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Kathryn C. Statler. *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam.* Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2007. \$45.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-8131-2440-7.

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Review by Philip E. Catton, Stephen F. Austin State University

Most works in the voluminous literature devoted to the Vietnam conflict focus on the last decade-and-a-half of the struggle, their authors' attention drawn no doubt by the gripping drama of this period, as well as the debates that still rage over the policies of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. In comparison, the earlier years of the conflict remain less well studied. Perhaps that is beginning to change. Recent studies by scholars such as Pierre Asselin, Jessica Chapman, Mark Lawrence, and Edward Miller have turned our attention back to the 1940s and 1950s.¹ Much of this work, moreover, eschews an American-centered approach that concentrates almost exclusively on U.S. policymaking. Instead, it brings into the story the actions of other participants – Vietnamese, French, British, Chinese, etc. – which has helped to shed new light on the course of events and the nature of the conflagration in Vietnam.

Kathryn Statler's *Replacing France* represents a fine addition to this trend in the literature. Drawing on research

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¹ Pierre Asselin, "Choosing Peace: Hanoi and the Geneva Agreement on Vietnam, 1954-1955," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9 (Spring 2007): 95-126; Jessica M. Chapman, "Staging Democracy: South Vietnam's 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai," *Diplomatic History* 30 (September 2006): 671-703; Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Edward Miller, "Vision, Power and Agency: The Ascent of Ngo Dinh Diem, 1945-54," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35 (October 2004): 433-458. See also the collection of essays in Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds., *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

conducted in U.S. and French archives (as well as Britain's Public Record Office), Statler examines how and why the United States supplanted France in Vietnam in the 1950s. Cold War concerns obviously played an important part in this development, she acknowledges, but so too did the process of decolonization and the peculiar dynamics of the Franco-American relationship. She focuses on these latter factors: how the end of empire in Indochina, together with the competitive-cooperation that characterized relations between Paris and Washington, drew the Americans deeper into the affairs of Vietnam and encouraged them to muscle aside the French. The result is a fresh, insightful, and thought-provoking "international history."

Statler begins by chronicling the course of events during the years 1950-1954. In this period, the French enticed Washington into increasing its support for the war in Indochina by portraying the conflict as an anti-communist, rather than a colonial, one. At the same time though, Paris fretted about the intentions of the Americans and their growing influence in Indochina. In fact, Statler argues that the French "had done too good a job of interesting the United States in Vietnam" (114). In the wake of France's defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Agreements, Washington moved to replace the former imperial power and assemble in South Vietnam all of the machinery of nation-building, American style. By 1960, she concludes, French colonialism had been supplanted by U.S. "imperialism lite" (289), a brand that ultimately proved no more successful than the original.

As this characterization of U.S. policy suggests, Statler is critical of America's involvement in Vietnam. Like most historians of the conflict, she subscribes to the "orthodox" (as opposed to the "revisionist") view that the U.S. intervention was a tragic mistake. She identifies two particular villains of the piece: Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and "American exceptionalism." She charges Dulles with holding a "Manichean worldview" that "precluded serious negotiations with his adversaries, and oftentimes with his allies," pointing to his unwavering support for South Vietnam's Ngo Dinh Diem as one example of his inflexibility. As for "American exceptionalism," Washington's faith in the superiority of U.S. values, and the ability to export them to Vietnam, "propagated an assertive foreign policy" and underlay America's confidence in replacing the French. Statler does highlight France's own notions of its cultural uniqueness and "civilizing mission," but generally portrays its diplomacy as less rigid and more pragmatic than that of the United States. There were a number of policymakers who understood the pitfalls of America's approach in Vietnam, she observes, but "[u]nfortunately, most of them spoke French" (284-285).

Statler's book fills an important niche in the literature on the Vietnam War. As she notes, studies of the conflict in the 1950s tend to concentrate either on important "turning points" such as the Dien Bien Phu debacle, or on the big Cold War concerns that drove U.S. policy. Through a sustained analysis of Franco-American relations during the 1950s, Statler provides a more complete picture of the events of the decade. For example, her examination of U.S. assistance programs in the early fifties, which included direct economic aid to the Bao Dai government, suggests the continuity between the periods before and after 1954. There was clearly a budding American effort at nation-building underway long before Dien Bien Phu and the Geneva Conference prompted Washington to take a more hands-on role in Vietnamese affairs. Statler's focus on the Franco-American relationship

also offers a number of fresh insights. Indeed, one of the great benefits of doing multi-archival “international history” is that it leads not only to the unearthing of new material but also new ways of looking at familiar episodes. She is able to ask some particularly intriguing “what if?” questions as a result of analyzing events from multiple perspectives rather than just a single point of view. For example, if France had succeeded in maintaining ties with North Vietnam rather than choosing to back U.S. policy in South Vietnam, to what extent would that have constrained Washington’s freedom of action in the aftermath of the Geneva settlement?

Like Odd Arne Westad’s recent work, Statler’s book also challenges us to reconsider the dynamics of the Cold War in the Third World.² In particular, she points to the importance of “North-South” issues, not just “East-West” ones, as motive forces. Thus, she suggests that long-standing ideological convictions – and the clash between France’s “civilizing mission” and the U.S. drive to bring American-style modernization to the post-colonial world – helped shape the course of events in Vietnam as much as Cold War strategic and military considerations. In addition, she frequently draws the reader’s attention to the interests and actions of the Vietnamese, highlighting their role in influencing events. For the Vietnamese, of course, the “North-South” issues of colonialism and independence were at least as important as the “East-West” struggle between the competing blocs. Statler offers a particularly telling analysis of Ngo Dinh Diem’s behavior after 1954, as the Vietnamese leader sought first to eliminate the last vestiges of French colonial rule, before turning back to France in the late 1950s to provide a counterweight to the growing influence of the Americans.

By treating Diem as an active participant in events, Statler’s work complements the efforts made by other scholars to bring the Vietnamese out of the historical shadows and make them more than passive bystanders in the history of the conflict. Nevertheless, there were a number of places where the Vietnamese might have received more attention than she devotes to them. For example, she spends relatively little time dealing with the critical question of how Bao Dai came to appoint Diem as prime minister, noting the “murkiness surrounding his ascent” (119). Ed Miller’s work on this episode suggests that historians are more likely to find the answer to this question in the dynamics of Vietnamese politics than the designs of Washington or Paris.³ Given the emphasis she places on the influence of culture, perhaps Statler also missed an opportunity to examine the extent to which France’s faith in its cultural superiority and its disdain for the Americans affected the Diem regime’s view of the United States. Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, was particularly scathing in his criticism of the Americans, comparing them unfavorably to the French and accusing them of ignorance and crass materialism. Was the Saigon government’s anti-Americanism, which emerged with a vengeance in the early 1960s, influenced by a French-induced cultural contempt for the Anglo-Saxons?

² Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³ Miller, “Vision, Power and Agency.”

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There are a couple of other issues that deserve critical attention. The first concerns the chronological scope of *Replacing France*. Beginning the book in 1950, the year that saw a significant increase in U.S. involvement in Vietnam, makes absolute sense. That said, Statler might have provided some additional background information to help explain Franco-U.S. relations after this date, especially in terms of America's longstanding antipathy towards French colonialism in Indochina. As is well-known (and perhaps that accounts for Statler's omission), negative U.S. views of France's colonial presence pre-dated the First Indochina War and presumably bolstered Washington's determination to push the French aside in the 1950s. One certainly wonders whether the Americans would have treated the British in quite the same way. The book ends around 1960, but the choice of this date seems less self-evident. Indeed, Statler briefly discusses events in the early sixties – De Gaulle's call for Vietnam's "neutralization," French involvement in Saigon's purported flirtation with Hanoi, and the U.S. role in the plots to overthrow Diem – that seem tailor-made for the kind of analysis to which she subjects those of the 1950s. Perhaps, the year 1963 would have made a more logical end-date, particularly since so much of the story in *Replacing France* revolves around the figure of Ngo Dinh Diem.

The second issue concerns some of Statler's concluding comments, in which she suggests that, by 1961, the United States had "built a colony rather than a nation" in South Vietnam (286) and thereby replicated the kind of enterprise that had earlier doomed French Indochina. While Statler makes a compelling case that neocolonial impulses drove U.S. policy, her characterization of Diem's South Vietnam as essentially a colony seems wide of the mark. Throughout the book, she emphasizes Diem's "agency" and refusal to tow an American line. Yet, at the end, she portrays him as little more than a power-mad dictator, leading a U.S.-sponsored entity that lacked any claim to legitimacy. I would argue that Diem represents a more s

ubstantial historical figure than this interpretation suggests. For all his failings, and there were plenty of them, he stood for a brand of non-communist nationalism that had real intellectual and political roots in Vietnam. He sought to put his ideology into practice, moreover, by pursuing nation-building initiatives of his own, sometimes without reference to his superpower patron. Diem's South Vietnam may have been dependent on U.S. support, but surely it represented more than a mere American appendage. Statler's conclusion about the end result of the Franco-American transition in Vietnam is a little jarring and seems at odds with her treatment of Diem in the main body of the book.

Notwithstanding the above comments, *Replacing France* is a finely researched, well written, and original piece of scholarship, which deals with an important and under-studied aspect of the Vietnam conflict.

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