Imperialists Divided: The Views of Tonkin’s Colons before 1914*

by John F. LAFFEY**

Imperialist and anti-imperialist movements inevitably engendered their own stereotyped images, heroes and villains, slogans and clichés. Imperialists took pride in a purported unity of effort which extended from their metropolitan ranks to the colonies where brave military men, enlightened administrators, selfless missionaries, dynamic entrepreneurs and dedicated settlers either defended themselves against barbarous savages or endeavoured to civilize recalcitrant natives. Anti-imperialists, reversing the images, have exalted the heroic freedom fighters who led the struggles of the courageous and generous masses against rapacious colonialists. Such images, however radical their opposition, do not survive unless they contain some elements of truth. But these very elements of truth, along with opposed ideological convictions, have allowed too many historians to mistake rhetoric for reality and, consequently, to overlook the complexity of the imperial experience. One should be able to recognize, for example, that imperialism spawned an extraordinary amount of human suffering without falling back, in blame or praise, on the image, even within a single national context, of a unified imperialist community. The different groups which composed such a community certainly shared a common stake in the domination of other peoples, but they were fully capable of working at cross-purposes, of disparaging each other’s motives, and, indeed, of hating each other intensely. Such at least appears to be the lesson to be derived from the case of the French colonization effort in Tonkin before 1914.

Reflecting on his experience as Governor General of Indochina, Paul Doumer boasted that he had refused to read the local press.¹ Whatever one’s view of Doumer and the fiscal burden he bequeathed to the colony, that decision should arouse some sympathy. Though it may be natural for administrators, colonial and otherwise, to dislike journalistic criticism of their doings, the French newspapers of Indochina do not make for plea-

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** Department of History, Concordia University.

sant reading: they carried racist aspersions on the indigenous peoples, impractical suggestions designed to forward the interests of their readers, and castigations, justified or not, of metropolitan and colonial policies and personalities. The Avenir du Tonkin carried these tendencies farthest. It spoke for Tonkin’s colons. Owned and managed by men with personal stakes in colonial agricultural development, the Avenir du Tonkin drew upon the services of colon contributors and found its most attentive audience in the ranks of the colons. Ranging in tone from peevish querulousness to vitriolic hysteria, it reflected the enormous frustration engendered by the relative failure of the effort at agrarian colonization in Tonkin. No group, aside from that of the colons, escaped its shafts. Its depiction of the Vietnamese deserves separate treatment. This article will be concerned with its treatment of other segments of the imperialist community. Governors General, colonial bureaucrats and magistrates, metropolitan imperialists, all came under attack. The onslaught intensified whenever one of its targets dared to reply and whenever someone had the temerity to criticize the colons themselves. At one in a determination to retain and to exploit Tonkin, the French imperialist community fragmented when it came to the question of how best to accomplish these goals. A survey of the contents of the Avenir du Tonkin, remarkably consistent despite several changes in management, sheds light on the lines of fracture within that community, suggests that imperial failure, quite as much as imperial success, can breed vice, and poses questions about the pathology of a group willing to identify its members with the persecuted Christ. Unlike Christ, however, the colons never believed in turning the other cheek, and they were in a position to make life more difficult for their fellow imperialists.

The Avenir du Tonkin functioned as the protectorate’s Journal Officiel until 1889, and in this early phase of its life carried items like the lyrics of a “Chant national compose par les mandarins et les hommes du peuple tonkinois en honneur de M. Parreau, Resident general en Annam et au Tonkin:"

Powerful country of France,
You produce intelligent men.
The Spirit of War is your strength.

Some grasp of the temper of the Indochinese press can be obtained from the “Revue des journaux” section of the Revue Indo-Chinoise. In 1904 this journal changed to a more scholarly format and, while increasing in value as a source for the more profound French analyses of the societies of Indochina, lost value as a source for the more immediate and cruder expressions of colonial opinion.

3 For the Christ reference, see Henri Laumonier, “Non Sens,” Avenir du Tonkin, 12 February 1905, p. 1. Unfortunately, the copy of the Avenir du Tonkin microfilmed at Paris’ Bibliothèque Nationale has a gap between 11 April 1907 and 21 January 1910. Though it would be of interest to have colon reactions to events like the 1908 attempt at poisoning the Hanoi garrison, these events do not seem to have affected substantially attitudes already formed. The gap would have been a more serious obstacle to the argument presented here if the reformist policies growing out of the Russo-Japanese War had not withered in face of events like the 1908 incident. The gap, however, has affected the structure of the article in one fashion: a discussion of the attitudes of private metropolitan interests has been introduced between the treatments of political developments in France.
To a high degree, you possess the art of governing peoples.
To our weak country, fallen into decadence,
You give your powerful support in saving it from fatal ruin.  

But once the Avenir du Tonkin had ceased to perform official functions, praise for administrators vanished from its pages. Convinced that they possessed “the art of governing peoples,” the colons denied the same “art” to the administration. Indeed, a hatred of bureaucracy soon took root among the colons. It sprang from troubles on the land: for a variety of reasons in each case, the plantations of Cochinchina flourished, while those of Tonkin stagnated.  

Hardly inclined towards self-criticism, Tonkin’s colons blamed the administration for failing to aid their agricultural endeavours. Their attacks on the administration in this regard actually had scant justification: it distributed a sizeable amount of land to them, set up a labor code aimed at the control of rural proletarians, and ignored the innumerable colon violations of the decrees governing land, labor and fiscal policies. With the impact of the Russo-Japanese War, the administration did shift to a somewhat more rigorous line in its dealings with the colons, but even then it backed away from the idea of easing tensions with the Vietnamese through the repurchase of lands conceded to the colons and, on the whole, continued to dream of the development of a more healthy plantation economy dominated by French nationals. But the administration had to set some limits on the more exaggerated of colon claims. The continued tranquillity of an area where “pacification” rested on a fragile base required such a course of action. The political stake in effective control, as well as the centralizing tendencies embedded in the French bureaucratic tradition and the administrators’ sense of belonging to a corporate body with rights and privileges of its own, dictated a refusal to entertain the colons’ demand that they be regarded as the “intermediaries” between the colonial government and the indigenous peoples of Tonkin.  

The colons responded to this denial of their claims to a quasi-feudal status with vituperation directed against the Governors General, the lesser administrative personnel and specific bureaucratic policies.

Colon reaction to Governors General tended to move through a fixed cycle: inquisitive interest in a new appointee, a warm welcome for him, supplications, increasingly critical remarks, bitter attacks, and, after his departure, a nostalgia for the days of his rule as the same pattern unfolded with his successors. Looking back with regret to the once abused Jean-

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4 "Chant national composé par les mandarins et les hommes du peuple tonkinois en l’honneur de M. Parreau, Résident général en Annam et au Tonkin," ibid., 1 September 1888, p. 6.


Louis de Lanessan (June 1891 — December 1894), the colons extended no sympathy to his successor, Armand Rousseau (March 1895 — December 1896): “We will rob nobody of illusions by remarking that a government does not exist in Indochina at the moment, though we have a Governor.” 7 Lanessan, at least in retrospect, possessed the merit of having roused bureaucratic ire by favoring the colons. 8 But Rousseau looked better when compared with Paul Doumer (February 1897 — March 1902). 9 Doumer, a pivotal figure in the colonial development of Indochina, constituted something of a special case. The colons recognized that his appointment lay in the desire of metropolitan political circles to rid France of him, and they feared that, given his political importance, any clash between Doumer and the Minister of Colonies would harm Indochina 10 But a new appointment always raised colon hopes, and in a passing moment of euphoria they decided: “We have had educators, financiers, diplomats, engineers, etc... we finally have an agriculturalist.” 11 The honeymoon lasted about a year. The colons then discovered that they disliked Doumer’s review of concession policy. 12 His program of indirect taxes and monopolies roused even more bitter complaints. This Governor General, moreover, had not bothered to disguise his distaste for the local press. 13 The memory of his rule went a long way to blunt criticism of his successor, Paul Beau (October 1902 — February 1908), but eventually a colon did make the inevitable unfavorable comparison with Doumer. 14

It still took the rule of Albert Sarraut (November 1911 — November 1913), seen by the colons as the representative of a totally misguided colonial reformist movement in France, to revive much real affection for Doumer. 15 Sarraut’s efforts to introduce some degree of reform in Indochina provoked an altogether remarkable threat from the Avenir du Tonkin:

...as is written in the republican catechism, when the law is transformed into an instrument of oppression, revolt becomes the most sacred of duties.

But, short of a general revolt, it will always be possible for a citizen ruined by governmental autocracy to introduce onto the scene citizen Browning, as the editors of La Guerre Sociale put it. 16

Clumsy irony lay behind the threat, for its author was a royalist, little enamoured of republican catechisms and certainly more given to reading L’Action française than La Guerre Sociale. In speaking of general revolt and assassination, even in crude jest, the Avenir du Tonkin had ventured into

16 Ibid.
treacherous waters, and, recognizing the dangers, began to repair its relations with Sarraut even before the Vietnamese assassination of two French officers in Hanoi in 1913 drove home the folly of thoughtless references to violence. 17

Like the Governors General, the more minor administrative personnel came and went with some frequency. The colon complained of this endless circulation of administrators, but whereas they had to take into consideration the personalities and larger policies of the imperial proconsuls, they could content themselves with a static portrayal of the bureaucrats in their demonology. 18 Seen from the colon perspective, the sins of the fonctionnaires were many. They distrusted the colon and interfered with the colonization effort. 19 They put the interests of the natives ahead of those of the colon. 20 They dared to portray themselves as the friends of the natives and to paint the colon as the enemies of the Vietnamese. In France the administrators attacked the colon as “an exploiter of the native, never satisfied and ill-humoured, a wrecker.” 22 In Tonkin these “minor feudal magnates, vomited into our possessions by the Ecole Coloniale,” tried to deny the colon the most elementary rights. 23

Such sentiments, all too obviously tied to the colon’s private interests, threatened to be self-defeating when taken in and of themselves. Colon publicists, consequently, cast their nets farther afield. They

18 “Le Séjour Colonial,” ibid., 10 November 1900, p. 1. The bureaucrats subjected to colon attacks usually remained nameless, but the case of Host Van Vollenhoven, who served as Sarraut’s Secretary General, constituted an exception. The colon attacked him on a variety of grounds: his non-French birth, his name which “smelled a little of cocoa,” his youth, his education at the Ecole coloniale, his service as a Minister of Colonies’ chef de cabinet, his symbolizing the intrusion of African specialists into the Indochinese administration, and his alleged status as “the protégé of M. Clémentel, of the Temps and of international banking.” In pursuing the unsuccessful campaign against him, the Avenir du Tonkin sought, for reasons to be discussed below, to find common ground with the bureaucrats on the scene who might be expected to resent the new appointee. “Le nouveau secrétaire général de l’Indochine,” ibid., 3 July 1912, p. 2; Henri Laumonier, “Tous Héros,” ibid., 6 July 1912, p. 1.
23 Matgioi, “Aidons nous les uns les autres,” ibid., 8 March 1907, p. 1. Attacking the Ecole coloniale earlier, the colon had ranged themselves behind demands in Lyon and Marseille for the creation of provincially based colonial schools designed to serve the needs of different segments of the empire. The passage of time did not temper their hostility to the Parisian school: one of their publicists remarked in 1907: “One harvests as one sows, one has sown the Ecole Coloniale, one has harvested nullities.” “Une Ecole d’Administrateurs,” ibid., 22 December 1898, p. 1; Matgioi, “Le Faisceau,” ibid., 19 January 1907, p. 1; “Enseignement pratique colonial,” ibid., 21-22 August 1911, p. 1.
charged the bureaucrats with simple incompetence: "It is well known today that the administrators, or residents, ignorant of native affairs and the Vietnamese language, are absolutely incapable of governing a province."  

Victims of routine, an obsessive interest in minutiae and secure employment, the bureaucrats, in the colons' view, hardly led a real life, for such a life primarily involved combat. The administrators, moreover, had an unfortunate tendency to multiply, and the colons feared that the French colonies would come to resemble those "South American Republics where there are as many officers as soldiers." Pursuing this line of attack, one of their spokesmen outlined a primitive form of Parkinson's Law: "Once upon a time one said that everytime there is a function, there is a fonctionnaire; today one might say: everytime there is a function, there are ten fonctionnaires, and everytime there are fonctionnaires without functions, one creates functions." Though such criticism was often justified, the picture of the average bureaucrat which emerged from it ended in caricature: he remained featureless, aside from his many vices, the most notable being his tendency to persecute hardworking and patriotic colons who knew much better than he how to handle the subject populations.

The colons made a better case in attacking specific administrative policies. Any policy which diverted attention away from agriculture roused their ire. Here they could pursue their own interests while making claims on behalf of the Vietnamese. Complaining in 1896 that no portion of a recent government loan had gone into agricultural development, they pointed to the current famine in Tonkin as evidence that the administration had done nothing for the mass of the native population. The major loan secured by Doumer in 1898 did not impress them:

What matters the natives dead of famine? The ruined colons? The bureaucrats whose advancement has been delayed? The speculation on the piastre? Life costlier for all? The merchants and industrialists without business? The colonization of Tonkin stationary for two years? What matters any of this since M. Doumer has returned with the funds?

Doumer's railways should be reserved for the future, and money should be invested in irrigation and other works of immediate usefulness. The administration's failure to provide adequately for irrigation continued to disturb them. In 1906 a colon spokesman flatly charged that nothing had been done for agriculture during the twenty years since the conquest.

29 M.N., "De la Colonisation (3e article)," ibid., 10 November 1898, p. 1.
The *colons* also bitterly attacked the tax burden imposed upon the Vietnamese. In 1896 the *Avenir du Tonkin* castigated the administration for not remitting taxes in famine-struck Bac Giang province and for compounding this mistake by arresting "the canton chiefs, the mayors and the notables of these unfortunate villages." \(^{33}\) Doumer's regressive fiscal program infuriated the *colons*. They charged him with bleeding Tonkin white. \(^{34}\)

But the confirmation of their dire prophecies about the program brought some twisted comfort: the *colons*, while expressing regrets and concern, found a certain grim satisfaction when a clash between agents of the alcohol monopoly and villagers left three Vietnamese dead. \(^{35}\) The onslaught on the taxes and monopolies hardly slackened with the passage of time. \(^{36}\) Just as in the case of the administrative failure to do more for agriculture, the attacks upon the fiscal policies could be justified in objective terms. But here too self-interest entered the picture. The *colons* worried about the threat to security posed by the tax burden. \(^{37}\) Moreover, they also found in this issue an opportunity to present themselves as the defenders of the Vietnamese, whom they often maligned in other contexts, against a blundering and rapacious bureaucracy. \(^{38}\)

This role fitted neatly into the *colon* self-image. At its most metaphorical the vision of self took the following form: "... living in the bush, in the midst of the natives, he resembles... one of the great and robust oaks of France, transplanted here, on a foreign soil, in the midst of a forest of bamboo; he dominates the scene, he sees what happens near and far, and, if he does not always have the freedom to say what he thinks, he is always free to think of what he sees." \(^{39}\) From the *colon* perspective, here lay a major cause of the difficulties with the administrators:

> By the very fact that he dominates the scene, he troubles some; one does not dare, however, to cut him down, and he always remains upright, proudly raised above the bamboo, braving squalls and tempests which still do not prevent him from seeing what goes on. He sees in particular the bamboo forest... bend under the rain of vexations and continual injustices, which destroys some bamboo. These are the natives succumbing under the enormous weight of badly collected and badly divided taxes, and of arbitrary corvées, without speaking of the multiple other charges. \(^{40}\)

But despite all the metaphorical strength, impotence could not be disavowed:

> In their distress the natives appeal to the *colon*, who witnesses their suffering, who understands them, who wishes to succour them, appeal to him to vindicate their just claims and to render them justice. But he cannot do it. He has no influence with the powers that be and remains a simple spectator of the

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\(^{33}\) "Rigueurs incompréhensibles," *ibid.*, 2 May 1896, p. 1.

\(^{34}\) SIMPLEX, "Et après la saignée blanc???," *ibid.*, 3 August 1898, p. 1.


\(^{40}\) *Ibid.*
war waged on the yellows by the whites. The only right of the colon is summed up in a single word: to see, to see the misery and the discontent of the people growing daily while waiting to witness revolt. Then he will see many other things. He will see himself attacked by everybody simultaneously and accused of having exasperated the people by his inhuman deeds and of being the cause of the revolt. Such is the lot of the colon.\textsuperscript{41}

The imagery, wooden in more than one respect, conveys something of colon frustration, but, more important, such a depiction of the colon’s condition was self-serving: it reinforced a heroic self-image while allowing the colons to indulge in an even greater self-deception.

A more objective analysis, of which the colons were incapable, might have suggested that the winds of imperialism had warped and stunted these French “oaks” and that, had the agricultural efforts been more successful, the sinking of their twisted roots into the soil of Tonkin would have drawn sustenance away from the bamboo forest just as effectively as the actions of the bureaucrats. Nothing better indicates the basic thrust of colon attitudes than their views on colonial legal practices. They insisted on defining justice as the protection and extension of their own interests to the exclusion of all other interests. Their most immediate complaints centered on the difficulties involved in litigation with Vietnamese sharecroppers who defaulted on the advances made to them. The colons believed that the costs of such legal action nullified its effectiveness.\textsuperscript{42} One commentator estimated that costs in a case involving a claim of 160 francs against a defaulting sharecropper ran as high as 95.42 francs.\textsuperscript{43} Another colon explained that, if the disputes between planters and sharecroppers were seldom that important in themselves, the sheer number of these conflicts posed serious problems: were a colon to seek legal redress in each case, he might have to travel one hundred to one hundred and fifty kilometres each time, only to discover often enough that appeal to the law could achieve little for him.\textsuperscript{44} The colons charged, in brief, that the legal system did not answer to their economic needs.

They, however, did not leave the matter there. In their view, colonial legal structures and practices ranked with the neglect of agriculture and the tax program as gross errors made by misguided and incompetent fellow imperialists. As legal institutions and procedures changed in time, so too did colon criticism of their details. Yet the main lines of criticism remained constant. The colons had no wish to be judged by native mandarins, about whom they remained ambivalent.\textsuperscript{45} At the same time they had scant respect for French magistrates and legal officials. The centralizing tendencies

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} “Syndicat des Planteurs du Tonkin,” \textit{ibid.}, 21 April 1901, pp. 3-4, p. 3.
of the magistrates disturbed them. They also attacked the organization of
the colonial judicial service, which often enough did send its magistrates
scurrying from one end of the empire to the other. Prolonged residence in
a single area, of course, would have better allowed the magistrates to be­
come familiar with indigenous customs and language, but the colons
transformed a valid point in an all too characteristic fashion: “When one
brings to the bar a Frenchman, a Dahomean and a Vietnamese, all guilty of
the same offense, he (the magistrate) must know how to distinguish the
man from the savage, and the savage from the malevolent monkey.”
Apparently incapable of making such distinctions, the magistrates commit­
ted what the colons could only regard as crime: “There seems to reign in
the colonial magistrature, as presently composed, a tendency to favor the
native against the Frenchman.” The case of a M. Testard confirmed their
fears about the judicial service. Testard had attacked and wounded a Viet­
namese who allegedly had cried. “All Frenchmen are pigs.” During the
course of this former soldier’s second trial the prosecutor, a M. Lévy, dar­
ed to refer to Testard as “cowardly.” Testard received a suspended sen­
tence of twenty-four hours in prison, an excessive penalty in colon eyes,
and, refusing to forgive Lévy’s characterization of him, one of their public­
cists gratuitously dragged into the Avenir du Tonkin a rhapsody on how
French soldiers treated Jews in Algeria.

French justice provoked other charges. Objectively, it may have
made little sense to require Vietnamese participants in French judicial pro­
cedings to swear the proper French oath, but colon ridicule of the require­
ment possessed distinct tones of its own: “After having subjected the
natives to the justice of regular French tribunals, certainly ‘ one of the most
stupidities committed here is administering to the Vietnamese, morally and
physically degenerate people, the solemn oath of honest, free, educated
generous men.’” Continuing along the same lines, this critic posed
a question: “Would it not be more rational to administer to monkeys the
oaths of monkeys, and to Europeans their own oaths” He concluded:
“to administer our oath to the Vietnamese, who are absolutely incapable
of comprehending grandeur and sanctity... is to serve strawberries in cham­
pagne to swine.” The concern with distinctions between the colonizers
and the colonized also emerged in the protest against Europeans, charged
with or convicted of crimes, being taken publically through the streets of
Hanoi, for this practice allegedly exposed all Europeans to Vietnamese rid­
icule. Indeed, for the same reason, the colons wanted Vietnamese spec­
tators excluded from judicial proceedings involving Europeans.

49 MONES, “Tous Francais,” ibid., 10 February 1897, pp. 2-3, p. 3.
51 ibid.
52 ibid.
would also have liked to remove native interpreters from cases pitting Europeans and Vietnamese against each other. Having defined interpretation as "grand and... noble" work, they decided that it required "knowledge and qualities hard to find in an Asiatic." 55 Momentarily forgetting their opposition to the multiplication of European personnel, they suggested the creation of "a corps of European interpreters" like that which existed in Algeria. 56

An insistence on repression runs through colon ruminations on the law. They wanted the French code to provide harsher punishments and regretted the inclination of the judiciary to dispense with the death penalty. 57 Hence, they greeted the wave of repression unleashed by Sarraut after the 1913 bombing incident with delight. 58 On the whole, however, the colons believed French law to be insufficiently rigorous. They welcomed, therefore, those occasions when their compatriots took the law into their own hands. 59 More significantly, dissatisfaction with French legal procedures led the colons to discover initially unsuspected virtues in traditional Vietnamese legal practice. Among its merits could be counted the principle of collective responsibility. 60 Traditional corporal punishments appealed to them even more: the colons argued that, not only did the Vietnamese understand such penalties better than prison, but that they actually preferred them, for prison sentences deprived their families of support. 61 The latter point may have had some limited validity, but the colons chose to rest their case on the nature of Vietnamese character: "The Vietnamese, essentially a liar, lacking moral sense, has no concept of honor such as we understand it. A penal condemnation brings him no sense of shame. Only corporal punishment acts directly on the native's mind." 62 Expressed in a variety of forms, the refrain remained the same: "The yellow's mentality is made in such a way that he only respects what he fears." 63

The climate of colon opinion, most clearly expressed in attitudes toward the law, brought them into the battle being waged in France between the proponents of Assimilation and the increasingly powerful advocates of Association. 64 Hardly sophisticated ideologues themselves, the colons appropriated the arguments of metropolitan theorists to justify positions they

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56 Ibid., See also B., "Une Plaie," ibid., 25 July 1900, p. 1.
60 LISBETH G., ibid., 24 November 1899, p. 1.
64 For a general treatment of these theories during this period, see Raymond F. BETTS, Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).
had already reached on their own. But they threw themselves into the struggle with gusto. The Assimilationists, of course, constituted the enemy. These misguided spirits continued to cling to the mistaken idea of racial equality. From the defects of the legal system to the 1913 bombing incident, Assimilation could be blamed for much of what had gone wrong in Tonkin. The theorists of Association, men like L. de Saussure and Gustave Le Bon, with their stress on racial differences, made far more sense to the colons. Yet, as the colons learned, Association could be interpreted in more than one fashion. They would come to complain: “Les Combès et les Pelletan export jetsam to Indochina, the Vietnamese pays to maintain these people, and that is called Association.” But behind such a self-satisfying fusion of concern for the Vietnamese with political prejudice lurked a more fundamental question: “Will there be a policy of Association for the colon as there is for the Vietnamese?”

Etienne Clémentel, a member of the second and third Rouvier cabinets (January 1905 — March 1906), became the first Minister of Colonies to call publically for the implementation of Association. Either because it had become so accustomed to the contrary tendency or because of some more mundane error, the Avenir du Tonkin initially portrayed him as demanding Assimilation. The correction of this mistake, however, did not make the colons any fonder of Clémentel. In general they disliked Ministers of Colonies: to take but two cases, they charged Trouillot, one of the several Colonial Ministers of the Meline ministry (April 1896 — June 1898), with managing to destroy the work of ten years in three months, and they dismissed Milliès-Lacroix, who became Minister of Colonies in the Clemenceau ministry (October 1906 — July 1909), because he had never given any thought to the colonies before assuming the ministry and, perhaps more significantly, for being “too much the perfect bourgeois to be a good colonial.” But Clémentel especially enraged the colons. He arrived at his ministerial post as metropolitan criticism of the colon attitudes towards the Vietnamese mounted as a result of the sobering Russo-Japanese War, and, in response to such criticism, he dared to project a visit to Indochina in order to organize the defences of France’s Far Eastern possession

and to settle "the differences which exist between the colons and the natives." The colons hardly considered a Minister of Colonies to be a fit judge of their affairs. Their invective, consequently, reached new depths: they painted "Nguyễn van Kêlêmentêlê" as the "partisan of association and the victim of disassociation." They offered their own explanation of the source of his delusions: "On account of resting amoureously on a small neo-cohinchinese breast, M. Clementel has thought to divine the aspirations of the Vietnamese soul." The latter effort disturbed the colons more than the former. For them, the real problem with Clémentel's policy lay in his interpretation of Association: "Under the coloring of Association, we raise the Yellows, we lower the Whites."

The colons received another shock when Georges Clemenceau, who had opposed Jules Ferry's acquisition of Tonkin years before, came to power in 1906. The Avenir du Tonkin published an impressive catalogue of his anti-imperialist activities — a call for the abandonment of Corsica in 1871, an attack upon French rights in Egypt in 1877, opposition to the intervention in Tunisia in 1881, the blocking of French cooperation with the British in the bombardment of Alexandria in 1882, the obstruction of action in regard to Madagascar in 1885 and, of course, his role in bringing Ferry down in 1885 — before it posed the question of on whose behalf he worked. Having managed to suggest that he acted as a British agent, the colon journal did not overlook his entanglement in the Panama scandal. But Clemenceau resembled William Gladstone in at least one important respect: willing to denounce colonial acquisitions when out of power, neither statesman showed himself inclined to renounce them when holding office. By 1906 Clemenceau could not be ranked among the active anti-imperialists, a group upon which the colons expended remarkably little venom. The Clemenceau ministry appeared to the colons to pose a more subtle threat than aggressive anti-imperialism. They expected it to pursue an African course: "... it is good taste in M. Clemenceau's entourage to play at being the African and to forget Tonkin." Having little use for Clemenceau's Minister of Colonies, Millés-Lacroix, the colons found what comfort they could in the notion that France would have its real Colonial Minister in Stephen Pichon, the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Politicians, the "barnums politiques," could create real problems for the colons. But colonial affairs seldom occupied the center of the Third

75 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Matgioi, ibid., 8 February 1907, p. 1. The appearance of Onésime Reclus' Lâchons l'Asie, Prenons l'Afrique (Paris: Librairie universelle, 1904) had increased colon sensitivity to the dangers of an African orientation within the imperialist movement.
79 Matgioi, Avenir du Tonkin, 8 February 1907, p. 1.
Republic’s political stage. In order to wield some influence in France, the colons had to work with and through the metropolitan business communities possessed of a stake in empire and the colonial lobbies patronized by these communities. On occasion the colons mobilized the support of these metropolitan groups, but more often, at best, the contradictions within the imperialist movement made relations difficult and, at worst, colon views and activities alienated the more powerful of the metropolitan imperialists. Like other French colonials, Tonkin’s colons suffered from and protested against the neo-mercantilist orientation of the mother-country’s tariff policy. In their opposition to the tariff structure they were at one with such metropolitan free traders as the Lyonnais Ulysse Pila, the man sometimes described as the real “vicerey” of Indochina, but at the same time they attacked his Magasins généraux de Haiphong as monopolistic and accused the Pila family of manipulating Haiphong’s Chamber of Commerce on behalf of its own interests. Possible conflicts of interest led to other ambivalent reactions: the colons, for instance, attacked French banks for investing in Siberia at a time when Upper Tonkin stood ready for development, but they also feared large scale investment in Tonkinse agriculture.

Essentially little men caught up in a larger, menacing economic world, the colons struggled to survive and to prosper in that world. Far more successful in surviving than in prospering, they nursed all the rancours felt by men, engaged in an active life thousands of miles from France, for the colonial rentier comfortably ensconced in metropolitan cities like Paris, Marseille and Lyon. The issue of the awarding of decorations and ranks in the Legion of Honor to metropolitan imperialists became a veritable obsession with the colons: in their perspective, the parasites bathed in glory while the true heroes went unrewarded. The government often provided these honors in connection with the Colonial Expositions held in France, undertakings which the colons considered excessively expensive and total-

81 For a discussion of the importance of the business communities, see John F. Laffey, “Municipal Imperialism in Nineteenth Century France,” Historical Reflections/Reflexions historiques, 1 (June, 1974), 81-114.
ly useless. The Marseille Exposition of 1906 especially infuriated them. Here one of the most sacred of colon taboos had been violated: "The saddest part is that the metropolitan's habitual frivolity has produced a deplorable effect on the natives sent there. Never have French women given proof of such indecency..." But neither sexual fear, a common accompaniment of racism, nor the thwarted mania for decorations prevented the colonists from grasping some of the real dynamics of French imperialism, and hence they occasionally sounded like social radicals. The Avenir du Tonkin, reflecting upon Victor Augagneur's move from the mayoralty of Lyon to the Governor Generalship of Madagascar, charged with more than a little truth: "...it is not a man, it is a city that one names Governor General, it is Lyon that, through the influence of its great industry, has bent the interests of policy in favor of the interest of its capitalists."

Up to a point the major metropolitan imperialist organizations, bodies tied to groups like the Lyonnais capitalists, tolerated the colonists. These organizations, after all, had a stake in maintaining that all went well or at least could go well within the empire. Both the Comité de l'Asie française and the Union Coloniale devoted attention to instances of colon success in Tonkin. But both organizations also proved willing to discuss the need for the colonial government to repurchase the concessions and to distribute the lands regained to the Vietnamese. These metropolitan organizations, moreover, felt much less constraint than the administrators when they came to the consideration of the faults of the colonists. The Russo-Japanese War convinced them of the need to bring the colonists under firmer control.

Arguing that "reason and sentiment, interest and justice" dictated a greater solicitude for the needs of the peoples of the empire as "the more efficacious and the surer way of gaining their sympathies and, consequently, their fidelity", Charles Depince warned in the pages of the Union coloniale's Quinzaine coloniale that the administrators' efforts to achieve such results could be "paralyzed, even thwarted" by the attitudes of the colonists towards the natives. He singled out Tonkin as the area of the empire where expressions of "mistrust and hate" for the natives assumed the most constant and violent character. Henri Laumonier, at once a colon and the most racist of Tonkin journalists, replied to Depince: "Annamitophobes!"

86 CASSANDRE, ibid., 2 March 1905, p. 1; LAUMONIER, ibid., March 2, 1913, p. 1.
88 Alf. MEYNARD, "Courrier de Hanoi," ibid., 21 October 1905, p. 1. For Lyonnais imperialism during this period, see LAFFEY, Proceedings. It would be interesting to explore the question of whether the note of social radicalism was later incorporated into an imperial fascism. The colonists could be seen as occupying a status very roughly comparable to that of the Central European Mittelstand.
92 Ibid., p. 698.
and why? Because we refuse to play the role of victims, refuse to allow ourselves to be pillaged and assassinated."

Shortly thereafter the Bulletin du Comité de l’Asie française carried an announcement of its "astonishment" and "regret" that an article entitled "La loi de Lynch" had appeared in a Tonkinese journal. The Bulletin went on to charge that "the state of mind of our confrère seems to us singularly inopportune and unconscious of the nature of the task we have to perform in Indochina." Laumônier, in reply, pointed out that the cry for lynch law had come after the murder of one colon and the acquittal of Vietnamese charged with the murder of another and that its espousal by a single journalist hardly meant that Tonkin’s press had committed itself to massacre. Returning to his polemic against the Quinzaine coloniale, he now argued that its "best collaborators are here in... the government bureaus." Laumônier, in short, brought together the colon hatreds for metropolitan imperialist and colonial bureaucrats.

Political sagacity did not distinguish the colons. When they drew up a detailed list of complaints and demands in 1906, the Union Coloniale flatly rejected two of their most important claims. The Quinzaine coloniale dismissed the demand for the creation of representative bodies structured along the lines of the Algerian Financial Delegations with the observation that the size of the French minority in Indochina did not warrant such a course of action. It also rejected the demand for the introduction of land legislation modelled on the Australian Torrens Act, a move which would have pulverized Vietnamese property patterns, with a more telling observation: such legislation would "transform this people of small property holders... into an agricultural proletariat inclined to be swayed by all the promptings of misery and social revolt." Yet the following year Joseph Chailley, the secretary of the Union Coloniale who had expressed his reservations about the colons on several occasions, lent their claims some limited support. The colons erred in tending to lump all their metropolitan imperialist critics together, for such backing, whatever its limitations, underscored the extent to which the imperialist establishment still contented itself with calls for the removal of "abuses" and refused to think in terms of structural reform within the empire.

95 Ibid.
97 Ibid. The ellipsis appears in the article.
98 "Les vœux des planteurs du Tonkin," La Quinzaine coloniale, 10 February 1907, pp. 81-84, p. 82.
Harsher critics of the situation in Indochina emerged outside the ranks of the imperialist organizations. But most of them, even when calling for radical change, remained firmly committed to imperialism. Captain Fernand Bernard charged in 1901 that there existed no greater danger to French Indochina than the land concession system: "colonization understood in this fashion adds nothing to the wealth of the country, it only increases the misery of the Vietnamese."\(^{101}\) Eleven years later J. Morel, a colonial administrator who had served in Tonkin, published an academic thesis which revealed the transgressions of the colons in all their nakedness. Morel, scarcely an anti-imperialist, worried about the land concession becoming "a foyer of anti-French agitation."\(^{102}\) Both authors infuriated the colons, but Morel drove them to a greater frenzy.\(^{103}\) Not only did his detailed facts and figures cut much closer to the bone, but his thesis, giving rise to dispute even in the Chamber of Deputies, appeared at a time of great difficulty for the colons.\(^{104}\)

During the years immediately before the outbreak of World War I the colons confronted challenges which seemed to dwarf those brought about by the Russo-Japanese War when the repurchase of the concessions had been considered, the metropolitan imperialist organizations had been antagonized, and a Minister of Colonies had even considered a visit to Indochina. They now had to worry about whether the acquisition of Morocco would lead to the neglect of Indochina.\(^{105}\) They also found themselves to be the target of novelists. Paul Adam’s La Force and Emile Fabre’s Les Sauterelles produced the inevitable furious reaction: "How do writers... like Paul Adam and Fabre... produce these fantasies in colonial matters? The doctors of a future neurological congress will have to enlighten us on this point of mental pathology."\(^{106}\) However important such works may have been in influencing metropolitan opinion, they expressed rather than created sentiments which menaced the colons. Seen in this light, perhaps the most interesting aspect of Les Sauterelles lay in its translation into Vietnamese by a French army officer whom the colons promptly described as "a valiant warrior who during his sojourn here did not leave the offices of the Conseil de Guerre in Hanoi."\(^{107}\) The real threats to the colons emerged from two overlapping movements: the concern of military men with strengthening the French army through the introduction of more colonial units and the forceful expression on the metropolitan political stage, in the Chamber of Deputies, of colonial reformist views which, outstripping the caution of the im-

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\(^{104}\) M. VIOLETTE, ibid., 10e législature, 1ère séance du 17 décembre, 18 December 1912, pp. 3239-3274, p. 3248.


perialist lobbies, had been growing in strength since the turn of the century.

As the international situation in Europe became more threatening, military men became interested in "the France of one hundred millions" as a reservoir of man-power. They recognized that changes would have to take place in the empire if they were to secure substantial numbers of loyal colonial troops. Generals Famin and Pennequin, both of whom had served in Tonkin, turned their attention to the situation in Indochina. Their views immediately alienated the colons. The Avenir du Tonkin accused Famin of having "fallen... into fashionable eccentricity by doing his part in the humanitarian concert." The general had made the utopian mistake of wanting the French to make the Vietnamese love them. Two years later, with the old primitive rebel De Tham stirring once again in the uplands, colons and others met in Hanoi to found a Ligue des intérêts français. This "assembly of 1100 citizens" protested against many of the new developments, among them:

II. ...the views of General Pennequin, including the most serious: "De Tham is a hero worthy of all our admiration, as he has that of the whole Vietnamese people," a view which constitutes a justification of assassination, theft and piracy.

III. ...the project of General Pennequin relative to the creation of a Vietnamese army which will assure the ruin of French domination in Indochina.

A colon spokesman did not hesitate to dip into the past in order to discredit the general: understanding the aboriginal peoples better than the Vietnamese, Colonel Pennequin had gained his Tonkinese victories in the mountains rather than in the delta region where in May, 1892 the bands of Doê Ngu allegedly played with him like a child. The colon reaction to the idea of a larger Vietnamese force staffed in some part by Vietnamese officers rested upon two perceptions. Although they admitted the superiority of the Tonkinese tirailleur in time of war, they discounted the dangers of war and hence preferred the militiaman to the tirailleur: "While the militiaman... remains submissive, defers to all the authorities and keeps his salutary fear of our code, the tirailleur, because of this déracinement... which makes an individual of him, an individual very proud of but very burdened by this unexpected individuality, is an easy prey for all the smart talkers and all the fomenters of discords." The colon position on Vietnamese officers had a more telling logic of its own: "...either these Vietnamese will be worthy of being French officers... and then their first and most noble concern will be to throw us into the sea. Or these people will content themselves with their pay, the honors of

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109 Ibid.
their position, the joy of wearing a showy uniform... and I do not want them as officers of the French army." 113

Had they not been paralleled by increasing metropolitan interest in Indochina, the wishes of the military men would have still roused colon ire but also would have produced less real concern. In 1909, 1910 and 1911 Adolphe Messimy and Maurice Viollette presented colonial budget reports to the Chamber of Deputies which described conditions in Indochina in scorching terms. With interest in the colony already awakened by the Vietnamese attempt in 1908 at poisoning the Hanoi garrison, heated debate took place in the Palais Bourbon, with the Avenir du Tonkin being singled out for some special parliamentary attention. 114 Viollette, a radical colonial reformer and not an anti-imperialist, came to carry the burden of the attack on Indochinese conditions in the Chamber of Deputies. 115 Having earlier accused "the judeo-masonic Republic" of lacking interest in the colonies, the colons now had to cope with colonial affairs attracting too much political attention in France. 116 Their hostile reactions to this development took a variety of complementary and contradictory forms.

The colons attempted to repair relations with the bureaucrats. This course of action entailed forgetting their previous complaints, many of which were now repeated by parliamentarians who, on the whole, treated the administrators more roughly than the colons. The hierarchy of colon hatreds eased an incomplete transition in attitudes. A revenue agent had been killed, and during the course of the judicial investigation the president of Saigon’s criminal court exploded at a witness from that service: "By your abuse of powers, by your exactions, by your countless misdeeds, you have made the populations hate you, and if some of you have perished, do not be astonished. It is written in the scriptures: ‘He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.’" 117 The colons had nurtured similar sentiments for years, but they also had always disliked magistrates more than administrative agents. They now swept to the defense of these agents. The new Ligue des intérêts français sought to bring together the fonctionnaires with the colons. If the second and third points of its program were directed against the plans of the military men, the first and fourth points were designed to appeal to the bureaucrats:

115 Maurice Viollette, 1re séance du 3 avril, Chambre des Députés, 10e Législature — Session ordinaire de 1911, ibid., 4 April 1911, 1686-89; Maurice Viollette, ibid., December 20, 1912, 3296-3302, 3305-3306.
117 Quoted in Supplement, 5 July 1912, p. 4.
The assembly of 1100 citizens...

I. Protests against the injurious and unjust words pronounced by councillor Nacquart, president of the Criminal Court of Saigon, and addressed to the revenue corps of Indochina, words which constitute an encouragement of crime.

IV. Protests against the nomination of M. Van Vollenhoven [for the Secretary Generalship], a nomination which constitutes a scandalous promotion, an act of astonishing favoritism, an act which gives Indochina an ambitious administrator, completely ignorant of the country, who affirms a real scorn for the public opinion of Indochina, for its needs, and also for the competence of administrators who have made their careers in Indochina and possess claims which M. Vollenhoven lacks, notably that of belonging to families who were French in ages when one fought for France.¹¹⁸

Laumônier, however, remained skeptical of the new organization's potential: he pointed out the timidity of private individuals and the unwillingness of bureaucrats to run the risk of "governmental thunderbolts."¹¹⁹ Undoubtedly, he had some right on his side when he considered the probable reactions of the bureaucrats, but at the same time old enmities could not be easily buried.

Conspiracy provided a satisfying explanation of the attacks upon the colons. In one variation they saw themselves as the sacrificial offerings in a plot arranged by the bureaucrats in an attempt to shift responsibility for Indochina's problems from their own shoulders, where it belonged, to those of the colons.¹²⁰ In another version they suggested that a division of imperial spoils had taken place in which Eugene Etienne, the noted imperialist politician, received Africa and "the patrons of Viollette who is only a valet" received Madagascar and Indochina.¹²¹ Following this line of thought and again striking a note of social radicalism, the chief spokesman for the Avenir du Tonkin posed some pertinent questions: "A group like the international consortium of the Yunnan construction company, enterprises like Chieze et Menard, have caused, through the ferocious rapacity of those who benefit from them, many deaths, while impoverishing the colony by carrying millions away from it. Why then do our parliamentarians, so ardent in the struggle against humble and defenseless colons, remains mute when it is a question of fighting these devastating "sharks"? Are there State pardons for the great pirates of finance?"¹²²

A new note of defensiveness appeared. The colons denied that they were slave masters out of the pages of Uncle Tom's Cabin.¹²³ But they also unconsciously repeated an argument used by Southern plantation owners in the quarrel with Northern abolitionists: "The colons of Tonkin... have at all times treated their native auxiliaries with humanity, because they know perfectly well that the cooperation of these workers is

¹¹⁸ "Procès-Verbal," Avenir du Tonkin, 5 July 1912, p. 6. See also n. 18.
¹²¹ Le PASSANT, ibid., 7 June 1911, p. 1.
¹²³ Ibid.
indispensable to them." Carefully excluding any of their number from the catalogue, they admitted that nasty incidents did take place: "Because a soldier, after drinking, will beat an unfortunate rickshaw coolie, because a French woman, already unstrung by the heat, will box the ear of an insolent boy, because a police agent, exasperated by a vagabond's silence, will thrash him, a small group of metropolitans launches anathemas against us." In the colon view, the metropolitan critics, especially Viollette, generalized much too quickly from such scattered instances of colonial misbehavior. Unfortunately, from the colon perspective, the ill-informed criticisms made in the Chamber of Deputies reached Tonkin where some Vietnamese interpreted them as an "encouragement to sedition."

Confronted with this danger and scarcely inclined by temperament to defensiveness, the colons, directing most of their venom against Viollette, "the Hébert of the Third," counter-attacked. The onslaught on Viollette eventually slackened. Whatever subsequent recriminations over ultimate responsibilities, significant manifestations of unrest from below have a marvelous way of leading quarreling groups within a ruling strata to compose their differences. The Hanoi bombing incident of April 1913 paved the way for a truce. Governor General Sarraut, hitherto denounced as Viollette's man, won colon support for the ruthlessness of his response to the incident. Viollette proclaimed in the Annales Coloniales: "No, no policy of weakness." Impressed by this stand, Viollette's most severe colon critic acknowledged they shared a common concern with the condition of the Vietnamese and appealed to the parliamentarian not to judge all colonials in terms of "some brutes," isolated exceptions whose existence confirmed the general rule of the sterling qualities of the French of Indochina. Differences, of course, remained. Viollette still came in for colon criticism. Metropolitan journalists, either having taken the temperature of the colon press or remembering Laumônier's untoward reference to "citizen Browning," charged their colonial confrères with responsibility for the bombing incident. But the crisis had ended. The colons returned to their more usual complaints: "The government of the Republic has created a Colonial Office, several Colonial Expositions and a special Colonial School where function numerous fonctionnaires who

124 Ibid.
129 "Reponse de M. De Monpezat a un article de M. Viollette," ibid., 22 November 1912, pp. 3-4, p. 3; SPECTATOR, "Comment M. Sarraut rentre en France," ibid., 28 September 1913, p. 1.
131 Ibid.
cultivate *fonctionnarisme*. The government of the Republic calls that 'colonizing'.”

Like other imperialists, Tonkin’s *colons* were insatiable. However much they longed for them, the ribbons and crosses of the Legion of Honor would not have satisfied the *colons*. More government concern with irrigation would have been appreciated, but it would not have tempered criticism of other facets of colonial policy. Perhaps the granting of feudal powers and prerogatives over the land and the indigenous populations would have quieted them, at least until the inevitable explosion which would have led them in turn to more hysterical attacks on the offending populations and the government which had allowed them to get out of hand. In any event, although the colonial government did a remarkable amount for the *colons*, it could not pursue a course of action which would interfere with its own powers and its need to extract the revenues necessary to meet the charges on its loans. Faced with this check and the relative failure of their agrarian undertakings, the frustrated *colons* gave free rein to vilification of their fellow imperialists, in Indochina and in France, and to racist ravings. Their hysteria reached fever pitch during and immediately after the Russo-Japanese War, when the metropolitan imperialists lost patience with them and the government authorities showed signs of taking a firmer line, and, even more important, during the years immediately before the outbreak of World War I when radical imperial reformers subjected *colon* attitudes and activities to critical scrutiny in the Chamber of Deputies. Yet on both occasions, in giving more vehement vent to outrage and hatred, the *colons* only expressed sentiments constantly nurtured in more normal times.

Little, if anything, can be said in extenuation of *colon* attitudes. Yet, the consideration of their views of fellow imperialists calls for some shading. However self-interested *colon* motives were, their criticisms of the bureaucracy were not wholly mistaken. Compared to the crude and grasping *colons*, the apparently more moderate and certainly more cultivated metropolitan imperialists who supported organizations like the Union Coloniale and the Comité de l’Asie française reaped far more of the profits flowing from the exploitation of Tonkin without being subjected, as the *colons* bitterly noted, to any sweeping criticism from the imperial reformers. The *colons* thrived on self-delusion — hypocrisy alone does not wholly explain their declarations of sympathy for the indigenous peoples suffering under the harsh burden of taxes, monopolies and corvées and their brutal treatment of the same peoples in their discussions of the workings of the legal system — but they were not necessarily any more prone to self-delusion than the Viollettes and the Sarrauts who wished the subject populations well, worked for reform, and met popular resistance with repression. Finally, although the *colons* provided their fellow imperialists with ample reason to dislike them, they were never abandoned. Whatever the

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fissures within the imperialist bloc, its component groups continued to constitute a community whose members shared a common stake in domination and exploitation, a basic solidarity of interest in empire.