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“Prevailing Wind”

In the classic 1942 film *Casablanca,* the unscrupulous French police prefect, Captain Louis Renault explains that his choices are guided less by a moral compass than by a weathervane: “I have no conviction, if that’s what you mean. I blow with the wind, and the prevailing wind happens to be from Vichy.” This picture of an amoral, opportunist, sleazy French official resonated with American audiences because this was largely how they viewed the Vichy regime that ruled a rump French state and collaborated openly, often crassly with the Nazis. Americans would have liked, undoubtedly, to think of themselves as more in the mold of protagonist Rick Blaine: a hard-bitten realist whose jaded cynicism masks a steely resolve to do the right thing, to make principled decisions regardless of the personal cost. Although Rick claims repeatedly, “I stick my neck out for nobody,” his ethical and romantic nemesis Viktor Laszlo points out that Rick sounds like “a man who’s trying to convince himself of something he doesn’t believe in his heart.”

This mythic self-image of American rectitude shaped audience reactions to *Casablanca* (indeed, it shaped the film itself) and continues to shape American collective memories of the Second World War as a crusade for freedom and justice led heroically by the United States. Of course, the realities of that conflict were far more complicated, ambiguous, and less flattering, but distorted public perceptions are remarkably resilient. Four decades ago, Studs Terkel unflinchingly examined the complex and often harrowing lived experience of that war for individual Americans, only to have many miss the irony (implied by quotations marks) in his title, “The Good War,” and adopt it as a straightforward description of America’s World War II.[1] More recently, Elizabeth Samet has trenchantly exposed the corrosive effects on culture, politics, and society of American self-delusions about the so-called Good War.[2]

Michael S. Neiberg’s *When France Fell* similarly punctures the myths of the conventional American story of the Second World War, showing that it is not merely obvious caveats such as the alliance with the totalitarian Soviet Union, or Allied bombing of civilians, or the use of atomic weapons that complicate celebratory depictions of the exploits of the “Greatest Generation.” The policy of the United States toward Vichy France is another of the war’s “dark undersides” that we must investigate if we would avoid telling only “the story we wish to tell ourselves” (p. 242).
The story that Neiberg tells us about this part of the United States’ war is complex, and much of it is unflattering to Americans more comfortable with easy dismissals of France’s role in the war, feckless and weak and in need of GIs to save the nation not only from German occupation but its own self-inflicted shame and degradation. Anyone given to easy, contemptuous stereotypes about the French as “cheese-eating surrender monkeys” (a term coined in the 1990s on the satirical animated television show The Simpsons, and given great currency during the rise of anti-French sentiment in the run-up to and early stages of the Iraq War that began in 2003) might be chagrined to learn that US national security policy up to 1940 rested on the assumption of preponderant French military strength in Europe. And Neiberg makes clear that this strength was real, with for instance French naval strength clearly and significantly ahead of that of the Germans. And it was not just France that placed tremendous faith in the now much-maligned Maginot Line defenses but many Americans as well—not only political and military officials but popular media, with American newspapers and newsreels touting its “impenetrable” defenses (pp. 19-20).

In fact, US reliance on French military strength was so pronounced that Neiberg reverses another recent trope of American discourse about French and European effeminate weakness and unwillingness to stand up in their own defense: the notion of the “free rider.” Americans now use this term as a complaint about European, particularly French and German, unwillingness to spend money from their own budgets on defense, these nations preferring instead to count on the US taxpayer-funded American military to keep the peace in Europe and the world. But in the 1930s and 40s, the United States was the “free rider,” reliance on both French and British strength allowing Americans “to vastly underspend on defense” (p. 12).

The result of this was a nation grossly unprepared for war, and when the stunning French defeat of May-June 1940 became clear, a justified sense of “panic” (p. 57) began to permeate American politics and culture. The reaction was immediate and, fortunately for American fortunes in the coming war, constructive: in June, the United States launched a plan to increase dramatically the size and strength of its armed forces, and by the end of the summer Congress authorized billions of dollars of new defense spending and instituted a peacetime draft for the first time in American history. And this was just the beginning. Lawmakers had strenuously resisted any such measures as late as spring 1940, but the fall of France changed everything. Neiberg persuasively argues that US mobilization for war commenced not in December 1941, with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, but during this period. The significance of the event, and the story the author is telling, could not be greater—an accurate understanding of the importance of France to US strategic thinking upends the American timeline of the war, the conventional dating of the conflict from 1941 to 1945.

All of this context helps explain US policy toward the Vichy regime that ruled the part of France that Germany did not occupy after the defeat. Officially neutral but effectively a vassal of the Nazi state, Vichy presented a quandary to American officials. Charles De Gaulle’s Free French movement, which had sprung up in British exile immediately following the armistice with the Germans, presented an alternative France, both a different idea of France and a different set of national representatives with whom to deal. But from the beginning the US government’s choice to treat Vichy as the only true, legitimate government of France was “more than a case of the United States reluctantly getting its hands dirty,” since the Vichy’s subservience to German interests and the Vichy’s own odiousness was evident to many from its origin—quite simply, American officials “saw much more that they liked in Vichy than in de Gaulle’s Free French” (p. 77).
US policy and efforts to maintain dialogue and good relations with Marshall Pétain’s government was rooted in four strategic considerations that seemed imperative to policymakers: the need to keep the powerful French fleet from supporting the German war effort, the need to keep the resources of the vast French colonial empire in ostensibly neutral hands, the importance of obtaining intelligence about Vichy’s intentions, and a shared, overriding fear and hatred of communism (pp. 99-100). The problem was that these imperatives blinded the Roosevelt administration not just to the acute moral compromises necessitated by dealing with such a regime, but also to the very real, concrete ways that this policy “made America less secure, not more” (p. 123).

In particular, the US policy of supporting anyone but de Gaulle, because of his admittedly monumentally difficult personality and a mistaken belief that he was somehow soft on communism, often shaded into the grotesque, involving all sorts of seedy compromises. Despite the high-minded rhetoric of the Atlantic Charter, the United States actively supported the maintenance of French colonial rule. Despite glaring evidence that Vichy figures such as Pierre Laval and Admiral François Darlan were dishonest and amoral, actively supporting and aiding the Nazi regime’s war effort and its loathsome and murderous racial politics, the United States continued to confer on them rhetorical legitimacy as interlocutors and even to offer them material support. Despite mounting, overwhelming evidence that his Vichy policy was an abject failure, US secretary of state Cordell Hull only deepened his commitment to it—Neiberg is particularly unsparing in his use of adjectives to describe Hull and his actions: “deluded” (p. 124), “naïve” (p. 149), “bizarre and unnecessarily confrontational,” “thin-skinned, stubborn, and sensitive to perceived slights,” “failed and deeply unpopular” (p. 215).

The British found American attitudes counterproductive and even bewildering. One British official regarded American hatred of de Gaulle as “so violent as to be almost pathological” (p. 223). In 1942, US officials cut a deal with Admiral Darlan to forestall Vichy armed resistance to the US invasion of North Africa, making him high commissioner for French North and West Africa. This effectively recognized Darlan as the likely leader of a postwar France, undermining Allied claims to any sort of moral high ground. As a British diplomat trenchantly noted, “we are fighting for international decency and Darlan is the antithesis of that” (p. 201). And it was not just the British who recognized this. An American official admitted that this episode amounted to “a sordid nullification of the principles for which the United Nations were supposed to be fighting for” (p. 205), and a US intelligence report conceded that “the moral principles of the United Nations cannot find expression in immoral actions” (p. 204).

Indeed, the power of Neiberg’s analysis is that he does not rely merely on *ex post facto* judgment, benefiting from the hindsight of the historian. As he notes, Vichy’s true colors were always evident to “anyone who wanted to see them” (p. 91): “French subservience to the Germans became more obvious with every passing week” (p. 94). As *When France Fell* shows clearly, there were numerous and obvious indications that the American public did not support its government’s Vichy policy, that it saw Vichy’s true colors, and that it even supported de Gaulle’s Free France movement. Most important, all of this was clear to see for US officials, who chose to ignore it. Incredibly, US officials ignored evidence they themselves had gathered that not even the French people supported Vichy and its Nazi sponsors (p. 128).

Neiberg gives short shrift to the idea, peddled by figures like the contemporary Harvard historian William Langer, whom Hull enlisted in an effort to justify and whitewash US policy, that the United States reluctantly and temporarily abandoned principles in a necessary effort to prioritize and win the war. Rather, “senior officials lent
their immediate and material support to discriminatory and dictatorial policies even after the country had achieved its military aims” (p. 8). It was only after the liberation of France and the triumphant return of de Gaulle at the head of the nation, that the United States made “belated official acknowledgement that Vichy was in fact what most Americans had known all along—an enemy of the United States, its people, its values, and its interests” (p. 239).

At the risk of introducing a cavil in an overwhelmingly positive review of a book that is important, well argued, deeply researched, and a pleasure to read, written by one of the most productive and accomplished American historians of both world wars, one puzzling aspect of When France Fell deserves mention. The film Casablanca looms large over all of this history, not only because it is one of the most well-known, and many argue greatest films ever made, and not only because it is certainly the most famous film ever made about Americans and the French under Vichy during the Second World War. The film more or less literally looms large over Neiberg’s book because each chapter quotes or paraphrases famous lines from the film (of which there are many that have become permanent fixtures of American popular culture and speech). And yet the author never acknowledges this fact, and only once makes a passing reference to the film in the text (p. 163). This may bemuse readers who do not know the film well. So the chapter titles effectively become an inside joke for those who have committed large parts of the film and its dialogue to memory, such as the author and this reviewer. Perhaps that was Neiberg’s intention all along.

In the final scene of Casablanca, police prefect Renault throws his lot in with Rick, theatrically throwing a bottle of Vichy water into the trash as the two men walk off into the night to face, with the war undecided, an uncertain future. Rick surmises that this could be “the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” This famous line gives chapter 6 of When France Fell its title, but the statement is played for irony in the book, since the friendship between the United States and Vichy, in Neiberg’s telling, is anything but beautiful. But even in the film, the friendship is ambiguous, since the opportunist Renault is once again blowing with the prevailing wind and seeking at any cost to be on the winning side.

This contrasts with the high-minded behavior of Rick, the noble, if wounded soul whose own cynical opportunism is only a façade, masking a conviction to make good and do the right thing in the end for reasons of honor and love, and even country—as Renault says, “Well, Rick, you’re not only a sentimentalist, but you’ve become a patriot.” This is how Americans like to see themselves and their choices in matters of diplomacy and war on the world stage, particularly during the World War II era. But Neiberg’s book shows us that the United States pursued a morally compromised and ineffective policy toward Vichy France far longer and with greater tenacity than is consistent with this self-image.

Notes


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