

Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005)

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Commentary by Shawn McHale, George Washington University

In writing this review of Mark Atwood Lawrence's excellent book, I will begin with a caveat: I was not trained as a scholar of American foreign relations. I am a historian of Southeast Asia, focusing my research on Vietnam, with a deep interest in French (and other) colonialisms and their legacies. My training and interests deeply inform my own work, the kinds of questions I ask, and the way I approach Mark Lawrence's *Assuming the Burden*. This difference of approach will become clear later on in this review, but it does not detract from my appreciation for what Mark Lawrence has accomplished.

Mark Lawrence has penned an excellent account of the path to American support for the French war in Indochina, 1945 to 1950. His book is a skillful marriage of traditional diplomatic history and innovative transnational approaches. The writing is lucid; the research, rigorous. Lawrence plumbs British, American, and French archives and then fashions out of this material a well-synthesized account of the triangular diplomacy (Washington-Paris-London) through which, eventually, the US was pulled into funding the French war in Indochina. Rather than argue that London, Paris, and Washington each had distinct national positions that conflicted or converged, Lawrence argues that each capital was riven into factions over Vietnam. Conservatives emphasized France's continued right to some form of authority over French Indochina; their opponents argued for taking into consideration the aims of the non-communist nationalists. Ultimately, Lawrence argues, the "conservative" factions in Paris, Washington, and London came together and triumphed.

In my view, this book is a major contribution to understanding the American intervention in the region. But it also, I will eventually suggest, may overextend the thesis that, in Lawrence's words, "Western policy was largely responsible for generating the outcome that Western policy makers most dreaded" (279). The actions of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, I will argue, cannot be completely discounted. More on that in a moment.

In the comments that follow, I would first like to make a few historiographical observations. I will then make some comments on the story that Lawrence does not tell in any detail: the transformations on the ground in Vietnam, primarily seen through Vietnamese sources. This detour allows us to measure whether or not Lawrence is right: that the hawks on both sides of the Atlantic got it wrong, those leery of American intervention were right, and that the reality on the ground supports the "liberal" argument against intervention.

Historiographical Observations

Different readers will come to Lawrence's work with different interpretive concerns. Here, I would like to situate Mark Lawrence's work in terms of Southeast Asian history and Cold War history.

Historians of Southeast Asia, focusing on Southeast Asian perspectives, have created a sizeable body of work on colonialism and its legacy in the region. Their scholarship has often been infused with an indigenist tone, and has discussed nationalism and anticolonialism extensively. In almost all cases, historians of Southeast Asia assume that the period from 1920 or so to 1940 is crucial in the rise of nationalism, communism, and anti-colonialism in the region. The Banten uprisings of 1926 on Java, the 1930-31 Nghe Tinh soviets, and even the agitation on Luzon and the Burma delta in the 1930s, have all been seen as signs of challenges to landlord or colonial rule. This was followed, of course, by the Japanese invasion and occupation of Southeast Asia during World War II.

It would probably be fair to say that, in general, historians of Southeast Asia agree that the Japanese occupation had a dramatic impact on the region, even if the impact varied from country to country. This occupation, its sharp weakening of colonial power, and its lingering effects into the late 1940s, was the primary context for the rise of independence movements in the region.

Recent scholarship, such as Mary Callahan's *Making Enemies* on Burma, is provided a more complex view than before of the dynamics driving post-1945 Southeast Asian transformations. Indeed, whether writing about state formation, ethnicity, or separatism, scholars of post-1945 Southeast Asia no longer see anticolonial nationalism alone as the prime motor of change in the region. And the Cold War? I cannot speak for all historians of Southeast Asia on this, but most would agree that before 1950, it had a very limited impact on shaping the region. This view is one shared by Mark Lawrence in his book.

What about historians of American foreign relations? Here I am treading on unsure ground, but will still proffer a few observations. American historians, when approaching Vietnam, have tended to focus heavily on the 1963-1975 period, basing their analysis largely on English-language sources. Not just any sources: American sources. Thus, historians tend to present a view of intervention in which the Americans are actors, the Vietnamese the acted upon. Internal American differences are painstakingly explored. In contrast, the views of other directly relevant actors, such as the French and Vietnamese, tend to come across poorly. Stereotypes abound: who hasn't read of Ngo Dinh Diem acting like a mandarin? Furthermore, little attention is paid to the actions of the French or the British in Southeast Asia after 1945. It is as if, with the triumph of American power by 1945, both Great Britain and France had become marginal actors in Asia. This is a serious misreading of the evidence.

There is another oddity in much scholarship on Vietnam by historians of American foreign relations: the assumption that Vietnam was a logical Cold War battleground. It was not. The immediate post-1945 period in Southeast Asia was profoundly shaped by colonialism, the legacy of war, and the movement to decolonization. In some cases, such as the struggles in Burma, Indonesia, or Vietnam, decolonization was violent. In others, such as the Philippines, colonial political elites managed to consolidate their power in the post-1945 period. Given the obvious and fundamental significance of this transition to postcolonial independence, why have scholars of

American foreign relations often forced these events into a Cold War framework? This is a bit of a puzzle. It is one that Mark Lawrence's book helps us understand.

Turning from these general historiographical observations, it is clear that Lawrence understands the significance of British and French imperial ambitions in this early postwar period, and gives them their due. Some of this story has been told: for example, Tilman Remme has addressed the evolving British diplomacy in Southeast Asia in the postwar period, touching upon the pivotal role the Malayan Emergency had in re-orienting British policy in the region as a whole towards a clear anti-communism.¹ But in focusing on diplomacy over Vietnam in particular, Lawrence gives a focused argument on how Britain helped to pull the United States into the First Indochina War. He shows that both France and Great Britain had converging interests in promoting the perpetuation of imperial institutions in the region.

This attention to Great Britain is salutary. American historians of foreign relations have often focused on bilateral relations, and in the process played down the significance of Great Britain in Southeast Asia. Daniel Fineman's fine study of US-Thai relations, for example, breaks new ground in sketching out the American role in Thailand's shift to authoritarian rule, 1947-58.² But Great Britain's role from 1945 to 1950 in postwar Thai policy is downplayed.

Lawrence, by examining French, British, and American diplomacy, does not fall into the trap of framing issues only in bilateral terms. But in discussing this transnational diplomacy, and in emphasizing convergences among hawkish factions in different countries as well as their opponents, I had some unease about Lawrence's choice of terms to describe these factions. Should Lawrence have used the terms "liberal," "liberality," or "liberalism" to characterize not only American and British political factions, but French ones as well? (On such use for the French, see, for example, pp. 131, 149, 151, 191.) I am uneasy about its application to France: after all, the terms "liberal" and "liberalism" (and indeed liberalism in general) have had little resonance in France. In contrast, I would argue that a stronger case could be made for the use of the term "conservative" to describe post-1945 factions in all three countries.

I will also note that while Lawrence is restrained in his narration, the French do not come across well in his book. At best, some French diplomats and military men come across as defenders of French prestige and believers in empire; at worst, some of them appear opportunistic, mendacious, or ungrateful. In late 1945, for example, Philippe Baudet, then chief of the Asia section in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, made the claim to the Americans that the Viet Minh was "a mere puppet of Japan" (Lawrence, 95). Either this claim reveals an astonishing ignorance of what was really happening in Vietnam, or it suggests that the French Foreign Ministry promoted mendacity towards a supposed ally. Other examples suggest that the French had an enduring suspicion of the Americans. Sometimes this descended into pettiness, such as harassing Vietnamese who visited the USIS reading room (Lawrence, 131). At other times, this suspicion was probably reasonable, in the sense that the French did not want Americans to stick their noses into what they still considered their internal affairs.

¹ Tilman Remme, *Britain and Regional Cooperation in South-East Asia, 1945-49* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

² Daniel Fineman, *A Special Relationship: The United States and Military Government in Thailand, 1947-1958* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).

The Story Not Told: the View from Vietnam

But the question still remains: can a focus on Euro-American transnational diplomacy tell us the full story of the American drift into supporting the French war in Indochina? Did the actions of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam—and not just those of the European imperial powers—have virtually no impact on the eventual American decision to pay for the French war effort? I bring this question up because Lawrence writes:

By 1954, no American officials had any doubt - nor should they have - that Ho Chi Minh's movement served the interests of international communism. The link was real and obvious, even if Western policy was largely responsible for generating the outcome that Western policy makers most dreaded. (279)

The question that I would like to address briefly, then, is whether or not this strong claim (that Western policy led to the undesired outcome) should be moderated. I hasten to add that I believe it would be absurd to criticize Mark Lawrence for his inattention to Vietnamese diplomacy. That is not the topic of his book. I am simply asking if Lawrence overextends a key thesis of his book by neglecting the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's role in the First Indochina War. So in the section that follows, I would like to make a few comments on the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and its murky politics and diplomacy.

From its founding, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was defined by contradictions. One of the first calls of the Viet Minh movement in the August 1945 General Uprising was to realize “the rights of democratic freedom, of assembly, of organization, of religious beliefs, of thought, of free speech, of travel, [and] of universal suffrage”.³ At the same time that some in the Viet Minh stressed the necessity of such democratic freedoms, others in the movement were busy assassinating thousands of “traitors” to the revolution. Which face of the revolution, then, accurately captured its true character? Ironically, both.

These contradictory impulses also shaped foreign policy. In the early years after the August General Uprising (Tong Khoi Nghia) of 1945, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) faced an acute problem. Should it stress its anticolonialist, nationalist and democratic credentials? If it took this tack, it could reach out to fellow Asian anticolonial movements like the Indian, Indonesian, or Burmese ones, as well as appeal to Western powers like the United States. Or should it stress its revolutionary credentials and boldly reach out to the communist bloc? From the fragmentary evidence now available, it appears that this question was not resolved before 1948 or 1949.

One 1948 Viet Minh publication suggested that the Democratic Republic of Vietnam wanted to stress its “liberal” side: it went so far as to claim that the “Vietnamese Republic was the most advanced Asian democracy, and one of the most advanced democracies in the world.”⁴ (Whether or

³ “Thong cao thu nhat cua Uy Ban Giai Phong” [First communique of the Liberation Committee [of the Provisional Government], August 1945, in Tran Huy Lieu and Van Tao, compilers, *Tong khoi nghia thang tam* [The August General Uprising](volume 12) of *Tai lieu tham khao lich su Cach mang Viet Nam* [Historical research materials on the Vietnamese revolution] (Hanoi: Van Su Dia, 1957), 34. This proclamation appears to have been made on August 17, 1945.

not this statement by a well-known communist was stated in good faith is an open question, but we can find similar sentiments about the Viet Minh movement expressed by some patriotic non-communists in this period.)

Within the communist party, however, there was dissension over the direction of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Some veteran communists argued that Ho Chi Minh was betraying the communist bloc. And the USSR leadership was, in turn, suspicious of Vietnamese communists, especially Ho Chi Minh. It gave the Vietnamese no support.⁵ In these early years, with almost no contact with the Communist world, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam failed to articulate a coherent and consistent foreign policy.

By the late 1940s, as we all now know, the situation in Indochina had changed dramatically. Chinese communists seized control of China in 1949, routing the Guomintang. The newly established People's Republic of China (PRC) recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1950; soon thereafter, the Soviets recognized the DRV as well. 1950 marks a pivotal moment in modern Vietnamese history: the internationalization of the war, and the linkage of this anticolonial conflict to the Cold War, begins here.

Following these political changes, DRV leaders then abruptly shifted their foreign policy. The communist leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam abandoned their attempt to soft-pedal criticisms of the United States and veered toward an embrace of Maoism. Vietnam, then, decided to “lean to one side”, the communist one, in the developing Cold War.

But was this shift only a belated response to the actions of Western powers like France, Great Britain, and United States? No—this shift, it is plausible to argue, was long in the making. The evidence comes from within Vietnam. First, the communists vastly increased their mass base after 1945. In August 1945, the Indochinese Communist Party (the core of the Viet Minh) could only count approximately 5,000 members. By 1948, it claimed 110,000 members; by 1951, over 776,000. In a short amount of time, the Party had transformed itself from a tiny and marginal political force to the best organized political party in Vietnam.

One can still ask: does this evidence really support the Cold War hawks' view that communists with links to Beijing and Moscow were on the march in Vietnam? Yes and no. The transformation of the Viet Minh, and the sharp rise in party strength, was initially accomplished with no substantive help from outside Communist parties. Indeed, the communist-led Viet Minh had extremely limited contact with foreign communist parties from 1940 to late 1949.

Furthermore, when we look at the initial membership in the Viet Minh movement in particular, a few tentative observations can be made. The Viet Minh, in these early years, was characterized by a strange combination of inclusive and exclusive practices. On the one hand, some of the early allies of the communist-led Viet Minh were so-called “patriotic” landlords and independent intellectuals. They were not purged extensively until the 1950s. On the other hand, the Viet Minh

⁴ Ngo Ha [Tran Van Giau], *Cach mang thang tam* [The August Revolution], Bangkok: Tu sach ‘Tin Viet Nam’, [1948?], p. 43.

⁵ Christopher Goscha, “La survie diplomatique de la République Démocratique de l’Indochine: le doute soviétique effacé par la confiance chinoise (1945-50),” *Approches Asie* 18 (2003).

could be ruthless, relying on assassination to kill thousands of potential political opponents (such as Trotskyist intellectuals or local notables).

I would speculate that up to 1948 or so, there was a struggle for the ideological direction of the revolution in Vietnam. Up to that year, the Viet Minh still could have veered in a more pluralistic direction, one in which communists and non-communists shared political power. But after that year, due to international developments as well as internal ones, that likelihood became increasingly fanciful. By 1950, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was overtly embracing Maoism and attacking the United States in print. Yes, hawkish Cold warriors in the United States and elsewhere helped create this result. But the Vietnamese were creators of their own history as well: and it is unclear if American support for more “liberal” policies would have fundamentally reshaped the Vietnamese political landscape.

Conclusion

On the dust jacket to Mark Lawrence’s book, Lloyd Gardner is quoted as saying of *Assuming the Burden* that

It will no longer be possible to argue that the war was the result of misperceptions. Vietnam was understood perfectly by the groups in each of the three nations -France, Britain, and the United States - pushing for war. This will no longer upset a lot of people who continue to argue the Fog of War thesis.

It is astonishing, given the paucity of scholarship based on Vietnamese language sources, that anyone can make such a claim. Vietnam was not understood perfectly. It was misperceived. We are still grappling to understand the internal dynamics of Vietnam in this period, not to mention the regional and international contexts of the war.

Gardner’s views, I would argue, do not catch the essence of Lawrence’s book. In my reading, Lawrence is not trying to argue that “liberals” in the US and elsewhere understood Vietnam perfectly. He is simply trying to argue that they had a healthier and more prudent skepticism of the wisdom of opposing anticolonial nationalists in Vietnam. While I would argue that Lawrence may overstate the case for Western powers creating the result they most feared – the communist triumph – I still think that he has written an excellent, well-written study of the American path to intervention.

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