
Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux
Reviewers: Philip Catton, Laurent Cesari, Michael Creswell, Ginger R. Davis


Contents

- Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge......................... 2
- Review by Philip E. Catton, Stephen F. Austin State University .................................. 8
- Review by Laurent Cesari, University of Artois (Arras, France) ..................................... 12
- Review by Michael H. Creswell, Florida State University ............................................... 15
- Review by Ginger R. Davis, Temple University ............................................................... 19
- Author’s Response by Kathryn C. Statler, University of San Diego ............................... 24

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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

In the past year and a half H-Diplo has featured roundtables on three books that focused directly on the Vietnam conflict and a number of other books on the Cold War that also addressed aspects of this conflict. In May 2006 Mark Atwood Lawrence’s *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (2005) received a very favorable assessment from five reviewers who welcomed Lawrence’s international 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 to support the French in the first Indochina War. In June 2007, four specialists discussed Seth Jacobs’ *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (2004); and in July 4 reviewers challenged Mark Moyar’s revisionist *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (2006).

Kathryn Statler’s *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (2007) now joins this list of impressive reassessments on the Vietnam conflict and shares significant similarities with them. Similar to Lawrence, Jacobs, Moyar, and a number of other scholars with new books or forthcoming studies on Vietnam, Statler is part of a new generation of scholars who did not live through the Vietnam conflict or teach and write about it before 1975. Without having to defend past assessments in writing or political positions carved in the sands of shifting views on the Cold War and Vietnam, these authors are free to reconsider past contemporary and historical assessments and to apply more of an international approach in their studies. On the other hand, they may miss not only the contemporary passions but also insights grounded in the contemporary context that excessive hindsight too readily dismisses.

Statler’s study offers a sequel to Lawrence in some respects as he ended his study with the U.S. decision in 1950 to aid the French directly in their Indochina conflict. Statler begins her study with this decision and follows French-U.S. relations on Vietnam through the Geneva Conference in 1954, the ensuing U.S. replacement of France and support for Ngo Dinh Diem and the South Vietnam government, culminating in an expanding U.S. presence, the breakdown of the Geneva agreements on Vietnam, and the ensuing North Vietnam decision to organize, arm, and unleash an insurgency in South Vietnam. Similar to Lawrence, Statler does introduce, whenever possible and appropriate, the perspectives of Great Britain, the Soviet Union, China, and the Vietnamese but her main focus and primary sources are in the French-U.S. relationship.

The reviewers have raised a number of questions that enhance the importance of this study and merit further discussion including

1.) Many historians aspire to write international history and some definitely accomplish this such as Odd Arne Westad’s *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* featured in a recent H-Diplo roundtable. However, the challenges are many as indicated in another roundtable on Marc Trachtenberg’s *The Craft of International History. A Guide to Method*. Several of the reviewers would prefer more...
international perspective in Statler’s study, a shift from a focus on U.S.-French relations to a transnational perspective, as well as more consideration of the linkage between larger Cold War policies of the U.S. and France in Europe and Asia and Vietnam issues. They would also welcome more evaluation on French diplomacy and the internal debates shaping French decisions. Statler addresses these issues in her response.

2.) A central issue that Statler does explores before and during the Geneva Conference is the relationship of the Cold War in Europe to Indochina. Statler demonstrates that Cold War considerations significantly influenced Washington’s policies on Vietnam, both indirectly with respect to the European Defense Community (EDC)—the plan to bolster Western troops in Europe by bringing German forces into a supra-national European army- and directly concerning Washington’s views on what the Soviet Union and China were up to with respect to Vietnam and Southeast Asia as a whole. Historians have previously recognized and discussed the EDC’s relationship, but Statler develops the issue in significantly more depth with more primary sources than previous accounts. She is particularly insightful in the development of how France manipulated Washington’s increasingly strident demands for French ratification of EDC to maximize American aid and support in Vietnam (see pp. 69, 77-78, 82, 100-101, 113). In conclusion, Statler suggests that the issue illustrates the “dangers of tying one policy goal to another. Both Paris and Washington thought they had linked policies in a way that would allow them maximum leverage against one another, but in the end, both became mired in their own cleverness.” (279)

3.) John Foster Dulles is Statler’s least favorite policy maker on the French and American sides of the Vietnam issue: “if there is a villain in the story, or at least someone to hold primarily responsible for this commitment, it might be John Foster Dulles.” (284) Dulles comes across as a bit of a loose cannon, mixing threats against the French on EDC and any negotiations on Indochina with reassurances that the U.S. would not undermine the French in either Europe or Vietnam. Dulles’ unwillingness to risk much with respect to the Soviet peace offensive after the death of Stalin is understandable. However, the pressure to keep France fighting in Vietnam as Washington completed a cease-fire agreement for a divided Korea did not reflect a very understanding approach with a major Cold War ally. Dulles appears caught up in tactics and maneuvers vis-à-vis Cold War adversaries and allies without sufficient thought being devoted to the relationship of Washington’s available means to its objectives and the wisdom of jumping into situations regardless of the likelihood of success. Statler does push the available evidence pretty far when she suggests that Dulles “embarked on a series of actions that could be construed as attempts to sabotage the [Geneva] conference.” (97) Dulles maneuvered vis-à-vis the French as he did with most adversaries and allies, leaving everyone guessing about what he was really up to. However, it is unlikely that either he or President Eisenhower really wanted to undermine the Geneva conference since they lacked the support of the British and Republican leaders in Congress for the only other alternative to negotiations at Geneva, direct American military intervention.

4.) “Replacing France” is the major focus of Statler’s study as she skillfully traces the evolution in Washington’s calculations from providing aid and advice to France before the
Geneva accords and then a shift to replacing the French as soon as possible. In the process Statler offers a number of insights, such as how Washington relied too much on assessments from newcomers to Vietnam rather than the reports of experienced officials in the field—"the incoming top American official would always be more optimistic than the outgoing, which ensured that the United States would always stay in Vietnam just a little longer." (83) Statler also captures a degree of irony in France’s failed management of the relationship with Washington over Vietnam. France successfully uses the Cold War and EDC issues to get aid from Washington but at the same time France does not want advice from Washington and unsuccessfully resists the influx of American advisors—from MAAG military advisors to United States Information Service officials, Special Mission for Technical and Economic Aid officers, CIA agents, U.S. press correspondents, and other Americans representing a variety of organization. Before long France is fighting a multi-sided conflict against the Viet Minh and then North Vietnam, against the Saigon government led by Diem, and against American economic and cultural penetration of South Vietnam. France gambled to try and maintain its stature if not its colonies by persuading the Americans to come into Indochina and lost almost everything except the ability to criticize from the sidelines the American effort in the 1960s. After 1956 France found itself being pushed out by the Americans and Diem in every area from training Vietnamese troops and officers to education and cultural centers despite earlier agreements with the Americans, and remained influential only in the economy as American private capital did not follow the rest of American policy. French officials expressed an intense sense of being evicted from Vietnam by Americans who knew little about the area, the people, the culture, and seemed to learn even less. (214-216)

5.) Statler addresses several of the “hot button” contemporary issues from the sixties, most notably in Chapter 4 on “The Non-Elections of 1956.” Statler carefully applies an international perspective to the issue, develops the various perspectives of Diem, Hanoi, Moscow and China, Paris, London and Washington. She resists the tendency to predetermine the issue as something that had no chance of happening and, instead, develops the evolving perspectives of the participants. France, for example, initially pushed for elections to maintain its cultural and economic influence in both parts of Vietnam whereas the U.S. preferred postponement and partition and backed Diem’s refusal to cooperate in a series of ad hoc responses. In Statler’s dispassionate analysis the non-elections are less of a great travesty against democratic principles than a process of “disorganization and mistrust, in which events tended to overtake policy” with Diem as the most significant actor. On the other hand, Statler notes how the failure to hold elections contributed to Hanoi’s decision for an insurgency in South Vietnam and “the continued reduction of the French presence and paved the way for an increased American presence in Vietnam.” (181)

6.) Recent literature has brought a revival of analysis on Diem’s objectives and leadership skills with increased scholarly disagreement, a definite shift from earlier assessments that dismissed Diem as undemocratic and incompetent to manage South
Vietnam and compete with Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam. A general problem in the debate is reliance on Western as opposed to Vietnamese language sources to evaluate Diem. Although Statler does not focus on this issue, she does at various times support a view of Diem recently advanced by Mark Moyar in which Diem is depicted as a very dedicated leader who was determined to create an independent South Vietnam based on Vietnamese culture and interests rather than the American model that American civilians and military advisors pushed on him from 1954 until Washington accepted the ill-fated coup to overthrow Diem in 1963. “The West consistently underestimated Diem,” Statler concludes. “Most western accounts at the time and into the present assess Diem as an uncompromising and unskilled leader. But consider his accomplishments.” (251-252) With Statler’s reliance on Western sources, it is difficult to penetrate very far on Diem’s objectives, although he does seem to maneuver with respect to both powers to achieve as much independence as possible.

7.) Statler sheds significant insights on not only the process by which the U.S. contributed to the end of French colonialism in Vietnam but also the development of an early and critically costly effort to replace the French with an American neocolonial model. Although Statler does not necessarily explore new dimensions of the model in Vietnam, she does give it a sharper focus with respect to how Americans tried to impose American standards, culture, and language as they replaced the French and built an American landscape in South Vietnam. (262). As Statler notes, this quest intensified in the sixties. Americans disdained a French colonial administration and mentality, but they seem as clueless as the French with respect to understanding and supporting Diem’s quest to be an independent national leader. In all of the studies of America as empire, as a hegemony, as neoconservative or neoliberal crusader for democracy, recognition should be given to the illuminating example of Vietnam, 1954-1963, before the war and Americanization of it transformed this earlier relationship.

8.) Finally, Statler contributes to the ongoing historiographical debate on how and why the United States entered the Vietnam conflict and continued to expand its involvement, its resources, the lives of its soldiers, its prestige and credibility, and its domestic politics and stability. In her conclusion, Statler touches on different interpretations, such as the “quagmire thesis,” the “stalemate thesis,” the “stumbling thesis,” and, one could add the “victory denied” thesis and others. Statler’s contribution to the debate is to emphasize the role of intra-alliance conflict as being “responsible, to a considerable degree, for increasing American invention in Vietnam.” (277) Despite the agreement of France, Britain and the United States on common policies they, according to Statler, “never managed to carry

1 Seth Jacobs focuses more on American attitudes that shape official endorsement of Diem rather than actual policies and results in South Vietnam. The most enduring critical view of Diem and his regime appeared in Frances FitzGerald’s Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam (1972), especially Chapter III “The Sovereign of Discord”, pp. 96-184. For the recent literature on Diem, see the works cited by Philip Catton and his own Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam (2002).

2 Moyar does focus more extensively on the 1960-63 period and explores the conflicting assessments on Diem, his domestic policies, and counterinsurgency efforts by American journalists and military advisors. See Moyar, Chapters II-IX.
through these policies in practice. The search for ‘common action’ always appeared just out of reach. But in attempting to realize this goal, American increased its influence in Vietnam, with the result that by 1960 the Americans had replaced the French in almost all domains in South Vietnam and dissuaded them from maintaining a presence in North Vietnam.” (277-278)

Participants:


**Michael Creswell** is currently an associate professor of history at Florida State University, Michael Creswell is a graduate of Indiana University (B.A.) and the University of Chicago (M.A., Ph.D.). His major publications include “Between the Bear and the Phoenix: The United States and the European Defense Community” *Security Studies* ([Summer 2002]; “How France Secured an Anglo-American Continental Commitment, 1945-54,” in *Cold War History* (June 2002); and with Marc Trachtenberg, “France and the German Question, 1945-1955,” which appeared in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* (Summer 2003). Creswell is also author of *A Question of Balance: How France and the United States Created Cold War Europe* (Harvard, 2006). His next book will examine how France rebuilt its army after the Second World War.
Most works in the voluminous literature devoted to the Vietnam conflict focus on the last decade-and-a-half of the struggle, their authors’ attention drawn no doubt by the gripping drama of this period, as well as the debates that still rage over the policies of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. In comparison, the earlier years of the conflict remain less well studied. Perhaps that is beginning to change. Recent studies by scholars such as Pierre Asselin, Jessica Chapman, Mark Lawrence, and Edward Miller have turned our attention back to the 1940s and 1950s. Much of this work, moreover, eschews an American-centered approach that concentrates almost exclusively on U.S. policymaking. Instead, it brings into the story the actions of other participants – Vietnamese, French, British, Chinese, etc. – which has helped to shed new light on the course of events and the nature of the conflagration in Vietnam.

Kathryn Statler’s *Replacing France* represents a fine addition to this trend in the literature. Drawing on research conducted in U.S. and French archives (as well as Britain’s Public Record Office), Statler examines how and why the United States supplanted France in Vietnam in the 1950s. Cold War concerns obviously played an important part in this development, she acknowledges, but so too did the process of decolonization and the peculiar dynamics of the Franco-American relationship. She focuses on these latter factors: how the end of empire in Indochina, together with the competitive-cooperation that characterized relations between Paris and Washington, drew the Americans deeper into the affairs of Vietnam and encouraged them to muscle aside the French. The result is a fresh, insightful, and thought-provoking “international history.”

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Statler begins by chronicling the course of events during the years 1950-1954. In this period, the French enticed Washington into increasing its support for the war in Indochina by portraying the conflict as an anti-communist, rather than a colonial, one. At the same time though, Paris fretted about the intentions of the Americans and their growing influence in Indochina. In fact, Statler argues that the French “had done too good a job of interesting the United States in Vietnam” (114). In the wake of France’s defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Agreements, Washington moved to replace the former imperial power and assemble in South Vietnam all of the machinery of nation-building, American style. By 1960, she concludes, French colonialism had been supplanted by U.S. "imperialism lite" (289), a brand that ultimately proved no more successful than the original.

As this characterization of U.S. policy suggests, Statler is critical of America's involvement in Vietnam. Like most historians of the conflict, she subscribes to the "orthodox" (as opposed to the "revisionist") view that the U.S. intervention was a tragic mistake. She identifies two particular villains of the piece: Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and "American exceptionalism." She charges Dulles with holding a “Manichean worldview” that “precluded serious negotiations with his adversaries, and oftentimes with his allies,” pointing to his unwavering support for South Vietnam’s Ngo Dinh Diem as one example of his inflexibility. As for “American exceptionalism,” Washington’s faith in the superiority of U.S. values, and the ability to export them to Vietnam, “propagated an assertive foreign policy” and underlay America’s confidence in replacing the French. Statler does highlight France’s own notions of its cultural uniqueness and “civilizing mission,” but generally portrays its diplomacy as less rigid and more pragmatic than that of the United States. There were a number of policymakers who understood the pitfalls of America’s approach in Vietnam, she observes, but “[u]nfortunately, most of them spoke French” (284-285).

Statler’s book fills an important niche in the literature on the Vietnam War. As she notes, studies of the conflict in the 1950s tend to concentrate either on important “turning points” such as the Dien Bien Phu debacle, or on the big Cold War concerns that drove U.S. policy. Through a sustained analysis of Franco-American relations during the 1950s, Statler provides a more complete picture of the events of the decade. For example, her examination of U.S. assistance programs in the early fifties, which included direct economic aid to the Bao Dai government, suggests the continuity between the periods before and after 1954. There was clearly a budding American effort at nation-building underway long before Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference prompted Washington to take a more hands-on role in Vietnamese affairs. Statler’s focus on the Franco-American relationship also offers a number of fresh insights. Indeed, one of the great benefits of doing multi-archival “international history” is that it leads not only to the unearthing of new material but also new ways of looking at familiar episodes. She is able to ask some particularly intriguing “what if?” questions as a result of analyzing events from multiple perspectives rather than just a single point of view. For example, if France had succeeded in maintaining ties with North Vietnam rather than choosing to back U.S. policy in South Vietnam, to what extent would that have constrained Washington’s freedom of action in the aftermath of the Geneva settlement?
Like Odd Arne Westad’s recent work, Statler’s book also challenges us to reconsider the dynamics of the Cold War in the Third World. In particular, she points to the importance of “North-South” issues, not just “East-West” ones, as motive forces. Thus, she suggests that long-standing ideological convictions – and the clash between France’s “civilizing mission” and the U.S. drive to bring American-style modernization to the post-colonial world – helped shape the course of events in Vietnam as much as Cold War strategic and military considerations. In addition, she frequently draws the reader’s attention to the interests and actions of the Vietnamese, highlighting their role in influencing events. For the Vietnamese, of course, the “North-South” issues of colonialism and independence were at least as important as the “East-West” struggle between the competing blocs. Statler offers a particularly telling analysis of Ngo Dinh Diem’s behavior after 1954, as the Vietnamese leader sought first to eliminate the last vestiges of French colonial rule, before turning back to France in the late 1950s to provide a counterweight to the growing influence of the Americans.

By treating Diem as an active participant in events, Statler’s work complements the efforts made by other scholars to bring the Vietnamese out of the historical shadows and make them more than passive bystanders in the history of the conflict. Nevertheless, there were a number of places where the Vietnamese might have received more attention than she devotes to them. For example, she spends relatively little time dealing with the critical question of how Bao Dai came to appoint Diem as prime minister, noting the “murkiness surrounding his ascent” (119). Ed Miller’s work on this episode suggests that historians are more likely to find the answer to this question in the dynamics of Vietnamese politics than the designs of Washington or Paris. Given the emphasis she places on the influence of culture, perhaps Statler also missed an opportunity to examine the extent to which France’s faith in its cultural superiority and its disdain for the Americans affected the Diem regime’s view of the United States. Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, was particularly scathing in his criticism of the Americans, comparing them unfavorably to the French and accusing them of ignorance and crass materialism. Was the Saigon government’s anti-Americanism, which emerged with a vengeance in the early 1960s, influenced by a French-induced cultural contempt for the Anglo-Saxons?

There are a couple of other issues that deserve critical attention. The first concerns the chronological scope of Replacing France. Beginning the book in 1950, the year that saw a significant increase in U.S. involvement in Vietnam, makes absolute sense. That said, Statler might have provided some additional background information to help explain Franco-U.S. relations after this date, especially in terms of America’s longstanding antipathy towards French colonialism in Indochina. As is well-known (and perhaps that accounts for Statler’s omission), negative U.S. views of France’s colonial presence pre-dated the First Indochina War and presumably bolstered Washington’s determination to push the French aside in the 1950s. One certainly wonders whether the Americans would have

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3 Miller, “Vision, Power and Agency.”
treated the British in quite the same way. The book ends around 1960, but the choice of this date seems less self-evident. Indeed, Statler briefly discusses events in the early sixties – De Gaulle’s call for Vietnam’s “neutralization,” French involvement in Saigon’s purported flirtation with Hanoi, and the U.S. role in the plots to overthrow Diem – that seem tailor-made for the kind of analysis to which she subjects those of the 1950s. Perhaps, the year 1963 would have made a more logical end-date, particularly since so much of the story in Replacing France revolves around the figure of Ngo Dinh Diem.

The second issue concerns some of Statler’s concluding comments, in which she suggests that, by 1961, the United States had “built a colony rather than a nation” in South Vietnam (286) and thereby replicated the kind of enterprise that had earlier doomed French Indochina. While Statler makes a compelling case that neocolonial impulses drove U.S. policy, her characterization of Diem’s South Vietnam as essentially a colony seems wide of the mark. Throughout the book, she emphasizes Diem’s “agency” and refusal to tow an American line. Yet, at the end, she portrays him as little more than a power-mad dictator, leading a U.S.-sponsored entity that lacked any claim to legitimacy. I would argue that Diem represents a more substantial historical figure than this interpretation suggests. For all his failings, and there were plenty of them, he stood for a brand of non-communist nationalism that had real intellectual and political roots in Vietnam. He sought to put his ideology into practice, moreover, by pursuing nation-building initiatives of his own, sometimes without reference to his superpower patron. Diem’s South Vietnam may have been dependent on U.S. support, but surely it represented more than a mere American appendage. Statler’s conclusion about the end result of the Franco-American transition in Vietnam is a little jarring and seems at odds with her treatment of Diem in the main body of the book.

Notwithstanding the above comments, Replacing France is a finely researched, well written, and original piece of scholarship, which deals with an important and under-studied aspect of the Vietnam conflict.
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 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”.

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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 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 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.

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4 Creswell, A Question of Balance, 156.
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 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

\(^1\) Mark Atwood Lawrence, Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). See also Mark Atwood Lawrence and Frederik Logevall, The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007).
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 Vietnamienne (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 neocolonial 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.

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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 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.\(^5\) 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


\(^4\) Bradley, 56-59 and 90-91.

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. Trương 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 Nguyễn Văn 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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Let me begin by thanking Tom Maddux for putting this roundtable together and expressing my appreciation for the thoughtful commentary Philip Catton, Laurent Cesari, Michael Creswell, and Ginger Davis have provided. Their observations and constructive criticism have given me much to ponder, and I have enjoyed formulating a response to some of their comments.

The book, concisely summarized by Ginger Davis, is indeed a study of “intra-alliance politics within the crucible of decolonization to analyze how America became involved in Vietnam.” As such, it is primarily concerned with West-West relations during the early Cold War, and in particular the Franco-American relationship vis-à-vis Indochina, which has not received its due share of scholarly consideration. Intra-alliance conflict is, I argue, key to understanding how and why the United States committed itself to a non-communist South Vietnam in the 1950s as it systematically replaced or, as Davis notes, “displaced” France. Therefore, while I do examine other important actors--Franco-American allies in London and Saigon as well as adversaries in Moscow, Beijing, and Hanoi--the focus remains on French and American players. The one exception is Ngo Dinh Diem, who shaped events, particularly in the 1954-56 period, in ways no one could have anticipated at the time. Because the discussants do an excellent job summarizing the book, I will stop here and turn my attention to their commentary, highlighting four themes raised in their remarks.

Vietnamese agency. Both Catton and Davis would have liked to see more attention paid to the Vietnamese perspective throughout the book, and rightly note a number of valuable studies that consider Vietnamese decision-making.1 More elaboration on Vietnamese actors other than Diem would have undoubtedly strengthened the book, but Diem deserved the most ink, in my opinion, because he was the most critical South Vietnamese figure during the period under discussion. I did not spend a great deal of time determining how Bao Dai came to appoint Diem, for example, because a definitive answer on this issue

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1 The discussants note Mark Bradley’s and Robert Brigham’s important monographs as well as articles by Edward Miller, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, and Jessica Chapman, who look at various aspects of the Vietnam Wars through the Vietnamese perspective.
has not been reached. I do, however, conclude that the “available French and American documentation indicates that Bao Dai made a calculated decision to appoint Diem on his own.” (119, 315, notes 3, 4, 5). And, while I devoted chapter seven to the Franco-American-North Vietnamese power struggle going on, it is true the DRV takes a back seat. Why? Because I view the Franco-American relationship as the most important factor leading to American intervention in the 1950s. As a result, I relied primarily on American and French perceptions of Vietnamese actors and those translated Vietnamese sources I found at NARA, the Eisenhower Library, the French Foreign Ministry, Overseas, and Defense archives, the Pierre Mendès France Institute, the French Contemporary History Archives, and the Public Record Office.

With respect to Diem’s role in manipulating people and events, Catton’s comments on this point deserve further discussion. He is absolutely correct that I want to have my cake and eat it too. On the on hand, I argue that Diem’s actions were often the most important in keeping himself in power during 1954-56, in helping push the French out of South Vietnam, and in sabotaging the 1956 elections. On the other hand, I argue that the increasingly heavy-handed American presence in Vietnam began to limit Diem’s actions, a fact Diem himself recognized, and that this presence eventually reduced South Vietnam to little more than a colony by the time Eisenhower left office. Still, I don’t think I ever go so far as to claim, as Catton writes, that Diem was “little more than a power-mad dictator.” Rather, I second Catton’s own conclusions about Diem’s non-communist nationalist credentials that had “real intellectual and political roots in Vietnam.” In fact, I cite Catton precisely on this issue. (342, n 11).² My point is that Diem did have quite a bit more agency, especially in foreign policy, than he has been given credit, but that this agency diminished over time as the Americans supplanted the French and attempted to build their version of a nation south of the 17th parallel. I argue that Diem’s greatest opportunity to influence events was the chaotic 1954-56 period as he played French, Americans, and South Vietnamese against one another. In the end, his determination to oust the French actually backfired as the resulting vacuum allowed the Americans to step up their “neo-colonial” activities and their control of South Vietnam.

Periodization is another issue I did not resolve entirely to my satisfaction. Would 1963 have been a more logical end point, as both Catton and Davis suggest? Perhaps. Certainly the book could have benefited from research at the Truman and JFK libraries since I do cover events from 1950-1963. Ultimately, I concluded that the long process and major decisions about replacing France in Vietnam were carried out primarily by the Eisenhower administration, and it is those years that are the focal point of the book. Therefore my discussions of the 1950-1952 and 1961-1963 periods were more general and designed to demonstrate continuities between the Truman and Eisenhower and Eisenhower and JFK administrations. Because the book begins with the French quest for American aid and a coordinated western defense, I did carefully mine French archival sources dealing with the 1950-52 period.

Two more points with respect to chronology. First, Davis makes an excellent observation that I missed an opportunity to set up early on a better comparative analysis than the one I give on pages 51-53 of how communism “as a constructed idea” manifested itself differently in France and in the United States. Such a comparison would have been most useful in furthering my explanation of differing French and American goals, especially as both countries reacted to the process of decolonization. The reason I did not say much on other contemporary colonial issues, as Davis also recommends, is because there was almost nothing in the documentation to suggest that Algeria, Senegal, Cambodia, or Laos had a significant bearing on Franco-American decision-making during this period. Second, I also regret that I did not extend my assessment of the importance of French cultural supremacy in Vietnam, as Catton suggests, to the Diem regime’s increasing anti-Americanism in the early 1960s.

The EDC, which created great tension in Franco-American relations until its demise in the French National Assembly, is featured in the first third of the book and is clearly linked to the Indochina debate, as all the discussants remarked. I appreciate Cesari pointing out that the EDC and Indochina were both a means to larger ends (West German rearmament and containment of the PRC), which I deal with briefly in chapters one and two, and I do not disagree with him that Eisenhower and Dulles insisted on both the EDC and a non-communist Indochina. A “trade-off” was not in the cards; my point is that by linking the two, by promising that more aid for Indochina would be forthcoming if only the French National Assembly would ratify the EDC, the Eisenhower administration was setting itself up for failure on both issues. The French quickly perceived that by promising the EDC’s ratification, they could continue to request and receive aid, a card they played for a very long time, and one that should have caused Dulles to readjust policy accordingly. American documentation makes it abundantly clear how betrayed Dulles felt when the French settled at the Geneva Conference in July and then failed to ratify the EDC in August 1954 (108-109, 114) and goes a good way toward explaining his hurry to replace France in Vietnam afterwards.

Less clear is Creswell’s commentary on the EDC. I question his contention that there is a “flawed conventional wisdom” regarding the EDC, given the great number of differing studies devoted to it. The French drew a direct connection between Western and Eastern defense, but the Americans established the linkage between the EDC and Indochina, which Paris then exploited. And while I agree that there were a number of French officials who saw Moscow rather than Bonn as the greater threat, German rearmament, entry into NATO and the Western European Union were a result of the EDC’s failure and the Eisenhower administration’s determination to push ahead with West German integration. If these events transpired with “French consent,” it was grudging at best.

The 1956 elections. These non-elections were critical to advancing U.S. interests in South Vietnam, and I had hoped for more commentary on this chapter. Although I concur with Cesari that the United States certainly wanted to oppose them immediately after the Geneva Conference, American officials remained unconvinced they could get away with this strategy. In fact, American policy fluctuated until the French began to lose their political, military, and economic influence in Vietnam, Diem made it clear he would not hold the
elections, and the British, Soviets, and Chinese all decided, for varying reasons, not to insist on elections. The North Vietnamese gambled--and lost--that the French would continue to maintain control in South Vietnam and be bound by the Geneva Accords. As Diem and the Americans consolidated control in Saigon, Hanoi was left scrambling to find a way to salvage the elections. The fluid international situation thus helped along the 1956 elections' demise and led to a window of opportunity for an increased American presence in South Vietnam. This presence would eventually pervade Vietnamese political, military, economic, and cultural affairs.

I have left most of Creswell’s comments for last as they focus more on the book he wishes I had written rather than the one I did. *Replacing France* is not a study of France; it is a study of Franco-American alliance politics and how these politics eventually led the United States to replace France as the dominant western power in Vietnam. As such, French domestic politics, military influence, and economics (all absent or inadequate according to Creswell) are discussed where appropriate. For example, I assess factionalism in the National Assembly and public opinion on the “dirty war” as they pertain to Franco-American negotiations on Vietnam (18, 37, 54-56, 76, 108, 294, n 7), but a detailed discussion of “the rise and fall of governments and the shifting political arithmetic in France’s National Assembly” that Creswell would like to see is irrelevant to my overall argument. Indeed, a majority of the decision-making on Indochina occurred at the French Foreign Ministry, or Quai d’Orsay, which, despite the revolving door of French governments, provided a stable French foreign policy and therefore figured prominently in the book (54).³ I also examine military input on Indochina, despite Creswell’s claims to the contrary. Military influence on the part of Generals Jean de Lattre, Henri Navarre, Paul Ely, and Pierre Jacquot—even Alphonse Juin’s views on Indochina and the EDC (31-32, 37)—on the French side, and Admiral Arthur Radford, Army Chief of Staff Matthew Ridgway, Generals J. Lawton Collins and John O’Daniel, Colonel Edward Lansdale, and Lieutenant General Samuel Williams on the American one all factor into the story.⁴ But I make no claim to be writing a military history of 1950-54, which has been done elsewhere and which would be odd for the 1954-60 period since my point is that a war was going on, but one that did not involve military


⁴ A quick clarification, Training Relations Instruction Mission (TRIM) commander Lieutenant General Samuel Williams (General John O’Daniel’s successor) reorganized TRIM, not Colonel Edward Lansdale, as might be concluded from Davis’s comments.
means. Nor do I claim to be writing an economic history although I do provide a number of figures on increasing aid to the French (20, 21, 24, 34, 45, 59, 68) and a section on economics in chapter six (199-203) to demonstrate how the Americans sought to replace the French in the economic realm. Quite frankly, I am unclear how providing more “hard figures” would have “helped me make my case” about how and why the United States replaced France in Vietnam.

I am also confused by Creswell’s comment of “imbalance” in the book—that French officials “simply watch events as they unfold while U.S. officials instigate most of the action.” The French, as Replacing France makes clear, struggled mightily to maintain their influence in Vietnam, resisting each perceived American encroachment on their domain and attempting many initiatives to save the présence française. I focus explicitly on the “opportunities and limits” facing French diplomacy and “why France made certain choices over others” in every chapter, whether it was choosing to push for more American aid despite the risk of increased American involvement in Vietnam, choosing to negotiate and settle at the 1954 Geneva Conference despite American opposition, choosing to push for alternatives to Diem, choosing to fight to maintain military, economic, political, and cultural influence, or choosing to pursue negotiations with Hanoi on economic and cultural affairs after Geneva. French decision-makers figure prominently—Henri Bonnet, Guy La Chambre, Joseph Laniel, Jean Letourneau, Jean Daridan, Mendès-France, Edgar Faure, Jean Sainteny, Paul Ely, Christian Pineau, Georges Bidault, Henri Hoppenot, Jean-Pierre Daonnaud, and Maurice Couve de Murville to name but a few.

Finally, as for Creswell’s perplexing claim that I provide “no sustained explanation as to why the United States so consistently misunderstood its ally,” let me clarify. I do not suggest that the United States had uninformed diplomats in France—quite the opposite. David Bruce and Douglas Dillon provided sound advice in Paris, as did Donald Heath and J. Lawton Collins in Saigon. My point, reiterated throughout the book, is that Eisenhower, and particularly Dulles, did not listen to these experienced diplomats when they should have. Dulles was not the nuanced diplomat vis-à-vis Vietnam that post-revisionists have made him out to be elsewhere (301, n 5). Anytime an American official became too negative about the prospects for a viable non-communist South Vietnam, or, even worse, appeared to be listening to his French counterpart, he was recalled. And while French officials did mislead their American counterparts on occasion, especially with respect to the EDC’s prospects for success, they were usually quite clear about their priorities in Vietnam. The biggest culprit in the Eisenhower administration’s misunderstanding of its Gallic ally was the conviction that given the opportunity, American methods would succeed in Vietnam where the French ones had failed. Modernizing, not civilizing, was the answer to a

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pro-western South Vietnam. The result? In the aftermath of the Geneva Conference, American officials began a full-fledged nation-building effort, but one that looked a lot like earlier French colonialism, and, even worse, one that would make it ever more difficult for the United States to disengage from South Vietnam. Massive American intervention during the 1960s was not the inevitable outcome, but, as I conclude in the book, the “cumulative weight of ten years of direct American involvement from 1950 to 1960 created a momentum in South Vietnam that was not easily stopped.” (289).