

Press Management and U.S. Support for France in Indochina, 1950–1954

On March 6, 1951, Donald Heath, the U.S. minister in Saigon, met with the French Commander-in-Chief General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny at the French High Commission in Indochina. Among other topics, they discussed a recent news article by the *New York Times* reporter Tillman Durdin. In it, Durdin highlighted Vietnamese nationalists' criticism of the French-supported Vietnamese government led by Tran Van Huu, and the U.S. government's disappointment with Huu's decision to replace Nguyen Huu Tri as governor of North Vietnam. Angry at Durdin's criticism given that the reporter had "enjoyed his hospitality and facilities," de Lattre, who had become fearful of an American effort to replace France in Indochina, relayed to Heath his concerns about the article and its suggestion of close links between U.S. officials and Tri.¹ Assuring the general that "the article was not harmful [to French] policy or prestige," Heath cautioned de Lattre about doing anything that might interrupt his "generally good relations with American correspondents" and explained that the United States remained committed to a policy of supporting and not supplanting the French in Indochina.² Nevertheless, Heath told de Lattre that he would bring French concerns with the article to Durdin's attention. With opposition to the war beginning to build in France, Heath feared the damaging effect that the article might have on Franco-American relations and on the U.S. effort to sustain France's war. This intervention was just one of many actions U.S. officials in Vietnam took to meet the threat that adverse American press reporting posed to U.S. goals in Indochina during the early 1950s.

While studies have drawn attention to a number of issues that inflamed the Franco-American relationship in Indochina and the inhibiting effect they had on the Western effort there, scholars have rarely acknowledged French sensitivity toward the American press and its impact on U.S. diplomacy in

1. Telegram 1567 from Heath to Secretary of State, March 8, 1951, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), 1951, vol. VI, part 1, Asia and the Pacific, eds. Paul Claussen, John P. Glennon, David W. Mabon, Noel H. Peterson, and Carl N. Raether (Washington, DC, 1977), doc. 201, 389.

2. *Ibid.*

Vietnam.³ Indeed, studies of the press during the Vietnam War have focused almost entirely on the period of heavy U.S. involvement in the 1960s and 1970s. Scholars have paid far less attention to American press coverage of the earlier French conflict in Indochina, where the 1950 decision to aid France's war against the Viet Minh first involved the United States in an active effort to prevent Vietnam's fall to communism. Given the preoccupation of the United States with its own defeat in Vietnam, the small number of reporters who travelled to Indochina to cover the Franco-Viet Minh War, and the comparatively limited interest the American public exhibited in this earlier conflict, such neglect is not surprising.

Historians who have discussed the role of the American press during the Franco-Viet Minh War, either in broader surveys of the media's involvement in Vietnam or of the First Indochina War itself, generally downplay its importance to U.S. officials. Studies suggest that the press largely shared policymakers' understanding of Vietnam's importance to the bipolar struggle against global communism and encouraged support of the French war, and that reporters in Vietnam itself, under-resourced and subject to strict French censorship, found it difficult to establish an independent perspective on the conflict.⁴

Examining the period from the U.S. decision to support France's war in 1950 to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, this article argues that American press reporting was, contrary to what previous scholarship has suggested, a major concern of U.S. officials in this period. In fact, it contends that U.S. diplomats in Vietnam spent considerable time trying to shape American press coverage of the Franco-Viet Minh War and that press management formed an important part of the American effort to preserve the French commitment in Indochina. The article suggests, therefore, that U.S. anxieties about the press's ability to undermine U.S. policy in Vietnam long predated its own war in Southeast Asia. It investigates why press management assumed such significance and assesses the efforts of the American diplomatic mission in Indochina to shape American foreign correspondents' coverage of the conflict. Although the mission's efforts were broadly successful, the article highlights its failure to prevent the publication of a small number of stories that cast doubt on official optimism about the progress made by the French, aggravated

3. Cultural competition, the large American presence in Indochina, and disagreements over the central purpose of the war were just some of the issues that irritated Franco-American relations and disrupted the war effort against the Viet Minh. See Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY, 2007), 15–84; George C. Herring, "Franco-American Conflict in Indochina, 1950–1954," in *Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1954–1955*, ed. Lawrence S. Kaplan et al. (Wilmington, DE, 1990), 29–45.

4. Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War* (New York, 1993), 53–58; Louis Campomenosi III, "The 'New York Times' Editorial Coverage of the American Involvement in Vietnam, 1945–1965: A Case Study to Test the Huntington Thesis of the Existence of an Oppositional Press in the United States" (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1994), 116–39; William M. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam: Media and Military at War* (Lawrence, KS, 1998), 1.

Franco-American relations, and deepened the apprehension of mission officials that the war in Indochina could be lost in the pages of American newspapers and news magazines. In focusing on the significant contribution made by the American mission in Indochina to press management—a contribution that, like the role of the press itself, has not received the attention it is due—the article showcases the important role Americans on the ground played in the implementation of U.S. policy in Vietnam during this period.

THE AMERICAN PRESS AS A FOREIGN POLICY ISSUE IN
INDOCHINA

From the outbreak of the Franco-Viet Minh War in 1946, French officials observed with apprehension the American media's coverage of the conflict. They feared the effect that negative coverage might have on their attempts to convince the United States to support their war, a subject that divided the State Department in the late 1940s. To try to influence the content of U.S. press reports, French diplomats complained to the State Department about American reporters who wrote critically about the French war effort, briefed American journalists on the virtues of French policy, and leaked material to supportive correspondents.⁵ However, holding a neutral stance in the conflict between the Viet Minh and France, U.S. policymakers refused to entertain French requests to intervene with the American press at the time.⁶

President Harry Truman's decision to recognize the French-supported governments of Indochina and to approve an aid package in 1950 transformed the role of the United States in Vietnam and the government's attitude toward press management. Viewing Indochina as central to the effort to prevent communist expansion in Southeast Asia, fearful of the increasing opposition to the war's continuation in France and reluctant to employ their own troops in Vietnam, U.S. policymakers sought to do all they could to bolster the French effort. Policymakers took a new approach to dealing with American journalists, who were drawn in greater numbers to the country following the U.S. commitment to the struggle, albeit mostly on temporary visits, and whose reporting continued to irritate French officials. U.S. officials feared that the press could undermine French military morale, damage Franco-American relations, and weaken domestic support in France for the war. French perceptions of the official U.S. position on Indochina were often colored by the stories of American reporters written in newspapers and magazines like the *New York Times* and *Life*, which had worldwide circulation and articles that were reprinted in French newspapers.⁷ Additionally, knowing that the continuance and success of the French

5. Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA, 2005), 133–34, 182.

6. *Ibid.*, 183.

7. Telegram 609 from U.S. Consulate Hanoi to Secretary of State, April 24, 1951, 751g.00/4-2451, Central Files (hereafter CF), 1950–1954, Record Group 59: Records of the

war effort relied on congressional support for the government's aid package to Indochina, U.S. officials worried that critical American press coverage of the war might cause Congress to question the value of U.S. aid.⁸

The U.S. government's anxiety about the press's ability to undermine its policy in Indochina reflected broader concerns about the press's influence and loyalty during the 1950s. Journalists attracted the intermittent attention of Senator Joseph McCarthy and others during the Red Scare. Policymakers deemed the press an important target for communist infiltration because, as one Senate investigation noted, of their "access [to] sensitive information and because they influenced public opinion."⁹ U.S. officials questioned the loyalty of American correspondents who had reported on the Chinese Civil War. Adjudged to have undermined Chiang Kai Shek with their pessimistic coverage, several journalists lost their jobs during the 1950s.¹⁰ Such concerns clearly affected the thinking of U.S. officials with regard to Indochina. A group of leading policymakers pondered in one meeting "whether [the] Communists were responsible for the lurid despatches from Indochina," while Edmund Gullion, chargé d'affaires and later Heath's deputy in Saigon, warned a former China correspondent sent to cover Vietnam against undermining the French with the same defeatist reporting that he felt had blighted the anti-communist effort in China.¹¹

The greater stress that U.S. officials placed on press management in Indochina came also as Washington began to embrace public diplomacy as a Cold War weapon. Concerned by the potency of communist propaganda, U.S. officials in the early 1950s devoted increasing resources to try to win over the hearts and minds of allied and neutral nations. One of the chief targets of this campaign was France, where policymakers worried that the neutralist and anti-American tendencies of the French public might have an adverse impact on the U.S. effort to combat global communism. Identifying the French press as key to shaping French political and public opinion, U.S. officials in France planted stories in the French media, subsidized French publications, and moved to

Department of State (hereafter RG 59), United States National Archives and Records Administration II (hereafter USNA), 1; Statler, *Replacing France*, 39.

8. U.S. Summary of Minutes of a Meeting between Representatives of the United States and France at the Department of State, June 16, 1952, *FRUS*, 1952-1954, vol. XIII, part 1, Indochina, ed. Neil H. Peterson (Washington, DC, 1982), doc. 80, 192.

9. Quoted in Edward Alwood, *Dark Days in the Newsroom: McCarthyism Aimed at the Press* (Philadelphia, PA, 2007), 1.

10. Stephen R. MacKinnon and Oris Friesen, *China Reporting: An Oral History of American Journalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (Berkeley, CA, 1987), ix; Peter Rand, *China Hands: The Adventures and Ordeals of the American Journalists Who Joined Forces with the Great Chinese Revolution* (New York, 1995), 311-15.

11. Memorandum of Discussion at the 178th Meeting of the National Security Council, December 30, 1953, box 5, NSC Series, Ann Whitman File, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library (hereafter DDEL), 2; Seymour Topping, *On the Front Lines of the Cold War: An American Correspondent's Journey from the Chinese Civil War to the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2010), 126.

discredit journalists that espoused ideas damaging to U.S. interests.¹² In Saigon, however, American diplomats, perhaps fearful that any effort to manage French press reporting would encourage harmful rumors that the United States intended to replace France in Vietnam, generally refrained from intervening with French journalists.¹³ Although the United States Information Service (USIS) worked closely with the Vietnamese press too, most of the press management activities of U.S. officials in Vietnam were directed toward shaping American coverage of the war.¹⁴ Senior officials in Washington—particularly during the siege of Dien Bien Phu—also used speeches, press briefings, and off-the-record meetings to recast France’s colonial war as a Cold War struggle and to highlight French progress.¹⁵ The U.S. mission in Vietnam’s effort with American correspondents in Indochina was just one component in a larger press management machine focused on achieving U.S. goals in Vietnam in the early 1950s.

For the most part, however, American press reports from Indochina posed few problems for the U.S. government. Journalists viewed the Franco-Viet Minh War largely through the same Cold War prism as U.S. officials and were generally in accord with their government’s decision to support France’s war.¹⁶ Indeed, powerful voices in the American media had pressed hard for the United States to aid France in Indochina.¹⁷ Henry Luce, the editor-in-chief of *Time-Life*, was one of the strongest supporters. Following the U.S. government’s decision to support France in 1950, Luce’s influential publications heralded the importance of the French war, displayed relative optimism about French chances, and placed French commanders on their iconic cover pages. When reporters sent back stories that complicated this picture, Luce’s tight hold over the editorial tone of his magazines ensured that what was printed was mostly in accord with the U.S. policy of assistance to the French. As one biographer notes, “Luce not only edited but also censored” his magazines.¹⁸ The *New York Times* adopted a similar line, accepting and promoting the centrality of France’s war effort to the Cold War.¹⁹ Moreover, journalistic culture in the 1950s placed a

12. Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower’s Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, KS, 2006), 111; Brian Angus McKenzie, *Remaking France: Americanization, Public Diplomacy, and the Marshall Plan* (New York, 2005), 40.

13. Pierre Cenerelli, “Revisions of Empire: The French Media and the Indochina Wars, 1946–54” (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2000).

14. Howard R. Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire: An American in Vietnam, 1952–1991* (Washington, DC, 1992).

15. Jon Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, the Media, and the American Public* (Baltimore, MD, 2005), 26–61.

16. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*, 60.

17. Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York, 2012), 212–13; Robert E. Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia* (New York, 2005), 142–43.

18. Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce*, xiv.

19. Marilyn B. Young, “‘The Same Struggle for Liberty’: Korea and Vietnam,” in *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*, ed. Mark Atwood Lawrence et al. (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 209; Campomenosi, “The ‘New York Times’ Editorial Coverage,” 97.

premium on official sources, giving government officials considerable scope to shape coverage.²⁰

Alongside the inclination of American journalists and editors to support the war, the restrictions that French officials placed on press coverage in Indochina and the lack of resources the media devoted to the story increased the likelihood of favorable reporting. The French carefully screened all outgoing journalistic dispatches, censoring those parts they deemed damaging to their war effort, and restricted reporters' access to the front. Given Indochina's relatively low importance in the United States, newspapers also invested limited funds in covering the war, confining their correspondents to sporadic and short-term visits that made it difficult for them to build up the contacts and knowledge base to challenge the official version of events more consistently. The nature of these restrictions meant that American correspondents often accepted, or were forced to accept, the self-serving and optimistic image of the war put forward by the French.²¹ Associated Press (AP) correspondent Larry Allen was one of the worst culprits. Famed for his daring coverage of the Second World War, Allen rarely ventured into the field during his time in Indochina. Allen told a Vietnam press corps colleague that "he had not left Hanoi for eight months" and that he simply sat in "Hanoi rewriting official pronouncements."²² Reflective of his tendency to rely on officially supplied French information, Allen was awarded the Croix de Guerre in 1952 "in recognition of his 'scrupulous concern for objectivity.'"²³

Despite the severe restrictions under which American correspondents worked, damaging articles still slipped through. Journalists circumvented French censors by sending stories back on a tape in the mail or by filing their story after departing the country, and censors occasionally missed critical stories because of their poor English.²⁴ Reporters, too, watched the movements of official French military photographers to predict where the next offensive might take place and gained authorization to accompany French troops from commanders in the field rather than those more senior leaders prone to saying no.²⁵

That journalists could find ways to bypass the restrictions is, of course, not significant alone. It was also crucial that not all American newsmen were supportive of the U.S. decision to aid France and that some journalists found cause

20. Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950-1953* (New York, 2008), 12.

21. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers*, 56-58.

22. Mecklin to Gruin, "French & Press in Indo-China," February 5, 1954 in Despatch 349 from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Department of State, "Press Relations of General Navarre," February 19, 1954, 751g.00/2-1954, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA, 1.

23. "Correspondent Wins French Croix de Guerre," *Lewiston Evening Journal*, November 26, 1952, 1.

24. Thomas A. Bass, *The Spy Who Loved Us: The Vietnam War and Pham Xuan An's Dangerous Game* (New York, 2009), 55.

25. Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 51; Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene: Volume 2, 1939-1955* (New York, 1994), 395.

to criticize French military tactics, draw attention to the persistence of French colonial rule, and highlight the weakness of the French-supported anti-communist Vietnamese government. Harold Isaacs of *Newsweek* raised concerns about the harmful long-term effects of supporting France on U.S. prestige in Asia, while Seymour Topping of the AP doubted the possibility of a French military victory after they lost control of the frontier with China in late 1950.²⁶ Conversations with Vietnamese officials, French soldiers, and lower level U.S. representatives often gave correspondents cause to doubt the official version fed to them by French authorities. Despite official U.S. mission support for France in Indochina, many of its members, particularly those who spent greater time in the field, were exasperated by the lack of military progress and the slowness of French political concessions to the anti-communist Vietnamese government. The development of a Vietnamese National Army and the transfer of more substantive functions of government to the Vietnamese was, many U.S. officials believed, crucial to uniting the country's anti-communist nationalists against the Viet Minh.²⁷ U.S. officials' frustrations sometimes came out in conversations with American journalists. When correspondents sent back pieces informed by dissenting official sources in this period, editors, as Steven Casey notes, "were likely to stand by correspondents who produced such copy, even in the face of intense criticism from officials and generals."²⁸

The constraints that France placed on correspondents in Indochina had unintended consequences as well. French attempts to spin positive stories from military failures, particularly when journalists contrasted such information with that gained from other sources, and their refusal to provide correspondents with the resources necessary to do their jobs created a tense relationship between the American press and the French military in Vietnam.²⁹ Angered by French efforts to impede their reporting, American journalists frequently complained to U.S. officials, leaving the U.S. mission anxious that French mismanagement of the press would make journalists more likely to write critically of the war.

EARLY SKIRMISHES, THE DEFEATS ON RC4, AND DE LATTRE

From the early stages of the increased U.S. commitment in Indochina in 1950, French officials displayed clear concern about the reporting of American journalists. Heath, who had arrived in Vietnam in July, received his first major complaint from French authorities about the reports of the American press in November 1950; it would not be his last. Durdin had aroused French resentment when the *New York Times* published an interview he had completed with

26. Memorandum of Conversation between Ogburn and Isaacs, "United States Policy in Indochina," April 17, 1950, lot 54 D190, U.S. Policy Papers of Indochina, box 9, Records of the Philippine and Southeast Asian Division, 1949-1952, RG 59, USNA; Topping, *On the Front Lines*, 126, 155.

27. Statler, *Replacing France*, 39-43.

28. Casey, *Selling the Korean War*, 15.

29. Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 50.

Prime Minister Huu, giving, in French eyes, unwanted publicity to Vietnamese frustrations about the lack of independence their government enjoyed. Dependent on French support, Huu's chances of creating a government that could compete politically with the Viet Minh also rested on being able to win over those Vietnamese nationalists who had so far refused to support a government with such limited independence. Detailing Huu's frustration at the French failure to provide true independence to his government and his desire for British and U.S. "pressure on France in order to achieve democratic freedom for the Vietnamese people," Durdin's article provided the perfect platform for the Vietnamese leader to assert his nationalist credentials.³⁰ "Premier Huu made it clear that he regarded the present agreement with the French . . . as limiting Vietnamese sovereignty. He said that he favored replacing the agreements with a treaty based on equality between France and Vietnam," Durdin wrote.³¹ French officials reacted angrily to the interview, which received wide coverage in French newspapers.³² Defending the need for some restrictions on the independence of the Vietnamese government to ensure that their troops had reason to fight, the French stressed to their American counterparts that the interview "might strengthen [the] 'isolationist' wing of [the] Assemblée Nationale and cause them to start [a] campaign to write off [the] Indochina venture."³³

Hopeful of U.S. support, French officials urged Heath to "tell Huu that [the] interview in question had [a] very unfortunate effect."³⁴ Aware of the importance of further French political concessions to Huu's government, Heath was nevertheless responsive to the French request, given his and Washington's prioritization of the French military effort in Vietnam. At a meeting with Huu on October 29, Heath told him that while he appreciated Huu's desire for greater independence, the military situation must take precedence.³⁵ Despite the minister's intervention, Huu refused to make a conciliatory statement. To prevent a recurrence, the U.S. mission's press officer, Howard Simpson, briefed Vietnamese officials on how to deal with the American press. Stressing "the linkup between satisfactory coverage in the U.S. media and the continuance of American military and economic aid," Simpson took Vietnamese officials

30. Tillman Durdin, "Vietnam Premier Demands France Grant His Regime Full Sovereignty," *New York Times* (hereafter *NYT*), October 20, 1950, 4.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Telegram 2286 from U.S. Embassy Paris to Secretary of State, October 26, 1950, 751g.00/10-2650, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

33. Telegram 657 from Heath to Secretary of State, October 24, 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, vol. VI, East Asia and Pacific, eds. Neal H. Petersen, William Z. Slany, Charles S. Sampson, John P. Glennon, and David W. Mabon (Washington, DC, 1976), doc. 578, 907; Telegram 668 from U.S. Legation Saigon to Secretary of State, October 26, 1950, 751g.00/10-2650, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

34. Telegram 668 from U.S. Legation Saigon to Secretary of State, October 26, 1950, 751g.00/10-2650, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

35. Telegram 704 from U.S. Legation Saigon to Secretary of State, October 29, 1950, 751g.00/10-2950, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

through “the technicalities of ‘on-the-record,’ ‘off-the-record,’ ‘background,’ and the subtleties of cushioning a ‘no comment’ reply” when dealing with U.S. correspondents.³⁶ Indochinese leaders, however, continued to defy U.S. instruction, intermittently making use of the American media to take France to task for the slow pace of decolonization.³⁷

As Durdin’s interview was infuriating French officials, French management of the press during the series of autumn defeats along Vietnam’s northern border began to draw the apprehension of U.S. officials. Representing, according to the scholar Bernard Fall, the greatest French colonial defeat “since Montcalm had died at Quebec,” French forces were driven out of a series of forts along Route Coloniale 4 (RC4) by the Viet Minh, losing control of virtually all of North Vietnam to the Red River.³⁸ Hopeful of controlling the flow of information about these setbacks, the French military limited the information they gave to foreign correspondents and heavily censored outgoing dispatches, causing uproar among reporters in Indochina. Correspondents filed a private complaint about French treatment of the press with the U.S. Legation in Saigon and one AP reporter made the issue public in an article in the *New York Times*. “French military censorship and a lack of accurate information are preventing foreign correspondents cabling factual, comprehensive accounts of the serious reverses being suffered by the French army in North Indochina,” the article asserted.³⁹

The situation left Heath uneasy. “Because of a desire to prevent or delay an occasional article critical of French policy or revelatory of French military operations, the French local censorship is well on the way towards producing an hostile foreign press,” he explained to Washington.⁴⁰ Fearful of such an eventuality, Heath concluded that “France should be told in Washington and Paris and by me here that they must do something to improve their handling of foreign correspondents.”⁴¹ The minister could empathize with the press, having experienced similar frustration with the French failure to keep his mission informed about developments along RC4.⁴²

There is little in the documentary record to suggest that Heath’s proposed démarche to the French received serious consideration in Washington. State

36. Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 43.

37. See, for example, Michael James, “King, Here, Warns Cambodia May Rise: Norodom Says Indo-China Unit May Turn to Reds if French Reject Independence Plea,” *NYT*, April 19, 1953, 1, 13.

38. Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy* (New York, 1972), 33.

39. “French Said to Restrict Indo-China War News,” *NYT*, October 20, 1950, 5.

40. Telegram 734 from Heath to Secretary of State, November 1, 1950, *FRUS*, vol. VI, doc. 583, 917.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Memorandum of Conversation between Stephen McClintic and “Source,” October 9, 1950 in Despatch 245 from U.S. Legation Saigon to Department of State, “Transmittal of a Memorandum of Conversation on French Reverses in Tonkin,” October 10, 1950, 751g.00/10-1050, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA, 1.

Department officials may have wanted to avoid upsetting Franco-American relations or simply overlooked the issue in favor of more pressing concerns. Given that French officials ignored similar warnings from their envoys in Washington and London, it seems doubtful that a U.S. approach would have had any effect.⁴³ With the United States so invested in France's war, French officials knew that they could ignore American suggestions without any serious fear of reprisal.⁴⁴ Strict press censorship regulations, therefore, remained in place. After one correspondent told the French minister of the Associated States of Indochina, Jean Letourneau, on November 5 that "he had never seen [censorship] so bad in his long years as a newspaperman," Letourneau replied that he had "done all [that was] possible [in] recent weeks [to] make military censorship as intelligent and relaxed as possible."⁴⁵

With Heath's efforts to push French officials into liberalizing their censorship policies proving unsuccessful, American journalists continued to protest their treatment in 1951.⁴⁶ French frustration with the reports of the American media, too, grew more intense. De Lattre, who became joint high commissioner and commander-in-chief of French forces in Indochina in late 1950, was particularly sensitive to the reporting of the American press. In a series of heated exchanges with American reporters during his time in Indochina, de Lattre accused them of attempting to "embroil Fr[ench] relations with Vietnam and the US" and of writing stories that were "'false' and 'tendentious' . . . without having tried to report the Fr[ench] point of view."⁴⁷ Worried about the effect that de Lattre's rather confrontational attitude towards journalists might have on the tone of American news reports, Heath urged the general to "not be over-sensitive about isolated criticism."⁴⁸ Heath told him that the vast majority of press articles "would be very helpful to him and all interests concerned" and pressed the general to be lenient with the American media given their resentment towards any kind of censorship.⁴⁹

Heath's attempt to reassure de Lattre that the American media would prove a useful ally was not merely an effort at diplomatic persuasion; rather, it was an accurate reading of the sum of the American media's coverage of the war in this period. Indeed, de Lattre generally received favorable coverage in the American press.⁵⁰ *Time* and *Life* promoted his central message that Indochina was a key

43. Cenerelli, "Revisions of Empire," 33.

44. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 311–12.

45. Telegram 788 from U.S. Legation Saigon to Secretary of State, November 7, 1950, 751g.00/11-750, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA, 1.

46. "Indo-China War News Blackout in Third Day," *Washington Post*, January 3, 1951, 4.

47. Telegram 2364 from Heath to Secretary of State, June 30, 1951, *FRUS*, vol. VI, part 1, doc. 233, 440–41.

48. Telegram 1235 from U.S. Legation Saigon to Secretary of State, January 14, 1951, 751g.00/1-1451, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA.

49. Telegram 1567 from Heath to Secretary of State, March 8, 1951, *FRUS*, vol. VI, part 1, doc. 201, 389.

50. Young, "The Same Struggle for Liberty," 200–1.

Cold War struggle and lauded his successes on the battlefield.⁵¹ Likewise, reports in the *New York Times*—particularly by Durdin, who became one of the general's strongest advocates—frequently trumpeted de Lattre's impact in Indochina.⁵² The visit of Robert Aura Smith, a *New York Times* editor who met with French authorities in Vietnam in December 1951, reveals that the newspaper actively attempted to aid de Lattre's war effort. "What can my paper do to help you in the fight you are so courageously waging?" Smith asked Georges Gautier of the French High Commission.⁵³ After Gautier stressed the need for Smith's newspaper to highlight the importance of France's war to the global struggle against communism, Smith answered, "We have been trying to do that all along."⁵⁴

Although Heath urged French restraint with the press, he nonetheless believed it vital that steps be taken to ease de Lattre's concerns. In the minister's eyes, the "activities [of] certain irresponsible Amer[ican] journalists" were contributing to a worrying rise in tension between French and American representatives in Indochina during the summer of 1951. In fact, de Lattre told the British military attaché in Saigon that he saw Heath as personally responsible for the critical material that appeared in the American press. The general complained about the "encouragement given by the American Minister to anti-French journalists" and "referred to Mr. Heath as 'ce sacré petit bonhomme d'un petit Consul' [this bloody little chap who mistakes himself for a consul]."⁵⁵ Heath worried that this decline in relations might cause French authorities to reconsider their commitment in Indochina, just as de Lattre appeared to steady the French effort, and that such antagonism would limit U.S. opportunities to influence French decision-making.⁵⁶

Heath had already established a system to limit tension between American journalists and the French, encourage favorable reportage, shore up the French commitment in Indochina, and leave French officials more open to American advice. As he reported in September 1950: "[The] Legation makes [a] consistent and painstaking effort [to] brief American and other foreign correspondents. [As] Soon as [a] new correspondent arrives, [the] Public Affairs Officer takes him [to] Counselor Gullion for [a] detailed briefing. Minister Heath adds [a] further briefing and both remain accessible."⁵⁷ Correspondents also "were often

51. *Ibid.*, 208–11.

52. *Ibid.*, 200.

53. Despatch 279 from U.S. Legation Saigon to Department of State, "Interview Between Acting French High Commissioner Gautier and Robert Aura Smith of New York 'Times'," December 3, 1951, 751g.00/12-251, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Graves to Murray, July 20, 1951, FO 959/109, The British National Archives (hereafter TNA).

56. Unnumbered Telegram from Heath to Secretary of State, July 20, 1951, *FRUS*, vol. VI, part 1, doc. 243, 458.

57. Telegram 340 from U.S. Legation Saigon to Secretary of State, September 9, 1950, 751g.00/9-950, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA.

cosseted and wooed by U.S. officials” in an attempt to shape the tone of their coverage.⁵⁸ According to Simpson, on one visit the columnist Joseph Alsop was “picked up at the airport by the ambassador’s chauffeur,” provided with a room at the ambassador’s residence, and U.S. officials were ordered to run his copies over to the cable office.⁵⁹ Heath briefed his staff and American visitors carefully, instructing them to consider French sensitivities when talking to the press.⁶⁰ He also grasped his own media opportunities to promote the war’s importance and the inevitability of eventual victory, supplementing speeches made by top-level policymakers in Washington.⁶¹

However, U.S. representatives often had to take reactive steps to limit the damage done by American reporters. On April 21, 1951, *New York Times* journalist Anthony Leviero published details of President Truman and General Douglas MacArthur’s criticism of the French military in Indochina during their meeting at Wake Island in late 1950. MacArthur was quoted as “no longer sure of [the French army’s] quality,” while Truman appeared puzzled “over the French inability to win a decisive victory in Indo-China.”⁶² De Lattre responded by refusing U.S. requests for a statement about how U.S. aid had helped him in Indochina “at a time when [the] US press was putting words in [the] mouth of Truman and MacArthur [and] belittling [the] Fr[ench] soldier.”⁶³ In response, the State Department ordered its staff in Vietnam to “attest to [the] high opinion in [the] US of [the] intentions and performance of [the] forces of [the] Fr[ench] Union in IC and [the] fact that US actions with regard to IC policy speak for themselves” in conversations with de Lattre and his staff.⁶⁴ A letter from Heath appeared to clear the air somewhat, with one French officer reporting that de Lattre had received a “very nice letter from Heath on [the] *New York Times* [article] and was much mollified.”⁶⁵

American diplomats also used the press to repair damage caused by earlier reports. As William Prochnau notes, this was common practice. He writes, “The State Department often considered correspondents, even—perhaps even more so—from the prestigious *New York Times*, as useful extensions of foreign policy.”⁶⁶

58. Simpson, *Tiger in the Barbed Wire*, 42.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*, 5, 41.

61. Telegram 2474 from U.S. Legation Saigon to Secretary of State, June 9, 1952, 751g.00/6-953, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

62. Anthony Leviero, “Wake Talks Bared: At the Meeting on Wake Island,” *NYT*, April 21, 1951, 7.

63. Telegram 613 from U.S. Consulate Hanoi to Secretary of State, April 25, 1951, 751g.00/4-2551, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

64. Telegram 1429 from Secretary of State to U.S. Legation Saigon, May 1, 1951, 751g.00/5-151, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

65. Telegram 616 from U.S. Consulate Hanoi to Secretary of State, April 28, 1951, 751g.00/4-2551, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

66. William Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War: Reporting from Vietnam* (Edinburgh, 1996), 21.

Durbin was particularly open to requests of this sort. Following de Lattre's complaints about an article in the *New York Times* on January 5, 1951, which described the general as "a man of much temperament and little tact," Durbin responded positively to Heath's call for a more favorable piece "to help [de Lattre's] morale and our relations."⁶⁷ As Oliver Harvey, the British ambassador in Paris, noted of de Lattre, "Shaming though it is to say, with . . . flattery one can do almost anything with him."⁶⁸ A month later, an article along the lines Heath had desired appeared from Durbin in the *New York Times*. It argued that if "a miracle is achieved and the Communist-led Vietminh Nationalists of Indo-China are defeated, one of the biggest single factors in the Franco-Indo-Chinese victory will certainly have been Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny."⁶⁹

Despite this focus on journalists, U.S. officials continued to hold concerns about the French approach to the international press. The issue came to the fore again in early 1952, when the French evacuated Hoa Binh, an important junction ninety kilometers southwest of Hanoi. While U.S. officials regarded the withdrawal as a tactically astute move given the urgent need for troops elsewhere, a series of reports in the American media characterized the evacuation as "a serious setback for the whole policy of 'containment.'"⁷⁰ The State Department feared that these reports would "result in further misinterpretations at a time when [the] Hoa Binh withdrawal is attracting considerable ATTN to [the] IC MIL scene" in both France and the United States.⁷¹ Indeed, Heath worried that critical press coverage of the Hoa Binh operation might "encourage Fr[ench] pessimists in their effort to force [a] re-examination [of the] whole Fr[ench] commitment in IC."⁷² Reports from Paris indicated that opposition to the conflict in France was again on the rise.⁷³

To Heath, the pessimistic articles were a product of the "poor Fr[ench] public relations handling of the Hoa Binh operation."⁷⁴ He believed that the alarmist tone of American reporting about the evacuation was a direct reaction to the "series [of] super-confident" communiqués that had emerged from the French High Command since the French capture of the town in November 1951.⁷⁵

67. Telegram 1235, January 14, 1951, RG 59, USNA.

68. Harvey to MacDonald, December 6, 1950, FO 959/109, TNA.

69. Tillman Durbin, "Fighter on a Mission: The Tough Dynamism of Gen. de Lattre de Tassigny, France's New Commander in Indo-China, is Producing Dramatic Results," *NYT*, February 18, 1951, 152.

70. "Defense Ring around Hanoi is Tightened," *Washington Post*, February 26, 1952, 3; "Crisis in Indo-China," *Washington Post*, March 1, 1952, 8.

71. Telegram 1216 from Department of State to U.S. Legation Saigon, February 26, 1952, 751g.00/2-2651, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

72. Telegram 1689 from Heath to Secretary of State, February 29, 1952, *FRUS*, vol. XIII, part 1, doc. 25, 48.

73. Telegram 3796 from Bruce to Secretary of State, December 26, 1951, *FRUS*, vol. VI, part 1, doc. 313, 577.

74. Telegram 1690 from U.S. Legation Saigon to Secretary of State, February 29, 1952, 751g.00/2-2952, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

75. *Ibid.*

Communiqués issued by de Lattre, who died from cancer in January 1952, and his successor Raoul Salan, lauded the French success at Hoa Binh as “an important step towards the liquidation of the long and inconclusive war against the partisans of Gen. Ho Chi Minh.”⁷⁶ Despite French assurances of the tactical value of the move, journalists naturally viewed the evacuation pessimistically.⁷⁷

HENRI NAVARRE, THE VIET MINH INCURSION INTO LAOS, AND
DIEN BIEN PHU

It was not until May 1953 that the U.S. mission again focused on improving French handling of the press. Following the news that General Henri Navarre would soon replace Salan as commander-in-chief, Paul Sturm, U.S. consul in Hanoi, pushed for U.S. officials in Paris and Saigon to “politely, but firmly” point out to Navarre “that [the] inept handling of [the] press in Indochina could end by undermining American public opinion which is now favorable to the provision of aid.”⁷⁸ The early signs seemed promising. René Cogne, appointed commander of French ground forces in northern Vietnam by Navarre, promised to do all that “lay within his power” to improve matters and Heath convinced French authorities to reduce the number of copies that journalists needed to provide to French censors from three to two.⁷⁹

However, as U.S. officials started to become more optimistic about the prospects of improved relations between French officials and American correspondents in Indochina, French criticism of the American press continued. French officials were disappointed by the lack of publicity their July 3, 1953 promise of additional powers to the Indochinese governments received in the American media.⁸⁰ Tension between the two parties rose further following the publication of an article written by David Douglas Duncan in *Life* magazine in August 1953.⁸¹ Under the heading “Indochina, All But Lost,” the article attacked French military tactics, drew attention to France’s failure to provide real independence to their colonial subjects, and questioned the French commitment to the fight in Vietnam.⁸² France, Duncan detailed, “failed to fight ruthlessly when this might have won the war and lacked the political wisdom to offer Indochina independence when this might have won a peace.”⁸³ In a particularly troubling section for U.S. policymakers, two American aid workers described a wasteful

76. “Crisis in Indo-China,” *Washington Post*, March 1, 1952, 8.

77. Telegram 1689 from Heath to Department of State, February 29, 1952, *FRUS*, vol. XIII, part 1, doc. 25, 47.

78. *Ibid.*

79. Telegram 780 from U.S. Consulate Hanoi to Secretary of State, May 29, 1953, 751g.00/5-2953, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA; Mecklin to Gruin, February 5, 1954, RG 59, USNA, 3.

80. Memorandum of Conversation between MacArthur, Seydoux, Pelletier, Bonsal and McBride, July 20, 1953, 751g.00/7-2053, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

81. David Douglas Duncan, “Indochina, All But Lost,” *Life*, August 3, 1953, 73-91.

82. David Douglas Duncan, “The Year of the Snake,” *Life*, August 3, 1953, 73.

83. *Ibid.*, 73.

U.S. aid program, criticized French interference in Vietnamese affairs, and decried the lack of a more forceful U.S. stance in Vietnam.⁸⁴ The article quoted Herman Holiday: "It is difficult to be on a losing team. It is worse to be on a losing team and know it. It is unforgiveable to be on a losing team and know it and do nothing about it."⁸⁵ The French were outraged. Foreign Minister Georges Bidault threatened "to have the magazine pulled from Parisian store shelves," while *Paris Match*, a weekly French magazine, criticized Duncan's article as representative of "the 'short-sightedness' of the United States policy of 'anti-colonialism.'"⁸⁶

For Heath—who was promoted to ambassadorial rank following the upgrade of the diplomatic post in Saigon to an embassy in June 1952—and policymakers in Washington, the fallout caused by the article raised renewed fears about the French commitment in Indochina.⁸⁷ Though U.S. officials could count themselves lucky that Pierre Mendès France, one of the chief opponents to the war in France, had missed out narrowly on the French premiership in May, the news from France was grim. The Paris Embassy reported that "support for [a] policy [of] negotiated withdrawal may be expected to fall on more responsive ears than would have been [the] case at any time since US aid programs began."⁸⁸ Concerns over the war's detrimental effect on France's ability to protect its interests in Europe, the signing of an armistice in Korea, and the Soviet peace offensive that followed Stalin's death in March all served to place greater pressure on French leaders to end the fighting in Indochina during the latter half of 1953.

Would Duncan's article push them closer? U.S. officials did not wait to find out. Heath was asked to confirm the accuracy of Duncan's article and told to "instruct [his] staff to limit [their] discussions with reporters to activities for which [they are] directly responsible" and to air any policy opinions they held through private channels.⁸⁹ Heath's investigation, however, convinced him that most of the blame for the article lay with Duncan. His article, the ambassador argued, was "not only poor—I am forced even to say slanted—journalism."⁹⁰

84. David Douglas Duncan, "Americans Speak From Indochina," *Life*, August 3, 1953, 88, 91.

85. *Ibid.*, 88–91.

86. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 362–64; Despatch 614 from U.S. Embassy Paris to Department of State, "Paris-Match's Reply to Life's August 3 Report on Indochina," August 24, 1953, 751g.00/8-2453, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA, 3.

87. Telegram 121 from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, July 18, 1953, 751g.00/7-1853, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA; Memorandum from Jackson to Cutler, August 11, 1953, OF 181-C Indo-China, box 716, Official File, White House Central Files, Records of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, DDEL.

88. Telegram 6082 from Dillon to Department of State, May 23, 1953, *FRUS*, vol. XIII, part 1, doc. 289, 580.

89. Telegram 102 from Stassen to U.S. Embassy Saigon, July 31, 1953, MSA – Mission – Hanoi – "Special Papers," box 6, James P. Hendrick Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library, 4.

90. Heath to Luce, August 12, 1953 in Heath to Bonsal, August 12, 1953, 751g.00/8-1253, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA, 1.

He felt that Duncan had arrived “with a preconceived idea of the Indo-China situation” and that he merely “proceeded to tailor facts to fit his prejudice, to distort reality into chimera.”⁹¹

Heath did not keep his feelings private; the ambassador vented his frustration to Henry Luce, who had been away from his office when the decision was taken to publish the article.⁹² The ambassador frequently wrote to journalists throughout his tenure in Indochina, congratulating correspondents when their articles assisted his diplomatic efforts and correcting them on inaccuracies in their writing when they did not.⁹³ Heath attacked Duncan’s errors and stressed the damage that could be done. Alongside the incendiary effect on Franco-American relations, he told Luce that the American taxpayer “might be influenced by this unfair, biased piece of writing against supporting an effort so patently crucial for the entire free world.”⁹⁴ The ambassador hoped that Luce would sanction another piece in the near future to counter Duncan’s story.⁹⁵

Although the American public continued to take little real interest in the press’s coverage of the war, representatives in Congress were more attentive. Senator John F. Kennedy, for one, kept a close eye on reports from Indochina.⁹⁶ Given *Life*’s large circulation, it is probable that many members of Congress read Duncan’s article. This must have worried U.S. policymakers, who sought congressional authorization for a further extension of U.S. aid in September 1953. Whilst Congress had remained largely supportive of the government’s policy in Indochina, pessimistic news from Vietnam had pushed some lawmakers earlier that year to insist that an extension of U.S. aid be conditional on a French issuance of a date of full independence for the Indochinese governments. Although the attempted amendment eventually failed, U.S. policymakers waited anxiously to see if Duncan’s article might prompt renewed calls for such a step.⁹⁷

Dealing with Heath’s letter as well as similar complaints from the French, Luce placed Duncan on the inactive list and expressed interest in publishing a more positive article on Indochina.⁹⁸ Figures in the State Department felt that Heath’s letter to Luce could be the answer and pushed successfully for its publication.⁹⁹ Published as “France is Fighting the Good Fight” in the September 21

91. *Ibid.*

92. Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce*, 183.

93. Telegram 1264 from Heath to Department of State, December 22, 1952, *FRUS*, vol. XIII, part 1, doc. 157, 328–29.

94. Heath to Luce, August 12, 1953, RG 59, USNA, 6.

95. *Ibid.*

96. Kennedy to Dulles, May 7, 1953, 751g.00/5-753, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA, 1.

97. William Conrad Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Executive and Legislative Roles and Relationships* (Princeton, NJ, 1986), 129–34.

98. Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce*, 184; Telegram 391 from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, September 3, 1953, 751g.00/9-353, RG 59, USNA.

99. Telegram 291 from Department of State to U.S. Embassy Saigon, August 22, 1953, 751g.00/8-2253, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA.

edition of *Life*, the ambassador's letter described Duncan's article as a "depressing picture" that misrepresented the truth.¹⁰⁰ Heath argued that Franco-Indochinese relations were improving, particularly after the July 3 declaration, and expressed confidence in ultimate success in Indochina.¹⁰¹ Luce and the State Department were fulsome in praise for Heath's effort.¹⁰² However, the ambassador and other U.S. officials had perhaps overestimated the impact of Duncan's piece. Coverage of the war in the American press remained largely favorable, after all. Two *New York Times* editorials in this period pushed for greater aid to Indochina and Congress's decision to support President Eisenhower's September request for a further \$385 million in aid demonstrated that Duncan's article had done little to shake lawmakers' resolve that Vietnam remained a wise investment.¹⁰³

Despite earlier optimism, it was clear by late 1953 that French policy towards the international press in Indochina had changed little, with correspondents continuing to protest their treatment.¹⁰⁴ John Mecklin, a *Time-Life* reporter covering the war, told embassy officials that French public relations officers displayed great ignorance about "the journalistic profession," that France lacked an effective and consistent censorship system in Indochina, and that the French repeatedly denied the press "any kind of access to critical battles until several days later."¹⁰⁵ "For the responsible newsman trying to cooperate with the French," Mecklin concluded, "the system makes life pretty difficult."¹⁰⁶

Worryingly for U.S. officials, French failings again appeared to be having an adverse effect on the tone of American reporting. Comparing the reports he received from official representatives in Indochina with press coverage of the Viet Minh incursion into Laos in December 1953, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles hypothesized that the French inability to provide adequate news briefings was playing a part in the overly gloomy press coverage of this recent military engagement.¹⁰⁷ Stories stressed that the Viet Minh had now succeeded in cutting Indochina in two and pondered if the incursion was part of a move by Ho Chi Minh to establish control over the northern half of Indochina.¹⁰⁸

100. Donald R. Heath, "France is Fighting the Good Fight," *Life*, September 21, 1953, 62.

101. *Ibid.*

102. Telegram 416 from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Department of State, September 16, 1953, 751g.00/9-1653, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA; Bonsal to Heath, September 25, 1953, lot 58 D207, Viet Nam Correspondence 1953, box 3, Records of the Director, Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs, RG 59, USNA.

103. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government*, 139-41; Campomenosi, "The 'New York Times' Editorial Coverage," 128.

104. Mecklin to Gruin, February 5, 1954, RG 59, USNA, 3.

105. *Ibid.*, 2-3.

106. *Ibid.*, 3.

107. For the embassy's view on the Viet Minh incursion into Laos, see Telegram 1110 from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, December 27, 1953, 751g.00/12-2753, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

108. "Indo-China Cut in Half by Red Push: Town is Overrun at Thailand Line; Bangkok Declares Emergency State," *Washington Post*, December 27, 1953, M1; Tillman Durdin, "Indo-

Mecklin agreed with the secretary, stressing to U.S. representatives in Indochina that the “alarmist stories exaggerating the proportions of the French setback” in central Laos were a direct result of the French decision to prohibit newsmen from travelling to the French command post until a few days later.¹⁰⁹ Given such an order, Mecklin believed that journalists made the not illogical jump that the attack must have been of a very serious nature. Furthermore, he noted, restrictive moves taken against the American press also limited the opportunities for journalists to produce stories more favorable to the French war effort. Successful French operations like the one that took place just northeast of Seno in January 1954, Mecklin suggested, were “so very badly reported in Saigon that nobody fully appreciated the full proportions of the French success until days later.”¹¹⁰

Dulles was not alone in his increasing concern about press coverage of the war. In a National Security Council meeting in early February 1954, Vice President Richard Nixon noted, “. . . what should really concern us is the constant stream of bad news from the battle areas. This is developing a defeatist attitude in the United States as well as in France.”¹¹¹ The major source of alarm for policymakers remained Paris, where support for the conflict continued to wane and where French politicians looked for opportunities to end the war. The day seemed to be getting closer, with French Prime Minister Joseph Laniel publicly indicating France’s desire to explore a negotiated settlement and with the decision taken at the Berlin Conference in February 1954 to add Indochina to the multilateral talks on Korea scheduled to begin in Geneva in April.¹¹² With the French High Commission making the case that the “distorted picture of the present campaign” that American journalists were providing “might cause public opinion in France finally to conclude that the war in Indochina was a bad bargain and that France should withdraw its forces forthwith,” press management in Indochina began to take on even greater importance for the United States.¹¹³

By mid-February, Heath reported, “tension between journalists covering [the] Indochina war and French military censorship [had] heightened to dangerous proportions.”¹¹⁴ Journalists used the newly created International

China is Sliced in Two as Foe Reaches Thai Border: Indo-China is Split by Vietnam Drive,” *NYT*, December 27, 1953, 1, 3.

109. Mecklin to Gruin, February 5, 1954, RG 59, USNA, 3.

110. *Ibid.*

111. Memorandum of Discussion at the 183rd Meeting of the National Security Council, February 4, 1954, *FRUS*, vol. XIII, part 1, doc. 534, 1015–16.

112. On Laniel’s openness to negotiations, see Despatch 9 from U.S. Embassy Paris to Department of State, “Laniel Investiture Speech – Indochina,” June 29, 1953, 751g.00/6-2953, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA.

113. Memorandum by McClintock to Heath, February 15, 1954 in Despatch 349, February 19, 1954, RG 59, USNA; Telegram 1469 from Heath to Department of State, February 17, 1954, *FRUS*, vol. XIII, part 1, doc. 563, 1053.

114. Telegram 1469 from Heath to Department of State, February 17, 1954, *FRUS*, vol. XIII, part 1, doc. 563, 1052–53.

Correspondents Association of Indochina to issue an ultimatum to Navarre to relax censorship, while Navarre sent members of his staff to the embassy to protest stories filed by American correspondents.¹¹⁵ With press protests having little effect (Navarre responded to one formal complaint from correspondents by inviting the press corps to his headquarters for champagne and “a petulant lecture on the proper role of the press”), it was left to embassy officials to intervene.¹¹⁶ Robert McClintock, who replaced Gullion as Heath’s deputy in Saigon in 1953, took the press’s complaints to two of Navarre’s representatives. Explaining the irritation that American journalists felt “at the present system of press relations in Indochina,” he stressed that the critical stories appearing were, to some extent, a result of the way that journalists were being treated. U.S. correspondents felt, he said, that they “were subject to undue restriction and censure, and that in their present frame of mind they might be capable of filing stories which, were they not under this feeling of injury, they in calmer moments would not send.”¹¹⁷ McClintock hoped the French “would, for their part, realize that possibly a more liberal policy would pay dividends in the long run.”¹¹⁸

Heath, however, believed that an improvement in the situation relied equally on “the wisdom and discretion of American correspondents in a war situation.”¹¹⁹ To the ambassador, the “consequent demands of home editors on their correspondents here for exciting news or dope stories on what [the] future holds” had contributed to the increasingly frayed relationship between the French and the press.¹²⁰ War correspondents, as Steven Casey notes, were often “less hemmed in by the routines and structures binding others in their profession.”¹²¹ The mission urged American reporters to be sensitive to the French predicament. Relations between American correspondents and French officials, though, remained strained as the decisive battle for Indochina began.

The battle would take place in northwest Vietnam at Dien Bien Phu, where French paratroopers took the Viet Minh by surprise and began constructing a fortress in late November 1953. Navarre hoped to replicate the French success at Na San in 1952, when a heavily fortified French position provided the platform for a crushing victory.¹²² Although French leaders had given up hope of winning the war by this point, they saw success at Dien Bien Phu as vital to securing a strong negotiating position at Geneva.¹²³ It was crucial, therefore, that

115. *Ibid.*, 1053.

116. Mecklin to Gruin, February 5, 1954, RG 59, USNA, 4.

117. Memorandum by McClintock to Heath, February 15, 1954, RG 59, USNA, 1.

118. *Ibid.*

119. Telegram 2085 from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Department of State, April 22, 1954, 751g.00/4-2254, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

120. Telegram 1469 from Heath to Department of State, February 17, 1954, *FRUS*, vol. XIII, part 1, doc. 563, 1053.

121. Casey, *Selling the Korean War*, 13.

122. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 383.

123. *Ibid.*, 357.

the press did nothing to jeopardize French chances in the battle. Navarre hoped to set the tone, using his public statements to radiate purpose and confidence.¹²⁴ In early 1954, Navarre told the press that Dien Bien Phu represented “a golden opportunity to inflict a major defeat on the enemy.”¹²⁵

Foreign correspondents had plenty of opportunity to survey the battleground for themselves before the Viet Minh attacked on March 13. Reporters examined the defenses and chatted with French soldiers on the ground. Like Navarre, Colonel Christian de Castries, the flamboyant French cavalryman placed in charge of the defense of Dien Bien Phu, exuded confidence about the battle to journalists touring the fortress. He told *Le Monde* reporter Robert Guillain in January 1954, “If he [the Viet Minh] comes down, we’ve got him. It may be a tough fight, but we shall halt him.”¹²⁶ With many journalists “on a first-time visit to Indochina” and only on “short” trips to Dien Bien Phu, French efforts to manage press impressions of the looming battle enjoyed some success.¹²⁷ The great preparations underway at the camp were impressive to the most pessimistic of observers and the confident assurances of French officers seemed to reflect a genuine belief that France would secure a devastating victory. *Life*’s Howard Sochurek, one of the first American journalists to cover the Dien Bien Phu story, was noticeably impressed by the preparations at the camp. “At the time, it looked like a big success for the French,” he recalled.¹²⁸ “I didn’t have any idea the place would fall. None of us thought it would fall.”¹²⁹ Some reporters, though, retained doubts, fearing that the French abandonment of the high ground might prove costly.¹³⁰

Once the battle began, journalists relied almost completely on the French for information about Dien Bien Phu. With the Viet Minh quickly disabling the valley’s airstrip, it became virtually impossible for correspondents to travel to the battlefield. Sochurek was extremely lucky to escape with his life after a failed attempt to land there once the fighting began.¹³¹ Robert Capa, Sochurek’s replacement, was told he would be “expected to do no more than ‘sit on his ass in Hanoi’” in covering Dien Bien Phu.¹³² A few months later, Capa was killed while on patrol with French forces near Thai Binh.¹³³ The French heightened censorship, too, only passing through those reports that

124. Quoted in Jules Roy, *The Battle of Dienbienphu*, trans. Robert Baldick (London, 1965), 107.

125. Logevall, *Embers of War*, 444.

126. Quoted in Roy, *The Battle of Dienbienphu*, 126.

127. Howard R. Simpson, *Dien Bien Phu: The Epic Battle America Forgot* (Washington, DC, 2005), 42.

128. Quoted in Harry Maurer, *Strange Ground: An Oral History of Americans in Vietnam, 1945–1975* (New York, 1989), 76.

129. *Ibid.*

130. Simpson, *Dien Bien Phu*, 42.

131. Quoted in Maurer, *Strange Ground*, 76.

132. Richard Whelan, *Robert Capa: A Biography* (New York, 1985), 295.

133. *Ibid.*, 299–300.

utilized official information supplied by the French military. French communiqués, however, were often lacking in detail.¹³⁴

Frustrated by French efforts to impede their ability to report on the battle, American correspondents in Indochina looked again to their diplomatic representatives. They delivered an appeal to Heath on April 15, pushing the “State Department to call upon the French high command here to relax censorship and other restrictions imposed on news coverage.”¹³⁵ French efforts to control the press were, the appeal noted, “so serious that we can no longer properly carry out our jobs’ of informing the free world of the French fight against the Communist-led Vietminh.”¹³⁶ In response, Heath and McClintock separately broached the matter with senior figures in the French High Commission.¹³⁷ “On both occasions,” Heath noted, “we pointed out [the] gravity of charges made by US correspondents and [the] validity of their point that [the] free world must be given accurate and constant news on [the] ‘battle of Dien Bien Phu’ but without any compromise of military security.”¹³⁸ A few days later, news arrived from the French Foreign Office “that recent changes in censorship regulations had been removed and [that the] situation [is] now [the] same as before [the] Dien Bien Phu battle commenced.”¹³⁹ “Although recognizing [that the] problem of press relations [in] Indochina [remained] still less than satisfactory,” the State Department expressed its gratitude to the French Foreign Office and concluded that there did “not appear to be anything further [the] Dep[artmen]t can do at this time.”¹⁴⁰

Journalists, however, remained critical of French press policies until the end of the Franco-Viet Minh War.¹⁴¹ The embassy’s intervention did little to address one of the press corps’ major grumbles: the accuracy of the information that the French military provided to foreign correspondents. To many reporters, it had become startlingly obvious that French press releases were distorting reality. As Simpson notes, “Newsmen checking the officially supplied data against first-hand accounts and leaks that they had received from returning pilots, wounded personnel, and talkative staff officers often found the official

134. Tillman Durdin, “Defense Breached Earlier: Foe in Indo-China Takes 2D Outpost,” *NYT*, March 16, 1954, 1.

135. “U.S. Newsmen Want French to Relax Indochina Censorship,” *The Tuscaloosa News*, April 15, 1954, 2.

136. *Ibid.*

137. Telegram 2023 from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, April 16, 1954, 751g.00/4-1654, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA.

138. *Ibid.*

139. *Ibid.*; Telegram 3941 from U.S. Embassy Paris to Secretary of State, April 19, 1954, 751g.00/4-1954, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA.

140. Telegram 2050 from Department of State to U.S. Embassy Saigon, April 22, 1954, 751g.00/4-2254, CF 1950–1954, RG 59, USNA.

141. Cenerelli, “Revisions of Empire,” 34.

version wanting.”¹⁴² Navarre’s deputy, Cogny, proved an invaluable source in this regard. Disillusioned by the battle, he frequently let details slip to journalists.¹⁴³

Despite tight French censorship, American journalists succeeded in sending off a series of reports that U.S. officials deemed potentially harmful to the French effort at Dien Bien Phu. Taking Sturm’s advice that it would be counterproductive to initiate a “general policy on our part of getting tough with [the] American press in Indochina,” Heath adopted a more ad-hoc approach to dealing with uncooperative journalists.¹⁴⁴ Such an approach included trying to minimize the significance of certain articles. After *Chicago Tribune* correspondent Quentin Pope correctly identified the movement of female U.S. diplomatic personnel from Hanoi to Saigon as evidence of increasing U.S. government concern about the military situation in the north of Vietnam, Heath informed Pope that the women were here for consultation and that they would be heading back shortly. Weighing up the “conditions [in] Hanoi and [the] damage [to French morale] being caused by widespread rumors here that all American women have been evacuated from Hanoi,” Heath told the State Department on March 29, the “return [of] these women to their posts [is the] only effective way [to] counter these rumors.”¹⁴⁵ The move had the desired effect; although Pope filed the story with his editors, it did not appear in print.

U.S. government efforts to manage the Indochina news also focused on American television coverage. Although not every American had access to a television by the time of Dien Bien Phu, nightly news programs were reaching millions of people across the United States by the mid-1950s, making what they said of keen interest to U.S. officials.¹⁴⁶ Television networks so far, however, had proved useful allies for the U.S. government, liaising closely with American officials in the production of a series of shows designed to sell the U.S. government’s crusade against communism.¹⁴⁷ One of the most prominent was *Battle Report – Washington*, a National Broadcasting Company (NBC) program produced in the White House that provided “a firsthand account of what the Federal Government is doing in the worldwide battle against communism.”¹⁴⁸ Heath appeared on the show in early 1951.¹⁴⁹

142. Simpson, *Dien Bien Phu*, 9.

143. Martin Windrow, *The Last Valley: Dien Bien Phu and the French Defeat in Vietnam* (London, 2005), 257.

144. Telegram 586 from U.S. Consulate Hanoi to Secretary of State, April 15, 1954, 751g.00/4-1554, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA, 2.

145. Telegram 1822 from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, March 29, 1954, 751g.00/3-3954, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

146. J. Fred MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace: The Video Road to Vietnam* (New York, 1985), 26.

147. Nancy E. Bernhard, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947-1960* (Cambridge, 1999).

148. *Ibid.*, 117.

149. For Heath’s statement on *Battle Report*, see Statement by Donald Heath, “Indochinese Resistance to Communist Domination,” February 4, 1951, no. 606, vol. XXIV, January 1–June 25, 1951, *The Department of State Bulletin*, 262.

Nevertheless, NBC caused quite a stir in Indochina during the height of the fighting at Dien Bien Phu. Robert Hecox, an NBC correspondent who evaded French censors by sending the story out from Indochina on a tape, reported that de Castries “is prepared to resign his command and his commission in protest over [the] treatment he and his men have received at [the] hands of military superiors.”¹⁵⁰ Navarre was livid, telling Heath that he feared that the “publication or broadcast of such a report would endanger [the] lives of [the] gallant defenders of Dien-Bien-Phu by encouraging [the] enemy to feel that de Castries was in serious straits.”¹⁵¹ Explaining to Heath that he was unable to expel Hecox from Indochina, Navarre threatened to throw the journalist in prison if the story was made public.¹⁵² In Paris, Laniel responded to similar types of stories in the French media by imploring the press to get on side. “It is necessary that certain newspapers know that their defeatism weakens those who negotiate for France and outrages those who die for it,” he said.¹⁵³

Following his meeting with Navarre, Heath instructed Sturm to tell Hecox to “take immediate steps to kill the story” and urged the consul to make Hecox aware that if Navarre carried out his threat to imprison him, “this Embassy would find it difficult to intervene [on] his behalf.”¹⁵⁴ Sturm’s effort, however, had little effect. As he reported, “Hecox positively refused to take any steps to kill [the] story, and stubbornly maintained that its release was in [the] interests of [the] free world position in Indochina.”¹⁵⁵ Why should he drop the story, Hecox asked, when he had obtained the information from de Castries himself, via his wife, and then “waited two days after receiving [the] story in order [to] give Decastries time to reflect”?¹⁵⁶ State Department attempts to pressure NBC into blocking the story met with similar failure, with the network’s editors happy to stand by Hecox and his official source.¹⁵⁷ Both Sturm and the department refused to employ Heath’s threat as a means of persuasion, believing “that such a threat would incline them to use script” and only give Hecox reason to “exaggerate [the] importance of [the] incident beyond its merit.”¹⁵⁸ When the story was broadcast on April 15, U.S. officials were relieved to see it appear in a softer form than was feared and to observe that the reaction in the United

150. Telegram 576 from U.S. Consulate Hanoi to Secretary of State, April 12, 1954, 751g.00/4-1254, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

151. Telegram 1999 from U.S. Embassy Saigon to Secretary of State, April 15, 1954, 751g.00/4-1554, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

152. *Ibid.*

153. Telegram 4215 from U.S. Embassy Paris to Secretary of State, May 5, 1954, 751g.00/5-554, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

154. *Ibid.*

155. Telegram 586, April 15, 1954, RG 59, USNA, 1-2.

156. *Ibid.*, 1.

157. Telegram 1968 from Department of State to U.S. Embassy Saigon, April 15, 1954, 751g.00/4-1554, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

158. *Ibid.*

States and France was fairly restrained.¹⁵⁹ Less than a month later, Dien Bien Phu fell, ending U.S. hopes of preserving a French military effort in Indochina.

This essay demonstrates that U.S. officials were deeply interested in the American press's coverage of the Franco-Viet Minh War after 1950 and that management of the American press formed an integral part of the U.S. attempt to sustain France's war effort in Indochina. Viewing the preservation of the French military effort as central to the fulfillment of their Cold War goals in Vietnam, U.S. officials treated French complaints about the American press with increased sensitivity following the 1950 decision to support France's war. Although French controls and the support of influential journalists and editors in the United States resulted in largely favorable coverage of the war in the American press, a small number of American journalists were able to bypass French censors, seek out alternative assessments of the conflict, and publish critical and pessimistic articles. Fearful of the effects of such reports on the French commitment to the war and on the continuance of the American aid program, U.S. officials in the diplomatic mission in Vietnam played an important role in managing the media. They employed a range of techniques to try to prevent these stories from coming to press and engaged in a series of firefighting efforts to repair the damage caused by those articles that slipped past censors. Press management was one of a number of vital tasks the mission undertook in Indochina.

Despite some success in restricting the appearance of negative pieces and easing French concerns over the reporting of the American press, small numbers of damaging articles continued to find their way to print. Officials had difficulty in preventing these stories from appearing because the war was going badly and there were a number of frustrated French, Vietnamese, and American officials that were prepared to say so on the record. Able to find critical official voices to inform their articles, journalists and editors were well equipped to resist U.S. government pressure to alter the content of the few pessimistic reports that evaded French censors.

While U.S. officials believed correspondents were partially to blame, they deemed poor French handling of the press equally responsible for the less favorable stories that appeared. Concerned that French failings would create a hostile atmosphere conducive to the writing of critical reports, U.S. representatives in Vietnam made several efforts to get their European ally to liberalize its approach to the international press. Although the mission's pressure was crucial in securing some small French steps towards greater press freedom in Indochina, mission representatives found—as the United States did with a range of issues throughout the Franco-Viet Minh War—that their diplomatic leverage was insufficient to force the French to make more substantive changes.

159. Telegram 1977 from Department of State to U.S. Embassy Saigon, April 16, 1954, 751g.00/4-1654, CF 1950-1954, RG 59, USNA.

It is difficult to gauge what impact the few critical and pessimistic articles that appeared in the American press had on U.S. policy in Vietnam. Critical reports certainly had an adverse effect on Franco-American relations in Indochina, bringing some of the U.S. government's private frustrations with the French into the open and creating further tension between the two allies. These reports also gave domestic audiences in France and the United States a sense of Western failings in Vietnam. However, the great economic and human cost of the war, the armistice in Korea, the Soviet peace offensive, and concerns over the war's effect on France's ability to defend its borders in Europe had much more of an impact on the thinking of French politicians than American press reports.¹⁶⁰ Equally, despite some calls for U.S. aid to be conditioned on further French political concessions to the Vietnamese, Congress never really wavered in its support of the government's effort in Indochina.

In the context of the period, however, it is easy to see why officials treated press coverage so seriously. Concerns about the loyalty and influence of the press, an increased focus on winning the hearts and minds of allied and neutral nations, the vociferous nature of French complaints, and weakening French resolve in Indochina all preyed on policymakers' minds during the early 1950s. The inability of the United States to influence military and political developments in Indochina—hundreds of millions of dollars of aid failed to shift the war decisively in France's favor, while the French successively limited U.S. influence over their decisions—also left press management as one of the few areas where the United States could influence events in Vietnam.

The important place that press management assumed for U.S. officials in Indochina was, of course, not unique to this period. A similar belief in the press's ability to undermine U.S. policy in Vietnam pervaded the thinking of Heath's successors in Saigon, including during the early 1960s.¹⁶¹ Reminiscent of Heath, John Mecklin, the public affairs officer in the embassy who had reported on the French war for *Time-Life* in the 1950s, complained about the "irresponsible" and "sensationalized" reporting of some journalists in the American press corps, all the while sympathizing with the treatment correspondents received from the South Vietnamese government of Ngo Dinh Diem.¹⁶² The central conundrum remained. How best to shape the tone of American reporting from Vietnam? The mission, as it had in the early 1950s, tried to strike the right balance between ensuring that journalists received enough information, of sufficient credibility, to fill out their dispatches and inhibiting correspondents' ability to report negatively on the war. Efforts to restrict journalistic access to the battlefield were accompanied by optimistic press briefings in

160. Laurent Cesari, "The Declining Value of Indochina: France and the Economics of Empire, 1950–1955," in *The First Vietnam War*, ed. Lawrence et al., 175–95; Telegram 106 from Achilles to Department of State, July 8, 1953, *FRUS*, vol. XIII, part 1, doc. 329, 643.

161. Hammond, *Reporting Vietnam*, 2.

162. John Mecklin, *A Mission in Torment: An Intimate Account of the U.S. Role in Vietnam* (Garden City, NY, 1965), 148.

Saigon and official attempts to persuade Diem to liberalize his attitude towards the press.

This policy, however, met many of the same obstacles that it had during the 1950s. Huge sums of U.S. aid failed to give the United States enough leverage over Diem to improve relations between the South Vietnamese president and the American press corps.¹⁶³ U.S. diplomats also struggled to contain press criticism of the tactics employed in Vietnam given the continued ineffectiveness of U.S. policy and, as American representatives became more disillusioned about policy, the greater availability of pessimistic official voices in the field. In several ways, the Saigon mission's experience with the press in the early 1950s foreshadowed what was to come in later years for the United States in Vietnam.

163. *Ibid.*, 142–44.