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24 March 1954

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

SUBJECT: The Probable Outcome at Dien Bien Phu and its Implications

1. The outcome of the battle at Dien Bien Phu remains in doubt, but we believe on the basis of information presently available that the French will be able to hold. The Viet Minh attacks have been extremely heavy. The Viet Minh have displayed unexpected skill in the use of massed fire and other artillery techniques. However, the French have been preparing since December for the battle now in progress. They have had ample time, men, and equipment with which to set up an efficient prepared defense. The all-out Viet Minh attacks on this prepared position have, in fact, given the French command the opportunity they have long awaited to engage the enemy in force.

2. The Viet Minh made their last infantry assault on Dien Bien Phu on the night of 14-15 March. In the lull since that date, Viet Minh forces have been regrouping and resupplying, presumably in preparation for further assaults. It is possible, however, because of the heavy losses sustained thus far, that the Viet Minh command may not renew their all-out offensive, but may undertake only to contain the French at Dien Bien Phu. In this circumstance, the Viet Minh might launch concentrated attacks within the Delta where they have recently increased their strength by re-deployment of regular forces.

3. The over-all French military position in Indochina will probably not be decisively affected by the outcome at Dien Bien Phu. Even if the Viet Minh were to wipe out the French force at Dien Bien Phu, the French losses relative to their over-all strength would be a fraction of those the Viet Minh would almost certainly sustain. We estimate that the Viet Minh would have to sacrifice roughly half of their total striking force in Indochina in order to achieve such

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a victory at Dien Bien Phu. On the other hand, the French do not stand to advance their military position greatly unless they are able to grind up the bulk of the Viet Minh attacking force at Dien Bien Phu.

4. The battle of Dien Bien Phu, ending just prior to the Geneva conference, has assumed a psychological and political importance in France and the US which is disproportionate to its military importance. Because of the keen interest of the French press and people in the battle, it is probable that a major French defeat at Dien Bien Phu would set off a public clamor for immediate cessation of the war in Indochina. If this occurred, however, Laniel would probably be able to survive the immediate crisis by promising that his government would undertake at Geneva to reach a diplomatic settlement of the Indochina war. In the meantime, the French would continue the war in Indochina. The will of the Vietnamese to continue the war, although weakened by a French disaster at Dien Bien Phu, would probably not be shattered.

5. We believe it likely, however, that the outcome at Dien Bien Phu will be inconclusive and that the French, although retaining their hold on the position, will be effectively contained for some time to come by the Viet Minh forces. In this circumstance, both sides will probably claim the victory but no considerable propaganda advantage will be realized by either side. In any event, neither this result nor even a genuine French victory would do more than slightly abate present pressures in France for a prompt negotiated settlement, either at Geneva or subsequently through bilateral negotiations. To the members of the French Assembly, the military crisis at Dien Bien Phu is only the latest incident in a series of developments which makes it essential for France to liquidate the Indochina commitment as soon as possible.

SHERMAN KENT
Assistant Director
National Estimates



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