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Michael Creswell, *A Question of Balance: How France and the United States Created Cold War Europe*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2006. xvi + 238 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-674-02297-3.

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In the story of the Cold War, a few years stand out as crucial turning points. There's 1949, for example, when the Chinese communists took power and the Soviet Union broke the U.S. monopoly on atomic weapons. There's 1963, when the United States and the Soviet Union shifted dramatically toward détente by signing the first meaningful arms control agreement. There's 1969, when Chinese and Soviet forces skirmished along the Sino-Siberian border, definitively splitting the communist bloc in two.

In *A Question of Balance: How France and the United States Created Cold War Europe*, Michael Creswell reminds us that another year — 1954 — belongs on any good list of watersheds. To be sure, there was no spectacular clash or dramatic relaxation of tension. Rather, it was the year of a monumental diplomatic breakthrough among Western governments. The United States, France, Britain, and other nations overcame intense disagreements and put the crucial finishing touches on the alliance system that would be the cornerstone of their security for the remainder of the Cold War and beyond. More specifically, the Western powers struck a complicated deal that brought the Federal Republic of Germany into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The agreement ended a decade of uncertainty about West Germany's future, harnessed the country's huge industrial and military potential to NATO, and gave the alliance the vigor, durability, and cohesion that would characterize it for years to come. In a real sense, in short, the deal “created Cold War Europe.”

Unsurprisingly, many historians have eagerly taken up the challenge of explaining how countries that had sought to destroy Germany during the Second World War came to embrace the Federal Republic as an ally just a decade after the fighting ended. For many years, the conventional wisdom held that the United States forced deeply skeptical West European nations to accept West German membership. In this view, fresh memories of Nazi depredations led continental Europe — France, above all — to oppose any plan envisaging the restoration of German military power. But Washington, eager both to cut U.S. military expenditures and to beef up West European defenses against communist aggression, insisted on arming West Germany, whose population and industrial base made it a potential military juggernaut. This interpretation meshed neatly with pervasive assumptions among historians about French fecklessness and U.S. omnipotence following the Second World War.[1]

In more recent years, a younger generation of scholars has offered a sharply different view. Above all, Temple University historian William I. Hitchcock successfully challenged the older line of argument in a landmark 1998 book, *France Restored: Cold War Diplomacy and the Quest for Leadership in Europe, 1944-1954*. [2] Hitchcock joined earlier scholars in noting that U.S. leaders applied strong pressure on West European governments to incorporate Germany into a new Western security architecture. But he broke ranks by insisting that France, far from a hapless bystander as Washington dictated European security arrangements, decisively shaped the West European order. Indeed, argued Hitchcock, Fourth Republic governments played a weak hand with remarkable skill across the postwar decade, frequently bending American power to French purposes.

Creswell offers a similar interpretation of Franco-American relations, arguing that the 1954 agreement on Germany represented not an imposition of U.S. will but a significant diplomatic victory for France. "Although U.S. pressure played a part," Creswell asserts, "far more decisive factors—having to do with internal French politics and international French concerns—ultimately led France to sanction, of its own accord, the plan to rearm West Germany" (p. 5). Readers looking for the most eloquent and broadly argued version of this position would do well to seek out Hitchcock's book. But Creswell's study, rooted in impressive research in French and American archives, provides a useful narrative meriting the attention of scholars deeply interested in the tortuous twists and turns of Franco-American diplomacy on the pivotal matter of rearmament.

The book begins by laying out the basic U.S. and French positions on the "German question" in the first few years after the Second World War — familiar terrain for scholars of post-1945 international history. By 1949, Creswell shows, many U.S. policymakers had hit upon the idea of rearming West Germany as a way to bolster Western defenses against massive Soviet forces stationed in Eastern Europe. The scheme appealed as a way not only to expand the size and power of Western forces but also to give those forces a better chance of defending Western Europe by vastly enlarging the battlefield on which they might fight. Many French leaders, according to Creswell, shared the American analysis. Only by folding West German troops and territory into Western defenses, they acknowledged, could Western Europe conceivably defend itself against Soviet attack. But the French, far more than their American counterparts, refused to countenance the establishment of a distinct West German army. Memories of German invasions in 1870, 1914, and 1940 were far too raw for France to accept full revitalization of German power.

The French government therefore proposed an alternative scenario designed to harness German power without permitting the establishment of a full-fledged German army. Under the French plan, West European nations would set up an integrated military force known as the European Defense Community (EDC). German units would be embedded within an army dominated by troops from other EDC nations and would take orders from a combined EDC command. Washington, Creswell shows, enthusiastically backed the scheme as a way to bring about German rearmament while respecting the sensitivities of its allies. Six nations — France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg — signed the EDC treaty in May 1952.

Even before the treaty was signed, however, the French government soured on its own plan. In the book's central chapters, Creswell enumerates French reservations with admirable clarity. First, national elections in 1951 strengthened the Gaullists, who adamantly opposed the EDC as an infringement of French sovereignty. From that point on, French governments worried that they lacked sufficient National Assembly votes to ratify the treaty without substantial amendments. Second, the draining colonial war in Indochina caused French leaders to worry that, with huge French forces committed to the empire, German troops would inevitably outnumber French troops in Europe. That imbalance not only raised the haunting specter of a superior German force across the border but also stirred worry that Germany would demand a degree of authority within the EDC commensurate with its manpower commitment. Although many French leaders were willing to rearm Germany, none was willing to concede German equality, much less superiority, in either troop strength or decision-making power. Third, French officials grew increasingly frustrated by U.S. and especially British unwillingness to make any long-term commitments to station troops on the continent. Without such deployments, the French government feared that it might one day face a rearmed Germany all by itself.

For all of these reasons, the French government dragged its feet on submitting the EDC treaty for ratification by the National Assembly. The delay infuriated U.S. officials anxious to bolster Western defenses, but it did not, as Creswell emphasizes, lead Washington simply to bypass France and unilaterally rearm Germany. U.S. officials were too worried about losing French cooperation and antagonizing the Soviet Union to follow such a provocative course, Creswell suggests. Remarkably, the

Eisenhower administration did not lash back at France even when the National Assembly definitively rejected the EDC on August 30, 1954. Instead, the U.S., French, British, and West German governments went back to the drawing board to design an alternative scheme acceptable France. The new arrangement, hammered out in a series of meetings in late 1954, embodied major U.S. and British concessions. In return for French agreement to rearm West Germany, London pledged to station large numbers of British troops on the continent indefinitely, while Washington indicated a similar intention. The new plan received quick ratification, and West Germany entered NATO on May 9, 1955.

Thus, Creswell argues, were “key French demands” satisfied as part of a grand bargain among the major Western powers (p. 161). Unfortunately, Creswell does not make this point as convincingly as he might. He fails to provide an adequate account of the final meetings where the deal was struck or to describe the ultimate agreement in satisfactory detail. As a result, the book suffers from a curious imbalance. Creswell spends approximately 150 pages describing the stalemate over German rearmament that lasted from the late 1940s down to the National Assembly’s rejection of the EDC in August 1954. Over that time, the basic nature of the standoff between France and the United States changed little, but Creswell sees fit to provide a detailed account of meeting after meeting. He then devotes a mere six pages to describing — in aggravatingly general terms — the flurry of activity that gave rise to the final bargain. Creswell does little to explore the crucial turnabout in British thinking and provides almost no discussion of U.S. decision-making. One is left wondering too how the deal was understood at the time. Did officials from the key NATO countries see it as a French triumph and a defeat for the United States? Or did they see it simply as the price of keeping an erratic French ally safely within the Western fold? Did the deal tie up all the loose ends, or did uncertainties remain? Creswell offers little guidance.

The larger problem with the book lies in Creswell’s tendency to claim too much for his conclusions. In his analysis of U.S. motives, for instance, he asserts that Washington’s willingness to accommodate French sensitivities about German rearmament is “surprising” (p. 167). In fact, several studies, not least John Lewis Gaddis’s highly influential 1996 synthesis of Cold War history, have made much of U.S. willingness to permit weaker allies a remarkable degree of influence within the Western alliance.^[3] Historians Geir Lundestad, Marc Trachtenberg, and William Hitchcock have made a similar point in narrower studies of transatlantic relations.^[4] Creswell’s argument is, to put it simply, old hat. Indeed, by the time *A Question of Balance* was published, it would have been more surprising for Creswell to contend that the United States ran roughshod over its allies.

Creswell also misfires in his attempt to set himself apart from previous scholarship dealing with French motives. Most historians, Creswell rightly observes, have maintained that French policy makers, consumed by memories of past German aggression, worried at least as much about a rearmed Germany as they did about any threat from the Soviet Union. Creswell, by contrast, argues that French leaders believed the Soviet Union “represented the primary danger to their security,” and he takes several scholars to task for seeing things differently (p. 9). *A Question of Balance* undoubtedly performs a valuable service by pointing out that some French officials appear to have viewed Moscow as the greater danger and by suggesting the possibility of a significant cleavage between forward-looking policy makers in Paris and persistently Germanophobic public opinion. But Creswell fails to show that the anti-Soviet priority was pervasive or predominant, even within Parisian leadership circles. On the contrary, the bulk of the book provides abundant evidence of deep and broad fear of a powerful Germany. Again and again, Creswell’s story reveals that French officials were desperate to limit German power, even at the cost of weakening Western defenses in some of the darkest years of the entire Cold War. French foot-dragging on German rearmament, not to mention the ultimate defeat of the EDC, is simply inexplicable if the nightmare of a powerful Germany throwing its weight around at the heart of Europe did not weigh profoundly on French minds.

Revisionist aspirations are unquestionably admirable — perhaps even the lifeblood of historical scholarship. But Creswell seems to get carried away, stating his case too boldly and claiming with too

much certainty to turn earlier scholarship on its head. As a consequence, the book loses an opportunity to lead readers through the complex historiography of transatlantic relations in the early Cold War. More seriously, Creswell risks losing credit for the considerable contribution he has made — his rich narrative of the background to one of the Cold War's pivotal moments.

NOTES

[1] For example, Frank Costigliola, *France and the United States: The Cold Alliance Since World War II* (New York: Twayne, 1992); Frank A. Ninkovich, *Germany and the United States: The Transformation of the German Question Since 1945*, updated ed. (New York: Twayne, 1995); and Irwin Wall, *The United States and the Making of Postwar France, 1945-1954* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[2] William I. Hitchcock, *France Restored: Cold War Diplomacy and the Quest for Leadership in Europe, 1944-1954* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[3] John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially chapter two.

[4] Geir Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952," in Charles S. Maier, ed., *The Cold War in Europe: Era of a Divided Continent* (New York: Markus Wiener, 1991), pp. 143-68; Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), especially chapter three; and Hitchcock, *France Restored*, especially conclusion. On the general problem of how small powers wield influence over large powers, see Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation Among Democracies: European Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Tony Smith, "New Wine for New Bottles: A 'Pericentric Paradigm for the Study of the Cold War,'" *Diplomatic History* 24 (fall 2000).

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