the start, the US had felt that the Geneva Conference should leave the working out of any political settlement to the UN General Assembly.⁶⁵ Dong declared his adamant opposition to any UN role in the supervision of the truce (not to mention placing the entire question of a political settlement in the General Assembly's hands). He questioned the competence of a body that had refused to admit a nation of 500 million persons.⁶⁶ Chou ended any thought of turning to the UN with a pointed remark that any attempt to bring the UN in would wreck the Geneva Conference.⁶⁷

If the US may have been skeptical about the objectivity of a three-member commission including Communist Poland and an India whose neutrality was suspected of being "communist-leaning," it should be understood that the DRV had at least as much reason to be wary of the UN. Though the US would portray the UN as an obviously impartial body, it did not appear so to the Viet Minh. In the early years of the UN, the US had shown a remarkable ability to win its way, except where a Soviet veto was operative, and even there the US had found a way out by reinterpreting the charter so as to enlarge

64. According to Lt. Gen. Nguyen Van Hinh, the Viet Minh used the Vietnamese revolution as "merchandise in trade" to please their Soviet and Chinese "masters." Radio Saigon, Vietnam Home Service, 23 July 1954.

65. See New York Times, 24 May 1954 and 26 May 1954. Britain and France gave no support to this proposal. New York Times, 9 June 1954.

66. New York Times, 3 June 1954.

67. New York Times, 4 June 1954.

the functions of the General Assembly, where US dominance was as yet completely unchallenged. While it would be inappropriate here to become involved in a discussion of the Uniting for Peace resolution's legal merits or of the implications of the US's ability to exclude Communist China from the organization, it can at least be seen that the DRV might have had reasonable qualms about entrusting its fate to representatives of an organization which had proved so amenable to US desires. Perhaps the best evidence that the DRV's doubts about the UN were well-founded came in 1957, when the General Assembly voted, 40-8 (with 18 abstentions), to admit South Vietnam to the UN.⁶⁸ The DRV, on the other hand, was rejected, with the US expressing doubt that the DRV met the definition of a state because of its subordination to Moscow and Peking.⁶⁹

To sum up, it is important to understand that from the start it was the DRV that urged free elections as the basis for a political settlement of the Vietnamese war. Though its willingness to accept such terms unquestionably was based on its confidence of winning, that does not alter the fact that it did accept elections as the appropriate way to press its claim to be the legitimate government of all Vietnam. Moreover, the concessions made by the DRV in exchange for the promise of elections suggest the overwhelming importance the Viet Minh attached to the elections as the key to the final achievement of the national goals for which it had spent eight years fighting.⁷⁰ Nhan Dan clearly was confident⁷¹ the elections would be held:

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68. New York Times, 1 March 1957. The USSR vetoed the proposal in the Security Council.
69. New York Times, 31 January 1957.
70. Numerous other analyses attest to the extent to which the DRV relied on elections. For example, Robert Scigliano, in South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), p. 133, has written: "The Viet Minh had set heavy store by these elections...." The Economist, 16 July 1955, asserts: "The Geneva Agreement was regarded by the Chinese and the Viet Minh as an unavoidable device to save French face, and they took it for granted that it merely entailed a delay of two years before the Viet Minh would take over the other half of the country, thus gathering the full harvest of their military victory."
71. There are, to be sure, those who argue that the DRV never expected the elections to be held. P. J. Honey, in Communism in North Vietnam (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1963), p. 6, reports that Dong told a Vietnamese friend of Honey's at Geneva that he did not really think the

The French government has recognized the independence, sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity of the three states in Indochina.... The final declaration of the Geneva Conference has stipulated the withdrawal of foreign troops from Indochina and ... general elections in each country of Indochina.... The above-mentioned recognition and stipulation, on the one hand, guarantee the consolidation of our basic victories, and on the other, create favorable conditions for us to overcome all difficulties and go forward to settle peacefully the question of complete national unity and independence.⁷²

Perhaps the most forceful statement of the DRV's expectation and determination that the country would be reunified by elections in 1956 was Dong's speech to the final meeting of the Geneva Conference:

A big step has been made. It remains to take other steps. We will have to reestablish lasting and durable peace in Indochina by a settlement of political issues, first among which is the accomplishment of the national unity of our people through elections....

The conference has set the date for our unity. We shall achieve this unity, we shall achieve it just as we have won the war. No force in the world, internal or external, can make us deviate from our path to unity through peace and democracy. This will be the consummation

elections would take place. Even if such a view were accurate, it would not necessarily signify that the DRV thought the elections would be sabotaged. Dong may simply have felt that the Bao Dai regime, already very weak, would collapse under the impact of a Geneva settlement which, if carried out, would almost certainly have meant the regimers demise. There is, nevertheless, a possibility that Dong anticipated that the US would back the State of Vietnam in defiance of the electoral provision. Nhan Dan found on 25 July that it was already "evident that the enemies of peace, first ... the American imperialists ... [would] entice the puppets to find every possible means to sabotage the implementation of the armistice agreements." (See Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 25 July 1954.) But it is important to remember that what proved to be the essential condition for the thwarting of the elections, namely the emergence of a stable government in the south with full US backing, was foreseen by almost no one in July 1954. The confident tone of the rest of the Nhan Dan article strongly suggests that the DRV considered its Geneva victory a real one.

72. Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 25 July 1954.

of our national independence....
Long live peace!
Long live the unity of our country!⁷³

73. Radio Moscow, 22 July 1954.

III. WERE ELECTIONS EVER REALLY POSSIBLE?

In view of the State of Vietnam's obvious disinclination to permit the sort of free elections envisaged by the Geneva Agreements, it is reasonable to ask whether elections were ever really possible. The answer is that the opinions of the State of Vietnam government did not seem to matter at the time, because, as was recognized in the Geneva Agreements, the competent authority of the zone south of the 17th parallel was the French army, not the Vietnamese regime. No doubt existed about France's responsibility for insuring the implementation of the Geneva Agreements in the south.⁷⁴ There was no reason for the Viet Minh leaders to think that France would renege on her obligations. In the days following the Geneva Conference, France-Asie pointedly urged the State of Vietnam regime to start preparing for the elections by carrying out reforms and seeking to counter Viet Minh propaganda. "The cease-fire is not final. It is but a means to solve the deadlock," the article asserted. Referring to those who maintained that the elections set for 1956 were "a bitter joke," France-Asie argued that such ideas would "get Vietnam nowhere."⁷⁵ Mendes-France stated publicly that he felt the elections could be won by the south, if needed reforms were undertaken.⁷⁶ That the DRV was relying on France should be clear from Dong's

74. See, for example, the statements of French cabinet ministers before the Chamber of Deputies, recorded by Roger Pinto in "La France et les Accords d'Indochine devant les Accords de Geneve," Revue Francaise de Science Politique, V, no. 1 (January-March, 1955), cited in George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis, "The United States in Vietnam," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, XXI, no. 6 (June, 1965), 31.
75. Radio Saigon, 28 July 1954.
76. Ngo Ton Dat, "Geneva Partition and the Question of Reunification," p. 280. It had been reported earlier that the French believed a two-year interval would offer "a good chance" of preventing a Communist victory, provided that a viable Vietnamese government could be established and considerable US economic aid were forthcoming. New York Times, 19 July 1954. Talk of the south's winning the election undoubtedly did not worry the DRV. As Philippe Devillers points out in "The Struggle for the Unification of Vietnam," The China Quarterly, 9 (January-March 1962), 3, the "almost derisory weakness" of the southern regime was such that the "majority of Western observers had undoubtedly few illusions about the non-Marxists' chances of 'recovery.'"

statement on 1 January 1955: "It was with you, the French, that we signed the Geneva Agreements, and it is up to you to see that they are respected."⁷⁷

It is important to remember that although it had reserved "freedom of action" and condemned France's having committed the south to elections without its consent, the State of Vietnam government did not explicitly state that it would refuse to participate in the elections. It is true that many Vietnamese and "other observers" had "little confidence" that it would actually prove possible to hold reunification elections any more than it had proven possible in Korea or Germany.⁷⁸ But there was in those doubts, as expressed at the time, the implication that somehow the Communists would refuse to let the elections take place, simply because they had never permitted such elections in other countries.⁷⁹ It was not at all clear that the State of Vietnam would refuse to participate in the elections. In fact, there were even some prominent leaders of the State of Vietnam--most notably two former premiers, Tran Van Huu and Nguyen Van Tam--who accepted the Geneva Agreements and urged that the elections be seen as a challenge to which the Saigon government should respond with positive measures to win popular support. Given the unstable situation in the south, it did not seem out of the question that such leaders as those might be back in power when the time came for elections.

Even if the State of Vietnam were to attempt to contravene the Geneva Agreements, it was not certain that such an effort would be any more successful than its original attempt to block the accords at Geneva. After all, seven of the nine participants at Geneva had pledged their support to the agreements. The seven had even prevailed over US objections at Geneva; might they not do so again, if need be? Although the US revived talk of a collective defense arrangement almost immediately after the Geneva Conference,⁸⁰ it remained

77. Devillers, "Struggle," 8.

78. New York Times, 24 July 1954.

79. B. S. N. Murti, Vietnam Divided (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1964), p. 179, suggests that the West must have felt that neither Moscow nor Peking could allow free elections in Vietnam because of the precedent it would set for Korea and Germany. There may also have been, Murti believes, a suspicion that the DRV government could not afford to let the results of free elections in the area they controlled reveal even the slightest opposition to its rule.

80. See the speech by Secretary Dulles on 23 July 1954, in Cole (ed.), Conflict, pp. 176-177.

committed by its unilateral declaration to the view that "peoples are entitled to determine their own future," and it asserted that nothing in its declaration should be taken to indicate a departure from that position. The US pledged not only to refrain from the use or threat of force to upset the agreements; it also promised that it "would not join in any arrangement which would hinder" self-determination in Vietnam (nowhere does it refer to a "South Vietnam").⁸¹

Besides, there were some voices in the US which greeted the prospect of elections with favor. The New York Times saw the agreement on nation-wide elections under neutral supervision to determine Vietnam's "final fate" as perhaps the "one saving grace" in the accords. The Times asserted that elections would have "a better chance of realization" in Vietnam than in Korea or Germany because the Communists hoped to win the Vietnamese elections.⁸² That the Times believed the prospect of elections should be taken seriously was clear from this editorial warning:

If the Communists live up to the agreements reached there will be a free and supervised election in Vietnam two years hence. We cannot assume, with any certainty, that the Communists will permit such a free election. Conversely, we dare not assume that it will not take place. These two years must be used, in Vietnam, in intensive preparation for such an election.⁸³

Others stressed the urgency of extending social and economic aid to the State of Vietnam so that it might win the election.⁸⁴

81. A good indication that the US did not recognize the existence of two states in Vietnam was the US announcement in September 1954 that the US consulate in Hanoi would remain open after the Viet Minh took the city. The US specifically cited paragraph 6 of the Geneva Conference Final Declaration which stated that the military demarcation line did not represent a political boundary. Murti, Vietnam Divided, pp. 173-174. Also, President Eisenhower, in his 23 October 1954 letter to Diem offering to discuss an aid program, refers to Vietnam as "a country temporarily divided by an artificial military grouping." The letter is in U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1965), p. 67.

82. New York Times, 20 July 1954.

83. New York Times, 25 July 1954.

84. See, for example, the speech by Rep. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., New York Times, 25 July 1954.

And in its daily coverage the Times wrote of the elections as if they were expected to take place in 1956. The Viet Minh leaders clearly were not without reason to think that the elections would be held as scheduled.

IV. WHY WERE ELECTIONS NOT HELD?

The statements of the DRV in the period following the Geneva Conference provide evidence that the Viet Minh regime did in fact contemplate the unification of the country under their control by means of elections. Dong's statement to the final meeting of the Geneva Conference stresses the importance of peace almost as much as the need for national unity.⁸⁵ Ho's statement of 22 July 1954 similarly placed emphasis not only on the indivisibility of Vietnam but also on the struggle for peace and democracy, specifically elections.⁸⁶ Nhan Dan reported the Viet Minh line: "Henceforward, the main task of our struggle is to consolidate the peace we have won, faithfully and rapidly implement the provisions of the armistice agreement, and go forward to the settlement of political issues."⁸⁷ As the Viet Minh radio put it on 5 August 1954: "The phase of armed struggle is now being replaced by the phase of political struggle." Exhorting the southern compatriots, the Viet Minh radio warned against the use of violence: "The political struggle requires the people in South Vietnam to maintain a high vigilance. It demands that our people avoid every provocation and use peaceful measures to win democratic freedom and ... attainment of general elections to unify our country."⁸⁸

Throughout 1954 and into 1955, the utterances of the DRV leaders continued to reflect a policy based on political struggle leading to the 1956 elections. Ho Chi Minh, in a November interview, was asked whether he feared that the division of Vietnam could be as lasting as the partition of Korea and Germany. Ho replied negatively, pointing out that the "conditions in Vietnam are different from those in Korea and Germany." He repledged the DRV to work "untiringly" for peaceful reunification as provided in the Geneva Agreements.⁸⁹ In June 1955 Ho again stressed that Vietnam could not be compared with Korea and Germany and insisted that the military demarcation and provisional division could endure only until the 1956 elections were held. "Vietnam is a single country

85. Radio Moscow, 22 July 1954. See also Dong's statement broadcast over Radio Peking, 2 August 1954.

86. New York Times, 26 July 1954, and Facts and Dates on the Problem of the Reunification of Viet-Nam (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), p. 10.

87. Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 25 July 1954.

88. Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 28 September 1954.

89. Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 10 November 1954.

and nothing can prevent the firm will of its people from achieving its unity," he added.⁹⁰ Perhaps the most convincing statements of the DRV's expectation that the country would indeed be reunified by elections in 1956 were those made to their supporters. Viet Minh troops native of south Vietnam who were regrouped in the north were told that they would be returning home in 1956 after the elections.⁹¹ And as the Viet Minh forces left areas they had ruled for many years, they advised the inhabitants to accept life under the State of Vietnam government until the Viet Minh could return after the reunification elections.⁹²

If the DRV's statements revealed a confident expectation and a strong determination that the country would be reunified by elections, the Viet Minh demonstrated those attitudes by more than mere words. The best evidence that the DRV took the Geneva Agreements' promise of elections seriously is the behavior of the Viet Minh during the ensuing two years.⁹³ As Roy Jumper, writing in late 1956, put it: "The Viet Minh agents have lain low during the past two years in South Vietnam. They waited expecting to win the South through the expected all-Vietnam elections."⁹⁴ Ho Chi Minh's followers largely refrained from any effort to retain a military hold on southern areas they had controlled for as long as ten years. The DRV's cooperation in the implementation of the Geneva Agreements probably came as a surprise to some.⁹⁵ It is hard

90. New York Times, 8 June 1955.
91. Philippe Devillers, lecture, Cornell University, 13 December 1965. See also Hots letter to troops coming north. Broadcast over the Viet Minh radio on 17 September 1954, Hots letter said that although the troops regrouping in the north were "temporarily far" from their native villages, they could expect to "return happily" after the country's peaceful unification.
92. Reported by Tillman Durdin, New York Times, 19 May 1955. Additional statements of the DRV's reliance on peaceful struggle may be found in New China News Agency dispatch of 21 September 1954, Vietnam News Agency dispatches of 5 November 1954 and 28 March 1955, and Voice of Nambo broadcast of a Nhan Dan editorial on 23 September 1954.
93. See Jean Lacouture, Vietnam: Between Two Truces (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 52.
94. Roy Jumper, "The Communist Challenge to South Vietnam," Far Eastern Survey, XXV, no. 11 (November, 1956), 161.
95. For example, some diplomats had doubted that any considerable movement of refugees out of Communist areas

to imagine that its withdrawal from areas it had long controlled meant only that the Viet Minh had become resigned to permanent partition. To suppose that is to ignore, among other things, the force of the Viet Minh's commitment to national unity. The Viet Minh forces had fought too long and hard for national unity under their leadership for them to give up what they had won without actually believing they could regain it. The DRV's actual relinquishing of territory and its abandonment of violence must be regarded as solid evidence that the Viet Minh hoped to unify the country peacefully.

The Viet Minh waged an extensive campaign to win votes in the election. In late September 1954 it was reported that "politically" the Viet Minh was "working hard in the South to consolidate its influence." Political workers "intensified their activity" as Viet Minh military forces withdrew, and the Viet Minh was "plainly preparing to win the national elections scheduled ... for 1956."⁹⁶ During the last three months of 1954, a congress of the Lien Viet (United National Front) met in Hanoi. A Viet Minh-dominated organization, the Lien Viet included representatives of various political parties from northern, central, and southern Vietnam. According to Nhan Dan, the aim of the congress was to mobilize popular forces in the struggle for "independence, peace and unity and democracy." The Lien Viet's "work for 1955" was said to consist "in winning support in all levels of the population with a view to winning the general elections for a united Vietnam."⁹⁷ In late December the DRV added four leaders from south Vietnam to its cabinet in what was described in the press as a move undertaken because of its expected impact on "the psychological warfare" south of the 17th parallel in preparation for the 1956 elections.⁹⁸ In March of 1955, it was reported by C. L. Sulzberger of the New York Times that Viet Minh agents were already going through villages in the south "lining up votes." Their procedure was to take along two photographs, one of Ho Chi Minh and one of Bao Dai, and to ask the peasants

would be permitted. New York Times, 24 July 1954. Similarly, Joseph and Stewart Alsop had doubted that the Viet Minh troops would voluntarily relinquish control of the areas they held. As the Alsop brothers put it: "Who can suppose that they [the Viet Minh] will peacefully march away, abandoning the territory they now hold?" New York Herald-Tribune, 23 July 1954.

96. Tillman Durdin in the New York Times, 29 September 1954.
97. New York Times, 13 January 1955.
98. New York Times, 31 December 1954.

whom they preferred.⁹⁹ In June 1955 there were reports that the Viet Minh was working hard to prepare for elections and had opened an intensive new campaign to woo the workers and peasants of the south. Communists had reportedly secured positions in athletic organizations, ancestor worship cults, workingmen's groups and other associations in an effort to win support for the Viet Minh not only on the basis of Ho's prestige as a nationalist leader but also through promises of the economic advantages communism allegedly would bring to the south.¹⁰⁰ Meetings, demonstrations and the simple process of making known the provisions of the Geneva Agreements (considered a subversive activity in the south) were also part of the Viet Minh campaign to win the elections.¹⁰¹

Still another type of action taken by the DRV to promote Vietnam's peaceful reunification was Hanoi's proposal on 4 February 1955 that "normal relations" be established between the two zones. The Communists declared their willingness to grant all facilities to persons on both sides of the border in sending mail, carrying out business enterprises, and facilitating exchanges of a cultural, scientific, sporting, and social nature.¹⁰²

Anticipating the approach of the 20 July 1955 deadline set at Geneva for the consultations on elections, the DRV leaders began to press specifically to ensure the holding of those meetings. In April Dong visited New Delhi and issued a joint statement with Nehru reaffirming the importance attached by the two governments to the holding of reunification elections under the procedure laid down at Geneva.¹⁰³ On 6 June Dong declared his government's readiness to begin the consultations scheduled for the following month. Dong went on to warn: "Vietnam is one. The Vietnamese nation is one. No force can divide them. Whoever tries to partition Vietnam is the enemy of the Vietnamese people and will surely be

99. New York Times, 13 March 1955.

100. New York Times, 2 June 1955 and 8 June 1955.

101. Murti, Vietnam Divided, p. 157. The extent to which such demonstrations can be regarded as Viet Minh activities is uncertain, but in at least one case the demonstrators were reported to be acting on the exhortations of Radio Hanoi. New York Times, 4 July 1955.

102. See Facts and Dates, p. 18, and New York Times, 7 February 1955.

103. Donald Lancaster, The Emancipation of French Indo-China (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 370.

defeated."¹⁰⁴ In July Ho went to Peking and Moscow seeking both economic aid and support for the holding of the consultative conference. His visits produced joint communiqués stressing the importance of starting the consultative meetings on time.¹⁰⁵ On 19 July Premier Dong, on behalf of himself and President Ho, sent to President Diem a letter formally proposing that Diem appoint representatives to attend a consultative conference to discuss reunification elections as provided in the Geneva Agreements.¹⁰⁶

During the preceding year, the Diem government had made no effort to hide its contempt for the Geneva Agreements, but it had not actually enunciated an official policy with regard to its participation in the consultative conference. Although at the start of 1955 the US was still talking about new measures to win the 1956 elections,¹⁰⁷ doubts about the possibility of holding the election were apparent, particularly in dispatches emanating from Saigon. On 28 February Radio Saigon suggested that the elections would not be held because of the absence of democratic liberties in the north. On 15 March Secretary Dulles argued that it would be hard to create the conditions for a free choice in the north.¹⁰⁸ By March 1955 it was becoming quite clear that the Diem regime would probably try to avoid the elections. As Sulzberger put it, the 1956 elections "really will never be held.... Nobody likes to talk about this. But when the time to admit it arrives, a grave crisis must inevitably develop."¹⁰⁹ At the end of March it was reported that observers in Saigon were expressing "open doubt" that such elections ever would be held.¹¹⁰ In mid-May the State of Vietnam government, in notes sent to Britain, France and the US, urged a conference to formulate a common position on the elections in light of the probability, as seen

104. New York Times, 7 June 1955. See also For the Consultative Conference (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1955).

105. Facts and Dates, pp. 24-25.

106. Ibid., p. 26.

107. See, for example, the article in New York Times, 8 January 1955, reporting US hopes that a land reform program could "tip the scales in favor of the West" in the 1956 elections.

108. The Saigon broadcast and Dulles' speech are both reported in Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 15 March 1955.

109. New York Times, 12 March 1955.

110. New York Times, 30 March 1955.

in Saigon, that they would not be held.^{†11} On 9 June, three days after Dong's announcement that the DRV was ready for consultations, Saigon's view reportedly was that any comment on the DRV statement should come from France. The south, it was asserted, had no intention of acting on the matter.^{†12}

Despite the flow of reports describing Saigon's unwillingness to participate in reunification elections, there was genuine uncertainty as to whether Diem would agree to take part in the consultative conference. France had been consistent in urging the State of Vietnam government to prepare for elections. In March 1955 Premier Edgar Faure urged Diem to cooperate with the sects in the hope of winning their support in the election.^{†13} Faure said in April that France was determined above all to observe strictly the Geneva Agreements, and he insisted that there could be no question of annulling or postponing the 1956 elections.^{†14} Faure warned that there were two pitfalls before the Diem government--one was losing the 1956 elections and the other was trying to avoid them.^{†15} On the completion of the withdrawals and transfers of military forces, representatives of the French High Command and the Viet Minh army issued a joint statement resolving "to continue to assure their responsibility in the full implementation of the provisions of the Geneva Agreement and of the final declaration...." Both parties reaffirmed their determination to "implement scrupulously" the necessary provisions "in order to consolidate peace and to achieve the unity of Vietnam by means of general elections."^{†16} The British also felt strongly that Diem should observe fully the provisions of the Geneva Agreements. On 13 July, Foreign Secretary Macmillan declared in Parliament that Britain would exert all its influence to ensure the holding of consultations as provided in the Geneva Agreements.^{†17}

111. New York Times, 20 May 1955.

112† New York Times, 9 June 1955.

113† Ngo Ton Dat, "Geneva Partition and the Question of Reunification," pp. 363-364.

114† New York Times, 14 April 1955.

115. New York Times, 4 May 1955.

116. Quoted in Cole (ed.), Conflict, p. 208. This statement was cited by Dong in his 6 June declaration of the DRV's readiness for consultations.

117. Facts and Dates, p. 24. See also Economist, 16 July 1955.

The official attitude of the US was ambiguous. It was generally believed by early 1955 that the US was not investing heavily in the buildup of the State of Vietnam merely to hand it over to the Viet Minh in elections. On 14 May, however, Faure was reported to have obtained Dulles' assurance that the US would back France in seeking to prepare for the 1956 elections.¹¹⁸ In June Sulzberger reported that the "only solid fact" agreed on by the US, France, and Britain during May's Indochina negotiations in Paris was "that the Geneva pledge for all-Vietnam elections must be carried out." Washington reportedly was "of the same mind as Paris and London ... that every preparation must be made on the assumption elections will be held." Sulzberger explained that Dulles had secured reluctant British and French support for Diem, and "in exchange he concurred that the promised elections in Vietnam should faithfully be carried out." According to Sulzberger, Diem's reported opposition to elections put him in disagreement with "the one point on which the Big Three unequivocally agree."¹¹⁹ The Times now wrote editorially of the elections as if they really were expected to take place:

The real deadline in Vietnam ... is July of next year, when a definitive election is scheduled. That deadline must be met.... The United States still expects an election in all of Vietnam and would like to see that election properly supervised. Moreover, it would like to see free Vietnam strong enough and stable enough that it would offer a reasonable alternative to the Communist rule in the north. This is the reason for the present assistance and training program.¹²⁰

Probably in response to growing pressures from the Western powers, Diem began to move toward accepting elections. On 14 June he told a group of correspondents that his government was willing to discuss the question of elections with the DRV. He did not elaborate that statement, except to say that "it all depends on the conditions under which elections are held." A source close to the premier said that the south would demand extensive third-party supervision and detailed procedures for insuring a secret ballot. He mentioned the grouping of military forces in concentration areas so they could not exercise pressure during the elections as one of the conditions the State of Vietnam was considering. The source said that the results of any talks between the two regimes would be submitted to the soon-to-be-elected National Assembly, which would have to decide whether the south would

118. New York Times, 14 May 1955.

119. New York Times, 8 June 1955.

120. The above quote is drawn from New York Times editorials of 20 May 1955 and 29 June 1955. See also New York Times, 26 May 1955.

actually participate in the elections. Tillman Durdin, who reported Diem's remark and the "source's" amplifying comments, characterized it as the "first definite indication that South Vietnam was likely to engage in discussions" with the DRV concerning procedures for elections.¹²¹

As the 20 July deadline neared, it was expected that Diem would make a statement, but its contents were kept secret.¹²² The Economist wrote that Diem seemed likely to "keep everyone guessing until the last moment about whether he will send representatives to consultations" with the DRV.¹²³ On 16 July Diem made known his position in a radio broadcast to the nation. He stated that he favored free elections in principle but could not consider holding them until the DRV had given him proof of its readiness to place national interests before its Communist creed. It is "out of the question," he asserted, "for us to consider any proposal from the Vietminh, if proof is not given us that they put the superior interests of the national community above those of communism; if they do not give up terrorism and totalitarian methods; if they do not cease violating their obligations...." Diem also reasserted that the State of Vietnam did not consider itself bound by the Geneva Agreements.¹²⁴

The British responded on 18 July with a Foreign Office declaration expressing regret at Diem's statement and urging that consultations be started as soon as possible.¹²⁵ Diem's attitude toward elections was discussed at the Paris conference of Western foreign ministers to prepare for the Geneva summit conference. The foreign ministers, fearing bitter recriminations from the USSR at Geneva, agreed to do their best to persuade Diem to change his mind.¹²⁶ Britain and France made an effort to convince Diem that the State of Vietnam's position would be a strong one if it could demonstrate with the support of the ICC that free elections were being blocked by the Viet Minh's failure to permit adequate supervision. He was assured that the West and the ICC would back him fully in trying to prevent "Communist fraudulism or subversion

121. New York Times, 15 June 1955.

122. New York Times, 15 July 1955.

123. Economist, 16 July 1955.

124. The text of Diem's talk is in Republic of Vietnam, The Problem of Reunification of Viet-Nam (Saigon: Ministry of Information, 1958), pp. 30-31.

125. New York Times, 19 July 1955.

126. Murti, Vietnam Divided, p. 184.

during the election period." Paris and London sought to clarify to Diem the difference between holding elections and simply taking part in the consultations, which was all that was required at the moment. They stressed that in talking with the DRV, Diem would be making no irrevocable commitments and would be giving evidence of his adherence to the Geneva Agreements.¹²⁷ At the Geneva summit meeting, the three Western leaders agreed to undertake added efforts to convince Diem to accept the DRV's invitation, but Eisenhower and Eden both stressed that their power to move Diem was limited. On 26 July a Western note was transmitted to Diem.¹²⁸

The State of Vietnam, nevertheless, denied that the Western powers had put any pressure on it to conform to the Geneva Agreements, and insisted that the Western note had actually been an expression of sympathy with its position. US State Department officials affirmed that the note had conveyed overall approval of Diem's position, but had urged that he at least "go through the motions" of trying to organize free elections.¹²⁹ The British denied any implication that they had given approval to Diem's refusal to talk with the DRV.¹³⁰ But Western assurances could not alter Diem's conviction that by entering talks with the DRV he would have committed himself to the elections.¹³¹ On 9 August Diem formally replied to Dong's note of 19 July. The State of Vietnam premier essentially reiterated his position of 16 July, insisting that "nothing constructive [with respect to elections] will be done as long as the Communist regime of the North does not permit each Vietnamese citizen to enjoy democratic freedoms and the basic fundamental rights of man."¹³²

The next day, in a press conference, Secretary Dulles asserted that Diem was correct in not feeling bound by the Geneva Agreement to hold reunification elections because his government had not signed the Agreement.¹³³ The British Foreign Office, on the other hand, was reported "disturbed" by

127. Ibid., p. 189.

128. Ibid., p. 185.

129. New York Times, 9 August 1955.

130. New York Times, 10 August 1955.

131. New York Times, 23 July 1955.

132. See Ngo Ton Dat, "Geneva Partition and the Question of Reunification," pp. 389-390.

133. Ibid., p. 390. See also Murti, Vietnam Divided, p. 186.

the Diem statement.¹³⁴ On 30 August Dulles gave Diem unequivocal support, stating: "We certainly agree that conditions are not ripe for free elections."¹³⁵ Thus the US, whose participation in the common Western effort to persuade Diem to talk with the DRV had always been unenthusiastic,¹³⁶ now emerged in firm official support of his opposition to elections. In view of the US's heavy economic aid to the State of Vietnam and its fervent backing of Diem in the face of British and French urgings that he be replaced, the importance to Diem of US backing for his election stand must have been considerable. Apparently encouraged by Dulles' strong support, Diem declared bluntly on 21 September that there could be "no question of a conference, even less of negotiations" with the DRV.¹³⁷

It should be clear that despite the apparent unwillingness of the State of Vietnam to take any steps toward elections, the DRV during the first year after Geneva had been making extensive preparations in anticipation of the elections and had had at least some reason to think that Diem might be forced into accepting them. Even after Diem's refusal to permit a consultative conference, the DRV still had cause to hope that the elections would be held. The continuing instability of Diem's position offered a possibility that more conciliatory elements might accede to the leadership. And the DRV probably was conscious of a considerable amount of international support for its position that either the French

134. See The Times (London), 11 August 1955. According to The Times, British officials were unhappy that Diem seemed "determined to go on finding excuses for postponing election talks" with the Viet Minh. The British had already taken pains to dissociate themselves from any expression of support for Diem such as that given by Dulles. See New York Times, 10 August 1955.

135. Quoted in Ngo Ton Dat, "Geneva Partition and the Question of Reunification," p. 391.

136. Whereas France and Britain had publicly called for consultations, the US, at least prior to 22 July, had only expressed "unofficially" the "hope" that Diem would meet with the Viet Minh. But the US had not formally suggested to Diem that he do so. New York Herald-Tribune, 22 July 1955, cited in ibid., p. 380. On 23 July, the New York Times accurately described the US position as "obscure." The Times had already, on 21 July, altered its previous line and given editorial support to Diem's 16 July stand: "We must not be trapped into a fictitious legalism that can condemn 10,000,000 potentially free persons into slavery.... The agreements do not necessarily have to be abrogated but they should at least be scrutinized with the sharpest eye."

137. Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 372.

or the State of Vietnam, one or the other or both, should be held responsible for ensuring that the Geneva Agreements were implemented in the southern zone. Accordingly, the DRV continued its efforts to prepare for elections and to press for a consultative conference. Two approaches were employed: the intensification of propaganda work in the south and the appeal for international assistance.

The principal step taken to intensify its campaign to rally popular support in the south for reunification elections was the formation in September 1955 of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, which incorporated the Lien Viet. The platform of the Fatherland Front set forth in some detail the DRV's understanding of how the peaceful reunification of Vietnam by elections should proceed. It called, in effect, for a sort of federation. Through "free, general elections, organized on the principle of universal, equal and secret ballot," a unified national assembly was to be chosen. The assembly, which was to be the highest legislative body of the state, would elect a central coalition government. The platform emphatically stated that it was necessary to take into account differences between the two zones. Thus there was to be set up in each zone a People's Council and an administrative body with wide powers. Those organs would have the right to promulgate local laws consistent with the characteristics of the zone concerned and not at variance with common national laws. Normal economic, cultural and social relations were to be immediately restored between the two zones. The armed forces were to be integrated gradually and through negotiations. Agrarian reform policies in the south were expected to differ from those in the north; in the former region the government would "requisition-by-purchase" properties of landlords for distribution to the peasantry. The platform insisted that there should be no attempt "by either side to annex or incorporate the other."¹³⁸

The Fatherland Front platform was quickly made the program of the DRV government. Dong, in a report to the Fifth Session of the National Assembly in September 1955, warmly embraced the platform as the "basis" and the "method" by which national unity could be achieved. Dong declared that the Fatherland Front program opened up "a new stage ... of complex and difficult political struggle...." Plans to use the Fatherland Front program as the basis of an extensive campaign to rally support for the consultative conference were also made clear. The program was to be given the most extensive dissemination. All political parties, people's organizations, and "representative personalities" in both zones were to establish contact and exchange ideas on the program so as to

138. See Viet-Nam Fatherland Front (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), pp. 19-22.

create a nationwide movement demanding that the Southern authorities hold consultations on elections.¹³⁹ Broadcasting over Radio Hanoi and working through Viet Minh cadres who had stayed in the south, a number of organized demonstrations were held to persuade Diem to open consultations with the DRV.¹⁴⁰

A good part of the DRV's propaganda effort was devoted to attacks on the October 1955 referendum and the March 1956 constituent assembly elections held in the south. An effort was made to encourage the populace to boycott the elections. Strikes were staged, and demonstrations were held.¹⁴¹ The DRV denounced the elections as a violation of the Geneva Agreements and a "farce," insisting that South Vietnam was not a country.¹⁴²

Although the DRV may have had some confidence that strong popular support for the holding of elections would compel the southern government to cooperate,¹⁴³ it is probable that Hanoi placed more hope in its appeals for international action to force Diem's compliance with the Geneva Agreements. The DRV looked to the co-chairmen, especially the USSR, to put pressure on Diem. Roughly a week after Diem's 9 August refusal to accept the DRV's invitation to hold consultations, Dong sent a letter to the co-chairmen reporting the situation and requesting that they take "all necessary measures to ensure ... the immediate convening of the consultative conference...." Despite France's disclaimer, in a June note to Hanoi and the ICC, of any responsibility for bringing the south into consultations with the north,¹⁴⁴ Dong demanded that France and the State of Vietnam guarantee the implementation of the

139. Ibid. pp. 11-12, 29, 34-45.

140. Murti, Vietnam Divided, p. 196.

141. See Facts and Dates, pp. 37, 38, 52, 54, 55.

142. Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 1 May 1956.

143. Alex Josey, "Will Ho Chi Minh Unite Viet Nam?" Eastern World (London), November 1955, p. 16, reports that the DRV leaders were confident that the desire of nationalists in the south for unity would eventually force Diem to yield. Josey talked with Ho, Dong, and General Vo Nguyen Giap, army chief of staff.

144. New York Times, 21 June 1955. It was reported in the Economist, 16 July 1955, that the Viet Minh were in the ironic position of appealing to the French to leave their troops in Vietnam to ensure observance of the Geneva Agreements.

agreements.¹⁴⁵ Nehru also intervened at this point, expressing to Eden and Molotov the hope that they could induce Diem to cooperate.¹⁴⁶ In September Molotov gave the DRV weak support in a UN speech. He said he felt "entitled to expect" that steps would be taken to prevent a "breakdown" of the consultations and called such steps "essential, if the general elections are to be held within the prescribed time limit...."¹⁴⁷ On 31 October Chou En-lai informed the co-chairmen of his support for the DRV's August letter.¹⁴⁸ In November 1955 Dong again approached Molotov with a request that the co-chairmen take action, and again the USSR's response was mild.¹⁴⁹ Molotov called on the French to inquire about their position on elections and expressed his concern about the State of Vietnam's attitude.¹⁵⁰ He also met with British Foreign Secretary Macmillan at Geneva. The British, who had stated in August that they did not believe the State of Vietnam could continue indefinitely to refuse consultations,¹⁵¹

145. Murti, Vietnam Divided, p. 190. Dong's letter to the co-chairmen (text in Cmnd. 2834) produced no results. On 16 September the British Foreign Office announced that the USSR had handed over the DRV's letter to the co-chairmen to India. On 20 September Britain transmitted the letter to the other members of the Geneva Conference. Facts and Dates, pp. 34-35.
146. Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 371. Again on 7 September Nehru and Krishna Menon spoke in support of the DRV. Facts and Dates, p. 33. According to the New York Times, 27 August 1955, Nehru had already held that the State of Vietnam was bound as a "successor regime." In an aide-memoire sent to the co-chairmen on 14 June 1955, India had called on Britain and the USSR to issue a request that the DRV and the State of Vietnam begin consultations. The aide-memoire noted that the French had "transferred their sovereign authority" in the south subsequent to the signing of the Geneva Agreements. Thus, asserted the aide-memoire, the representative authorities to whom the election provision applied were the DRV and, "in virtue of Article 27, the State of Vietnam which has taken over the civil administration in South Vietnam from the French authorities." Text of the aide-memoire is in Cmnd. 2834.
147. New York Times, 24 September 1955.
148. Cmnd. 2834.
149. Lancaster, Emancipation, p. 372.
150. New York Times, 5 November 1955.
151. New York Times, 10 August 1955.

said that they still favored the elections; Macmillan reportedly told Molotov that chances for holding the elections might be better after the Saigon government elected its constituent assembly.¹⁵² On 20 December the co-chairmen reported the delivery of the various messages they had received to the members of the Geneva Conference and said they would be "grateful" to receive comments and suggestions.¹⁵³ By the end of 1955, it is likely that the DRV's hopes of obtaining action by appealing to the co-chairmen had been greatly diminished.

At the end of January 1956 an innovation was introduced into the DRV's campaign for international aid in bringing the Diem regime to discuss elections. In response to the co-chairmen's December request for suggestions, Chou En-lai proposed the reconvening of the 1954 Geneva Conference, adding the members of the ICC.¹⁵⁴ On 14 February 1956 the DRV also proposed a new Geneva Conference in a note to the co-chairmen.¹⁵⁵ A week later the Indian government wrote to the co-chairmen to express its support of all initiatives aimed at ensuring the fulfillment of the Geneva Agreements.¹⁵⁶ On 18 February the Soviet Foreign Ministry delivered a note to the British embassy, supporting the proposals made by China and the DRV and urging that the co-chairmen inform the conference members of their common belief that a new meeting was needed. The British reply on 9 March suggested that it would be premature to propose a full conference until the views of other countries had been clarified, but proposed that the co-chairmen meet to discuss the situation. On 30 March the USSR reasserted its support for a new conference but also agreed to meet first with the British. The tone for the upcoming Anglo-Soviet meeting was set by a British note sent to the USSR on

152. New York Times, 15 November 1955. This view, surprising in light of the DRV's tendency to see such "separatist" elections as a major bar to reunification, was also maintained by New York Times, 5 February 1956. The probable assumption was that a strengthened Saigon regime, holding a popular mandate, might be in a stronger position to negotiate with the north.

153. Cmnd. 2834.

154. New York Times, 31 January 1956.

155. Facts and Dates, p. 51.

156. Ibid., p. 52. Nehru strongly supported the DRV, stressing that since Diem accepted the benefits of the Geneva Agreements, he should undertake the responsibilities. See ibid., p. 53.

9 April. Restating London's belief that the Diem government should agree to consultations but denying that it was legally bound to do so, the British note urged that the maintenance of peace be regarded as the "paramount objective."¹⁵⁷

The meetings that were held in April between the Soviets and the British produced what must have been a disappointing result for the DRV.¹⁵⁷ The co-chairmen showed more concern about the maintenance of peace in Vietnam than about the country's reunification in their message issued on 8 May. They expressed their concern about the situation and strongly urged the authorities of both Vietnamese governments to ensure the implementation of the political provisions adopted at Geneva. Both governments were:

invited to transmit to the Co-Chairmen as soon as possible, either jointly or separately, their views about the time required for the opening of consultations on the organization of nation-wide elections in Viet-Nam and the time required for the holding of elections as a means of achieving the unification of Viet-Nam.

But the real concern of the co-chairmen was apparent in their statement that pending the holding of elections they attached "great importance" to the maintenance of the cease-fire.¹⁵⁸

The DRV responded first on 11 May 1956 by dispatching another letter to Diem, citing the co-chairmen's message and requesting the start of consultations, but also pledging to maintain peace.¹⁵⁹ On 4 June Dong replied to the co-chairmen.^t He repeated the DRV's readiness for immediate consultations and requested that the co-chairmen take the necessary steps to bring them about. He also declared that he would again seek a new Geneva Conference if the southern government maintained its "negative attitude" toward consultations and

157. The letter was hailed as a triumph in the south. Ibid., pp. 71-72.

158. Texts of the various notes mentioned above are in Cmd. 2834. It has been noted by Ngo Ton Dat, "Geneva Partition and the Question of Reunification," pp. 404-405, that the British insistence that elections be held on time had declined after the start of 1956. He attributes this change to a "desire to achieve unity of policy" with the US, an appreciation of the progress made by Diem in establishing order, and apprehension about the growth of DRV armed strength.

159. Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 12 May 1956; also New York Times, 13 May 1956.

elections.¹⁶⁰ There was, of course, no question as to what Diem's position would be. After winning his self-proclaimed referendum against Bao Dai the preceding October and declaring a Republic of Vietnam, Diem insisted that he now had a popular mandate not to proceed with unification elections.¹⁶¹ Diem even told a British correspondent in March that he did not want unification until the south had been strengthened and popular disillusionment had weakened the north.¹⁶² One of the first acts of the newly-elected constituent assembly in March was formally to denounce the Geneva Agreements.¹⁶³ Thus, when on 29 May the Diem government answered the co-chairmen's message, it simply reaffirmed its prior position that "the absence of all liberty in North Vietnam makes the question of electoral and pre-election campaigns practically unattainable for the moment."¹⁶⁴ Diem received ardent support from the US in a speech delivered by Walter S. Robertson, Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East, before the American Friends of Vietnam on 1 June.¹⁶⁵ The 20 July deadline for elections passed.

Hanoi's willingness to let the 1956 deadline pass without incident should not be taken as a sign that the DRV's interest in reunification through elections had diminished. That Hanoi was still under heavy pressures to achieve reunification seems clear enough. The Viet Minh's strong commitment to national unity through years of hard fighting against the French has already been mentioned. Furthermore, North Vietnam, traditionally a food deficit area, could not hope to lead a truly independent existence. Vietnam is an economic unity; the two halves complement each other. Without access to southern rice, the DRV leaders faced the prospect of an uncomfortable dependence on Chinese food supplies.¹⁶⁶

160. Ngo Ton Dat, "Geneva Partition and the Question of Reunification," pp. 410-411.

161. New York Times, 26 October 1955. Bao Dai had denounced Diem's action in holding the referendum as one which would render reunification through nation-wide elections impossible.

162. The Times (London), 12 March 1956, cited in Murti, Vietnam Divided, p. 190.

163. New York Times, 9 March 1956.

164. Ngo Ton Dat, "Geneva Partition and the Question of Reunification," pp. 409-410.

165. Ibid., p. 412.

166. Possible evidence that the DRV leaders were unhappy at this prospect is available. In late 1954, the DRV

The DRV was under significant pressure as well from Viet Minh troops from the south who had been regrouped in the north and told they would be returning to their homes after the 1956 elections.¹⁶⁷ A similar source of embarrassment was the group of Viet Minh cadres who had stayed behind in the south.¹⁶⁸ Cultural and social pressures for a normalization of relations with the south were also of some importance.

There is good evidence that elections were still the means by which Hanoi sought to accomplish reunification. Throughout the year following Diem's refusal to hold consultations, DRV leaders had continued to maintain in uncompromising terms the paramountcy of the struggle for reunification through elections. Dong had said in September 1955 that there could be "no other alternative" than the holding of the elections as prescribed in the Geneva Accords.¹⁶⁹ In April 1956 Truong Chinh reaffirmed the policy of working for national reunification through elections. Recognizing the difficulties encountered Truong Chinh noted that there were "some people who do not believe in the correctness of this political program and of the policy of peaceful reunification of the country, holding that these are illusory and reformist." But, asserted Truong Chinh, the recent declarations of the Soviet Union's Twentieth Party Congress concerning the peaceful transition to socialism had provided "new reason to be

reportedly delayed its aid negotiations with China several months in an effort to work out an arrangement with France. Though an agreement was reached, French concerns and technicians proved unwilling to remain in the Communist zone. New York Times, 1 January 1955. Sulzberger suggested that Ho, fearful of Chinese domination, might seek to play off China against France and to act as a sort of "Communist Nehru." New York Times, 13 November 1954.

167. New York Herald-Tribune, 29 August 1956.

168. It should be remembered that the Geneva Agreements required the regrouping only of military forces, not of all supporters of one side or the other. There is no evidence that the DRV made any effort to encourage civilians to move north, and, in view of the Viet Minh's expectation that the country would be reunified by elections, there was no reason to do so.

169. Fatherland Front, p. 41. See also Hots 2 September 1955 speech, ibid., pp. 44-45; Ho's New Year's Day 1956 appeal for intensification of the struggle for consultations, Facts and Dates, p. 47, and Ho's 6 July 1956 speech, Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 6 July 1956.

confident" about the policy of relying on elections.¹⁷⁰ In May Dong referred to the national reunification effort as "the sacred struggle of the Vietnamese people in the present historical phase." He expressed confidence that the country still could be united through peaceful means.¹⁷¹ In July Ho was asked in an interview what would happen if no elections were held. He answered: "In that case, the Vietnamese people will continue to struggle with greater energy to have free general elections held throughout the country, for such is the most cherished aspiration of the entire Vietnamese people...." When the idea that both Vietnamese governments might be admitted to the UN was mentioned to him, he replied negatively, insisting that: "Vietnam is a whole from the North to the South. It must be unified. It cannot be cut in two separate nations any more than the United States can be cut into two separate nations."¹⁷²

Another sign that the DRV still was sincerely interested in elections is the report of Hanoi's effort to win Diem's agreement to elections by offering to postpone them. On a number of occasions in 1955 and 1956 and through several intermediaries, the DRV leaders informed Saigon of their willingness to postpone the plebiscite and to appeal to a foreign arbiter.¹⁷³ If the DRV had viewed the election provision merely as a propaganda device to embarrass the Diem regime, it surely would have insisted on Diem's keeping the original date. Hanoi's apparent reasonableness on the subject probably reflected a hope that Diem would agree to elections one, two, or three years hence, thus committing himself and enhancing the DRV's chances of ultimately gaining peaceful reunification.

The reason for Hanoi's continued advocacy of elections is not hard to understand. The DRV originally had favored elections because it expected to win, and in 1956 it could still be confident of victory. At the root of that confidence perhaps was the knowledge that the north's population exceeded that of the south by two or three million (out of roughly 30 million total). But the expectation of a DRV victory cannot be explained solely or even principally in terms of the northern majority. Reports of the south's poor prospects in the elections rarely laid the cause at the lack of a free vote in the north which would make a Communist victory automatic. The strong support for the Viet Minh in the south is

170. Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 29 April 1956.

171. Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 1 May 1956.

172. Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 12 July 1956.

173. Lacouture, Between Two Truces, p. 68.

a crucial factor which simply cannot be ignored. Some observers believed that the Viet Minh actually was stronger south of the 17th parallel than in the north.¹⁷⁴ During the two years after Geneva there was reason to believe that the Viet Minh's electoral strength in the south remained considerable.¹⁷⁵ Thus, an 8 October 1955 Economist article stated:

The mass of the people in the south favor the Communist regime in the north, but for reasons of nationalistic sentiment rather than because of any doctrinaire attachment to Communism. They have been strengthened in their allegiance since Geneva by the high-handed and inept actions of Diem. The kind of argument one hears is that the choice lies between an efficient dictatorship in the north and an inefficient dictatorship in the south.

The Economist also perceived a significant swell of support in the south for the holding of reunification elections:

Many Vietnamese in the south have been criticizing Diem for his refusal to meet the Viet Minh leaders for discussions about the organization of national elections. There may well develop a really spontaneous and massive demonstration by the people of southern Vietnam to demand elections. Mr. Diem will then be faced with the choice of acceding to their demands, and certainly lose the election, or of opening fire on his own people and being overthrown by force.¹⁷⁶

Although by the spring of 1956 Diem had indeed strengthened his control of the government beyond what most had thought possible, it is important to remember that Diem's remarkable achievement in eliminating his rivals for political power in Saigon did not mean he had acquired the broad base of popular

174. Ellen J. Hammer, The Struggle for Indochina Continues (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1955), p. 22.

175. On Viet Minh strength in the south during the first year after Geneva, see New York Times, 24 October 1954, 23 December 1954, 31 December 1954, 20 May 1955, 8 June 1955, 23 June 1955, 17 July 1955.

176. See also Eastern World (London), November, 1955, p. 11, which reported that Diem's refusal to consult on elections had alienated liberal elements in the south who feared that a failure to meet with the north would produce a new war. The article also reported widespread opposition to Diem among the peasantry, stemming particularly from Diem's failure to institute land reforms.

support needed for success in a free election;¹⁷⁷ on the contrary, he had done little to win such support.

Despite the evidence that the DRV was rightly confident of victory in the elections, some have maintained that the DRV's willingness to allow the 1956 deadline to pass without incident suggests that Hanoi had by then lost real interest in the elections because of the problems encountered in its land reform program. This argument ignores several facts. It was not until the summer of 1956 that the DRV leaders came to realize that they were confronted by a severe internal crisis.¹⁷⁸ On 17 August Ho admitted that errors had been made. The Nghe An peasant uprising, the most spectacular manifestation of discontent in the countryside, did not occur until November. Thus, the DRV's policy on how to react to the passing of the July deadline was certainly formulated and probably executed before the gravity of the agrarian problems was known.

Furthermore, while it would be wrong to minimize the seriousness of the difficulties faced by the DRV in late 1956, it does not necessarily follow that Hanoi was significantly less willing to hold reunification elections. Even after the extent of the land reform failure became clear, the DRV continued to seek the co-chairmen's intervention to force the Diem government to fulfill the Geneva Agreements. On 15 August Dong sent a note to the co-chairmen approving the USSR's 21 July proposal that the co-chairmen recommend that Diem immediately set a date for consultations and elections. Dong insisted that Saigon could not continue to speak of unity while refusing to discuss elections and renewed his demand that a new Geneva Conference be convened if Saigon failed to comply. As a further sign of his sincerity, Dong pledged that if there was an agreement to hold elections,

177. An editorial in The Times (London), 9 March 1956, summarized Diem's achievement in this way: "The liberal intellectuals have been silenced in one way or another, the gangster organization of the Binh Xuyen has disintegrated; the Cao Dai General Nguyen Than Phuong has brought his forces over to the Government and deposed his 'pope.' By no means all of the countryside is firmly administered by the Government in Saigon. But at any rate organized armed resistance has been ended.... A year ago Mr. Diem refused national elections on the grounds that there was no guarantee of democratic freedom in the north. If he has asserted his own power by equally undemocratic methods, it has nevertheless been asserted."¹⁷⁸

178. Bernard B. Fall, The Two Viet-Nams (New York: Praeger, 1964), p. 155.

all questions connected with their organization and supervision would be submitted to both sides for mutual agreement.¹⁷⁹ And on 22 November, just days after the Nghe An uprising, the DRV and China issued a joint communiqué condemning the Saigon regime and the US for prolonging Vietnam's division and demanding that the members of the Geneva Conference take action to ensure the implementation of the Agreements. Although this communiqué probably was primarily an effort to extract further action from the USSR, it may also have been issued in the hope that Britain, then on very bad terms with the US because of the Suez crisis, might reverse its earlier stand on the issue of elections in Vietnam.¹⁸⁰

Finally, it should be pointed out that the north's anticipated margin in the elections was such that it is hard to imagine that discontent about the land reforms could have seriously threatened the DRV with defeat in the elections. Many of the DRV's problems stemmed from the country's division, and one would expect that under those circumstances pressure for reunification would increase, not decline. While reunification would not have solved the land reform problems, it would have relieved economic and social pressures¹⁸¹ thereby removing some of the causes of tensions in the countryside. It really is hard to see why the DRV would have reacted by losing interest in the elections to problems some of which might have been at least partly alleviated by reunification.

The fact remains that the DRV did allow the election deadline to pass without undertaking drastic action. Many were surprised at the restraint shown by the DRV in the face of the frustration of what it felt were its legitimate claims. In view of the fact that recourse to violence eventually was taken, it is important to understand that throughout the two-year period there was an expectation that Diem's failure to allow elections might lead the DRV to violence, and, many said, such a course on the DRV's part could not be considered wholly unjustified. Immediately after the Geneva Conference, the New York Times had remarked that if the scheduled elections did not take place, the Viet Minh would have "a good excuse for making trouble."¹⁸² On 16 July 1955 the Economist asserted:

179r New York Times, 15 August 1956.

180. This is suggested by Hinton, Communist China, pp. 338-339r

181. Seerp. 39 above.

182. New York Times, 25 July 1954.

... no western representative can possibly advise Diem to refuse to confer with the Viet Minh. To do so would be to invite either Communist-inspired civil disturbances in the South, or, eventually, a military attack which the nationalists would face without allies in the field.

On 21 April 1956, as the deadline approached, the Economist warned that Diem's refusal to participate in elections "constitutes a provocation to the Viet Minh to launch a war against the Nationalist south." And the New York Herald-Tribune, writing after the passing of the deadline, said: "These [southern Viet Minh] underground workers had doubtless expected to play a decisive role in the election that never came off. Now their only future is subversion."¹⁸³

Though it ultimately did respond to Diem's "provocation," why did the DRV fail to do so in 1956? The DRV's failure to renew hostilities undoubtedly reflected at least to some extent its reluctance to engage in another war without having recovered from the considerable devastation of the first. But perhaps more important was the unwillingness of the Russians or the Chinese to support such a move. There was, in effect, a basic conflict of interests between the DRV and its Communist allies. The Soviets were not eager to establish the precedent of free elections in divided countries for fear that the West would insist on applying the same principle to Germany and Korea, where a Communist victory was unlikely. Most important, the Soviets were anxious to avoid a major war. The SEATO umbrella over Indochina and the US government's strong support for Diem clearly made the consequences of a DRV attack uncertain; Vietnam apparently was too far from the USSR's central interest to be worth such a risk. Perhaps the most striking example of the USSR's willingness to sacrifice the DRV's interests for its own was Moscow's 1957 proposal that, as part of a package deal to include the two Koreas, both parts of Vietnam should be admitted to the UN.¹⁸⁴

183: New York Herald-Tribune, 29 August 1956. For additional representative statements of the view that the south would either have to accept the elections or be prepared for a Viet Minh resumption of violence, see New York Times, 11 August 1955 (statement of the Canadian ICC Member) and 8 January 1956.

184: The DRV, which opposed the admission of both Vietnams to the UN (seerp. 41, above), never publicly acknowledged the Soviet proposal. Hanoi vehemently attacked Saigon's effort to gain admission alone, arguing that neither part of the country was qualified for membership; only a reunified Vietnam could join. Hanoi praised the USSR

Though the Chinese were more deeply concerned than the Soviets about the future of the DRV, Vietnam was still much less important to Peking than other questions, particularly Taiwan. China, like the USSR, was in the midst of promoting a policy of peaceful coexistence and detente; like Moscow, Peking was probably unwilling to sacrifice that policy for the sake of Vietnamese reunification, even under Communist auspices. Furthermore, if Peking's fear of a major war in Indochina had led Chou En-lai to urge moderation and compromise on the Viet Minh at Geneva, that fear of war probably was at least as great in 1956 as it had been in 1954. Finally, it is even possible that Peking preferred a divided Vietnam, keeping the DRV dependent on China for its food supply.¹⁸⁵ In any case, however inviting and however justifiable an invasion of the south might have seemed to Hanoi's superior army, the DRV's economic dependence on its Communist allies, especially China, would have been a severe restriction on any plans to move against the south.¹⁸⁶ It is quite likely that the DRV was wary of involving itself in a situation in which it might have had to face both Diem and the US without strong Chinese or Soviet support; such a situation would have jeopardized the very existence of the DRV.

for its veto of the Saigon effort. See New York Times, 25 January 1957 and 31 January 1957; and Vietnam News Agency dispatches of 26 January 1957, 30 January 1957, and 12 February 1957. The Soviet proposal was rejected by the UN Special Political Committee by a vote of 45 to 12 (with 18 abstentions). The same committee approved the 13-power motion to admit the Republic of Vietnam by a vote of 44 to 8 (with 23 abstentions). Only the Communist countries voted against the Republic of Vietnam, while the abstainers included Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Austria, Bolivia, Burma, Cambodia, Canada, Ceylon, Egypt, Finland, India, Indonesia, Israel, Jordan, Laos, Liberia, Libya, Morocco, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Sweden, and Syria. No country breakdown is available for the vote on the Soviet proposal but it can probably be assumed that four of the 23 abstainers just listed joined the 8 Communist countries in support of the DRV. See United Nations General Assembly, Eleventh Session, Official Records-Special Political Committee, 22nd Meeting, 30 January 1957, p. 105.

185. The above analysis of Soviet and Chinese unwillingness to support a DRV renewal of hostilities is largely drawn from Brian Crozier, "The International Situation in Indochina," Pacific Affairs, XXIX, no. 4 (December, 1956), 311.
186. Ibid., 312-313. For details on the DRV's economic dependence on her Communist allies, see Brian Crozier, "Indochina: The Unfinished Struggle," The World Today, 12, no. 1 (January, 1956).

It should be manifest that the DRV had a very serious interest in holding the 1956 elections, and that it did all it could, short of violence, to bring them about. But some will still discount the DRV's efforts and argue that Hanoi never could have permitted free elections because no Communist state has ever done so. This argument has been at the heart of the US and Saigon positions. It in essence holds that a Communist state is by definition incapable of ever permitting a free election.

There is reason to question the validity of that argument. Apart from the fact that the Geneva Agreements did not stipulate any preconditions on which the holding of elections would depend, it should be recalled that it was a generally accepted fact that the Viet Minh held substantial popular support which would have given it a victory even in "really free" elections. If a Viet Minh majority was anticipated by everyone, even President Eisenhower, is it reasonable to assume that the DRV would have felt it necessary to coerce its population or to rig the election in some way? If Communist governments have been known to rig elections, they have also been known to show considerable tactical flexibility in using whatever method seems to promise the greatest gain at the lowest cost. The simplest way for the DRV to gain control of all Vietnam would have been to permit free elections. To say that the DRV had an interest in permitting free elections is not to say that Communist governments in general would permit them or even that the DRV would always allow them, but only that the DRV might have allowed them in 1956 because it was confident of victory. To assume that every Communist state is under some sort of irrepressible compulsion to rig every election seems unwise. While no one really can say what the DRV would have done, it does not seem necessary to assume that the DRV would have rigged an election it could have won honestly just because other Communist governments, under different circumstances, have rigged them.

Besides the DRV's good prospects in a free election, it is surely of some relevance that the DRV responded to Saigon's accusations by spelling out its own understanding of "free elections" in rather more reasonable and realistic terms than Diem's insistence that the DRV disavow Communism.¹⁸⁷ On

187. There was an unofficial report in the Saigon vernacular Ngon Luan, 29 July 1955, which was somewhat more specific than Diem's statements about the north's need to put the country's interest ahead of Communism's, guarantee fundamental freedoms, etc. The report listed the characteristics the DRV must have to prove it was "democratic": "political opposition in the Government, basic freedoms for the people, army and police outside the control of the party, freedom of the press." Then the UN was to

6 June 1955, Pham Van Dong declared at a press conference that the DRV "stands for free general elections throughout the territory of Vietnam with all the guarantees necessary for the preparation, organization and conduct of general elections, in particular, guarantees of freedom of electioneering activities for all political parties, organizations and individuals."¹⁸⁸

In September 1955 Dong further elaborated the DRV's understanding of free elections in a speech to the Fifth Session of the National Assembly discussing the program of the Fatherland Front. In Dong's words:

The basic principles that govern these general elections are: general free elections throughout the country on the principle of universal, equal, direct and secret ballot. It is universal in the sense that all Vietnamese citizens, including army men and army officers, without distinction of sex, nationality, social class, profession, property status, education, religious beliefs, political tendency, length of residence, etc. . . . shall have the right to elect and be elected. It is equal in that every elector shall cast one vote, and all votes shall have equal value. It is direct in that the people will directly elect their deputies to the National Assembly, and not through any intermediary. It is secret in that the ballot papers are in closed envelopes. All the above-mentioned conditions are to ensure that the elections will be entirely free and there can be no interference, no threat that might prevent their electors from freely expressing their will.

As stipulated by article 7 in the Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference, control of the elections shall be exercised by the International Commission for Supervision and Control. . . .¹⁸⁹

Ho Chi Minh, when asked about safeguards for free elections, replied: "This is a calumny by those who do not desire the reunification of Vietnam by means of free general elections. The Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam will guarantee full freedom of elections in the North of Vietnam."¹⁹⁰ Ho was more specific in two letters he wrote to the editor of Nhan Dan. On 17 November 1955, he elaborated his view of free elections:

make an inspection to determine whether the DRV was democratic. Only at that point could elections be organized. Quoted in Murti, Vietnam Divided, pp. 186-187.

188. Ibid., p. 182.

189. Fatherland Front, pp. 41-42.

190. Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 12 July 1956.

FREE ELECTIONS: All the Vietnamese citizens, male or female above 18 years old, regardless of class, nationality, religion, political affiliation, have the right to participate in the elections[†] to vote freely for the persons in whom they have confidence.

FREE CANDIDATURE: All Vietnamese citizens, male and female above 21 years old, also with the above-mentioned non-restriction clauses, have the right to stand for election.

FREE CANVAS: All Vietnamese citizens, whether from the North or the South, have the right to canvass freely throughout the country through conference, leaflets, press, etc. The Government of the North and the authorities of the South should ensure the liberty and the security for all citizens during their activities for elections.

METHOD OF VOTING: Totally equal, secret and direct. In short, the Vietnamese people and the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam shall ensure complete freedom and democracy to the nationwide elections (as provided in the Geneva Agreement).

In his second letter, written on 25 February 1956, Ho proposed a method by which the Western nations could judge which part of Vietnam really had democratic freedoms. He offered to permit any number of representatives of the southern zone to campaign in the north. The DRV would guarantee their complete security and right to campaign freely and to distribute their electoral propaganda, provided the DRV's representatives were allowed to do the same in the south.^{†91}

Whether or not the DRV would have lived up to those conditions cannot be known. One can at least say that the conditions described above were exemplary of a free election. But the Saigon government and the US refused even to consider the possibility that the DRV could permit a free election[†] they argued that the lack of freedom in any Communist country made it impossible to hold a free election there. Yet, such concern about the absence of prerequisites for a free election seems not to have deterred the US from proposing free elections in Germany or Korea, where the non-Communist part of the country was certain to win.^{†92} In effect, the lack of freedom in Communist-ruled areas has been raised as a

191. Both letters are from Murti, Vietnam Divided, pp. 187-188.

192. One such proposal was made on 4 November 1955. The Western "Big Three" plus West Germany jointly proposed the holding of a free election in September 1956 to unite the two parts of Germany. New York Times, 5 November 1955.

barrier to free elections only in Vietnam, where the Communists were expected to win, and not in divided countries where a Western victory was anticipated. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the US was less concerned about the conditions of voting than about the likelihood of an unfavorable outcome.

Moreover, the unwillingness of the Saigon regime and the US to consider elections under such conditions as those proposed by Ho and Dong is, to say the least, ironic in view of the circumstances that characterized Diem's rule in general and the elections conducted under his aegis in particular. In August 1954 Diem established sedition courts to deal with cases threatening Vietnam's "national independence" and "public security," particularly with respect to acts aimed at "overthrowing the national government."¹⁹³ The arrest and imprisonment by the Diem regime of those who merely advocated free nationwide elections--among them the Saigon lawyer, Nguyen Huu Tho, later to become the leader of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam--was a significant commentary on the credentials of the Saigon government to pass on whether the DRV was qualified to hold free elections. With respect to freedom of the press, the Saigon government announced in late August that it was considering the "possibility" of abolishing domestic political censorship.¹⁹⁴ That possibility apparently was rejected. As the London Times (among others) pointed out, that suppression of opposition which was criticized in the north had already occurred in the south.¹⁹⁵ According to B. S. N. Murti, an Indian member of the ICC, various "mopping up" operations and repressive campaigns against former resistance members drove them to the jungles and eventually to guerilla activity.¹⁹⁶ As Sulzberger described the situation in March 1955, the Diem regime was a "barren dictatorship," which could not expect to overcome the appeal of the Viet Minh with "unborn democracy and ineffective dictatorship."¹⁹⁷

It is noteworthy that Diem's hastily arranged referendum between himself and Bao Dai in October 1955 probably was illegal, because Bao Dai, who had appointed Diem premier, withdrew his mandate several days before the referendum (the

193. New York Times, 4 August 1954.

194. New York Times, 31 August 1954.

195. The Times (London), 18 August 1955.

196. Murti, Vietnam Divided, p. 196.

197. New York Times, 12 March 1955.

local papers failed to report that Diem had been dismissed).¹⁹⁸ Bao Dai also never agreed to participate in the contest. But the question of the election's legality is minor compared to other problems. The referendum reportedly was rigged by the premier's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu.¹⁹⁹ Diem received 98.2% of the votes. The voting procedure itself seems not in the best tradition of secret balloting. The voter tore off one half of a picture ballot and put it in a sealed envelope.²⁰⁰ One wonders what was done with the other half.

With respect to the March 1956 constituent assembly election, which the State Department praised as relatively "fair,"²⁰¹ there were numerous restrictive provisions. The government kept the right to veto candidates of whom it disapproved. Campaign finances, transport, and propaganda were provided exclusively by the government. By a presidential decree of 11 January 1956 concentration camps were set up to house families of former Viet Minh supporters and current political prisoners. All opposition parties boycotted the election. Several independents had their candidacy suppressed. Suspected electoral opponents of the Diem regime were arrested. And once elected, deputies were to be immune from arrest only if they refrained from supporting the policies or activities of rebels or Communists.²⁰² An informative report of the conditions in which candidates operated in a Republic of Vietnam election is provided in an article by Nguyen Tuyet Mai, a candidate in the 1959 National Assembly elections. In her words: "... the essence of South Vietnamese politics is as totalitarian as the regime in the North which it so strongly decries."²⁰³ As Robert Shaplen put it, the National

198. Murti, Vietnam Divided, p. 141.

199. Robert Shaplen, The Lost Revolution (New York: Harper, 1965), p. 129. That the referendum was rigged is also reported by Bernard B. Fall, "How the French Got Out of Viet-Nam," in The Viet-Nam Reader, p. 89. Scigliano, Nation Under Stress, p. 23, suggests that the referendum "recalls elections in Communist states."

200. New York Times, 24 October 1955. In fact, in a later election the Viet Cong capitalized on this procedure by announcing that anyone who could not produce an unused ballot picture of Diem the day after the election would be punished.

201. New York Times, 11 March 1956.

202. The above description of conditions in the constituent assembly elections is from Murti, Vietnam Divided, pp. 192-193.

203. Nguyen Tuyet Mai, "Electioneering: Vietnamese Style," Asian Survey, II, no. 9 (November 1962), 11-18.

Assembly chosen in 1956 and 1959 was a "completely controlled body."²⁰⁴ Thus, even if one assumes the worst about the DRV's promises about electoral conditions, it seems questionable whether the election in the north could really have been much less free than that in the south.²⁰⁵

While it is impossible to speak with certainty of Hanoi's intentions, it seems undeniable that the DRV did almost everything possible to facilitate the holding of elections. From 1954 to 1956, the DRV behaved largely as one would expect a country sincerely interested in carrying out the Geneva Agreements' election provision to act. On the other hand, Diem, clearly conscious that he would lose the election, was under heavy domestic political pressure completely to eliminate the possibility of elections and thus to demonstrate that Communist rule was not "around the corner."²⁰⁶ Diem's refusal even to consult probably also reflects a fear that the DRV might have agreed to any reasonable conditions he imposed. The conclusion seems inescapable that the 1956 elections were not held because the Diem government, with important US backing, was more interested in maintaining itself as a separate, anti-Communist government than in risking its survival to achieve the national unity to which all Vietnamese ostensibly were committed.

204. Shaplen, Lost Revolution, p. 130.

205. As Murti, Vietnam Divided, p. 188, points out, it is noteworthy that despite the enormous number of DRV complaints about the lack of freedom in the south, Hanoi never made this an issue with reference to the elections. This is another sign that the DRV was seeking elections, not a propaganda victory.

206. See, for example, New York Times, 17 July 1955, on Diem's awareness that he would lose and on the political pressures leading him to reject elections. Ellen Hammer, "Viet Nam, 1956," Journal of International Affairs, X, no. 1 (1956), 35, asserts that the fear of elections had a "paralyzing effect" on the Saigon government.

EPILOGUE

THE FAILURE TO HOLD ELECTIONS:

SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRESENT

With the passing of the July 1956 deadline for elections, Hanoi began to stress that the struggle for reunification would be a long and arduous one.²⁰⁷ The DRV continued to base its appeals on the election provision of the Geneva Agreements, holding both that the French (who had withdrawn their High Command in April 1956) were responsible for implementing the Agreements until they made arrangements for officially handing over that obligation to the Saigon government and that the Republic of Vietnam was already obligated as a "successor regime."²⁰⁸ Efforts were made through 1960 to engage the Diem government in consultations about elections. In June 1957 Dong wrote to the Geneva Conference co-chairmen again calling on them to take steps to facilitate the holding of elections.²⁰⁹ In July 1957, March and December 1958, July 1959, and July 1960 Dong addressed notes to Diem urging that he agree to the holding of a consultative conference to discuss reunification elections.²¹⁰ The DRV also sought to institute at least a normalization of relations with the south, which would permit Hanoi to trade for southern rice. Diem rejected all of Hanoi's offers, condemning them as "false propaganda."²¹¹ The DRV consistently blamed Diem's refusals on pressure from his United States backers and, in the face of repeated rejections, continued until at least 1958 to

207. See, for example, Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 2 January 1957.

208. See Seventh Interim Report of the International Commission for Supervision and Control, August 1, 1956--April 30, 1957 (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1957) [Cmd. 335], and Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 10 January 1957.

209. Economist, 29 June 1957.

210. See New York Times, 21 July 1957; Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 9 March 1958; Vietnam Peace Committee, Five Years of the Implementation of the Geneva Agreements in Vietnam (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959), p. 8; and Devillers, "Struggle," 10.

211. New York Times, 17 March 1958; see also Problem of Reunification.

pledge its determination to carry out more actively its efforts to reunify the country on the basis of "independence and democracy by peaceful means."²¹²

It is important to understand that Hanoi continued to view reunification as a goal the legitimacy of which was assured by the Geneva Agreements. Inasmuch as Geneva had explicitly affirmed the unity of Vietnam and the non-political character of the demarcation line, the DRV leaders undoubtedly felt justified in continuing to hold that Vietnam was a single country, the reunification of which was essential.²¹³ Thus,

212. See, for example, New York Times, 17 April 1958.

213. It should be noted that although the DRV has continued to insist on the importance of reunification, Hanoi has for some time maintained that even if the US were to withdraw, reunification would not come immediately. Lacouture reports (Between Two Truces, p. 246) that the DRV leaders had come to accept a delay of 10 to 15 years; since the start of US bombing attacks on the north, that timetable has probably been compressed somewhat, but even recently (Doc Lap, 14 October 1965) Hanoi has admitted that reunification must be "gradual." One must also consider the NLF's coolness toward early reunification (see Lacouture, Between Two Truces, pp. 173, 245-246). The NLF platform calls for reunification by "stages." An apparent lack of enthusiasm for reunification also was manifest when the NLF held its first congress in January 1962. It mapped out 10 points, and reunification was not among them. The congress also proposed the establishment of a neutral zone to include South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. A pamphlet written by two DRV citizens native of the south discussing the NLF advocates a "Laotian solution" for South Vietnam. The pamphlet's principal mention of reunification is in a short section which begins by describing the problem as "particularly difficult." (See Tran Van Giau and Le Van Chat, The South Viet Nam Liberation National Front [Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962], pp. 32, 34-35, 84, and 87. The pamphlet also contains the information on the NLF congress.) Ironically, US bombing of the north has had the effect of increasing the NLF's sense of kinship with the DRV. The increase in the NLF's emphasis on reunification can be seen by comparing the above pamphlet with the NLF statement in We Will Win (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1965), published after the start of the bombing raids. Both Hanoi and the NLF have consistently favored an immediate "normalization" of relations between the zones, which would enable the north to tap southern food sources again.

Secretary Rusk is correct in pointing out that "Hanoi has never made a secret of its designs."²¹⁴ For Hanoi sees reunification not as an invidious "design" that should be hidden but as a legitimate national (i.e., encompassing all Vietnam) enterprise bearing the approval of all present at Geneva.²¹⁵ The extent and the character of Hanoi's efforts to promote reunification after 1956 are, of course, matters of the greatest controversy.²¹⁶ Although such questions are indeed

214. Speech before the American Society of International Law, Washington, D.C., 23 April 1965, in State Department Bulletin, LII, no. 1350, p. 698.

215. In fact, Hanoi has sometimes seemed to betray a sense of embarrassment that it was not doing as much as it should to promote reunification. See, for example, Hanoi's effort to rationalize the "consolidation of the north" as an integral part of the reunification struggle. Vietnam News Agency dispatches, 31 December 1956 and 10 January 1957.

216. Some analysts have asserted that the DRV's effort to foster a change in the southern government's attitude toward elections consisted essentially of "propaganda activities" until 1959. (See Scigliano, Nation Under Stress, p. 137, and New York Times, 2 May 1960.) Others have reported that the killing of village chiefs in the south began "within a few months" after the passing of the 1956 election deadline, although the murders are attributed to "stay-behind" Viet Minh, not infiltrators from the north. (See Fall, "How the French Got Out," p. 91.) Some very knowledgeable writers have argued that the adoption of violent methods by southern Viet Minh supporters came largely as a response to Saigon's repressive campaigns against them, an activity which the Diem government openly undertook as early as 1954 despite the Geneva Agreements' prohibition of reprisals against partisans of either side. Hanoi, that argument continues, feared becoming involved in a major war, but the southerners, subject to Diem's repressions, were unwilling to wait indefinitely; thus, in response to southern pressures culminating in the March 1960 meeting of "former resistance veterans," Hanoi that September agreed to endorse the formation of a National Liberation Front. (For a development of the view that Saigon's campaigns against Viet Minh supporters led to the start of civil war in the south, see Lacouture, Between Two Truces, pp. 53-54, Devillers, "Struggle," 11-20, and Murti, Vietnam Divided, p. 196. Concerning southern pressures on a reluctant Hanoi, see the Lacouture and the Devillers citations.) The State Department's view, of course, is that Hanoi sought first to overthrow Diem by encouraging its southern

important ones, it is not necessary to answer them in order to understand Hanoi's perspective on the present situation. Whatever the nature of Hanoi's involvement in the south and whenever it began, there can be no denying that eventual DRV efforts to "support" the "struggle" in the south were a direct consequence of Diem's refusal to permit the scheduled elections. From the history of Hanoi's unsuccessful efforts to bring about the holding of the 1956 elections, some implications can be drawn about the DRV's understanding of the present situation in Vietnam.

The history of elections sheds some illumination on the DRV's relations with the USSR and China. In a sense, the DRV's frustration in its efforts to achieve national reunification through elections was a result not only of the US's support of Diem but also of the unwillingness of the major Communist powers to exert strong pressure to secure the implementation of the Geneva Agreements. The ineffectiveness of Soviet and Chinese support cannot have failed to impress on Ho Chi Minh the disadvantages of dependence even on fraternal Communist countries. Any tendency to view Hanoi simply as an extension of the Communist power of Moscow or Peking must be considered in the light of the DRV's past relations with its allies. It seems safe to assume that the DRV's experience has reinforced Hanoi's disposition to follow a course independent of its Communist allies.

US officials have often expressed the view that Hanoi's failure to respond affirmatively to Washington's peace overtures proves that the DRV is not interested in a peaceful settlement of the war. But the DRV's experience in attempting to bring about the holding of the 1956 elections suggests that there may be other reasons for Hanoi's failure to respond to US negotiation offers.

In Hanoi there is a considerable reservoir of skepticism about any proposals emanating from Washington, and this attitude of distrust should not be hard to understand in view of the US role in support of Diem's undermining of the 1956 elections. The DRV's leaders are convinced that the US was instrumental in Diem's refusal to allow elections. Their attitude is well represented by this passage from an article in the army journal Quan Doi Nhan Dan:

We demand the reunification of our land because for the last nine years the United States itself prevented

followers to terrorize the countryside, and that when this effort failed to topple Diem, the DRV launched "aggression" by sending infiltrators to seize the south and set up a puppet Liberation Front to conceal its aggression. (See the 1961 and 1965 white papers on Vietnam published by the State Department.)

any negotiation that would bring about a peaceful reunification of the two parts. Even now the United States still stubbornly considers the south as a "separate country (!)" as it deliberately tries to prolong the division of our country.²¹⁷

Can one really be surprised when US offers bring a response like this:

Johnson proposed to solve the Vietnamese problem by free elections, and he considered this proposal ... a concession. This is nothing new. A free election to reunify Vietnam ... is a matter ... clearly specified in the 1954 Geneva agreement. This election should have been carried out nine years ago, but it was precisely the United States which, through the instrumentality of its henchmen, sabotaged the execution of this provision ... these proposals are deceitful tricks....²¹⁸

Furthermore, Hanoi's understanding of the nature of the war makes it very difficult for the DRV to accept US peace offers. The DRV leaders see Diem's refusal to implement the election provision and his attempt to create instead an international boundary at the 17th parallel as a central cause of the current conflict. To the DRV, the goal of reunification appears not as an aggressive design but as the legitimate fulfillment of the clear intention of the Geneva Agreements. Hanoi places considerable weight on the Geneva Agreements' explicit assertion that the 17th parallel was not to be construed as a political boundary. The merit of Hanoi's position on this question has been acknowledged even in the West. As the London Times put it in 1956: "There is the tacit American insistence that the Western powers party to the Geneva agreement should accept the fait accompli of a divided Vietnam.... For both France and Britain it means that the intention of the Geneva agreement will have been frustrated and a charge of bad faith may be raised."²¹⁹ Yet it is precisely on the acceptance of the notion that the 17th parallel constitutes a legitimate political boundary that the US interpretation of the war as "North Vietnam's aggression against South Vietnam" depends. The State Department's 1965 white paper on Vietnam makes this assertion: "In Vietnam a Communist government has set out deliberately to conquer a sovereign people in a neighboring state." It is impossible to conceive of "aggression" of one state against another, when there is no legal basis for the existence of more than a

217. Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 27 September 1965.

218. Quan Doi Nhan Dan, 23 September 1965.

219. The Times (London), 9 March 1956.

single state. To the DRV, the idea that South Vietnam is "a neighboring state" is an absurdity born of the US desire to retain a foothold in Indochina.²²⁰ Thus Ho stated:

... it is a dishonest argument to say that the southern part of our country is a neighboring country separate from the northern part. One might as well say that the Southern states of the United States are a country apart from the Northern states ... Vietnam is one, the Vietnamese people are one.... As sons and daughters of the same fatherland, our people in the north are bound to extend wholehearted support to the patriotic struggle waged by the people of the south.²²¹

While Hanoi's assumptions about US intentions are certainly open to doubt, it is not so easy to dismiss the DRV's reasons for refusing to accept the US interpretation of the nature of the war.

When the US asks for "some sign that North Vietnam is willing to stop its aggression against South Vietnam," it is calling upon Hanoi to accept Washington's interpretation of the war. Washington is asking the DRV implicitly, if not explicitly, to admit having committed aggression, when to Hanoi it is quite clear that Saigon and Washington are the guilty parties--guilty of sabotaging the unity of Vietnam by refusing to allow the 1956 elections to take place. However much Hanoi may need and want peace, it is unrealistic to expect the DRV to admit, even implicitly, that it has been an aggressor, when the facts of the last decade tell it otherwise.

It is certainly beyond the province of this study to suggest what the US negotiating position should be. But several observations are possible about the prerequisites for successful negotiations. If the US wishes to understand and to deal effectively with its adversary in Vietnam, it must recognize the reasons for Hanoi's distrust of the US. Only if the roots and the intensity of Hanoi's skepticism about US peace overtures are fully understood by Washington can effective steps be taken to dispel Hanoi's doubts and prepare the

220. See the article by Do Xuan Sang, secretary general of the Vietnam Lawyers Association. The "shopworn plea" of Hanoi's "aggression" and refusal to abandon South Vietnam, he asserts, "precisely goes counter" to the basic principles of the Geneva Agreements. The attempt to build a separate state in the south is "out-and-out illegal" in view of the Geneva Agreements. Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 26 February 1966.

221. Tass dispatch, 9 December 1965, and Vietnam News Agency dispatch, 8 December 1965.

way for effective negotiations. Furthermore, Hanoi is likely to remain unreceptive to peace proposals which treat the DRV as an aggressor being forced to the conference table by punitive US bombings. Any realistic approach to negotiations in Vietnam must give at least some consideration to the DRV's efforts to implement the Geneva Agreement's election provision and to the manner in which those efforts were frustrated.

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