

Geneva Accords (1954)

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Description After the Vietnamese communist revolutionary organization (Vietminh) defeated France in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, a peace conference was held in Geneva to work out the future of Vietnam. The conference, which was also attended by Laos, Cambodia, France, the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, and China, marked the end of the First Indochina War. The Eisenhower administration, fearing that communists would dominate the outcome, instructed US delegates to observe the proceedings but to not sign the accords. Under Chinese and Soviet pressure, the Vietminh reached a compromise with the French that divided the country temporarily in half at the 17th parallel. Vietminh forces were to withdraw to the north of this line while French forces would withdraw to the south. Each side agreed not to sign military alliances or permit foreign bases on Vietnamese soil and internationally supervised national elections were to be held in 1956 to unify the country.

The Geneva Accords were never fulfilled because the United States initiated a military buildup and replaced the French puppet Bao Dai with Ngo Dinh Diem, a Christian anticommunist. Diem, fearing that communist leader Ho Chi Minh would easily win an open election, instead held a rigged referendum to legitimize his dictatorship. The failure of the Geneva Accords can be viewed in hindsight as a lost opportunity, as the United States became embroiled in the Second Indochina War, one of the most destructive conflicts in modern history that many historians mark as a key turning point in the decline of American hegemony.

Suggested Reading: **Combs, Arthur.** 1995. The path not taken: The British alternative to U.S. policy in Vietnam, 1954-1956. *Diplomatic History* 19: 33-58.

Greenstein, Fred I. and Richard H. Immerman. 1992. What did Eisenhower tell Kennedy about Indochina? The politics of misperception. *Journal of American History* 79 (2): 568-87.

Randle, Robert F. 1969. *Geneva 1954: The settlement of the Indochinese War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.