



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

Roundtable Editor: **William R. Keylor**, Boston University

Roundtable Participants:

Charles Cogan, Harvard University; **Jeremi Suri**, University of Wisconsin; **Irwin Wall**, Visiting Scholar, Center for European Studies, New York University; University of California, Riverside

H-Diplo Roundtable Editor: **Diane Labrosse**, Concordia University; National Security Archive
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Author's Response

Kim Munholland, University of Minnesota

When Diane Labrosse informed me that *Rock of Contention* would be the subject of a roundtable discussion on H-Diplo, I was at once surprised, pleased and flattered. My thanks go to her for the proposal, which has brought together four eminent scholars in the field of international history. William Keylor's introduction shows the extent and variety of perspectives that the commentators bring to the discussion, and his introduction places the themes of the book in a general context. To the commentators I extend my appreciation for three expert and thoughtful assessments of the book's contribution to an understanding of the vexed issue of French-American relations during WWII seen through the prism of a colonial and imperial setting.

When I set out to write a book about Free French-American relations during WWII, I did not intend to limit myself to New Caledonia. But I definitely wanted to get away from the center to look at the periphery and to see how this relationship played out in everyday encounters. I imagined that I could look at three regions: the South Pacific, North Africa and the Liberation of France. In these locations the practical needs of cooperation, I thought, would reveal a less contentious relationship than the well-known conflict at the level of high politics between de Gaulle and Roosevelt. I knew, vaguely, that the earliest contact was in the South Pacific, but, as Irwin Wall alerts the potential reader, the first step was to locate New Caledonia on the map and then, like the Americans heading for the island in 1942, I had to find out more about it. Once into the topic, I discovered a complexity that said a good deal about Gaullism, about differing American and French attitudes and values, about issues of French colonialism in a particular setting, about American security concerns, and about the emergence of global issues that would persist into the postwar world. The history of New Caledonia during the war had a regional interest, but it was also relevant within the broader context of a global upheaval.

I also discovered that the story -- the events -- in New Caledonia had been told from one perspective, that of Gaullism. This narrative, based largely upon de Gaulle's memoirs and letters, treats New Caledonia as an episode in the General's struggle to resist what he perceived to be American intentions to weaken France at the expense of the French Empire. It was part of the wartime story of David triumphing over Goliath. It was a useful narrative that cast de Gaulle in a heroic role, but I discovered in looking at other records that there was another side to the story. While the Gaullists saw the Americans exploiting Free French weakness and internal differences, the Americans considered the Free French to be engaged in provocative actions that compromised the war effort. One of my tasks was to find some balance since the Gaullist reading was one-sided and placed blame for what Charles Cogan calls the execrable relationship manifest in New Caledonia upon the Americans. This led me to rethink the way in which the mutual distrust developed and how events in New Caledonia intensified American Francophobia and Gaullist anti-Americanism.

While the three commentators agree that I have at least made a case for a dual responsibility in the contentious relations between the United States and the Free French, each offers some qualification or raises questions about aspects of the analysis, and I would like to respond to these.

Both Charles Cogan and Irwin Wall wonder if there were not good reasons for de Gaulle to be suspicious of Roosevelt's intentions toward the French Empire, implying that the American arrival in New Caledonia was not entirely innocent of an underlying political agenda. From the outset de Gaulle was sensitive to the issue of French imperial sovereignty and his writings reveal his early concern over the imperial ambitions first of Great Britain and subsequently of the United States. Roosevelt's ignoring his movement and early offers of cooperation, combined with the "Vichy gamble," fed his suspicions. There is no doubt that Roosevelt was dismissive of France after the defeat in 1940. My argument, though, is that despite evident distrust on both sides before Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt's thoughts about a postwar security system had not yet taken shape until after the events in New Caledonia. De Gaulle suspected a calculated policy when there was none, at least in 1942. By 1943 Roosevelt's thoughts became more concrete and there was an American threat to New Caledonia and the French Empire, which justified Gaullist distrust of Roosevelt's intentions and brought a calculated policy of resistance to American domination and imperialistic ambitions. New Caledonia hardened attitudes on each side of the relationship.

For both Cogan and Wall, my effort to present the American side of the quarrel in New Caledonia has led to a narrative in which American actions appear to be reasonable and pragmatic while French behavior is characterized as neurotic. Perhaps my desire to salvage General Patch's reputation from Admiral d'Argenlieu's denigration created some distortion. Patch was not faultless, but he needed local support, and he tried to place in Free French resentment toward the Americans in perspective.

For Cogan General de Gaulle's problem was the remoteness of New Caledonia and the lack of competent officials to manage the rallied empire. There is something to this, but a particular problem was that the mixture of patriotism, loyalty to the republic, opportunism, economic necessity and personal ambition that motivated the individuals who carried out the rally of New

Caledonia bore the marks of the discredited Third Republic. De Gaulle was not sure that their idea of France, including a less centralized imperial France, conformed to his "certain idea of France," nor that the French Caledonians and Governor Sautot fully understood the nature of threats to the integrity of imperial France. To be sure, de Gaulle was not fortunate in his choice of representatives, but he persisted in his faith in d'Argenlieu, who accompanied him to Casablanca and who later was his choice to be High Commissioner for Indochina.

Jeremi Suri focuses attention upon the particular problems of France in the Pacific, including both the issue of a strategic contest for global influence and French and American perceptions of "the other." On the latter point I can assure him that the response of Wisconsin farmers to clichéd anti-French jokes can be found among his neighbors to the west. New Caledonia reinforced negative images with the Americans emerging as rude and overbearing in French eyes and the French dismissed as touchy and difficult neurotics by Americans.

Suri questions, however, my portrait of Roosevelt as an anti-colonialist who was determined to deny the French full control of their overseas domain. Citing the work of Mark Bradley and Mark Lawrence, he questions whether Roosevelt was as firmly opposed to French imperial rule in New Caledonia (and Indochina) as my account suggests. Here I am prepared to cede a point. Although FDR continued to make critical comments about French rule in Indochina and cited Halsey on obstructionism in New Caledonia, in both colonies he showed a willingness to allow the French a leading role as a mandatory power. I have no quarrel with a historiography that questions Roosevelt's commitment to anti-colonialism and French exclusion, even if my account credits the State Department and Truman with taking a "realistic" approach toward the French and their imperial rule in light of the emerging Cold War.

Suri also warns against my claim that New Caledonia is a metaphor for French-American relations during and after the war. New Caledonia was after all a region with its particular geopolitical reality and local conditions that were not the same as those in North Africa after liberation, where the *mésentente* was greatly in evidence, as it was during the liberation of metropolitan France. The North African example might very well show Roosevelt's policy to be wrongheaded as he persisted in his acceptance of Vichy bis, as the work of Jacques Cantier, Christine Lévisse-Touzé, Martin Thomas and Irwin Wall, among others, has shown.[1] Nevertheless, the New Caledonia example provides evidence of the way in which a Gaullist resistance to the United States, what became an Official anti-Americanism, emerged during the war and was evident at the time of liberation in North Africa and metropolitan France.

Finally, Irwin Wall's concern that my revisionism may have gone too far in shifting blame for the *mésentente* needs to be addressed. My intention was not to let FDR escape the justified criticisms of his relationship with de Gaulle and the Free French. As I stated in the introduction of the book (2), there is much to criticize in Roosevelt's policy. Both French and American historiography deplore his "Vichy gamble" as a bet on the side of collaboration and thus, as de Gaulle noted, on the side of Hitler. The implication, though, is that there was some ideological sympathy for Vichy. How else explain support for General Giraud, a known royalist whose democratic credentials were far more questionable than the allegedly fascist de Gaulle and his entourage? Again, it is a matter of timing. One could argue that on pragmatic grounds, namely keeping the French fleet and empire out of German hands, was worth a gamble. But this rationale

could not be sustained after the invasion of North Africa and the scuttling of the French fleet. Roosevelt's support for notorious Vichyites from Darlan to Peyrouton and Boisson quite rightly upset de Gaulle. This policy, which de Gaulle saw as inimical to the Free French cause, had repercussions in New Caledonia. Here was the regional interaction that Suri has asked to see. That is, as relations between de Gaulle and the Americans deteriorated in Algeria in the last six months of 1943, Laigret launched his anti-American campaign in New Caledonia, setting off the crisis.

This interaction explains why I "backtracked" in the chapter on Roosevelt and de Gaulle. The contest between Giraud and de Gaulle and the triumph of the latter in North Africa in the summer of 1943, despite Roosevelt's opposition, strengthened de Gaulle's conviction that a policy of intransigent resistance was necessary to counter American domineering behavior and preserve French imperial sovereignty.

When Admiral Halsey reported Laigret's "uncooperative" and hostile behavior in New Caledonia, he confirmed Roosevelt's belief that de Gaulle and his Free French had been uncooperative all along and were deliberately causing him trouble. When Ambassador Wilson went to de Gaulle in Algiers in November to clear up any misunderstanding in American relations with the General, de Gaulle replied that he had the impression that the problem was not due to a "misunderstanding" but the consequence of a calculated policy of hostility toward him.[2] A *mésentente* obviously had been established, and New Caledonia played a crucial role in its formation.

NOTES:

[1] Jacques Cantier, *L'Algérie sous le régime de Vichy* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2002); Christine Levisse-Touzé, *l'Afrique du Nord dans la guerre: 1939-1945* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998); Martin Thomas, *The French Empire at War 1940-1945* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998); Irwin Wall, *France, the United States and the Algerian War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[2] Cited in François Kersaudy, *De Gaulle et Roosevelt: Le duel au sommet* (Paris: Perrin, 2004), 347-48.

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