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Professional Reading

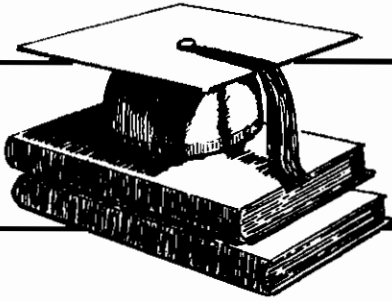
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PROFESSIONAL READING

OUR MAN IN HANOI*

by

Ronald Spector†

A few days after Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh movement seized power in northern Vietnam in August 1945 a young American OSS officer radioed from Hanoi, "From what I have seen these people mean business and I am afraid the French will have to deal with them. For that matter we will all have to deal with them."¹ The officer was Archimedes L.A. Patti, one of the most elusive and controversial figures in the long, unhappy history of America's involvement in Vietnam. The message, although not cited by Patti, well illustrates one of the main themes of this book: his unsuccessful effort to convey to French and Americans alike his own sense of the vitality and strength of Vietnamese nationalism.

During the closing months of World War II Patti had been chief of OSS secret intelligence operations in Indochina, working with both the French and the Vietminh. Shortly after V-J Day he led an OSS "mercy team" on a mission to Hanoi to assist and protect allied prisoners of war, investigate possible war crimes, report on the political and economic situation, and make the preliminary arrangements for the formal Japanese surrender to the allied occupation forces. In accordance with decisions reached at Potsdam, the Chinese would

provide the occupation forces for northern Indochina, the British the forces for the south. France was not included but Patti agreed to take along five Frenchmen under Maj. Jean Sainteny, the head of the French intelligence mission in Kunming called M.5.

Patti and Sainteny arrived in Vietnam during the critical period later known as the August Revolution, the period in which the Vietminh seized power from the moribund puppet government of Tran Trong Kim that had been set up by the Japanese when they deposed the French colonial regime in March 1945. After news of the surrender the Japanese watched passively while the Vietminh seized the reins of government in the principal towns and cities of North Vietnam and proclaimed independence from both France and Japan.

Not surprisingly, Patti's mission has been the subject of considerable interest and debate. The earliest account, and one that more or less set the tone, was Pierre Maurice Dessingé's

*A review of Archimedes L.A. Patti, *Why Vietnam: Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 557pp.

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PROFESSIONAL READING 107

"International Intrigue in French Indo-China" published as a feature article in the French daily *Le Monde* in April 1947. According to Dessinge, the United States had always known that northern Indochina was "a strategic zone," and immediately after V-J Day, Americans in Indochina had intrigued with Vietnamese nationalists to secure economic concessions for the United States and the use of Haiphong as an American air and naval base. The Americans "promised [the Vietnamese] that the wealth and power of the United States would bring them independence."²

Similar accounts appeared in Gen. G. Sabartier's memoir *Le Destin Du Indochine*, and in an article entitled "The Indo-China Story" that appeared in the British *New Statesman and Nation*. According to that the *New Statesman*, "American O.S.S. men . . . roamed over Tonkin assuring the Vietnamese that French sovereignty would not be restored" and prospecting for "economic advantages."³

A somewhat more moderate version was offered by M. Jean Sainteny, who played a prominent role in this period of Vietnamese history as commissioner of the French Republic in Tonkin. Sainteny characterized the Americans in Hanoi as "blinded by a childish anticolonialism" that prevented them from correctly understanding the political situation in Indochina. "When the United States loyally would come to realize their error" concluded Sainteny, "it was to be too late."⁴ In a more scholarly manner this interpretation of events in Indochina immediately following World War II was enshrined in the works of the late Bernard Fall, particularly his most influential book, *The Two Vietnams*.⁵ In the early 1950s at the time of the Korean War, of Dien Bien Phu, and of Senator Joseph McCarthy's search for "subversion" in the U.S. Government, these accounts of American activities in Hanoi attracted considerable attention.

During the 1960s, as dissatisfaction with American policy in Southeast Asia grew, many writers criticized Patti, not for being sympathetic to the Vietminh, but for failing to be sympathetic enough. The most extreme view was presented by Gabriel Kolko who claimed that "American officials who went to Indo-China during the first heady months of freedom . . . after V-J Day were unanimous" in believing that Ho and his movement were Moscow-controlled communists. "Their reports," claims Kolko, "helped to consolidate Washington's support for the French."⁶ Other writers are attracted by the idea that, given American support, Ho might have become an "Asian Tito" and Vietnam a bulwark against communist expansion.⁷

Both groups of critics have been very quiet lately. The passage of time has shown that colonialism, in whatever form, has very limited staying power; while the Vietnamese communists have turned out to be something less than the warm, wonderful, human beings described in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*.

The question remains. What did happen in Hanoi in August and September of 1945? Did Patti's dozen Americans really play an important role, and if so what was that role? Unfortunately, documentation about this period was, and remains, elusive. State Department records contain occasional fleeting references to OSS operations and to some of the people involved but these are few and vague. Then, in 1965, MGen. Philip E. Gallagher, who commanded the American military advisory detachments with the Chinese occupation forces in northern Indochina, turned his papers over to the Army Chief of Staff who, in turn, deposited them with the Chief of Military History.

General Gallagher had taken some knocks for his supposed errors of commission and omission in 1945 and he

108 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

was not a man who relished controversy—but he sensed that the United States was entering upon a new and more dangerous phase of involvement in Vietnam and wanted to help in any way he could. He therefore decided to make his records available for research, and they have since been used as an important source on the early American involvement in Indochina. The Gallagher papers, however, are a rather small collection and General Gallagher himself did not arrive in Hanoi until mid-September, almost a month after Patti.

The records of Patti's operations, along with many other OSS records, were turned over to the Central Intelligence Agency where they remained inaccessible to researchers. Patti himself steadfastly refused to talk with journalists or academicians. He had attempted to publish an account of his mission in 1954 but had been prevented by the Defense Department and apparently did not try again until 1973 when, encouraged by the hearings of the Fulbright Committee into the origins of the Vietnam War, he approached Robert Blum of the committee staff and myself to try and locate documents for an expanded account of his work. A complete set of Mr. Patti's messages and some other OSS documents at the CIA were eventually located and made available for his use. The result is this book, one of the most thorough and informative memoirs to emerge from the Vietnam conflict.

Patti was and is an unreconstructed anti-imperialist. If to the French he appeared to suffer from "infantile anti-colonialism," to him the French appeared stubbornly and suicidally blind to the new facts of life in Asia. "French intransigence made attempts at negotiations" between them and the Vietminh "quite vain." Sainteny "could not bring himself to accept the finality of French colonial rule or to recognize the fact that Indochina had enough of foreign domina-

tion." MGen. Douglas D. Gracey, British commander of Allied occupation forces in southern Indochina, was "a man without a plan. He merely reacted to events as they occurred, neither anticipating them nor appreciating their impact . . . !"

Patti's view of Ho Chi Minh also remains unchanged. He pictures the Vietnamese Communist leader as a supreme pragmatist, ready to make deals and settle for half a loaf; a patriot first and a revolutionary second. His portraits of Ho and accounts of their conversations are among the most interesting and valuable parts of the book.

The author neither denies nor apologizes for his sympathy toward the Vietminh; yet he argues, correctly in my view, that OSS cooperation with Ho in wartime operations was mainly a product of French unwillingness to cooperate wholeheartedly with the Americans and the manifold French inability to operate effectively in Indochina after March 1945.

Whatever the accusations and counter-accusations, Patti's memoir makes clear how limited his freedom of action really was during those first critical weeks in Hanoi. Patti's mission comprised some 20 lightly armed Americans amid thousands of Vietnamese and hundreds of very well armed Japanese troops. OSS postsurrender missions like his were by no means simple wrap-up operations. A team sent to Mukden was disarmed and beaten by the Japanese and the leader of another team, Capt. John Birch, was killed by Chinese Communist troops near Suchow. In Hanoi there was also the added danger of a bloody clash between the French and Vietnamese inhabitants such as actually occurred in Saigon. Patti knew he was walking on eggs.

Readers with a special interest in Vietnam will be both enlightened and frustrated by this book. For example, Patti claims that OSS played a role in Ho's release from a Chinese prison in

1943. This seems plausible, but the author offers no proof. Likewise, Patti's description of how the Vietminh were able to use the famine of 1944-45 to mobilize the peasants and channel their suffering into opposition to the French and Japanese seems to confirm the influential article by Huyn Kim Khanh in the *Journal of Asian Studies*⁸ but, again there is little documentation. Early in his book Patti appears to accept the claim of Fourteenth Air Force commander, Gen. Claire L. Chennault, that Washington prevented him from giving aid to the French during the Japanese takeover in March 1945, but later himself contradicts this claim when he cites a statement by the chief of OSS Special Intelligence that "we had sent hundreds of tons of supplies to the French."

American policy toward Indochina, never very well defined to begin with, became even more confused during the

spring and summer of 1945 with the death of Roosevelt and the U.S. shift away from any attempt to prevent the French from resuming their rule in the country. One of the intriguing questions is the extent to which American actors on the scene in China and Southeast Asia knew about this shift in policy. On this point Patti is not too helpful. Early in the book he insists that "to Heppner [OSS Commander in China] and me it was obvious that the Truman administration had capitulated to DeGaulle . . ."; yet elsewhere Patti repeatedly complains of the uncertainty of American policy and asserts that he believed his orders "not to assist the French in their designs for reentering Indochina" remained in force.

These puzzles notwithstanding, this is a solid and informative book that may be read with profit by all who seek an understanding of our Vietnam involvement.

NOTES

1. Message, Patti to Individual No. 61, 1 September 1945. Copy in historian's files, U.S. Army Center of Military History.
2. Pierre Maurice Dessinge, "Les Intrigues International en Indo-Chine," *Le Monde*, 14 April 1947.
3. "The Indo-China Story," *New Statesman and Nation*, 17 April 1954, p. 492.
4. M. Jean Sainteny, *Histoire d'une Paix Marquee, Indochina, 1945-1947* (Paris: Fayard, 1967), pp. 94-95.
5. Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Vietnams* (New York: Praeger, 1967), pp. 54-59, 67-71.
6. Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943-1945* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 610.
7. James William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 114; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941-1966* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); and Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), chap. II.
8. Huyn Kim Khanh, "The Vietnamese August Revolution Reinterpreted," *Journal of Asian Studies*, August 1971, pp. 761-782.

