
H-France Review Vol. 12 (September 2012), No. 129

Charles L. Robertson, *When Roosevelt Planned to Govern France*. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011. ix + 235 pp. Preface, endnotes, and index. \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN: 978-1-55849-881-5.

Review by Michael H. Creswell, Florida State University.

When Roosevelt Planned to Govern France is the product of a dinner conversation the author, Charles Robertson, had in 1979 with a former member of General Charles de Gaulle's wartime staff. According to this official, at the time of Liberation, he and his colleagues turned back an American ship filled with personnel and documents intended to help establish a U.S.-led military government in liberated France, eventually paving the way for the French to hold elections. By turning away the Americans, the French retained their sovereignty and frustrated the plans of the anti-Gaullist American president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. Skeptical but unable to disprove these claims, Robertson laughed and politely let the matter pass.

Fast forward twenty-five years to the sixtieth anniversary celebrations of the liberation of Paris. There Robertson heard a panel of speakers on television making the same claims his dinner partner had made a quarter of a century before. Then in May 2003, the venerable *Le Monde diplomatique* included a front-page story by a well-known Sorbonne historian, Annie Lacroix-Riz, in which she argued that the United States planned in 1941-1942 to transform France into a protectorate run by the Allied Military Government of the Occupied Territories (AMGOT). Like the Axis powers, France would, she contended, be stripped of its sovereignty, including the right to issue currency.^[1] Lacroix-Riz's contentions have been mirrored by other French historians, wartime officials, and journalists, though in somewhat milder forms, both before and since. While Robertson has encountered few if any Americans who had even heard of this story, he says that it is a truism among France's educated class. Lacroix-Riz's charge was enough for Robertson, an emeritus professor of government at Smith College, to research *When Roosevelt Planned to Govern France* in order to get to the bottom these assertions. Although long skeptical of these claims, Robertson finally found the documentation he needed to write the book.

These claims prompt obvious questions: what gave rise to them and do they have any basis in fact? Robertson attempts to answer the first question in part by tracing relations between Roosevelt and de Gaulle. A major thread running through the book is the continuing mistrust between the two men. Words, deeds, and events both large and small were the root causes of this mistrust. One reason for this mistrust was Roosevelt's belief that, following the fall of France in 1940, de Gaulle enjoyed little support among the French people and that more acceptable and legitimate French figures existed. Roosevelt instead thought that Vichy head of state, Marshal Philippe Pétain, and not de Gaulle, commanded the French public's respect. The U.S. State Department also wanted to avoid alienating Pétain, whom it thought might hold out against German demands. Recognizing de Gaulle politically would thus end any American influence over Pétain. Roosevelt's beliefs were nourished by Cordell Hull, the Secretary of State, H. Freeman Matthews, the U.S. chargé d'affaires to Vichy and Admiral William

Leahy, the U.S. ambassador to Vichy until mid-1942 and later a presidential advisor, all of whom viewed de Gaulle negatively. Roosevelt clung to this view long after the facts demonstrated otherwise.

Roosevelt clearly had little understanding of de Gaulle, but he was not alone. Many French people knew little of de Gaulle, who before the war not a well-known figure in France. Known primarily for being somewhat difficult and for his controversial writings advocating the use of armored warfare, de Gaulle was slightly on the margins of France's pre-war military leadership. In 1936, de Gaulle's initial promotion to colonel was blocked by General Maurice Gamelin, France's chief of the general staff (though the decision was later reversed). De Gaulle, along with many other French colonels, was promoted to the temporary position of brigadier general only in response to the emergency of May 1940. Then on June 5, new Prime Minister Paul Reynaud named de Gaulle under secretary of defense and of the army. This appointment lasted until the Vichy government came to power. Reynaud then resigned, thus throwing de Gaulle out of a job. Unwilling to join what he considered the defeatist politicians of the Vichy government, de Gaulle fled to London, where he remained for most of the war.

Another source of dispute between Roosevelt and de Gaulle was the fate of the *Union Française*--France's colonial empire. De Gaulle saw the empire as vital to his effort to establish a French government-in-exile, free from the control of another country. The empire would also help provide the manpower necessary for the eventual liberation of occupied France. The *Union Française* was thus key to France's future. But as is well known, Roosevelt detested colonialism and longed to see it come to an end. This dispute over empire fed Roosevelt's distrust of the Frenchman.

Roosevelt's mistrust of de Gaulle's strengthened after the latter's Brazzaville declarations of October and November 1940, in which he announced that the Free French movement would make decisions for France, and that the Vichy government had no legal basis. For Roosevelt, not only were there other French leaders besides de Gaulle to consider, but a French government established without a national election would be illegitimate. One could not, he felt, speak of any French government until after liberation and an election in which the French people would decide their leadership, not have it imposed on them. De Gaulle and his advisors, however, rejected this line of reasoning, seeing it instead as a personal affront. Such presumptions further sowed doubt about de Gaulle in Roosevelt's mind.

Robertson contends that the U.S. government's dim view of France in general resulted from the catastrophe of 1940, when France, then still considered a great power, was defeated within weeks. This unexpected defeat irreparably tarnished France's image in the eyes of many Americans, including Roosevelt. They believed France's days as a great power were over. This belief underlay Roosevelt's later conviction that the Allies would have to govern a postwar France. Roosevelt even went so far as to consider, perhaps not too seriously, dismembering France, Belgium, and Luxembourg in order to create the state of "Wallonia" (p. 15).

One should not overlook the role of personal chemistry. De Gaulle's personal style grated on Roosevelt and others. [2] In one instance, de Gaulle marched into a meeting with Roosevelt and announced "I am Joan of Arc. I am Clemenceau." While this was certainly an attempt to justify his position as de facto French leader by way of historical analogy, Roosevelt later admitted that he almost laughed in de Gaulle's face (p. 74). De Gaulle also insisted upon being treated as an equal, even though he relied upon British funds to set up his headquarters in Algiers. De Gaulle equally refused to follow the script that his Anglo-American allies wrote for him.

Roosevelt's actions and pronouncements had the likely unintended effect of convincing de Gaulle and his allies that the American president sought to undermine him and recreate a French third republic with Pétain and the hated former Prime Minister Pierre Laval in charge. Such a result would be a

complete anathema to de Gaulle. Robertson argues that this inability of de Gaulle and Roosevelt to see eye to eye lay the groundwork for the supposed poor relations between the longtime French leader and the United States. These clashing styles thus helped give rise to mutual recriminations that threatened to spiral out of control.

While de Gaulle long endured America's skepticism, he also gained a key wartime supporter: British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. Although the two men butted heads on several occasions, Churchill considered de Gaulle an important ally in the fight against Germany. Churchill not only tried to persuade his cabinet to support de Gaulle financially, but he also tried to persuade Roosevelt to support him as well, though the president refused to change his mind about the general.

Eventually, this deep mistrust began to fade. After D-Day, Roosevelt and Secretary of State Henry Stimson slightly softened their stances toward de Gaulle (p. 162). Then on October 23, 1944, Roosevelt finally recognized de Gaulle's provisional government, which he had resisted doing for years. Nevertheless, the president indicated that France would not immediately take part on post-war security conferences (p. 179). Roosevelt no longer saw France as a great power.

Let us now return to the second question posed above: do the claims made by many French historians, journalists, and former officials that United States planned to establish control over France have any basis in fact? Robertson insists that the answer is "no." AMGOT was not ready to take over France upon liberation and French officials accepted this fact. This answer prompts a follow up question: why did French officials conclude in 1944 that the United States did not want to take over France, only to later reverse themselves and say the opposite?

Robertson posits that political reasons explain why this widely-held, though mistaken, belief has persisted among those who, based on their wartime knowledge and experience, should have known better than to embrace and repeat these myths that have flourished in recent years. France's defeat in June 1940 sharply divided the country. In order to heal these deep wounds, France needed something to rally against. In Robertson's words: "For the Gaullists, one part of the overall strategy...lay in creating an external common enemy--the Allied governments--and in arguing that it was only due to de Gaulle's efforts that France was saved from their machinations. If it was necessary to exaggerate, distort somewhat, or enhance their accounts of what happened, so be it" (p. 195).

The book's primary strength is Robertson's ability to, in clear prose, poke large holes in the exaggerated assertions put forward by many French historians, journalists, and former wartime participants about America's plans to turn post-liberation France into a protectorate. Roosevelt, Hull, and Leahy may have judged both de Gaulle and France unfairly, but they ultimately decided that it was the French who had to govern France and not the Americans.

Alongside these strengths are a few limitations. While Robertson's account is convincing, some scholars might still want to see more evidence. Although he conducted research at the Archives nationales in Paris, incorporates the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, official histories, and numerous memoirs of official participants during this period, he relies mostly on secondary sources. Important collections on this chapter of history at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, the National Archives of the United Kingdom, and elsewhere were seemingly not consulted.

A few minor points also deserve mention. Even though the book is relatively short--235 pages in total--it is not necessarily a quick read. This slow-going results, at times, from Robertson's blow-by-blow retelling of events and his inclusion of material not entirely germane to his main topic. Dates are also sometimes missing for even important events and often paragraphs full of detail include no footnote or

at best a single source. In addition, the author twice refers to Annie Lacroix-Riz as a “Marxist historian,” but he fails to identify the worldview or approach of other historians he cites. Finally, Robertson’s account is not strictly original. As he himself notes, at least two French authors have already written works that accord with his own conclusions, albeit in much less detail.[3]

Despite these concerns, this book should find an audience among readers interested in knowing more about the roots of de Gaulle’s skepticism of the United States and the tenacity with which he maintained his demands. Students of Franklin Roosevelt will also want to factor into his foreign policy legacy his apparent belief in General Henri Giraud, who after Darlan’s assassination, became his *de facto* successor with Allied support, and in Pétain, as well as his antipathy for de Gaulle, who he believed was a difficult, grandstanding egomaniac who did not command support among a majority of French people. Cold War historians might equally profit, as this chapter in Franco-American relations lay the foundation for much of what happened after 1945.

NOTES

[1] Annie Lacroix-Riz, “Quand les Américains voulaient gouverner la France,” *Le Monde diplomatique* (May 2003), http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2003/05/LACROIX_RIZ/10168.

[2] These others included Winston Churchill and a number of French officials.

[3] See Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *La France Libre. De l’appel du 18 juin à la Libération* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1996/2001), pp. 48-49; and André Kaspi, *La Libération de la France: juin 1944-janvier 1946* (Paris: Perrin, 1995), pp. 51, 52-53. Robertson deserves credit, though, for fleshing out matters.

Michael H. Creswell
Florida State University
mcreswell@fsu.edu

Copyright © 2012 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172