



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

Commentary by Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, Harvard University

Mark Lawrence's *Assuming The Burden* represents international history at its finest. Covering the period from the end of the Second World War to the onset of the Cold War, Lawrence adeptly traces the evolution of Western decision-making regarding Vietnam. With mid-1947 as the turning point, Lawrence shows us how the convergence of European forces resuscitating the dying imperial order and American forces fearing the bourgening east-west ideological conflict willfully misperceived the situation in Indochina. Lawrence argues that Western leaders bent on maintaining the colonial order in Vietnam manipulated the political situation in Vietnam in two manners: they tried to manufacture a link between Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and they misportrayed the Bao Dai solution as legitimate French transfer of power to a nationalist regime. The result of this convergence of European and American hard-line interests to recast the French colonial war as a Cold War struggle against international communist aggression enabled active U.S. support for the re-establishment of French colonialism by 1950. Part of a larger story on the evolution of American policy toward national liberation struggles and decolonization in the Third World, Lawrence shows us that far from being an internal discussion within Washington, resultant U.S. policy was a product of a complex transatlantic dialogue.

Lawrence's most important contribution reveals how France and Britain, in what would be their final display of real influence over U.S. decision-making in Vietnam, exploited a period of ambiguity in American foreign relations toward colonial territories from the end of the Second World War to 1950. Rectifying the literature on this period that treats U.S. decision-making in isolation, Lawrence carefully inserts American policy debates during this period back into the international (or more specifically transatlantic) dialogue. He argues that French manipulation pushed American policy from obstruction to neutrality to active support of France's attempt to re-establish its colonial empire in Indochina by misrepresenting the political situation in Vietnam. Other than a brief period in which they thought they could do it alone, the French repeatedly turned to British and American aid for the re-establishment of their control over Indochina. The British, wanting to appease their desire to help Paris but escape domestic and international condemnation

connected to such support, aimed to get the U.S. to do the dirty work of aiding and abetting French colonialism instead. However, for those who are apt to blame the root of American failures in the Third World during the Cold War – particularly in countries where the U.S. failed to install and maintain “dependable” governments – on rapacious European colonialists, Lawrence shows that there existed hard-liners in Washington who were equally to blame.

Moreover, the story that Lawrence weaves is not that simple: French, British and Americans governments did not act as homogenous actors. By delving into the bureaucracies of the foreign policy establishments in Paris, London and Washington, Lawrence shows that all three governments were beset with factionalization. In particular, there existed a power struggle between “reformers” or “liberals” who wanted to see a certain amount of autonomy given to the Indochinese and “hard-liners” or “conservatives” who wanted to see the maintainance of the colonial order in Indochina. He reveals, contrary to the conventional wisdom, that Vietnam policy was not founded on ‘givens’, rather, there was intense debate between and within national governments regarding the fate of Indochina.

In the first half of the study, which deals with the period between the end of World War Two and the emergence of the Bao Dai solution in mid-1947, Lawrence shows that there existed considerable opposition to French colonial efforts in the U.S. even after the death of President Roosevelt. In particular, the State Department concerned with Far East Affairs, Asian-based diplomats, OSS, and big business wanted to align U.S. policy on the side of Asian nationalism. (p. 52) Since most of the literature on this period portrays the inevitability of U.S. support in 1950 by minimalizing – or outright disregarding – the role of these actors in driving U.S. policy against French efforts early on, Lawrence’s contribution is immense.

Unlike in the U.S., the institutions that wanted to concede autonomy and implement reforms never dominated policy in France and Britain. Drawing on the long tradition of imperial history which explores the tension between the metropole and the periphery, Lawrence quotes Leon Blum on the consternation of the center: “Decision-making power does not belong to military authorities or civilian settlers in Indochina, but to the government in Paris.” (p.154) Along with the French High Commissioner for Indochina, Admiral Thierry d’Argenlieu, General Douglas D. Gracey, head of the British occupation forces in southern Indochina, pushed European policy from conciliation to confrontation by taking unilateral actions on the ground. Standing firm against the tide of decolonization, these “men on the spot,” along with like-minded ministries and officials in the metropole, worked tirelessly to re-establish the imperial order in Indochina.

Unfortunately for the Indochinese, the “liberals” in the U.S. could not carry carry the day. In the second half of the book, Lawrence shows how ardent colonialists in France and Britain, joined by hardliners in the U.S., successfully invoked the spectre of communism fanned by the savage fire of instability to wrest control of American policy from the liberals. By the declaration of the Truman Doctrine in the middle of 1947, the Europeans found the key to getting Washington to move from neutrality to active support by

showing that Ho Chi Minh was a nefarious agent of Stalin (p. 169). Presenting the Bao Dai solution as a legitimate nationalist alternative, the hardliners were able to mute liberal demands for reform and instead actively aid the French recolonization effort. Unfortunately for Vietnamese non-communist nationalists, the Americans and British never again pushed for real reform while the French never intended to confer true independence. With the convergence of interests complete, European colonialists and American hardliners succeeded in bridging the old imperial order and the new cold war to the detriment of the Indochinese.

Although I agree wholeheartedly with Lawrence's portrayal of the process in which Western policymakers misapplied the "Cold War paradigm [which] produced little but horror and tragedy for forty years," it is still important to see how the Vietnamese parties shaped their own images (or did not shape them) in western eyes. (p. 11) Although nations that emerged to shaky independence after World War Two were at the mercy of larger state actors and the emerging international system, they were not wholly without agency. In addition, the omission of key Vietnamese voices is noticeable since Lawrence's highlights the views of the liberals who were concerned about Asian opinions. Since throughout Lawrence's analysis, British and American governments are shown to be anxious about the bugaboo of Asian opinion towards their support to re-establish the colonial order, the book would have benefited from a greater consideration of events going on in Vietnam at that time.

Upon closer examination of new documents from the archives of the former socialist bloc as well as a closer reading of published speeches and writings from Vietnam, two things become clear: one, the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) under Ho Chi Minh struggled to prove their internationalist credentials to Moscow (see the work of Christopher Goscha) and two, the ICP leaders may have welcomed the coming of the Cold War to the region moreso than conventional wisdom would have it (see the work of Tuong Vu). Following the dissolution of the ICP in November 1945, Ho Chi Minh was suspected of being an Asian Tito not only amongst liberals in the West, but also Stalin and the communist camp. As a result, DRV diplomacy failed to procure socialist support in their war against the French until Mao Zedong and the PRC intervened in 1950. Also, although the Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh leaders ordered their cadre to abstain from criticizing the U.S. during this period, closer reading of ICP speeches and publications show that they held a binary vision of the world even during the Second World War. All of this new evidence points to Western decision-makers who willfully misportrayed the situation as being correct, even if they did not care for the reality.

Lastly, non-communist actors in this work are presented as passive subjects of imperial machinations. In his treatment of the Bao Dai solution, Lawrence rightly collapses the failure and bankruptcy of that project on French stubbornness to give over independence and American and British complicity in not pushing their ally towards real reform. However, the Bao Dai solution also had support amongst non-communist (albeit elite) nationalists. According to Bui Diem, author of *In the Jaws of History* and member of the Dai Viet party, the Bao Dai solution did offer a "glimpse of hope" (comment to reviewer). It would have been interesting had Lawrence delved deeper into non-communist politics

to analyze how these nationalists did or did not appropriate and subvert the French initiative. For instance, what did non-communist parties think of the Bao Dai solution? Did any use it to advance their cause at home? If so, did the Bao Dai solution help in giving legitimacy or sustaining an opposition to the DRV, the Viet Minh, and communism which persisted after the First Indochina War?

In conclusion, it is no small feat for a scholar to delve into the archives of three nations and acquire a nuanced understanding of the bureaucratic politics of each foreign policy apparatus. Lawrence's ability to do so makes *Assuming the Burden* useful and illuminating for specialists of American, French and British foreign policies as well for scholars interested in international relations and diplomacy of the period. That *Assuming the Burden* is extremely well-written, offers a new interpretation, and is expansive in scope guarantees that it will remain a must-read for scholars in the field.

Copyright (c) 2006 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.
