



**Kim Munholland**, *Rock of Contention: Free French and Americans at War in New Caledonia, 1940-1945*, New York: Berghahn, 2005

Roundtable Editor: **William R. Keylor**, Boston University

Roundtable Participants:

**Charles Cogan**, Harvard University

**Jeremi Suri**, University of Wisconsin

**Irwin Wall**, Visiting Scholar, Center for European Studies, New York University; University of California, Riverside

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### **Editor's Introduction**

**William R. Keylor**

**Boston University**

Relations between wartime allies have historically been fraught with conflict. This was particularly true of the Second World War. Mounting tensions between the United States and Great Britain, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union, on the other, over questions of boundaries, reparations, and postwar governance in liberated Europe generated severe strains in the Grand Alliance before the demise of Hitler's Reich. Less acute but nonetheless acrimonious exchanges between Washington and London over such issues as the future of the British Empire, international trade policy, and international monetary relations tested the resilience of the "special relationship" and complicated the wartime friendship between Roosevelt and Churchill. Amid these controversies that beset the three great powers whose military forces were defeating the Axis, wartime disputes also pitted members of the Big Three against lesser participants in the anti-German coalition.

One egregious example was the rupture of relations between the Kremlin and the Polish government-in-exile in London after the revelation of the Katyn Forest massacre. Another was the ongoing squabble between the Roosevelt administration and Charles de Gaulle's Free-French government-in-exile, a topic that has been examined in detail by a number of historical studies. Washington's decision to maintain diplomatic relations with the collaborationist French government of Marshal Henri-Philippe Pétain in Vichy from the fall of France in the summer of 1940 to the Anglo-American landings in North Africa in the autumn of 1942 set the stage for this troubled relationship. Then Roosevelt's stubborn insistence on casting about for alternatives to the Free-French leader he so detested, together with U.S. government plans for the military occupation of France after its liberation, left de Gaulle with a profound suspicion of American motives toward his country that remained with him for the rest of his career.

One vexing problem that Washington faced in its efforts to marginalize the Free-French movement during the war was that a few of France's overseas possessions had ousted their Vichy governors and declared their loyalty to de Gaulle's rag-tag outfit in London. One of these was the French island of New Caledonia in the South Pacific, which had been acquired in the nineteenth century and established as a penal colony to which common criminals as well as political prisoners (such as revolutionaries captured after the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871) had been exiled. Kim Munholland's exhaustively researched and elegantly written monograph explores the increasingly tense relations between the Free-French authorities (whom de Gaulle had dispatched to New Caledonia after it rallied to his cause in the fall of 1940) and the American military forces that appeared on the scene in the spring of 1942 to establish a staging ground for what would later become the counter-offensive against the Japanese forces in the Solomon Islands to the north.

The remarkable story of this relationship that Munholland recounts with great finesse is one of misunderstandings, misapprehensions, and mutual recrimination. From the moment the Americans landed, the Gaullist authorities on the island began to suspect ulterior motives on the part of the forces commanded by Brigadier General Alexander Patch. De Gaulle and his man on the spot, the imperious Admiral Thierry D'Argenlieu, suspected Washington of harboring territorial designs on the French-owned island, whose only significant economic asset was its nickel ore but whose location astride the sea-lane between the United States and Australia attracted the interest of U.S. naval strategists who took note of its useable harbors. There is little evidence that Roosevelt ever seriously considered taking over the island, nor did he pay much attention to provocative suggestions from junketing U.S. senators that it be acquired in payment for France's defaulted World War I debt. Indeed, the island receded into the background of American strategic thought once the counteroffensive against Japan had reduced its value as a staging ground for military operations. Nor is there any credible evidence that the American military forces on the spot encouraged the indigenous population of Melanesians (known as Kanaks) to agitate for independence from France, as the ever-suspicious Gaullist officials believed. The U.S. army had more important things on its mind than diverting scarce manpower and resources to stir up the natives behind the lines as it prepared and then launched the Solomon Islands campaign. Reports from the island of Free-French paranoia about U.S. intentions served to confirm Roosevelt's presumption that de Gaulle was more interested in pursuing his country's own political objectives than in contributing to the war against the Axis.

The Free-French authorities on the island had few resources to fall back on as they struggled to preserve their power and prerogatives amid the overwhelming presence of the American GIs. The outcome of Franco-American disputes over housing, brothels, the spending habits of American soldiers, and other relatively trivial issues was preordained in light of the huge disparity of power on the island. The Americans did what they wanted until they no longer needed the island and then unceremoniously departed. Once they did so, the island vanished from the American radar screen. The absence of a powerful independence (or even autonomist) movement, let alone one that had Communist connections, prevented New Caledonia from drawing the kind of attention from Washington that French Indochina would in the years after the war.

The three commentators selected for this review of Munholland's book are, for different reasons, admirably suited to the task. Chuck Cogan's many publications since he retired from government service have focused on the complicated and perplexing encounter between the United States and France since the beginning of the Second World War, especially on the central role played by Charles de Gaulle in that often contentious relationship. Irwin Wall has also probed the evolving nature of the Franco-American *mésentente* since 1945, and in particular has prompted a fundamental reevaluation of United States policy toward the Algerian War in the late fifties and early sixties. Whereas Cogan and Wall are specialists in the history of modern France, Jeremi Suri belongs to the small (but growing) number of historians of American foreign relations who seek to understand that country's position in the world from a genuinely international perspective rather than from the traditional "view from Washington."

The only notable point of discord among the author and the three commentators centers on the true intentions of President Roosevelt concerning the French Empire after the war. Cogan and Wall agree with Munholland (and with the reigning scholarly consensus) that the American president seriously intended to convert much of the French Empire into trusteeships administered by the embryonic United Nations Organization. Suri extrapolates from the recent revisionist studies by Mark Bradley and Mark Lawrence on U.S. policy toward French Indochina to question whether FDR's anti-colonialist rhetoric truly reflected a policy change in Washington.[1] Considered from the advantage of hindsight, it seems fair to conclude that Gaullist apprehensions about the long-term consequences of the American presence on New Caledonia were entirely unfounded. Roosevelt's wartime palaver about transforming the French possessions in Asia — both Indochina on the mainland and the islands in the South Pacific — into international trusteeships led to no concrete policy proposals to challenge French control. Neither the autonomous preferences of the Caledonians of French heritage nor the complaints of maltreatment by the indigenous Kanaks and the Asian indentured laborers on New Caledonia prevented Paris from preserving French dominance on the island. After de Gaulle granted independence to most of France's overseas possessions in the 1960s, Munholland's "rock of contention" in the South Pacific remained (and remains to this day) one of the few isolated outposts of what had once been the world's second largest colonial empire.

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[1] Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Mark Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

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