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H-Diplo Roundtable - Assuming the Burden, Porch on Lawrence

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Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005)

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Reviewers: Anne Foster, Indiana State University, Shawn McHale, George Washington University, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, Harvard University, Douglas Porch, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, Martin Thomas, Exeter University, UK

Commentary by Douglas Porch, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California

Books about Vietnam either ask how the United States might have won that war, or how Washington became embroiled in such a backwater battlefield in the first place. Mark Atwood Lawrence's deeply researched and professionally crafted book falls into the second category. It follows a lead of books like David Kaiser's *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* which faults the Eisenhower administration for locking the United States into policies in Indochina that Kennedy might have reversed had he lived. Lawrence extends the investigation into the waning months of World War II, which he argues was really the pivotal period when fateful decisions were made that spiraled into a thirty year's war. His focus on a triad of mid-level policy-makers in Washington, Paris and London, also broadens the frequently U.S. centric view of the antecedents of the conflict, one that, in his opinion, "has attributed too much autonomy to the United States and overlooked crucial ways in which other governments shaped U.S. choices"(6).

Lawrence also reminds us that the question of how to transition colonial empires to independence, an old discussion that took on critical dimensions in World War II, constituted an international concern, and was not simply FDR's hobbyhorse. The process of defeat and occupation during World War II had discredited old regimes, profoundly reshaped the balance of power, and created opportunities for hitherto upstart groups in a geostrategic arc running from Mediterranean Europe to Beijing. Policymakers were forced to decide which places were worth fighting for and which were best ignored. "Simply put, the situation in Vietnam acquired new meaning between 1945 and 1950 partly because powerful policymakers said it did and because they took actions that gave substance to their coalescing representations of reality," Lawrence asserts (9).

Nevertheless, while the playing field was a global one, Lawrence concludes that the overpowering dimensions of U.S. power from 1944 made it the critical player. Washington, and specifically the Truman administration, had the power to set a different course, one that could have avoided a conflict that eventually scorched three countries. Problems, however, began with the death of the anti-imperialist FDR, followed by the displacement of idealistic New Dealers by hard headed, and hard hearted, technocrats and businessmen of the war generation. Truman's intolerance for, and ignorance of, the nuances of diplomacy facilitated simplifications that framed foreign policy options as a zero-sum game. As international tensions gradually chilled

into a Cold War, American conservatives and their counterparts in Britain and France “crafted solutions that bore the outward trappings of liberality,” like the Bao Dai regime, to silence liberal proponents of fundamental change. “The tragedy of American policymakers in the 1944-50 period,” Lawrence concludes, “lies in the fact that the Truman administration squandered the considerable leverage it held over France to force a better outcome to the Indochina problem. That leverage was jettisoned by officials who accepted the overriding need to protect French prestige and influence at all costs” (286).

Of course, nothing is inevitable in history, and different decisions might certainly have produced different outcomes. By adopting the optic of the *longue durée*, Lawrence reminds us that Vietnam was a festering tragedy long before it nudged itself into U.S. awareness in the early 1960s. He argues that a cabal of hawks in three countries conspired to point Vietnam policy in a confrontational direction. However, to see other options emerging for Indochina in the immediate post-World War II years is a challenge. Perhaps, Paris had the option of recognizing Ho Chi Minh and walking away. With the benefit of hindsight, it would certainly have saved many lives. Lawrence argues that this lay well within the realm of possibility: some French colonial experts recognized that the empire would have to change to remain the same—the Brazzaville Conference of January 1944 had set the stage for a French Union, and even the Colonial Ministry adopted the post-modernist title of *Ministère de France d’outre mer*, whatever that meant. But the vacuum of serious thought about the future of Southeast Asia, the confusion of the Japanese surrender, the political turmoil in post-war France, and the “benign public indifference” (127) to colonial issues, meant that the men on the ground drove events (they always did in the colonies)—Mountbatten allowed French troops to return to Indochina because he feared a clash between Viet Minh and British Indian troops; Ho Chi Minh, who preferred the French to plundering Chinese Nationalists, acquiesced; Admiral Georges Thierry d’Argenlieu, high commissioner and commander-in-chief in Indochina from 1945 to 1947, used negotiations with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to buy time to build up French forces with surplus U.S. war supplies. By December 1946, both sides were spoiling for a fight. Lawrence collects substantial evidence that moderates in France fretted that hawks in Saigon led by d’Argenlieu, an ex-Carmelite monk reputed to have “the most brilliant mind of the twelfth century,” were driving France’s Indochina policy over a cliff, but they were powerless to prevent it.

The truth, however, was that d’Argenlieu was acting within the norm of French imperial behavior where aggressive colonial soldiers on the periphery seized the initiative and forced Paris to go along. True in the Third Republic, it was especially the case in the immediate post-war years. The Fourth Republic was a political system crafted to give minority interests, prominent among them those of empire, power far beyond their numbers. French governments, concocted from unsteady multi-party coalitions, survived for six months on average. Imperial and military lobbies had to be satiated. Once the guns spoke in Vietnam in December 1946, all debate died in Paris, even on the Left.

In any case, as Lawrence recognizes, the notion that French grandeur, even though significantly battered from 1940, could be separated from empire had yet to percolate through to the French people. “Indo” must be considered as an episode in a violent and traumatic period of Occupation and decolonization that climaxed with the Algerian War, one that challenged France’s self-image, cast doubt upon the character of the French people in times of crisis, and profoundly

reshaped French politics. France was simply going to have to work through it. Therefore, a profound reorientation of French imperial policy at this point in her history, one that embraced a no-fault divorce between France and her empire, would have to await the completion of three wars and the emergence of de Gaulle as a man able to master powerful colonial and military interests and market a vision of France as a European, rather than an imperial power.

So, if Paris was incapable of controlling its imperial proconsuls, pressure to produce a different scenario for Indochina had to come from the United States. But that was unlikely to happen. No clear consensus on the direction of U.S. policy toward Indochina had emerged in Washington, anymore than it had on Korea. U.S. diplomatic focus targeted on Europe. “There is little question that American policymakers would have accepted—even welcomed—a deal between France and Ho Chi Minh at any point before 1950,” Lawrence believes.(283) That may be true, but it is irrelevant. Before the 1949 victory of the Chinese Communists and Beijing’s decision in early 1950 to arm and train Viet Minh forces, Ho remained a nuisance but hardly an overpowering threat to French control of Indochina. Indeed, like Mao, he actually needed the war to mobilize a support base for the Viet Minh. So, without firm evidence that Ho Chi Minh could sustain any claim to be the legitimate ruler of Vietnam, why should Washington expend significant political capital to force a major change in France’s Indochina policies before 1950? The issue hardly seemed a priority.

Those with memories of how little “leverage” the United States had been able to exercise over French policy in North Africa and in France in the latter stages of World War II, even as Washington was liberating French territory and resurrecting the French army, probably recognized that the game wasn’t worth the candle. Both London and Washington required a strong France in Europe. The United States and France disagreed seriously about the fate of West Germany and once the Korean War began, Washington, its army seriously depleted by Truman administration budget cuts, needed French troops in Europe more than ever, even as it appeased the French over plans to arm the Federal Republic of Germany. Besides, where in the ramshackle edifice that passed for government in France was that pressure to be applied? If Paris could not control its proconsuls in Indochina, how was Washington to do so? The Fourth Republic was simply incapable of calibrating a major shift in colonial policy in Indochina, any more that it was to in Algeria in 1954. And the United States in the years immediately following World War II had no great incentive to force them to do so.

The outbreak of the Korean War followed by the successful Viet Minh campaign, with Chinese backing, in October 1950 to roll up the RC4 and drive the French back to the Tonkin Delta, moved the Indochina War from a slow burn to a major focus of U.S. policy. From that moment, the French tail seriously wagged the American dog—the French masterfully leveraged Washington policy, most notably by threatening to withdraw from Indochina and leave it to the communists, or by refusing to cooperate in the creation of the European Defense Community. But that was after 1950.

So, while Lawrence paints a tantalizing picture of a policy in transition, a time in which other decisions might have led to a different outcome in Indochina, to have come to fruition, almost every contingent event would have had to fall into place. As an exercise in counter-factual history, this scenario is simply not “robust.” In fact, it is a-historical. The deck was stacked

against a moderate solution in Indochina even before 1950. From that point, Washington was certainly going to support a “politique de force” there. Therefore, while Lawrence fills some critical gaps in our knowledge of how U.S. involvement in Indochina emerged, the critical decision for the United States comes back to the 1960s when Washington had to decide whether, with the proxy war over, Vietnam was the place to draw a line in the sand. In the period from 1944 to 1950, the U.S. role in the tragedy was largely a negative one of not being able to foresee the future, or even grasp the reality of the present, in this remote corner of the world where it had few interests. By the 1960s, with much more information available, the decision to intervene directly in Vietnam was really throwing good money after bad. That was the moment when America’s entanglement in Vietnam assumed its tragic dimensions.

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