CHAPTER FOUR

The Reflexive Context

Boxed in by Public Opinion at Dien Bien Phu

During the winter and early spring of 1954, members of the Eisenhower administration reached a decision on intervening at Dien Bien Phu in Indochina. They were expecting an urgent request for assistance from the French, who were then fighting a communist insurgent group called the Viet Minh in the French colony of the Associated States of Indochina, composed of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. By 1954, France had committed a large number of forces to the war and had received significant financial and material assistance from the United States. On November 20 and 21, 1953, the French sent in a sizable number of their best troops to seize and occupy the remote Dien Bien Phu fortress, which could be resupplied only by air, in an attempt to draw the Viet Minh into a decisive battle. Eisenhower recalled being "horror stricken" that they would try to defend such an isolated location:[1] "I can't think of anything crazier. No experienced soldier would ever establish a force, an immobile force, in a place, in a fortress, and then ask the enemy to come and get it." Observing that those sorts of situations always ended with the garrison's surrender, he remarked, "Just as I expected, it became a desperate position."[2]

In early January 1954, the administration considered the conditions under which it might intervene in the Indochinese conflict in general and at Dien Bien Phu in particular. During the spring and after an intense examination of the question, the administration developed a

policy supporting "united action" to combat communism in Indochina. Conceived as both a temporary reaction to Dien Bien Phu and a long-term effort regarding the larger threat to Indochina, the vaguely defined policy envisioned a multilateral coalition, including the British and other regional powers, to deter Communist Chinese intervention in Indochina and to intervene itself if necessary. After the situation at Dien Bien Phu worsened in early April, the administration decided to intervene to relieve the outpost if three conditions were met: (1) the action was multilateral; (2) the French promised independence to the Associated States; and (3) Congress gave its approval. Since Congress made its approval contingent on multilateral action (with the British in particular), the administration focused on obtaining commitments from the British and French. Although these efforts failed, the administration stuck to its conditions by rejecting in April two desperate French requests for unilateral American intervention. The fortress fell in early May.

The administration's deliberations reflected a blend of attention to both domestic and international imperatives. Believing that a communist victory in Indochina would seriously damage American interests and rejecting unilateral intervention because of public opposition, Eisenhower decided that multilateral intervention provided the only viable policy alternative. Dulles, instead of seeing multilateral intervention as the best alternative allowed by public opinion, favored multilateral intervention almost from the beginning as the best policy to address American interests.

Initially, the prospect of American intervention arose because of fears that the French regional position might be seriously damaged if the battle for Dien Bien Phu were lost. As Eisenhower dealt with this prospect, public opinion limited his perceptions of the range of viable policy alternatives. He feared a repeat of the Korean War experience, in which an unpopular war undermined the Democrats' electoral fortunes (which he took advantage of as the Republican candidate in the 1952 presidential election). To do nothing meant the possible repeat of the "loss of China" debate (but this time the blame would be on his Republican administration), which would cost him politically, especially since he had run for office on a platform of liberating communist nations. Eisenhower also reacted to public opposition to unilateral intervention and action tainted by colonialism by requiring that any intervention be multilateral. National security concerns drove Dulles's thinking throughout the case. When implementing the multilateral policy, both Eisenhower and Dulles took actions to lead public opinion to support their chosen policy.[3]

As I described in chapter 1, realist and Wilsonian liberal theories lead to divergent expectations of behavior in the reflexive context. As in the crisis context, realist theories suggest that public opinion has no influence on choices, with policymakers leading the public to support the policy selected by the government. The Wilsonian liberal approach, however, states that decision makers will be constrained by public opinion.

According to the beliefs model, Eisenhower and Dulles would have reacted in different ways to public opinion. As in the crisis context, because Eisenhower believed that the support of public opinion was necessary, especially in cases of war and the commitment of American troops, his actions would be expected to be constrained in terms of war and on issues in which he perceived the public could not be led. Otherwise, he would have decided on the policy that best supported the national interest and then attempted to lead the public. But since Dulles's concern regarding public opinion centered on his belief in the need for time to generate public support, he would have supported the "best" policy based on other factors and then used the extended time allowed by anticipation to formulate a public education program to generate support.

The influence of public opinion for this case is coded in a *moderate constrain category* influence, with a lesser *lead category* influence. Although other interests had a significant effect, public opinion acted as an important factor limiting the administration's range of action. On the one hand, Eisenhower's decisions, which public opinion constrained, largely conformed to expectations of the Wilsonian liberal perspective, as does the main case finding, because he made the final decisions. On the other hand, Dulles's actions were generally what the realists expected, since he developed his view without reference to public opinion and then attempted to lead the public to support his chosen policy. The beliefs variable predicts this divergence between Eisenhower and Dulles and is largely supported by this case, since it accounts for when and why they reached their positions. The behavior of both actors was coded as *supportive* of the beliefs model because their behavior was *consistent* at all points and a *causal* influence was suggested at both the policy selection and implementation stages.

Problem Representation: Setting the Agenda

Early in its tenure, the administration recognized the importance of Indochina. Shortly after taking office, the secretary of state, John Foster

Dulles, recorded the consensus of an Oval Office meeting with Eisenhower and others that Indochina "had probably the top priority in foreign policy, being in some ways more important than Korea because the consequences of loss there could not be localized, but would spread throughout Asia and Europe."[4]

At a meeting on January 8, 1954, when the Viet Minh had surrounded Dien Bien Phu, the NSC considered Dien Bien Phu, intervention, and Indochina. Eisenhower expressed his strong opposition to using ground troops to confront the problem. As the minutes of the meeting state:

> For himself, said the President with great force, he simply could not imagine the United States putting ground forces anywhere in Southeast Asia, except possibly in Malaya, which we would have to defend as a bulwark to our off-shore island chain. . . . I can not tell you, said the President with vehemence, how bitterly opposed I am to such a course of action. This war in Indochina would absorb our troops by divisions![5]

In response to the recommendation of the JCS chair, Admiral Arthur Radford, that the United States do all in its power to prevent the loss of Dien Bien Phu even if it entailed using carrier aircraft, Eisenhower supported a quick air intervention. Despite noting his concern with keeping American troops out of Indochina, he insisted that the United States had to keep its vital interests in mind. While NSC adviser Robert Cutler and Secretary of the Treasury George Humphrey worried air intervention might draw the United States into a larger commitment, Eisenhower commented, "What you've got here is a leaky dike, and with leaky dikes it's sometimes better to put a finger in than to let the whole structure be washed away."[6] Although this meeting reached no final determination of policy, Eisenhower directed the CIA and Defense Department to report to the NSC on the feasible steps, short of actual intervention, that the United States might take to assist the French.

Problem Representation: Defining the Situation

From January 8 through mid-March 1954, the administration developed its definition of the situation as it related to two important issues: (1) the broader international and domestic political context regarding intervention in Indochina and (2) intervention at Dien Bien Phu after it was attacked on March 13.

The still-fresh memory of the Korean War, under an armistice for less than a year, remained on the decision makers' minds. Eisenhower ran for president in 1952 on the platform of ending the divisive conflict and had succeeded in achieving a cease-fire in the summer of 1953. The prospect of another wrenching experience like the Korean War would clearly have caused him to hesitate before embarking on another limited conflict.[7] In his memoirs, Assistant to the President Sherman Adams attributed Eisenhower's eventual decision to forgo intervention to his desire to avoid another Korea and believed that Eisenhower's anxiety derived from his perception of the public's reluctance to fight another Asian war.[8]

By the same token, Indochina also attained significance because of the broader political context. Holding the line against further communist expansion supplied an unchallenged assumption, given Eisenhower's 1952 presidential campaign stressing the "liberation" of communist-held nations. In addition, during the election, Eisenhower exploited the 1949 "loss of China" to the communists, which occurred on Democratic President Harry Truman's watch, which made the prospect of ceding a nation to the communist sphere uncomfortable at best.[9] In fact, Eisenhower explicitly made this linkage himself at a cabinet meeting, noting that he could not afford to have the Democrats ask, "Who lost Vietnam?"[10]

The Korean and Chinese analogies provided two contradictory legacies with which the administration needed to grapple. If it became involved in a limited war in Indochina, the government faced the prospect that a war-weary public would turn against the policy and the administration. But doing nothing and allowing the communists to take over Indochina gave the Democrats a political and electoral issue to exploit. Consequently, the administration confronted a public opinion climate hostile to both unilateral intervention to prevent Indochina's fall and any policy that would allow the communists to take over the country.

Whereas the Korean and Chinese analogies formed the domestic background for intervention, the NSC 5405 policy paper on American policy in Southeast Asia outlined the national security interests at stake. Approved by Eisenhower on January 16, NSC 5405 described the loss of Indochina as having severe repercussions for American interests around the world and recognized that a weakening of French resolve was a more serious threat to the region's security than even intervention by the Chinese.[11] Soon after the approval of NSC 5405, a furor erupted in

Washington on January 27 when Joseph and Stewart Alsop revealed in their *Washington Post* column that the administration was considering sending two hundred uniformed air force mechanics to Indochina to assist the French.[12] This leak led Senator John Stennis (D, Miss.), an influential member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, to express publicly his deep opposition to sending the mechanics and American troops to Indochina because he feared more American personnel would inevitably follow. At the February 3 press conference at which Eisenhower announced he would send the two hundred mechanics, along with additional equipment, he attempted to reduce this concern by emphasizing that the mechanics would not take part in the fighting. However, his announcement only further stimulated press and congressional apprehension, which forced Eisenhower to hold a meeting with the congressional leadership to allay their anxieties. But before the meeting could take place, another press leak on February 4 revealed the existence of the Special Committee on Southeast Asia, which was created to coordinate American efforts on Indochina and French assistance and had considered the mechanics issue. This revelation further undercut confidence in the administration's position because it implied that it was developing policy that could lead to American involvement in the war, without consulting with Congress.[13]

The administration then began a brief but intense public campaign to reduce congressional and public concerns. At his February 7 press conference, Eisenhower emphasized, "No one could be more bitterly opposed to ever getting the United States involved in a hot war in that region than I am; consequently, every move I authorize is calculated, so far as humans can do it, to make certain that that does not happen."[14] When congressional leaders observed that the opposition would quiet down if Eisenhower pledged to remove the mechanics by June 15, he made this commitment in addition to assuring them he would not rashly commit American troops to the conflict and promised to consult with Congress if the situation in Indochina changed dramatically. He further attempted to deflate public and congressional worries at his February 17 press conference when he reaffirmed that he would not take the nation into war unless it resulted from constitutional processes—meaning congressional involvement. These efforts succeeded in calming public and congressional anxiety.[15]

Eisenhower took away from this experience a renewed understanding of the public opposition to American participation in the Indochina war. In the original draft pages of his memoir *Mandate for Change*,

he included a long retrospective on why he did not intervene in Indochina. In addition to other factors (such as the French and Indochinese leaders' shortcomings, the ineffectiveness of air strikes, and potential American association with colonialism), Eisenhower argued, "One measure . . . advocated by some, I felt completely unfeasible—and do to this day: commitment of large formations of U.S. ground troops." In a statement implying that he used congressional sentiment on this issue as reflecting public opinion, he attributed his concern to the public's opposition, as exemplified by Stennis's reaction to the "modest" step of sending mechanics and the negative response to Nixon's April 16 comment on intervention.[16] He could only surmise that public opposition would be even greater if he sent American ground troops into Indochina. Although the rest of this quotation indicates that Eisenhower weighed the military viability of action more heavily, it suggests that opposition from public opinion somewhat constrained his outlook toward intervention.

Polling numbers from this period reveal a constant and significant level of public opposition to the use of ground troops in Indochina and support Eisenhower's conclusion. In anticipation of later decisions, Eisenhower recruited pollster Alfred Politz to conduct a poll in the summer of 1953 to sound out public opinion on the subject.[17] The subsequent memorandum to Eisenhower indicated that if it seemed that the communists were going to invade Indochina, 47 percent of the public thought the United States should help fight; 32 percent disagreed; and 21 percent did not know. Several follow-up questions were asked of the 68 percent answering "yes" and "don't know" regarding specific policy options to fight the communists. The results found that as a percentage of the entire sample, the public opposed almost all forms of action except for increased arms supplies: (1) for "American soldiers fighting in Indo-China" 30 percent favored it, 23 percent opposed it, and 15 percent did not know; (2) if the United States supplied most of the money and men 16 percent favored action; 39 percent opposed it; and 13 percent did not know; (3) concerning unilateral U.S. involvement without UN cooperation 11 percent favored it, 42 percent opposed it, and 15 percent did not know; and (4) regarding "increasing armament supplies to Indo-China," 46 percent favored it, 9 percent opposed it, and 13 percent did not know.

These poll results reveal the American public's tentativeness regarding intervention. In the portion favoring some kind of assistance, small pluralities favored sending American soldiers, and large pluralities

adopted a multilateral approach by opposing both the United States acting as the primary supplier of troops and material, as had been done in Korea, and unilateral action without the support of the international community. When the original question's 32 percent opposition is factored in, a majority of the public opposed sending American soldiers to fight, supplying most of the men and material, and acting without international cooperation.

Later polls found that the public opposed ground troops but would favor air intervention under certain conditions. A September 18, 1953, Gallup poll stated, "The United States is now sending war materials to help the French fight the Communists in Indochina. Would you approve or disapprove of sending United States soldiers to take part in the fighting there?" Only 8 percent of the public supported this move; 85 percent disapproved; and 7 percent expressed no opinion—a level of opposition that the report stated was "unusually significant." The same did not hold for the use of air power. An October 1953 poll by the State Department found that 53 percent approved and 34 percent disapproved of using the air force "if it looks like the Communists might take over all of Indochina."[18]

This potential public opposition dovetailed with Eisenhower's other concerns regarding military intervention in Indochina and made him realize that military involvement with large numbers of troops would be unwise. Even before taking office, he had doubts about the viability of a military solution to the communist threat in Indochina. In a March 17, 1951, diary entry, Eisenhower reasoned that even if the French were able to pacify all of Indochina, it would still be threatened by the "inexhaustible" communist Chinese manpower across the border. He concluded that "I am convinced no military victory is possible in that kind of theater."[19] In the continuation of the earlier quotation from the draft of his memoirs discussing the problems of potential public opposition, he linked the military viability of intervention with his ability to overcome domestic opposition:

> But [public opposition] in itself should not be overriding. Indeed had the circumstances lent themselves to a reasonable chance for a victory or a chance to avert a defeat for freedom, then I feel the task of explaining to the American public the necessity for sacrifice would have been a simple one indeed. But this was the wrong war for such action. The jungles of Indochina would have swallowed up division after division of U.S. troops.[20]

Although Eisenhower felt he could have led the public to support ground intervention if the military conditions in Indochina had favored such action, he was not willing to risk an unsuccessful intervention in Indochina given the underlying public opposition. But if the military conditions had been favorable, he might have attempted to lead the public.

In addition to these concerns, Eisenhower focused on two other considerations throughout his deliberations: (1) the domestic and international implications of American support for French colonialism and (2) the linked issue of independence for Indochina. In a March 26, 1953, meeting with French Prime Minister René Mayer, Eisenhower stressed that in order for the American government to give more financial support to the French war effort, the American public would have to be convinced both that the French were not pursuing colonialism and that Indochina would soon be granted full independence. Eisenhower also advised Mayer to emphasize the threat from communism in his statements because "unfortunately many Americans continue to think of the war in Indo-China as a French colonial operation rather than as a part of the struggle of the free world against the forces of Soviet Communism."[21]

In sum, Eisenhower saw the situation in Indochina as fraught with threats at varying levels. He believed that vital American interests were involved in Indochina and preferred to take action short of military involvement to preserve them. Although the introduction of American ground troops would lead to dire consequences both militarily and domestically, he remained open to air intervention or a quick strike to support American interests. In addition, the perception of French and American actions as supporting the independence of the Associated States rather than colonial interests was required to gain domestic support. In short, Eisenhower perceived a series of threats emanating from Indochina, ranging from American regional and global national security concerns to anxieties about domestic support for intervention.

Dulles viewed American interests in Indochina in a similar manner. At a January 5, 1954, briefing of the bipartisan congressional leadership, he observed that Indochina was "fraught with anxiety and danger" and expressed his fear that the French would quit the war if the United States cut off aid, since they had lost their desire for a successful prosecution of the war after promising negotiations on independence in the summer of 1953.[22] Later, at the January 8 NSC meeting, Dulles linked his concern regarding the danger to Indochina with the possibility of military action.

The Pentagon's notes of the meeting show Dulles arguing that the French position in Indochina was so critical as "to force the U.S. to decide now to utilize U.S. forces in the fighting in Southeast Asia."[23] Aside from the situation in Indochina, Dulles perceived potential domestic problems for the administration. In a February 24, 1954, conversation with Eisenhower, Dulles warned that based on his recent meeting with the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, the administration should anticipate possible domestic attacks, given the lack of domestic preparedness for French setbacks in Indochina.[24] The implications, given the memory of the "who lost China" debate, must have been clear.

Dulles perceived a situation dangerous to American interests but still salvageable. He thought that Indochina needed to remain out of communist hands in order to preserve the American position in the region and felt that the current French government represented the best hope to achieve that end, since the French opposition parties would likely abandon the cause altogether.[25] Although Dulles favored intervention to prevent Indochina from becoming communist, he believed the current French government would continue to prosecute the war, barring a serious setback. Since he had already heard rumblings reminiscent of the outcry after China became communist, he thought that the "loss" of Indochina could have significant domestic ramifications.

Against this background, the Viet Minh made their first large-scale assault on Dien Bien Phu on March 13. On March 18, Eisenhower described in a letter to his friend Swede Hazlett the consequences of the battle's outcome in mainly psychological rather than military terms:

> The situation [at Dien Bien Phu] there becomes increasingly disturbing. I hope the French will have the stamina to stick it out; because a defeat in that area will inevitably have a serious psychological effect on the French. I suspect that this particular attack was launched by the Communists to gain an advantage to be used at the Geneva Conference.[26]

At the March 18 NSC meeting, Dulles, like Eisenhower, interpreted the Viet Minh attack at Dien Bien Phu as a ploy to gain a negotiating advantage at the Geneva Conference, which was scheduled to include a discussion of Indochina. He recalled his warning to French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault that "on the basis of the American experience in Korea, that if Indochina were put on the agenda for the Geneva Conference it would be the signal for violent Vietminh attacks on the French Union forces in Indochina. This was precisely what had happened."[27]

Option Generation

Possible options were evaluated during March and focused on three interrelated questions: (1) whether or not to intervene, (2) whether intervention would be unilateral or multilateral, and (3) whether to use air and naval forces alone or ground forces as well. After the Viet Minh attack, the military began to make the necessary arrangements to intervene at Dien Bien Phu. On March 19, an American carrier task force was told to prepare for action off the Indochinese coast and be ready to act on three hours' notice. On March 22, the carrier task force was ordered to prepare to attack the communist forces at Dien Bien Phu if ordered to do so.[28]

In this atmosphere, the administration began more intense discussions regarding potential intervention. On March 23, after Eisenhower approved visiting French Chief of Staff Paul Élyʼs requests for matériel to help Dien Bien Phu hold out, Dulles, Radford, and Ély met to discuss American policy. Ély pressed for clarification of American thinking on intervention, whereas Dulles only referred to the broad political preconditions necessary (regarding independence and American training of indigenous forces) before the United States would become involved, because once engaged, it would be difficult to extract American forces.[29]

On March 24, Radford and Dulles spoke privately regarding the French situation. Dulles noted his concern that the French were creating vacuums throughout the world and that the United States faced the critical decision of how it could fill them. Appearing somewhat apprehensive about domestic criticism, Radford replied that the French might withdraw in two to three weeks if they did not achieve victory and speculated that the administration would "look bad here to our own people. The appearances he will have to make—hearings, etc.—can be embarrassing."[30] To avoid domestic criticism, Dulles suggested, pending a clarification of the political situation, the United States might step up activities along Formosa's coast and increase direct contacts with the Associated States. He even worried, "We could lose Europe, Asia, and Africa all at once if we don't watch out."[31]

After meeting again with Ély, who probed Radford on whether and how the United States would intervene, Radford warned that the dire situation at Dien Bien Phu and the political and psychological implications in France caused him to be

> gravely fearful that the measures being taken by the French will prove to be inadequate and initiated too late to prevent a progressive deteriora-

> tion of the situation. The consequences can well lead to the loss of all of S.E. Asia to Communist domination. If this is to be avoided, I consider that the U.S. must be prepared to act promptly and in force possibly to a frantic and belated request by the French for U.S. intervention.[32]

While Radford conducted a series of meetings with Élу, the broader administration policy concerning Indochina continued to develop. On March 21, Eisenhower met with his top-level advisers (including John Foster Dulles, CIA Director Allen Dulles, Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson, and Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield, a top political adviser to Eisenhower). Although there is no record of this meeting, its timing, the content of the legislative leaders' meeting the next day, and the presence of Summerfield suggests that they discussed a proposal by Dulles for multilateral intervention (united action) and its political ramifications.[33] On March 22, Eisenhower, Dulles, and Radford met with a select group of Republican legislative leaders to notify them of the administration's plans. Dulles informed the leaders that the administration was considering publicly proposing united action in Indochina and wished to have their endorsement of the proposal, which the leaders gave.[34]

Eisenhower and Dulles met again on March 24. As Dulles reported, they first discussed Dulles's and Radford's conversation with Élу on the previous day. Dulles remembered that Eisenhower "agreed basically that we should not get involved in fighting in Indochina unless there were the political pre-conditions necessary for a successful outcome. He did not, however, wholly exclude the possibility of a single strike, if it were almost certain this would produce decisive results." Given the content of Dulles's memorandum concerning his March 23 conversation with Élу, the political preconditions seemingly pertained to factors internal to the Associated States, such as independence and training issues. Dulles then raised the subject of his united action speech set for March 29. In hopes of checking the drift toward appeasement of the Chinese by France and Britain, he felt that "it would be useful for me in my speech Monday night to talk about Indochina and its importance to the free world." While Eisenhower agreed, he cautioned that nothing should be said that would commit the United States to any particular action.[35]

The March 25 NSC meeting concerned several reports that recommended considering intervention.[36] Both Dulles and Wilson agreed that the interagency NSC Planning Board should consider interven-

tion. Eisenhower supported the examination saying, "What he was asking for was the extent to which we should go in employing ground forces to save Indochina from the Communists." However, he "did not see how the United States or other free world nations could go full-out in support of the Associated States without UN approval and assistance." He added that a request from the Associated States for intervention would also be necessary. Furthermore, Eisenhower "was clear that the Congress would have to be in on any move by the United States to intervene in Indochina. It was simply academic to imagine otherwise."[37]

After a brief discussion of executive prerogatives on intervention, Eisenhower suggested that the administration begin to explore the level of support in Congress for intervention. Since he thought the UN might not support the coalition and reasoned that the administration could get the necessary two-thirds support from the Senate for a treaty, Eisenhower wondered whether the United States could intervene as part of a regional group limited to nations in Southeast Asia based on an Indochinese invitation (after the negotiation of a treaty to form the multilateral coalition). Whereas Wilson proposed forgetting about Indochina and concentrating on the other nations in the region, Eisenhower "expressed great doubt as to the feasibility of such a proposal, since he believed that the collapse of Indochina would produce a chain reaction which would result in the fall of all of Southeast Asia to the Communists." By the end of the meeting, Eisenhower had come up with three conditions for American intervention: (1) an invitation from the Associated States, (2) congressional support, and (3) either UN action or a regional grouping. The Planning Board was ordered to consider the "circumstances and conditions" under which the United States would intervene either multilaterally or unilaterally to prevent the fall of Indochina.[38]

Dulles expanded on his view regarding the importance of Dien Bien Phu at the March 26 cabinet meeting. He stressed that the United States must help the French win or else the communists would "cut our defense line in half."[39] Given the danger, he was "inclined to believe [a] situation may develop requiring [the] U.S. to take some strong risks—but less than [the] risks or action would be later." The French, he believed, were interested in American assistance but only under the condition that their prestige would not be damaged. Indochina was an "extremely serious situation which may require going to Congress for more extensive action" and a multilateral political understanding.[40]

By March 26, the administration had several options on the table. Unilateral action to relieve Dien Bien Phu remained a strong possibility, and both Eisenhower and Dulles would accept a single air strike if it were decisive (although they both preferred multilateral intervention over unilateral action). Eisenhower remained wary of using ground forces under any conditions. Given the seriousness of the threat, both Eisenhower and Dulles supported discussions with Congress about possible intervention. Implicit in the discussion was the option of staying out completely if the conditions proposed by Eisenhower were not met.

Policy Selection

During the final week of March, the administration concentrated on presenting the united action proposal to Congress and the public. Dulles went over a draft of his March 29 speech with Eisenhower who, thinking it was "very fine," approved it on March 27 with only minor changes. Dulles hoped that a strong statement would stem the French drift toward accommodation with the Viet Minh and deter Chinese intervention (without committing troops) and that American intervention would not be necessary. Since the administration had made no final decision, the vague speech committed the United States to no one policy.[41]

Dulles's perception of public opinion did affect how he tried to build support, but he chose the policy of united action because he thought it best addressed national security requirements. On March 27, he discussed his perceptions of public opinion with Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs Carl McCardle. Dulles noted that the director of the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department, Robert Bowie, "thinks the country will not be willing to go along with a tough program" (presumably a reference to intervention) and thought the administration might have to compromise. The telephone minutes recorded, "The Sec. said if [the public] won't go along with a strong policy, it won't go along on appeasement. Neither policy is popular—we better take the one that is right. The President agreed,—though the Sec. said he is not as critical."[42]

Dulles perceived domestic problems with both intervention (the Korean War analogy) and "appeasement" that would allow Indochina to become communist (the China analogy). Despite this domestic pressure, Dulles felt that the administration needed to pursue the policy that best met the challenges of the international situation. As he out-

lined in his March 26 presentation to the cabinet, the national security considerations pointed to united action as the best alternative.

What Eisenhower agreed with is not clear from this quotation. It could refer to either the unpopularity of appeasement and intervention or the need to adopt the "right" policy. Later reasoning by Eisenhower, in which he felt limited by public opinion, appears to rule out his insistence on adopting the "right" policy, regardless of public opinion. Other information supports the view that Eisenhower believed both intervention and appeasement were unpopular with the public and that he and Dulles agreed on which policy was "right" (multilateral intervention)—although I concluded that they reached this judgment for different reasons. Given this information, the statement probably indicates that Eisenhower and Dulles agreed on multilateral intervention. For Eisenhower, being less "critical" probably refers to his willingness to compromise rather than pursue a strong policy of intervention.[43]

Dulles gave his televised address, entitled "The Threat of a Red Asia," on March 29. He stressed the French pledge for independence and argued that Southeast Asia's strategic position made the region vital to American security interests. Concerning American action, he recalled his recent statements, "to impress on potential aggressors" that the United States would respond to aggression at "places and by means of free world choosing" to ensure that aggression would not be rewarded and that the threat "should not be passively accepted, but should be met by united action." After the speech, he thought he had met his objectives by warning the Chinese of potential aggression, implying to the French the continued American commitment to Indochina, outlining the potential danger to the American public to build support for potential action, and issuing a call for action vague enough to commit the country to no particular policy. The nation's and Congress's response to the speech was muted but indicative of "broad support." When asked at his March 31 press conference whether united action would mean direct intervention with American troops, Eisenhower remained noncommittal, noting the great disadvantage of employing American forces around the world in response to every situation but also adding that each case needed to be evaluated on its own merits.[44]

While the effort to build support for the united action policy progressed, the administration continued consulting with congressional leaders over the ever-worsening situation at Dien Bien Phu. On March 29, in a meeting with Republican legislative leaders, Nixon reported that Eisenhower stated, "very simply, but dramatically," that "I am

bringing this up at this time because at any time in the space of forty-eight hours, it might be necessary to move into the battle of Dien Bien Phu in order to keep it from going against us, and in that case I will be calling in the Democrats as well as our Republican leaders to inform them of the actions we're taking."[45]

The situation soon became more precarious during March 30–April 1 when the Viet Minh took the fortress's central defensive position. With Indochina sinking fast, the NSC again considered the question of intervention on April 1. When Radford warned that unless conditions were reversed, there would be "no way to save the situation," Eisenhower concluded, "The plight of the French certainly raised the question whether the United States ought now to consider any kind of intervention to save Dien Bien Phu." He noted his understanding that all but Radford of the JCS opposed an American air strike.[46] Eisenhower commented that although he could see a "thousand variants in the equation and very terrible risks, there was no reason for the Council to avoid considering the intervention issue." In response to a question by Dulles as to what could be done to save the fortress, Radford replied that American forces could help by the next day if the decision were made. At this point, Eisenhower adjourned the NSC to discuss the issue with a more limited group in the Oval Office.[47]

Unfortunately, no memorandum of the conversation in this meeting has been found in the State Department files or at the Eisenhower Library. However, based on the actions taken after the meeting, the evidence points to a decision to consult Congress over possible intervention to save Dien Bien Phu.[48] Following the Oval Office meeting, Dulles told Attorney General Herbert Brownell that "something fairly serious had come up after the morning NSC meeting." Presumably this statement refers to a possible congressional resolution on intervention, since Dulles noted he was "working on it with Legal Adviser [Herman] Phleger" and he hoped to have something to present to Congress.[49] He later informed Eisenhower that he had approved an April 2 meeting, in keeping with the action Eisenhower promised if the administration were contemplating intervention, with four members from both the Senate and House (two from each party), and hoped to have something to show Eisenhower the next morning.[50] After Eisenhower approved the meeting, Dulles spoke to Radford, "We need to think about the whole range of things we can do with sea and air power which might hold and so involve the Chinese Communists that they won't think of further adventures in SE Asia." Radford and Dulles agreed that they

must "satisfy" Congress "that for the particular job we want to do, it can be done without sending manpower to Asia."[51]

As of April 1, Eisenhower still had not completely ruled out unilateral intervention at Dien Bien Phu. He told two newspaper editor friends that even though he would have to deny it forever, the United States might have to use carrier planes to bomb the area around Dien Bien Phu to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.[52] But his view soon changed. On April 2, Eisenhower met with Dulles, Wilson, Radford, and Cutler to consider the congressional resolution on intervening.[53] After approving Dulles's congressional resolution, Eisenhower decided "that the tactical procedure should be to develop first the thinking of congressional leaders without actually submitting in the first instance a resolution drafted by ourselves." Dulles agreed and indicated that he and Radford did differ on the resolution. Dulles viewed the resolution as a deterrent action and a measure to bolster the American position from which the United States could form a coalition including France, the Associated States, Thailand, Indonesia, the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand. He felt that "it [was] very important from the standpoint of congressional and public opinion that adequate participation in any defensive efforts should be made by these other countries." Dulles thought that Radford, however, saw the resolution as authority for immediate use in a "strike," regardless of "any prior development of an adequate measure of allied unity." But Radford, the staunchest proponent of action, now pulled back, stating that although he had previously favored intervention to save Dien Bien Phu, "he [now] felt that the outcome there would be determined in a matter of hours, and the situation was not one which called for any US participation."[54]

At this meeting, the administration reached an important decision by resolving to pursue a congressional resolution authorizing American intervention in the hopes of deterring Chinese intervention, bolstering French morale, and authorizing the pursuit of united action. The resolution also served the additional function of assisting in the acquisition of support from regional actors. Although officials recognized that international support would rely in part on the administration's ability to obtain domestic support, Dulles in particular realized that an international coalition would make intervention more acceptable to domestic opinion. In this sense, congressional, public, and international support for united action each relied in part on the others.

On April 3, Dulles and Radford outlined to the congressional delegation the administration's case for a resolution granting authority to

Eisenhower to use sea and airpower. Senate Majority Leader Knowland expressed his immediate support, but further discussion "developed a unanimous reaction" by the members that Congress would not act until "the Secretary had obtained commitments of a political and material nature from our allies." Congressional leaders were unanimous in wanting "no more Koreas with the United States furnishing 90% of the manpower." Radford and Dulles stated that they did not contemplate the use of ground troops, but the members of Congress felt that "once the flag was committed the use of land forces would inevitably follow." The group decided that Dulles should attempt to get commitments from the British and others. If he could get their acceptance, "the consensus was that a Congressional resolution could be passed, giving the President power to commit armed forces in the area."[55]

Afterward, Dulles reported to Eisenhower that "on the whole it went pretty well,—although it raised some serious problems." Dulles indicated that Congress would "go along on some vigorous action" as long as those in the area participated (as he expected), and he concluded that he could move forward on united action. Again, Dulles returned to the need for multilateral participation in order to gain public support for united action: "The Sec. said the position of Britain is what they were thinking of. It is hard to get the American people excited if they are not [involved]."[56]

This analysis suggests that Eisenhower did seriously consider intervention and felt that he needed congressional approval but that the atmosphere in Congress did not create for him additional obstacles to intervention.[57] In a meeting with his advisers on April 4, Eisenhower set the conditions that provided the foundation for the administration's policy. Sherman Adams reported that at this meeting, "Eisenhower had agreed with Dulles and Radford on a plan to send American forces to Indo-China under certain strict conditions." The conditions were first "joint action" with British, Australian, and New Zealand troops and other regional actors (such as the Philippines and Thailand) if possible. Second, the French would continue to fight with full participation until the end. Third, "Eisenhower was also concerned that American intervention in Indo-China might be interpreted as protection of French colonialism. He added a condition that the French would need to guarantee future independence" to Indochina.[58] These conditions were directly linked to Eisenhower's perception of public opinion. Multilateral involvement ensured that the United States would not be faced with almost total reliance on American forces in a protracted war, as in Korea. In addition,

Eisenhower could defuse domestic concerns about colonialism because of the independence condition. These actions also served to address the anxieties raised by congressional leaders in the April 3 meeting.[59]

The discussion at the afternoon NSC meeting on April 6 points to many of the factors that weighed on decision makers' minds during this period.[60] At this meeting, Eisenhower opposed unilateral American intervention because of opposition from Congress and the public. But although Dulles believed that the United States should pursue united action first, he did not rule out unilateral action if the coalition option failed. Eisenhower clearly rejected unilateral action, but he maintained his support for multilateral action as a necessary move to create domestic support.

According to the minutes, Eisenhower stated:

> As far as he was concerned, said the President with great emphasis, there was no possibility whatever of U.S. unilateral intervention in Indochina, and we had best face that fact. Even if we tried such a course, we would have to take it to Congress and fight for it like dogs, with very little hope of success. At the very least, also, we would have to be invited in by the Vietnamese.

Dulles supported this assessment, indicating that based on his April 3 meeting with congressional leaders, "it would be impossible to get Congressional authorization for U.S. unilateral action in Indochina." He argued that "to secure the necessary Congressional support," three conditions would have to be met: (1) united action, including nations in the region; (2) French acceleration of the independence program; and (3) a French commitment to continue the war.[61]

Echoing his comments from April 2, Dulles saw the decision that day "as not primarily a decision to intervene with military forces in Indochina, but as an effort to build up strength in the Southeast Asia area to such a point that military intervention might prove unnecessary." Dulles thought,

> If we could build a good political foundation in and around Southeast Asia, it might not be necessary to intervene with our own armed forces. If, on the other hand, the United States failed to get results in its efforts to build up a regional grouping, it would certainly be necessary to contemplate armed intervention.[62]

Since Congress would support intervention under certain conditions, Dulles recommended concentrating on developing the regional group-

ing before the Geneva negotiation in order to bolster French morale and make the communists back down. But even though he made multilateral intervention the priority, he did not rule out going it alone if necessary.

Eisenhower endorsed the long-term coalitional approach and "expressed warm approval" for the creation of the organization even if Indochina were lost. He concluded, "The creation of such a political organization for defense would be better than emergency action." He later expressed the view that the "thing to do was to try to get our major allies to recognize the vital need to join in a coalition to prevent further Communist imperialism in Southeast Asia."[63] However, multilateral action remained the sine qua non of American policy, and Eisenhower stated "with great conviction that we certainly could not intervene in Indochina and become the colonial power which succeeded France. The Associated States would certainly not agree to invite our intervention unless we had other Asiatic nations with us."[64]

Eisenhower clearly was worried about the implications of a communist takeover of Indochina and saw the regional grouping as a means to secure public support and avoid unilateral intervention:

> Indochina was the first in a row of dominoes. If it fell its neighbors would shortly thereafter fall with it, and where would the process end? If he was correct, said the President, it would end with the United States directly behind the 8-ball. We are not prepared now to take action with respect to Dien Bien Phu in and by itself, but the coalition program for Southeast Asia must go forward as a matter of the greatest urgency. If we can secure this regional grouping for the defense of Indochina, the battle is two-thirds won. This grouping would give us the needed popular support of domestic opinion and of allied governments, and we might thereafter not be required to contemplate a unilateral American intervention in Indochina.[65]

Essentially deciding to pursue the previous policy, the NSC postponed a decision regarding intervention in lieu of seeking British support for a regional grouping to defend Southeast Asia and pressing the French to "accelerate" the movement for independence. The minutes indicated Eisenhower's intention to seek congressional authorization for American participation in this regional grouping if an agreement was reached. Much to his chagrin, Nixon concluded that Eisenhower had

> backed down considerably from the strong position he had taken on Indochina the latter part of the previous week. He seemed resigned to

> doing nothing at all unless we could get the allies and the country to go along with whatever was suggested and he did not seem inclined to put much pressure on to get them to come along.[66]

Although Eisenhower felt something needed to be done about Southeast Asia, he rejected any unilateral action because it would not receive public support.

Eisenhower and Dulles reached essentially the same position on the multilateral approach, but public opinion affected their policy positions in different ways. Whereas Eisenhower was held back by public opinion, Dulles tried to lead it. Eisenhower believed that national security and a fear of the electoral repercussions of another "who lost China" debate made protecting Indochina from the communists necessary. For Eisenhower, public opinion and the resulting congressional sentiment precluded unilateral action. In January and in earlier pronouncements, Eisenhower had ruled out the use of ground troops in Indochina because of their military viability and political considerations. However, he had accepted some form of unilateral action throughout the winter and spring, even indicating on April 2 that the United States might have to pursue this action. But by April 6, Eisenhower clearly opposed unilateral action at the NSC meeting. His reasoning reflected a concern that public opinion would oppose unilateral action, thus making it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to obtain congressional authorization. His concern regarding a repeat of the Korean War was probably heightened by congressional sentiment expressed at the April 3 meeting. Even though public opinion restricted his view of unilateral intervention, he felt that public opinion would support American action if it were multilateral and clean of the taint of colonialism. But he did not want to use ground troops, given his judgment of their utility, or unilateral action, because of opposition at home. This process of elimination left multilateral intervention as the only way of preserving Indochina.

Eisenhower's openness to unilateral intervention on April 1 and his opposition to it on April 4 and 6 suggests that he received the information about public opinion that influenced this view between these two days. Congress's opposition to unilateral intervention on April 3 probably gave him the current reading of public opinion (he also had recent polling information suggesting the same thing). Since Eisenhower was already sensitive to the Korean analogy, the insistence by the congressional leaders on "no more Koreas" in which the United States acted

unilaterally would have made him concerned about public opinion. Given his comments at the April 6 NSC meeting, it appears he had indeed read congressional sentiment as reflecting the public's general opinion.

Dulles also preferred multilateral action. In addition to being the easiest policy for which to generate public support for intervention, he found other reasons to recommend it. A multilateral grouping would serve three purposes that would remove the threat from Indochina: (1) strengthening the French will to continue the fight, (2) preventing further communist aggression, and (3) forcing the communists to back down at Geneva. His comments at the April 6 NSC meeting also indicated his openness to unilateral intervention if multilateral action failed (something that Eisenhower was not prepared to accept). Whereas Eisenhower saw multilateral action as the only option available to the administration, Dulles saw it as the best way to achieve American objectives, regardless of domestic constraints. Instead of being held back by public opinion, Dulles attempted to lead it, as evidenced by the March 29 speech and later efforts during the policy's implementation.

Policy Implementation

As the United States began trying to build international support for united action, the French made their first informal request for American intervention late in the day on April 4. The American ambassador to France, Douglas Dillon, cabled Washington that the French government had notified him that "immediate armed intervention of US carrier aircraft at Dien Bien Phu is now necessary to save the situation."[67] Although administration leaders quickly rejected the French proposal as inconsistent with their policy decision to pursue united action, the request set off a flurry of activity in the American government the morning of April 5. Dulles telephoned Eisenhower and informed him of Dillon's telegram. Recalling the outcome of the April 3 meeting with Congress, Dulles said that in principle, the United States had already answered the question by deciding that other nations needed to be included to ensure the United States did not act alone. Eisenhower replied that unilateral action would be "unconstitutional and indefensible" unless the administration had some way of gaining congressional support. Although Eisenhower suggested "taking a look to see if anything else can be done," he also insisted that "we cannot engage in active war" and chose to continue to seek united action.[68]

In his response to Dillon, Dulles reaffirmed the administration's conditions on intervention and reminded him that everything was being done "to prepare [the] public, [and the] Congressional and Constitutional basis for united action in Indochina."[69] After the April 6 NSC meeting, Dulles told Dillon that he could tell the French that "it can hardly be expected that this momentous decision [for intervention] could be taken without preparation when our nation is not itself directly attacked. There must be adequate public understanding and Congressional support and action and international preparation." He regretted the political delay, but congressional support depended on united action.[70] In sum, the administration's response to the French request for intervention was to implement the decision that had been made on April 4 to pursue united action. In their deliberations regarding the French telegram, Dulles and Eisenhower felt limited by Congress's conditions concerning intervention, and in his messages to Dillon, Dulles stressed the need (and the actions being taken) to prepare the public for action.

The administration continued this effort to prepare the public for multilateral intervention in the week following the April 4 decision. In speeches and press conferences, the administration underscored the importance of Indochina.[71] In addition to these efforts, the State Department started an intensive program to generate domestic support for intervention. Reporter Richard Rovere attended one of these sessions and broke the story on April 8. He reported that Dulles was

> conducting what must undoubtedly be one of the boldest campaigns of political suasion ever undertaken by an American statesman. Congressmen, political leaders of all shadings of opinion, newspapermen, and radio and television personalities have been rounded up in droves and escorted to lectures and briefings on what the State Department regards as the American stake in Indo-China.[72]

At the April 9 cabinet meeting, Eisenhower continued to reject unilateral action. He added that the domestic situation in the United States would greatly improve if the British and others agreed to participate, given the American aversion to "go it alone."[73] The next day, April 10, Dulles left on a trip to Europe to persuade America's allies to join a united action coalition. When he returned on April 15, Dulles felt that he had accomplished his purpose by getting the French and British to agree to joint action. However, the main result of the trip, a vaguely worded communiqué, committed the British only to "an examination of

the possibility of establishing a collective defense . . . to assure the peace security and freedom of Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific."[74] Although Dulles claimed that the British statement reflected its agreement to undertake a collective defense, the British privately rejected joint military intervention (a key aspect of united action) and instead preferred a collective security arrangement that did *not* include Indochina.[75] For their part, the French objected to the American timetable for action and insisted that any movement toward a collective security arrangement before Geneva would be impossible because it would appear to their own people that they had decided the conference would fail.[76] Although Dulles did not appear to realize it at the time, the British had rejected the substance of united action, and the French had spurned any coalitional effort before Geneva, thereby making his vision of united action impossible to achieve.

In addition, the administration faced a domestic uproar when on April 16, Vice President Nixon stated that if the French withdrew and American troops provided the only way to save Indochina, "I believe that the executive branch of the government has to take the politically unpopular position of facing up to it and doing it [i.e., sending troops], and I personally would support such a decision."[77] The statement, perceived as an administration trial balloon on sending troops, met with both sharp and widespread opposition. Both parties in Congress reacted negatively, based on concerns that the administration had once again cut them out of foreign policy decision making. The American and world press also responded harshly.[78] Apparently scared by the interventionist talk, on April 18, the British undercut the administration's united action strategy by pulling out of an April 20 meeting at which the collective security arrangements were to be discussed.[79] Although Dulles did not appear overly concerned with Nixon's statement, this incident strongly reinforced Eisenhower's aversion to unilateral intervention because of public opposition.[80]

The public remained wary of involving American ground troops, as Eisenhower suspected, but it nonetheless supported the main lines of the administration's policy. Referring to a February Gallup Poll finding that only 11 percent of the public favored dispatching ground troops to Indochina, a State Department report on public opinion concluded that "editorial opinion, Congressional statements, and public opinion polls all point to ['an unwillingness to send troops to participate in the fighting']." The report provided summaries of previous polls from 1953 that showed approval of sending in the American air force if the communists

tried to take over Indochina, but an unpublished March 1954 Gallup Poll found public opposition to action by any forces. The poll asked: "Suppose things got so bad in Indo-China it looked as if the Communists were going to beat the French and take over all of Indo-China. Which *one* of these things do you think the United States should then do?" Nine percent said to "send American soldiers and flyers to take part in the fighting there"; 33 percent preferred to "send the French more supplies than we do now—but *no* soldiers or flyers"; 45 percent wanted to "try to arrange for an armistice and a peaceful settlement by negotiation"; and 13 percent expressed no opinion. The report also noted that commentators voiced "widespread and strong" support for Dulles's united action policy and viewed his trip to Europe as a success.[81] This report largely supported the multilateral American policy and Eisenhower's perception of public opinion as extremely wary of any use of troops and concerned with the independence of the Associated States.

At a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ministers' meeting in Europe on April 22, French Minister of Foreign Affairs Georges Bidault informed Dulles that the situation at Dien Bien Phu was "virtually hopeless" and only a "massive" air intervention by the United States could avert disaster. Bidault now favored internationalizing the war (although he had previously opposed it) and hoped that the United States would take action.[82] Dulles reported on April 23 that he felt Dien Bien Phu had become a symbol "out of all proportion to its military importance" and believed that if it fell, the French government would be taken over by "defeatists." In this climate, Dulles reported that the French commander in Indochina now felt that his only alternatives were either a massive B-29 bombing by American planes or a cease-fire which Dulles assumed would be limited to the area around Dien Bien Phu.[83] Much to Dulles's dismay, he learned over dinner that the cease-fire that the commander had in mind encompassed all of Indochina rather than merely Dien Bien Phu. British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden also informed Dulles the British were unlikely to become involved militarily for fear of igniting World War III.[84]

Although frustrated by the spiraling situation, the Eisenhower administration stuck to its original position taken in early April. On April 24, Eisenhower complained that the French wanted the United States to enter the war as "junior partners and provide materials, etc." while the French remained in charge. He could not "go along with them on that on any such notion" and expressed his exasperation at the British position. Apparently resigned to the fortress's collapse, Eisen-

hower asked Undersecretary of State Bedell Smith to have a draft message prepared for that eventuality.[85] Later that day, Dulles informed Bidault that American military involvement remained conditioned on prior "congressional authorization," which was not "obtainable in a matter of hours" and not "at all except in the framework of a political understanding" with other interested parties in the region.[86]

In the rapidly shifting situation, Dulles now doubted that even unilateral action would save the day. On April 25, Dulles cabled Washington of his opposition to "armed intervention by executive action." He now opposed intervention because American security was not directly threatened; it was not clear such action would "protect our long-range interests"; it was "unlikely" that air intervention would save the fortress; immediate intervention without the British might strain American relations with the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand; and the United Stated had not reached a political understanding with the French.[87]

Eisenhower met with Republican congressional leaders on April 26 to discuss Dien Bien Phu. Despite the deteriorating situation, Eisenhower remained opposed to unilateral intervention, and he reiterated his belief that any American intervention would need to occur through united action so as to free it from the taint of colonialism. Even though the fortress might fall, Eisenhower indicated that the administration was still trying to form a collective grouping for intervention, but under no circumstance did he foresee introducing American ground troops. One legislator raised the potential problem that the administration would be criticized for not sufficiently emphasizing the danger in Indochina. Eisenhower agreed and noted the criticism that Truman and the Democrats had suffered after China became communist.[88] They all agreed that the administration might be attacked for "losing" Indochina. Eisenhower attempted to redirect these concerns toward America's hesitant allies. The problem was that "neither the French nor the British had risen to the occasion, and so Dien Bien Phu would be lost."[89] Perhaps in response to this concern, Eisenhower held a press conference on April 29 to underscore the administration's efforts.[90]

At the NSC meeting on April 29, Eisenhower approved explorations of a regional grouping without the British and at the same time fended off pressure from within the administration to intervene unilaterally, possibly with ground troops.[91] The director for foreign operations, Harold Stassen, spoke favorably of unilateral American intervention and stated his belief that Congress and the public would support direct

intervention if Eisenhower explained the action as necessary for American interests. Eisenhower seriously questioned this assessment. Arguing that he could not lead public opinion on this issue, the minutes recorded that "the President expressed considerable doubt as to whether Governor Stassen's diagnosis of the attitude of the Congress and people in this contingency was correct." Eisenhower also suggested that unilateral intervention would be viewed as merely replacing "French colonialism with American colonialism." He feared that the Chinese and possibly the Soviet Union would respond if the United States intervened unilaterally and observed that collective action was the only policy consistent with the broader American national security policy. He thought that unilateral action would amount to an attempt to "police the entire world" and would cause a significant loss of support in the free world, since the United States would be "accused of imperialistic ambitions." Eisenhower observed that "if the United States were to permit its ground forces to be drawn into a conflict in a great variety of places throughout the world, the end result would be gravely to weaken the defensive position of the United States."[92]

To avoid this option, Undersecretary Smith suggested a multilateral air strike that would both meet the coalition conditions imposed by Congress and provide the necessary assistance to keep the French in the war. Nixon pointed out that even though the air strikes would not influence the military situation, it could have a positive effect on the world's perceptions of American resolve. Expressing an opinion he had long held, Eisenhower said he would agree to put the multilateral air intervention proposal before Congress if the French would stay and fight. Although he supported multilateral action, he

> wanted to end the meeting with one word of warning. If we wanted to win over the Congress and the people of the United States to an understanding of their stake in Southeast Asia, let us not talk of intervention with United States ground forces. People were frightened, and were opposed to this idea.[93]

Similarly, Nixon reported, "the President himself said that he could not visualize a ground troop operation in Indochina that would be supported by the people of the United States and which would not in the long run put our defense too far out of balance."[94] Smith reported to Dulles in Europe that Eisenhower "feels sure that neither Congressional nor public opinion would accept a last minute partnership with the French" without a multilateral coalition joined "by [the] most exposed and interested

nations."[95] In the face of pressure from his advisers for more aggressive action, Eisenhower held to his position of supporting multilateral action but rejected ground troops and unilateral action of any kind.

On May 5, the administration resigned itself to the fall of Dien Bien Phu. At a White House meeting attended by Eisenhower, Dulles, and Cutler, the top decision makers reflected on their choices and accepted the loss of the fortress. Perhaps to blunt possible domestic criticism, Eisenhower suggested that Dulles give "a chronology of the U.S. actions to Congress in his bipartisan briefing to show that throughout we had adhered to the principle of collective security." He reaffirmed his rejection of an overt unilateral American intervention because it would raise "a colonial stigma on the U.S., and because it would exhaust the U.S. eventually." Dulles and Eisenhower agreed that the "conditions did not justify the U.S. entry into Indochina as a belligerent at this time" and decided to proceed with efforts to organize a regional grouping and find out where the United States and British might be able to agree.[96] Later that day, Dulles briefed a bipartisan congressional group, partly to head off possible criticism of the administration after the inevitable fall of Dien Bien Phu and to explain the administration's efforts toward united action.[97]

The French troops at Dien Bien Phu surrendered on May 7. After failing to create a multilateral coalition, Dulles publicly announced on June 8 that the administration would not be asking for congressional authorization for intervention. On June 12, the French government fell on a vote concerning Indochina and a government led by Pierre Mendès-France—who was committed to a negotiated settlement and against asking for American intervention—replaced it on June 17. On July 22, negotiators in Geneva reached a cease-fire agreement, called the Geneva Accords of 1954, which required a temporary partition of Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel followed by national elections in 1956. Neither the United States nor the Vietnamese government signed the accords. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), negotiated in September 1954, created the collective grouping that American decision makers had sought throughout the crisis, made up of Australia, Britain, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and the United States. These nations agreed to "meet common danger" and recognized that threats to Laos, Cambodia, and southern Vietnam would "endanger" the signatories' security.[98]

With the fall of both Dien Bien Phu and the French government, serious consideration of American intervention in Indochina during

1954 ended. Although it appeared late in the process that Congress might assent to unilateral American intervention, the administration could not build the multilateral coalition that Eisenhower felt was necessary for public approval, nor would the French grant the assurances he wanted. Eisenhower refused to relent to internal pressure from his advisers to send American troops into the region unilaterally. Throughout the process, the American public remained opposed to any commitment of American ground troops and unilateral intervention—views that weighed on Eisenhower's mind. In the end, despite his concern about American interests in the region and pressure from within the administration to intervene, Eisenhower concluded that the necessary conditions for a successful intervention had not been met.

Variables

Assessments of public opinion influenced these decision makers' policy stances, especially Eisenhower's. The effect of another war on the American public, which Eisenhower believed would oppose intervention, concerned him greatly, especially if ground troops were employed. In the broader political context, he thought he needed to avoid both another Korea (limited war) and another China (loss of a country to the communists) and also perceived that the colonialism and independence issues could affect public support. The positions that Eisenhower eventually adopted were consistent with his perceptions of public opinion regarding independence, colonialism, and ground troops. In fact, the conditions for American involvement that he established were selected in part to reduce public opposition. He reasoned that public concerns about colonialism could be assuaged by an invitation from the Associated States before intervention. Eisenhower felt that the public opposed unilateral action and he ruled it out for this reason, but he favored multilateral intervention, as did the public. As the administration moved toward united action, Eisenhower's concern with public opinion emerged during his discussions with Republican congressional leaders regarding the potential criticism that Democrats might level against them if Indochina fell. To alleviate these fears, he moved to frame the issue for the public by emphasizing both the importance of American interests in Indochina and the administration's efforts to protect them.

Dulles's focus on public opinion emerged during the selection of the policy responding to the threat to Dien Bien Phu. Dulles perceived public opposition to caving in to the communists and also to taking

more aggressive action. Given this view, he recommended pursuing the "right" policy (which he determined was the united action policy). Since he believed that the participation of other nations would generate domestic support, the policy was at once the best one, in his view, from a national security perspective and designed to create the greatest public support. As the administration moved toward implementation, he concentrated on leading the public, as suggested in many of his communications and the far-reaching State Department briefing program to persuade opinion leaders to support intervention.

Other interests had a significant influence on policymakers, especially Dulles, and helped determine the placement of intervention on the agenda. Because the administration perceived Indochina as a bulwark against further communist expansion in the region, American national security interests in the region and around the globe might be seriously threatened if it fell. In addition, should the French lose the battle for Dien Bien Phu, the political and psychological ramifications might lead to a new French government, which might seriously jeopardize France's commitment to the Indochina war. As Dulles presented it at the March 26 NSC meeting, united action, regardless of the domestic imperatives, best served American interests in the region. His reluctance to support unilateral action of any kind was related to his belief that the policy had a slim chance of working.

Other interests affected Eisenhower. Fearing that the political and psychological consequences of losing Dien Bien Phu could seriously threaten French stamina, he favored an examination of limited intervention, implying with his finger-in-the-dike metaphor that limited early action might alleviate the need for more dramatic action later. But even though Eisenhower saw Indochina as vital to national security, he viewed a larger-scale ground intervention negatively because of his misgivings about the viability of such action. This left unilateral and multilateral air or naval action as possible alternatives. Eisenhower also insisted on united action and independence for the Associated States in part because of his fear that world opinion might see unilateral American action as merely replacing French colonialism with American colonialism.

Both Dulles and Eisenhower acted according to their beliefs throughout the decision process, and these beliefs had a causal influence at the critical junctures, thereby yielding a *supportive* influence coding of beliefs. Although they both reached the same policy conclusion, their beliefs caused them to do so for different reasons, and they were prepared to support different policies if conditions changed.

According to his beliefs, Eisenhower would have been constrained by public opinion if opposition to a policy, especially war, were immovable. Otherwise, he would have attempted to lead the public to support the policy he deemed best for national security. In addition to the national security interests at stake, he felt he needed to take action on Indochina because of the potential public reaction if another country fell to communism. Process tracing reveals that public opinion limited his range of action by causing him to reject unilateral intervention and reinforcing his aversion to using ground troops. The conditions that Eisenhower imposed on American intervention stemmed from his concern with having domestic support. Given the public's aversion to the Korean War and colonialism, he found it necessary to impose the multilateral and independence conditions on intervention. Once he chose to support multilateral intervention, he moved to drum up support for his selected alternative. This behavior is *consistent* with expectations based on beliefs in setting the agenda, defining the situation, and generating options and suggests a *causal* influence on policy selection and implementation.

For Dulles, beliefs predictions suggest that if he saw public opinion as a problem, he would have formulated an education program if he had had enough time. Dulles regarded multilateral intervention as the best approach from a national security standpoint and attempted to lead the public to support it. Although he did not think it necessary, he supported unilateral intervention. He anticipated potential domestic criticism from either letting Indochina become communist or taking overly aggressive action, but these issues did not limit his view of the situation. Instead, he used the anticipation of these views to construct a public information program to create support for multilateral intervention which he thought would prevent Indochina's fall. As the administration moved to implement the policy, Dulles continued to attempt to lead public opinion and actively worked to achieve this goal through briefings at the State Department. His behavior is *consistent* with his beliefs during the agenda setting, the definition of the situation, and the option generation stages, and they had a *causal* influence during policy selection and implementation.

Coding the Influence of Public Opinion

When considered as a whole, the effect of public opinion falls into a *moderate constrain category* influence, with a smaller influence as within

the *lead category*. In addition to damaging the U.S. strategic position, Eisenhower feared a possibly divisive and politically damaging domestic debate about "who lost Indochina" if the communists won the war. When formulating a policy to confront this problem, public opinion and Eisenhower's own trepidation based on his military experience together ruled out ground intervention. Worried about the domestic reaction to "another" Korean War, public opinion also played a stronger role in eliminating a unilateral American action and pressured Eisenhower to insist on guarantees of independence. He supported the united action proposal because it fit American interests in Indochina and the region and it alleviated his concerns regarding colonialism and the independence of the Associated States. In regard to the strength of influence, public opinion was one of the primary determinants of policy, along with concerns about the viability of intervention. Public opinion set a range of acceptable and unacceptable policy options, but other interests also had an important influence on policy choices. For this reason, public opinion acted as a *moderate* constraint on decision making. Dulles's perceptions and actions throughout the case fall into the lead category, as do some of Eisenhower's actions at the implementation stage when he attempted to build support for united action. This behavior warrants a lesser coding of the *lead category*.

As in the crisis context, public opinion affected policy outcomes through the more perceptual linkages, with the strongest connection resulting from perceptions of the opinion context. This linkage influenced decision makers on a number of issues, perhaps most clearly through Eisenhower's use of the Korean and Chinese analogies in the formation of his attitudes. Anticipated reactions affected how decision makers defined the conditions for intervention, with both Dulles and Eisenhower feeling that the public would be receptive to intervention if it were multilateral and Eisenhower attending to the colonialism and independence issues because of the potential reaction by the public. In addition, based on his reading of the opinion context, Dulles anticipated that the public would not support either the policy of appeasement or intervention in Indochina.

Specific measures of opinion entered decision making through congressional opinion, press reactions to the administration's actions (the technicians and Nixon's April 16 speech), and polling information. Whereas decision makers relied on the more vague measures of public opinion to formulate their views, the heightened attention given to the issue allowed more expressions of public opinion to enter the process.

Decision makers in the offshore islands crisis context were able to formulate policy largely outside the public view, but the Dien Bien Phu issue, which continued to be front-page news because of its inherent drama, activated congressional, press, and public attention that allowed these more specific expressions of public sentiment to become relevant. Even so, the overall linkage process did not change dramatically from the crisis case.

This case provides mixed support for both the Wilsonian liberal and the realist viewpoints (see table 4.1). Support for the Wilsonian liberal perspective comes primarily through the actions of Eisenhower, who throughout responded to the perceived constraints of public opinion. Because his actions had a strong influence on the overall coding of public opinion, the Wilsonian liberal view more accurately describes the generation of options and policy choice. The realist perspective—according to which decision makers should lead public opinion to support the policy that they select for national security reasons—is supported most by Dulles's actions. Throughout, Dulles based his decisions on his perception of the nation's security interests and then attempted to lead the public to support them. More broadly, agenda setting and policy implementation align more closely with this view.

This divergence between Eisenhower and Dulles results largely because of the differing influence of their beliefs on their behavior. Because of his concerns with staying in the range acceptable to public opinion, Eisenhower remained limited by public opinion's view of the situation, much as he had during the crisis case. Dulles, however, now found—given the administration's anticipation of the issue—the time necessary to formulate and lead the public to support the policy he

TABLE 4.1 **Influence Coding: Reflexive Case**

Predicted Public Influence			**Actual Public Influence**	**Influence of Beliefs**
Realist	Wilsonian Liberal	Beliefs		
Lead	Constrain	DDE: Constrain/ *Lead*	Constrain (moderate)/ with lesser	DDE: Supportive
		JFD: Lead	Lead	JFD: Supportive

Note: Italics indicate conditional predictions.

deemed best. Thus, even though Eisenhower and Dulles agreed on the same policy, they reached that point in two very different manners. These results imply that beliefs can be a vital variable in explaining and predicting how public opinion influences policymaking. But chapter 5's discussion of the administration's response to the Soviet Union's launch of *Sputnik* points to the possible limits of the influence of beliefs when confronted with strong situational pressures.