

# H-Diplo

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H-Diplo Review Essay on **Charles L. Robertson**. *When Roosevelt Planned to Govern France*.

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **William R. Keylor**, Boston University

Charles L. Robertson attributes his decision to undertake an investigation of this controversial topic to two personal experiences he had in Paris. The first was a dinner in 1979 where an aged veteran of Charles de Gaulle's entourage during the Second World War claimed that he and several colleagues had indignantly turned back a ship after the Normandy landings of 1944 carrying American government personnel who were preparing to take up their posts in an American-run military occupation regime in liberated France. The second was a May 2003 essay in *Le Monde Diplomatique* by the respected Sorbonne historian Annie Lacroix-Rix repeating the allegation that the D-Day liberators planned to subject France to the same treatment that was planned for the soon-to-be defeated Axis powers.<sup>1</sup> These two experiences prompted him to probe the historical record of this murky episode in Franco-American relations with the goal of proving or disproving the allegations about the putative plans by the Roosevelt administration to establish an Allied Military Government of the Occupied Territories (AMGOT) in France after its liberation.

This brief explanation in the book's prefatory chapter, "How This Book Arose," stimulated in this reviewer an eerie sense of déjà vu. I recalled my own uncomfortable encounter with the AMGOT issue at a 1985 conference in Reims commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the German capitulation in that city. In my presentation on American war aims in Europe, I denied ever having seen any credible evidence that President Franklin Roosevelt intended to treat France as a defeated enemy rather than as a liberated friend, as some French Gaullists (and leftist historians) have insistently claimed. This then-junior scholar was mortified to hear the indignant response by Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, the renowned dean of French diplomatic historians who had mentored an entire generation of France's most productive scholars of

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Lacroix-Riz, "How to Manage the Peace: When the U.S. Wanted to Take Over France," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (May 2003), 1.

international relations. He reiterated the old allegations about banknotes prepared by American financial officials for distribution in an occupied France ruled by American GIs before Free French leader Charles de Gaulle and his supporters shrewdly outmaneuvered the Yankees and reasserted French national sovereignty. As the panel broke up, I was partially reassured when Duroselle's star student (and my dear friend) André Kaspi, who went on to occupy the chair of American history at the Sorbonne, sidled up to me and whispered "Il a tort, tu as raison."<sup>2</sup> Many years later, while serving as a visiting professor at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (Sciences-Po) in the spring of 2003, I came across the same Lacroix-Rix article in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, reaffirming the AMGOT allegation that had inspired Robertson to get to the bottom of the matter.

This carefully researched study has exploited a wide range of secondary sources as well as primary sources in the library of the *Fondation Charles de Gaulle*, the *Archives Nationales*, the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, and the memoirs and biographies of participants on both sides of the Atlantic. In fact, the book goes far beyond the narrow question of U.S. plans for military government in France to explore the tendentious relationship between the Roosevelt administration and de Gaulle's Free French movement. This larger story has already been recounted in great detail by Milton Viorst, Mario Rossi, Julian Hurstfield, André Kaspi, and Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, among others.<sup>3</sup> But Robertson provides a lucid and useful summary of the contentious wrangling between the U.S. administration and de Gaulle's movement during the Second World War. He reviews all of the Franco-American controversies that complicated Allied plans leading up to the successful landings in Normandy in June 1944: FDR's stubborn refusal to have anything to do with Gaulle's Free French movement in London while retaining diplomatic relations with the collaborationist regime of Marshal Philippe Pétain in Vichy for the first two years of the German occupation; the tender feelings that both Roosevelt and his ambassador to Vichy, Admiral William Leahy, harbored for Pétain based on their memory of his heroic role in the First World War, compared with their contemptuous dismissal of the upstart de Gaulle as a nobody with delusions of grandeur; the energetic U.S. campaign to court alternatives to de Gaulle—General Henri Giraud, General Maxime Weygand, even the notorious Vichyite Admiral François Darlan; the failure to keep de Gaulle informed about Allied plans for the North African landings in 1942 and the D-Day landings in 1944; and the refusal to recognize his provisional government until six weeks after the Free French leader triumphantly entered Paris, despite unmistakable signs of his popularity among the French people.

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<sup>2</sup>A decade later Kaspi noted that "A shadow of mystery floats over the acronym AMGOT that solid studies may someday dissipate," offering the observation that "Roosevelt had never really decided on an AMGOT for France" and that it was a scarecrow that "de Gaulle took up when he wanted to rally French unity behind him" (cited on 196).

<sup>3</sup>Milton Viorst, *Hostile Allies: FDR and de Gaulle* (New York: McMillan, 1965); Julian Hurstfield, *America and the French Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Mario Rossi, *Roosevelt and the French* (Westport: Praeger, 1993); Robert Paxton and Nicholas Wahl, eds., *De Gaulle and the United States* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1994); André Kaspi, *La Libération de La France: juin 1944-janvier 1945* (Paris: Perrin, 2004); Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *La France Libre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

Robertson correctly identifies the underlying source of this conflict between FDR and de Gaulle, apart from their reciprocal personal animosity. The French leader was passionately committed to restoring his country to great-power status after its ignominious capitulation in 1940 and shameful collaboration with the Nazi occupation. The American president was convinced that France was finished as a great power and had no intention of allowing it into the exclusive club of the “Four Policemen” (the U.S., Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and China) that (he hoped) would bear the principal responsibility for preserving order and security in the postwar world.

The overt hostility to de Gaulle in the White House and the State Department (especially from Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Under-Secretary of State Sumner Welles) was reinforced by anti-Gaullist French expatriates in the United States, such as the former Permanent Secretary-General of the French Foreign Office, Alexis Saint-Léger<sup>4</sup>, the former deputy Henri de Kerillis, and the popular writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. But do all of these well-known indications of Roosevelt’s and his close foreign-policy advisers’ enmity toward de Gaulle and the president’s obsession with banishing France from the ranks of the great powers constitute evidence of concrete American plans to treat liberated France like an occupied country? Robertson’s answer to that question, after a careful review of the historical evidence, is a resounding “no”. The president himself was not averse to making offhand remarks that might lead one to believe that such a plan was in the offing. On May 8, 1943, Roosevelt wrote Churchill that de Gaulle, who had a “messianic complex,” believed that “the people of France itself are strongly behind him personally. This I doubt.” He went on to speculate about the possibility of a military occupation of France “run by British and American generals,” joking that “I do not know what to do with de Gaulle. Possibly you would like to make him Governor of Madagascar” (83). The creation on June 4, 1943 of the *Comité français de la libération nationale* (CFLN) in Algiers with de Gaulle and Giraud (temporarily) as rotating co-chairs marked the advent of a de facto French government-in-exile. But Roosevelt continually resisted pressures from Churchill to recognize it as a political entity, preferring that the French simply be asked to provide troops to the Allied commanders and stay out of politics (91). An attempt by the CFLN in September to convey to Washington and London its plans for administering liberated France elicited tacit approval from Churchill but no response from the White House. It was this non-response, together with a few of FDR’s offhand remarks such as the one to Churchill cited above, that fueled subsequent speculation in France that the Americans were dead set on imposing AMGOT on France after the Germans were cleared out.

Another bit of evidence that lent credence to this scenario was the establishment in Charlottesville, Virginia in early 1942 of a School of Military Government, an obscure entity devoted to the preparation of American service personnel for imposing military rule in territories liberated from foreign occupation. The graduates of this school became the personnel of the new Civil Affairs Division of the War Department that was established in March 1943. They were intended to operate in former enemy countries (Germany, Austria, Italy), but, as Robertson demonstrates, the decision was made not to plan for a military government in liberated countries such as France, Norway, Holland, the Netherlands, and

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<sup>4</sup> Who wrote poetry under the pseudonym Saint-Jean Perse.

Luxembourg. As soon as a portion of liberated territory was cleared of enemy troops, administrative authority would be turned over to the governments-in-exile (107). Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower in particular was intent on avoiding getting bogged down in the domestic political affairs of liberated regions, particularly after unpleasant experiences in North Africa (where he had to contend with rival French groups there jostling for political power). But while Allied officials opened up negotiations with other governments-in-exile with the goal of providing for a smooth transition to civil administration after liberation, they refused (on explicit orders from the White House) to deal with de Gaulle's operation. The Roosevelt administration feared that to do so would imply recognition of the CFLN as the official government of France, something that the American president consistently resisted.

In the end, it was the intervention of Eisenhower that broke the logjam. He had assured de Gaulle in December 1943, shortly before leaving North Africa to take command of the combined Allied forces assembling in Great Britain for the invasion of France, that French troops would be among the first to enter Paris and that he would informally recognize de Gaulle's supreme authority to represent liberated France (113). In the lead-up to the Normandy landings Eisenhower, with strong support from Churchill and his Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, ordered military officers to work with the CFLN on civil affairs in those parts of France that had been liberated. Roosevelt continued to drag his heels on formal recognition. But de Gaulle and his representatives in the French Resistance methodically prepared for the day when they would replace the retreating Germans while Eisenhower, now with the support of de Gaulle's long-time adversary Secretary of State Cordell Hull, insistently pressed the President to give in.

As the Allies prepared for the Normandy invasion the issue of what de Gaulle angrily called the '*fausse monnaie*' (which would become a major component of the AMGOT claim by French critics) became the major bone of contention between the Roosevelt administration and the Free French leader (who had been summoned from Algiers to London for a last-minute briefing on the invasion plans). The Americans were printing French francs for use by the occupying troops, but (again, on orders from Washington) refused to include any reference to the Provisional French Government on the banknotes in order to avoid the formal recognition that FDR was still unwilling to grant. Eisenhower strongly supported de Gaulle's complaint that the arrangement was a flagrant violation of French sovereignty (149-150). In short, the Supreme Allied Commander hoped to secure the cooperation of the French civilian population as the Allied forces did battle with the Germans in northern France and fully realized that de Gaulle was the French leader best suited to help bring that about. On May 25 Eisenhower's headquarters in Britain dispatched an order to the American and British soldiers preparing for the landing that should have ended once and for all the AMGOT myth: "Military government will not be established in liberated France....(The French themselves will conduct all aspects of civil administration in their country, even in areas of military occupation)." It went on to specify that the *Mission militaire de liaison administrative*—the corps of Free French officers set up by de Gaulle in Algiers that would accompany Allied troops to supervise civil affairs after the liberation—"is to be used as a direct channel to local authorities, ...the latter to be responsible for reestablishing French civil administration and judicial authority" (cited on 154).

In the aftermath of the D-Day landings, de Gaulle firmly established his bona fides in liberated France, where he was hailed by the population. Regional commissioners, prefects, sub-prefects, and municipal officials loyal to the leader of Free France effortlessly assumed positions of authority after the collapse of the Vichy administration. The irritating issue of the American-printed banknotes faded into insignificance as French civil administration officials distributed enough francs to local banks so that few of the American bills needed to be placed into circulation. The occupant of the White House, however, could not resist issuing a few rear-guard blasts against the Free French leader. On June 14, the very day that de Gaulle had landed in Bayeux, Normandy to the acclaim of the population, Roosevelt predicted to his Secretary of War Henry Stimson that "other parties will spring up as the liberation goes on...and de Gaulle will become a very little figure" (162). At a press conference on June 23, despite the fact that the provisional French government was setting up an administrative apparatus in Normandy while Eisenhower's troops concentrated on fighting the Germans, FDR declared that the Allies should "liberate a little more of France before we go into the matter of civil administration" (162-163). But in the end the president caved in to the pressure exerted by his supreme military commander, his secretary of state, his secretary of war, and large segments of the American press: On July 11 he recognized the Provisional Government of the French Republic (GPRF) as the de facto authority in the country during the liberation. But since this declaration fell short of explicit diplomatic recognition, suspicions were rife among Gaullist officials -- and later French historians -- that the Americans were still hoping to install alternatives to de Gaulle. The names of the former Third-Republic Prime Minister Edouard Herriot and even the detested Vichyite Pierre Laval were kicked around, despite the absence of any confirmatory documentation of official American approaches to these individuals. On October 23 1944 FDR finally bowed to the inevitable and accorded formal recognition to the GPRF as the de facto government of the country.

Robertson concludes that the AMGOT myth, bolstered by Gaullist memoirs and kept alive by some French scholars long after the liberation of the country, owes its persistence to several undeniable facts about American policy toward France during the Second World War. Roosevelt maintained diplomatic relations with the Vichy regime while denigrating de Gaulle and his Free French movement. He occasionally indulged in some loose talk about the need to administer liberated France as an occupied country. His War Department established schools to train civil affairs officers for service in liberated territories, and they took up their posts in Italy as the advancing Allied armies drove up the peninsula. His administration cast about for almost any alternative to de Gaulle as the head of a new French government until the Frenchman's careful planning and cultivation of French public opinion resulted in a *fait accompli*.

But as this well written book makes clear, one overriding feature of American policy toward France ensured that there would be no Allied military occupation of the country after its liberation: the thinking of the man who would command the Allied forces in Europe and his ability to translate his intentions into policy. While in North Africa Eisenhower noted with approval that the French Committee on National Liberation had meticulously formed an embryo administration that could promptly replace the Vichy administrative apparatus. By assuming the task of administering the liberated country, the Provisional French Government

would relieve the Allied troops of onerous political responsibilities that would detract from their military mission. Ike and his aide-de-camp Walter Bedell Smith recognized that de Gaulle, and de Gaulle alone, was best suited to prevent domestic chaos behind the lines as Allied forces engaged the German army in France because he enjoyed the support of the French population and was fully prepared to take power. None of the blustering of a passionately anti-Gaullist American President could prevent the U.S. military commander, backed by most of Roosevelt's foreign-policy and military-policy advisers in Washington, from allowing liberated France to govern itself after its occupiers and their French collaborators had been removed from the scene.

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