

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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Assuming the Burden is an outstanding work of scholarship that sheds new light on a broadly familiar topic: the origins of United States engagement in Vietnam. Like all good international history, its reach extends far beyond the course of events it explains. In this respect, the book has several important things to say. One is that the internationalization of the Indochina War was both more gradual and more multilateral than is sometimes assumed. In the author's words, 'Washington, as it crafted policy toward Vietnam, was merely one participant in a complicated, decidedly international dynamic in which other governments usually held the initiative and set the agenda.' (p.5) Mark Atwood Lawrence does not deny the primordial significance of America's decision to help avert a French defeat, but he frames it in a much broader international context. Thus, the chronological focus is as much on the initial years of the Franco-Viet Minh conflict in 1945-48 as on the immediate background to the US provision of military aid from June 1950 onward. In similar vein, alongside the familiar faces of the Truman administration, less well known decision makers among mid-ranking powers like the United Kingdom, among Vietnam's Asian neighbors, and in newly independent India figure large in Lawrence's account of the diplomacy that eventually resulted in a French war effort overwhelmingly subsidized by the United States.

Of course, Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong, Robert Schuman, and Dean Acheson traverse the pages, but they don't always predominate. One of Lawrence's many achievements in this book is to pack the diplomatic stage with other influential actors. These range from the backroom planners of the Quai d'Orsay's Asian division, to Britain's commissioners-general in South East Asia, the government establishments in Bangkok and Manila, and the resolutely anti-colonial Jawaharlal Nehru. That is not to say that the more familiar decision-making centers—competing State Department offices, Saigon high commission cliques, Emperor Bao Dai's French advisory staff, and the shifting multi-party coalitions in Paris—are in any way confined to the shadows; merely that Lawrence proves how many individuals and organizations competed for the diplomatic spotlight. As a result, protracted arguments in Washington between hawkish pro-interventionists and dovish protagonists of non-military alternatives emerge as both subtler and more open to foreign, and especially French, manipulation than might be expected.

Implicit in Lawrence's scrupulous attention to the international diplomacy of the war in Indochina is another key argument, namely, that the zero-sum thinking of Cold War cannot alone account for America's eventual commitment to back France's fight for survival in

Vietnam. Other alignments made a difference: support among newly independent Asian states for the long-suffering Vietnamese; Britain's sympathy (admittedly limited) for France as a European partner and fellow imperial power; the ethnic affiliations of the overseas Chinese communities across Southeast Asia; and the changing composition of coalition government in France as the center-left tripartism of 1944-47 gave way to center-right 'Third Force' government from 1947 to 1951. In light of these factors, Lawrence has no truck with the idea that all the critical decisions along the road to US provision of military aid originated in Washington. Most important, by highlighting the fluidity in the immediate postwar international system, Lawrence reminds us of two related points. The American investment in a non-Communist Vietnam was not pre-ordained but, rather, was rooted in a sustained French diplomatic effort that eventually bore fruit in 1949-50.

Herein lies another crucial argument, which *Assuming the Burden* makes especially well. What Lawrence rightly terms a 'trans-national' approach calls into question the prevailing wisdom in the late 1940s, and since, about the confusion and inconsistency of government in the French Fourth Republic. What William Hitchcock so clearly demonstrated in regard to France's European policy in the early Cold War, Lawrence illustrates with respect to the Indochina War: the coalition dynamics of France's governmental system promoted a sustained period of centrist administration. This, in turn, afforded a narrow political elite remarkable opportunity to dominate foreign policymaking in France in the decade from 1946.¹ One is struck time and again, not by the weakness or indecisiveness of French colonial policymakers, but by their singular, if misguided, resolve. Hence, during 1946, in the months preceding outright war in the Vietnamese territories, the French leadership made remarkably little effort to win US sympathy for their cause. Only as, what Lawrence dubs, this 'illusion of autonomy' dissipated did Washington's support loom larger in French calculations. Even so, for years afterward, France's quest for US assistance would be conducted on strictly conditional terms that guaranteed the Paris government and the Saigon high commission leeway to prosecute the war and devise their preferred political solutions without meaningful restriction.

Lawrence is also in tune with those scholars who identify the rise of France's Christian Democrats, the Mouvement Républicain Populaire (MRP), with a peculiarly intransigent and oft-times irresponsible approach to colonial policy that was characterized by secrecy, brinkmanship, and a profoundly misplaced self-confidence.² These features were born of contradictory impulses. On the one hand, the MRP's dominance in successive coalition administrations, especially those of the 'Third Force', nurtured a certain self-assurance in international affairs.³ On the other, the Party's incipient electoral decline and growing fear of Charles de Gaulle's Rassemblement du Peuple Français—the MRP's principal rival for

¹ William I. Hitchcock, *France Restored. Cold War Diplomacy and the Quest for Leadership in Europe, 1944-1954* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998). It bears emphasis that there was a consistent rightward drift French coalition government after 1947, see Deborah Kisatsky, "The United States, the French Right, and American Power in Europe, 1946-1958," *The Historian*, 65:3 (2003), 615-34.

² *Assuming the Burden*, 157-60; Martin Thomas, "The Colonial Policies of the Mouvement Républicain Populaire, 1944-54: From Reform to Reaction," *English Historical Review*, 476 (April 2003), 380-411; James I. Lewis, "The MRP and the Genesis of the French Union, 1944-1948," *French History*, 12 (1998), 276-314.

³ R. E. M. Irving, *Christian Democracy in France* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973), 199-205. More generally, see Pierre Letamendia, *Le Mouvement Républicain Populaire. Histoire d'un grand parti français* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1995).

French Catholic center-right votes—generated a paranoid dread of appearing ‘soft’ on questions of Empire and France’s international status.⁴ The results, so far as Indochina was concerned, were tragic. One was connivance in the Saigon high commission’s spoiling tactics during the fitful negotiations with Ho Chi Minh’s Hanoi government in 1946. Another was the blanket refusal to contemplate open dialogue with the Viet Minh thereafter. These actions and others like them confirmed how central was the MRP’s collective leadership to the key colonial and strategic choices made in Paris between 1945 and 1950.⁵ If the Party’s foreign policy architects, Georges Bidault, Robert Schuman, and Paul-Henri Teitgen pre-eminent among them, deserve much credit for articulating a vision of an integrated, peaceful Europe, their colonial actions read very differently.⁶ *Assuming the Burden* makes plain that MRP ministers and their allies in Saigon’s colonial administration and on the French general staff were pivotal decision-makers in France’s disastrous Indochina policy. Before 1950, parliament and public did little to rein them in.⁷

Although he rarely dwells on the Viet Minh’s internal politics, Lawrence is equally unequivocal about the DRV’s communist orientation and the importance of its leadership rivalries to the course of the war. In particular, he recognizes the significance of the victory of the hard-line strategists grouped around General Vo Nguyen Giap. That said, while Lawrence draws extensively upon French, US, and British diplomatic and intelligence assessments of Viet Minh strategy, in general terms, he modestly defers to existing work on the Vietnamese side to the Indochina War. The book should not be faulted on this account since it makes no claims to be a political study of Viet Minh ideology or a military history of the Indochina conflict. Rather, the chapters provide sufficient detail of Viet Minh planning and events on the ground to enable the reader to gauge the feasibility of French objectives and the wisdom of eventual Anglo-American identification with them.

What, then, of the impersonal factors, the deeper structural shifts in the international system, in geo-politics and regional trade, and in an accelerating process of decolonization that might account both for France’s inability to retain its grip on the Indochinese Peninsula and for America’s deepening involvement? Here, too, Lawrence is sure-footed. He is alive to the problems of postwar reconstruction and increasing Cold War division in Europe and Asia that bore so heavily on western policymaking in Indochina. He analyzes the changing Southeast Asian strategic concerns of France, the United States, and, especially, Britain with real

⁴ See Frédéric Turpin, ‘Le RPF et la guerre d’Indochine (1947-1954),’ in *De Gaulle et le Rassemblement du Peuple Français (1947-1955)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1998), 530-40; and Turpin, ‘Le Gaullisme et les négociations entre Bao Daï et la IVème République (1947-49),’ *Revue d’Histoire Diplomatique*, 111:2 (1997), 143-4.

⁵ For MRP ministers’ role in the 1946 negotiations, see Martin Shipway, *The Road to War. France and Vietnam, 1944-1947* (Oxford: Berg, 1996); Philippe Devillers, *Paris-Saigon-Hanoi. Les Archives de la Guerre, 1944-1947* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1988).

⁶ Serge Berstein, Jean-Marie Mayeur and Pierre Milza (eds), *Le MRP et la construction européenne* (Paris: Editions Complexe, 1993).

⁷ Marc Michel, ‘L’Empire colonial dans les débats parlementaires,’ in Serge Berstein and Pierre Milza (eds), *L’Année 1947* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 2000), 191-201; Alain Ruscio, ‘L’opinion publique et la guerre d’Indochine. *Sondages et témoignages*,’ *Vingtième Siècle*, 1 (1991), 35-46.

assurance.⁸ He understands the economic inter-dependence of the region's economies. And he appreciates the irresistible strength of anti-colonial nationalism within Vietnam and across South and Southeast Asia more broadly. But the book also makes due allowance for contingency, for accident as well as design. In this sense, the book's human side shines through. It is not reducible to a history of structures and systems. Nor does it posit an inevitable clash of ideologies or civilizations. Instead, it identifies a series of real policy choices and explains how they were reached.

It is, however, in the realm of bureaucratic design—of the organizational structures of Washington policymaking—that the book makes some of its most striking findings. Lawrence illustrates the long-term consequences of the differential weight attached to policy advice from the State Department's competing regional bureaus. It is perhaps unsurprising to see Europeanists, primarily concerned with the restoration of French power in Europe, triumph time and again over their Asianist colleagues. But Lawrence probes much more deeply into Washington's architecture of administrative influence. For one thing, he rejects as simplistic a straightforward binary model that equates Eurocentricity and Cold War pre-occupation with hawkishness on Indochina, Asianism with dovish anti-colonialism. Instead, we are offered a more complex, and more convincing, analysis of the declining force of Rooseveltian liberal internationalism and the growing strength of those elements of the Washington bureaucracy persuaded that the preservation of European colonial control in Southeast Asia served American strategic interests, at least in the short term. For another thing, his purview extends to wartime agencies such as the Office of Strategic Services and the State Department's Foreign Economic Division, to their postwar organizational evolution, and, most important, to the working relationships that their staffs forged with like-minded officials in Paris, Saigon, and London. Very often, the interplay between such groups and individuals produced the intelligence analyses and the economic evaluations that informed the vital policy decisions regarding involvement in Vietnam.

Plainly, these bureaucracies mattered. The hierarchical structures in which they operated were every bit as significant as their underlying assumptions about the nature of Vietnamese nationalism, about French military capacity, and about the developing Cold War in Asia.⁹ Moving forensically from one policy review to the next, Lawrence reveals the narrowing opportunities that existed for the opponents of US military engagement in Vietnam to make their voices heard. More than that, he does precisely the same in the French and British cases. The book's findings here are equally pertinent to diplomatic historians, scholars of empire, and international relations specialists. In its entirety, *Assuming the Burden* is not one, but several case studies: of the workings of multilateral alliance diplomacy; of the relative strength of metropolitan center and colonial periphery in shaping policy outcomes; and of the shortcomings of complex bureaucracies faced with conflicting strategic demands in differing geographical regions. If it is predictable to learn that American and British policymakers ranked the economic and military recovery of France far higher the legitimate demands of the Vietnamese for immediate self-determination, it is nonetheless eye opening to be shown the ways and means by which this fundamental decision was adhered to despite rapidly mounting

⁸ For a summary of the latter, see Karl Hack, "South East Asia and British strategy, 1944-51," in Richard J. Aldrich ed., *British Intelligence, Strategy and the Cold War, 1945-51* (London: Routledge, 1992), 309-25.

⁹ For theoretical background, see David Welch, "The Organizational Process and Bureaucratic Politics Paradigms: Retrospect and Prospect," *International Security*, (Fall, 1992), 112-46.

evidence of the bankruptcy of French colonial reform. When one factors the Viet Minh's powerful grip over the Vietnamese peasantry into the equation, the hopelessness of the Bao Dai solution becomes starker still. As if the Emperor's limited support among Vietnam's rural majority were not enough, Lawrence is at pains to stress French reluctance to concede Bao Dai's fledgling administration even the outward trappings of power—a decent official residence and a network of overseas representatives for instance.

Inevitably, then *Assuming the Burden* returns us to the hardest of questions. If the prospects for the Bao Dai solution were so unpromising, why did the French opt for it? Perhaps more to the point, why did the United States and Britain ultimately endorse it? Lawrence's answers make good sense. For it's here that he returns the dynamics of Cold War to the fore. Just as he emphasizes the fluidity in the international politics of Southeast Asia from 1945 to mid-1948, so he highlights the fundamental changes that took place in the eighteen months that followed. In his eyes, French governmental investment in Bao Dai was a means to kill two birds with one stone. It allowed Third Force hardliners to assuage growing pressure inside the governing coalition and among the wider public for talks with Ho Chi Minh. And, by setting up a non-communist nationalist alternative in Vietnam, it breathed fresh life into the effort to win over the Truman administration, Britain's Labour government, and others. Rising war costs added urgency to the process.¹⁰ In this reading of events, the Bao Dai solution was a vehicle to break the diplomatic logjam in Washington and, to a lesser extent, London that inhibited the western powers from openly endorsing the French cause. In this latter respect, the French ultimately achieved their goal, but only just. The Bao Dai solution served its purpose as a diplomatic lever, if not as a viable political alternative for the Vietnamese. Much affected by the June 1948 outbreak of communist-inspired rebellion in the precious colony of Malaya, once Clement Attlee's government was persuaded to endorse Bao Dai, it added its voice to French calls for US military aid. There were added advantages for the British here. A US commitment would help conceal the extent of Britain's existing backing for the French war effort, and so calm the unease among its Commonwealth partners.

Compared to London, the policy shift in Washington toward acceptance of the Bao Dai solution and the concomitant pledge of material support for the French military campaign was much slower to take effect. State Department and NSC planning also linked the two issues—Bao Dai's installation as effective head of government and provision of war materiel—more closely than the British ever did. As a result, the Truman administration almost called the French bluff. The Americans did not blithely accept Bao Dai as a figurehead whose presence in Saigon was alone judged sufficient to warrant endorsement of French policy, far from it. US negotiators insisted, first, on an end to the ludicrous experiment in Cochinchina separatism and, second, on French parliamentary ratification of the Elysée Accords, which gave some substance to Vietnamese national autonomy. Unfortunately, the effect of this well-intentioned pressure was doubly counter-productive. On the one hand, it undermined those on the liberal left in France who insisted that dialogue with the Viet Minh was the only viable alternative. On the other hand, it weakened US advocates of more extensive French reforms in Vietnam by suggesting that pressure on Paris to make the Bao Dai solution work could still yield results. By the time the fallacy of this last assumption had become obvious, America was already committed to aid France's war. Worn down by nagging French insistence on formal recognition of Bao Dai, alarmed at the

¹⁰ Antoine Daveau, «Le poids de la guerre d'Indochine,' *Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique* 103 (1993), 339-40; Hugues Tertrais, 'Le poids financier de la guerre d'Indochine,' in Maurice Vaisse (ed.), *L'Armée française dans la guerre d'Indochine* (Paris: Editions Complexe, 2000), 33-50.

possibility of a unilateral French pullout, and driven to act by Mao's victory in China, the US eventually fell into line with French wishes.

In its entirety, *Assuming the Burden* is an intricate story, expertly told. Suggestions? Very few: indeed, only a couple of any consequence. One is that the economic dimensions of the Indochina War and especially its impact on Southeast Asia's regional economy (most notably the issue of foodstuff supply) perhaps deserve a little more consideration in the treatment of international reactions to the conflict. For Britain in particular, still the region's dominant economic power at the time, Southeast Asian export earnings mattered a good deal. For India, too, assured rice supplies were critical, especially after Burma, a long-time supplier, descended into civil war in 1948. Both states were therefore predisposed to view events in Indochina in light of their overwhelming desire for regional economic stability. To be sure, these, and other matters of money and commerce are discussed in the book. For instance, the Viet Minh's sophisticated international trading network, expertly analyzed in a recent study by Christopher Goscha, is highlighted.¹¹ So, too, is the importance of Malaya as the British Empire's dollar-earning cash cow. Nor is the mounting burden of war costs on the French treasury or the commensurate increase in France's diplomatic pressure on the US overlooked. The issue is thus one of nuance rather than neglect. Where matters of rice distribution, currency earnings, and the disruption of export relationships figure large in the discussion of the early phases of the war, they recede into the background once the Bao Dai solution took shape. On one level, this is entirely justifiable. The problems of foodstuff distribution that dogged Southeast Asia in the final months of World War II, and which reached their appalling apogee in the Tonkin famine of 1944-45, were less acute, if no less important, in subsequent years. And the escalation of the Indochina conflict inevitably curtailed French schemes of colonial development, placing the search for a political alternative to the DRV at the head of French and American concerns. Moreover, it makes sense to attach greater weight to the strategic and geo-political dimensions of Indochina policy as Cold War enmities hardened in 1948-49. But the codification of the Colombo Plan and the Korean War boom in 1950 both indicate that issues of colonial development as well as export earnings from Southeast Asia's strategic raw materials still figured prominently in western thinking in 1950.

The second suggestion again relates to emphasis rather than omission. It concerns what became the principal forum in which France's war policy was determined: the inter-ministerial commission on Indochina, or Comité interministériel de l'Indochine, usually known by its shorthand title, the 'COMININDO'. Here, too, the purpose is not to fault the book. *Assuming the Burden* leaves us in no doubt that colonial and military policy formulation in Paris and Saigon often circumvented Cabinet government, bureaucratic process, and parliamentary scrutiny. But the COMININDO was the key innovation that facilitated the hi-jacking of Indochina policy by a coterie of imperial hardliners from 1947 to 1950 and beyond. If not quite the missing piece of the French policy jigsaw, the COMININDO was, it seems to me, certainly the most vital one. Might it be that its capacity for rapid decision-making and the remarkable continuity in its membership—again dominated by MRP ministers—could help explain the tenacity with which the cardinal French diplomatic objectives of US political support and material aid were pursued in Washington?

¹¹ Christopher E. Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution* (London: Curzon Press, 1999).

Neither of these points detracts from the comprehensiveness and insight that characterize *Assuming the Burden*. It is by some margin the best and most fulsome account of the path to the United States' initial decision to resist the Communization of Vietnam. What Mark Bradley accomplished in respect of changing perceptions of Vietnam in American cultural politics, Mark Atwood Lawrence has achieved in regard to Vietnam's growing significance within US diplomacy and overseas military commitment.¹² As Lawrence acknowledges, leading Vietnamese scholars are surely correct in their assessment that America made as many fateful choices in Southeast Asia in the years 1945-50 as in 1961-65. [p.281.] *Assuming the Burden* makes the case convincingly that US ideas and attitudes about Vietnam conceived in the late 1940s endured for decades afterward. The 'official mind' of American policy in the second Vietnam War was substantially configured by the decisions and experiences of the first.

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¹²] Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America. The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).