

## From the *Pentagon Papers* (1967):

The simple truth seems to be that **the U.S. knew little of what was transpiring inside Vietnam, and certainly cared less about Vietnam than about France.** Knowing little and caring less meant that real problems and variety of choices were perceived but dimly. For example, the U.S. could have asked itself—"Did we really have to support France in Southeast Asia in order to support a non-communist France internally and in Europe?" Another question we could have asked ourselves was—"If the U.S. choice in Vietnam really came down to either French colonialism or Ho Chi Minh, should Ho automatically be excluded?" Again, "If the U.S. choice was to be France, did France have any real chance of succeeding, and if so, at what cost?"

French representations to the contrary notwithstanding, **Ho Chi Minh possessed real political strength among the people of Vietnam.** While calling Ho another George Washington may be stretching the point, there is no doubt about his being **the only popularly recognized wartime leader of the Vietnamese resistance, and the head of the strongest and only Vietnam-wide political movement.** . . . Washington and Paris, however, did not focus on the fact of Ho's strength, only on the consequences of his rule. Paris viewed Ho as a threat to its regaining French economic, cultural and political prerogatives in Indochina. The U.S., wary of Ho's communist background, was apprehensive that Ho would lead Vietnam into the Soviet, and later Chinese, orbit. . . .

. . . U.S. support for Ho Chi Minh would have involved perspicacity and risk. **As clear as national or independent or neutral communism may seem today [1967], it was a blurred vision in 1945-1948. Even with the benefit of seeing Tito [in Yugoslavia] assert his independence [from Moscow], it would have been hard for Washington to make the leap from there to an analogy in Asia.** . . . The reality of Ho's

strength in Vietnam could have worked seriously against U.S. interests as well as against Chinese Communist interests. Ho's well-known leadership and drive, the iron discipline and effectiveness of the Viet Minh, the demonstrated fighting capability of his armies, a dynamic Vietnamese people under Ho's control, could have produced a dangerous period of Vietnamese expansionism. . . . **Ho, in fact, always considered his leadership to extend to Indochina as a whole, and his party was originally called the Indochinese Communist Party.** Thailand, Malaya, Singapore, and even Indonesia, could have been next. It could have been the "domino theory" with Ho instead of Mao. This may seem implausible, but it is only slightly less of a bad dream than what has happened to Vietnam since [the 1940s]. **The path of prudence rather than the path of risk seemed the wise choice.**

**[Compare: While the chance that the "inferior" Vietnamese could set up a communist, independent nation was quite slim, to American policy makers by 1950, "it [was] one hell of a chance to take" (Bradley, *Imagining*, 170).**