Kathryn Statler has written a tract for our times: she draws an explicit parallel between French-American conflict over Vietnam and the present occupation of Iraq. The comparison is pertinent, for the French Indochina war (1946-1954), was indeed a time of intra-alliance conflict between Paris and Washington, followed by a backlash during which the United States strove to get rid of French political influence in South Vietnam.

The argument runs like this. By late 1949, at the time of the communist seizure of power in China, France had been able to convince the Truman administration to fund her conflict against the Viet Minh as a contribution to the global cold war. Quarrels immediately developed between the two allies over control of these funds. To achieve quick results, the United States pressed for aggressive tactics and the mobilization of a large (and underpaid) Vietnamese army. Local troops would be motivated by the promise of a complete independence from France. French governments were able to resist these demands for the duration of the war, by threatening to put an end to operations if Washington...
persisted in its anti-colonial exertions, but also because of the overlap between war in Indochina and rearmament in Europe. Waging war on one continent while rearming on another one taxed French resources, whereas West German rearmament depended on prior ratification of the European Defense Community (EDC) by the French parliament. “The EDC and Indochina linkage” (p. 77) allowed France to extract ever larger sums from Washington for its war, and even to make peace against the will of the United States. For, as K. Statler rightly notes (pp. 82 and 104), the fear that the French parliament might reject the EDC if the United States vetoed a negotiated end to the Indochina war, was one key factor that convinced the Eisenhower administration to allow the insertion of Indochina on the agenda of the Geneva conference of 1954, and to tolerate the armistice.

But as soon as the war was over, the shoe was on the other foot. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles decided, not only to maintain South Vietnam as a separate, anti-communist state, but also to put an end to French influence there. Ngô Đình Diệm seconded this policy which maximized his independence from his lifelong enemies: France, the communists, and Bao Dai. After the clash between Diem and the sects in Saigon, in April, 1954, France dropped her objections. The middle-of-the-road governments of the Fourth Republic could not bring themselves to a break with Washington. Most importantly, South Vietnam, now an officially independent state, demanded in September, 1954, the phased withdrawal of the French Expeditionary Corps, which was completed in April, 1956. From then on, France lacked any instrument (and any argument, since it did not contribute any longer to the defense of the country), to coerce South Vietnam to comply with the political provisions of the Geneva agreements, which called for all-Vietnamese elections in July, 1956. South Vietnam became a “neocolonial” experiment (p. 9), where various US agencies, inspired by modernization theory, tried their hand at nation-building on the American pattern.

South Vietnam did not behave as a docile pupil of Washington. In particular, the authoritarianism of Ngô Đình Nhu, brother and chief political counselor of Diệm, created tensions with the succeeding American ambassadors in Saigon. In time, it dawned upon Diệm and Nhu that they might use France as a possible counterweight to the United States. They particularly appreciated the fact that France stood away from any participation in the failed military coup of 1960 against Diệm, whereas some Americans were involved. Thus, the way was open for the French efforts at mediation between North and South Vietnam in 1963, which cost the lives of Diệm and Nhu in an American-sanctioned coup.

K. Statler has produced a remarkable book. She has mined all the required English-language sources, but I should like to insist on her impressive command of French archives. She has made good use of French presidential and ministerial papers, as well as of the archives of the Colonial, Defense and Foreign Offices, which are very large repositories. Her writing is clear and concise. Her thesis of an intra-alliance conflict between France and the United States seems to me unquestionable. The characterization of American policy in South Vietnam as neocolonial is apt, for not only did the United States control much of the state administration, but it also tried to Americanize the country, as it had done in the Philippines or in Western Europe during the Marshall Plan. I have learnt a lot from this
book, and shall limit my remarks to one detail and an objection to the general line of her argument.

First, the detail. K. Statler insists that the undermining of the all-Vietnam elections was not the work of the United States alone, that Diem played his part in it as a free agent. This is correct, but one must add that US opposition to these elections came immediately after Geneva. Consider the following remarks by Foster Dulles on July 24, 1954 (four days after the Geneva agreements): “The Secretary said that—in view of the population distribution: 13 million in North Vietnam; 9 million in the South- he thought that we would have to take the position in 1956 that conditions were not favorable for the free expression of the will of the population.”1 This is the very line that Diem followed in 1955 and 1956. True, the State Department hesitated somewhat in 1955 on the means to implement this policy, but the general direction was clear.

My main objection concerns the fact that K. Statler could have stated more explicitly the links between Indochina, the EDC, and the general aims of American foreign policy. She faults the Eisenhower administration, and especially Dulles, for its rigidity. If Washington had considered alternatives to the EDC, she tells us, France would not have been able to milk the United States by casting doubt on its ratification. And if the United States had not been blindly hostile to Vietnamese reunification, it would not have used such heavy-handed tactics in South Vietnam after Geneva. This is true, but only a part of the truth. Just as Iraq in the eyes of the present Bush administration, EDC and Indochina were means to larger ends.

The EDC would have allowed the Eisenhower administration to kill several birds with one stone. It would have provided for West German rearmament (the initial requirement of the Truman administration). It would have paved the way for a reconciliation between France and Germany, thus enhancing the political cohesion of the Western bloc. It would have created a united Europe strong enough to provide for its own conventional armed forces, thus allowing American forces posted in Europe to come back home. Best of all: this European army would have been part of NATO and would not have possessed its own atomic bombs. Thus, the EDC was the perfect device for the strategic “new look.” No wonder the Eisenhower administration was willing to pay to have it ratified.

As for Indochina, it was part and parcel of US policy against the People’s Republic of China (PRC). One might say that, even under Truman, American funds for Indochina were the means of a very tight containment policy that was close to roll back, for American strategists never doubted that the Kra isthmus, not Indochina, was the real line of defense of Southeast Asia. Defending Southeast Asia in Indochina allowed Western powers to put pressure on Beijing. Under Eisenhower, bringing the communist regime in China toppling down was a long term goal mentioned in all basic national security policy papers. Western “victory” in Indochina would have implied a “defeat” for a client of Beijing, and dealt a blow to the prestige of the PRC. After Geneva, the United States deterred France from developing

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trade with the PRC as well as with Hanoi, and North Vietnam was put immediately on the CHINCOM list. In other words, the Sainteny mission might have disrupted the American economic war against the PRC.

This brings me to the point where I disagree with Kathryn Statler’s otherwise admirable book. I do not think that, from an American point of view, a trade-off was possible between the EDC and Indochina. The fundamental policies of the Eisenhower administration required both the EDC and the elimination of the Việt Minh, and France failed it on both counts. This disappointment goes a long way to explain the harshness of American policy toward France after Geneva, not only in Indochina, but also at Suez. In the eyes of the Eisenhower administration, France had become “a failed empire”\(^2\).