

THE MAN WHO BENT EVENTS: “KING JOHN” in Indochina



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A distinguished general is asked to assume command of an undersized military force fighting a counterinsurgency war widely criticized by opposition political leaders and broadly unpopular among his countrymen, and to do so with relatively limited resources and little hope for gaining political support or additional resources in the future. Yet despite the handicaps, he succeeds in turning the tables against the insurgents, seriously damaging their forces and capabilities while dramatically undermining the support they receive from the populace. In doing so, he forces enemy leaders to abandon their timetable for establishing totalitarian rule. The time is 1951, the place Indochina, and the man French General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny.

Background

When General de Lattre was selected to command French troops battling the Vietminh in Indochina, many in the French (and U.S.) Government saw him as France's last best hope to breathe life into a failing effort to defeat a nationalist-communist insurgency. De Lattre was a highly competitive, extremely demanding, and charismatic commander with a penchant for theatricality in communicating his orders. (In fact, early on he acquired the nickname “King John” from those with whom he served.) A cavalry officer, de Lattre had already enjoyed a long and distinguished career with service in two World Wars. He had seen combat action as a lieutenant in World War I, and he had served with distinction during the interval between wars, leading eventually to his selection as commandant of France's war college (*L'Ecole de Guerre*) in 1935. When France declared war on Germany in 1939, de Lattre was given command of the French 14th Infantry Division, which he led briefly until the armistice with Nazi Germany and the establishment of the Vichy Government. Choosing to remain on active duty despite the humiliation of France's partitioning and partial annexation by Germany, he then commanded Vichy troops in North Africa until 1941. In 1942, he assumed command of the 16th Division and attempted to organize it as an anti-German force. As a result of this effort, de Lattre was arrested and sentenced to 10 years in jail. However, he managed to escape and made his way out of Algeria to join Free French forces.

Recognized for his patriotism, military skills, and audacity, de Lattre was later selected to command French Army B, one of two armies of the U.S.

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PHOTO: General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, 1951. (Courtesy of French Association Rhin et Danube)

6th Army Group, set up to organize the invasion of southern France. Under his command, French Army B landed in Provence in August 1944 and helped allied forces liberate French territory from Nazi occupation. French Army B later became the French First Army.

After the expulsion of Nazi forces from France, de Lattre’s French First Army participated in the invasion of Germany. Later, due to his reputation and achievements as a war leader, he was given the high honor of representing France at ceremonies marking the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany.

Unfortunately, the end of World War II did not result in a lasting peace for France, which almost immediately became embroiled in conflicts in its far-flung colonies and former colonies as it tried to salvage its pre-war economic and cultural ties. Against the backdrop of a chaotic postwar environment featuring a global clash between Western liberal democracies and Marxist-Leninist states, Stalinist acolytes began to fan the flame of indigenous nationalist and colonial independence movements in an effort to expand Communism throughout the world. France found itself facing just such a foe in Indochina, where Soviet-trained guerrilla leaders Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap led the Vietminh, an indigenous insurgency that merged Vietnamese nationalism with Communist ideology.

Attempts at sharing power between the French and the Vietminh quickly failed. Still exhausted from World War II, France embarked on a war in Southeast Asia against insurgents who had gained much experience from battling the Japanese during World War II.

French commanders initially sought a quick victory through conventional means. In an effort to decapitate the insurgent movement, French paratroopers conducted an airborne assault against the Vietminh’s jungle headquarters in October 1947. They also attacked over land, using armored and riverine formations in a pincer movement aimed at capturing or killing the Vietminh’s leaders and engaging Giap’s forces in a decisive battle. However, choosing the Maoist tactic of retreating when



Portrait of Generals Montgomery, Eisenhower, Zhukov, and de Lattre in Berlin, 1945.

Library of Congress

attacked, Ho Chi Minh and Giap escaped into the jungle with the balance of their forces intact and denied the French the decisive battle they sought.¹ Subsequently, the Vietminh guerrilla forces adopted small-scale hit-and-run and ambush tactics that avoided a pitched battle in which the French would have had a clear advantage. They embraced Mao’s strategy of wearing down the enemy politically while steadily building a conventional capability to use against him when he was most vulnerable. This strategy proved effective.

At the start of the conflict, the French Expeditionary Corps was a professional army that included Algerian, Moroccan, Senegalese, and French Foreign Legion infantry units, with mainly French artillery and armor in support. An all-French aviation unit and a strategic reserve of crack parachute battalions supported the force. French forces also included well-trained Vietnamese parachute units and colonial *bataillons de marche*—self-contained Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian infantry battalions led by French officers and NCOs.

The vast majority of Vietnamese people expressed a desire for independence from all foreign control, but deep religious and political divisions fostered violent internal conflict. While few preferred continuing under French rule (with a promise of eventual independence), many saw this as a much better alternative to the vicious intolerance toward personal liberty, religious expression, and dissent characteristic of Ho Chi Minh’s Stalinist movement. Indeed, the Vietminh’s ideological dogmatism and its use of

violence to stamp out dissent drove many religious groups into an alliance with the French. Chief among these were the Hoa (an ascetic Buddhist sect) and Vietnam's large Catholic population.

After conventional operations failed in 1947, Brigadier General Charles Marie Chanson in Cochin China (southern Vietnam) and Major General Marcel Allesandri in Tonkin (the north) decided upon a dramatic change in strategy: they would emphasize pacification as a way to undermine the insurgents' popular support. The resulting campaign focused on rural economic development, medical programs, and construction projects in the key rice-growing regions of Vietnam's river deltas. By the summer of 1950, the strategy appeared to be succeeding.

Unfortunately for the French, the fundamental character of the war had already begun to evolve prior to 1950. In December 1949, Chinese Communists began establishing training camps near the Vietnamese border to train and supply Vietminh fighters. The Vietminh also acquired a great deal more firepower in the form of 75mm and 105mm American howitzers captured from the Nationalist Chinese during the Chinese civil war. Together, the Chinese-supplied training and new firepower produced a change in insurgent strategy.

From the camps in China, Giap reorganized his regiments into division strike forces, which he then began to employ against French outposts along remote areas of the Red River near the Chinese border. He expanded these attacks into a systematic campaign to isolate French garrisons along the border. As part of his plan, the Vietminh started ambushing resupply convoys on Colonial Route (RC) 4. By late 1949, resupply of the border posts had become extremely costly in terms of lost equipment and manpower, so the French began to abandon posts regarded as nonessential. In time, Vietminh ambushes entirely cut off ground resupply to Cao Bang, the largest and northernmost outpost along RC 4, which thereafter could only be resupplied by air.

Sensing that the French were in a precarious situation because their units were widely dispersed and difficult to resupply and reinforce, Giap ordered an all-out offensive throughout Vietnam. Although the offensive did not bring victory, it did succeed in diverting French support from defense of the northern outposts to defense of urban and rice-growing

areas. This further degraded French defensive capabilities and exposed isolated units to attack.

The French did not recognize the danger their northern outposts were in until October 1950, when in response to intelligence reports of massing Vietminh forces, they tried to evacuate Cao Bang. But it was too late. Seizing the window of opportunity ahead of French efforts to evacuate the camp, Giap attacked in full force.

In a matter of days Giap's forces annihilated eight battalions, including the garrison at Cao Bang and a relief force attempting to reach the outpost via RC 4. Lost were two full battalions of the Foreign Legion, three Moroccan battalions, a battalion of T'ai hill tribe partisans, and two parachute battalions—one of them the elite 1st Foreign Legion Parachute Battalion.

To destroy the relief force, Giap used the garrison at Cao Bang as bait to entice the relieving forces into a huge area ambush, where they were destroyed by infantry supported by heavy guns. Such an elaborate and deadly ambush was the direct result of Chinese Communist support. It was becoming glaringly evident that Giap, with Chinese help, had transformed his army from a relatively ineffective guerrilla force into a robust, capable conventional force with significant firepower.

The RC 4 ambush was a complete surprise and the shock to the Expeditionary Corps and the French Government was traumatic. When the magnitude of their losses became apparent, French forces in Tonkin descended into near panic and prepared to evacuate the country entirely. The stronghold of Lang Son surrendered without a fight, and many felt the French would soon abandon the Red River Delta. Not long thereafter, Giap announced that he would be entering Hanoi to take charge. There was broad public expectation that Communist forces would soon converge on the city, seizing control of it and Vietnam as well.

It is important to note that these events occurred at the same time Western forces were suffering a major setback elsewhere in Asia. In November, a large Chinese offensive in Korea inflicted the biggest battlefield defeat ever on the modern U.S. Army, pushing its Soldiers back from the Yalu River down to positions below the 38th parallel. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh and Communism must have seemed inevitable.

This was the dire situation that the new commander-in-chief of French forces, General de Lattre, faced upon his arrival in Vietnam some two months after the northern debacle. Called “the French MacArthur” because of his penchant for the dramatic as well as his audacity in taking risks, de Lattre had an immediate and electrifying effect on the Expeditionary Corps.² By his presence alone he stabilized the strategic situation overnight and breathed new life and courage into the troops.

Transforming the Force in Three Days

Rarely has an arrival been as theatrical as the one de Lattre staged on 17 December 1950 at Saigon airport. The former commander-in-chief of the French First Army, the man fellow Frenchmen selected to represent the country when Germany formally surrendered, de Lattre waited for all the passengers to disembark ahead of him, including the secretary of the commonwealth. After making the crowd wait even longer, he finally emerged in his white uniform.

De Lattre’s fits of anger were legendary, as was his reputation for not countenancing fools or those he perceived to be fools. As if to confirm this reputation, he paused on the top step of the airplane’s staircase, scowling grimly at the crowd, and then slowly walked down the stairs to inspect the troops. During what was supposed to be a welcoming ceremony, de Lattre showed open disdain for the



Courtesy Foundation Maréchal de Lattre de Tassigny

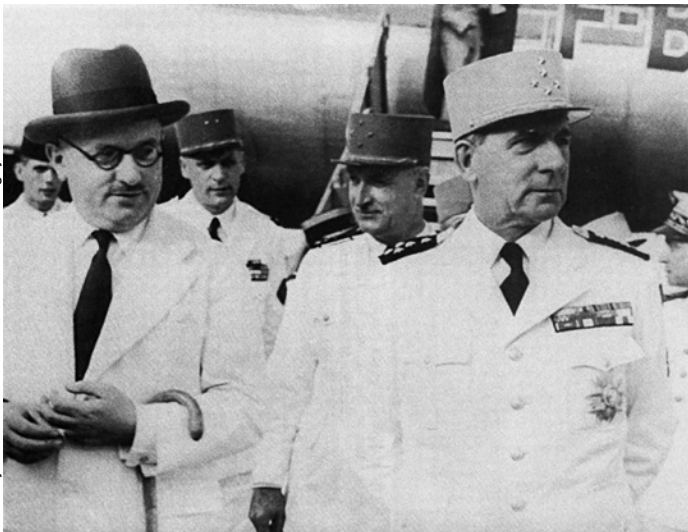
General de Lattre with General Salan and Colonel Beaufre planning the defense of Tonkin, December 1950.

officials who had come to welcome him, including his two predecessors, the high commissioner and the commander-in-chief of the Expeditionary Corps, whose powers he would shortly assume and consolidate.

It became clear from the moment that de Lattre stepped on the tarmac that he had not come to promote paternal fairness or provide benevolent comfort. Instead, he was there to instill iron discipline, by personal example, in a flagging force that desperately needed aggressive, decisive leadership. Stepping up to the formation he was to inspect, he set the tone for his assumption of command by immediately relieving the officer in charge of the troops, having assessed him as “shabby.” The unfortunate officer, who himself had just arrived in Vietnam, was flown back to France in the same plane that had brought the general.³

De Lattre repeated this on-the-spot dismissal numerous times, summarily relieving and sending back to France many other officers who failed to meet with his immediate approval. He replaced them with his own men, in particular those called his *maréchaux* (marshals), the young colonels who had fought under him in World War II.⁴

To inform the public that he, not Giap, would control Hanoi, de Lattre ordered that a large military parade be held there on 19 December, two days after his arrival. Considering the situation at the time, such an order seemed to many to be surreal.



Courtesy Foundation Maréchal de Lattre de Tassigny

General de Lattre arriving at Saigon airport to assume command of the French Expeditionary Forces, December 1950.

However, the parade proved to be a stroke of psychological genius. It boosted the martial spirit and morale of the French troops and the confidence of those living in French-controlled areas. Moreover, it gave de Lattre the opportunity to get a close-up look at his men in order to assess their condition and morale and to communicate with many of them in person, Soldier-to-Soldier, at a crucial time.

At the parade, de Lattre personally inspected the troops very slowly, as if taking possession of them. Afterwards, he mustered the officer corps present to give them a simple message. "Our fight is selfless," he said. "We are here to defend civilization. This fight is not a matter of supremacy, but of liberation. I came here to wage war with you, but also to make you proud to wage it. The era for indecisiveness is over. Gentlemen, I give you my word that from now on you will be given orders."⁵ Addressing the junior officers, he added, "It is especially for you lieutenants and captains that I have come . . . for all those who are fighting to win." Among the junior officers in the group was Bernard de Lattre, the general's only son, a young lieutenant taken along on his father's mission to save civilization in a far part of the French world.⁶

De Lattre's rapid, forceful action served to calm and reassure the troops. Within just a few days, there was a marked upswing in the morale of French forces, and calm had returned to previously panic-stricken streets. The Expeditionary Corps appeared to have regained its faith and its will to fight.

De Lattre versus Giap

Despite de Lattre's salutary impact, everyone knew that lofty words and theatrical parades were not enough to turn the tide of events against the determined Vietminh. Success would ultimately depend on shrewd, effective action in combat and subsequent exploitation of combat successes on the global political stage. The opportunity for the new commander-in-chief to change the tide of events in both areas came almost immediately.

During the night of 14 January 1951, the Vietminh launched a high-profile attack on the western forefront of the Red River Delta, near the little town of Vinh Yen, a few kilometers from Hanoi. The battle began unfavorably for the French. The Vietminh 312th Division attacked, cut off, and surrounded Mobile Task Force 3, one of five French

mobile task forces that had come to the rescue of troops withdrawing from their garrisons. At the same time, the Vietminh 308th Division had positioned itself to attack into the flank of expected French reinforcements.

De Lattre reacted immediately, but suspecting an attempted replay of the strategy in which Cao Bang had been used as bait for a ground ambush, he commandeered all available civilian planes and airlifted five battalions from Cochin China and Annam (central Vietnam) to a staging area, where he constituted two task forces to rescue the besieged troops. He then organized a relief effort with close air support from all available aircraft in the area of operation. He also devised his own surprise for the camouflaged and waiting Vietminh, ordering aerial attacks of their positions with a recently arrived supply of napalm from the Americans.

Late on the afternoon of the 15th, as the French counterattack had just begun, de Lattre flew to Vinh Yen with his deputy, General Raoul Salan. His first words for the colonel in command of the sector were, "Is this not over yet?" The bewildered colonel did not know if de Lattre was being critical or ironic, and the general did not elaborate.⁷

After three days of bitter fighting, Giap gave up the field and broke off the attack, having lost thousands of troops. It was a resounding victory for the same French Expeditionary Corps that, just two months before, had suffered a supposedly decisive defeat and been in the midst of preparing to abandon Vietnam.

De Lattre did not even pause to savor this first battlefield success against Giap's forces. Having successfully repelled one major assault by the Vietminh, he instantly began preparing for the follow-on attacks he knew would come. He reequipped the Expeditionary Corps to cope with the enemy's new conventional capabilities and began preparations to deal with a possible Communist Chinese offensive of the type that had inflicted such heavy losses on American troops in Korea.

De Lattre decided that the Expeditionary Corps would focus its main effort on Tonkin. In doing so, he put an end to public speculation that the French might choose to sacrifice the north to save the south. In de Lattre's mind, any move to sacrifice the north would shake the already slender confidence the new Vietnamese national government had in its French allies, further undermine the already threadbare

political will of the French Government, and jeopardize any effort to build a new, all-Vietnamese army. Such a policy would also cede the enemy a huge territory without a fight—territory that he could use as a staging-ground to improve his fighting capabilities and then continue the war into the south.

For de Lattre, the Vietminh’s principal combat advantage was its ability to attack in human waves using insurmountable numbers. Believing that these human-wave tactics resulted from an indigenous cultural disregard for taking casualties when attacking a superior enemy, he concluded that the only way to defeat them was by using massive firepower positioned in front of clear fields of fire. Therefore, he decided to transform the Red River Delta into a huge entrenched camp covered to the north by a line of positions virtually impregnable to an enemy lacking overwhelming firepower. Existing posts were fortified into a linked network of concrete strongholds supported by interlocking artillery fire—a disposition soon nicknamed “the de Lattre line.”⁷⁸ Native commandos led by French officers and NCOs patrolled and monitored the gaps between the posts.

Similarly, de Lattre turned Haiphong into a defensive fortress, to be used as a refuge for units withdrawing in case of a breach to the forward line of interlocking defenses. In addition, he set up a number of quick-reaction mobile task forces inside the overall defensive line. These were led by his *maréchaux*. The standard task force had three motorized infantry battalions, one engineer company, one reconnaissance company (to clear up and open roads), and one artillery battery. All were capable of conducting attacks or counterattacks with virtually no notice.

Taking the Offensive Politically

The general also recognized the critical importance of promoting support for his objectives among the French Government and people. His strategic objective was to make the average Frenchman sympathetic to the fight for Vietnamese freedom

and French honor. Thus, he was one of the very first modern military leaders to understand the need to enlist the media to make his case to the public. In an effort to give the war in Vietnam the same kind of global media footprint the U.S.-led war in Korea was receiving and to promote the need for a similar international effort in Vietnam, he cultivated contacts with journalists. As de Lattre told the war correspondent for *France-Soir*, “What’s the use of military success, if nobody knows about it? Whatever is happening anywhere in the world will come to the knowledge of hundreds of millions of human beings. Journalists are go-betweens. However, they prove to be more than that: they are event-makers. An event will not come to light unless a newspaper writes about it. The focus is to deliver to the journalists the necessary raw materials, in order to meet the requirements of the huge news market.”⁷⁹

De Lattre also aggressively sought opportunities to inform and educate French and Allied politicians about the situation in Indochina, the conflict’s ultimate purpose, and the resources required to win the war. In March 1951 he travelled to Paris, where he briefed the National Defense Committee on Indochina. While there, he met with French politicians



Courtesy Foundation Maréchal de Lattre de Tassigny
 General de Lattre with Colonel Edon inspecting a recently recaptured Tonkin village, April 1951.

and Allied officials to ask for material and moral support for the war (and with journalists to outline his strategy, objectives, and requirements). The fight for Indochina was not only the French Expeditionary Corps' fight, he said, but France's fight on behalf of the Western world:

[The] war [is] indeed a litmus test for France in its endeavor to transform the Empire and to finish the building of a brand new French Union, as well as a test of capability against Communism and the U.S.S.R. . . . As long as we hold on to Indochina, we will remain a major power. If we happen to fail to do that, we [will] soon be considered the ill man of the second half of the 20th Century.¹⁰

De Lattre told the National Defense Committee that he had only temporarily restored the situation in Tonkin, and at the price of a dangerously reduced military presence in other sectors. He went on to testify that he needed reinforcements immediately to launch an offensive that would buy time for the Vietnamese troops then in training. Once the Vietnamese reached the level of capability necessary to replace French forces, the latter would withdraw. Said de Lattre:

If we decrease the ongoing effort, in a matter of weeks we will jeopardize what has already been accomplished. For this huge investment to bear fruits, an increased effort has to be accepted. On the one hand, we could lose everything; on the other hand, we could take the steps necessary to win.¹¹

De Lattre's arguments proved at least in part persuasive. The French Government struck a balance between Indochina and the requirements of its new NATO membership and agreed to provide from 15,000 to 20,000 men under the condition that they were to be back in France before 1 July 1952.

Before de Lattre's efforts could come to fruition, Giap struck for the second time. The Vietminh leader had reorganized his forces and, during the night of 29 March, he attacked the Mao Khe post north of the Red River Delta between Hanoi and Haiphong. The stratagem was the same one used at Cao Bang: place an outpost in peril as bait to entice relieving troops into a prepared ambush along the main avenue of approach. Giap anticipated the French would rush in to relieve the surrounded garrison. De Lattre refused to react in a precipitous manner. Suspecting yet another ambush attempt, he dispatched the "Sizaire task force" along an

indirect route to Mao Khe, bypassing RC 18 where the camouflaged Vietminh waited in ambush. Spurning the roads, the task force waded through paddy fields to make contact with the enemy surrounding the beleaguered outpost.

Thanks in large part to the staunch resistance of a colonial airborne battalion and the fire support provided by some assault naval divisions (floating fire-support units on the Red River), the relieving force successfully crossed the paddies and drove off the besieging enemy. After sustaining heavy casualties, Giap declined decisive battle and withdrew. Once again, intelligent battlefield maneuver, determined defender resistance, and superior firepower had defeated the Vietminh in open battle.

Shortly thereafter, in a third attack against de Lattre's forces, Giap tried to penetrate the Red River Delta itself. This time, he chose to attack from the south, still the weakest part of the de Lattre Line. In order to slow down any attempt at reinforcement, he first infiltrated several battalions into the delta to contact provincial troops and sympathetic village militias. Their mission was to harass French forces and seize supplies of rice while three full-strength divisions stealthily concealed themselves in the chalky rocks along the delta.

On the night of 18 May, Giap launched the main assault along the Day River. The situation quickly became desperate for the surprised French troops.



General de Lattre pins the Croix de Guerre, 2d award, on his son Bernard, 1951.

Library of Congress

Once again, however, quick and forcible decisions avoided a total breakdown. Because the enemy blocked the roads, de Lattre sent several river units into the area and dropped two airborne battalions. The fighting was fierce and lasted for more than a week, but the quick intervention of the mobile groups had taken the initiative away from the Vietminh, and yet again Giap withdrew with heavy casualties. On 7 June, Giap ordered most of his units to vacate the delta, leaving just a few behind as spoilers and a sleeper force.

Among the French fatalities during this action was Lieutenant de Lattre, the General's only son. Even as the battle raged, de Lattre took the bodies of his son and two brothers-in-arms killed next to him back to France. Covered by the French flag, their coffins were driven through the streets of Paris mounted on an armored car to bear witness to the sacrifice of French youth (and de Lattre personally) on behalf of France.

“Behave like men!”

De Lattre's defensive successes drove Giap's forces back into the jungle and temporarily restored the situation. However, they weren't enough to lead to final victory. The political direction given to the commander-in-chief prior to his assuming command was to “base your actions upon the principles required to make the return of Commonwealth to independence as effective as possible.” This reflected the prevailing political opinion that because Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos had been independent since 1949, the final solution to Vietnam's problems was up to the Vietnamese. Some argued that France had pledged to help establish democracy in Indochina, but most French political leaders emphasized that as a prerequisite for French support, Emperor Bao Dai and the Vietnamese Government had to understand that the fight was first and foremost theirs; moreover, because Communist China might soon turn its attention toward Indochina, their time to act was short.

Expecting France would send insufficient reinforcements, de Lattre launched a vast recruiting campaign in the spring of 1951 to increase the Expeditionary Corps by “Vietnamizing” the rank and file. To speed the strategy of Vietnamization, he began a massive campaign aimed at the country's youth. On 11 July, he delivered a famous speech at a Saigon

public school in which he exhorted the students to “behave like men . . . If you are patriots, fight for your country because this war is yours. You have the privilege to have access to education; therefore it is your duty to ask for the privilege to fight at the head of troops.” De Lattre convinced Bao Dai to attend the 14th of July Parade (in honor of Bastille Day), where the very first Vietnamese units would march beside the French ones. An enormous, friendly crowd gathered to admire the troops. The next day, Bao Dai decreed a general mobilization.

Because of de Lattre's efforts, the Vietnamese Army increased rapidly, aided in no small measure by an egalitarian policy (authored by the general) that integrated Vietnamese troops into French units. De Lattre succeeded in increasing the Vietnamese Army's strength by some 25 percent in just a few months, and until the end of the war, each French battalion included a large proportion of Vietnamese volunteers.

If we cannot call de Lattre the father of the Vietnamese Army, we can say that he gave it a decisive momentum and put progressive methods into practice. At the end of 1951, the Vietnamese Army was more than 120,000 strong and the Vietminh no longer monopolized the strategy of achieving independence through war.

The Trip to America

By mid-1951, France was having difficulty paying for the war. Both the Expeditionary Corps and the new Vietnamese recruits were badly in need of new equipment. The United States was already France's main supplier of military equipment, but its stocks were limited and its supply unpredictable because many American politicians looked on the conflict with disdain, considering it merely an outdated colonial war in which America should take no part. De Lattre therefore decided to undertake another pilgrimage, this time to persuade American political leaders that supporting the Indochina war was in their best interests. He would tell them that France was fighting in Vietnam for the same reason the U.S. was fighting in Korea: to contain Communist expansion.

De Lattre's long trip began in September, with a stop in Paris. He had to make the decision-makers there understand that the results he had achieved thus far, although substantial, were fragile, and needed greater material and moral support to be ultimately successful. His task was a tough one, for



General de Lattre with President Harry Truman, Henri Bonnet, and Donald Heath in the United States, 1951.

the government tended to save money at the expense of the war effort. Still, the general was candid about the prospects for success in Indochina. While stressing the need to fund the war fully, he bluntly apprised officials of France's precarious situation: "If the situation can quickly deteriorate as a result of Chinese intervention, it will, in no way, improve overnight. A disaster could occur in Indochina: no miracle is to be expected."

Recognizing that France was struggling with the financial burden of post-World War II reconstruction, and ignoring the pain caused by an as-yet-undiagnosed illness, de Lattre flew on to Washington. Dubbed "the French fighting general" by the American press, he used the full gamut of his skills in an attempt to convince the White House, Congress, and the Pentagon that it was in America's interest to give the French material support. He emphasized a few simple themes: the wars in Korea and Indochina were part of the same global war against Communist expansion; there could be only one peace; winning the war in Indochina required the same means and equipment used in Korea. He went on to describe Indochina's strategic importance and the consequences the war's outcome would have on the defense of the Western world. Before flying back to Indochina, de Lattre stopped in London to deliver a similar message and in Rome to outline the situation of Vietnamese Catholics to Pope Pius XII. (After his papal interview, the Catholic Front's

two million Vietnamese Catholics took a stand in favor of Bao Dai.)

The papal interview was to be one of de Lattre's very last political acts on behalf of operations in Indochina. The pain he had been feeling since March and throughout his trip would be diagnosed in early October as cancer of the hip. At the time, successful cures of cancer were rare. The general had no illusions about his fate.

De Lattre's Final Battles

After a lull in large military operations during the rainy season, the Vietminh launched a new offensive directed not against the Red River Delta, which they now assessed as unassailable, but at the mountainous region along the Thai and Laotian borders. In mid-September, the Vietminh 312th Division surrounded Nghia Lo. The French blocked Giap's new offensive thanks to the local garrison's resistance and reinforcement by three airborne battalions led by de Lattre's deputy, General Salan. The battalions airdropped in the foe's rear and cut his logistical lines. Despite a favorable ratio of forces, the 312th had to retreat.

On 25 September, in an effort to prevent any infiltration that might precede an attack on the Day outpost, French forces launched operations to clear Vietminh cells out of the delta. A month of these operations achieved only limited success, but there was no Communist offensive. Although extremely ill, de Lattre seized the initiative at the end of October to launch an offensive of his own. In part, he calculated such an operation would bolster French support for the war. At the end of December, the French Parliament was supposed to vote on the budget for Indochina, and de Lattre badly needed quick and, if possible, dramatic successes to convince his countrymen (and the Americans) that victory was ultimately achievable.

De Lattre's offensive faced significant problems. There weren't enough troops to attack the Vietminh north of Tonkin, and it was difficult to lure Giap into fighting in areas without cover, where he knew he would face French firepower. Therefore, de Lattre decided to seize Hoa Binh, located only a few dozen kilometers from the western part of the Red River Delta, at the juncture between the northern and southern Vietminh bases. The general's intent was to lure Giap into besieging Hoa Binh (now fortified) and then wear him out in a battle of attrition.

Hoa Binh would be the first of a series of such operations.¹² (Unfortunately, after several initial successes, this strategy led to the Dien Bien Phu disaster.) On 10 November, the French seized the town with a well-executed airborne operation. De Lattre flew in to give his personal regards to his Soldiers for the last time. One observer noted, “He’s smiling despite the fact that his suffering is more and more difficult to bear. He looks as if he is transfigured by this last encounter with his men.”

On 15 November, de Lattre made one more airplane trip, this time flying to France for an emergency operation. He would never return to Indochina. Just before 6 p.m. on 11 January 1952, General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, Commander-in-Chief in Indochina, died in France. French and free-Vietnamese fighters all across Indochina went into mourning. To recognize his lifelong achievements, France posthumously awarded him the rank of field marshal. The award paid tribute to a life devoted to the service of his country. He had begun his Soldier’s career in a cavalry charge in 1914; he had been one of the main actors in the liberation of France in World War II; and he had almost single-handedly rescued France from the brink of defeat in Vietnam in 1951.

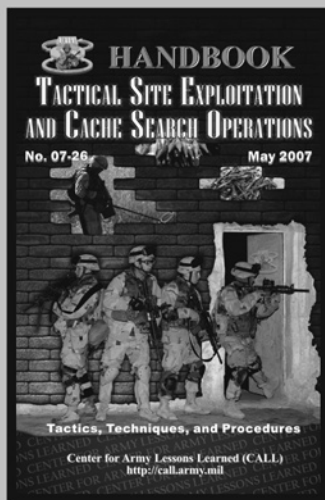
In just one year, “the French MacArthur” had restored fighting morale and esprit among French troops, won three major battles, given enormous impetus to the creation of a free Vietnamese Army, and shored up support for the war among French and Allied politicians. No one can say for sure that the war would have ended differently had de Lattre survived, but he undoubtedly was the right man in the right job in the right place at the right time. His single major failing was that he joined his only son too soon. **MR**

NOTES

1. Philippe Héduy, *La guerre d’Indochine 1945-1950* (Société de Production Littéraire, 1981), 80.
2. Général Yves Gras, *Histoire de la guerre d’Indochine* (Plon, 1979), 369.
3. Lucien Bodard, *L’aventure, La guerre d’Indochine, IV* (Gallimard, 1967), 343.
4. Olivier Weber, Lucien Bodard, *Un aventurier dans le siècle* (Plon, 1997), 649.
5. Général Yves Gras, 399.
6. *Ibid.*, 398.
7. Général René Gilli, “La marque du général De Lattre en Indochine,” *Le Casoar* 167 (October 2002).
8. Général Yves Gras, 414.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Gilli.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Despite its smooth start, the Hoa Binh gambit did not play out as De Lattre had hoped. After three months of tough combat, the French abandoned the town and withdrew under heavy contact to the safety of the De Lattre Line. Each side is thought to have lost about 5,000 men in the overall action.

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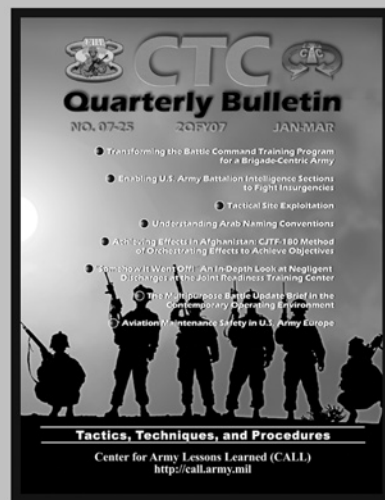
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