H-Diplo Roundtables

Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005)

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Anne Foster, Indiana State University, Shawn McHale, George Washington University, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, Harvard University, Douglas Porch, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, Martin Thomas, Exeter University, UK

Response by Mark Atwood Lawrence, University of Texas at Austin

In a landmark 1995 essay, the eminent diplomatic historian Michael Hunt raised a question that surely tweaks the conscience of any scholar tempted to write about the origins of the Vietnam War. Do we really, he asked, need so many studies of the decision-making process that led the United States down the road to disaster?[1] It does not require much imagination to see another question hanging in the air: Can we possibly learn anything from *yet another*?

This roundtable provides abundant evidence, I think, that the answer is a resounding yes – that the matter remains a vital and vibrant area of study, with ample space for new scholarship and debate. In making this assertion, I do not mean to indulge in self-congratulation about *Assuming the Burden*. To be sure, I am delighted by the praise that Professors Foster, McHale, Nguyen, Porch, and Thomas have offered for the book. But I am even more pleased that my book managed to spark such lively interest and, yes, critique from such a distinguished group. No scholar could ask for more than the careful and considered attention of his colleagues. I wish to express my sincere thanks to all five for their enormously insightful reviews and to Professor Thomas Maddux for organizing and moderating the roundtable.

I am naturally gratified that four of the five of the reviewers (all but Professor Porch) seem to share my conviction that setting U.S. decision-making within a broad, transnational context helps illuminate new questions and answers about American behavior as well as about international politics more generally in the early Cold War period. In framing my book in this way, I cannot, of course, claim to be breaking new conceptual ground. For decades, distinguished diplomatic historians have called for truly international, multi-archival histories. What is striking, however, is that few scholars until quite recently have taken up this challenge in a rigorous way with respect to the Vietnam War.

Professors Foster, Thomas, McHale, and Nguyen are concerned only that my book is not ambitious enough in its internationalizing agenda. A full international history, they suggest, would require attention to a wider array of countries and issues than I explore. Foster wonders

[1] Michael H. Hunt, "The Long Crisis in Diplomatic History," in Michael J. Hogan, ed., *America in the World: The Historiography of American Foreign Relations Since 1941* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 126.

about comparisons that might be drawn between Western policymaking toward Vietnam and toward other Southeast Asian territories, especially Indonesia, where the Netherlands confronted an anticolonial insurgency with striking similarities to the one that France confronted in Indochina. Thomas also suggests the value of viewing Vietnam within its regional context but proposes greater attention to a different issue: persistent worries among Western policymakers that unrest in Vietnam would imperil regional food supplies and thereby increase the chance of political turbulence across South and Southeast Asia. For their part, McHale and Nguyen ask whether I might have done more to illuminate Vietnamese agency in the Western decision-making processes that I investigate.

These are excellent points. Undeniably, fuller attention to these matters would have given the book a more panoramic quality. I wonder, however, whether deeper analysis of the Indonesia case, the food-supply problem, or Vietnamese politics would have led to me to conclusions different from those that I offer in the book. I am inclined to think not. In fact, it seems to me possible that closer attention to these three subjects would have offered evidence broadly supportive of my key arguments. U.S. policymaking toward the Indonesian controversy, for instance, helps make my point about the fundamental flexibility of U.S. attitudes on colonial questions as well as the possibility that liberal attitudes could predominate under certain circumstances. As Foster suggests, a key question is why American policy developed in one direction in Indonesia and in quite another Indochina. I believe I help answer that question by demonstrating how U.S., British, and French officials reframed the insurgency in Vietnam as thoroughly communist in nature, a process that had no parallel in Indonesia because of the utter implausibility of viewing the Indonesian nationalists as inspired by international communism. The Indonesia case helps make another of my points, too. Americans, I argue, made policy in Southeast Asia not only on the basis of calculations about the value of West European allies but also – and more importantly – on the basis of judgments about threats to American interests in the local Asian scene. If U.S. policymakers had cared only about Western Europe, after all, they would have thrown their support fully behind the Netherlands. The ideas that they held about the drift of events in Southeast Asia mattered a great deal.

On Thomas's point about the desirability of examining the food issue across the 1944-1950 period, I can only say that I agree entirely. This is an important and fascinating matter deserving further research. As Thomas suggests (and as I argue in the book), Western policymakers emerged from the Second World War deeply worried that massive shortfalls in Vietnamese rice production would fuel famine and political instability not only within Vietnam but also across the region. This alarm helps explain why the three Western powers – above all Britain, whose interests in India made it especially sensitive to the problem – were so determined to restore stability to Vietnam as quickly as possible. I confess that the book does not carry this theme down into the later 1940s, after the immediate postwar crisis lapsed. This is perhaps a lost opportunity since lingering concerns about food certainly help explain the appeal of trilateral cooperation in the key years of decision, 1949 and 1950.

Let me now turn to questions about Vietnamese agency. Professor McHale suggests that I may have overstated my point that the Western powers, by viewing the anticolonial insurgency under Ho Chi Minh as essentially communist, helped create the very problem that it most feared. It may be, McHale indicates, that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam embraced a communist

agenda and gravitated toward the communist bloc without such a nudge from the West. On this matter, I am tempted simply to defer to colleagues such as Professor McHale, who have deep knowledge of the Vietnamese revolution. Let me point out, however, one recent study of Vietnamese politics that, to my reading, seems broadly consistent with the approach I have taken – Christoph Giebel's fascinating *Imagined Ancestries of Vietnamese Communism: Ton Duc Thang and the Politics of History and Memory*.[2] In Giebel's telling, the DRV lacked any real ideological center as late as 1947. Ho Chi Minh's movement was clearly failing to win sympathy from the liberal Western powers, but it had done little to tie itself to the communist bloc. Only in 1948 did DRV leaders, facing an increasingly desperate political and military situation, opt fully for the communist bloc, a sort of desperation move that reflected anxiety about the sustainability of the war as much as any genuine enthusiasm for the Soviet Union. From that point, Vietnamese communist leaders reoriented their agenda – and, crucially for Giebel, rewrote their own history – in order to cement their identification with Moscow (and eventually Beijing). The apparent solidity of that relationship after 1949 should not, though, blind us to the remarkable flexibility that seems to have existed just a year or two earlier. In this connection, it is also worth invoking William J. Duiker's characterization of Ho Chi Minh as a fundamentally pragmatic, eclectic leader who was willing to tack before shifting political winds.

There is, of course, a chicken-and-egg problem here. Did the DRV's shift toward international communism provoke the Western powers to reorient their attitudes toward Vietnam, or did the hostility of the Western powers push the Vietnamese into the communist camp? I look forward to new archival discoveries in Vietnam that will help us answer this old and crucial question with a higher level of sophistication and confidence. For now, though, I lean toward the latter scenario. My best evidence admittedly comes from Western archives, but it is nonetheless quite striking: Western policymakers, who had powerful incentive to discover direct links between the DRV and international communism in the late 1940s, repeatedly failed to find such evidence. As I suggest in my book, even the strongest Western supporters of trilateral cooperation in Southeast Asia had to admit that the ties were sketchy and indirect at best.

I also want to respond to Professor Nguyen's question about whether Bao Dai may have had a larger and more significant following than I allow. As with key questions about the DRV, I look forward to new discoveries that may permit a more complicated view than historians have usually taken up to now. But existing scholarship, I think, sustains my view of a politician with strikingly little appeal beyond his small, urban, elite constituency. My best evidence again comes from Western documents: French, British, and U.S. policymakers with strong incentive to identify Bao Dai's "successes" had a great deal of difficulty finding much to say. The best they could offer was the possibility that, if developments broke in exactly the right way, he might inspire meaningful support at some point in the future. It is also worth noting that even historians who err on the side of crediting Bao Dai, and the anticommunist cause that he represented, with a legitimate following have difficulty making the case much beyond the fall of 1947. Take Neil Jamieson, for example. In *Understanding Vietnam*, Jamieson contends that the anticommunist National Union made "spectacular progress" during the middle months of 1947 in promoting the establishment of a government under Bao Dai that was both anticommunist and

[2] Christoph Giebel, *Imagined Ancestries of Vietnamese Communism: Ton Duc Thang and the Politics of History and Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 47-58.

anti-French. By the end of that year, however, the opportunity had evaporated, a casualty of effective Viet Minh propaganda and French efforts to extinguish the potential for a bona fide anti-colonial nationalism.[3]

It remains only to say something about Professor Porch's review, which goes in a different direction from the others in directly challenging the basic approach and conclusions of my book. Simply put, Porch disputes the idea that events might realistically have taken a different course in Indochina during the period I explore. More specifically, he challenges me on two matters. First, he doubts that there existed any significant possibility that the French government might have followed a course other than war in Vietnam. Second, he questions whether the U.S. policymaking could reasonably have followed a course other than backing that French war effort. "Nothing is inevitable in history," Porch concedes, but he goes on to contend that it is a "challenge" to see things playing out differently from the way they went in the years leading up to 1950.

I acknowledge that it is difficult to imagine French or U.S. policy following a different course after the culmination of the Chinese revolution in October 1949. By that time, both governments were primed to regard the "loss" of China as a catastrophic setback that necessitated trilateral military cooperation in Vietnam. The perceptual transformation was basically complete by that point and the chain of subsequent events therefore highly predictable. But this does not seem to be Professor Porch's main point. Rather, he disputes the existence of real flexibility – of contingency – in the history of Western decision-making from the end of the Second World War down to that crucial 1949 turning point. He even goes so far as to charge me with making an "a-historical" argument in contending that there was. It will come as no surprise that I simply cannot agree with Professor Porch's view. I believe that my book marshals a tremendous amount of evidence – perhaps even a tad too much, as Professor Thomas gently hints! – to sustain my point about the ambiguities, unresolved tensions, and contingency of decision-making in both Washington and Paris across the years from 1944 to 1949. In these years, it is vital to emphasize, there were as yet no tried and true patterns of Cold War behavior or deeply entrenched popular expectations.

It may be that one path – the one Washington actually followed – strikes us in retrospect as by far the most likely course. But I am not at all persuaded that policymakers at the time understood events in this way. French leaders fretted constantly that they would never get what they wanted from the Americans. Hawkish U.S. officials worried persistently that the liberals would endlessly obstruct their goal. Even Ho Chi Minh, it seems, kept his options open. Everything was up for grabs.

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[3] Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 211-213.