
H-France Review Vol. 6 (November 2006), No. 146

Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to the War in Vietnam*. Series "From Indochina to Vietnam: Revolution and War in a Global Perspective," Fredrik and Christopher E. Goscha, eds. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. xii + 364 pp. Maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 0-520-243154-3.

Review by David W. Del Testa, Bucknell University.

In *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to the War in Vietnam*, Mark Lawrence demonstrates how, between 1944 and 1950, interrelated political decision-making and strategizing in Washington, London, Paris, and French colonial Indochina led the United States to make a deep and long-lasting commitment to support anti-communism in Vietnam. He argues that during this period, a succession of French governments skillfully manipulated a broad range of international tensions to convince the government of the United States to support its particular efforts against Ho Chi Minh's (1892-1968) anti-colonial Viet Minh (*Viet Nam Doc Lap Minh Hoi*, or "League for the Independence of Vietnam"). Lawrence describes how this political decision-making occurred as a dynamic, evolutionary and interrelated "transnational debate" (p. 7) carried out by multiple actors rather than as merely a proxy war fought in Vietnam between the United States and the Soviet Union. Lawrence's globalization of the 'Vietnam question' and his minimization of the role of the post-World War II superpowers is not precisely new, but he does do an excellent job of illustrating how international political policy towards postwar Vietnam developed as a response to domestic and international political concerns. He thus challenges a standard historical portrayal of Vietnam as only a concern of the French and Vietnamese between 1945 and 1950. Most original, perhaps, is Lawrence's detailed discussion of the personalities and policies of Great Britain in the development of the United States as the guarantor of an anti-communist regime in southern Vietnam after 1950.

Lawrence argues that before 1948, none of the important international political actors knew what to do about or with Ho Chi Minh's anti-colonial movement in Indochina, and this lack of direction eventually allowed a conflicted French foreign policy to disrupt any possibilities of a peaceful and inclusive international settlement of Vietnam's affairs. Without communicating it very clearly, Lawrence indicates that France's postwar military leadership—decidedly pro-colonial because it was drawn heavily from France's colonial possessions—felt that preserving French control over Vietnam would help preserve French autonomy vis-à-vis the United States, and that the French military establishment's profound conservatism and anti-Americanism (born of wartime misunderstandings and Roosevelt's ardent anti-colonialism) produced an aggressive policy that civilian diplomacy (such as the 1946 Sainteny Accords) could only temporarily soften. He describes in an interesting fashion how a postwar British desire to step away gradually from colonialism clashed continually with an unwillingness to stop support for France's involvement in Indochina for fear of alienating a cross-Channel ally. Lawrence argues that the perceived setbacks of the 1949-1950 period for the second Truman administration—the victory of Chinese communist forces over the nationalists in mainland China, the detonation of an atomic weapon by the Soviet Union, and the attack of North Korean communists against southern Korea, among others—pushed the United States to seek any stage on which an anti-communist stance might be taken. He does note that American policy makers, particularly Secretary of State Dean Acheson (1893-1971), based their decision to prop up France's failing efforts to reassert control throughout Indochina on assumptions—the connection of Ho Chi Minh to international communism, that Vietnam was crucial in halting the progress of an *international* communism throughout South and

Southeast Asia, and that the United States was capable of establishing a new political order in Vietnam--that were naïve and uninformed.

Loosely-woven cloth serves as an excellent analogy to the structure Lawrence has adopted to tell the political stories surrounding Vietnam in the immediate postwar period. He sets up parallel, chronological stories of various countries' interests in Vietnam as the warp, and presents the tensions, jealousies, and postwar needs of each country and their respective international relations as the weft. Lawrence's methodology constantly reveals the deep transformations that had occurred in the postwar world to allow the political and moral challenges to European colonialism to occur, and how bald American and Soviet political imperialism gradually replaced it. For example, Lawrence presents the story of post-independence Indian and Sri Lankan stevedores refusing to service ships bringing supplies to French military forces in Indochina and of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), India's first post-independence prime minister, effectively using the political issue of continued colonialism in Indochina as a tool of diplomacy. These among many examples speak volumes to the globalization of political power in the post-World War II era despite the imposition of a larger bipolarity, and how troublesome any political program resembling colonialism could become (the contemporary consequences of the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1990 and international responses to it spring to mind).

Assuming the Burden challenges some of the orthodoxies of the historiography of this period. For example, scholars have typically derided the proposal of the 1947-48 government of Robert Schuman (1886-1963) to have the former Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai (1913-1997) serve as leader of an independent Vietnam within a French Association. Although he certainly does not challenge Bao Dai's reputation as an unrelenting libertine of weak political potential, Lawrence provides a fresh and careful analysis of how in fact Bao Dai might have attracted some local loyalty if the French had actually granted him some measure of political autonomy. In fact, Bao Dai's independent Vietnam remained so in name only. He also pays much more careful attention to the intrusion of national politics on Vietnam during the period of Allied occupation than other scholars have done so far. In particular, he sharply defines Douglas Gracey (1894-1964), the British general in charge of the British zone of occupation south of the sixteenth parallel, as a pro-colonial activist who may have done the most to permit the reassertion of direct French control of Vietnam and the illusion of its sustainability among pro-colonial French military leadership. He also weakens a history that gives Ho Chi Minh sole credit for securing the evacuation of a massive force of rapacious Chinese occupation troops from their zone of occupation in northern Vietnam. Completely ignoring Ho Chi Minh's famous 'wedding ring' campaign to secure enough lucre to buy off Lu Han, the general and leader of China's Allied occupation zone in China, he instead focuses on how the French caved in to Chinese demands to permit China's evacuation of this zone (the terms of which remind one of a mirror of French demands on Qing China some ninety years earlier).

Lawrence's efforts to discuss the dynamic relationship between all of the concerned parties in a limited space have led to some understandably summary treatments of otherwise important topics. As a result, the question of motives and consequences behind decision-making sometimes receive shallow or no treatment. Similarly, the French and especially the Vietnamese sometimes come off in a monolithic fashion that belies important and influential internal divisions and conflicts. For example, Lawrence does a good job discussing Admiral Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu (1889-1964), Paris' High Commissioner for Indochina from 1946 to 1947, and his use of a *politique de force* in order to preserve Indochina's colonial status. But he doesn't effectively communicate the deep colonial roots of France's postwar military leadership and the visceral anti-Americanism that evolved in the context of the involvement of the United States in France's internal affairs. In another example, Lawrence does not address at all the internal fallout of Ho Chi Minh's decision to agree to the 1946 Sainteny Accords, how this weakened him politically and promoted the pro-Chinese faction within his leadership and perhaps

international perceptions of the Viet Minh as a tool of “international communism.” But overall, these are minor criticisms of an excellent work of global vision.

Assuming the Burden is part of a larger renaissance of scholarship on European and American involvement in Asia during and after World War II. Like these other works, it relies on a breadth and depth of research from which previous scholars could not draw, and this makes its conclusions steadier and clearer than previous efforts. Taken together with books such as Dixee R. Bartholomew-Feis’s *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh*, Mark Bradley’s *Imagining Vietnam & America*, Eric Jennings’ *Vichy in the Tropics*, and Christina Klein’s *Cold War Orientalism*, readers should be able to develop a comprehensive political and cultural view of the growing importance and place of Vietnam in the consciousness of Americans and the relationship of that consciousness to France and America’s relationship with France. Like the others, Lawrence’s book certainly serves the scholar. But its clarity and breadth might encourage its assignment to advanced undergraduates or graduate students in courses on Vietnam, on the Cold War, or on decolonization.

NOTES

[1] Indeed, through Lawrence I found the comparisons between the methods of France’s first colonial conqueror, Admiral Charles Rigault de Genouilly (1807-1873), and one of its last, d’Argenlieu, strikingly similar.

[2] Dixee R. Bartholomew-Feis, *The OSS and Ho Chi Minh: Unexpected Allies in the War against Japan*, Theodore A. Wilson, ed., *Modern War Studies* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2006); Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam & America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919-1950*, John Lewis Gaddis, ed., *The New Cold War History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Eric Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétains’s National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940-1944* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

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ISSN 1553-9172