Kathryn Statler’s *Replacing France* is a welcome addition to the growing scholarly literature on post-World War Two France. For far too long, as those who study post-war France will attest, historians of the Cold War have largely overlooked the country’s role in that decades-long conflict. But as Statler and others demonstrate, those who wish to understand the Cold War ignore France at their peril. The Hexagon lay at the center of many important events during that period, even some that continue to resonate.¹

Beyond spotlighting the role of France in the early years of the Cold War, Statler also contributes to the rising trend of historical writing from a transnational perspective. Not content to focus on the policies and strategies of one state or even two, she gives voice to other actors, explaining how they affected events and were in turn affected by them. This point is significant because

Statler believes that alliance politics, especially between Britain, France, and the United States, undermined any long-term coordinated Western policy toward Vietnam. Even when they agreed on political objectives, the three powers often disagreed over how best to pursue them.

Statler succeeds in distinguishing her work from previous accounts on the long conflict in Vietnam. Most of them focus either on the First Indochina War (1946-1954) or America’s Vietnam War (1964-1975). Instead, Statler examines the transition period in which the United States took over from France. Her main premise in the book is that the United States neither gradually became ensnared in a quagmire, nor became locked into a stalemate, nor stumbled into war. Rather, the United States “systematically” pushed France out of Vietnam and voluntarily assumed the burden. Ironically, the anti-colonial Americans eventually established their own colonial suzerainty over South Vietnam.

The concept of “culture” holds a prominent place in the book. Statler argues that culture was the “largest thorn in the side of western solidarity” in Vietnam. (7) Not only did France and the United States clash over cultural differences between the two of them, but they also attempted to impose their respective cultures onto Vietnam. Tapping into a familiar motif, Statler asserts that both France and the United States each viewed its own culture as unique and superior and took for granted that the rest of the world longed for its blessings. She asserts that America’s cultural influence on Vietnam exceeded what has been deemed “cultural transfer or transmission” and resulted instead in a “type of imperialism.” (8) It might have been “informal” imperialism, but it was imperialism nonetheless.

In addition to the inherent paternalism of such attitudes, they can also lead to disastrous outcomes when put into practice. The belief in one’s cultural superiority and the duty to spread it can give rise to the embrace of unilateral policies. And if smaller nations fail to appreciate the benefits of imbibing this foreign culture, it is simply force fed to them. Accordingly, France and the United States attempted to force this diet onto a resistant South Vietnam. Little did they realize the folly of their dubious assumptions. Tragically, all sides paid a heavy price.

Another prominent factor in Statler’s account concerns diverging diplomatic styles. She contends that France and the United States differed significantly in their practice of diplomacy. In her view, France took a more pragmatic approach, willing to talk to its enemies, while the United States viewed diplomacy as a zero-sum game, unwilling to concede even an inch on what might be a slippery slope to disaster. These differences, she believes, played a large role in shaping these two countries’ policies toward Vietnam and promoting the disdain that American and French officials eventually felt for each other. This ill will fostered mutual suspicion and a disinclination to cooperate on even issues of considerable magnitude.

Overall, Statler presents a strong case. Drawing on archives on both sides of the Atlantic, though surprisingly not the Truman Library, she shows in great detail how the United States and France displayed excessive confidence in the rightness of their policies and condescension for the country that they presumably intended to help. She also lays bare
the breakdown in unity among Britain, France, the United States, three allies that
nevertheless often viewed each other in a less-than-favorable light. Finally, Statler offers a
stinging critique of the United States, especially Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, for
ideological rigidity and cultural and political myopia. It is not a pretty picture.

Despite her general sure footedness on the historical terrain, Statler does stumble on
occasion. Unfortunately, she follows the flawed conventional wisdom concerning the
European Defense Community (EDC), an ill-starred organization intended to rearm the
Federal Republic of Germany in a way acceptable to the Europeans. Although the EDC is
not the focus of her book, she notes that it had a marked bearing on American and French
grand strategy and thus how Paris and Washington responded to the conflict in Indochina.
France drew a direct connection between the Indochina War and European defense. As
Statler writes, “Western and Eastern defense problems were now intimately linked,
according to French officials.” (38) American officials began to see the situation in the
same light.

But while Statler establishes the EDC’s importance to the Indochina question, she states
that “France was more concerned about Germany than about the Soviet Union.” 2 Yes, there
were indeed many individuals in France who worried more about Bonn than Moscow, but a
number of key French decision makers thought otherwise, and it was their policy that
carried the day. Germany was rearmed, entered NATO and the Western European Union,
and thus served as a frontline state in the effort to contain the Soviet Union. All of this
occurred with French consent. 3

This last point underscores another concern about Statler’s account: it appears slightly
imbalanced. For most of the book, it seems as though French officials simply watch events
as they unfold while U.S. officials instigate most of the action. This situation changes only
once France is for all intents and purposes out of Vietnam. Only then do we see France
making things happen, as French officials labored mightily to ensure that their country’s
cultural influence was not ejected from Vietnam as completely as their armed forces. One
wishes that the author had developed this interpretation more fully. What cards did
France have in dealing with the Americans and how skillfully did French officials play
them? Considerable French agency is the main theme of the recent historical works on
Fourth Republic France. It would have improved the book had Statler placed more
attention on the opportunities and limits facing French diplomacy, and why France made
certain choices over others.

Statler also provides a relatively meager focus on internal debates in France. While she
notes that political cracks began to appear in France over the Indochina War, she remains
largely silent about the divisions that arose over other important issues. We see little of the

2 Kathryn C. Statler, Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam (Lexington, KY:
University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 36.

3 See Creswell, A Question of Balance; and Pierre Guillen, “Les chefs militaires français, le réarmement de
Contemporaines 129 (January 1982), 3-33.
rise and fall of governments and the shifting political arithmetic in France’s National Assembly. An assessment of French public opinion is also absent. Overlooking these domestic currents is unfortunate because they cumulatively roiled the waters of French foreign policy, which meant that France had to balance its Indochina policy along with a host of other pressing issues. It would have been highly informative to see more of the trade-offs France was forced to make due to domestic politics.

Domestic politics is not the only absence in the book. Curiously, the voices of the military leadership of France and the United States are muted in Replacing France. It would have been interesting and informative to know more about the kind of advice they provided to their own governments. Although known as la grande muette, the French Army’s military leaders loudly spoke out on French political matters. Indeed, Marshal Alphonse Juin was publicly censured for criticizing French policy.

Although the book is accurately billed as a transnational history, it is primarily the story of U.S.-French relations. The British make an occasional showing in the book, but not much more. Except for chapter five, one of the most valuable and interesting chapters in the book, we hear little about the viewpoints of the British, Chinese, Russians, and even the Vietnamese, as they put in almost token appearances elsewhere. In fact, Anglo-French relations were a key element of French grand strategy. Without Britain offering a continental commitment to Europe, France was unwilling to go forward with the EDC. And had this affair been resolved years earlier, France would have been free to focus greater attention on Indochina.

America’s incomprehension of French policy is another thread running throughout the book. For example, Statler states that “Despite its recognition of problems in the Western Alliance, the Eisenhower administration consistently failed to understand French motivations.” (83) Yet Statler provides no sustained explanation as to why the United States so consistently misunderstood its ally. Uninformed U.S. diplomats in France? This would seem unlikely, as America’s ambassador to France, the Francophile David Bruce, was extremely well connected with France’s political establishment and met regularly with key French officials. Was it due to poor U.S. leadership? Perhaps the blinkered vision of Eisenhower and Dulles prevented them from seeing things as they actually existed and instead how they wanted to see things. Or perhaps France itself may have played a role in America’s miscomprehension. French Prime Minister Pierre Mendès France told U.S. officials that the governments that had preceded his own had misinformed the United States about political sentiment in France’s parliament in order to placate the American leadership.4

Economics also fails to receive its due in the book. Some hard figures about the American and the French budgets would have gone far in helping Statler to make her case. Instead, we are told, for example, that American aid to France was increased or decreased, but rarely how much. Statler also neglects to state the size of the French defense budget and how much of it was devoted to the Indochina War. Moreover, the statistics that Statler

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4 Creswell, A Question of Balance, 156.
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does provide are in either French francs or U.S. dollars with no attempt to convert them, forcing the reader to go elsewhere to learn the relative value of the two currencies.

Despite these and other concerns, Replacing France is well written, strongly argued, and deeply researched. The book increases our understanding of a poorly understood but important subject. Along with Mark A. Lawrence's Assuming the Burden, an essential book against which this one will likely be compared, Replacing France deserves inclusion on a list of required readings on the Indochina Wars.