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FRENCH INDO-CHINA
(Political Situation)

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FRENCH INDO-CHINA
(POLITICAL SITUATION)

When France collapsed in 1940, it was not as a casual onlooker that Japan viewed the debacle. Japan saw (with the clarity of insight of an Al Capone) that French Indo-China would need "protection" if it were to remain secure against the designs of unprincipled foreign powers who might seek to take advantage of France's plight. Zealously intent on her professed role of protector of the weak, she brushed aside the feebly conventional protests of the Vichy-appointed Governor General (Vice-Admiral Jean DeCoux) and began pouring in "protection" in the form of Japanese troops - to the eventual total of seventy thousand.

Backed (and confronted) by this protection, DeCoux maintained for four and a half years an outward semblance of French sovereignty; presenting to the world the seeming anomaly of a colony surviving the down-fall of its mother country.

By early March, 1945, however, the disastrous course of the war made it necessary for Japan to revise her plans. The new government in France had been singularly unappreciative of the trouble Japan had gone to in providing protection for Indo-China; and the presence of the existing French Indo-Chinese Army under

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General Alessandri (15,000 French & 35,000 natives) might prove more than embarrassing to the Japanese in the event of an Allied landing.

In view of this situation Japan decided to ring down the curtain on Act I of the Indo-China farce and shift the props in preparation for the next scene - in which (coached by her far-seeing empire-builders) she would play her best loved role, "The Emancipator."

The matter of shifting scenery involved the elimination of the French Indo-Chinese Army; and Japan went about it in the best Port Arthur - Pearl Harbor manner, with Ambassador Matsumoto attending a party given by Governor General DeCoux while orders to attack the French forces were already being carried out in different parts of the country. In less than two months all resistance had ended, except for desultory efforts by remnants under General Alessandri, and a military regime was established, with the Japanese Ambassador and six Consuls General serving as "advisors" to the Japanese Army.

Eager to play to an appreciative audience (before the Allies might arrive) her role espousing the cause of freedom, Japan by mid-March had set upon gilded if unstable thrones the

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Kings of Cambodia, Luang Prabang (Laos) and the Emperor of Annam, and in her solicitude for these heretofore-oppressed peoples, offered counsel and guidance to the carefully selected government Cabinets.

Japan's actors however, proved more eager than artful, and their performance was disturbed by increasingly rude heckling of the Etsumei (Annamese Independence League). This anti-French organization (ignored by the Japanese in forming the Annamese Cabinet) had waited long years for independence and was to be neither deceived nor appeased now by the Japanese counterfeit. (Apparently deluded themselves, the Japanese reported aggrievedly to Tokyo that "the Annamese have gone so far as to question Japan's real motive."¹)

The Annamese Emperor, Bao Dai (who, the Japanese learned to their dismay, was "not nearly as weak-minded as the French had said") recognized the importance of political harmony, and proceeded to reorganize his Cabinet to include some members of the Etsumei. The latter, however, were not to be thus easily stilled, and in addition to demands for lower taxes, release of Japanese Army rice for civilian consumption, etc., began clamoring for extension of Annamese

(1) PSIS-400-6; 400-14

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sovereignty to the long-claimed States of Tonkin and Cochinchina. By July (1945) popular support for this last issue had become so strong that the Cabinet threatened to resign, being dissuaded only by a Japanese promise to "restore" the desired areas to Annam by September.

A further cause of Etsuimei dissatisfaction and no little suspicion, was the return from Tokyo (after many years of exile for anti-French activities) of pro-Japanese Prince Cuong De. It was feared that the Japanese (in an effort to rectify their mistake in crowning Bao Dai), intended to install Cuong De as Emperor.

The Japanese Army, ever disdainful of the Japanese Foreign Office and uninterested in these endless political artifices, saw in the Etsuimei's defiant attitude an affront to its dignity, and began making large-scale arrests. The Etsuimei thereupon adopted a more aggressive attitude and, after a series of minor incidents, seized arms and ammunition from Emperor Bao Dai's native Security Units (who had been armed by the Japanese). Thus equipped, the

* Annam, Tonkin and Cochinchina embrace 20 million of Indo-China's total population of 24 million. The remaining States of Cambodia and Laos have 3 and 1 million respectively.

** It seems probable that this is the basis for the charge which the French have made in attempting to discredit the Etsuimei that the latter were equipped by the Japanese.

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Etsuwei on 24 July made what appears to have been a fairly large-scale surprise attack on Japanese troops in Tonkin, with resultant casualties to both sides.²

Before the Japanese Army could carry out extensive punitive measures against the Etsuwei, rumors of Japan's acceptance of the Potsdam Ultimatum began to spread amongst the Army officials. At first the Commander of the Japanese Forces (probably Iatsumoto who also acted as Governor General) violently denounced the rumors as "enemy propaganda"; but on the evening of 12 August he called together the Japanese Army officers and diplomats to inform them "in tones of intense grief" that he had learned that what had been regarded all along as the "demagoguery of foreign nations was in fact true." He then directed that discussion by private persons of the Imperial decision be forbidden and that the entire Army carry on without confusion, maintaining military discipline as usual.³

On the following morning the Japanese military and diplomatic officials decided to restore Cochin-China to Annam, but before arrangements could be completed the Japanese Emperor's Rescript was read and "the opportunity was lost."

(2) H Series, 196458, 196325, 198116, 196950.

(3) 21 August 1945, H-202559.

When the newspapers published Japan's acceptance of the Potsdam declaration on 16 August, there was confusion throughout Indo-China; the French residents openly demanded that Japan be made responsible for the preservation of order; the Annamese began to argue about how to prevent a return of French rule, while anti-French elements in all quarters broke into terroristic activities.

On the following morning Bao Dai's representative in Hanoi (capital of Tonkin) informed Minister Tsukamoto of the creation of a "Political Affairs Committee" which was to attempt to bring about political unity of Annam. The representative stated that since it was necessary to prove that the Annamese were capable of self-government, they wished to devote their full effort to maintaining order and preventing the return of the French. To this end the Japanese were requested to supply arms, Tsukamoto failed to reply to this request.

Shortly after the Annamese Emperor's representative departed, the Minister of Education called on Tsukamoto to deliver the following message: "The Annamese Independence League has adopted a policy of cooperation with Japan; can they ask you to let bygones be bygones and release the members of that faction who

* The seat of Bao Dai's government was in Huế, capital of Annam.

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have been taken into custody by the Army?*. Again the Japanese Minister failed to make a definite reply. Describing political demonstrations in Hanoi that day, Tsukamoto stated:

"Armed peace preservation units and police units marched out with a brass band at their head and paraded about. In the afternoon public officials held a mass meeting and paraded; their number approached several tens of thousands and their discipline was magnificent. Because the Etsumei had hoisted their party flags in their midst, a truly strange sight greeted the eye. The French were panic stricken."

On the following morning (19th), the Independence Party, with the permission of the Political Affairs Committee, held a mass meeting in Hanoi, (capital of Tonkin). Shortly before noon the streets became crowded with automobiles bedecked with party flags; then the party members split into several groups and occupied all the principal Indo-Chinese government offices, hoisting their party flag. At noon Tsukamoto and his staff were invited to lunch with the party members, "just as if the Etsumei leaders were already administrative officials." While the diplomatic officials were at lunch, other Etsumei officials "demanded of Japanese Army officials that Tokyo's political power be entrusted to them since they had inflicted no injury on the Japanese, French or anyone."

* The Etsumei flag consists of a yellow star upon a red background.

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At the end of this eventful day, Tsukanoto reported to Tokyo that the Japanese Army had at first felt that "we should strike a blow against the Etsunai; but we have not resorted to this for various reasons and we are trying to work a compromise with the government." However, the Minister predicted great difficulties ahead, "since the attitude of the Etsunai is unyielding and their resolutions are gradually extending southward."⁴

On the following day (20 August) two messages destined for the United States and France were sent from Hanoi to Tokyo. The former read as follows:

*Addressed to the President of the United States of America

Having learned that the Chief of the Provisional government of France will shortly visit Your Excellency for the purpose of determining the future status of Indo-China, we wish to inform Your Excellency that all the Indo-Chinese states have proclaimed their independence and are determined to retain it. Our people, in particular, do not regard the French population as their enemies, and will respect their persons and their properties; but they will resist with every ounce of their strength the re-establishment of French domination in any form whatsoever.

The day of colonial conquest is gone, and a people - - especially the people of Viet Nam, who have 20 centuries of history and glorious past - - can no longer be placed under the guardianship of another people.

(4) 21 August 1945, H-202559, 19 August 1945, H-202459.

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May France bow before this truth, proclaimed and upheld by the noble American nation. May she recognize it with good grace, so that peace will come also to my country, which has already suffered so much from this war without having participated and which asks only to share in the formation of a just peace for the world.

We entreat Your Excellency to communicate the contents of this message to the heads of the governments of Great Britain, China and the U. S. S. R. Please accept, Mr. President, the gratitude of ourselves and of all our people for Your Excellency's kind and noble intervening on our behalf."

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(signed) Bao Dai

The second message reads as follows:

"From His Majesty, Emperor Bao Dai, to General De Gaulle and the French people:

I address myself to the people of France, to the country of my youth, and also to her chief and liberator; and I wish to speak as a friend rather than a Chief of State.

You have suffered too much during four mortal years not to understand that the Annamese people, who have twenty centuries of history and a past frequently glorious, no longer wish and no longer can tolerate any foreign domination or administration.

You would understand even better if only you could see what is happening here, if you could feel this will for independence which lurks in the depths of all hearts and which can be repressed no longer by any human power. Even if you succeeded in re-establishing a French administration here, it would no longer be obeyed; each village would be a nest of resistance, each former ally an enemy; and your officials and colonists themselves would ask to leave this oppressive atmosphere.

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I beg you to understand that the sole means to salvage French interests and the spiritual influence of France in Indo-China is to recognize openly the independence of Viet Nam and to abandon any ideas of re-establishing French sovereignty here or a French administration in any form whatsoever.

We could so easily come to an understanding in other ways and become friends if only you would cease undertaking to become once more our masters. Appealing to the well-known idealism of the French people and to the great wisdom of their leader, we hope that the peace and joy which have sounded for all the peoples of the world will be assured equally for all the inhabitants of Indo-China.⁶

On 20 August the Etsumei proclaimed martial law in Hanoi.

Although the Japanese Army sent tanks into the city, there were no armed clashes. According to a despatch from Tsukamoto to Tokyo, the Army had adopted a policy of refraining from attack so long as Japanese nationals were not molested.⁷

On the following morning the Etsumi informed Japanese Consul General Nishimura (Resident Superior of Tonkin) as follows:

"As of today, we have taken over the Northern Political Committee which set up the Emperor of Annam; we have reappointed a leader for them and are now awaiting the formal appointment from (the Bao Dai Nationalist Government at) Hnd."

(6) The Japanese reported that the Cambodians, also, objected to the return of the French, stating, that "in all classes of the population it is universally felt that if the Japanese are to evacuate, they would like the British and Americans to come, rather than the French." (E-203767) 20 August 1945, E-202961.

(7) E-203781, 23 August.

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Thoroughly confused, Nishimura commented to Tokyo:

"Since the attitude of the (Etsusei) movement was to disavow Bao Dai and the Nationalist Government, it is extremely strange just how Etsusei could undertake a conciliation with Hué and yet continue to carry on a revolutionary policy against them."

On the 22nd, the Etsusei informed Nishimura that because of a lack of sufficient arms to keep public order, martial law in Hanoi had been lifted. A request that the Japanese supply the necessary arms apparently was refused. Nishimura informed Tokyo that perhaps a compromise could be reached between the Etsusei and the Bao Dai Government through mediation by the Japanese Advisor (Yokoyama) to the latter government. Yokoyama however was unsuccessful, reporting (on the 23rd) as follows:

"I have achieved no success in my negotiations with Etsusei. Since the revolutionary movement in the large cities is gaining in proportion the Cabinet is determined to resign en masse and the Emperor has decided to abdicate."

In the meantime an American plane arrived in Hanoi with 16 Americans and 5 French Officers aboard. According to Tsukamoto,

- The five French officers together with 3 others that arrived the next day (23rd) were confined in the Governor General's residence.

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it created a very "great sensation, the joy of the French knew no bounds, and the Etsumei began a unified onslaught of propaganda." ⁸ Every day there were "agitation moves" in the streets, and placards were posted throughout the city in English, Chinese, and Russian, bearing slogans such as; "Down with French Imperialism," "Independence or Death," and "Welcome to the Allied Nations." Tsukamoto reported that behind the scenes the Etsumei leaders were taking important Frenchmen into custody, and "at night time there was frequent gun-fire." ⁹

On the 25th Bao Dai abdicated; his Cabinet resigned and the Etsumei established the "Provisional Government of the Viet Nam Republic" headed by President Ho Chi Minh." ¹⁰ At the same time in Saigon, (capital of Cochin-China) 50,000 persons assembled to establish the Southern Section of the newly formed Provisional Government. They imprisoned Bao Dai's representatives, took over the administrative offices and apparently established complete control of Cochin-China.

- (8) 30 August 1945, H-204158.
(9) 31 August 1945, H-204137.
(10) 30 August 1945, H-204473.

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The local Japanese army authorities "maintained a neutral attitude and continued to protect the Japanese, French and other foreigners." 11

After Bao Dai's abdication he became an advisor to the Provisional Government, living in Hanoi under the assumed name of Prince Kirai. Shortly afterward, he issued the following message to the French government and the French people in the Annamese newspaper at Hanoi:

"From 1940 to 1945 the French Indo-China Government struggled with the Japanese pattern of Fascism which has been foisted on our nation but on August 20th of the same year our independence was finally restored."

Thereupon, I myself placing more importance on the interests of my nation than on my own imperial prerogatives, abdicated the throne on August 25th and on the 26th the Viet Minh Republic was established.

However, the French Government has now sent army officers charged with the mission of suppressing our Republic and our government has firmly protected us against the aggressive scheme.

The people of Annam are fully resolved to maintain their freedom in the face of the French colonials who are still impregnated with their old imperialistic ideas and are determined to block any fresh aggression on their part. Consequently, in order to prevent the outbreak of any regrettable incidents, I hereby appeal to the spirit of understanding of the responsible people of France.

* Bao Dai thus admits that his government (from mid-March to 20 August) was never in fact independent.

(11) 31 August 1945, H-204207.

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During my youthful years in France where I had been sent to complete my education I learned to know the French people as a people who love liberty and peace and cherished independence and equality above all else. Already at that time, I felt that the French colonials who were interested only in their own profits were defiling the glorious history of France.

It behooves France as one of the United Nations, to strive to achieve the several objectives envisaged by the war (leaders). So far as we are concerned, we feel that the war was fought, above all, to bring about the liberation of all people and nations." ✓

Between 25 and 30 August, the new Government informed the Japanese officials that they "desired extremely friendly relations with Japan in the future," and that they had reached "a certain degree of understanding with the United Nations in regard to the maintenance of independence." Furthermore, as far as France was concerned, the new government held "the trump-card of a nationwide people's rebellion," and there was "no way out through negotiations." Then they made two requests of the Japanese, first, that the Japanese government officials turn over their posts to

the new Government; and second, that the Bank of Indo-China be transferred from the control of the Japanese authorities to the Provisional Government. Tsukamoto informed Tokyo that "we were forced to consent to the second request as an immediate measure." Later, however, the Japanese changed their minds and decided to retain control of both the bank and the central offices of the Government General until the Allies took over.

12

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On 2 September the new flag of Indo-China flew over Hanoi and Saigon while huge crowds gathered to participate in the ceremonial celebration which was to mark independence and welcome the Allies. In the northern city the celebration ended without mishap but in Saigon numerous clashes occurred, resulting in the killing of 2 Frenchmen, and 20 Annamese, and the wounding of 21 Frenchmen and 120 Annamese. Consul General Kawano in Saigon stated in a dispatch to Tokyo: "The Mountbatten Headquarters has inquired closely into Japanese responsibility in the incidents, and has demanded punishment of the Japanese police officials who were responsible, arrest of the responsible people in Etsumei, and the dispersal of the revolutionary army." Apparently the Allied headquarters ordered the Japanese Army to enforce

(12) 4 September 1945, H-204901, 204759, DS 24 Sept. 1945.

* Red flag with blue and white horizontal stripes in one corner (according to press source.)

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these demands. On the 13th, Kawano reported that "order has been restored to Saigon for the time being and we are maintaining as close contact with the Allied Headquarters as we possibly can, merely awaiting their orders and instructions. ¹³ Thus the Etsumei party at Saigon on the eve of its independence celebration was ousted from the governmental offices and its army disarmed; but as Kawano stated, "the anti-French feeling is still prevalent and an extremely bad situation is brewing."

In Hanoi, however, the new government's flag continued to wave while the Chinese occupation troops arrived. On 14 September the Japanese in Hanoi reported that the new government of the Etsumei was achieving a definite form, and that the liaison of that group with the Japanese was steadily improving. The policy of the new government was to emphasize the importance of avoiding useless disturbances and bloodshed "at the present time." The Japanese attributed the comparative calm of Hanoi to the fact that advance French officers had promised the Etsumei a broad range of self-government. Nevertheless, the Japanese felt that the situation between the Etsumei and French was beginning "to show signs of unrest." As far as the Chinese troops were con-

(13) 4 September 1945, H-205738; 8 September 1945, H-205974;
13 September 1945, H-205884.

cerned, the Japanese stated as follows:

"If we judge from the activities of the advance Chinese troops, it becomes quite clear that a certain amount of military administration is to be set up in Indo-China. The French and Chinese advance officers have practically no liaison with each other, and in addition relations with the Etsumei are at present far from good. It is extremely difficult to determine future developments in regard to this matter."

In Hué (capital of Annam) the Etsumei leaders were encountering more difficulties. Yokoyama has reported that on 12 September American planes had dropped goods into the area occupied by the French, and as soon as the planes had gone, disturbances arose which had to be suppressed by the Japanese Army. Both the French and Annamese suffered casualties and as a result of this, it had been decided that only Japanese troops would be stationed on the borders of the French residential area. Yokoyama further stated that at present in Hué, it was a daily occurrence for members of the populace "to sally out with bamboo spears and other arms to conduct demonstrations." When Yokoyama pointed out to the leaders of the Etsumei that gestures of this nature would only harm their position, the latter replied that "we are sufficiently aware of this fact, but we are unable to adequately control the natives."

* 14 Sept. 1945, B-206585.

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In the meantime the Japanese officials throughout Indo-China were "working without stint on measures for the protection of resident Japanese;" however, they all felt there was "no room for optimism." On 30 August the Japanese Army instructed the various advisors, that "since it had become impossible for them to carry on their duties any longer, they might as well evacuate," but the diplomatic officials were to remain on duty for the assistance of the Japanese nationals. They were instructed to make arbitrary decisions for the protection and evacuation of the nationals since the situation was such that "if we do not act quickly, it will be too late to act at all." ¹⁴ The residents were instructed to incorporate themselves into "self-controlled groups," living together at various places throughout the cities. Each person was to understand thoroughly the contents of the Imperial Rescript, thus "assuring mental preparedness for the Allied occupation." However, the Japanese felt that "when one considers the situation after the Japanese Army is gone, he cannot fail to be struck with terror." ¹⁵

Meanwhile, the French were making vigorous efforts to regain their former position in Indo-China.

(14) 30 August 1945, H-204158; H-204473.

(15) 8 September 1945, H-205150.

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PAGE 19 - 25

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Commenting on the situation in the British Zone, a Japanese despatch from Saigon states that the violent disturbances of 2 September resulted in the discrediting of the Etsumei regime in Cochia-China, and that the French had thus "been given a pretext to seize control over administration to some degree."* He added however, that, "although the first order from the Allied Headquarters to the Japanese Army specified restoration of control by Frenchmen in the Saigon area, the British seem disposed not to absolve the Japanese Army from responsibility for preventing disturbances of government and public order."

26

Describing conditions in the northern area, a Japanese despatch of 23 September includes the following:

".....The Annamese Government has taken over the actual administration but this has created confusion in the carrying on of the French administration in the southwest and southern areas. At the present time the position of the responsible government authorities is not clear..... pillaging, robbery, etc., are rampant, just as if there were no government. If the French Army will take over at this time (and it appears that this probability is growing) the Annamese will resort to scorched-earth, guerrilla warfare. If they should put up a resistance, this will

* On 23 Sept. the native government at Saigon was overthrown by former French prisoners of war who had been released by the British.

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create an outbreak of trouble for the Chinese, French and Annamese Armies. The lack of rice, resulting in famine, will inevitably throw public order into chaos. Under such circumstances, we have become concerned about the fact that we are absolutely unable to protect the property and lives of Japanese nationals in Hanoi who have been politically involved.... we again ask you that you please arrange to find ships for their evacuation in the near future.....* 27

A further Japanese despatch from Hanoi on 29 September includes the following latest available ultra information on conditions in Indo-China:

*.....Since the surrender ceremonies, (Japanese) soldiers have been permitted to wear swords, but disarmament will be carried out gradually from now on. It is understood that each unit has been permitted to retain rifles and side arms in extremely small quantities.....

The Chinese authorities, disregarding consideration of the complicated political situation here and repeated entreaties from us, have not carried out the transfer of administrative matters as planned.....The Chinese seem to be utterly disregarding the wishes of the French and until recently have made clear to the local military their intention to enforce a military administration. Since then, the French and Chinese representatives have been at odds; Lu Han refused the French request for formal representation at the surrender ceremonies and had them attend as observers.*

* According to a 28 September AP story from Hanoi, the French commander, General Alessandri, refused to attend the surrender ceremonies at the Governor General's place, because the French flag was not among those displayed.

(27) H-207548.

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In regard to the machinery of the military administration, although it has not yet been confirmed, it appears that Lu Han will be the Supreme Commander.....It seems that Lieut. General (Sho?) has been nominated to represent Kuomintang Headquarters and watch over Lu Han.....

Public order inside the city of Hanoi has gradually worsened and the police have become completely powerless.....thieves throng the streets and damage especially among the Japanese, is increasing.

Although the French appear to be awaiting the (arrival) of about 4800 former French Indo-China troops now being held at the Yunnan border by the Chinese, 4000 of these are Annamese, and units of foreigners comprise the main strength of the rest. Such being the case, if, by way of experiment, they were to have them enter the country by land route, it would not be difficult to predict revolt on the part of the Annamese troops. Moreover, although the 4000-odd French troops who are prisoners of war here are in a state tantamount to liberation, judging by the attitude of the Chinese, there is no way to acquire arms. Thus the French can take no immediate drastic steps.....

No moves by the American representation have been evident, but it appears that they may be prevailing upon the Viet Minh not to resort to violence and at the same time making skillful use of their position as mediator....." 28

(28) H-208290

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CONCLUSION

A summation of the foregoing presents the following picture of the present confused situation in Indo-China:

- (a) Japanese troops and civilians (except those of the latter who have been selected to remain and "cooperate") anxiously awaiting their return to Japan.
- (b) British troops in the south, and Chinese troops in the north; the latter's presence a matter of deep concern and no little indignation on the part of the French.
- (c) The "Provisional Government of the Republic of Viet Nam" (a coalition of native independence factions, apparently dominated at present by the Etsumei) under President Ho Chi Minh; holding some measure of political control in the former Protectorates of Tonkin and Annam.
- (d) The former French Colony of Cochin-China politically controlled by the French (mostly former prisoners of war who were liberated by the British) who ousted the Etsumei.
- (e) The Kings of the minor states of Laos and Cambodia still seated, if precariously, upon their thrones, watching and waiting as they observe the general melee more or less from the side lines.

Whatever may be the outcome of the present turmoil in Indo-China, it is an inescapable fact that Japan has left her mark not only in Indo-China but in Malaya, Burma and the Netherland East Indies. Though the return of troops and many civilians

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to Japan may serve to accentuate in the minds of Japan's long-range planners an already keen sense of frustration of long-held hopes, it is safe to assume that the empire builders find sustenance for future hopes in the seemingly irreparable damage done to the prestige of France, Great Britain and the Netherlands in southern areas which hold the lives and aspirations of more than 125 million people.

Regardless of the manner in which the French, British and Dutch approach the problem of returning to these areas - whether they rely on force or on a revised political philosophy - many of their problems (which may prove to be permanent fixtures) will bear the stamp "Made in Japan."

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