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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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Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

In the past year and a half H-Diplo has featured roundtables on three books that focused directly on the Vietnam conflict and a number of other books on the Cold War that also addressed aspects of this conflict. In May 2006 Mark Atwood Lawrence's *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (2005) received a very favorable assessment from five reviewers who welcomed Lawrence's international study of the interrelationship of the French, British and U.S. governments as they maneuvered from the end of WWII to the U.S. decision to support the French in the first Indochina War. In June 2007, four specialists discussed Seth Jacobs' *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (2004); and in July 4 reviewers challenged Mark Moyar's revisionist *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (2006).

Kathryn Statler's *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (2007) now joins this list of impressive reassessments on the Vietnam conflict and shares significant similarities with them. Similar to Lawrence, Jacobs, Moyar, and a number of other scholars with new books or forthcoming studies on Vietnam, Statler is part of a new generation of scholars who did not live through the Vietnam conflict or teach and write about it before 1975. Without having to defend past assessments in writing or political positions carved in the sands of shifting views on the Cold War and Vietnam, these authors are free to reconsider past contemporary and historical assessments and to apply more of an international approach in their studies. On the other hand, they may miss not only the contemporary passions but also insights grounded in the contemporary context that excessive hindsight too readily dismisses.

Statler's study offers a sequel to Lawrence in some respects as he ended his study with the U.S. decision in 1950 to aid the French directly in their Indochina conflict. Statler begins her study with this decision and follows French-U.S. relations on Vietnam through the Geneva Conference in 1954, the ensuing U.S. replacement of France and support for Ngo Dinh Diem and the South Vietnam government, culminating in an expanding U.S. presence,

the breakdown of the Geneva agreements on Vietnam, and the ensuing North Vietnam decision to organize, arm, and unleash an insurgency in South Vietnam. Similar to Lawrence, Statler does introduce, whenever possible and appropriate, the perspectives of Great Britain, the Soviet Union, China, and the Vietnamese but her main focus and primary sources are in the French-U.S. relationship.

The reviewers have raised a number of questions that enhance the importance of this study and merit further discussion including

1.) Many historians aspire to write international history and some definitely accomplish this such as Odd Arne Westad's *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* featured in a recent H-Diplo roundtable. However, the challenges are many as indicated in another roundtable on Marc Trachtenberg's *The Craft of International History. A Guide to Method*. Several of the reviewers would prefer more international perspective in Statler's study, a shift from a focus on U.S.-French relations to a transnational perspective, as well as more consideration of the linkage between larger Cold War policies of the U.S. and France in Europe and Asia and Vietnam issues. They would also welcome more evaluation on French diplomacy and the internal debates shaping French decisions. Statler addresses these issues in her response.

2.) A central issue that Statler does explore before and during the Geneva Conference is the relationship of the Cold War in Europe to Indochina. Statler demonstrates that Cold War considerations significantly influenced Washington's policies on Vietnam, both indirectly with respect to the European Defense Community (EDC)—the plan to bolster Western troops in Europe by bringing German forces into a supra-national European army - and directly concerning Washington's views on what the Soviet Union and China were up to with respect to Vietnam and Southeast Asia as a whole. Historians have previously recognized and discussed the EDC's relationship, but Statler develops the issue in significantly more depth with more primary sources than previous accounts. She is particularly insightful in the development of how France manipulated Washington's increasingly strident demands for French ratification of EDC to maximize American aid and support in Vietnam (see pp. 69, 77-78, 82, 100-101, 113). In conclusion, Statler suggests that the issue illustrates the "dangers of tying one policy goal to another. Both Paris and Washington thought they had linked policies in a way that would allow them maximum leverage against one another, but in the end, both became mired in their own cleverness." (279)

3.) John Foster Dulles is Statler's least favorite policy maker on the French and American sides of the Vietnam issue: "if there is a villain in the story, or at least someone to hold primarily responsible for this commitment, it might be John Foster Dulles." (284) Dulles comes across as a bit of a loose cannon, mixing threats against the French on EDC and any negotiations on Indochina with reassurances that the U.S. would not undermine the French in either Europe or Vietnam. Dulles' unwillingness to risk much with respect to the Soviet peace offensive after the death of Stalin is understandable. However, the pressure to keep France fighting in Vietnam as Washington completed a cease-fire agreement for a divided Korea did not reflect a very understanding approach with a major

Cold War ally. Dulles appears caught up in tactics and maneuvers vis-à-vis Cold War adversaries and allies without sufficient thought being devoted to the relationship of Washington's available means to its objectives and the wisdom of jumping into situations regardless of the likelihood of success. Statler does push the available evidence pretty far when she suggests that Dulles "embarked on a series of actions that could be construed as attempts to sabotage the [Geneva] conference." (97) Dulles maneuvered vis-à-vis the French as he did with most adversaries and allies, leaving everyone guessing about what he was really up to. However, it is unlikely that either he or President Eisenhower really wanted to undermine the Geneva conference since they lacked the support of the British and Republican leaders in Congress for the only other alternative to negotiations at Geneva, direct American military intervention.

4.) "Replacing France" is the major focus of Statler's study as she skillfully traces the evolution in Washington's calculations from providing aid and advice to France before the Geneva accords and then a shift to replacing the French as soon as possible. In the process Statler offers a number of insights, such as how Washington relied too much on assessments from newcomers to Vietnam rather than the reports of experienced officials in the field—"the incoming top American official would always be more optimistic than the outgoing, which ensured that the United States would always stay in Vietnam just a little longer." (83) Statler also captures a degree of irony in France's failed management of the relationship with Washington over Vietnam. France successfully uses the Cold War and EDC issues to get aid from Washington but at the same time France does not want advice from Washington and unsuccessfully resists the influx of American advisors—from MAAG military advisors to United States Information Service officials, Special Mission for Technical and Economic Aid officers, CIA agents, U.S. press correspondents, and other Americans representing a variety of organization. Before long France is fighting a multi-sided conflict against the Viet Minh and then North Vietnam, against the Saigon government led by Diem, and against American economic and cultural penetration of South Vietnam. France gambled to try and maintain its stature if not its colonies by persuading the Americans to come into Indochina and lost almost everything except the ability to criticize from the sidelines the American effort in the 1960s. After 1956 France found itself being pushed out by the Americans and Diem in every area from training Vietnamese troops and officers to education and cultural centers despite earlier agreements with the Americans, and remained influential only in the economy as American private capital did not follow the rest of American policy. French officials expressed an intense sense of being evicted from Vietnam by Americans who knew little about the area, the people, the culture, and seemed to learn even less. (214-216)

5.) Statler addresses several of the "hot button" contemporary issues from the sixties, most notably in Chapter 4 on "The Non-Elections of 1956." Statler carefully applies an international perspective to the issue, develops the various perspectives of Diem, Hanoi, Moscow and China, Paris, London and Washington. She resists the tendency to predetermine the issue as something that had no chance of happening and, instead, develops the evolving perspectives of the participants. France, for example, initially pushed for elections to maintain its cultural and economic influence in both parts of Vietnam whereas the U.S. preferred postponement and partition and backed Diem's refusal

to cooperate in a series of ad hoc responses. In Statler's dispassionate analysis the non-elections are less of a great travesty against democratic principles than a process of "disorganization and mistrust, in which events tended to overtake policy" with Diem as the most significant actor. On the other hand, Statler notes how the failure to hold elections contributed to Hanoi's decision for an insurgency in South Vietnam and "the continued reduction of the French presence and paved the way for an increased American presence in Vietnam." (181)

6.) Recent literature has brought a revival of analysis on Diem's objectives and leadership skills with increased scholarly disagreement, a definite shift from earlier assessments that dismissed Diem as undemocratic and incompetent to manage South Vietnam and compete with Ho Chi Minh in North Vietnam.¹ A general problem in the debate is reliance on Western as opposed to Vietnamese language sources to evaluate Diem. Although Statler does not focus on this issue, she does at various times support a view of Diem recently advanced by Mark Moyar in which Diem is depicted as a very dedicated leader who was determined to create an independent South Vietnam based on Vietnamese culture and interests rather than the American model that American civilians and military advisors pushed on him from 1954 until Washington accepted the ill-fated coup to overthrow Diem in 1963.² "The West consistently underestimated Diem," Statler concludes. "Most western accounts at the time and into the present assess Diem as an uncompromising and unskilled leader. But consider his accomplishments." (251-252) With Statler's reliance on Western sources, it is difficult to penetrate very far on Diem's objectives, although he does seem to maneuver with respect to both powers to achieve as much independence as possible.

7.) Statler sheds significant insights on not only the process by which the U.S. contributed to the end of French colonialism in Vietnam but also the development of an early and critically costly effort to replace the French with an American neocolonial model. Although Statler does not necessarily explore new dimensions of the model in Vietnam, she does give it a sharper focus with respect to how Americans tried to impose American standards, culture, and language as they replaced the French and built an American landscape in South Vietnam. (262). As Statler notes, this quest intensified in the sixties. Americans disdained a French colonial administration and mentality, but they seem as clueless as the French with respect to understanding and supporting Diem's quest to be an independent national leader. In all of the studies of America as empire, as a hegemony, as neoconservative or neoliberal crusader for democracy, recognition should be given to the

¹ Seth Jacobs focuses more on American attitudes that shape official endorsement of Diem rather than actual policies and results in South Vietnam. The most enduring critical view of Diem and his regime appeared in Frances FitzGerald's *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (1972), especially Chapter III "The Sovereign of Discord", pp. 96-184. For the recent literature on Diem, see the works cited by Philip Catton and his own *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (2002).

² Moyar does focus more extensively on the 1960-63 period and explores the conflicting assessments on Diem, his domestic policies, and counterinsurgency efforts by American journalists and military advisors. See Moyar, Chapters II-IX.

illuminating example of Vietnam, 1954-1963, before the war and Americanization of it transformed this earlier relationship.

8.) Finally, Statler contributes to the ongoing historiographical debate on how and why the United States entered the Vietnam conflict and continued to expand its involvement, its resources, the lives of its soldiers, its prestige and credibility, and its domestic politics and stability. In her conclusion, Statler touches on different interpretations, such as the “quagmire thesis,” the “stalemate thesis,” the “stumbling thesis,” and, one could add the “victory denied” thesis and others. Statler’s contribution to the debate is to emphasize the role of intra-alliance conflict as being “responsible, to a considerable degree, for increasing American invention in Vietnam.” (277) Despite the agreement of France, Britain and the United States on common policies they, according to Statler, “never managed to carry through these policies in practice. The search for ‘common action’ always appeared just out of reach. But in attempting to realize this goal, American increased its influence in Vietnam, with the result that by 1960 the Americans had replaced the French in almost all domains in South Vietnam and dissuaded them from maintaining a presence in North Vietnam.” (277-278)

Participants:

Kathryn Statler earned the Ph.D. from the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1999 and is an Assistant Professor at the University of San Diego. Her research specialties include Franco-American Relations, Alliance politics, Vietnam Wars, and U.S. Foreign Relations. Her publications include *Replacing France: Alliance Politics and the American Commitment to Vietnam, 1950-1960* (University Press of Kentucky, 2007); “After Geneva: The French Presence in Vietnam,” in *The First Indochina War*, eds. Fredrik Logevall and Mark Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); “Alliance Politics after Stalin’s Death: Franco-American Conflict in Europe and in Asia, 1953-1954,” in *An Early End to the Cold War? The East West Conflict in the Aftermath of Stalin’s Death*, eds. Klaus Larres and Kenneth Osgood (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004); and “The Diem Experiment: Franco- American Conflict Over South Vietnam, 1954-1955,” *The Journal of American- East Asian Relations* 6/2-3 (Special Issue, Summer-Fall 1997): 145-173.

Philip Catton, an Associate Professor of History at Stephen F. Austin State University, received his PhD from Ohio University and specializes in Modern Asia and U.S.-Vietnamese relations. His publications include *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); “Trying to Hustle the East: U.S. Relations with the Ngo Dinh Diem Government.” In Frank A. Ninkovich and Liping Bu eds., *The Cultural Turn: Essays in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations* (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 2001); “Counter-Insurgency and Nation Building: The Strategic Hamlet Programme in South Vietnam, 1961-1963.” *International History Review*, December 1999; and “Old Battlefields and New Frontiers: Doing Research in Vietnam.” *Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Newsletter*, March 1998. His current research focuses on the 1954 Geneva Conference and the refugee exodus from North Vietnam.

Laurent Cesari “habilitated” in history in 1997 and is Professor of contemporary history, University of Artois, Arras, France. His books include *L’Indochine en guerres, 1945-1993* (“Indochina at war, 1945-1993”), Paris, Berlin, 1995; (Co-editor with Denis Varaschin): *Les relations franco-chinoises au vingtième siècle et leurs antécédents* (“Sino-French relations in the 20th century and their origins”), Arras, Artois Presses Université, 2003; (Editor): *La politique économique extérieure des Etats-Unis au vingtième siècle* (“American foreign economic policy in the 20th century”), special issue, *Histoire, Economie et Société*, volume 2, number 1, 2003; and *Les grandes puissances et le Laos, 1954-1964* (“The major powers and Laos, 1954-1964”), Arras, Artois Presses Université, 2007. Recent articles include “The declining value of Indochina: France and the economics of empire, 1950-1955,” in Mark Atwood Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds., *The first Vietnam war: colonial conflict and cold war crisis* (2007); “France and NATO, 1966-1976,” in Wilfried Loth and Georges-Henri Soutou, eds., *Eastern Europe and Western Europe in the cold war (1965-1975)*, London, Routledge, 2007 (forthcoming); and “Les droits de l’homme à l’époque de la guerre du Vietnam” (“The Vietnam war and human rights”), *Relations Internationales*, number 108, October-December 2007 (forthcoming). He is currently finishing a revision of his 1991 dissertation “France, the United States, and Indochina, 1945-1957.”

Michael Creswell is currently an associate professor of history at Florida State University, Michael Creswell is a graduate of Indiana University (B.A.) and the University of Chicago (M.A., Ph.D.). His major publications include “Between the Bear and the Phoenix: The United States and the European Defense Community” *Security Studies* ((Summer 2002); “How France Secured an Anglo-American Continental Commitment, 1945-54,” in *Cold War History* (June 2002); and with Marc Trachtenberg, “France and the German Question, 1945-1955,” which appeared in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* (Summer 2003). Creswell is also author of *A Question of Balance: How France and the United States Created Cold War Europe* (Harvard, 2006). His next book will examine how France rebuilt its army after the Second World War.

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