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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.

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Philip Catton, Laurent Cesari, Michael Creswell, Ginger R. Davis

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Author's Response by Kathryn C. Statler, University of San Diego

Let me begin by thanking Tom Maddux for putting this roundtable together and expressing my appreciation for the thoughtful commentary Philip Catton, Laurent Cesari, Michael Creswell, and Ginger Davis have provided. Their observations and constructive criticism have given me much to ponder, and I have enjoyed formulating a response to some of their comments.

The book, concisely summarized by Ginger Davis, is indeed a study of "intra-alliance politics within the crucible of decolonization to analyze how America became involved in Vietnam." As such, it is primarily concerned with West-West relations during the early Cold War, and in particular the Franco-American relationship vis-à-vis Indochina, which has not received its due share of scholarly consideration. Intra-alliance conflict is, I argue, key to understanding how and why the United States committed itself to a non-communist South Vietnam in the 1950s as it systematically replaced or, as Davis notes, "displaced" France. Therefore, while I do examine other important actors--Franco-American allies in London and Saigon as well as adversaries in Moscow, Beijing, and Hanoi--the focus remains on French and American players. The one exception is Ngo Dinh Diem, who shaped events, particularly in the 1954-56 period, in ways no one could have anticipated at the time.

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Because the discussants do an excellent job summarizing the book, I will stop here and turn my attention to their commentary, highlighting four themes raised in their remarks.

Vietnamese agency. Both Catton and Davis would have liked to see more attention paid to the Vietnamese perspective throughout the book, and rightly note a number of valuable studies that consider Vietnamese decision-making.¹ More elaboration on Vietnamese actors other than Diem would have undoubtedly strengthened the book, but Diem deserved the most ink, in my opinion, because he was the most critical South Vietnamese figure during the period under discussion. I did not spend a great deal of time determining how Bao Dai came to appoint Diem, for example, because a definitive answer on this issue has not been reached. I do, however, conclude that the “available French and American documentation indicates that Bao Dai made a calculated decision to appoint Diem on his own.” (119, 315, notes 3, 4, 5). And, while I devoted chapter seven to the Franco-American-North Vietnamese power struggle going on, it is true the DRV takes a back seat. Why? Because I view the Franco-American relationship as the most important factor leading to American intervention in the 1950s. As a result, I relied primarily on American and French perceptions of Vietnamese actors and those translated Vietnamese sources I found at NARA, the Eisenhower Library, the French Foreign Ministry, Overseas, and Defense archives, the Pierre Mendès France Institute, the French Contemporary History Archives, and the Public Record Office.

With respect to Diem’s role in manipulating people and events, Catton’s comments on this point deserve further discussion. He is absolutely correct that I want to have my cake and eat it too. On the one hand, I argue that Diem’s actions were often the most important in keeping himself in power during 1954-56, in helping push the French out of South Vietnam, and in sabotaging the 1956 elections. On the other hand, I argue that the increasingly heavy-handed American presence in Vietnam began to limit Diem’s actions, a fact Diem himself recognized, and that this presence eventually reduced South Vietnam to little more than a colony by the time Eisenhower left office. Still, I don’t think I ever go so far as to claim, as Catton writes, that Diem was “little more than a power-mad dictator.” Rather, I second Catton’s own conclusions about Diem’s non-communist nationalist credentials that had “real intellectual and political roots in Vietnam.” In fact, I cite Catton precisely on this issue. (342, n 11).² My point is that Diem did have quite a bit more agency, especially in foreign policy, than he has been given credit, but that this agency diminished over time as the Americans supplanted the French and attempted to build their version of a nation south of the 17th parallel. I argue that Diem’s greatest opportunity to influence events was the chaotic 1954-56 period as he played French, Americans, and South Vietnamese against one another. In the end, his determination to oust the French actually backfired as the resulting vacuum allowed the Americans to step up their “neo-colonial” activities and their control of South Vietnam.

¹ The discussants note Mark Bradley’s and Robert Brigham’s important monographs as well as articles by Edward Miller, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, and Jessica Chapman, who look at various aspects of the Vietnam Wars through the Vietnamese perspective.

² See Philip Catton, *Diem’s Final Failure: Prelude to America’s War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003) for a detailed look at Diem’s domestic policy.

Periodization is another issue I did not resolve entirely to my satisfaction. Would 1963 have been a more logical end point, as both Catton and Davis suggest? Perhaps. Certainly the book could have benefited from research at the Truman and JFK libraries since I do cover events from 1950-1963. Ultimately, I concluded that the long process and major decisions about replacing France in Vietnam were carried out primarily by the Eisenhower administration, and it is those years that are the focal point of the book. Therefore my discussions of the 1950-1952 and 1961-1963 periods were more general and designed to demonstrate continuities between the Truman and Eisenhower and Eisenhower and JFK administrations. Because the book begins with the French quest for American aid and a coordinated western defense, I did carefully mine French archival sources dealing with the 1950-52 period.

Two more points with respect to chronology. First, Davis makes an excellent observation that I missed an opportunity to set up early on a better comparative analysis than the one I give on pages 51-53 of how communism “as a constructed idea” manifested itself differently in France and in the United States. Such a comparison would have been most useful in furthering my explanation of differing French and American goals, especially as both countries reacted to the process of decolonization. The reason I did not say much on other contemporary colonial issues, as Davis also recommends, is because there was almost nothing in the documentation to suggest that Algeria, Senegal, Cambodia, or Laos had a significant bearing on Franco-American decision-making during this period. Second, I also regret that I did not extend my assessment of the importance of French cultural supremacy in Vietnam, as Catton suggests, to the Diem regime’s increasing anti-Americanism in the early 1960s.

The EDC, which created great tension in Franco-American relations until its demise in the French National Assembly, is featured in the first third of the book and is clearly linked to the Indochina debate, as all the discussants remarked. I appreciate Cesari pointing out that the EDC and Indochina were both a means to larger ends (West German rearmament and containment of the PRC), which I deal with briefly in chapters one and two, and I do not disagree with him that Eisenhower and Dulles insisted on both the EDC and a non-communist Indochina. A “trade-off” was not in the cards; my point is that by linking the two, by promising that more aid for Indochina would be forthcoming if only the French National Assembly would ratify the EDC, the Eisenhower administration was setting itself up for failure on both issues. The French quickly perceived that by promising the EDC’s ratification, they could continue to request and receive aid, a card they played for a very long time, and one that should have caused Dulles to readjust policy accordingly. American documentation makes it abundantly clear how betrayed Dulles felt when the French settled at the Geneva Conference in July and then failed to ratify the EDC in August 1954 (108-109, 114) and goes a good way toward explaining his hurry to replace France in Vietnam afterwards.

Less clear is Creswell’s commentary on the EDC. I question his contention that there is a “flawed conventional wisdom” regarding the EDC, given the great number of differing studies devoted to it. The French drew a direct connection between Western and Eastern

defense, but the Americans established the linkage between the EDC and Indochina, which Paris then exploited. And while I agree that there were a number of French officials who saw Moscow rather than Bonn as the greater threat, German rearmament, entry into NATO and the Western European Union were a result of the EDC's failure and the Eisenhower administration's determination to push ahead with West German integration. If these events transpired with "French consent," it was grudging at best.

The 1956 elections. These non-elections were critical to advancing U.S. interests in South Vietnam, and I had hoped for more commentary on this chapter. Although I concur with Cesari that the United States certainly wanted to oppose them immediately after the Geneva Conference, American officials remained unconvinced they could get away with this strategy. In fact, American policy fluctuated until the French began to lose their political, military, and economic influence in Vietnam, Diem made it clear he would not hold the elections, and the British, Soviets, and Chinese all decided, for varying reasons, not to insist on elections. The North Vietnamese gambled--and lost--that the French would continue to maintain control in South Vietnam and be bound by the Geneva Accords. As Diem and the Americans consolidated control in Saigon, Hanoi was left scrambling to find a way to salvage the elections. The fluid international situation thus helped along the 1956 elections' demise and led to a window of opportunity for an increased American presence in South Vietnam. This presence would eventually pervade Vietnamese political, military, economic, and cultural affairs.

I have left most of Creswell's comments for last as they focus more on the book he wishes I had written rather than the one I did. *Replacing France* is not a study of France; it is a study of Franco-American alliance politics and how these politics eventually led the United States to replace France as the dominant western power in Vietnam. As such, French domestic politics, military influence, and economics (all absent or inadequate according to Creswell) are discussed where appropriate. For example, I assess factionalism in the National Assembly and public opinion on the "dirty war" as they pertain to Franco-American negotiations on Vietnam (18, 37, 54-56, 76, 108, 294, n 7), but a detailed discussion of "the rise and fall of governments and the shifting political arithmetic in France's National Assembly" that Creswell would like to see is irrelevant to my overall argument. Indeed, a majority of the decision-making on Indochina occurred at the French Foreign Ministry, or Quai d'Orsay, which, despite the revolving door of French governments, provided a stable French foreign policy and therefore figured prominently in the book (54).³ I also examine military input on Indochina, despite Creswell's claims to the contrary. Military influence on the part of Generals Jean de Lattre, Henri Navarre, Paul Ely, and Pierre Jacquot--even Alphonse Juin's views on Indochina and the EDC (31-32, 37)--on the French side, and Admiral Arthur Radford, Army Chief of Staff Matthew Ridgway, Generals J. Lawton Collins and John O'Daniel, Colonel Edward Lansdale, and Lieutenant General Samuel Williams on

³ See William Hitchcock, *France Restored: Cold War Diplomacy and the Quest for Leadership in Europe, 1944-1954* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) for a resurrection of the 4th Republic's reputation in foreign relations. Hitchcock's work influenced my own research and writing on this subject and I cite him on pg 301, n 8.

the American one all factor into the story.⁴ But I make no claim to be writing a military history of 1950-54, which has been done elsewhere and which would be odd for the 1954-60 period since my point is that a war was going on, but one that did not involve military means.⁵ Nor do I claim to be writing an economic history although I do provide a number of figures on increasing aid to the French (20, 21, 24, 34, 45, 59, 68) and a section on economics in chapter six (199-203) to demonstrate how the Americans sought to replace the French in the economic realm. Quite frankly, I am unclear how providing more “hard figures” would have “helped me make my case” about how and why the United States replaced France in Vietnam.

I am also confused by Creswell’s comment of “imbalance” in the book--that French officials “simply watch events as they unfold while U.S. officials instigate most of the action.” The French, as *Replacing France* makes clear, struggled mightily to maintain their influence in Vietnam, resisting each perceived American encroachment on their domain and attempting many initiatives to save the *présence française*. I focus explicitly on the “opportunities and limits” facing French diplomacy and “why France made certain choices over others” in every chapter, whether it was choosing to push for more American aid despite the risk of increased American involvement in Vietnam, choosing to negotiate and settle at the 1954 Geneva Conference despite American opposition, choosing to push for alternatives to Diem, choosing to fight to maintain military, economic, political, and cultural influence, or choosing to pursue negotiations with Hanoi on economic and cultural affairs after Geneva. French decision-makers figure prominently--Henri Bonnet, Guy La Chambre, Joseph Laniel, Jean Letourneau, Jean Daridan, Mendès-France, Edgar Faure, Jean Sainteny, Paul Ely, Christian Pineau, Georges Bidault, Henri Hoppenot, Jean-Pierre Dannaud, and Maurice Couve de Murville to name but a few.

Finally, as for Creswell’s perplexing claim that I provide “no sustained explanation as to why the United States so consistently misunderstood its ally,” let me clarify. I do not suggest that the United States had uninformed diplomats in France--quite the opposite. David Bruce and Douglas Dillon provided sound advice in Paris, as did Donald Heath and J. Lawton Collins in Saigon. My point, reiterated throughout the book, is that Eisenhower, and particularly Dulles, did not listen to these experienced diplomats when they should have. Dulles was not the nuanced diplomat vis-à-vis Vietnam that post-revisionists have made him out to be elsewhere (301, n 5). Anytime an American official became too negative about the prospects for a viable non-communist South Vietnam, or, even worse,

⁴ A quick clarification, Training Relations Instruction Mission (TRIM) commander Lieutenant General Samuel Williams (General John O’Daniel’s successor) reorganized TRIM, not Colonel Edward Lansdale, as might be concluded from Davis’s comments.

⁵ See Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the U.S. Army in Vietnam, 1941-1960* (New York: Free Press, 1985); Jacques Dalloz, *The War in Indochina, 1945-1954* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990); and Alain Ruscio, *La guerre française d’Indochine* (Brussels, Editions Complexe, 1992) for details on military matters, and, of course, numerous works have been devoted to Dien Bien Phu. See, for example, *Dien Bien Phu and the Crisis of Franco-American Relations*, eds. Denise Artaud, Lawrence Kaplan, Mark Rubin (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1990) and John Prados, *The Sky Would Fall* (New York: Dial, 1983).

appeared to be listening to his French counterpart, he was recalled. And while French officials did mislead their American counterparts on occasion, especially with respect to the EDC's prospects for success, they were usually quite clear about their priorities in Vietnam. The biggest culprit in the Eisenhower administration's misunderstanding of its Gallic ally was the conviction that given the opportunity, American methods would succeed in Vietnam where the French ones had failed. Modernizing, not civilizing, was the answer to a pro-western South Vietnam. The result? In the aftermath of the Geneva Conference, American officials began a full-fledged nation-building effort, but one that looked a lot like earlier French colonialism, and, even worse, one that would make it ever more difficult for the United States to disengage from South Vietnam. Massive American intervention during the 1960s was not the inevitable outcome, but, as I conclude in the book, the "cumulative weight of ten years of direct American involvement from 1950 to 1960 created a momentum in South Vietnam that was not easily stopped." (289).

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