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Introduction by William I. Hitchcock

**Fredrik Logevall. *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*.** New York: Random House, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-375-50442-6 (hardcover, \$40.00); 978-0-679-64519-1 (eBook, \$14.99).

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Introduction by William I. Hitchcock, University of Virginia

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**F**redrik Logevall's *Embers of War* has two great strengths: it is beautifully written, and it takes on a big, important topic and tells us why it matters. These two qualities separate the book from a great deal of monographic literature on American foreign relations. It is fair to say, and the reviewers here generally agree on this point, that in its effort to provide an authoritative synthesis, the book tends to hide its argument, offering narrative instead of polemic. Readers may find this refreshing; I did. But those scholars who prefer their history to bite or to provoke may not find too many historiographical controversies here.

And yet the book will endure for many years to come not because of its interpretive claims but because it masterfully fills an enormous gap in the writing about a subject that Americans think they know well: the Vietnam War. In most scholarship on this topic, the years from 1945 to about 1960 serve merely as a darkly painted backdrop, a sort of ominous stage set on which the fresh-faced Americans arrive, like shipwrecked Viola on the shores of Illyria, asking "what country, friends, is this?" We now know a great deal more about Illyria. Logevall has given us a detailed, sweeping account of Indochina during the terrible years of the French war there, and as a result we cannot make sense of the subsequent American decisions of the mid-1960s without grasping this broader context.

In one sense, the agenda of this book is in tension with that of Logevall's excellent first monograph, *Choosing War*.<sup>1</sup> There he dissected a single year, 1964, and powerfully argued that it served as a pivot of history, the moment when the American decision to wage war in Vietnam was fully and irretrievably made. In that book, like so many others on the American war, the First Indochina War was merely glimpsed distantly in the rear-view mirror as the narrative sped forward toward the American catastrophe. Now Logevall has taken a large step backward in time, giving us the chance to glimpse the American story through the experience of those who came before, especially the French and the Vietnamese themselves. The irony here is that, if we take Logevall's first book and set it against this one, we come away with the sense that perhaps 1964 was not so decisive after all: the powerful undertow carrying Americans toward Vietnam was a global current, one that bore many other developments along with it—great power conflict in Asia, the weakening and collapse of empires, wars of decolonization, and national liberation movements—processes beyond the control of a small handful of American political leaders. At the close of the book, Logevall stresses this sense of inevitability by showing newly elected President John F. Kennedy embracing fully the proposition that "victory in Vietnam was crucial to American interests" (704). If Logevall does not engage directly with other historians in the text, perhaps he is in some sense in a debate with himself on the question of identifying America's point of no return.

Logevall's achievement, not altogether deliberate perhaps, is to reveal a central and productive tension in the scholarship: were the three decades of war in Indochina driven

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<sup>1</sup> *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

chiefly by the Cold War and its ideological zero-sum calibrations, or by the global tectonic shifts of decolonization? Logevall does not commit himself on the question, and it will be the work of the next iteration of scholarship on the calamities of Indochina to develop that particular debate.

Our four reviewers offer fulsome praise of the book. They admire its style, its ambition and its value in fleshing out a period that has been covered chiefly by French historians, and then often French military historians. To the extent that the reviewers have objections or criticisms, they might be summarized as follows.

Laurent Cesari suggests that Logevall's review of the military conflict is exhaustive but perhaps comes at the price of giving too little to the social dimension of the First Indochina War—its impact upon people on the ground, as well as the local well-springs of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement which sought to expel the French overlords. Cesari also expresses skepticism about the true intentions of Franklin Roosevelt toward Indochina, and the actual degree of latitude he had to chart an alternative path for Indochina after the war. Logevall spends some time chewing over the counterfactual problem of how American policy would have changed had Roosevelt lived longer. Logevall seems to think the conflict might have been avoided. But the question asks us to place truly God-like powers in the hands of the American President, and requires us to imagine that the fate of Vietnam hung upon the decisions of one frail American leader, whose agenda in 1945 was rather full.

David Hunt also chides Logevall for occasionally “sound[ing] an exceptionalist note,” and doubts the interest of Roosevelt in loosening the bonds of colonial empires before a sufficiently powerful alternative order could be put in its place. He also finds the last sections of the book that treat the period under Diem to be as lacking critical bite and insufficiently attentive to the deep tensions between Diem's ambitions and Washington's. Lloyd Gardner, the author of an excellent 1988 book that treated the American experience in Indochina from 1945 to 1954, also doubts the commitment of Roosevelt to some kind of independence for Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> He finds Logevall's handling of another president, Dwight Eisenhower, more persuasive. Like the other reviewers, Gardner is impressed with Logevall's careful parsing of the evidence about President Eisenhower's hawkish behavior in the vital crisis of 1954, when the French forces were suffering the mortal blows at Dien Bien Phu that would finally kill off their empire. Eisenhower, often portrayed by earlier scholarship as a master of restraint and determined to avoid conflict in Asia at all costs, is here presented as eager to create a united force that would intervene militarily and turn the tide against the Vietnamese communists. Only British reluctance stymied Eisenhower's plans.

Jonathan Nashel also praises the comprehensiveness of the book, but finds the story “oddly familiar,” asserting that it draws too heavily on secondary sources and insufficiently on

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<sup>2</sup> Lloyd Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II to Dien Bien Phu, 1941-1954* (New York: Norton, 1988).

primary sources while offering portraits of “elites arguing with one another.” Nashel finds Logevall’s “countless detours” and “brief bios” of key participants tiresome, and would have liked a shorter book.

My own assessment is that, aside from its scholarly contributions, *Embers of War* is the sort of book that reminds us that grand narrative history has a place in the academy. It invites us to step back from our narrow specializations to contemplate the broader sweep of history. Logevall’s great talent, perhaps insufficiently appreciated by these reviews, is to make this kind of writing look easy. But try it, and you’ll find that narrative history requires a long apprenticeship, mastery of the subject matter, and a willingness to spend countless hours in refining, polishing and shaping the text until it gleams.

### Participants:

**Fredrik Logevall** is John S. Knight Professor of International Studies and Professor of History at Cornell, where he serves as director of the Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies. His recent published works include *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (Random House, 2012); *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States*, 9th ed. (with Mary Beth Norton et al; Cengage, 2011); *America’s Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (with Campbell Craig; Belknap Press/Harvard UP, 2009); and *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (co-edited, with Andrew Preston; Oxford UP, 2008). A former Leverhulme Professor at the University of Nottingham and Mellon Senior Research Fellow at the University of Cambridge, Logevall has also taught at Yale University and the University of California, Santa Barbara.

**William I. Hitchcock** is Professor of History at the University of Virginia, and Director of Research and Scholarship at the Miller Center. He currently holds the Henry A. Kissinger Chair in Foreign Policy and International Relations at the Library of Congress. He is now engaged in two projects, one on the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower, the other on the history of human rights in the post-1945 world.

**Laurent Cesari** is professor of contemporary history at the Université d’Artois (Arras, France). He has published three books on the topic under review: *L’Indochine en guerres, 1945-1993* (*Indochina at War, 1945-1993*), Paris, Belin, 1995; *Les grandes puissances et le Laos, 1954-1964* (*The Major Powers and Laos, 1954-1964*), Arras, Artois Presses Université, 2007; *Le problème diplomatique de l’Indochine, 1945-1957* (*The Diplomatic Problem of Indochina, 1945-1957*), Paris, Les Indes savantes, 2012. He is presently working on a synthesis on bilateral relations between France and the United States since 1776.

**Lloyd C. Gardner** received his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin in 1960. He has taught at Rutgers since 1963, and continues to teach honors’ seminars for undergraduates. He is the author or editor of more than a dozen books on American foreign policy, and is currently writing a book on counter-insurgency with co-author Marilyn Young.

**David Hunt** is Professor of history at UMass/Boston. He is the author of *Children in History: The Psychology of Family Life in Early-Modern France*; he co-edited and contributed to *The*

*American War in Vietnam*; and he has written articles and chapters on the French Revolution and French social history and on Vietnam and the Vietnam War. His book *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* was published by UMass Press in 2008, and his article "Dirty Wars: Counter-Insurgency in Vietnam and Today" appeared in *Politics and Society* in 2010. He is now working on a book tentatively titled "Ethnography of Revolution: A Social History of the Vietnam War."

**Jonathan Nashel** received his Ph.D. in History from Rutgers University in 1994. His advisor was Lloyd Gardner. He is an Associate Professor of History and Chair of the Department at Indiana University, South Bend. His book, *Edward Lansdale's Cold War*, was published in 2005 by the University of Massachusetts Press. He is currently writing a cultural history of the CIA.

**F**redrik Logevall has written the first complete history of the French Indochina War in English. This is a real historiographical event since, apart from *Approaching Vietnam* by Lloyd Gardner, previous book-length studies in English of this important conflict consisted only in two excellent collections of essays, one of them co-edited by Logevall himself.<sup>1</sup>

Logevall has written a massive book, one that dwells on military history. His detailed study of military operations recalls the French historiography of the war, which was often penned by military historians or retired officers. Although Logevall's style is always readable and clear, this format may be responsible for a mass of details (the prostitutes at Dien Bien Phu fortress, 418), that, like other reviewers, I found a little too heavy<sup>2</sup>. But this is mostly a matter of taste, and I admire the wealth of information that Logevall has been able to synthesize. Although I have been working on and off on the diplomacy of the French Indochina war since 1986, I have found in *Embers of War* some references that I did not know.

Logevall offers a narrative history which, as far as access to archives permits, explains the viewpoints of all the different national actors in the conflict. He is very judicious on some perennial questions about which every historian of this war is expected to take a position. For instance, his examination of the possibility that U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles offered atomic bombs to France during the siege of Dien Bien Phu is very thorough, and points to an affirmative answer. I am also convinced by his analysis of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's policy during spring, 1954. Against Melanie Billings-Yun, Logevall contends –rightly, I think–, that the Eisenhower administration went to such lengths to coerce Britain into entering the war that it is implausible to characterize its political conditions for a military intervention as a smoke-screen hiding a “decision against war”<sup>3</sup>. His position on the role of the United States on the choice of Ngo Dinh Diem as Prime Minister by Bao Dai is both moderate and, as far as one can ascertain such secrets, judicious: the Eisenhower administration did not impose Diem, but the Chief of State of Vietnam confirmed him only after Dulles gave the green light (589, 590).

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyd C. Gardner. *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II through Dienbienphu*, New York, N. Y., Norton, 1988. Lawrence S. Kaplan, Denise Artaud, and Mark R. Rubin, eds., *Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations, 1945-1955*, Wilmington, Del., Scholarly Resources, 1990. Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds., *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis*, Cambridge, Ma., Harvard University Press, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Mirsky, review of “Embers of War”, *New York Review of Books*, volume 59, number 16, October 25, 2012, 43-45.

<sup>3</sup> Melanie Billings-Yun. *Decision Against War: Eisenhower and Dienbienphu, 1954*. New York, N. Y., Columbia University Press, 1988.

On the other hand, I think that Logevall oversimplifies the negotiating strategy of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) at the Geneva Conference of 1954. It seems an exaggeration to write that, like China and the Soviet Union, the DRV had agreed to a temporary partition of Vietnam before Geneva (560). This is what Chinese sources say, but according to the official history of DRV diplomacy, the leadership of the Lao Dong party (the Vietnam Workers' Party) did not formally accept partition before June 4, 1954, because the party refused to relinquish parts of Annam, around Qui Nhon and Quang Ngai, which it had been able to keep since 1945<sup>4</sup>. This version explains the behavior of Pham Van Dong, the chief DRV negotiator at the Geneva Conference, who did not clearly table partition before May 25, obviously under pressure from his allies, as Logevall rightly notes (566).

Logevall has written a cautionary tale against U. S. military interventions abroad. This choice has several general consequences. First, his concentration on military history implies that social history plays only a supporting part in the book. This may be a drawback for the analysis of Vietminh policy, since the DRV always had to balance the appeal of social revolution to mobilize the masses against a moderate stance so as not to frighten well-off 'patriots.' It is telling that the Lao Dong officially endorsed land redistribution at the end of 1953, in the context of Dien Bien Phu and the coming negotiations at Geneva. Logevall certainly does not neglect this part of the story, but I wish he had written a little more about it.

Second, Logevall stresses the importance of the United States for the Vietminh. True, Ho Chi Minh tried to meet President Woodrow Wilson at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, and went to extraordinary lengths to play Washington against France in 1945 and 1946. But does this imply that there was a possibility for the United States to 'co-opt' the DRV as it 'co-opted' Yugoslavia after it was expelled from the Cominform? Of course, Ho and Chairman Mao Zedong were both fiercely independent (this may be a better term than 'nationalist'), and masters of the strategy of 'national fronts' which implied a temporary alliance with bourgeois 'patriots.' But this did not mean that they were in favor of a diplomatic 'third way' between Moscow and Washington. On the contrary, they needed and asked for an alliance with the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia, China, and Vietnam made overtures to the United States only when convinced that they faced a bigger threat from a neighbor country: the Soviet Union for Yugoslavia and China, and China in the case of Vietnam after the break up the Soviet Union.

Of course, one can speculate, as Logevall does, that if the United States had taken the side of the DRV, it might have become a "national-communist" regime, independent from Beijing and Moscow (219, 646, 647). But that was never the order of the day. During the war, such a course would have implied a major clash with France, an important ally even if it was in decline. After the war, it would have meant an unthinkable departure from the established

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<sup>4</sup> *The Diplomatic Struggle as Part of the People's National Democratic Revolution (1945-1954)*, volume 2, Hanoi, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1976 (translated by Merle L. Pribbenow). (Document kindly provided by Pierre Journoud.)



policy of pressure on China. North Vietnam was added to the 'CHINCOM' trade list immediately after Geneva, along with China and North Korea. This leads me to my third point. Logevall might have put the story of the war more squarely in the broader context of American relations with China and the Soviet Union. Logevall notices, of course, that American policy makers became interested in Southeast Asia in the context of the communist victory in the Chinese civil war. But he might have stressed more forcefully that this interest was always part and parcel of a policy of pressure. In 1949, Secretary of State Dean Acheson did not simply mean to put Southeast Asian resources at the disposal of the reconstruction of Japan. He also intended to proportion Sino-Japanese trade to the docility of Chinese diplomacy toward Washington. (Chinese communists would have no part of this game.) Under Eisenhower, 'pressure on China' -and therefore on its communist southern neighbor- was meant to break the Sino-Soviet alliance. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson simply refined the policy by trying to co-opt Moscow against Beijing. Secretary of State Dean Rusk provides the link between the four administrations<sup>5</sup>.

Therefore, it is not enough, as Logevall does in his epilogue, to assign the American war in Indochina, and more generally the numerous American military interventions abroad, to the fear among politicians in power of a new McCarthyite campaign from the opposition, branding them with the 'loss of China' (or Vietnam, or whatever). Of course, such campaigns and such fears were part and parcel of the Cold War (think about Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis), but they were not the whole story. In fact, 'containment' is a misleading word, which sounds too defensive. From George Kennan on, this policy always aimed at 'regime change' and contained an offensive side. To a certain extent, the neoconservatives of the George W. Bush period can rightfully claim the inheritance of Kennan, as well as Wilson and Ronald Reagan. Logevall notes that as late as April, 1954, the National Security Council was unable to ascertain "Dien Bien Phu's and Indochina's ultimate importance to the West" (478). Indeed, if one reasoned in defensive terms, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden had a point: holding the Kra Isthmus between Thailand and Malaysia made much more sense. But keeping the delta of Tonkin in Western hands was more useful to exert 'pressure on Beijing.'

Saying this, I am just proposing another narrative of the Indochina war for the sake of argument. Fredrik Logevall has obviously written a first-rate book, which is a major addition to the rather short history of the French Indochina war in English, and a signal service to the English-speaking readership.

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<sup>5</sup> Gordon H. Chang. *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948-1972*, Stanford, Cal., Stanford University Press, 1990.



Review by Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University

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The heart of Fred Logevall's *Embers of War* resides in the period from January 1954, when the siege of Dien Bien Phu began, to the following September, when Secretary of State John Foster Dulles created the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in his own image to fight what he always called the international Communist conspiracy. It was in many ways a most surprising achievement, given that none of the other parties ever wanted the United States involved in the war. While it was true, of course, that the French appealed for military aid – especially as the ring tightened around the besieged fortress -- they had no desire to see their sacrifices lead to the Americanization of Vietnam and neighboring Laos and Cambodia.

As in other accounts of how this American trek into the most treacherous of political and military expeditions began, Logevall starts with World War II and the inevitable collapse of the century-old European empires. Even then, French and American policymakers were wont to blame one another for the ensuing troubles. When the French Vichy government sought to appease the Japanese by allowing them to extend their military reach into Vietnam in a forlorn effort to maintain their political authority, the American ambassador to the rump French regime, Admiral William D. Leahy, commented that they had insured the end of French rule. If the Japanese won the war, he told Vichy authorities, they would take Indo-China; if the U.S. won the war, it would take Indo-China.<sup>1</sup> He did not mean it would become an American 'colony,' but that a new order would replace the French rulers of the past century. Leahy became Franklin Roosevelt's Chief of Staff in the White House after his diplomatic mission to Vichy ended, and one can imagine the private talks they had about Indo-China and other incidents of European colonial misrule that both men believed had helped to bring on the war by creating an appeasement frame of mind in Paris and London.

But we do not have to have records of such Leahy-Roosevelt conversations, for Logevall supplies readers with plenty of Roosevelt's musings and exchanges with other diplomats about what should happen in order to meet colonial demands for freedom and independence in a positive way. He favored an international trusteeship for Indo-China and Korea, and perhaps other places, and spent some time at the Tehran conference sounding out Stalin in a preliminary way on his ideas. Yet these ideas always remained vague as to details. At Tehran Roosevelt made a bad prediction about (or perhaps offered a description of) the Vietnamese, suggesting that they were an essentially a peaceful people, perhaps implying too much about their willingness to accept delays in gaining full independence. Logevall does not quote from this interesting exchange as the American president talked with the Soviet leader at the first Big Three conference. Roosevelt's developing approach to the colonial question never got down to specifics, however, as with other questions about the future, the president preferred to hold off until the war was won.

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<sup>1</sup> See Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II Through Dienbienphu* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), p. 27.

Other policymakers, especially the ‘Europeanists’ in the State Department, as Logevall makes clear, did not share Roosevelt’s views. The debate went on until Roosevelt’s death, when President Harry Truman took up the task of finishing the war and securing the peace. Here was the first definitive moment for Logevall. Despite evidence that Roosevelt was reconsidering his position on Indo-China – at least to the extent of not actually kicking the French out – Logevall thinks that if Roosevelt had lived, things might have gone differently. Clearly, Truman had no intention of answering any of the several letters Ho Chi Minh sent to the White House in an effort to obtain American assistance. And there were other ways that the Vietnamese revolutionary tried to impress upon any American who would listen -- Office of Strategic Service agents in Vietnam, diplomats in nearby countries, whoever -- that he did not intend to lead his country into dependence upon the Soviet Union, or, later, Communist China. Socialism was not the immediate goal for a free Vietnam, he insisted, but rather American investment in an independent country. Socialism, he would say, was only a distant goal – at least fifty years away. Ho had attempted to approach President Woodrow Wilson and the American delegation at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 to present Vietnam’s claims to self-determination. It is always a bit surprising to read about such appeals, because they seem to express a stronger belief in American exceptionalism than that held by ‘realist-minded’ policymakers. One comes away from reading this book impressed with the depth of Ho’s concern to reassure Americans of his determination not to become a ‘satellite,’ and his desire for Washington’s support.

Whether Roosevelt was actually abandoning his most ambitious plans for Indo-China at the time of his death becomes, therefore, somewhat less determinative as proof of what he might have done in deciding whether or not to answer Ho’s persistent appeals. Even if he did nothing but take them into account, decisions on whether or not to aid the French in re-occupying Indo-China might well have been influenced by contacts with the Vietnamese leader. After all, Roosevelt did send the ‘Dixie Mission’ to China to make contact with Communist leader Mao Tse-tung.<sup>2</sup> There will never be a definitive answer, of course, to such questions. Given what we know about Roosevelt, however, Logevall has made a strong case that had he lived, opportunities might have arisen for alternate courses of action. In discussing the outbreak of the Franco-Vietnamese war, Logevall writes, “Wars are never inevitable; they depend on the actions of individual leaders who could have chosen differently, who had, if not a menu of options, then at least an alternative to large scale violence.” (163) While this statement was about responsibility for the war inside Vietnam, it might also apply to American political decisions. We must leave it at that, as unsatisfactory as all such speculations are for historians and their readers.

Once the Cold War got under way, and Indo-China’s struggle became fully internationalized, Ho Chi Minh’s fortunes could hardly have been less promising of early success. American aid to the French was growing, if not yet a crucial factor. But more than that the Soviet Union had little desire to become involved in an area that both Joseph Stalin,

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<sup>2</sup> Roosevelt’s hope was to head off a civil war, but the sending of representatives to Mao – with its American Civil War overtones – was quite a remarkable step. Whether it would have led to the president seeking a mediatory role remains an unanswered question.

and later, Nikita Khrushchev, regarded as of much less importance than the European front. This would all become quite obvious at the 1954 Geneva Conference, when the two Communist powers, Russia and China, urged on the Vietminh delegates the need to compromise, especially in regard to removing troops from Cambodia and Laos, and accepting a much longer time before all-Vietnamese elections were supposed to be held to determine the future of the country. In fact, Moscow seemed absolutely gratified by the prospect of a Korean-style partition of Vietnam as the final solution to the Franco-Vietnam War. From Russia's point of view American involvement was not totally a bad thing – it might well help to keep Chinese ambitions in check.

And so we come to the climactic section of Logevall's book: the events of 1954. Here, perhaps more than in any other place in the book, the author stakes out a position on why America 'wanted in' to the war and how it went about the process of doing just that. For years historians have debated whether President Dwight D. Eisenhower really wanted to involve the United States in the struggles within Southeast Asia, or whether he simply waited out all the proposals for sending in American forces, knowing that – in the end – each would be shown to be impractical. Logevall argues persuasively that Eisenhower was ready to go into the war if his conditions were met, and that he brought as much pressure as possible to see if they could. The stumbling block was always Great Britain. No matter what arguments were used, what emissaries were sent to Winston Churchill, what strategy was employed to enlist the French in bringing about a change in British attitudes – nothing worked.

Perhaps the most interesting (and, in these circumstances, 'desperate' might even be the word) attempt to force London's hand was Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's efforts to persuade Australia and New Zealand to join in a united effort – without Great Britain, if necessary – to internationalize the war. Their refusal to countenance risking such a division with Britain finally sealed off the possibility for good. Dulles had tried everything. He had given speeches that called for united action, he had misrepresented the American military's position in discussions with British leaders, he had gone behind Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden's back in discussions with the French, all for naught. Of course, it was not easy to sell the French on the idea that Paris must give the Indo-Chinese states full independence, but perhaps that might have been fudged some way, if only the war could have been continued as the Free World versus the Communist bloc of nations.

The argument that Ike wanted in to prevent the debacle at Dien Bien Phu and a French defeat across Vietnam that might lead to another Communist state is fully realized in *Embers of War*. Eisenhower's strategy for waging war failed – in the short term. I would have liked to see more attention paid to the concern as to what effect a defeat in Vietnam would have on Japan – the nation Ike called the 'biggest' domino of all when he described the famous line of toppling countries that would surely follow a defeat. Running the 'Free World' political and economic system was hard to do, and ever since Dulles (as the principal author of the peace treaty ending the war with Japan) began advising American presidents on the Far East, the problem of absorbing Japanese trade had loomed large in his mind. He had, for example, pressed the Philippines to accept Japanese imports at

reduced cost to satisfy reparations claims. And Eisenhower had made the same general point about Japan's need for outlets during the 'Domino' press conference in April 1954.

When the Australians and New Zealanders turned down the idea of going in without Great Britain, all plans for entering the actual war in 1954 came to a quick end. But suddenly something else became clear. The Geneva Conference ended in July with a cease-fire and a temporary division of Vietnam. Dulles had chafed at the idea of America meeting the decolonization process with the idea of a string of partitioned states. Surely there must be something better to offer former colonial peoples, or the Cold War might be lost. But in this instance, partition meant an end to French misrule and the chance to build up a bastion that could be defended.

Indeed, if some of the 'projects' of CIA operative Colonel Edward Lansdale for undermining support for Ho's government in Hanoi worked out – might it not be within the realm of possibility that the CIA would have another scalp to hang on its belt alongside those of Muhammad Mossadegh in Iran and Guatemala's leftist leader, Jacobo Arbenz? Was that so impossible to contemplate with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi facing very serious domestic problems, without much real help from Moscow and Beijing? The brutal way land reforms were carried out according to a rigid ideology, the isolation of dissident intellectuals, and other policies that President Ho seemed unable or unwilling to stop, weakened support among those who had fought against the French. Instead of South Vietnam falling, might not the dominoes go over the other way?

Logevall is at his very best in describing the American adulation for Ngo Dinh Diem, the man policymakers chose to be the George Washington of Vietnam. He received kudos from figures across the spectrum in American politics, including, for a time, even the perennial Socialist Party candidate, Norman Thomas. Eleanor Roosevelt enthused about Diem, so did Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, and Senator Mike Mansfield, who became for a time a totem to ward off dissidents inside the Eisenhower Administration who might want to get rid of the new savior. On July 7, 1959, the *New York Times* gushed on the fifth anniversary of Diem's ascension to the presidency, "A five-year miracle, not a 'plan,' has been carried out. Vietnam is free and becoming stronger in defense of its freedom and of ours. There is reason, today, to salute President Ngo Dinh Diem." (694) America's newspaper of record has an almost perfect record of approving wars, to paraphrase John Kerry a Massachusetts senator (John Kerry), before it opposes them – from Vietnam to Afghanistan.

In *Embers of War*, the reader will also find well-penned sketches of the people who made the war so easy to misunderstand, like Col. Edward Lansdale, and like the surgeon Tom Dooley, whose book *Deliver Us from Evil: The Story Of Viet Nam's Flight To Freedom*, became a 1956 best-seller with its horrific tales of Viet Minh torture stories, almost all of them fabrications. One will also find an appreciation –justly deserved – of the Franco-American journalist Bernard Fall, who saw behind the legend of Diem the real problems of creating a viable state in South Vietnam with Diem at its head. Henry Luce's *Time* magazine writers nurtured Diem's reputation with great care, giving Logevall an opportunity to sum up how the tragedy turned out in a few sentences: "In issue after issue, Americans learned that the

South Vietnamese premier had brought 'peace and stability' to his country and deserved Americans' unqualified support. *Schoolchildren across the United States, who would be of draft age in five or ten years, took weekly Time quizzes; securing a good grade meant knowing that Diem was a great patriot and ally of the West.*" (emphasis added, pp. 664-5)

*Embers of War* is a page turner that does not condescend to the reader and an important contribution to the literature on the First Indochina War. This is not a work that treats the diplomatic process as if it were some sort of chess game. One is instead delivered into the presence of men who exercised power, but were never entirely free, whose obsessions drove them to track enemies and quarrel with allies and whose choices brought down unintended consequences on themselves and suffering on others. Fredrik Logevall tells his story with a propulsive force and in the process builds a narrative full of tragic overtones.<sup>1</sup>

I go some but not all of the way with the argument in the first third of the book. The author declares that in 1945 Ho Chi Minh believed the United States was “uniquely able among the great powers to grasp the nature of the ‘colonial problem’” (83) and therefore a potential supporter of Vietnamese independence. Logevall himself at times sounds an exceptionalist note. “Americans still seemed to adhere, on some level, to a reflexive egalitarianism in world affairs, to an opposition to imperialism,” he asserts (195). As for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, “by the time of Pearl Harbor, he had become a committed anti-colonialist” (46) and “a major world voice for the liberation of colonial peoples in Asia and Africa” (99). The implication seems to be that before his untimely death Roosevelt was prepared to help the Vietnamese and other subject populations.

*Embers of War* offers a parallel to the argument that had he lived, the president might have softened the fierce antagonisms that developed during the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> But no statesman could have found a way to reconcile the interests of the Soviets, European allies with imperial agendas, and national liberation movements against colonial and neo-colonial domination. In the Vietnamese context, Roosevelt’s design was stillborn. His anti-French remarks are a matter of record, but as Mark Bradley has shown, they did not imply a commitment to independence for Vietnam, not when Americans perceived the Vietnamese through a “prism of racialized hierarchies” and assumed that they were incapable of self-government.<sup>3</sup> Roosevelt proposed a trusteeship, this one to last for twenty, thirty, or fifty years. When it became clear that the Chinese were in no position to serve as trustees, he

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<sup>1</sup> The text is beautifully presented, with many impactful photographs: a technician with a paint brush working on a U.S. supplied C-119 transport plane in order to change “the white star of the U.S. Air Force into the French tricolor,” 232; French paratroopers in November 1953 watching from a distance as comrades descend into Dien Bien Phu, 386; fly-on-the-wall snapshots of important people in unguarded moments (Eisenhower convulsed by his own joke while Dulles and various French leaders more or less gamely nod and smile, 344).

<sup>2</sup> For a recent statement, see Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt’s Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), the centerpiece in an H-Diplo Roundtable, Volume XIV, N.8 (2012) <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIV-8.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> On the “prism,” see Mark Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 70, 74-75.



was boxed in. France jumped at the opportunity “to assume for herself the obligations of a trustee,” as the president put it in March 1945 when he changed his mind and agreed that the French should be allowed to reestablish control over their former subjects.<sup>4</sup>

After discussing the dashed hopes for a rapprochement between the United States and the Viet Minh, Logevall traces events from the beginning of hostilities to the internationalization of the First Indochina War in 1949-1950. The middle section of the text, a full 400 pages carrying the narrative from that point to the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954, shows the author at the height of his powers as a historian of high-level statecraft. From the point of view of the Harry S. Truman administration, the ideal strategy for Indochina would have involved Americans advising an independent Vietnamese government and training its armed forces, so as to establish a polity strong enough to govern on its own and in line with priorities defined by Washington. Meanwhile troops supplied by France were required for the dirty work on the battlefield. Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson situated this endeavor within the framework of the Cold War, and, as the French military proved unable to bring the Viet Minh to heel, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles called for concerted action on the part of Great Britain, plus Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and the other Asian dominos.

Logevall shows that this strategy did not and could not work, first of all because it made no sense to the French. To be sure, they proved adept at echoing anti-communist battle cries, as in General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny’s operatic variations on that theme during a 1952 visit to the United States. But as French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault never tired of pointing out, France was fighting to hold onto its colony and had no reason to shed blood to help the Vietnamese achieve independence.<sup>5</sup> For similar reasons, the French cabinet was uneasy about internationalizing the war, a step in the logic of the bipolar U.S. understanding of “free world” combat against global communism, but one that implicitly delegitimized France’s colonial agenda. From 1952 on, as French morale faltered, the incoherence of their position became more pronounced. In order to fight on and achieve a negotiated settlement and withdrawal with a modicum of dignity, they were all the more in need of U.S. assistance. But the Americans wanted victory, not an exit strategy, and raged against defeatism in Paris. It was an alliance destined for an unhappy ending.

In a striking passage, Logevall analyzes a further contradiction, this one at the expense of the Vietnamese “Third Force” (258-259). After the French sponsored the Associated State of Vietnam (ASV) in 1949 headed by Bao Dai and the Americans recognized the toothless new government, the anti-communist Dai Viet and Nationalist parties were trapped in an

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<sup>4</sup> On trusteeship for 20, 30, or 50 years, *Ibid.*, 78; on the president changing his mind, *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>5</sup> And certainly not to clear the way for Japanese trading networks in Southeast Asia, a U.S. objective dating back to the late 1940s, as spelled out by Michael Schaller and Andrew Rotter (cited on 744, footnote 9). Logevall’s oeuvre amounts to a sustained critique of U. S. interventions, but this is one of the few moments where he borrows from revisionist scholarship that calls attention to economic factors shaping American policies.



unholy alliance with France and could not second Viet Minh denunciations of the sham ASV. French intransigence, seconded by the administration in Washington, thus strengthened the mandate of the Viet Minh and undercut its main domestic rivals.<sup>6</sup>

Logevall adds weight to the case already elaborated elsewhere against President Eisenhower's reputation as a statesman who kept the United States out of a dirty war in Southeast Asia.<sup>7</sup> He declares that even those sectors of the administration most attuned to the unfavorable balance of forces in Vietnam continued to believe that victory was possible and pressed General Henri Navarre to take the offensive, a recommendation he accepted by inviting the Viet Minh to do battle at Dien Bien Phu. The Eisenhower team "steadfastly rejected negotiations on Indochina" (429) and in March 1954 it presented the French with 'Operation Vulture,' a plan for massive air strikes, possibly including nuclear weapons, against the enemy. Eisenhower tried to soften up Congress for U.S. intervention and launched personal appeals to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, while Dulles badgered Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand to join the crusade. In mid-April Vice-President Richard Nixon openly spoke of dispatching U.S. troops to Southeast Asia, and a few days later Dulles may have offered Bidault two atomic bombs to break the siege. As the Viet Minh closed in, Dulles angered the British by attempting a flanking move in order to draw Commonwealth nations into a last-minute rescue mission. In its painstakingly constructed day-by-day account, the text makes Eisenhower seem frantic for intervention even after he came to accept the reality that Dien Bien Phu was doomed. Dulles' flight from the Geneva conference on May 3 1954 signaled for all to see that the Americans did not want a negotiated settlement, and in mid-May, the administration launched a final effort to blow up the conference by scheming once again for united action.

It could be that all of these moves were feints, meant to intimidate the Viet Minh and its Soviet and Chinese allies, and Logevall acknowledges that war-mongering statements did indeed have an effect on the other side. But he insists that Eisenhower was just as bellicose as Dulles, Nixon, and Admiral Radford, the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and that their combined efforts came close to prolonging a war that no one else wanted. The author is just as tough on the French, who plunged back into Indochina in 1945 when the necessary material means and political capital were not there and then fought through long and bloody years when few shared their conviction that they were 'protecting' the Vietnamese.

The treatment is kinder to the British and especially to Foreign Minister Anthony Eden, who resisted entreaties from Eisenhower and the ravings of Dulles and played a large part in bargaining an end to the war. The author's extended analysis of the British role adds depth and complexity that is missed when the focus is on France and the United States. As

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<sup>6</sup> On the Vietnamese side of the story, see Christopher Goscha's ground breaking *Vietnam: État né de la guerre: 1945-1954* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012), discussed in an H-Diplo roundtable Volume XIV, No. 1 (2012), <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIV-1.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> David Anderson, *Trapped by Success; The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* (New York: Columbia University press, 1991).

for the Soviets, Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov at Geneva comes across as an honest broker, taking care to mollify Vietnamese allies while prodding everyone toward a settlement that would allow for a shift of his attention to other, more pressing matters.

Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai was the one who was bluffing when, in an effort to pressure the Vietnamese, he claimed that “The Mendès France government, having vowed to achieve a negotiated solution, must be supported, lest it fall and be replaced by one committed to continuing the war” (597). By that time, even Charles de Gaulle was saying, “we will regret [leaving] greatly, but we must go” (cited on 434), and there was no longer any prospect that a pro-war coalition could win a majority in the French National Assembly. But if Logevall is correct, warlike signals from Washington had to be taken seriously, and he is not alone in thinking that DRV leaders had their own reasons to opt for peace.<sup>8</sup> It is also worth noting that the accords were ill received by Viet Minh militants in the south, who were left at the mercy of the soon-to-be installed Republic of Vietnam and its American allies, thus stoking the ‘embers’ that were to flare up into another war in 1959-1960.

There is a loss of analytic tension in the last part of the book. Logevall dutifully attends to the works of Philip Catton and Ed Miller, who present a fresh view of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngu, but he is not much impressed by their sort of revisionism and perhaps too quickly passes over its implications.<sup>9</sup> While Diem’s personal shortcomings were more than sufficient to doom his enterprise, Americans who dismissed him as a “Yogi-like mystic” and a “messiah without a message” (591) missed the stubborn patriotism that led him to insist on the sovereignty of the Saigon-based government and to conclude, usually with good reason, that U.S. advice was ill-informed and self-interested. An alternate conclusion might have underscored the continuity linking Roosevelt’s trusteeship to the Eisenhower administration’s attempt, as Catton puts it, to maintain a “compliant client” in Saigon.<sup>10</sup> The Viet Minh and then the NLF resisted what they took to be U.S. neo-colonialism, and in their own way so did the Ngo brothers. They were to pay dearly when the Americans lost patience and decided to dispense with their services.

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<sup>8</sup> Pierre Asselin, “The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference; A Revisionist Critique,” *Cold War History* 11:2 (2011), 155-195.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2002); Edward Miller, “Vision, Power, and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-1954,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35 (October, 1954), 433-458.

<sup>10</sup> Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure*, 9.

Well, the gang's all here. The first photograph in Fredrik Logevall's *Embers of War* gives a good indication of what is to come. Taken during the 1953 Bermuda Conference and during a black tie affair (of course), there's Prime Minister Winston Churchill looking distraught, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles looking his typical dour self, Foreign Minister Anthony Eden wishing he had Churchill's job, President Dwight Eisenhower looking pretty mellow, and French Premier Joseph Laniel coming down with a fever, yet trying to put on a good face on the disasters that await him and his country. They were there to talk about empires and their discontents. Juxtaposed to this group of very famous and powerful individuals is another image of unknown Viet Minh guerrillas climbing over a makeshift bridge. Both photographs show men waging war. But the white men in black ties are engaged in a struggle against an enemy they had only a glimmer of knowledge about. They may have had the fancy clothes, but they were a doomed lot even as the Vietnamese soldiers were effectively challenging a European empire that had controlled their land and people.

Logevall's book charts the interaction between these two groups—defenders of empires and revolutionaries--and does so in a classic way. His narrative shows the complex interaction between diplomacy and war. It is a type of history that is almost comforting in its emphasis on personalities within a background of larger historical forces. Tellingly, Logevall quotes the noted journalist David Halberstam in the title of the book. It was Halberstam who said in 2006 that the Vietnam War occurred “in the embers of another colonial war” (xxi). Logevall then charts a decaying French empire that fought tooth and nail in Vietnam to maintain the old order but was unsuccessful, as the post-war world had changed in ways that would simply not allow the French to re-establish their rule in Vietnam. And like Halberstam, Logevall details how once the Europeans left the stage, the Americans replicated these same mistakes in Vietnam. The focus of the book becomes, then, how and why the Americans saw themselves as different from the French, but were in fact newer, more complex colonialists. (Logevall uses the phrase “global hegemon” to describe the U.S. at one point (217)). He explores how the U.S. after WWII, with its Cold-War ideological blinders on, transformed Vietnam into the classic reified object. Or as the war correspondent and historian Bernard Fall put it, the Americans were “dreaming different dreams than the French but walking in the same footsteps” (714). As the book ends, with events in 1959, France is gone but America's Cold War theories and rationales for waging war in Vietnam have been laid out and are in the process of being enacted. And unlike a novel, we know how this story ends: the Americans, following in the footsteps of those Europeans at that Bermuda Conference, will be defeated, embittered, and left still arguing about how these things had come to pass.

What Logevall argues throughout this work is that by 1947 nothing could have forestalled the United States' efforts in Vietnam. (True, President Franklin Roosevelt had serious doubts, but 1945 was almost ancient history by this time). Yes, there were options, but they were never seriously considered. The most important of these was the possibility of tolerating Ho Chi Minh as a nationalist and a communist. In this respect, Logevall's history

is comfortably ensconced in the classic critiques of the war. However, Logevall clearly indicates his own contribution to this story when he writes, "...we still do not have a full-fledged *international* [my emphasis] account of how the whole saga began, a book that takes us from the end of World War I...through World War II and then the Franco-Viet Minh War and its dramatic climax, to the fateful American decision to build up and defend South Vietnam. *Embers of War* is an attempt at such a history" (xv). It is this international context that readers will find fascinating and that is the most impressive aspect of Logevall's approach. The book is entertaining too. (I realize that using the word "entertaining" may seem odd to some, even obscene to others, given the death and destruction that takes place in this history). You find yourself reading this book with pleasure. This book is also beautifully produced, and the maps and photos are particularly nice; Random House clearly felt they had a winner on their hands and poured resources into it. In short, the book will be the 'go to' book on the origins of the Vietnam War for the foreseeable future. The fact that there are a veritable "who's who" of historians who have blurbed for the book, and have written early, praiseworthy reviews in *The New York Times* and *The New York Review of Books* causes one to pause before offering a criticism or two.<sup>1</sup> To review this book is to be aware of its history.

For all its claims to novelty, though, there is something oddly familiar about *Embers of War*. The problem here is that while there is a great deal of primary research in sections of the book (e.g. the *Foreign Relations of the United States* volumes, U.S. presidential papers, British Foreign Office memoranda, French Ministry reports, and translated Vietnamese documents), it is not, strictly speaking, a monograph nor is it a textbook on the subject. It achieves its sprawling range by incorporating the work of one historian after another, from Joseph Buttinger to Paul Mus to Barbara Tuchman. Anyone familiar with this history—which I imagine to be a fair sample of the readership of H-Diplo—will look through the endnotes and see an imbalance between primary and secondary sources in some of the chapters. Logevall is clearly aware of this possible disparity in his intended audiences when he writes, "My goal in this book is to help a new generation of readers relive this extraordinary story: a twentieth-century epic featuring life-and-death decisions made under profound pressure, a vast mobilization of men and resources, and a remarkable cast of larger-than-life characters..." (xvi). What the book accomplishes, then, is an immense synthesis of the literature on the early years of the war with primary sources added throughout. If you want to know about any individual or event, this book nicely summarizes the literature and points you to other scholars who did the original heavy lifting. It weaves together the work of dozens of other writers and their theses and themes in a winning way, and a reader new to this history can be thankful that Logevall took the time and energy to do this work. But a reader who has kept up on the literature will zero in on the primary sources in this volume and wish, naturally enough, for more. This contrast can be seen all the more in those chapters where Logevall's work is driven by primary

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Brinkley, "Why Were We in Vietnam?," *New York Times Book Review*, September 7, 2012, 17; Jonathan Mirsky, "A Debacle That Could Have Been Avoided," *The New York Review of Books*, October 25, 2012, 43-45

sources (e.g. the chapters revolving around the 1954 Geneva Conference and its aftermath). These sections ‘pop’ and are an altogether rewarding reconstruction of events.

No history book is unique, and we are all indebted to the work of others. Yet, this book aims to be comprehensive. It aims to tell this international history in a new way, one that has elites negotiating amongst themselves yet supplies an awareness of the various historical, political, and economic structures that surround their decisions (e.g. imperialism, colonialism, and modernization theory). This work is also different from Logevall’s path-breaking earlier volume *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*.<sup>2</sup> That, too, was a massive work, though it was a micro-history of the Vietnam War since it focused in on the fateful 1963-65 period. This work was a traditional history too, with elites arguing with one another. But it had a deeply-laid foundation of primary sources to support its architecture and a distinct perspective. (The earlier volume also had the much-discussed counter-factual section in the last chapter, “if Oswald had missed,” which is pitch-perfect in getting students to understand the problem of contingency in history). In this new work, though, you can almost feel Logevall accumulating his bibliography, finding one good story after another in the secondary material, and then putting it all together. He goes on countless detours and loves to give brief bios of everyone who had anything to do with the war. There’s Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau recording his impressions of his time in Vietnam (and the women in their bathing suits) and a young John F. Kennedy having a dinner conversation with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on the irrationality of France waging war in Vietnam (209-10; 286). These digressions come at a price; the book is awfully long—839 pages to be exact. Given its indebtedness to other writers, less detail would have been just fine. Logevall’s description of the fall of Dien Bien Phu, for example, is clearly informed by the work of Bernard Fall who is something of the hero in this book based on his perceptive understanding of events at the time.<sup>3</sup> It did make me want to re-read Fall though, along with many of the other historians that Logevall weaves into this plot.

We’ve all encountered that well-worn cliché that the past is a foreign country, and realize that the origins of the Vietnam War are to our students today as foreign as one can imagine. For those who came of age during the War, or at least were aware of the War and the searing conflicts it caused in the U.S., students’ unfamiliarity with these events borders on the incomprehensible, though of course it stands to reason that even the best college students don’t have this history embedded in them. But for the persevering student (and

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<sup>2</sup> Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Fall was a prolific writer on Vietnam. His works include: *The Viet-Minh Regime* (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Department of Far Eastern Studies, Cornell University, 1954); *Street Without Joy* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1961); *The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1963); *Viet-Nam Witness, 1953-66* (NY: Praeger, 1966); *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966); edited, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution: Selected Writings 1920-1966* (NY: Praeger, 1967); *Last Reflections on a War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

professor), *Embers of War* will make that past seem nearer and more explicable. It will also help them understand how this history exceeds the narrow American context.



Author's Response by Fredrik Logevall, Cornell University

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I thank the four reviewers for their deep engagement with *Embers of War*, and I'm pleased by their positive overall assessments. More than that, I'm gratified that they grasp what I am trying to do in the book, which is to provide a full-fledged political-diplomatic-military history of the First Indochina War and the coming of the Second. Others before me have examined portions of the crucial period 1940 to 1960 in Indochina, and much of the resultant work is highly valuable.<sup>1</sup> As a whole, however, the French war has received far less sustained attention than has the period of heavy U.S. involvement that followed, especially—as Laurent Cesari points out, in calling *Embers* “the first complete history of the French Indochina War in English”—from non-French authors.

The reviewers spend considerable time on the matter of human agency vs. structure—understandably, as it is a core concern in the book. I argue that the Indochina story in this period is to a significant degree a contingent one, full of alternative political choices, major and minor, considered and taken, reconsidered and altered, in Paris and Saigon, in Washington and Beijing, and in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (DRV) headquarters in the jungles of Tonkin and then in Hanoi. It's a reminder to us, I suggest, that to the policymakers of the past, the future was merely a set of possibilities. If Indochinese decolonization was bound to occur, the process could have played out in numerous different ways, as the experience of European colonies in other parts of Asia demonstrates. Accordingly, I see much more fluidity in the history than does Laurent Cesari, who terms “unthinkable” (perhaps, as he suggests at the end of his essay, “for the sake of argument”) the proposition that the United States could have broken with France over Indochina at any point during the period in question, or that Ho Chi Minh would ever have followed any diplomatic “third way” between Washington and Moscow. This line of thinking strikes me as too mechanistic by half.

It won't do, however, to stop there. To argue for contingency and the inherent plausibility of unrealized alternatives is not to say all were equally probable. This is the advantage that hindsight gives us. Thus, for example, although many senior French officials comprehended that in Vietnamese revolutionary nationalism they faced a very powerful force, one made much stronger by the nature and outcome of the Pacific War, they could never bring themselves to grant the concessions necessary to have a hope of mollifying this force. They could never quite make the mental leap required to imagine an independent Vietnamese nation-state free of French control.<sup>2</sup> In the same way, even if one believes—as

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<sup>1</sup> The reviewers have all done important work on the subject under discussion. See, for example, Laurent Césari, *L'Indochine en guerres 1945–1993* (Paris: Belin, 1995); Lloyd C. Gardner, *Approaching Vietnam: From World War II Through Dienbienphu* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989); David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008); and Jonathan Nashel, *Edward Lansdale's Cold War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Mus, *Destin de l'empire français: De l'Indochine à l'Afrique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1954), Part 1.



I do—that American officials in this era always had real choices about which way to go in Vietnam, choices evident not merely in retrospect but in the context of the time, one also has to acknowledge the deep continuities in policy between administrations. In the late 1940s, patterns of thought with respect to Indochina were laid down in Washington that would drive U.S. policy for the next two decades. All of which is to say that too much emphasis on contingency can cause us to lose sight of the constants that permeate virtually the entire French and American experiences during the struggle for Indochina.

Yet there surely existed counterfactual branching points (to use Jon Elster’s phrase), when Indochina developments could have gone in a different direction.<sup>3</sup> The middle of 1945 is one such moment, when so much hung in the balance, when the future of Ho Chi Minh’s revolution and the French colonial effort was anyone’s guess [I refer to August as the “open moment” (p.104)]; these months therefore loom large in the book, and also in the reviews. I don’t share David Hunt’s view that Franklin Roosevelt in the final months of his life “changed his mind” on Indochina and now agreed that the French should be allowed to reclaim colonial control. Or at least the assertion needs to be qualified: the evidence suggests strongly that Roosevelt in early 1945 had not slackened in his conviction that the imperialist system was bankrupt and decolonization inevitable, and that the United States needed to be on the right side of history. If he had retreated from the notion of *international* trusteeships for colonial areas, he still stuck to the position that the imperial powers should act as trustees, remaining in charge only long enough to prepare the colonies for independence. The means may have changed, but not the goal. For me, therefore, as for Lloyd Gardner in his essay, Roosevelt’s death in April had historical importance for Indochina: it’s not fanciful to believe that, had he survived into 1946, he might have responded very differently than did his successor to Ho Chi Minh’s appeals that the Viet Minh be included in any Allied discussion regarding Vietnam’s postwar status, with potentially major implications for the incipient struggle.

Another branching point is the spring of 1954, when the Eisenhower administration considered intervening militarily to try to save the French position in the war. Historians have long debated whether Eisenhower seriously considered going in with guns blazing, or whether he sagely set conditions for intervention that he knew would never be met. My argument is the former, and I’m pleased that the reviewers find I make the case well. Gardner makes a fair point that I might have given more attention to the role of Japan in U.S. calculations in 1954 (though overall I find Japan to be less important in those calculations than do some previous scholars).<sup>4</sup> I also like Gardner’s succinct summary of what occurred that spring: “Eisenhower’s strategy for waging war failed—in the short term.” What Gardner means, I think, is that Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John

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<sup>3</sup> Jon Elster, *Logic and Society: Contradictions and Possible Worlds* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Michael Schaller, “Securing the Great Ascent: Occupied Japan and the Origins of Containment in Southeast Asia,” *Journal of American History* 69 (September 1982), 392–413; Andrew J. Rotter, *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987).

Foster Dulles, helped set the stage for the Second Indochina War by their fateful decision in 1954 to build up and sustain a non-Communist bastion in the southern half of Vietnam. Gardner rightly reminds us that the decision had a certain logic at the time, in view of recent Central Intelligence Agency ‘successes’ in Iran and Guatemala, and in view of the difficulties that Ho’s Democratic Republic of Vietnam was sure to have within its sphere as it sought to rebuild after seven-plus years of destructive war.

A few quibbles. Cesari is correct that *Embers* can in no way be considered a social history, but he errs or at least misleads in referring to my “concentration on military history.” Though it is true that I give close consideration to military developments at certain points in the narrative—they had, I maintain, a crucial effect on the outcome—I doubt many practitioners in the subfield would call the book a military history per se; it is too oriented toward high politics and diplomacy for that. To Jonathan Nashel’s complaint that I rely heavily on published sources in some chapters, I plead guilty: I am of the school that believes one should take historical evidence wherever one can get it, and the book was always intended to be in part a synthesis. I learned a great deal from the extant literature pertaining to the period 1940-60; much of it, to my knowledge, has been little used by scholars of the conflict, especially those writing in English. Nor do I argue, *pace* Nashel, that “by 1947 nothing could have forestalled the United States’ efforts on Vietnam”; again, U.S. officials always had choices about which way to go in the conflict. Hunt, for his part, is right to make note of the useful “Diem revisionism” in recent scholarship, but in my view the implications are rather less grand than he implies: Diem, for all his nationalist credentials and personal and political courage, had massive shortcomings as a leader, which only became more pronounced over time.

Finally, to Nashel’s claim that mine is a “type of history almost comforting in its emphasis on personalities within a background of larger historical forces,” I would respectfully say the opposite: the comforting historical argument is the one that says it was all preordained, all the result the structural forces beyond the capacity of any individual personality or group of personalities to shape or control. How much more troubling it is to learn that French leaders, motivated mostly by domestic political concerns and careerism, escalated and perpetuated a war in Indochina they privately doubted was either necessary or winnable, and that American leaders did the same thing after them.

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