

The OSS Role in Ho Chi Minh's Rise to Political Power

Bob Bergin

Introduction

Unexpected need for intelligence acquaints a man with strange bedfellows.¹

It's a small footnote in American history, but a significant event in the history of American intelligence: the OSS relationship with Ho Chi Minh is a marker for what can happen when an aspiring and clever politician is recruited as an intelligence asset. Although Ho was a minor figure then, he was carefully handled and was given nothing considered helpful to him or his political movement. But the young men of the OSS were no match for Ho's charm and cleverness, and his manipulative skills honed over 25 years as an agent of the Comintern.^a By the time the relationship ended five months after it began, the OSS intelligence operation was a success, and Ho Chi Minh was the president of the newly declared Democratic People's Republic of Vietnam.

In ordinary times, intelligence services can identify reporting needs and seek agents to service them in a methodical fashion. In a crisis, particularly in time of war, there is often a need to move quickly when options are limited. The situation is ripe for exploitation by fabricators or opportunists seeking a relationship that will help

a. The Comintern, or "Communist International," was an organization of the communist parties of the world, founded by Lenin in 1919 to promote world revolution.

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Ho Chi Minh, sitting on the floor, with other attendees of the 5th Comintern meeting held in 1924 in Moscow. Photo © SPUTNIK/Alamy Stock Photos

them achieve their own political ends.

In the climactic final months of World War II in Asia, OSS encountered "an awfully sweet guy" named Ho Chi Minh.^b He was Vietnamese, the leader of the "The League for Vietnamese Independence" (or Viet Minh), devoted to ridding Vietnam of the French who had colonized their country. Although it was occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army, Vietnam was of little operational interest to the OSS. An agent network inside Vietnam was producing a substantial flow of intelligence on Japanese activities that satisfied both British and Americans needs. Then, one day in March 1945, the flow of intelligence suddenly stopped. The effect on the American war effort was almost immediate: Fourteenth Air Force bombers had to stop flying missions over Vietnam

for lack of weather reports and targeting information. OSS received urgent requests to establish new agent nets inside Vietnam to replace the intelligence lost.

Ho Chi Minh was visiting Kunming, China, when he came to the attention of the OSS officer tasked with resolving the Vietnam intelligence problem. The officer

b. How, years later, US Air Ground Aid Service (AGAS) officer, Lt. Dan Phelan, described Ho to journalist Robert Shaplin. Phelan had parachuted into Ho's camp in advance of the OSS Deer Team in August 1945. Source: William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (Hachette, 2001) 301.

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It would take a while for the listeners waiting by their radios to comprehend the full impact of what the silence meant.

was impressed with Ho, as it seems was every American who met him. There was no trace of Ho in OSS files, but the French knew of him, as a long time anti-French rebel, and a communist. There were caveats on OSS use of both, but the need was urgent, and Ho appeared capable of doing the job. In a few weeks, Ho was on his way back to his jungle lair in Vietnam, with an OSS-provided transmitter, a radio operator, and an experienced American intelligence operative to work with him.



The Wires Went Strangely Silent—9 March 1945²

On 10 March 1945, OSS operatives at their Kunming, China, headquarters received a single six-word message from an agent in Vietnam: “Japanese seized all posts throughout Indochina.” Nothing more was heard from Vietnam that day. A check with the French Military Mission (FMM) in Kunming revealed that Free French links with their agents inside Vietnam had also gone silent.^a It would take a while for the listeners waiting by their radios to comprehend the full impact of what the silence meant.

a. The only French Military Mission accredited to the Chinese was at Chungking. The FMM in Kunming was the unit of French Intelligence (SLFEO) responsible for clandestine operations in Indochina. Source: Archimedes Patti, *Why Vietnam?* (University of California Press, 1980) 541, 545.

When the Japanese occupied Vietnam in 1941, they assured the Vichy French government that French sovereignty over their colonies in Indochina would be respected. Under Vichy control, the French colonial administration—complete with its army of “native” troops—remained intact and allowed to run France’s Indochina colonies as before. For the Japanese, this was “the most fruitful and least tedious method of administering their new ‘acquisition.’”³ It required little of the Japanese Army and kept its troops free for engagements elsewhere.^b

The arrangement worked well until the war moved into its final year, when France was liberated, and the American sweep across the Pacific drew closer to the Asian mainland. The Japanese had been long concerned about the loyalty of the French colonists. Vietnam had become a vital logistical base for the Japanese Army operating in China and Burma, and the Japanese could not afford to have the French colonists as an enemy at their back. When Americans landing on the Indochina coastline started to look like a distinct possibility, the Japanese acted.

b. Ho Chi Minh summed up the situation: “The Japanese became the real masters. The French became kind of respectable slaves. And upon the Indo-Chinese falls the double honor of being not only slaves to the Japanese, but also the slaves of the slaves—the French.” Ho Chi Minh, from his report on Indochina for OSS as quoted in Dixee Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh* (University Press of Kansas, 2006), 28.

On 9 March 1945, the Japanese implemented Operation Meigo (Operation Bright Moon), their contingency plan to take over Vietnam if it became necessary. “Japanese troops took possession of [French] administrative offices, radio stations, the central telephone and telegraph offices, banks and the main industrial enterprises. They also attacked the police forces and arrested French civilian and military authorities.”⁴ Units of the French Army that survived the initial assaults fought their way north toward the Chinese border. Their “coup” put the Japanese in complete control of Vietnam. French Indochina was no more.

The Japanese takeover created a serious problem for the OSS: agent networks inside Indochina that the United States had come to depend on were now gone, as was the intelligence on the Japanese presence that came from them—especially weather data and targeting intelligence that was absolutely essential for US Fourteenth Air Force bombers. “Even our air attacks had to cease, because we had neither weather reports nor any check on Japanese movements.”⁵

Intelligence Collection in Indochina

When the Japanese Army entered Indochina in 1941, the British and Chinese had a sudden need for information on what the Japanese were up to; so would the Americans as their involvement in East Asia grew. But the practical difficulties of establishing intelligence mechanisms in a new environment were compounded by the political situation. Tai Li, Chiang Kai-shek’s intelligence chief, told US Navy Capt. Milton

“Mary” Miles—then “Director of OSS/Far East”—that the Chinese “could do almost nothing so far as Indochina was concerned . . . many different [Vietnamese] groups were active in one way or another, but the trouble was they did not like each other. On only one point, apparently, were they able to agree . . . none of them liked the Chinese.” As for the French in Indochina, “being French, they seemed to have almost as many different categories as people,” and all were “heartily disliked . . . for not having permitted the people of the region enough liberty or political responsibility.”^a

While the Allied services became acquainted with the truths of Tai Li’s statements, three civilian amateurs—on their own—created an exceptionally effective intelligence network inside Vietnam. It was known as the GBT, after the surnames of the three who created it and ran it: Canadian Laurence L. Gordon; American Harry Bernard; and Chinese-American Frank Tan. All were formerly employed in Vietnam by the American Cal-Texaco Corporation.

The three turned to their “wealth of contacts” in Vietnam, among the local French, Vietnamese, Chinese, and others, to collect valuable information about Japanese activities throughout Indochina. What it collected, the GBT shared with the

a. The OSS was in contact with the FMM in Kunming, but internal political rivalries made the value of intelligence received from the French questionable. Source: Vice Admiral Milton E. Miles, USN, *A Different Kind of War: The Unknown Story of the U.S. Navy’s Guerilla Forces in World War II China* (Doubleday, 1967), 181–82.

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British, Americans, and Chinese,^b becoming their indispensable source of intelligence on Indochina. US Fourteenth Air Force Commander, Claire Lee Chennault, was particularly supportive of the GBT, as it was GBT targeting and weather data that made possible US air operations over Indochina.

With its success, the GBT attracted Allied interest in taking over GBT agent networks. The GBT accepted funding and radio equipment from the British and the OSS, and some help from the Chinese, but maintained that its success was dependent on “being subservient to no one.”^c The GBT was already cooperating with the Air Ground Force Resources and Technical Staff (OSS/AGFRTS), an OSS unit that was using the Fourteenth Air Force as the cover that enabled it to work unilaterally without Chinese interference. When OSS wanted to expand its association with GBT, it assigned Charles Fenn to work with group.^e

b. But not the French, as GBT “do not dare cooperate with the French as they [GBT] have strong Chinese support and assistance . . . [and also] their interests are not always those of the French Empire.” Source: Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh*, quoting an untitled memo by OSS officer Robert B. Hall, 89.

c. “Fenn’s was the only name [Gordon] would agree to.” Charles Fenn, born in the United Kingdom, emigrated to the United States in his early twenties. He became a news photographer and journalist; joined the Associated Press in 1941; and covered the war in North Africa and Asia, including the Japanese invasion of Burma. In 1943, in New York, Buckminster Fuller,

GBT leader Laurence Gordon and Fenn had met, and the two got along well, although Gordon feared losing GBT’s independence, “especially to OSS, whose methods Gordon considered autocratic.” Later, when fast moving events “forced a decision, the GBT was transferred to Air Ground Air Service, AGAS^d, along with Fenn’s services.” Fenn’s official capacity was as the OSS liaison to AGAS and to GBT.

With Natives if Necessary

“Both Wedemeyer and the US Navy sent us urgent pleas to get a new intelligence net operating—with natives if necessary!”^{e,f,7}

an advisor to OSS, recruited him. He was commissioned as a Marine lieutenant and sent to Burma to run MO operations, in which he excelled. In June 1944, he was sent to China, where his duties expanded to include intelligence collection operations under the cover of AGFRTS. Source: Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh*, 96.

d. AGAS was a US agency responsible for assisting in the rescue of downed airmen in China and Southeast Asia, “. . . whose work was divided between the rescue of downed pilots, liaison with Prisoners of War, and collection of intelligence.” Source: Charles Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biographical Introduction*, (Scribner, 1973), 73.

e. Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer, Commander of US Forces in China, replaced General Joseph Stilwell on 31 October 1944.

f. In colonial usage, the term “native” had become a pejorative. “One has only to remember the names applied to the rulers (baas, master, sahib) as against the single pejorative given to the ruled (native). Originally a useful term to describe an

Ho was known at the US Office of War information in Kunming, and often visited there “to read *Time* magazine and any other news literature they happened to have.”

“What natives?” Fenn asked. “Nobody knew any they thought could be trusted.” Then Fenn remembered: he had recently heard about an American pilot named Shaw, “who had been brought out from Indochina by an Annamite named Ho, who would not accept any reward, but had asked only to meet General Chennault.”⁸ The request was refused. The policy was that no ranking American officer could have contact with an Annamite, lest the French become annoyed.

Fenn learned from a correspondent named Ravenholt, who had written a story on Ho, that Ho was still in Kunming. Ho was known at the US Office of War information (OWI) in Kunming, and often visited there “to read *Time* magazine and any other news literature they happened to have.”⁹ Ho had started visiting the Kunming OWI library during the summer of 1944. The Americans there were impressed by “Ho’s English, intelligence, and obvious interest in the Allied war effort,” and OWI wanted to hire him to broadcast war news from San Francisco to Vietnam. But later, “OSS reports stated that the OWI plan was dropped because of objections from the French consul.”¹⁰ Fenn asked a contact at OWI to try to arrange a meeting with Ho. It was set for the next morning, 17 March 1945.

indigenous person, this finally classified its recipient with a status only one step up from a dog.” Source: Charles Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biographical Introduction* (Scribner, 1973), 9.

Troublesome Fenn Meets Old Man Ho—17 March 1945^a

Ho arrived right on time, in the company of a younger Vietnamese, a man named Pham Van Dong.^b Ho had been spoken of as “old,” but appeared younger than Fenn expected: “Ho was over 50, but his face was unlined, and his wisp of beard and thinning hair were only barely touched with gray.” Ho was given the code name “Lucius,” but Fenn and the other Americans continued to refer to him as “Old Man Ho,” simply because they were “all much younger” than Ho.^c

When Ho talked about his “League for Independence” or the Viet Minh, Fenn remembered that he had been told that the “League” was a communist group. Was that label correct? “Some of our members are Communists,” Ho said, “and some aren’t. The Chinese and French call all of us Communists who don’t fit into their pattern.” Fenn asked, “Are you

a. “Troublesome Fenn,” as he was sometimes called in OSS, was independent-minded and had little patience with bureaucracy, which often put him at odds with his OSS bosses.

b. Pham Van Dong, one of Ho’s closest associates, served as prime minister (PM) of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) from 1955 to 1976 and, following unification, as PM of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam from 1976 until 1987.

c. This and the conversation between Fenn and Ho Chi Minh that follows is adapted from Fenn’s account of his first meeting with Ho (from Fenn, *At the Dragon’s Gate*, 139–140). Fenn kept a personal diary during these years, which would account for the remembered detail.

against the French?” Ho answered, “Certainly not. But unfortunately they are against us.”

Fenn asked if Ho would be willing to work with the Americans, to take a radio and a generator into Indochina and collect intelligence—and to rescue more American pilots when that was possible. Ho noted that a radio operator from the outside would have to go in as well; the Viet Minh had no one trained to do that. When it seemed that Ho was willing to work with the Americans, Fenn asked what Ho would want in return.

“American recognition for our league,” Ho said.

Fenn hedged; Ho said, “Medicine and arms.”

“Why arms?” Fenn asked; the Vietnamese were not fighting the Japanese then.

But they should be, Ho responded. The Vietnamese would be willing to work not only with the Americans, but with the Chinese, and “even with the French, if they’d let us.” Ho agreed to meet Fenn again in two days. Fenn still needed to get OSS clearance to work with Ho, but he already knew that Ho “was our man. Baudelaire felt the wings of insanity touch his mind, but that morning I felt the wings of genius touch mine.”¹¹

To get the clearance he needed, Fenn had to find out more about Ho’s background. Except for his contacts with OWI, the Americans knew nothing about Ho, but Fenn’s French contacts did: Ho was “a longstanding rebel, anti-French, of course, and strictly communist. The [Nationalist] Chinese did not much

like him either.”¹² Fenn took what he had learned about Ho to his boss, Kunming OSS chief Col. Richard Heppner. Heppner was pragmatic: if Fenn thought Ho would do the job, Fenn should use him.

Where Did Old Man Ho Come From?

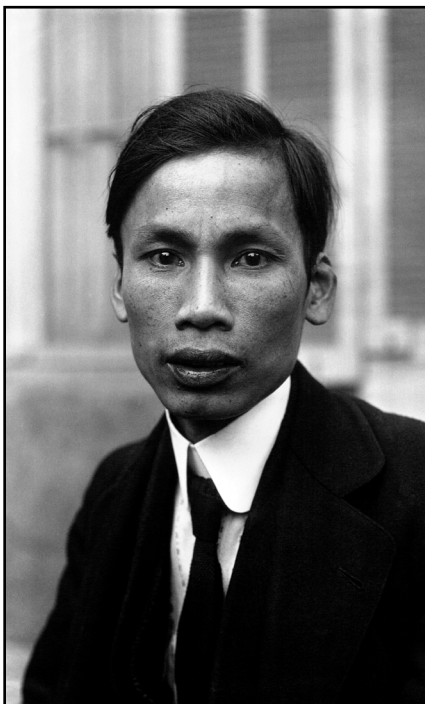
The leader of the Annamite communist movement was trained in Canton under Borodin, in addition to his extensive schooling in Moscow and various European countries. His name, Nguyen Ai-Quoc, is known to all Annamites.^a

It’s not surprising that the Americans knew nothing about Ho; the Ho Chi Minh persona was brought into existence only in late 1940. The French and British services had extensive files on “Nguyen Ai Quoc” (Nguyen the Patriot), the name Ho had employed during his time as a Comintern agent in Europe and Asia—until he vanished from Canton in early 1933 and returned to Moscow to escape the British and French, and a probable death sentence hanging over his head in Vietnam.^b When he

a. The OSS did not make the connection between the name “Nguyen Ai Quoc” and the name “Ho Chi Minh” then or when the first OSS officer, Charles Fenn, made contact with Ho in March 1945. This quote is the first reference in an OSS document to the man who would become known as Ho Chi Minh, from “An Outline of a Plan for Indo-China,” 26 October 1943, Section II, What We Have to Work with in Indo-China,” author unknown. Cited in Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh*, 148.

b. For an account of those years, see Bob Bergin, “The Operator: Ho Chi Minh as Political Activist in Europe and Asia, *The*

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Nguyen Ai Quoc, pictured in 1921 at a meeting of the French Communist Party in Marseilles, France. Photo © CNP Collection/Alamy Stock Photo

returned to China in 1938 on a new Comintern mission, Ho again became Nguyen Ai Quoc. He was assigned to the Chinese Communist Eighth Route Army, and beyond the reach of the British and French intelligence services. In his dealings with the Chinese Nationalists after his return, Ho used several new aliases, thus further depriving Allied intelligence of any new information about him.

When the Japanese Army started to move into Indochina in 1940, Ho’s focus shifted to new opportunities

Intelligencer: Journal of U.S. Intelligence Studies, 23, no 2, 37.

this might afford Vietnamese revolutionaries against the French. In late 1940, he traveled in China’s southern Yunnan Province, close to the Vietnam border. “To keep his identity secret, he became a Chinese journalist under a new name, Ho Chi Minh (He Who Enlightens.)”¹³ Early in 1941, Ho crossed the border into Vietnam and established himself near the Vietnamese village of Pac Bo, where he lived in a cave and devoted himself to broadening his base of support. He organized the first Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) Central Committee meeting since the VCP’s founding in 1930 [as the Indochina Communist Party], and established the Viet Minh, or League for Independence.^c

In August 1942, Ho started back to China, walking at night to avoid French patrols. On 27 August, Ho and his young Chinese guide were arrested by Nationalist Chinese police near Binhma, a market town where Ho could get a bus to Chungking.

Ho was carrying an ID card that identified him as Ho Chi Minh, the overseas Chinese journalist. He was also carrying papers that identified him as a representative of the “Vietnamese branch of the Anti-Aggression League” and of an international press agency, and he had a military passport issued by the KMT’s Fourth

c. The word “Indochina” in the original name of the Indochina Communist Party Ho founded in 1930 was now replaced with “the more emotive word ‘Vietnam,’ the use of which had for so long been forbidden by the French colonial regime.” Source: William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (Hyperion, 2000), 252.

Fenn set two conditions for meeting Chennault: Ho must ask no favors of Chennault, and politics were not to be discussed. Ho agreed.

Military command. “Suspecting that anyone with so many false documents must be a Japanese agent, they [local Chinese authorities] took him and his young guide into custody.”¹⁴

Over the next five months, Ho “spent time in 18 prisons in 13 different districts in south China.”¹⁵ Finally, in early February 1943, a Chinese military court declared Ho a political prisoner; his condition improved, and he was eventually released. The first contacts between the Viet Minh and the Americans began as early as December 1942, when Viet Minh representatives approached the American embassy for help in securing Ho’s release from prison but got no help from the Americans or the Free French in Kunming, “both of whom found him and his organization rather inconsequential.”^{16, 17}

Fenn first heard the Ho Chi Minh name in a conversation with a Chinese general named “Chen” while looking for a Vietnamese agent to use against Japanese targets in Indochina. In his 22 October 1944 report of the conversation, Fenn wrote: “There is an Annamite^a named Hu Tze-ming [a Chinese Mandarin rendering] who heads up the International Anti-Ag-

gression Group (Anti-fascist) who might be used.”¹⁸

Preparing Ho as an Agent

After his first meeting with Ho on 17 March 1944, Fenn turned to the Vietnam experts, his GBT colleagues Bernard and Tan. As Ho’s current communications were dependent on Vietnamese couriers, a radio operator would have to be sent in with him. GBT had a candidate, Mac Sin, one of their radio operators, and Frankie Tan would go in as well, “to conduct the training and collect information.” Both were ethnic Chinese and would blend into the local population. Tan had already spent several years in Amam.

Fenn held his second meeting with Ho and Pham Van Dong on 20 March, “at the Indo-China Café on Chin Pi Street.” Ho doubted that the two GBT Chinese would blend in easily with the Vietnamese locals. The Vietnamese were suspicious of all Chinese, but he agreed with the arrangement. Ho also suggested that he, the two GBT members, and their radio equipment should be flown to Ching Shi on the China-Vietnam border, about 300 miles southeast of Kunming. It would save considerable time. From there they would walk to the Viet Minh camp, a two-week, 200-mile, nighttime trek through Japanese-held territory to the village of Kim Lung in Thai Nguyen province, northeast of Hanoi where Ho had his base.¹⁹ Pham Van Dong would stay in Kunming to serve as liaison.

Fenn agreed to use aircraft as Ho had suggested. He told Ho that he had “already arranged medicines and a few things like radios, cameras, and weather equipment, which Mac Sin will train your men to use . . . we must leave out arms for the present. Perhaps later we can drop some in.”²⁰

“And what about meeting Chennault?” Ho asked.

Why was Ho so keen to do that? Chennault was the Westerner he most admired, Ho said, and he would like to tell him so. That sounded harmless enough—although Fenn suspected Ho had some political purpose in mind. The caveat against ranking Americans’ meeting Annamites still stood, but now it appeared that Ho “might be the key to all our future Indochina operations.”²¹ Fenn knew Chennault from his days as a correspondent. He could set up the meeting himself, with no need to go through channels, and without OSS learning about it.

Fenn set two conditions: Ho must ask no favors of Chennault, and politics were not to be discussed. Ho agreed. With that, Fenn “went to see [Chennault] personally and explained the importance of playing along with this old man, who had not only rescued one of the general’s pilots, but might rescue more if we gained his future cooperation.”^{2b}

a. The central part of Vietnam was called Annam by the French, the North was called Tonkin, and the South, Cochinchina. All Vietnamese eventually came to be called Annamites. As derived from the Chinese language, Annam means “pacified South,” and is considered demeaning by the Vietnamese. The word “Vietnam” was by used by Nationalists in the 1920s, and generally accepted by 1945.

b. Martha Byrd, Chennault’s biographer, notes, “It was no secret that Ho Chi Minh and his followers were Communists. Nor was it any secret that Chennault would have worked with the devil himself to keep his flyers out of enemy prison camps.” Source: *Chennault: Giving Wings to the Tiger* (The University of Alabama Press, 1987), 345. Likewise, Fenn mentions another author, Robert Shaplen (in *The Lost Revolution*:

The meeting took place on 29 March, in Chennault's office, the general sitting behind a desk "the size of a double bed." GBT's Harry Bernard had come along to watch. Chennault thanked Ho for rescuing the pilot, and talked about how Ho could continue to help the Americans, which Ho said he was always glad to do. As the meeting was breaking up, Ho told Chennault that he had a small favor to ask.

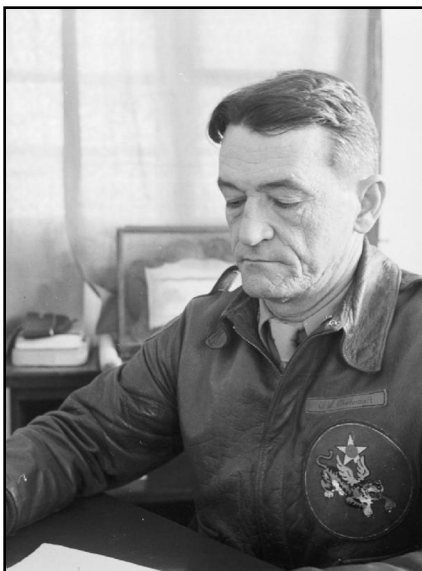
Fenn "drew a deep breath."²² "Here we go, boys, hold your hats," was written all over Bernard's face."²³

"May I have your photograph?" Ho said, and Fenn "almost gasped with relief." Chennault had his secretary bring in "a sheaf of eight-by-ten glossies" and invited Ho to take his pick. Ho selected one and asked if Chennault could sign it. Chennault wrote, "Yours sincerely, Claire L. Chennault." The meeting was done. It had obviously pleased Ho.²⁴

Fenn's subsequent meetings with Ho were held in a room above a Kunming candle shop that Ho shared with Pham Van Dong. There he briefed Ho on OSS and intelligence requirements, particularly for weather reports, "because without them our planes could not fly."²⁵ During one of their tea breaks, Ho asked if Fenn could get him six new Colt .45 automatics in their original wrappings. "No problem," Fenn said—"relieved to be asked for nothing more."²⁶ Fenn got the six .45 pistols from OSS.

The US in Vietnam, 1946–1966 [Harper & Row, 1966]), who notes that Kuomintang friends had warned Chennault to "steer clear" of Ho. Source: Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh*, 78.

To be received by Chennault was very important in Ho's mind [as it served] as official American notice [of his leadership].



Claire L. Chennault, commander of the 14th Air Force, autographed a photo of himself for Ho. Photo © Military History Collection/Alamy Stock Photo

Some days later, Harry Bernard and Fenn drove Ho to the airport, "along with his small plaited case, packet of pistols, and a couple of packages done up in rice paper . . . Mac Sin would fly with Ho, and Tan would fly in a second L-5 with generator, transmitter, and various small arms he insisted on taking . . . "Their immediate destination was Ching Hsis . . . where we still had an airstrip not yet in Japanese hands."²⁷ A "wire" soon came from Tan that all had arrived safely.

The Making of the Top Leader

Radio contact was established with OSS in Kunming, but Ho sent an occasional letter to Fenn via Vietnamese couriers. One of the early ones was delivered by a man who

spoke good French and brought Fenn up-to-date on Ho's situation: the courier said that after his long walk into Vietnam, Ho had arrived at his Pac Bo base quite ill:

When he got well enough, he invited all the top leaders to a conference, not his own people, but rivals working for other groups, who had used his absence to push themselves forward. Ho told them he had now secured the help of the Americas including Chennault. At first nobody really believed him. Then he produced the photograph of Chennault signed, "Yours Sincerely." After this, he sent for the automatic pistols [the six .45s that Fenn had given him] and gave one to each of the leaders as a present. The leaders considered that Chennault had sent these presents personally. After this conference, there was never any more talk about who was the top leader."²⁸

Archimedes Patti—an OSS veteran of the Italian campaign—who had just taken over as Chief of OSS Indochina operations in Kunming, summed up the significance of Ho's meeting with Chennault:

To be received by Chennault was very important in Ho's mind as official American notice. But the inscribed photograph turned out to be of vital importance to him only a few months later, when he was badly in need of tangible evidence to convince skeptical Vietnamese nationalists that he had Amer-

Patti had become enmeshed in an increasingly complex situation as French military units escaping the 9 March Japanese coup started seeking ways to get back into Indochina.

*ican support. It was a ruse which lacked foundation, but it worked.*²⁹

Soon after, a load of OSS supplies was dropped in, including radios, medicines and weapons. “According to Frankie Tan, this drop caused a sensation, and Ho’s stock went up another ten points.”³⁰

What the Americans Got from Ho

Ho returned good value for what he derived from his relationship with the Americans. Patti wrote, “Ho Chi Minh kept his word and furnished OSS with extremely valuable information and assistance in many of our clandestine projects.” By the end of June, Fenn wrote, “Tan and Ho between them had already set up an intelligence network of native agents that had amply replaced the French net lost by the [9 March] Japanese coup . . . [Also] the Viet Minh net eventually rescued a total of 17 downed airmen.”^a

Fenn viewed the three months following the 9 March Japanese coup as

perhaps the most significant in Ho’s career. At the beginning, Ho had been the leader of a political party that was but one amongst many, unrecognized by Americans, opposed by the French, shunned by the Chi-

*nese . . . By the end of June, he was largely, thanks to GBT, the unquestioned leader of an overwhelmingly strong revolutionary party.*³¹

In mid-June, an evaluation prepared by Patti’s staff listed Viet Minh accomplishments in the period since the March coup that included six provinces in the north “under the military and administrative control of the Viet Minh; an established Army of Liberation . . . an effective propaganda organization . . . and that all-important ingredient, popular support from the Vietnamese people.”³²

The impetus that propelled Viet Minh success was the 9 March Japanese coup that eliminated French authority and power in Indochina. “This coup meant that one of Ho’s two enemies was now *hors de combat*. [Vo Nguyen] Giap immediately declared Japan the sole enemy.”³³ The French watchdog was gone; the Viet Minh fox could run free.^b The famine of 1944–45 was another big factor. Japanese seizure of rice crops—and the indifference of the French authorities—combined with severe flooding in the spring, led to deaths of as many as two million Vietnamese, and the strong feelings against the French and Japanese grew.

But not everything was going well. In a letter to Fenn in mid-July,

b. Ho’s own description is more colorful: “The French imperialist wolf was finally devoured by the Japanese fascist hyena.” Source: William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (Hyperion, 2000) 296.

Ho apologized for not writing much, “because I am in bad health just now (not very sick, don’t worry!).” Frankie Tan, who had just returned to Kunming, explained that “Ho had been much shaken by his long walk to Pac Bo,” and then “had a bad relapse a month or so” after his first illness. Tan and Ho’s Vietnamese colleagues “had even feared for his life.”³⁴

A Parallel Operation Evolves

Archimedes Patti, who had arrived in Kunming in mid-April, was a French speaker, and as chief of the Washington OSS Indochina desk from mid-1944 until he departed for China, was well-read into the Indochina situation. He was aware of Ho Chi Minh and enthusiastic about Fenn’s contact, which he learned of upon arriving in Kunming. Before Patti departed for China, OSS chief William Donovan told him to use anyone willing to work against the Japanese, but cautioned him not to become involved in French Indochina politics.³⁵

In late April, Patti visited the China-Vietnam border area, where a Vietnamese contact introduced him to “an Annamite of influence and resources.”³⁶ It was Ho Chin Minh, who wanted to discuss collaboration with the Allies inside Vietnam.³⁷ Ho knew Patti was OSS, and acknowledged that he was cooperating with AGAS (Fenn’s operation) on “another matter,” to assist downed airmen, and said he was “ready to align himself with the Americans whenever they were ready.”³⁸ Patti could not make a commitment then, but later wrote, “Ho and the Viet Minh appeared to be the answer to my

a. Fenn notes that “Some of these rescues were partly due to other help.” Source: Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh*, 82.

immediate problem of establishing [Special] operations in Indochina.”³⁹

Patti had become enmeshed in an increasingly complex situation as French military units escaping the 9 March Japanese coup started seeking ways to get back into Indochina. President Roosevelt died in April, and the United States was now open to making concessions for the French. OSS was close to agreeing to create two French-American Special Operations teams—“Cat,” and “Deer”—in which the French military would participate. And Patti’s duties had just been expanded: in addition to intelligence collection, Patti was “to disrupt and destroy railroads in northern Vietnam to deny them to the Japanese.”

There was growing opposition from the Chinese to joint US-French military cooperation, and it was evident that French interest was not focused on defeating the Japanese but in restoring Indochina as a French colony. It was at that point that Ho Chi Minh contacted Patti again: “During the first week of June, Ho Chi Minh let me know that he was prepared to make available up to 1,000 ‘well-trained’ guerrillas for any plan I might have against the Japanese.”⁴⁰

Patti replied that he would give the offer serious consideration. When the French refused to join in an OSS operation against railroads in Indochina, Patti decided he would replace them with the Vietnamese.

Deer Team Drops In— Mid- to Late July 1945

On 16 July 1945, OSS Special Operations Deer Team leader, Maj.

There was growing opposition from the Chinese to joint US-French military cooperation, and it was evident that French interest was not focused on defeating the Japanese

Alison Kent Thomas, two members of his team, and three “French” arrived by parachute at the Viet Minh headquarters at Kim Lung.^a Thomas wanted to look the area over before committing the rest of his team. Frankie Tan was waiting on the ground, and Ho Chi Minh came to welcome them.

The “French”—a European officer and two Annamite members of the French Colonial Army—were “immediately recognized” by the Viet Minh cadre, and “it was only because of [Frankie] Tan’s amelioration that the French were ‘treated amicably.’”⁴¹ Major Thomas had included them, despite Patti’s warning him against it. Ho objected to their presence; they were escorted back to China, and Thomas was left to write in his diary, “Too bad they had to be sent away, but these people dislike the French almost as much as they dislike the [Japanese].”^{b, 42}

Thomas’s orders were to organize a guerrilla team of 50 to 100 men. “He had brought along sufficient containers of small arms and explosives to arm such a group.” Ho told Thomas that he had “three

thousand men under arms.” Thomas saw about 200 of them around the camp, “armed with French rifles and a few Brens, Stens, tommyes and carbines.”⁴³ He sent to Kunming his recommendation to use 100 “partially trained Viet Minh guerrillas,” and requested additional equipment: “air cargo transports eventually dropped more weapons—one automatic machine gun, two 60 mm mortars, four bazookas, eight Bren machine guns, twenty Thompson submachine guns, sixty M-1 carbines, four M-1 rifles, twenty Colt .45 caliber pistols, and a set of binoculars.”^{c, 44}

Did OSS Just Save Ho Chi Minh’s Life?

The remaining six members of Deer Team arrived by parachute on 29 July. Thomas was on a lengthy reconnaissance; the team was met by Frankie Tan and “Mr. Van”—the commander-to-be of the future Vietnam Liberation Army, Vo Nguyen Giap—in alias.^d Giap apologized for Ho’s absence, saying that he was ill. Two days later, when team members were told that Ho was still sick, they decided to see if he needed help. Lieutenant Defourneaux, the team’s French-American member, found

a. “Sensing the historical importance of the village [Kim Lung] for the fortunes of the Vietnamese Resistance, Ho ordered it renamed Tan Trao (“New Tide”). Source: Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 298.

b. Back in Kunming, Patti learned from a French contact that the three “French” were on a special mission to make contact with Ho for French Intelligence. Source: Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh*, 196.

c. As questions on OSS-provided weapons were later raised, numbers and types of weapons are cited here as they appear in research.

d. Giap became the principal commander in the war against the French, and later the Americans. He is considered to be one of the greatest military strategists of the 20th century.

him “in the corner of a smoky hut . . . covered with what appeared to be rags . . . yellow skin stretched over his skeletal body.” He was “shaking like a leaf,” obviously with a high fever.⁴⁵ OSS medic Paul Hoagland took a quick look: “This man doesn’t have long for this world,”⁴⁶ he said. Giap had been very worried about Ho: “For hours he lay in a coma. Every time he came to, he would murmur his thoughts about our work. I refused to believe he was imparting his dying thoughts. But afterwards, looking back on the scene, I realized that he felt so weak that he was dictating his last instructions to me.”⁴⁷

Hoagland had trained as a nurse, and worked as one for several years. He examined Ho, speculated “he was suffering from “malaria, dengue fever, dysentery, or a combination of all three.” He gave him “quinine, sulfa drugs, [and] other medicines” and checked on him periodically. Within 10 days, Ho seemed recovered. He was again up, and on his own around camp.⁴⁸

Had OSS just saved Ho’s life? It certainly appeared that way. Major Thomas later said that Ho was “very sick,” but he was not sure that Ho “would have died without us.”⁴⁹ Giap credited a local ethnic minority wild plant expert, who fed Ho rice gruel sprinkled with the cinders of a burnt root. “The miracle occurred . . . The president emerged from his coma.”⁵⁰ Pulled from an early grave or not, Ho was back on his feet—ready to make the move that would determine the course of Vietnam’s future.

Training the Viet Minh— Early August 1945

In the meantime, Deer Team got to work. The first six days in August were spent building a training camp with the Vietnamese—three barracks for the Viet Minh recruits; one for OSS; and a warehouse, infirmary, and radio center. And a shooting range. Of 110 recruits, Deer Team chose 40 of the most promising. Ho Chi Minh named them the Bo Doi Viet-My, the Vietnamese-American Force.⁵¹ Their instruction in American drill and use of American weapons continued from 9 to 15 August. On 10 August, a third air drop brought more weapons and ammunition.⁵² The recruits were enthusiastic; their commander pleased. “Giap made sure that his newly equipped units were seen by as many as possible. Wherever they went . . . local people cheered and welcomed them.”⁵³

On August 15, “after hearing of the Japanese surrender, [Major Thomas] had turned over most of the American weapons used in training to the Vietnamese-American Force.” Three days later, Thomas received a message from Kunming advising him that all OSS equipment was to be returned to an American base in China.⁵⁴ It was too late: the Vietnamese-American Force was on the road to Hanoi—with Deer Team marching alongside.

The Question of Weapons

In his biography, *Ho* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), David Halberstam wrote what others came to believe:

The Americans later claimed that they gave Ho only a few

revolvers, although there is considerable evidence that five thousand weapons were air-dropped to the Vietminh in the summer of 1945 by the Allies. Also, according to French and communist accounts, the number of Vietminh troops in the country at the time of the fall of Japan, was five thousand. (75)

In early August 1945, 5,000 weapons for the Viet Minh would have been highly significant. Halberstam, however, does not provide any of the “considerable evidence” he cites, nor does he say where he acquired that information.

There is no overall accounting of the weapons the United States provided to the Viet Minh. The number was small, perhaps fewer than 200 individual pieces, mostly passed by Deer Team. As noted above, Deer Team leader Major Thomas turned over all OSS weapons used in training to the Vietnamese-American Force on 15 August. Had the war gone on, presumably those same weapons would have been issued to the Vietnamese-American Force.

His own experience with the Americans had taught Ho not to expect weapons if he asked for them. Getting sufficient weapons had always been a problem for the Viet Minh, even when their force was small. Now an army was being formed. Vo Nguyen Giap later wrote,

We decided to try every means to get more weapons for our army. Besides those we seized from the [Vietnamese] civil guards or from the Japanese in battle, we used the money and gold contributed by the people to buy more armaments from the

Japanese and Chiang troops . . . Uncle Ho called on the people in the whole country to take an active part in 'Gold Week,' to give their gold for the purchase of weapons from the Chinese. Within a short time, people from all walks of life had contributed twenty million piastres and three hundred and seventy kilograms of gold.^{55, 56}

Historian Bernard Fall, too, commented on the results of the so-called Gold Week:

*It was thoroughly successful and provided the nascent "Vietnam People's Army" with 3,000 rifles, 50 automatic rifles, 600 submachine guns, and 100 mortars of American manufacture—plus the substantial French and Japanese stocks (31,000 rifles, 700 automatic weapons, 36 artillery pieces, and 18 tanks) that the Chinese were supposed to have secured but did not.*⁵⁸

This was the start to equipping the Vietnam People's Liberation Army.

Uncle Ho Makes his Move—Mid August 1945

*Ho must have rejoiced inwardly that the 'Deer' team had arrived so opportunely and that, by spreading it thinly, everything could seem much more than it actually was.*⁵⁸

In the first days of August 1945, no one could have foreseen how abruptly the war would end on 15 August. The convalescing Ho Chi Minh was following world events on Major Thomas's radio receiver. As the Americans moved closer to

In the first days of August 1945, no one could have foreseen how abruptly the war would end on 15 August.

the Japanese homeland, Ho's sense of urgency grew: when the Japanese were defeated, the French would return to Vietnam. "Ho knew that to retain leadership and momentum for his movement, he had to demonstrate both legitimacy and strength."⁵⁹ On 6 August, the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. The war's end was near. Ho called for a meeting of Viet Minh and other political leaders from all over Vietnam.

By 13 August, many delegates had arrived at Tan Trao. That evening, the National Insurrection Committee was formed. It issued Military Order Number 1, ordering a general insurrection; the next day, a Plan of Action was prepared. Vietnam's "August Revolution" was beginning.

On 16 August, the first National People's congress was convened, with delegates from the political parties that formed the Viet Minh Front, mass organizations, and ethnic and religious groups. As they gathered, "they were treated to glimpses of well-uniformed, well-armed, and well-disciplined troops coming and going in the area." Chennault's photo was prominently displayed alongside Mao's and Lenin's, and "rumors were rampant that the Viet Minh—and 'Uncle Ho' in particular—had 'secret' Allied support."⁶⁰

When Ho took the floor, he spoke of the overall situation, and "reiterated the importance of a rapid seizure of power in order to greet the Allied occupation forces in a strong position."⁶¹ As the congress concluded, an "appeal to the people" was issued, calling on all of Vietnam to rise up. It was signed "Nguyen Ai Quoc," the

legendary agent of revolution—and Vietnam started to understand the true identity of this mysterious "Ho Chi Minh."^a

In the days that followed, uprisings broke out all over Vietnam. Some were spontaneous, others were "incited by local Viet Minh units."⁶² On 19 August, the Viet Minh took control of Hanoi and started taking over the north. On 2 September 1945, in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh declared the independence of the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

Consternation in Hanoi—Late August 1945

Viet Minh Fighting with U.S. Troops in Tonkin Will Soon Be Here to Oust the French Oppressors Who Last Year Starved Two Million People.

Those were the words of the headline of a newspaper that circulated in Hanoi in the days before Ho declared independence. The article said that the arrival in Hanoi of Major Thomas, "allegedly at the head of the main body of Ho's troops, was to

a. Charles Fenn recalls, "Most . . . had long supposed Nguyen Ai Quoc was dead, and this surprising re-emergence was a powerful toxin. As for the French, they were certain he was dead. . . . Ho needed now to establish himself as . . . one who would consolidate rather than rebel. . . . Under this name of Ho Chi Minh, he knew himself to be tolerated by the Chinese, accepted by the Americans, and at least not proscribed by the French. As for his own countrymen, they needed only to be told the name of the liberator to begin cheering." Source: Fenn, *Ho Chi Minh*, 88.

be the signal for massive anti-French demonstration.”⁶³

OSS Indochina operations chief Archimedes Patti arrived in Hanoi on 21 August with an OSS team, and accompanied by a five-man French military team. To Patti fell the task of calming down the French and informing OSS headquarters in Kunming. He found the suggestion of demonstrations troubling. The French team, ostensibly in Hanoi to handle prisoner-of-war (POW) matters, had not been well received by the Vietnamese, or the Japanese. Patti wrote, “Knowing that demonstrations can turn into massacres . . . I radioed Kunming of the press report, emphasizing the importance of persuading our ‘Deer’ team to part from the Viet Minh force . . . and recommended in the strongest possible terms that our three Special Operations teams operating along the northern borders be returned to Kunming before being airlifted to Hanoi without their French elements . . . [to carry out the POW Mercy missions]. I hoped to disassociate all our Americans from either the Viet Minh or the French causes.”⁶⁴ It was already too late.

The Battle of Thai Nguyen—20–25 August 1945

When Vo Nguyen Giap’s “Vietnamese-American Force” set out from Tan Trao to march to Hanoi on 16 August, Deer Team joined them. The column was seen off by Ho and the delegates to the People’s Congress. Although orders from OSS told him to “sit tight until further orders,” Deer Team leader Major Thomas had decided that the team would accompany Vo Nguyen Giap to attack a

Japanese installation at Thai Nguyen, a town on the road to Hanoi.^a

The Vietnamese and Americans reached Thai Nguyen early on 20 August. Giap sent an ultimatum calling for the Japanese to surrender. Major Thomas had received orders not to accept the surrender of Japanese troops, but he sent his own ultimatum as well. The Japanese were ensconced in an old French fort and had no intention of leaving it. Shooting broke out and continued sporadically. Except for Thomas, the Americans stayed in a safehouse, well away from the action. Thomas stayed with Giap.

Shooting went on until the Viet Minh made a final attack on 25 August. The Japanese agreed to a cease-fire that afternoon, and later agreed to “be confined to their post,” although they kept their weapons. There had been some loss of life, “six Japanese, for certain,” three Viet Minh soldiers, and five civilians, according to Thomas.⁶⁵ The town celebrated its liberation with a parade on 26 August, and Ho made a brief visit from Hanoi. He asked Deer Team to accompany him back. But Thomas had again been told to “stay put”—and this time he listened.⁶⁶ When Giap reached Hanoi, he sent Thomas “two bottles of champagne and a bottle of Scotch-Haigs,” to help with the independence celebrations.⁶⁷

a. Archimedes Patti recalls, “They [Deer Team members] were probably totally oblivious to the impression they undoubtedly gave of Ho’s ‘secret’ Allied support. But after the congress concluded, the delegates scattered back to their homes all over Vietnam, carrying their impressions with them.” Source: Patti, *Why Vietnam?*, 136.

Deer Team members were unhappy with their leader. The war was over, and Major Thomas had disobeyed orders and engaged the Japanese. According to Lieutenant Defourneaux, the French-American co-commander of Deer Team, Thomas helped organize the attack on the Japanese, had given the Viet Minh “team equipment,” and “assisted” in surrender negotiations with the Japanese.⁶⁸ The reason for the attack on the Japanese at Thai Nguyen is not clear. Presumably, Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) leaders wanted to test the combat capabilities of the Vietnamese-American Joint Force . . . hoping to gain a clear-cut victory for psychological and political purposes.⁶⁹ Historian Douglas Pike believed the Battle of Thai Nguyen was “especially significant”—that it “marked the liberation of Vietnam.”⁷⁰

Good-Bye to All That

Patti spent his days in Hanoi dealing with a myriad of problems, Japanese mischief, official French outrage with “insufferable Annamites,” and French anti-OSS propaganda warfare, as well as the growing presence of allied authorities and a visit by the Soviet representative to Vietnam, who wanted to know if Ho and the Viet Minh were indeed under American “protection,” as the French had told him.⁷¹ And everyone awaited the coming of a Chinese army to take the Japanese surrender. Patti lunched with Ho and Giap, and facilitated contact for the senior French to meet Ho. On 29 September, Patti received his orders. The OSS would be terminated on 1 October; Patti was to return to Kunming by that date.⁷² His last day in Hanoi was 30 September, his last evening was at a dinner Ho

hosted that was also attended by Giap and several other Vietnamese Patti knew.

Deer Team had arrived in Hanoi on 9 September, moved into a house the Viet Minh provided, and “were able to visit Hanoi as tourists.” On 15 September, the night before his return to Kunming, Major Thomas “was invited to a private dinner with Ho and Giap.” He later recalled, “I asked Ho point-blank if he was a Communist. He told me, ‘Yes. But we can still be friends, can’t we?’”⁷³

Consequences and Lessons

People also say that as a result of our support, Ho came to power. I don’t believe that for a minute. I’m sure Ho tried to use the fact that the Americans gave him some equipment. He led many Vietnamese to believe



The OSS did not put Ho in power, but it was not without blame in his rise to leadership in Vietnam. Here he is shown after a meeting with French Foreign Minister Bidault in Paris in April 1946. Photo ©Keystone/Alamy Stock Photo.

The OSS role in Vietnam became controversial in the months that followed World War II.

*we were allies. But there were lots of reasons why Ho came to power and it wasn’t because we gave a few arms for 100 men or less.*⁷⁴

The OSS role in Vietnam became controversial in the months that followed World War II. French colonialism returned, and America now supported it as a bulwark against communism. The OSS was suddenly on the wrong side of history. Under Roosevelt, America had no stomach for colonialism; but with Roosevelt’s death and coming of the Cold War, that changed. The OSS, seen as “the embodiment of an American liberal ideology”⁷⁵ during the war, was now charged “with being too left-wing.”⁷⁶ Fenn and Patti were denounced for their relationship with Ho, and “some

authors have claimed that the actions of the OSS, especially those of Deer Team and Archimedes Patti, were instrumental in bringing the Viet Minh to power.”⁷⁷ The controversy emerged again when the United States engaged the Vietnamese Communists in the 1960s and ’70s.

Long before Fenn serendipitously found him, Old Man Ho had been seeking out a link to American influence that would make him stand out among the Vietnamese leaders who aspired to replace the French. Ho would have preferred a long-term relationship with the United States, but his need was short-term, requiring only the appearance of being close to the Americans. Once Ho had political power in his grasp, his need for the American connection ended. With at least a tinge of regret he moved on, returning to his constant friends—the Soviets—unseen, but always there.^a

The OSS did not put Ho in power, but it was not without blame. The issue was not US support, but the appearance of it: “It is no exaggeration to say that he [Ho Chi Minh] made the American officers dance to his tune with embarrassing ease,” which is how it looked to the critics. There were OSS missteps, and in Major Thomas’s case, that was significant. Fenn and Patti’s handling of Ho appears to have been competent and

a. Historian Dixee Bartholomew-Feis notes, “By the first anniversary of the August Revolution, references to America’s role in the victory over Japan had disappeared; instead, the Soviet Union was credited with ‘liberating the people subject to Japanese oppression.’” Source: Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh*, 312.

The question becomes, what can an intelligence service do to protect itself in encounters with political opportunists?

professional. Both understood the political consequences of acceding to a Ho request for support; his requests were avoided or turned aside until he no longer asked. The two times Fenn acquiesced to Ho's requests—for the famous Chennault meeting, and then for six .45 caliber pistols in original wrapping—the requests took on significance only once it was learned how Ho used the responses to them.

An obscure point, often missed, was the change in the nature of the operational relationship, from Fenn's using Ho as a principal agent in an intelligence collection effort, to Patti's using Ho's Viet Minh as an OSS Special Operations force. An intelligence purist would not have "crossed" the two operations—on principle: theoretically, that the crossing would jeopardize the security of assets in both operations, if one went bad. But that was not a real concern in this case—which was of a more expedient nature, under the exigencies of wartime.

The unexpected consequence was that politically astute Secret Intelligence agent handlers were replaced by Special Operations officers, whose focus was not on the political aspects of the operation, but on military action and its success. And that facilitated Ho and Giap's manipulation of Deer Team, influencing "how successfully Ho succeeded among his own people in pyramiding the little 'Deer' Team mission into a fantastic psychological factor . . . convinced the rival leaders . . . that he had American backing, and that he was the man—and his, the party—to form a provisional government."⁷⁸

The scenario Ho created was beyond OSS ability to control. The most astute agent handler could not have foreseen how Ho would use a half dozen pistols and a photograph to help secure the political leadership of his people. It was all for appearances, and the actions of the Deer Team leader were not predictable: the presence of Americans at Tan Trao during the Peoples' Congress, then on road to Thai Nguyen, and seeming to engage in the great battle, all occurred when the appearance of American support of the Viet Minh was most useful to Ho.

OSS had no defense against Ho's cleverness, and the skills he had acquired through training by the Comintern and by the master of the black operational arts, Mikhail Borodin. Very little is known of the training Ho received in either case. During his first years in Moscow, 1923–24, he learned "some of the basic techniques of clandestine work" at the University of the Toilers of the East, which trained communist cadre from Asia.⁷⁹ His postgraduate work took place in Canton, 1924–27, when he reconnected with an old Moscow acquaintance, Mikhail Borodin, the "advisor-in-chief to Sun Yat Sen and, later, the Nationalist government."^a Ho proved to be both an exceptional organizer and clandestine operative, with over two decades of experi-

a. Borodin was an associate of Lenin and Stalin, a high functionary of the Comintern, and represented the USSR Politburo. Madame Chiang called him "virtually Russia's pro-consul in Nation-alist China." Source: Madame Chiang Kai-shek, *Conversations with Mikhail Borodin* (World Anti-Communist League, 1977), 4.

ence. That the relatively inexperienced young men of the OSS were no match for him should not be a surprise.

Dealing with political opportunists is in the nature of the intelligence business. It has always been so, and there is no reason to suppose that it will not always be. The most prominent recent example was Ahmad Chalabi, "the Iraqi politician who from exile helped persuade the United States to invade Iraq in 2003." His group, the Iraqi National Congress, "attempted to influence US policy by providing false information through defectors, directed at convincing the United States that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction."⁸⁰

The question becomes, what can an intelligence service do to protect itself in encounters with political opportunists?

In the case of Ho, the OSS failure was in the vetting process. Fenn did his best, but his best was not good enough. He learned that Ho was an anti-French rebel and a communist; but he did not uncover the salient fact: Ho had also been an agent of the Comintern, and probably still was.^b The proper vetting of agent candidates is obviously essential, and extra caution must be exercised when strong political aspirations and involvement are found in an agent-can-

b. In Ho's case, even if Fenn had had unrestricted access to French Intelligence files, he would not have learned Ho's secret. The Ho persona came into existence in 1940, in China, beyond the reach of the colonial security services. To the French, Ho was Nguyen Ai Quoc, and the French services did not make the connection to Ho Chi Minh until Ho publicly came out as Nguyen Ai Quoc in September 1945.

didate. Knowledge of the history of intelligence is a good preventive: knowing what has come before will

help ensure necessary wariness in any good intelligence officer. And there must be a keen awareness in

any intelligence service, not only of the pitfalls of the past, but of the politics of the present.



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ENDNOTES

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56. Ibid., 66.
57. Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (Praeger, 1967) 65, quoted in Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh*, 260.
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