

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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Commentary by Anne L. Foster, Indiana State University

In his introduction, Mark Lawrence asks “How did a faraway corner of the French empire acquire such significance that Americans saw fit to intervene with economic and military aid?” The question is so ubiquitous in works on Vietnam that it has become nearly rhetorical, but Lawrence is actually interested in the answer. He explores how Vietnam, in the years after World War II, gained sufficient international importance in Paris, London and Washington to prompt the latter two countries to pursue the policies of their most hawkish officials in support of French ambitions to retain Vietnam, or at least to determine its form of government. It is a deeply appealing work. He deftly moves among viewpoints of French, British, and US officials, demonstrating the interplay of ideas, policies and men which led to outcomes different from those any one nation wanted at the outset. He convincingly argues for the contingent nature of policy in the late 1940s, especially in the United States. U.S. officials may have realized that the United States would wage a Cold War but it was not yet obvious whose strategy for winning would prevail. In Lawrence’s narrative, the American voices arguing on behalf of the Vietnamese, and against French colonialism, are persistent and sometimes in positions of power. Certainly these voices echoed in London and Paris, prompting officials there sometimes to moderate their positions in hopes of appeasing what they believed to be official US concerns.

Inexorably, as the decade progressed, the hawkish voices, belonging to those who saw dangerous communists behind every bush and believed force was the best way to eradicate them, prevailed in each country. France had to step away from Vietnam. But the Vietnamese did not get to choose for themselves, not so long as they might choose badly. The United States, eyes wide open to the non-democratic nature of their client state, stepped in to, as Lawrence states so well “assume the burden.” Lawrence hopes to convince us that the 1940s saw an honest and vigorous debate in Washington, London and even Paris about the nature of the reimposition of French rule in Vietnam in particular, and about how to respond to demands for independence across the colonial world in general. He also hopes to convince us that by the end of the 1940s, for Vietnam especially, debate was largely over, stifled primarily by the ease with which radical Asian (and later African) nationalists could be painted with the Communist brush, and dismissed. Formal colonialism had apparently died during World War II, but former colonial powers had no intention of allowing completely unfettered independence to spring up in its wake.

Lawrence is interested primarily in explaining the origins of the American War in Vietnam, the

ways in which the “Western Alliance” was constructed, and how that influenced the ways in which that alliance decided to wage the Cold War. His narrative demonstrates, however, that ideas about and debates over colonialism, whether in traditional or neo- forms, played critical roles in the shaping of strategy in the immediate aftermath of World War II and especially as the Cold War dawned. For instance, throughout the 1940s, Britain was much less likely to offer overt, substantial support than one might expect from a fellow colonial power, and even less than many British officials themselves wanted to offer. British officials reasoned, however, that they could better afford to put off the French than to antagonize Indian and Burmese nationalists. This sentiment was strong already during World War II, when Britain relied heavily on troops from the empire, and only grew after the war, when Britain realized that independent India was a more important friend in Asia than was French-controlled Indochina. The case for the United States seems even easier to make, since anti-colonial rhetoric and sentiment have a long history in the United States. Lawrence simplifies this issue, about which more below, but he does nicely point out the ways in which U.S. officials often were impatient with European slowness to realize that there was no return to the traditional colonialism of pre-1940. Yet those same U.S. officials were too bound by racist, or at least paternalistic, notions to quite believe Asians could rule themselves. Navigating these choppy, rocky waters during the 1940s was challenging enough for the Western powers, and became even more so as fear grew that the Soviet Union was willing to stir up already troubled waters for their own purposes.

It often seems to me that the interesting question, then, is not: why did the United States come to fight in Vietnam? Rather, the interesting question is, why was it Vietnam and not Indonesia? Why was it Vietnam and not Malaysia? Why did Britain let Burma go with relatively little conflict? In other words, what seems more difficult to explain is why there was only sustained, multi-national military conflict in one of the Asian colonies, not in several, or in different ones, especially since both Malaysia and Indonesia were economically much more important and, arguably, strategically as important. To offer these questions is not to say that Lawrence should have answered them, or even asked them. His answers to his questions, which are effective and convincing, merely suggest to me that a broader comparative framework, which I will discuss below, is imperative to our understanding of not merely the specific issues surrounding the U.S. decision to commit militarily to a particular political order in South Vietnam, but also to the more general issue of the relationship between the end of formal colonialism and the early Cold War. Since it is arguably these decisions, about the nature of those newly independent states created out of colonies during the Cold War era, that now have come back to haunt us in our post-Cold War, post-9/11 world, we should be paying much more attention to how and why these states were created as they were.

Lawrence’s primary comparative framework is his exploration of the nature of decision-making regarding Vietnam as it occurred in London, Paris, and Washington. As he says in his preface, remarkably little has been done to set U.S. decision making in the early Cold War into the context of multi-lateral relations in Europe. Language barriers are often cited, but Lawrence’s multi-national study only required one language other than English. Even learning both French and German presumably would be easier for most English speakers than learning Chinese or Japanese. It is also surprising because the archives in Europe are so easy to use, compared to those in Southeast Asia, or Central America, or other places scholars often go. It remains a puzzle to me, then, why, recently, so few scholars have attempted such multi-lateral analysis. A

possible, though not satisfying, explanation may be that it is more difficult, I believe on the basis of casual but sustained observation, to find an academic job in the United States, as a scholar of U.S.-European relations than as a scholar of U.S. relations with Asia or Central/South America.

Lawrence's careful attention to multi-lateral relations is revealing, however. This is the part of the comparative framework Lawrence has constructed most completely, and in doing so, he contributes in important ways to the re-writing of the early Cold War now ongoing. Within the foreign policy establishment in each country there was a debate, sizeable, protracted, and remarkably wider in scope than is often thought. Equally importantly, policymaking in each country, the United States included, was influenced by actions and arguments from its allies. The United States certainly did have more of the instruments of power than other nations. It had the largest economy by far; it had more military weapons and potential by far; it had an undamaged industrial plant, and a robust financial market. It also had an appealing political message, at least for many people throughout the world. It did not, however, have all the power. And especially, the United States did not have all the necessary knowledge, or even all the necessary established policy, to act as an unquestioned leader of even the burgeoning Western Alliance.

One of the most striking assessments that Lawrence offers, again and again, is of a Washington bureaucracy which did not have the necessary information, whether background knowledge or current intelligence, to formulate policy. Time after time, the United States pursued a policy of what Lawrence calls neutrality in part because the bureaucracy was in conflict about what was correct, but in part as well because they simply were overwhelmed by how many different places and issues they suddenly needed to know and decide about. The French and British both took advantage, providing information to support only their own position, working to control media and public images, and otherwise carefully channeling the information flow and decision-making process to suit their ends. Just as the new imperial history is demonstrating that imperial powers were altered, even shaped, by the experience of holding colonies, Lawrence shows us that for Europe or even the United States, there was not really any such thing as a purely European foreign policy. Events in the empire, or the former empire, shaped choices about relations on the European continent too.

A second part of the comparative framework, evoked often but not pursued by Lawrence, is the regional decolonization in Asia. The number of independent nations in Asia in 1941 was, arguably, three. By 1950, India, Burma, Indonesia, Korea, the Philippines, and Pakistan had joined the list, and independence struggles were on-going in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Only Malaysia was as yet relatively quiet, but by the end of the 1950s, that too would have changed. If we start our story in 1944, as Lawrence does, the decolonization of Asia appears relatively trouble-free, with intense but contained conflicts in Indonesia and later Malaysia, and a major one only in Vietnam. Lawrence's work is still a corrective, however, to those many works which start the story of the Vietnam War in 1954 or later, because then the existing landscape includes all these independent states (Malaysia again excepted), almost as though they had always been there. At least, by beginning in 1944, Lawrence often provides quotations and assessments which demonstrate that U.S., French, and especially British policymakers thought constantly about the way their policies would affect policies in the rest of Asia, especially in those countries struggling to achieve independence.

The most important case, about which too little is known and too little has been written, is Indonesia. The parallels between the French and Dutch experiences are dramatic. Both countries had been defeated during World War II, and hoped for first, U.S., then British, assistance in re-taking their colony. Both worked hard, and generally failed, to be allowed to participate in the liberation of their colony. Both faced determined, popular, long-standing nationalist movements in their colonies. Both saw the British responsible for part (France) or all (Netherlands) of the liberation and reoccupation of the colony. Both were dissatisfied with British efforts. Both had Socialist parties reluctant to advocate decolonization for fear of alienating traditional voters who might be attracted to a centrist, Catholic-affiliated party. Both were able to land troops in their colonies by the end of 1945, and both engaged in military action in attempts to reoccupy the whole colony. The Dutch committed 200,000 troops in Indonesia during the late 1940s. The French actually had far fewer in Vietnam. Both encountered ambivalence when attempting to get assistance from the United States and Britain, although both did receive financial aid and some military equipment. Here again, it appears that the Dutch received more, especially from the United States. By 1950, however, the Dutch had negotiated a peaceful transition to Indonesian rule (with the exception of Irian Jaya) and left the country. By 1950, the French had stepped up the military conflict and embroiled the United States in it, at least to the point of providing military assistance and, as Lawrence argues, getting the United States to accept the French analysis of the situation.

For those who do know this literature, the explanation for the different outcomes has generally been twofold, and simple. First, France was a more important potential partner in the Western Alliance than the Netherlands. The United States had greater need to appease France, especially since it was so worried about Communists in the French government, a worry that did not pertain to the Netherlands, where Communism was a consistent but only minor political force. The second part of the explanation has been that in Indonesia, the Indonesian nationalists themselves proved worthy of U.S. support by single-handedly suppressing an uprising by the Indonesian Communist Party in 1948. The Indonesians, by this action, proved to Washington's satisfaction that they were on the side of the United States in the growing Cold War. These explanations no longer satisfy, any more than the explanations previously offered for the U.S. decision to fight in Vietnam, namely that Ho Chi Minh was a communist, satisfy after reading Lawrence, or Mark Bradley, or Stein Tonnesson, to name only a handful of those who have deepened our understanding.

If policymakers debated about Vietnam as Lawrence demonstrates, then that prompts questions about whether similar debates occurred about Indonesia (or the other countries also engaged in independence struggles in the region). Surely they did, and indeed some of the quotations and examples provided by Lawrence demonstrates that they did. In that case, did policymakers see essential differences between these countries, and their struggles? What context of analysis was most important in deciding to follow one course for Vietnam and a different one for Indonesia? What role was played by personalities, perhaps most importantly that the British general in charge of taking the Japanese surrender in Vietnam, General Douglas Gracey, was deeply pro-colonial and worked in embarrassing ways to assist the French, while the British general in charge in Indonesia, General Philip Christison, was skeptical about his task from the beginning and made early, important contacts with Indonesian nationalists? At one point, Lawrence also

notes that the French feared that Vietnam's case would be raised at the United Nations Security Council, by India. He discussed how that fear prompted both Britain and France to act in certain ways. But the case of Indonesia was raised in the UN Security Council, a crucial development for the Indonesians, by India, acting with Australia. Why was India willing to pursue one but not the other?

The questions are innumerable, because nearly no one has worked on these issues in a multi-lateral or regional context. Lawrence laments the paucity of such works for Europe in the post-World War II period, but for Asia, especially Southeast Asia, there are even fewer. During this time period, Southeast Asians were coming to see themselves as living in a region, and of sharing common hopes and common struggles across the region. Their independence struggles were nationalist, but waged with lots of attention to what their fellow Southeast Asians experienced, and could offer them. Europeans, and to a lesser extent Americans, involved in colonial affairs drew on a long legacy of regional cooperation and mutual exchange, as well as competition. These modes of analysis and action persisted into the 1940s and beyond.

If broadening our gaze geographically to include the region lends a new perspective to the question of why Vietnam, broadening it chronologically is also illuminating, particularly on the issues of American anti-colonialism, imperial power cooperation, and European/American perceptions of the threat of communism. As Lawrence notes in his introduction, the end of the Cold War has proved freeing for historians, helping us to see that some of our assumptions were mere products of that conflict. One assumption endures, however: World War II was such a dramatic turning point in global foreign relations that for an understanding of policies in the post-war era, one needs give only, at most, a passing nod to the time before 1940. There are exceptions, of course, but periodization generally begins or ends with World War II. For the Vietnam War, this has been especially the case, with only Mark Bradley's work making a serious attempt to show influence across the divide of World War II.

What is striking, however, is that some of the debates and policies of the 1940s which Lawrence sees as setting in place the conceptual building blocks of a U.S. military commitment to South Vietnam, existed already in the 1920s and 1930s. The heated debates about whether the United States should support anti-colonial movements or European allies who were also colonial rulers had occurred after World War I as well, and throughout the interwar period. These debates were less urgent, perhaps, because none of the nationalist movements in Southeast Asia was strong enough to be on the verge of success in gaining independence. The debates were less urgent also because the United States was itself a colonial power, and many U.S. officials believed the United States was a beneficial presence in the Philippines. In the interwar period, as well, the debate about supporting colonialism was less often one between factions in the State or War Departments, and more often a sort of dualism within individuals. Most US officials in those years had a basic ideological commitment to anticolonialism, but in practical terms saw few colonial peoples capable of ruling themselves. It is too simplistic, for the 1920s and 1930s at least, to speak of people as being "anticolonial" or "procolonial" because they were often simultaneously both. One suspects the same holds for the 1940s, especially when Lawrence reports that even the most anticolonial of U.S. officials acknowledged that they saw no realistic alternative to France returning to rule in Vietnam. They stipulated, however, that this time the French should work harder to prepare the Vietnamese to govern themselves. The attitude of U.S.

officials about colonialism in Southeast Asia is remarkably persistent from the end of World War I right up to about 1950.

Similarly, the debates about what kinds of assistance Britain or the United States might give to France evoke similar discussions in the interwar period. Again, the scale is less than after 1945, but the imperial powers of Southeast Asia, France, Britain, the United States and the Netherlands, offered each other assistance in many ways. The Depression had prompted economic cooperation to restrict production of key commodities, such as tin and rubber. But more striking, throughout the interwar period the imperial governments shared intelligence and even intelligence agents, in an effort to combat what they perceived as regional threats, such as opium smuggling and communism. Colonial officials were accustomed to asking colleagues in other countries for assistance in maintaining their rule.

One of the threats colonial officials perceived throughout the interwar period was communism. Lawrence rightly notes that after 1945, the immediate threat of communism was closely identified in Western Europe and the United States with an expansionistic Soviet Union, and that in those years, the feared expansion was primarily in Eurasia near to the Soviet borders. It is too much to say, however, that there was no fear of global communism. Perhaps more precisely, it was a latent fear, suppressed by the wartime alliance with the Soviet Union and tempered by knowledge of Soviet weakness immediately after the war. But radical nationalists in Southeast Asia were just as likely to be suspected of communism in the 1920s and 1930s as they would be in the 1940s and 1950s. Colonial officials, including many from the United States, believed these Southeast Asian communists had ties to the Soviet Union and to a global communist network. Colonial governments exchanged intelligence, deported suspected communists on request from other colonial governments, and permitted foreign intelligence agents to operate in their country. Both the analysis, that communism was a centrally directed regional threat, and the actions, of regional cooperation in intelligence and suppression, provided important legacies drawn on in the late 1940s, as colonial officials again perceived a threat from communism.

Lawrence has widened our perspective about how and when the United States committed to a military option in Vietnam, demonstrating convincingly the importance of the 1940s and the influence of U.S. allies in the decision-making process. Our gaze now takes in more terrain, and the whole picture begins to have a different, more compelling logic. But the view is perhaps not wide enough. Just at the edges, both of geography and of chronology, appear new shapes, indistinct though present in Lawrence's work, awaiting attention.

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