Diplomatic relations between France and the United States were always notoriously prickly in the decades after 1945. But as Nicholas Wall reminds us in his important new book, relations were difficult between the two nations precisely because of a mutual dependence. The United States counted on France as the critical cornerstone of NATO. This explains the repeated interventions in the post-war years to shore up the fledgling Fourth Republic. Although American interference in French domestic politics declined after 1954, the fear of a French lapse into neutralism—whether under Pierre Mendes-France or Guy Mollet—remained acute. For her part, France was desperately dependent on American aid—be it economic, military or diplomatic—in her attempts to retain her colonial empire. The problem of course was that the United States was rarely sympathetic to France’s desire to retain its colonies. To be sure, the wartime American hostility to France’s Indo-Chinese colonies evaporated with the onset of the Cold War, the Communist victory in China in 1949 and the Korean War. Indeed the United States spent rather more money financing the French war in Indo-China than she spent on the Marshall Plan.

But Algeria was a different matter. French governments strove mightily to persuade the United States that the war in Algeria was part of the larger struggle against Communism, and that Algeria was merely the beleaguered southern flank of NATO. But American policy makers saw through such arguments. John Foster Dulles, his notorious anxieties about an omnipresent Communist notwithstanding, rejected the equation of the Algerian Front de la Liberation Nationale (FLN) with Communism. From his perspective, the French attempts to crush the FLN risked driving moderate Arab nations and much of the emerging Third World into the staunchly anti-colonial Soviet camp. And, while the French persisted in the polite fiction that Algeria was an integral part of France, American observers were not blind to the fact that French military pre-occupation with Algeria effectively ensured that few French troops would be available for the defense of Western Europe. Indeed, as Wall notes, one of the many ironies in this story is that when Charles de Gaulle withdrew France from the integrated command of NATO in 1962, this had little practical effect on the military resources at its disposal.

As a consequence, from the outbreak of the Algerian conflict the United States urged on France a “liberal” policy. In terms of specifics this “liberal” policy was vague but it involved direct negotiations with the Algerian rebels, leading to some form of autonomy and not excluding independence. French governments, from Mendes-France on, gave lip service to such “liberal” policies but, Americans would observe, such policies took distinctly second place to efforts to crush the rebellion. Worse, such efforts took forms calculated to complicate and imperil American attempts to win over the newly emerging states. French involvement in the Suez affair was the classic case, but so too was the French hijacking of a Moroccan passenger plane in order to capture the Algerian rebel leader, Ahmed Ben Bella. Seen in France as something of a coup, in the eyes of America and the rest of the world it was a clear case of piracy. Most serious of all was the Sakiet affair of February 1958 when the French air force, flying American fighters and bombers, attacked the Tunisian village of Sakiet Sidi Youssef, suspected of harboring FLN fighters. In the process they killed several scores of Tunisian civilians. Not only did this poison relations with Habib Bourguiba’s moderate and thoroughly
anti-Communist regime, but it suggested to Americans—
and to a later generation of historians—that the Fourth Re-
public had lost control over its military. On this point
Wall suggests, as he often does in this remarkable book,
that both the Americans and subsequent historians might
have got it wrong. On his account, the French military
were acting in accordance with standing orders that had
been approved by the French government.

American irritation with the French was matched by
French suspicions of the United States. The very re-
strained American contacts with the FLN were seen by
French intelligence as a vast plot by “Les Anglo-Saxons”
to move in on the Saharan oil reserves. Credence of the
cynical motives of the Americans could appear in a vari-
yety of forms. When the French generals revolted against
de Gaulle in the spring of 1961, both they and, it would
seem, the French government suspected covert CIA sup-
port, supposedly because the generals would promise less
equivocal support for NATO.

Whatever the case, by early 1958 the United States
had given up on the Fourth Republic and approached
its seemingly inevitable demise with, for the first time,
considerable equanimity, the more so since the succes-
sor regime was likely to be headed by de Gaulle. No one
suffered any illusions about how difficult de Gaulle could
be, but he did offer the possibility of effective government
and he was believed to be a “liberal” on Algeria. So the
events of May-June 1958 were greeted with a cautious
optimism by the American government.

Were these hopes well founded? The traditional
view has been: only partially. De Gaulle did, eventu-
ally, liquidate the Algerian adventure, thus satisfying
the United States. But he therewith emancipated him-
self from French dependency on the American hegemon,
replaced the American bipolar word view with a multi-
polar one, introduced an independent French nuclear de-
terrent, withdrew French troops from NATO and gener-
ally acted as a free agent. The clearest statement of this
position is that of the French historian, Maurice Vaïsse,
who credits De Gaulle with the diplomatic equivalent of
a “Copernican Revolution.” Central to his interpretation
was that by ridding France of the Algerian albatross de
Gaulle laid the foundations of a truly independent foreign
policy.

Wall is having none of this and, in the process, pro-
vides readers with a stimulating—not to say provocative-
reassessment of “le Grand Charles.” The General, he
bluntly observes, “was not and never would be close
to becoming the plaster saint that a recent semi-official
French historiography has made of him” (p. 259). In
the first place, Wall stresses the continuities between de
Gaulle’s Fifth Republic and the regime it replaced. The
independent nuclear policy—the “force de frappe” which
so troubled the Americans in the early 1960s—had been
laid down by the governments of the late Fourth Repub-
lic. De Gaulle’s withdrawal from the integrated com-
mand system of NATO changed very little, given the
paucity of French troop commitments from 1955 on-
wards. The incontestable French economic growth in the
1960s—allegedly the result of withdrawal from Algeria—
had deep roots in the Fourth Republic, its military com-
mitments and periodic balance of payments notwith-
standing.

More fundamentally still, Wall does not believe that
de Gaulle’s Algerian policy was so very different from
that of his predecessors. De Gaulle, he argues, did not
come to power with the intention of rescuing France from
the Algerian morass. To the contrary, he wanted to do
what his supporters, in France and Algeria expected him
to do: preserve Alerte Francais. Granted, knowing ex-
actly what de Gaulle meant when he declared before the
crowds in Algiers on 4 June 1958: “Je vous ai compris”
has long bedeviled historians. Those who believe that
de Gaulle had long ago reconciled himself to Algerian
independence can cite certain private conversations to
that effect. Those who believe he was lying on 4 June
can cite very different confidences. No one, Wall notes,
can cite any public declarations that suggest he was pre-
pared to give up on French Algeria. The problem is com-
pounded by the fact that, as Wall admits, it is not clear
that the General knew his own mind. Still, nothing in
the policies de Gaulle adopted in his first eighteen month
in power suggest any commitment to Algerian indepen-
dence. The Constantine Plan, involving as it did the com-
mitment of vast resources to Algerian economic devel-
oped, was not an obvious complement to any scheme
for letting Algeria go. Even more strikingly, the Challe
plan, adopted in January of 1959, was clearly a plan for
the military reconquest of Algeria. It displaced over a
million Muslim villagers into what were often glorified
concentration camps, created “free fire zones” and dra-
matically increased the body count of Algerian rebels.
Successful though the Challe plan was, in a narrow mil-
itary sense, its implementation strikes Wall as seriously
inconsistent with any vision of an independent Algeria.
Only when the Challe plan failed to break the resolve of
the FLN did de Gaulle consider other possibilities, all of
them designed to keep Algeria as dependant on France
as possible.
Wall therefore flatly rejects the proposition that for de Gaulle, liquidating the Algerian adventure was the necessary pre-condition for an independent French foreign policy, a multi-polar view of the world designed to replace the Anglo-American bipolar view. To the contrary, according to Wall, French retention of Algeria—in whatever form—was central to de Gaulle’s essential bipolar foreign policy. In essence, a France strengthened by her African connections—the famous “Eurafrican” vision inherited from his predecessors—could be an equal partner with the two Anglo-Saxon powers. The quid pro quo was obvious. If the United States wanted unequivocal support over Quemoy and Matsu or over the Congo, all they need do was acknowledge French preponderance in North Africa and be less obstreperous about French negotiations with the FLN.

Unfortunately for De Gaulle, the Americans did not take this bait, the Kennedy administration even less so than the Eisenhower one. As a result, de Gaulle’s Algerian gambit failed miserably and he was reduced to the petulant sniping at the United States that characterized his diplomacy in the 1960’s.

There emerges from this study a consistently negative portrait of de Gaulle. Far from being the farsighted diplomat that his admirers have so often depicted, he was in fact a hidebound and blinkered bungler. His obdurate refusal to recognize Algerian realities needlessly prolonged the war (which lasted longer under him than under the miserable Fourth Republic), unnecessarily increased the human suffering, played into the hands of the more radical elements in the FLN and generally produced what Wall describes as the “worst of all possible outcomes” (p. 252). The rest of his period in power was characterized by shallow and ineffectual posturing. Willi Brandt did more than de Gaulle ever could to overcome the East-West divide. De Gaulle’s massive spending on nuclear arms achieved little and ensured only that France would not invest sufficiently in higher education—for which de Gaulle would pay the price in 1968.

Given the subject matter this is bound to be a controversial interpretation and one that will not command universal assent. But it is argued with exceptional elegance and made stronger still by the author’s impressive command of the archival sources both in France and the United States. This is one of the most important books on de Gaulle to have appeared in the last 20 years and one that should be required reading for all historians of modern France.

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