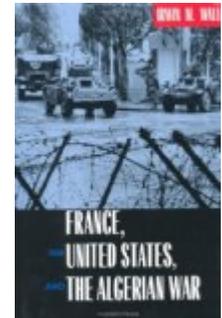


Irwin M. Wall. *France, the United States and the Algerian War.* Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001. xiii + 335 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-22534-3.



Reviewed by William D. Irvine

Published on H-Diplo (May, 2002)

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 Communism 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 Republic 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 restrained 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 variety 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 support, 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 successor 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, eventually, liquidate the Algerian adventure, thus satisfying the United States. But he therewith emancipated himself from French dependency on the American hegemon, replaced the American bipolar world view with a multi-polar one, introduced an independent French nuclear deterrent, withdrew French troops from NATO and generally 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, provides 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 his-

torigraphy 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 Republic. De Gaulle's withdrawal from the integrated command system of NATO changed very little, given the paucity of French troop commitments from 1955 onwards. The incontestable French economic growth in the 1960s—allegedly the result of withdrawal from Algeria—had deep roots in the Fourth Republic, its military commitments and periodic balance of payments notwithstanding.

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 *Algerie Francais*. Granted, knowing exactly 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 prepared to give up on French Algeria. The problem is compounded 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 months in power suggest any commitment to Algerian independence. The Constantine Plan, involving as it did the commitment of vast resources to Algerian economic development, 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 recon-

quest of Algeria. It displaced over a million Muslim villagers into what were often glorified concentration camps, created "free fire zones" and dramatically increased the body count of Algerian rebels. Successful though the Challe plan was, in a narrow military 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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Citation: William D. Irvine. Review of Wall, Irwin M. *France, the United States and the Algerian War*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. May, 2002.

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