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Michael S. Neiberg, *When France Fell: The Vichy Crisis and the Fate of the Anglo-American Alliance*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 320 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780674258563.

Review by Elizabeth Stice, Palm Beach Atlantic University.

The Second World War is probably the global conflict that most Americans feel most knowledgeable about. World War II narratives have a strong cultural presence in books, movies, and television and play a significant role in national identity. Popular stories about the Second World War often center on the heroics of US soldiers or the horrors of wartime Germany. When it comes to the war in Europe, Winston Churchill is an ever-present, major character and Great Britain our greatest ally. Almost always omitted is the fall of France and the complex effect of the Vichy regime on Anglo-American relations. Historian Michael Neiberg has written this book to tell “the now largely forgotten story of how the United States responded to the fall of France” (pp. 4-5).

In the case of the Second World War, the most iconic images of France are often of the liberation of Paris in 1944. *The Fall of France* begins by bringing to life the first stages of the war in 1940. The US initially watched the “phony war” with confidence in their allies and France’s Maginot Line. When France fell, the United States was among the most shocked and the most affected. As Neiberg points out, US defense spending and strategy had been reliant on the strength of allies like France, without the benefit of formal agreements. The fall of France created new vulnerabilities and the resulting nervousness launched the US on a path of increased defense spending. The possibility of the French Empire falling into the hands of the Germans was also alarming for Americans, creating concerns in Asia and giving renewed significance to the Monroe Doctrine. The fall of France forced the United States to confront the consequences of the Second World War, even before officially entering it.

The Fall of France expertly explains and describes the decisions that the United States made in reaction to the fall of France and to the proclamation of the État Français in a readable style suitable for a broad audience. Along the way it provides an introduction to the major figures of the Vichy regime and to events in wartime France, highlighting the American responses to people and policies, which were often in contrast with those of other allies. The end of the Third Republic divided the French people, but somehow it did not lead to much initial distrust of Vichy in the United States. While the British did not have confidence in the Vichy government or believe it to be truly neutral, the United States continued to maintain diplomatic relations and put its hopes in Pétain for a long time. This was not only awkward for Anglo-American

diplomatic relations, it meant that the two countries had to negotiate and resolve significantly contrasting practices, like US food aid being sent to France, despite the British blockade. One of the greatest strengths of *The Fall of France* is its examination of how responses to Vichy complicated the relationship between Britain and the United States.

By far the most entertaining and interesting narrative thread throughout *The Fall of France* is the United States' refusal to accept de Gaulle as leader of the Free French and as the potential future leader of a free France. Though the British intensely disliked de Gaulle, they reluctantly accepted him as the best option. In contrast, the United States worked its way through a long list of candidates, including General Maxime Weygand, General Henri Giraud, and even François Darlan, who had actively offered military cooperation to Hitler and the Germans. Though de Gaulle could be difficult, the extreme reluctance to work with him led to some ridiculous scenarios and foolish choices: Neiberg even explores what might have been, had Darlan not been assassinated. The rejection of de Gaulle was yet another contrast with British strategy, one with real consequences when it came to planning invasions in North Africa and in France.

The after-action reports on US dealings with France during the war reveal a variety of victories and blunders, but the overall evaluative question is about the merits of maintaining diplomatic relations with Vichy. The US later claimed that its "back-channel communications" were important and that the US was justified in putting confidence in Vichy's neutrality and its underlying anti-German sentiment. According to Neiberg, "America's relationship with France during the Second World War began from bad policy based on flawed assumptions" (p. 7). The US government was somehow blind to the collaborationist tendencies of Vichy, even when the US press and public saw things more clearly. Many officials seemed deluded by the "Lafayette tradition": the US held onto diplomatic support of Vichy even while it recognized the need to support the resistance, leading to a "deep state of confusion" (p. 147). It was not merely the support for anti-democratic individuals and institutions that was troubling. For Neiberg, US policy toward France was "based as much on fear, confusion, and misguided faith as anything else" (p. 243). From his perspective, "it does not take too much imagination to see how this policy could have gone disastrously wrong" (p. 244). *The Fall of France* makes that case pretty convincingly.

One of the chief strengths of *The Fall of France* is its integration of policy and diplomatic decisions into the war narrative. As Neiberg points out, "our collective memory of the Second World War as a period of American strength clouds the real trepidation that drove policy from 1940 to 1943" (p. 243). By highlighting the sources and significance of policy, Neiberg illuminates decisions made behind the battlefields that affected military operations, including Operation TORCH. The sections on the US attempts to woo Vichy officials and develop spy networks in North Africa are also interesting reading. The book succeeds in Neiberg's goal of a "fuller and more complete picture" of the Second World War through its thematic focus and through the significance of North Africa to the topic (p. 250).

The Fall of France also illuminates the role of fear and the instinct for self-preservation in Second World War decision-making. Many Vichy policies and personnel decisions were responses to fear of German anger or anticipation of a German-dominated postwar Europe. The British decision to attack the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir was based on fear, not unreasonable, of French ships falling into German hands, just as the US came to worry about tiny French colonies in the Western hemisphere. The British decision to attack Mers-el-Kébir led to distrust of the

Allies throughout France and its empire. Some French also feared that the United States sought to install a puppet government of its own in France after the war. And both the British and the French made decisions in North Africa on the basis of concern for the preservation of their empires. Though the Second World War was a clash of ideologies, fearful self-interest played a major part in shaping the conflict.

Though there are no large or obvious omissions in this book, it could be strengthened by more explanation in a few places. Much is made of the differences in British and American responses to Vichy and de Gaulle, but more could be said about the sources of those differences. Some background on British policy decisions is offered, but a bit more could be helpful. It should be said, though, that this book does a good job of getting beyond seeing Anglo-American relations as simply Roosevelt-Churchill relations. Similarly, the reasons for disliking de Gaulle seem self-evident to all of the historical figures and largely based on his ego, but a bit more explanation for Roosevelt's sense of him as "Hitlerian" could benefit the reader. More background on de Gaulle and his ultimate, though not initially obvious, appeal for many French citizens would also clarify the reasons for working with him.

Historians are always at work against the bias of hindsight. The ultimate and total defeat of Germany and the long influence of de Gaulle in French politics can make both seem inevitable. *The Fall of France* excels at reminding readers of the contingency of the past. The curious characters, early OSS efforts, and royalist plots in North Africa, the significance of empires that would later be disbanded, and the ambivalent policy toward Vichy all brought out in this book clearly demonstrate that events could have turned out differently. The United States and Britain landed in North Africa under Operation TORCH completely uncertain of how the French there would respond. As it happened, the French were not unified in their response anyway. The emphasis on all of the uncertainty makes this book relevant to people who study the present and not just those who study the past. After all, policy confidence can outstrip evidentiary support in any age. There are many lessons here for those with an interest in diplomacy and international relations.

The memory of war is always an interesting amalgamation of forgetting and remembering. When it comes to the Second World War, American soldiers have been well-remembered as has much of the war's significance. However, the role of France in American decision-making and the significance of policy and diplomacy in Anglo-American relations has been largely forgotten. With an approachable style, *The Fall of France* succeeds in reintegrating policy and diplomacy into the narrative of the Second World War. This certainly helps us better understand wartime events in North Africa and the "special relationship" between the United States and Great Britain. It also achieves Neiberg's aim of providing "a case study of statecraft in a rapidly changing environment where long-standing assumptions about the international system often disappeared overnight" (p. 5). That makes this book worthwhile reading for people in many fields.

Elizabeth Stice
Palm Beach Atlantic University
Elizabeth.Stice@pba.edu

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