Unlike many studies of the Cold War that use a “communist vs. anti-communist” framework, Kathryn C. Statler focuses on intra-alliance politics within the crucible of decolonization to analyze how America became involved in Vietnam. Statler, an associate professor at the University of San Diego, emphasizes the repeated misperceptions and missed opportunities in Franco-American relations from 1950 through the early 1960s. Using sources from Britain, France, and the US, she argues that “The Cold War explains why the United States intervened [in Vietnam], but the process of French decolonization explains why this intervention increased and led to a breakdown in western unity” (7). Indeed, Statler’s *Replacing France*, especially when used in tandem with that of Mark Lawrence’s *Assuming the Burden*, provides additional nuance to the growing body of literature that considers the transnational process of Cold War policy making.¹

*Replacing France* is divided into three phases of US-France relations. The first section details how the US and France both sought (and failed) to develop allied unity between 1950 and 1954. Conflicting goals served as the early point of departure. Paris first and foremost sought American aid in Indochina. Washington ranked European issues much higher than problems in Southeast Asia, seeking ratification of the European Defense Community (EDC) over support for French colonial holdings. Opportunities for compromise, such as the tripartite summits with the British, only widened the gulf between

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them. The US and France each suspected betrayal by the other: the French viewed Americans as playing to anti-colonial Vietnamese sentiments (which they did), the Americans feared French negotiations with the Soviets for their own “peace with honor,” especially during the post-Stalin peace offensive. Such issues combined with the looming struggle over ratification of the European Defense Community (EDC) and the Korean War settlement to complicate relations, as others scholars have observed, resulting in the Atlantic allies’ disunity at the 1954 Geneva Conference. Afterwards, the French supported nationwide democratic elections and worked to maintain some influence in Vietnam. In contrast, the US sought to isolate North Vietnam, avoid elections, and build up the southern noncommunist government. The subsequent defeat of the EDC in France, according to the author, resulted in a unilateral US commitment to build a noncommunist government in southern Vietnam.

Statler examines Franco-American rivalry for influence in Vietnam between 1954 and 1956 in the second part of her book. Here the author convincingly demonstrates that perceptions matter in foreign relations. Failure to forge allied unity resulted from differing goals as well as from US and French paranoia, confusion, and misunderstandings. The French viewed US support of Ngo Dinh Diem as “a concerted effort to undermine their interests and prestige” whereas Americans believed “that certain French elements were scheming to overthrow Diem” (122). President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles hoped for a speedy French departure, but France insisted on a continued presence. Diem viewed France as a greater threat than communism, perhaps justified by private French meetings with Bao Dai urging Diem’s dismissal (124). When South Vietnam’s stability vanished during the March 1955 sect crisis, French and American officials disagreed about the causes, actual events, and even the steps necessary in the aftermath. The 1956 “non-elections” further complicated the milieu. The French believed the US would not support elections and hesitated to alienate them with pro-election pressure, although the French proposed ideas for co-presidents as well as International Control Commission (ICC) assistance for elections. Statler also notes that Vietnam’s elections failed to occur also due to British procrastination, as well as Soviet and Chinese lack of concern for Indochina and desire to avoid war with the US.

Her story reaches its high point in the final segment, devoted to desperate French and determined Americans in a full-on US-French culture war from 1956 through 1960. Statler examines the separate Quai d’Orsay policies toward Hanoi and Saigon. Characterizing the French effort to retain influence in North Vietnam as “astounding,” the author explains that French leaders believed any chance of deterring Soviet and/or Chinese control should be pursued (236). The post-1955 French presence in North Vietnam included French students, clinics, plus schools and institutions like the Ecole Francaise d’Extreme Orient. Keeping an open door to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was not entirely a selfless act, as French officials recognized the vulnerability of remaining French investments in the North. In South Vietnam, France concentrated on developing good relations, supporting South Vietnam in the United Nations, and promoting French culture on nearly every front possible. France believed the US had launched a “defrancification” offensive in the South whereas Americans viewed French efforts as sad attempts to retain colonial control.
The author states that “perhaps the single greatest factor leading to the American commitment in South Vietnam was the Eisenhower and Diem administrations' determination to end the French presence there in the two years following Geneva” (183). US-French attempts to cooperate resulted in expanded American control (as evinced by the dissolution of the French Expeditionary Corps (FEC) in April 1956, the reorganization of the Training Relations and Instruction Mission (TRIM) by Colonel Edward G. Lansdale, the virtual disappearance of Ecole Militaire Superieur Vietnamiennne (EMS) by 1957, and the transformation of the Vietnamese National Army (VNA) into the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in 1955). The Americans also distanced themselves from the French and the taint of imperialism; US propaganda depicted American values as both anti-communist and anti-colonial (through efforts by Radio Vietnam, Voice of America (VOA), United States Information Service (USIS), Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam (MAAG), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Special Mission for Technical and Economic Aid (STEM), and others). At the same time the DRV intensified its cultural and diplomatic efforts after the “non-elections”: radio, pamphlets, postcards, films, newsreels, exchanges with the Soviets, appeals to Afro-Asian organizations, carefully crafted diplomatic appeals to South Vietnam, and the establishment of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) in 1960.

What do learn from Statler's work? The author is strongest in her discussions of perception in the diplomatic wrangling between France and the US. Her research uncovers a complicated US-France relationship, one as fraught with anxieties as those between rival Cold War countries. She also rightly and unequivocally confirms that the US acted in a neo-colonial manner, establishing informal colonial control in South Vietnam. Her account is also one of allies divided within their own governments. At several crucial points in her narrative, the US and French administrations failed to develop clear goals and policies. France sought a negotiated settlement in Indochina, all the while its leaders could not agree on the actual terms. The US, enamoured of a French military victory in Indochina, supported the Navarre plan even though Navarre himself predicted a stalemate as the best possible outcome. US cultural efforts remained disorganized and contradictory, as rival organizations vied for primacy or failed to consult with other US agencies. Even the actions of individuals seem contradictory, as when Dulles proposed aid for Indochina quid pro quo for EDC ratification, but then agreed to additional assistance to the French in Indochina without a word about the EDC. Other internal issues, such as the US tendency to rely on optimistic newcomers to South Vietnam rather than less-than-enthusiastic but experienced officials – what Statler terms as a “structural flaw” of the Eisenhower administration – also reveal the complexity involved in the process of policy making (82). Many of these assertions have been advanced elsewhere (US-France mutual suspicion, Franco-American cultural competition in Indochina, and US reliance on optimistic assessments) and should also be recognized as patterns that began much earlier.²

Culture plays a salient role in Statler’s analysis. As their power waned militarily, politically, and economically, the French stressed soft power tactics. Conversely, the US began with small investments in cultural transmission, which increased over time to an outright cultural offensive – more aptly “displacing” rather than “replacing” France. Statler, like many other historians, points to the hubris of France and the US, as both nations possessed an exceptionalist belief in their respective abilities and missions. Accordingly, Statler argues, “These differences in worldviews help explain the fundamental ideologies and political divisions between Paris and Washington and why they often failed to present a united front to their common enemies” (5). Both France and the US possessed a colonial mentality, both believed in their superiority. The French wanted to preserve their mission civilisatrice whereas the US wanted to stop communism. Statler rightly observes that “the Eisenhower administration replaced the French colonial presence in South Vietnam with an American neocolonial one,” an informal endeavor but one in which “Americans and American institutions took over former French functions at all levels of South Vietnamese society” (249). Much blame is laid at the feet of ethnocentric US officials, who promoted steady increases in American student and training exchanges, art and educational exhibits, book translations, media, and tourism, all with little to no importation of Vietnamese culture to the US. Statler’s evidence establishes convincingly the US cultural imperialism at work in South Vietnam. Moreover, the culture battles waged in South Vietnam reveal the seriousness of the growing rift between the two allies as well the importance placed on cultural activities by governments in not only the US and France, but also the DRV.

Many of my observations and suggestions for Statler’s work call for a more full discussion of attitudes and thus may extend beyond her stated focus. She depicts the post-1st Indochinese War French as fearful of another war and thus limited in their actions and decisions. More explanation is necessary to explain how the French, despite their continued presence in the North, remained oblivious to DRV economic and allied realities. Also, generalizations that the US and France faced a common threat in communism assumes that both understood “communism” and the “communist threat” similarly. A comparative analysis of how “communism” (as a constructed idea) manifested itself differently in France and the US may help explain differing goals and prioritizations. The influence of the French Communist Party (PCF) on negotiations with Indochina receives no analysis in comparison to other works that consider the role of the PCF.3 Next, Statler reaffirms that Washington-led directives ignored realities in South Vietnam, although “there were a large number of people who knew something about Vietnam, but they happened to be French, which automatically disqualified them due to their ‘colonial contamination’” (215). How this reconciles with prior American reliance on French orientalists in Mark Bradley’s Imaging Vietnam and America remains obscure.4 Analysis of the ways in which Americans both relied on and yet dismissed French information on Indochina over time could be revealing. The impact of anti-communism within the US

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4 Bradley, 56-59 and 90-91.
should also be noted as should the US military community’s doubtful view of the potential for French victory in Indochina. Statler’s characterization of Dulles as the possible “villain in the story” leaves little room for more understanding of how his partnership with Eisenhower worked. Additionally, Statler’s context of inquiry is the process of decolonization – perhaps something could be said on other contemporary colonial issues that may have had bearing on French and US decision-making during this period in Algeria and Senegal, or even Laos and Cambodia.

Finally, an all-too common criticism of historians of foreign relations is that we fail to make use of Vietnamese sources and Vietnam-focused studies. While the work of Mark Bradley, Robert Brigham, Jessica Chapman, Matthew Masur, Edward Miller, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, and other scholars greatly invalidate that perception, the recent and well-argued criticisms leveled at Mark Moyar’s *Triumph Forsaken* require the issue be raised here. True, Statler focuses specifically on Franco-American relations and she states early on that Vietnamese (as well as British, Soviet, and Chinese) roles are secondary considerations. The author then attempts to integrate and evaluate perspectives from Vietnam by using French and US sources. Is this approach successful? Not entirely. Statler incorporates some estimation of Vietnamese leaders within the context of Franco-American problems, but the result is that they almost always come across as mere pawns in a larger game. In appraising the impact of US activities in South Vietnam, Statler reflects that “To the extent that Americans aided in the forging of a nation, it was on the northern side of the seventeenth parallel” (11). Such a statement marginalizes the complexity of events surrounding the evolution of the DRV power structure in the 1950s. Her evaluations of DRV efforts to ensure elections and their appeals to communist and Asian allies are brief. Moreover, the extent to which DRV leaders, and also Diem, played upon and furthered ruptures in Franco-American unity deserves much more investigation. Truong Chinh appears once, assessed by a French source as an extremist, which Statler accepts uncritically (235). In French efforts to offer alternatives to Diem, names like Nguyen Van Tam, Pham Buu Loc, and Phan Huy Quat appear, but without examination of their possible appeal (125). Diem receives the most attention, especially in the fourth chapter, appearing in Statler’s analysis as an “underestimated” figure, both “savvy” and “intransigent,” who guided a successful foreign policy but a poor domestic program (179). The author reaffirms the view that Diem sought an independent path whereas his American benefactors pressed him to follow the American model. Most of the Diem chapter actually offers French and American views of this complex personality, built on US and French diplomatic exchanges and reports. Still, the brief glimpses into Hanoi and Saigon afforded by Statler encourage expanded investigations into how Vietnamese leaders weighed in on the Franco-American alliance, French decolonization policy in Africa and Asia, as well as Cold War era diplomacy generally.

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