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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **M. Kathryn Edwards**, Bucknell University

General Charles de Gaulle and the American war in Vietnam have both been the subject of extensive scholarship, but relatively few studies have focused explicitly on de Gaulle's Vietnam policy during the era of the American war.¹ Moreover, if the position of the French during the Vietnam War has been of interest to American historians, it is a subject that until recently had yet to be fully explored by French scholars. Based on extensive research in French and American archives, Pierre Journoud's *De Gaulle et le Vietnam* goes beyond political biography to present a detailed account of the evolution of the Franco-Vietnamese relationship from 1946 to 1969, including the often divergent opinions of President de Gaulle and the Quai d'Orsay. Although Journoud's focus is the Franco-Vietnamese relationship, de Gaulle's difficult relationship with Washington is an equally important element of his narrative.

¹ On Franco-American relations during the Vietnam War, see Marianna Sullivan, *France's Vietnam Policy: A Study in French-American Relations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978). De Gaulle's Vietnam policy is dealt with explicitly in Fredrik Logevall, "De Gaulle, Neutralization, and American Involvement in Vietnam, 1963-64," *Pacific Historical Review* 61 no. 1 (February 1992), 69-102; Yuko Torikata, "Reexamining de Gaulle's Peace Initiative on the Vietnam War," *Diplomatic History* 31 no. 5 (November 2007), 909-938. It is also addressed in several works of larger scope, including Maurice Vaïsse, *La Grandeur: Politique étrangère du général de Gaulle 1958-1969* (Paris: Fayard, 1998) and Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). On Franco-American relations during the French Indochina War, see Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California press, 2005), Kathryn Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007) and Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2012).

De Gaulle's central role in the escalation of tensions and the outbreak of the Indochina War in 1945-46 is well-covered territory,² and rather than contribute new evidence, the chapter dedicated to this period ("The Original Misunderstanding") is intended to examine the origins of de Gaulle's relationship with the newly proclaimed Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), and more specifically his relationship with President Ho Chi Minh. Although he does not bear sole responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1946, de Gaulle's intransigence on the questions of colonial independence and of the spread of communism were certainly key factors in the escalation of tensions. Yet by 1966, de Gaulle was quite vocal in his criticism of U.S. intervention in Vietnam, and staunch in his conviction that the neutralization of South Vietnam was the only solution to the Vietnamese quagmire, even if it meant reunification under communist rule. Explaining this dramatic reversal of position – a 'mental decolonization' of sorts – is central to Journoud's analysis.

De Gaulle began to reconsider his position on Vietnam in late 1953; if, as Journoud suggests, he was convinced of the necessity of a policy of neutralization soon after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, it was not until 1961 that he made his position known to Washington (97). His meeting with President John F. Kennedy in April of that year marked the beginning of an increasingly vocal opposition to American policy in Vietnam and support for the neutralization of South Vietnam, which Washington considered to be an untenable proposition tantamount to abandoning its ally to communism. Journoud himself identifies the flaws inherent in this policy, even as it became more clearly defined over time: it was not conceived as a "political plan for immediate and lasting implementation" and the prospect of a neutral South Vietnam being respected by the North was unlikely at best (171). Nonetheless, de Gaulle was fully committed to promoting neutralization by 1964, a stance that contributed to escalating tensions within the South Vietnamese regime and ultimately, a break in diplomatic relations by the newly-established Thieu/Ky regime in 1965. Due in no small part to the recent experience of the Algerian War, Journoud argues, de Gaulle was developing a new appreciation of emerging national liberation movements, and was even coming to view the DRV as a legitimate representative of Vietnamese nationalism. As a result, de Gaulle was receptive to the DRV's proposal to normalize relations between the two countries; in the absence of formal diplomatic relations, a small French delegation was established in Hanoi, marking a phase of rapprochement between the two former enemies. Although Journoud is careful to emphasize the broader international context in shaping de Gaulle's position (and that of the French diplomats more generally), this is one aspect of his study that could have been developed in greater detail.

The culminating stage of de Gaulle's 'mental decolonization' was his September 1966 speech in Phnom Penh, in which he publically stated that the war would not have a favourable outcome for the U.S., that the continued separation of Vietnam into two states ensured the perpetuation of the war, and that the only viable solution to the conflict would have to be a

² See, for example, Philippe Devillers, *Paris-Saigon-Hanoi: Les archives de la guerre (1944-1947)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988); Stein Tønnesson, *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945: Roosevelt, Ho Chi Minh and de Gaulle in a World at War* (London: Sage Publications, 1991); Frédéric Turpin, *De Gaulle, les gaullistes et l'Indochine 1940-1956* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2005).

political one. He pushed for open negotiations, and a timeline for the withdrawal of American troops. Finally, he re-emphasized his belief that the U.S. bore considerable responsibility for the outbreak and pursuit of the war. Journoud argues that this marked a “triple reconciliation”: de Gaulle with himself, the French with the process of decolonization, and France with its former enemies (245). Unsurprisingly, Washington was furious with de Gaulle; Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara went so far as to characterize the emphasis on American responsibility for the war as a “distortion of the facts” and the proposed withdrawal of American troops as a “capitulation” (253).

By late 1966, then, de Gaulle had effectively alienated both the United States and South Vietnam. However, this did not eliminate France from its role as intermediary between the parties involved in the Vietnam War. In fact, from 1966 to 1969, French representatives of all stripes continued to play an important role in establishing contacts and brokering channels of communication between the belligerents.³ Journoud effortlessly blends an account of the ‘official’ history of Franco-American-Vietnamese diplomacy with a close study of unofficial diplomacy. Although the Americans and Vietnamese both used a variety of diplomatic channels (Soviet, Chinese and European), Journoud highlights the role of French intellectuals like Philippe Devillers and Paul Mus, members of international organizations like Raymond Aubrac⁴ (then the director of the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization) and André Roussel (the Franco-Vietnamese Medical Association), and political figures, like former Minister of Veterans Affairs Jean Sainteny, who had played a key role in the French Indochina War. Although these channels of communication were not always successful in opening a dialogue between the belligerents, they did reinforce the French role of intermediary, a status ultimately recognized by all parties when Paris was chosen as the site of peace talks in 1968. By the time of his resignation in 1969, Journoud argues, de Gaulle had successfully steered France onto a path of reconciliation, both with the Vietnamese and the Americans.

In addition to laying out the most detailed study of French foreign policy regarding Vietnam to date, Journoud also successfully challenges several common assumptions. Among these is de Gaulle’s oft-cited anti-Americanism. In a departure from arguments advanced by Marianna Sullivan and Anne Sa’adah,⁵ among others, Journoud stresses that de Gaulle believed neutralization was “the most honourable way for the United States to save face in a situation that was mishandled from the beginning” (171).⁶ This is not to suggest that he underplays de Gaulle’s frequently antagonistic position with respect to the United States, nor that he ignores

³ Journoud’s examination of ‘unofficial’ diplomacy is not limited to these years; rather, the section discussed here builds on his analysis in earlier chapters of the early 1960s.

⁴ Aubrac, known for his role in the French Resistance, had also housed Ho Chi Minh during his stay in Paris in 1946.

⁵ Sullivan, *France’s Vietnam Policy*; Anne Sa’adah, “Idées Simples and Idées Fixes: De Gaulle, the United States and Vietnam,” in Robert Paxton and Nicholas Wahl, eds., *De Gaulle and the United States: A Centennial Reappraisal* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 295-315.

⁶ This argument is very much in keeping with that of Maurice Vaïsse in *La Grandeur*.

de Gaulle's broader foreign policy objectives. On the contrary, he highlights de Gaulle's lack of tact – in his words, de Gaulle was “not inclined to make the effort to elucidate his position in a way that might have invited greater appreciation from the Americans” (156). This occasionally left his foreign minister Maurice Couve de Murville scrambling to smooth ruffled feathers. As to foreign policy, Journoud clearly aligns de Gaulle's Vietnam policy with his broader objective of developing French influence in Asia and thus carving out a path independent of the U.S.

A second challenge comes in the form of a reminder that the transition from French to American influence in South Vietnam was anything but immediate in the wake of the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu. With the outbreak of the Algerian War in November 1954, France's attention to South Vietnamese affairs was lessened. The transfer of military influence from French to American advisers was largely complete with the withdrawal of the last French troops from South Vietnam in April 1956. However, the French continued to wield considerable influence in South Vietnamese political circles for close to a decade, despite Diem's anti-French sentiments, and maintained cultural and economic ties as well. As part of his challenge to the narrative of an immediate transfer of influence to the United States, Journoud presents the 1954 choice of Ngo Dinh Diem as Prime Minister as having been first and foremost a joint Franco-Vietnamese decision (58). Diem has long been characterized as an American choice, or at best as a decision made by South Vietnamese President Bao Dai under significant American influence; the image of Diem as an American agent was particularly popular with Gaullists. Journoud maintains that Bao Dai supported Diem's candidacy primarily because of pressure from nationalists, who saw in Diem a true “champion of independence” (54), and not merely because of the political and financial support Diem enjoyed from the U.S. Moreover, he argues that the decision could not have been finalized without the help of French intermediaries, and the assent of the French government. Journoud demonstrates the ongoing involvement of the French in Vietnamese affairs from the moment of Diem's ascent until the 1965 coup engineered by the pro-American generals Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky.⁷

The author has consulted an impressive range of archives, among them those of the French Foreign Ministry, Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior; the archives of the Charles de Gaulle Institute; and the Jean Sainteny papers. On the American end, he makes extensive use of the State Department archives, the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, and the Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon presidential archives. A minor issue here is the lack of a list of archival acronyms, which leaves readers to track down the endnote in which the first citation from each archive appears. That issue aside, Journoud's analysis makes an important contribution to the fields of French and American diplomatic history, as well as to histories of the Vietnam War. One hopes that an English translation will follow, so that this first-class study might reach a broader audience.

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⁷ The last in a series of coups following the ouster and assassination of Diem in 1963.

articles on the commemorative efforts of the National Association of the Veterans and Friends of Indochina (*Hagar* 9 no.2, 2010) and on the controversial 1991 Georges Boudarel affair (*French Colonial History* 11, 2010).

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