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**Benjamin Varat.** "Point of Departure: A Reassessment of Charles de Gaulle and the Paris Summit of May 1960". *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 19.1 (March 2008): 96-124. DOI: 10.1080/09592290801913759.

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There is no lack of literature on the Franco-American relationship during the cold war. Explanations for the contentiousness between the two nations have focused on differences in "national character," contrasting interpretations of a long and tortured history, and of course, a deep-seated tradition of anti-Americanism in the French body-politic, brilliantly explored recently in a path-breaking book by Philip Roger.<sup>1</sup> President Eisenhower, although not an astute analyst of French politics, certainly understood the basic problem: when reminded by an advisor of French "ingratitude" for the American role in rescuing and liberating them during two wars, Eisenhower remarked that this should not be said to the French, who rather think the U.S. abandoned them, by entering World War I only after allowing them to be bled disastrously for three years, and callously allowing them to fall to Hitler's armies in May 1940. A colleague of mine, Kenneth Barkin, often observed that the U.S. let France fall in 1940, and stood by while Britain almost fell too, but rushed to the defense of South Korea ten years later, a place of which at that time most Americans had probably never heard.

General De Gaulle, a persistent critic of the U.S. despite its claims that France was its "oldest ally," looms large in this analysis. His biographers have often observed his basic sympathy with the anti-American tradition of French rightists, as well as the contemptuous treatment he received during World War II from President Roosevelt, who referred to the "so-called" Free French and supported an alternate candidate to run France, the hapless General Giraud, against de Gaulle despite the latter's support by the French Resistance. Varat has taken a radically divergent view of the origins of Franco-

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Roger, *American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

American differences. He is skeptical of deep-seated explanations, and in my view, properly so: there is no evidence that “reflexive anti-Americanism” ever governed French foreign policy, although it existed as a current in French politics and, despite the protestations of President Sarkozy, who has used this phrase in contrasting his current pro-Americanism to that of his predecessor. Rather, differences and resulting contentiousness between the French and the Americans have reflected different perceptions of the national interests of the two nations by their leaders. To state this should be to state the obvious, but in analyzing history, as one of my professors properly remarked, nothing ever is obvious.

But in avoiding the macrocosm Varat errs by focusing on the microcosm. He has tried to reduce the Franco-American cold-war divergence as largely stemming from a single event, and an unlikely one at that. His focus is the failed Paris summit conference of May 1960. He does not argue that the summit caused the divergence, but rather more subtly, he believes that it became the occasion for the crystallization of differing perceptions about the evolution of the cold war and hence the contrasting perceptions of the national interests of the two countries. The circumstances of the summit are easily recalled. It came amid the crisis opened by the Russians in November 1958 over Berlin, a crisis over access to that divided city that only came to a partial end with the building of the Berlin wall in 1961. There was much saber-rattling during the crisis, but hopes were aroused that the Soviets would be more accommodating on the issue in Paris, as well as on disarmament questions; presumably Khrushchev had the opposite expectation, that the west would agree to minimal Russian demands that access to Berlin be turned over to the control of the East Germans. According to the French post-crisis analysis, which Varat takes as basically accurate, Khrushchev lost hope that Eisenhower would accommodate him in Paris on the Berlin question, while internal critics of his policy, in the main Stalinists and those sensitive to emerging Chinese charges of Soviet revisionism, succeeded in forcing him to tack left and seek a reason to torpedo the summit. Eisenhower unwittingly provided a pretext when the ill-fated American U2 spy plane was downed by a Soviet missile prior to the summit's opening. Eisenhower botched his response to this incident in one of the worst blunders of his presidency, first denying that it was a spy plane, and then when confronted with the evidence (and the pilot, Gary Powers, a prisoner in Soviet hands) claiming that he was unaware of the flights in the first place. Khrushchev had his pretext, and with his characteristic crudeness condemned western perfidy, made absurd demands for an apology and “punishment” of those responsible while in Paris, and when these were refused, went home in a huff.

To explain his resulting thesis of a fundamental French-American divergence over the summit, missed by all previous historians of the era, including this one, Varat must overcome the fact that de Gaulle and the Americans happened to agree during the crisis: the Americans were in fact grateful to de Gaulle for the firm and calm way that he rejected Soviet demands, delivered among rather absurd theatrics. Not only did Eisenhower initially go to the summit in basic agreement with de Gaulle on hopes for a favorable outcome and some détente, but de Gaulle blamed Khrushchev entirely for the

summit's failure, recognizing that the U2 incident was a pretext, and that under Chinese and internal Stalinist pressure Khrushchev was unlikely to back down in Berlin and further negotiations with him would be fruitless. The French consequently took a hard line during the Berlin crisis while the Americans, however, goaded to some extent by the British, still continued to hope that the Russians would agree to a negotiated settlement.

Building his case on this divergence, Varat goes on to explain that de Gaulle concluded that the Americans were in some measure going soft and insufficiently defending French interests, and he concluded that he must pursue a European defense initiative independently of Washington with France's European Common Market partners, with or without the participation of the British, who at this time were reconsidering their initial opposition to the European customs union. In pursuing this policy de Gaulle relied on the independent nuclear deterrent under development in France; the first French atomic explosion took place in Algeria in February 1960. His reasoning was that the independent French deterrent could become the basis of an independent European military strategy. Despite its small size, the French arsenal still would represent a threat to Soviet cities should the Russians attempt a conventional invasion of Western Europe, and in the event of an invasion of Western Europe by Soviet conventional forces, act as a "tripwire," although de Gaulle never acknowledged this, meaning that if the French were first to use the bomb in their own defense, the Soviets would reply of necessity against the United States too, thereby creating a nuclear holocaust. Eisenhower had taken umbrage at French suggestions that the United States would not defend Europe with nuclear weapons if necessary, but de Gaulle replied that while he did not question Eisenhower's word, France could not rely on assurances that all future American presidents would conclude that the defense of Europe was worth the nuclear destruction of some part of the United States itself if that could be avoided.

Varat, however, to some extent undermines his own argument by demonstrating that French-American divergences preceded the summit. The French bomb, to which the Americans were strongly opposed, was a result of decisions made during the Fourth Republic, first by Pierre Mendès France in 1954, and confirmed by Guy Mollet in 1956, and the decision to aim for February 1960 as the date of explosion was made by the Fourth Republic's last Defense Minister, René Pleven, before de Gaulle took power in May 1958. Moreover de Gaulle began implementing a phased withdrawal from NATO's integrated command (never the alliance itself, although there were baseless fears that he would do that too when it came up for renewal in 1969) in September 1959 when he withdrew the French Mediterranean fleet from the alliance, under the pretext that it was needed in the Algerian War. Even more, Varat seems to forget that de Gaulle's motivations were much broader than a simple conclusion that the cold war could be frozen into acceptance of the status quo, which he rather liked with regard to Berlin and the division of Germany, by a policy of firmness. He was still negotiating with the Americans and British at this time about France becoming a decisive actor in NATO on a par with London and Washington as part of what became called a "directorate" of the Big Three; his bid for such a governing body of the alliance was in turn premised on his demand that the Americans and British

would recognize a preponderant French interest in North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. De Gaulle's European initiative was part of a broad offensive designed to make Paris the capital of a newly-constructed "Eurafrica," and in some measure its representative in the councils of the Big Three. It was only after the summit, and into the Kennedy administration, that these hopes were definitively dashed, and de Gaulle embarked on his politics of so-called independence. He could hardly do so, moreover, while the Algerian war, itself a serious cause of French-American differences that Varat ignores despite a burgeoning literature on the subject, raged.<sup>2</sup> De Gaulle pursued his European strategy, nuclear deterrent, "directorate," and Eurafrican strategies all at once as part of a coherent whole that came crashing to the ground when Algeria turned out badly, a result that de Gaulle blamed on Washington's alleged support for the rebels despite its official neutrality. De Gaulle later repaid the favor by opposing the American war in Vietnam.

Despite these criticisms, Varat's exposure of the differing French and American analyses of Soviet behavior and intentions in response to the summit is in itself of value, and it makes his article worth reading for those interested in this important phase of the cold war. He might have added two important points, however. The Soviets, in pursuing the Berlin crisis, were motivated by a desire to shore up the East German regime which was foundering as its citizens fled to the West. Hence the exacerbation of the crisis that only ended with the construction of the Berlin wall. And secondly, the French hard line during the Berlin crisis could not but appear as a hypocritical policy in the end, based neither on a French nuclear deterrent, that despite the explosion of one bomb, did not yet exist and would not for some years, nor on French troops, 500,000 of whom were bogged down in an futile colonial war in Algeria. The policy was rather based on a desire to curry favor with the West Germans and a conviction that Soviet threats were all bluster. But it was not lost on the Americans and the British that if de Gaulle had been wrong, and the cold war over Berlin had become hot, France would perforce have been virtually absent from its front lines.

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*Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse*

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Connelly: *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Irwin Wall, *France, the United States, and the Algerian War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). In his review of recent literature on de Gaulle Varat also misses the best biography yet produced, Eric Roussel's *Charles de Gaulle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).