



**Kim Munholland, *Rock of Contention: Free French and Americans at War in New Caledonia, 1940-1945*, New York: Berghahn, 2005**

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**Review by Irwin Wall,**  
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In *Rock of Contention* Kim Munholland has tackled an obscure and little-known corner of the globe, New Caledonia, focusing on its role during the Second World War. Readers may well wonder where it is (in the South Pacific, 900 miles north of Australia-New Zealand) before they decide whether they want or need to know anything about it. Its importance during the war effort was that it became a crucial staging area and military base for American operations against Japan in the South Pacific. But this is incidental to Munholland's real purpose, which is to study it as a critical chapter in the troubled history of French-American relations. On the one hand it encapsulates the troubled wartime history of those relations on a truly microscopic level; the island is 300 miles long and 30 miles wide and was inhabited by only 57,000 people. But Munholland does not lose sight of the macrocosm, either; in his telling, the island's history becomes the basis for a revisionist account of relations between the Gaullists and the Free French.

The historical literature, both French and American, while admitting de Gaulle's difficult personality traits, arrogance, stubbornness, etc., and his excessive concern for protecting French sovereignty, generally focuses on FDR's well known contempt for the French and for de Gaulle as a major reason behind the development of the postwar contentiousness between the two countries. After the Battle of France and the rapid collapse of the French army in 1940, many Americans ceased to take France seriously again as an important military power. Many still do not. The British immediately backed the rather brash and impetuous action of a dynamic French officer, Charles de Gaulle, who managed to make out of the remnant of the French defeat a fighting force that became the nucleus of the Free French and the basis for a Resistance-based government after the war. But FDR at the war's outset could not see so far ahead, or if he could, did not desire that particular outcome. The United States recognized the collaborationist government of Marshall Pétain, which governed France under the heel of the German

occupation, pretending to take at face value Vichy claims to neutrality. We know today these claims were fraudulent; Vichy was a collaborationist regime. Yet the Americans continued to snub the "so-called Free French" until late in the war, even after Pearl Harbor and the November 1942 North African invasion, in fact supporting the claims of a rival general Giraud against de Gaulle once they had abandoned the Vichy regime, leaving de Gaulle almost entirely out of wartime planning, and refusing to recognize de Gaulle's government in exile. The exception was those parts of the French Empire that of their own volition rallied to the Free French at the beginning of the war. New Caledonia, in the shadow of Australia and the implicit protection of the British Empire, was one of these areas. There the Americans dealt pragmatically with the authorities on the spot.

By documenting carefully French policy toward the American presence in New Caledonia during the war, Munholland demonstrates the existence of a deep-seated suspicion, fear, even paranoia about the Americans that colored almost every phase of Free French policy. He is careful to put New Caledonia squarely in the context of other issues of contention between Free French and Americans; in doing so he shows that it is not atypical but in fact illustrative of the general Free-French attitude toward Washington, which frequently seemed to the Americans to be more concerned with keeping the Americans at bay than fighting the Germans or the Japanese. This was especially true of France's colonial empire, which the Free French thought that the Americans wanted for themselves. The Americans, to be sure, landed on New Caledonia without so much as a by-your-leave to the Free French, who much as they needed Washington for the defense of the Island, resented the high-handed manner with which Washington dealt with them. Free French officials were under specific orders in New Caledonia to place obstacles everywhere to American attempts to make changes designed to facilitate their military needs. In particular de Gaulle's Commissioner for the Pacific possessions, Thierry d'Argenlieu, a figure who later was to play a crucial role in the outbreak of France's Indochina war, was extremely jealous and needlessly suspicious of Washington and a fanatical imperialist. He ordered officials on the island to block American designs at every turn, opposing every requisition of a building for wartime needs, for example, and his governor Laigret was similarly determined to oppose Washington deliberately, apparently as a means of insuring that the population of the island would follow suit, remain loyal to France, and block alleged American designs to annex New Caledonia and other French possessions after the war. To be sure the Americans were not always blameless, and there later appeared reason for French suspicions. But in general the Americans come off as accommodating and correct in their behavior in Munholland's account, while the French were all too often petty and obstructionist, notwithstanding the potential harm this did to the war effort. General Patch, who commanded American forces on the island and whose armies later performed outstandingly in the liberation of France itself, emerges from this account as a model of statesmanship. Thierry d'Argenlieu and Governor Laigret seem stubborn fools. Munholland repeats the frequently made observation that de Gaulle was all the more insistent on the recognition of French pre-eminence and prestige as he needed to compensate for the real facts of French weakness. This game was played to the hilt in New Caledonia.

In telling the story of French-American relations, Munholland meanwhile provides the first account of the history of New Caledonia, in French or English, during the war. That history fills in a gap in the general treatment of Free French affairs or Free French-American relations, but it is also interesting in its own right. New Caledonia was critically important to the American war

effort as a staging area for the campaign against the Japanese in the South Pacific, particularly Guadalcanal and the Solomon Islands and New Guinea, which led the Americans eventually to land 100,000 personnel on the island, which was almost twice its existing population, both French and native Melanesian (known as Kanac). Both the history of American-French relations, and the internal history of the island's politics that Munholland provides, have an inherent fascination. The American story for the reasons provided above; the island's story for its interest if not entertainment value. Munholland shows how and why the population of New Caledonia spontaneously declared for Free France against Vichy, and how its patriotic groups pulled off an internal coup that managed to oust Vichy and declare allegiance to the Free French, one of the first French colonies to do so. Munholland further goes into political divisions that developed between the Free French administration and the islanders. Much of this story was played out under the noses of the Americans who landed soon after Pearl Harbor. There are two major events that Munholland treats in detail: the coup against Vichy and the indigenous riot against the Free French in 1942. These stories have comic aspects to which Munholland is acutely sensitive; one could construct a film very much like "The Mouse that Roared" from Munholland's narrative without departing too much from the reality of what took place. There were indeed islanders who profited so much from the American presence that at the war's end they hoped the Americans would never leave. That was a time when Americans were welcomed as liberators.

Munholland also provides an analysis of the effects of the American presence on the internal politics of the island. These effects were often progressive: as was true elsewhere of the American wartime occupation, particularly in North Africa, the Americans brought a new consciousness to colonial peoples. The Americans were scrupulous not to interfere in internal politics on the island despite Free French suspicions that they were doing so, and they more than once ignored requests from those working against the French that they intervene. But the effect of their presence, which economically alone upset the status quo on the island, was to bring a veneer of prosperity to the population, mostly the French, but to the natives too, many of whom were able to leave their reservations for the first time. This is not to mention the ubiquitous American cultural presence, although Munholland ducks the question of whether Donald Duck was an icon of American imperialism. The Kanacs gained a new consciousness politically during the American presence, observing that American blacks, despite segregation, were treated by whites in the U.S. army better than they, the Kanaks, were treated by the French, not to mention that African-Americans enjoyed higher wages and better living conditions. Many Kanacs, perhaps even a majority, would have preferred that the Americans take the island over from the French, and some asked that they do so. Also a 10% subclass of Asians, Vietnamese and Javanese indentured servants on the island saw their conditions improve economically due to the American presence, which facilitated the abolition of indentured servitude at the end of the war. New Caledonia provides a case study of how the war affected colonial peoples and stimulated or prepared the way for postwar decolonization, or reform as the case may be. New Caledonia today is an overseas department of France; but Kanac demands for autonomy or independence became grounds for a major crisis on the island again in the 1990s.

All this said, this author has to ask whether Munholland's revisionism is not occasionally carried too far. Munholland backtracks in treating the American side of the story and in doing so seems to undercut his own argument. We have, for example, a long account of the obstructionist and

paranoid attitudes of Governor Laigret who seems to be implementing the capricious policies of d'Argenlieu and de Gaulle. But only later do we discover that the Americans did indeed have designs on New Caledonia, as the Free French suspected, and that FDR, despite guarantees that he would respect the integrity of the French empire early in the war, reneged on these and advocated the establishment of a United Nations Trusteeship there preparatory to independence, while the American Navy was instructed to draw up plans for American strategic needs in the postwar Pacific irrespective of existing political sovereignty there. Not surprisingly the Navy concluded that the Americans should annex the island, and Admiral Halsey, on a fact-finding mission there, reported that it was too dangerous to allow it to be left in the hands of the French themselves. Several American Senators called for the U. S. to "purchase" the island, forgiving French World War I debts as payment. In short, like most cases of paranoia, the French one had a foundation in reality. All this is not to mention FDR himself, who concluded that the French Empire was not worth restoring, and advocated until his death that it all be turned over to the United Nations as "Trusteeship." This policy was only abandoned when a postwar Soviet threat seemed to make a restored postwar France more important to Washington than the emancipation of colonial peoples.

But when a pragmatic governor Tallec finally arrived in 1944 to implement a policy of cooperation with Washington, the declining strategic importance of the island in the war effort was clear. There were still calls in Washington for annexation of the Island, but the Navy lost interest in its possession. With the shift of the Pacific War to the island-hopping campaign preparatory to the bombing of Japan, the Americans thought even of vacating New Caledonia and eventually settled on using the remaining facilities there for repairs and rest and recreation for the troops. With the war's end the Americans quietly left.

The problem, if there is one, with Munholland's argument lies in the narrative of what is an apparent arbitrary obstructionism and baseless paranoia on the part of the Free French as prior to the evolution of real American designs on the island and the empire generally. After one realizes the reality of American designs on the Island, and absorbs the story of how the Americans ignored the Free French in making their wartime plans, one develops more sympathy for the French tactic of jealous recognition of their sovereignty at every juncture, even at the cost of what appeared often to be needless obstructionism. Perhaps this is Munholland's intent all along. It is not clear how much the Free French knew of American designs; on the other hand the designs existed. Full disclosure here requires me to admit that I am one of the authors being somewhat revised by Munholland, although I do not have a heavy investment: I only have one chapter in one of my books that deals with American relations with the Free French. However, I have always taught the wartime history of French-American relations mostly from the French point of view. I would change that chapter, and my lectures, more than a bit if I could, based on "what I now know" about New Caledonia.

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