

 **Review ESSAY**

**Irwin M. Wall.** *Les États-Unis et la guerre d'Algérie, préface de Georges-Henri Soutou, traduit de l'anglais par Philippe-Étienne Raviart.* 464 pp. €29. Paris: Éditions Soleb, October 2006. ISBN: 978-2952372619.

**Reviewed by Kim Munholland, University of Minnesota, Emeritus**

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Originally published in 2001 by the University of California Press as *France, the United States, and the Algerian War*, Irwin Wall's book was immediately hailed as an important, revisionist account of the war by placing what the French preferred to consider an internal matter into an international context with emphasis upon the crucial relationship between France and the United States. Previous accounts had dealt with the war's impact on French society, producing a domestic political crisis that ended the Fourth Republic and brought Charles de Gaulle to power. While this national drama and its memory continues to inspire a number of important studies that focus upon the way the war has shaped contemporary French identity, the internationalization of the war was innovative and marked a new dimension to the conflict seen in other contemporary studies that emphasized the significance of the Algerian war for international history.<sup>1</sup> In a military sense the French Army had won the battle but they lost the war, due to pressure from the international community, the United Nations, and persistent demands from the United States. Wall argues that American policy was more important than a growing domestic disillusion with the war or protests by intellectuals against the use of torture in convincing de Gaulle to abandon the effort to retain *l'Algérie française*, but he did so at the cost of his own objectives at the time of his coming to power.

Wall began his research intending to follow up his earlier study, *The United States and the Making of Postwar France, 1945-1954*. While the sequel under review confirmed his earlier argument about the significance of American influence in shaping postwar France, his research in the archives caused him to revise certain assumptions or hypotheses that he had developed about the way in which the Fourth Republic collapsed as a result of a colonial war and the way de Gaulle's return would skillfully guide France out of its imbroglio in Algeria. Evidence from the American and recently published French documents challenged these hypotheses.

French documents revealed the extent to which the Algerian conflict dominated French diplomacy from 1954 to 1962, dwarfing all other concerns including the formation of NATO and security in Europe. The Algerian conflict and the French view that Nasser's support for the FLN was a major obstacle to the French attempt to pacify Algeria led to French engagement in the Suez crisis, which severely tested the recently created NATO alliance. A second issue had to do with the domestic

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Thomas, *The French North African Crisis: Colonial Breakdown and Anglo-French Relations, 1945-1962* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Mathew Connolly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and an important volume of essays edited by Martin Alexander and J.F.V. Keiger, *France and the Algerian War, 1954-1962* (London: Frank Cass, 2002).

problems and political rivalries that paralyzed the Fourth Republic and prevented it from resolving the Algerian war despite the military success during the 1957 battle of Algiers. As a result the Americans lost interest in preserving the Fourth Republic and actually favored the return of de Gaulle to power, despite the difficult wartime relationship with de Gaulle.

Perhaps the most important of Wall's revisionist positions was a rethinking of de Gaulle's policy, particularly during his first two years in office from 1958 to 1960. Until his excursion into American archives and French documents Wall shared the view of Gaullists, who argued that his adroit maneuvers saved France a second time by ending the Algerian conflict, which he intended to do from the moment he came to power, despite the uprising of military officers and colons who had made his return possible and were determined to hold onto Algeria whatever the costs. Many of us, this reviewer included, explained de Gaulle in admiring terms for the way he moved gradually from the Delphic ambiguities of his "Je vous ai compris" speech in Algiers shortly after taking power that was followed by greater concessions leading to his granting independence four years later--to the fury of certain generals and the European settlers, who then tried to assassinate him. Wall argues that de Gaulle was not misleading the crowd in Algiers that day. He agreed with its message of keeping Algeria French. In taking this position, Irwin Wall challenged a generation of Gaullist scholarship that portrays the General in a prescient, heroic mode. In Wall's account de Gaulle was forced to change his policy once the Americans refused to buy into his grand designs for France in the postwar world.

The reason for de Gaulle's commitment to a French Algeria, or at least an Algeria closely tied to metropolitan France, was that Algeria was the key to a pan-African and Mediterranean role for France in a world of international politics. As part of this grand design de Gaulle would use France's African presence to claim a stronger role in the councils of the Anglo-Saxon world, particularly his desire to have France the third partner in a triumvirate within NATO but obviously looking beyond that horizon as well. The Algerian Sahara provided the testing ground for development of nuclear weapons, a program begun under the Fourth Republic. Recent oil discoveries made the Sahara doubly appealing for French military and economic interests. De Gaulle's Algerian policy, then, represented a continuation of the Fourth Republic's, not a break at least until 1960. To sustain French Algeria de Gaulle, no less than the Fourth Republic, relied upon American military and economic aid, but the price of this assistance was American pressure upon de Gaulle to begin a liberalization of French policies in Algeria. Instead, de Gaulle allowed the French Army the free hand it wanted to continue its counter-revolutionary war, employing the methods of torture, roundups, resettlement of Muslim populations, and crackdowns upon dissidents and anti-war protesters in France and Algeria.

In his last years in office Eisenhower tried to ease de Gaulle away from preserving Algeria at any cost, and he showed some sympathy for de Gaulle's desire to speak on equal terms with his Anglo-Saxon partners. But both Kennedy, who was far more determined to see France get out of Algeria, and Eisenhower refused to give de Gaulle any cooperation in the development of nuclear weapons. When de Gaulle realized that he could expect no aid from the United States, only exhortations to relent on Algeria, he decided that he would have to grant Algeria its independence, but then he would pursue a policy of French independence laced with a good dose of anti-Americanism. From the ruins of his grand designs de Gaulle would fashion a course that would lead France out of NATO's military command in 1966, thus getting some revenge on the Americans who believed that

the Algerian war was draining French ability to strengthen NATO in Europe. Wall does not go very far, however, beyond 1962 and the granting of independence on terms that fell far short of what de Gaulle hoped to achieve, leading to tragedy for all concerned: a flight of Europeans from Algiers and a bitter hostility toward France among Algerians. De Gaulle pulled out of Algeria not because of a military defeat—the FLN was reduced to some 15,000 guerilla fighters still in the field—but as a result of international pressures from the United States and international opinion that had turned against France as early as the 1958 Sakiet episode. Although Wall does not make this a central argument, the FLN successfully played its hand in the public relations war that it fought in parallel with the anti-colonial struggle on the ground.

These revisionist points were made in the English version and widely recognized in several reviews in Anglo-American literature. What did the French make of all this? Getting Anglo-American scholarship on France translated into French has been something of a challenge, particularly for those of Irwin Wall's generation, which was initially under the influence of mentors who argued that American scholars did not have the opportunity that French historians had in gaining access to original, archival sources and therefore could not contribute to basic research on French history. Beginning in the 1960s the separate spheres of French and Anglo-American scholarship began to break down. Transatlantic travel became cheaper and support for research for historians improved. Scholarly exchanges grew, and American works on France reached an interested audience among French scholars. These exchanges were valuable in many fields, but particularly for International relations as Americans combed French archives and French scholars came to America. Still, translation into French or into English for French scholars remained limited. Irwin Wall has been among those American historians of France who have had an influence as a result of translations of his work. His *L'influence Américaine sur la politique française 1945-1954* (also translated by Philippe-Étienne Ravieart) appeared before the English version, *The United States and the Making of Postwar France, 1945-1954*. It took Wall longer to get the French translation of his book on the Algerian War, evidence of the publishing industry's reluctance to invest in translations of topics that they consider to have limited audience appeal, but at least the author was successful, thanks to the entrepreneurial spirit of a young publishing company, Éditions Soleb.

The translation is an elegant job that remains faithful to the original. However, in the interim between the American and French version a number of events have intervened, notably the emergence of a more critical literature on de Gaulle<sup>2</sup> and, of course, the war in Iraq, which produced a crisis in French-American relations. For the French edition Irwin Wall has added a postscript "Fifty Years Later" that discusses French-American differences in light of the Iraq war and French opposition to a precipitous American invasion, which several commentators on both sides of the Atlantic have seen to be a deep and perhaps fatal crisis for the relationship. Wall brings some perspective to this argument by noting that despite an alliance in two world wars, the relationship has always been difficult, and the blowup over Iraq in 2003 was not appreciably worse than, say, relations at the end of the Fourth Republic when American disgust with the instability of the regime was matched by French anti-Americanism and resentment. At this point Wall states that relations could hardly have become worse. (111)

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Éric Roussel, *Charles de Gaulle* (Paris, Gallimard, 2002).

The comparison between the Algerian and Iraq wars reveals both parallels and divergences. Both could be considered occupations of Muslim lands that produced violent reactions against Western forces. Both occupying forces had recourse to torture to defeat terrorism but without success in ending resistance to the occupations. Chirac, as de Gaulle before him with Vietnam, tried to warn the Americans by citing the French experience. Bush and his advisors were aware of the French experiences but drew the wrong lessons. The differences are also instructive and reveal the ways in which international politics has changed during the past fifty years. In Algeria the French had the support of the Europeans, who constituted one-tenth of a population of some nine million inhabitants and an army of elite troops plus draftees totaling over 500,000 troops. The American invasion force never surpassed 160,000, plus British support and troops sent by the 'coalition of the willing' to maintain security in a population of 25 million Iraqis. There were no colons to support the American-led invasion. The French argued that they were preserving a colony, which they insisted was part of France, whereas the Americans were invading a sovereign state.

The Algerian war came in the midst of the Cold War when the French were still dependent upon an American nuclear umbrella. In addition, the Americans financed eighty percent of the French war in Algeria with supplies and equipment that otherwise might have been used to strengthen NATO. By the time of Iraq the bipolar world was gone for over a decade with the emergence of American military dominance and American actions that became increasingly unipolar and indifferent to international opinion. Chirac noted with some regret that '*l'Amérique du Papa*' was gone. In many ways the French and American roles were reversed, at least from the time of the Suez crisis in which Eisenhower opposed the Suez venture in favor of multilateralism at the UN and an appeal to a respect for the rule of international law to force the Israeli, British and French troops to withdraw. At Suez the French were fighting Arab nationalism and Nasser's support for the FLN. The French wanted regime change in the ways that the Americans, among other less plausible arguments, were seeking to topple Saddam Hussein. In Suez the Americans won their point at the UN and stopped France and Great Britain. In the buildup to the Iraq war France tried but failed to deter the United States even with the support of Germany, Russia and China. France's position was that war should only be a last resort, not a preventive strike, and like Eisenhower in 1956 Chirac mobilized international opinion against the United States. Nevertheless the American plunge into Iraq went forward, revealing the contours of the new rules of international behavior as defined in Washington.

How, then, did the French respond to the critique of de Gaulle and, in the post face, the contrasts in roles played by the United States and France in the Algerian conflict and in the Iraq war? The answer is that *Les États-Unis et la guerre d'Algérie* has caught their attention at least in the revisionism on de Gaulle's role in ending the conflict and his subsequent decision to regain French independence and room to oppose the United States. Among the reviews of Irwin Wall's book in French was a favorable notice by Éric Roussel in *Le Figaro* that appreciated the contribution of Wall's revisionism and his willingness to challenge orthodox opinion, whether on Algeria or Iraq. American and French scholars have discovered that when it comes to bilateral relations or international history, they have much to offer each other, whether or not statesmen are prepared to pay attention to what they have to say.

**Author's Response by Irwin Wall, Professor Emeritus, University of California, Riverside and Visiting Scholar, NYU**

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There is little an author can do, other than say thank you, when a reviewer summarizes his work with admirable clarity and accepts for the most part its conclusions, however controversial. And so in these few words I will neither nitpick with Kim Munholland's wonderful job nor blow my own horn any further than he has done. He did raise the issue of the reception of the book in France, however, and that raises some interesting additional questions that I thought H-Diplo readers might find of interest. The book was reviewed extremely favorably here and in England when it came out in 2001, with most scholars accepting its conclusions. Ditto for Matt Connelly's book, *A Diplomatic Revolution*, which came out a year later, and took a similar view of de Gaulle. The dissenters in my case were Stanley Hoffmann, in *Foreign Affairs*, not surprising, since I questioned his view of de Gaulle as consummate political artist, rather depicting him as a stubborn pursuer of failed policies, and Richard Vinen in the *TLS*, who thought I had little new to say, or rather that I said what he knew all the time. The most enthusiastic favorable reviewer was the H-Diplo reviewer then, Bill Irvine, and I invite readers to check his review out along with that of Kim Munholland.<sup>3</sup>

I did not expect the same reception in France, where I was taking on some strongly-held beliefs and where the de Gaulle reverence has assumed the status of a national myth. Indeed, I had a foretaste: H-France gave the book to Romain Souillac of the University of Bordeaux, and he took me to task for over-emphasizing the importance the American attitude toward the war in France, and neglecting the strong evidence that indicates that de Gaulle intended all along to emancipate Algeria from French rule. In short Souillac ably defended the existing historiography.<sup>4</sup> In a review of the American edition in the *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, Anne-Marie Duranton-Crabol also complimented my scholarship, and then argued similarly that de Gaulle intended to leave Algeria. I expected more of the same therefore from the appearance of the French edition. When the French edition came out I held my breath, and I read with great pleasure the review of Eric Roussel, which Munholland mentions, in *Le Figaro Littéraire*. Roussel was willing to admit that I had perhaps made my case based on the archival materials thus far; but he thought that not everything was in the archives. Hopefully more will one day be uncovered, especially when the General's papers see the light of day, but it is hard for me to imagine that something other than what appears in French diplomatic documents with regard to Algeria will emerge; but until then I think my argument can stand. There was also a mention of my book by Jean Daniel, in an editorial in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, but he did not address Algeria, rather my postscript on Iraq, finding there confirmation of evolving opposition to the American war there by American opinion (hardly representative, alas, in my case). But for the rest of the French media, which generously reviewed my earlier book, *The United States and the Making of Postwar France* in its French version, there has been stony silence. Not for lack of my publishers trying; we hosted a luncheon for the major

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<sup>3</sup> William D. Irvine. "Review of Irwin M. Wall, France, the United States and the Algerian War," H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews, May, 2002. <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=211021023296606>.

<sup>4</sup> Romain Souillac. "Review of Irwin M. Wall, France, the United States and the Algerian War," H-France Review Vol. 2 (March 2002), No. 30. <http://www.h-france.net/vol2reviews/souillac.html>.

publications, and most of them did send reporters to hear what I had to say. They seem to have been unimpressed, by me and by the book. I get two explanations from French colleagues: that the Gaullist myth is so widely believed that contrary views are rejected out of hand as unworthy of notice, and that worse, the major press, in crisis, no longer devotes as much space as before to reviewing academic books. Even the Communist newspaper *L'Humanité*, which enthusiastically reviewed my earlier book, ignored this one; I was told by someone highly placed that the Gaullist myth holds sway even there.

In fact the sole favorable review of the book in French (and the very best one) is not a review; it is the introduction to the French edition by Georges-Henri Soutou. On the other hand there was a very lengthy diatribe in an obscure publication the politics of which I find it hard to discern: *De Defensa*, which is published in Belgium. The reviewer, whom I assume was the editor, accuses me of being a spokesman for the American system which I objectify into the incarnation of virtue and use as a yardstick to browbeat the unruly French colonialists who failed to live up to Washington's expectations. In fact I am the inventor of a new kind of history, partisan "Americanist" history and values objectified, "le parti-pris objectif ou l'objectivation partisan," which I take to mean the imposition of American—indeed pro-American government—standards and views upon the world. The same reviewer dismisses my comparison of the Iraq and Algeria wars and the contrasting roles France and the United States as unworthy of notice, although I make it perfectly clear that I identify with the French policy during the Iraq war, not the American. I can only express my astonishment; being an apologist for American imperialism is the last thing of which I ever thought anyone would accuse me, but I did write a book in which Eisenhower, during a crisis over decolonization, despite his limitations, comes off better than de Gaulle.

I await the academic reviews in France which will take more time. In the meantime the lesson I take from all this is that the Franco-American divide, in diplomacy and in *Weltanschauung*, exists as well in scholarship, at least with regard to de Gaulle.

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