



Mark Lawrence, “Transnational Coalition-Building and the Making of the Cold War in Indochina, 1947-1949,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Summer 2002): 453-480.

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Published by H-Diplo on 1 September 2002

Alliance Politics at Work

Mark Lawrence has written a provocative and engaging article on the nature of alliance politics and the genesis of U.S. involvement in Indochina. His essay, “Transnational Coalition-Building and the Making of the Cold War in Indochina, 1947-1949,” focuses on the under-explored issue of how the Western alliance functioned with respect to Indochina. [1] Lawrence makes two important claims about this alliance. First, he argues that Britain and France played leading roles in determining a policy that was “Western” rather than “American.” In other words, British and French policymakers were equally, if not more, influential than the Truman administration in shaping the early Western response to Indochina. Second, and according to Lawrence more important, “like-minded factions” in Paris, Washington, and London viewed the conflict in Indochina through the prism of the Cold War and thus cooperated with one another to defeat rival viewpoints at home and to reassert French control in Indochina. (455)

Lawrence’s second point, while valuable in assessing the eventual triumph of Cold War hawks in Paris, London, and Washington, could go further in analyzing how these elements “learned to draw upon the support of like-minded elements abroad to compensate for a lack of consensus at home.” (456) As Lawrence demonstrates, French and British hawks convinced equally hawkish Americans of the necessity of fighting the Cold War in Indochina, which resulted in a transnational coalition. Like-minded decision makers might have worked together to create a common policy in Vietnam, but perhaps it is more accurate to suggest that they manipulated one another. For example, by supporting the Bao Dai experiment and subsequent Elysée Accords, which gave former Vietnamese Emperor Bao Dai nominal control of the State of Vietnam, the French were not being like-minded but rather playing to American and British interests to achieve the concrete goal of political, economic and military aid. As Lawrence perceptively notes, “at least as important as the accords themselves was the French effort to sell U.S. officials on the idea that the Bao Dai experiment represented a significant new departure in French policy, worthy of American political and material backing.”(469) The operative term here is “sell.” Very early on the French figured out exactly how to wring political and economic aid from their benefactors. U.S. officials saw the “Bao Dai experiment” as a positive first step, and then placed more pressure on the French for additional reforms, holding out an unofficial quid pro quo of economic and military assistance. (474) French leaders quickly learned that the way to obtain additional American aid was to promise, but not necessarily deliver, concessions on matters the Americans held dear. Moreover, British officials appeared equally ready to manipulate their American counterparts. Unable to fund the Indochina war themselves and fearful of domestic political opposition, British officials eagerly transferred responsibility to the Americans, claiming a need for “British experience and American resources.” (471) Thus, although pro-war

factions in London, Paris, and Washington were determined to “redefine the conflict in Indochina as a Cold War confrontation with communism, rather than a war of colonial reconquest,” they also constantly sought ways to redefine their transnational coalition in order to achieve their respective national interests.(475)

Although Lawrence spends more time on the second point, I would suggest that his first point makes the greater contribution to the literature. In particular, the extent to which European governments were able to influence American behavior in Indochina is a critical question that, as Lawrence rightly notes, has not been carefully addressed. His article clearly demonstrates that Paris and London played an active role in Indochina that eventually led to a pivotal American decision in 1949: Washington’s declaration of political support on 21 June for the newly formed State of Vietnam, under Bao Dai’s leadership. In the declaration, the Truman administration also applauded the Elysée Accords, signed on 8 March 1949, which gave the new state a certain degree of autonomy. (477) Lawrence’s focus on the significance of the Elysée Accords in creating international, and especially American, support for the French war effort emphasizes the importance of the early 1947-1949 period.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of how the three countries became a transnational coalition was the French need to create policy in Indochina “in ways likely to attract foreign support- especially that of the United States and Britain-for French objectives.” (467) Lawrence thoroughly details the internal political debates in France and how French hawks implemented various reforms in order to entice the Americans into providing political, economic and military support for the war effort. This early French success in achieving American cooperation is noteworthy, considering how quickly the Franco-American relationship soured in the early 1950s as French leaders attempted to exclude the United States from all decision making regarding Indochina while American leaders demanded more influence. Lawrence provides less detail on the Franco-Anglo relationship. We know that London reinstated French rule over Indochina by mid-1946, supplied arms and ammunition in the beginning of 1947, and urged the United States to provide economic aid to France. But how did the British define the fight against communism in the non-European world (as they struggled with their own dissolving empire) and what role did they play in convincing the Americans to support French policy in Indochina? The article leaves these aspects of the story unresolved.

Lawrence’s conclusions leave one with much to think about. He writes that the U.S. declaration of support for French policy on 21 June 1949, “marked one of the most important moments in the long history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The significance of the June 1949 State Department statement lies in the fact that it marked the completion of the international coalition that had been in the making since shortly after the outbreak of the Franco-Vietminh war more than two years earlier.” (477) Of paramount importance “was growing international support for the war that enabled the hawks to wage war as they saw fit.” (478) British and French policymakers’ success in creating a “transnational coalition” on Vietnam was thus “one of the most tragic moments of the Cold War.” (480) Dare we conclude that the shrewd diplomacy of the French and British in the late 1940s answers the perennial question of how the United States became involved in Vietnam? Perhaps not, but Lawrence has provided a new framework for understanding the origins of the U.S. commitment to Indochina-no small feat. In the end, Lawrence leaves the reader wanting more detail on the evolving relationship between Paris,

London, and Washington as the three governments struggled to resolve the Indochina problem. Happily, we will have more as Lawrence's argument sketched here will undoubtedly be fully fleshed out in his forthcoming book--Constructing Vietnam: The United States, European Colonialism, and the Making of the Cold War in Indochina.

Notes:

[1] As Lawrence notes in his essay, a number of scholars have addressed European agency with respect to European affairs, but little work has been done on European agency regarding the non-Western world, with the notable exception of Andrew Rotter's *The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia* (Ithaca, NY, 1987). See for example, Geir Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952," in *The Cold War in Europe: Era of a Divided Continent*, ed. Charles S. Maier (New York, 1991), 143-168; John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford, 1997); Thomas Risse-Kappen, *Cooperation Among Democracies: the European Influence on U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), William Hitchcock, *France Restored: Cold War Diplomacy and the Quest for Leadership in Europe, 1944-1954* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998); and *The Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspectives*, ed. David Reynolds (New Haven, CT, 1994).

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