If you waited until the Vietnam Conflict was over and the last helicopter had left the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon on April 30, 1975—we are historians who wait for the dust to settle, right?—you had limited available secondary and primary sources. As I flip through my lecture notes—written on a Hermes typewriter—from a course initiated in 1978, I note some of the few available sources. George Herring’s *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* appeared as a first edition in 1979. Herring’s most influential study, however, did not devote much attention to the pre-1950 period. Several articles by Walter LaFeber and Gary R. Hess had a prominent place in the discussion on Franklin D. Roosevelt and Indochina. Early volumes of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* also provided revealing primary sources on the views of U.S. officials in Vietnam about the emerging French-Viet Minh conflict.

But if you knew as little about Indochina as U.S. policymakers, you went to French authors mentioned in Mark Lawrence’s bibliography such as Lucien Bodard, Philippe Devillers, and John T. McAlisters and Paul Mus, *The Vietnamese and Their Revolution* (1970). Bernard Fall, the French born author, who wrote about the Indochina conflicts and lost his life on the “Street without Joy” with a U.S. patrol in 1967, shaped many lectures with his *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (1963), *Street Without Joy* (1964), and *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (1967). Most influential of all was Frances FitzGerald’s *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (1972) which students found irresistible in the 1970s, dismissed it as leftist propaganda in the 1980s, and now consider it too long and too slow.

So we had bits and pieces of the story from the perspective of the participants, but we necessarily lacked—given the restrictions on governmental sources—a study of the interrelationship of the French, British and U.S. governments as they maneuvered from the end of WWII to the U.S. decision in 1950 to support the French in the first Indochina war with funds, arms, and diplomatic support. All of the commentators agree that Mark Lawrence’s study offers an impressive international approach to this period and topic by

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making use of French, British, and U.S. archives to explore the fascinating interaction of the policymakers as the British and French scrambled to reoccupy their colonies in South and Southeast Asia, as the U.S. made the transition from FDR to Harry Truman and the emerging Cold War, and as the French moved from trying to assert control in Vietnam on their own to efforts to recruit British and French assistance to defeat Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh.\(^2\)

The commentators do raise a number of issues with respect to Lawrence’s study which are certainly worth of further discussion:

First, they raise the question of whether or not the U.S. had realistic alternatives during the 1945-1950 period with respect to the options followed or drifted into, such as acquiescing in the return of the French to Indochina in 1945 or playing along with the French Bao Dai solution in 1950 and using it as a bridge to provide aid to the French. Lawrence vigorously suggests that before 1948-1949 the situation was pretty fluid and that the U.S. had options to use leverage against France’s determination to hold onto Vietnam. Lawrence even proposes that the U.S. up to 1950 would have been willing to accept a deal between France and Ho Chi Minh. (p. 283).

Second, the commentators note the impact of British and French policy at significant stages and the ways in which they encouraged and pulled the U.S. into Southeast Asia. At the same time Lawrence develops the concept of a coalition of hardliners in all three countries that worked together to shape a Cold War oriented coalition to oppose Ho Chi Minh and his Cold War allies. This group faced stubborn resistance from officials in all three countries who opposed the French war and U.S.-British involvement in it.

Third, Lawrence offers a more developed and complex model of policy formulation on the U.S. side than previous interpretations that ranged from geostrategic in the Cold War containment mode, the familiar economic calculations about the value of Southeast Asia, and domestic political concerns linked to the impact of the Chinese Communist triumph in 1949. Lawrence recognizes that these “reciprocally reinforcing considerations helped propel the Truman administration toward supporting the French in Indochina” (p. 5). Lawrence, however, adds to this mix the transnational environment in which “Washington, as it crafted policy toward Vietnam, was merely one participant in a complicated, decidedly international dynamic in which other governments usually held the initiative and set the agenda.” (p. 5) In a significant way, Lawrence modifies William A. Williams’ thesis in “Tragedy” and challenges John Lewis Gaddis’ perspective in “We Now Know” on the crafting of U.S policies.

Fourth, several commentators note that the Vietnamese including Saigon allies of the French to Mekong delta peasant sects to Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh never get on to the main stage of Lawrence’s study as active participants influencing the views and maneuvering of the three Western powers. As historians we always want more sources, more interpretation, and more participants. When the Vietnamese are moved to center stage, how will the story change?

Fifth, Lawrence makes a case for giving increased importance to the ideas shaping U.S. policy in 1950 as establishing the key assumptions that shaped U.S. policy until 1965 and provided a definite continuity limiting the role of contingency, “variations over time as different administrations with different needs, perceptions, and personalities reckoned with the Vietnam problem in their own way” (p. 280). What are those key assumptions and did they remain as influential as Lawrence suggests?

Sixth, Lawrence is usually quite dispassionate in his evaluation of policy and policymakers even when he is dealing with very misguided French leaders who, despite being quite shrewd and successful at making appeals to U.S. Cold War concerns, do not seem to have much of a clue about their prospects in Vietnam and other colonial possessions. A significant exception is Lawrence’s objective to “shed light on the origins of the Cold War in the colonial world” and to explain how Western policymakers imposed assumptions and policies from Europe to other areas. “The misapplication of the Cold War paradigm produced little but horror and tragedy for forty years,” concludes Lawrence in the introduction and the conclusion (pp. 11, 287).

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Project at Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars, can be found at online at [http://www.coldwarfiles.org](http://www.coldwarfiles.org) (2005).

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