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Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam*. New York: Random House, 2012. Pp. xxii, 839. ISBN 978-0-375-50442-6.

Review by Gregory A. Daddis, US Military Academy, West Point (gregory.daddis@usma.edu).

One of the more agreeable trends in the historiography of the Vietnam Wars over the last decade or so has been the discussion of events in Southeast Asia within a larger international context. To be sure, many American historians still concentrate on aspects of US involvement—the decision to escalate, the conduct of the ground war, or the interrelationships between domestic discontent and foreign policy decision-making. Nonetheless, scholars are increasingly considering Vietnam as more than just an American conflict.¹ Fredrik Logevall (Cornell) continues this salutary trend in his masterful new study, *Embers of War*. In a brilliant, captivating, even gripping, narrative based on detailed and judicious historical analysis of the Vietnam conflict, he succeeds in providing a “full-fledged international account of how the whole saga began” (xv). Moving from the end of World War I to the American commitment to defend a faltering South Vietnam, this is a story of contingency and continuity in both the formulation of foreign policy and the conduct of war.

Logevall tackles his subject chronologically, dividing his text into six highly readable parts. He opens with a brief review of France's profit-driven colonial policy and the impact of the First World War on emerging Indochinese nationalists, who saw promise in Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and commitment to self-determination for all peoples. Logevall introduces Ho Chi Minh in the immediate postwar period to illustrate the disappointed ambitions of anti-colonial leaders; Ho appears here as a thoughtful and patient pragmatist who well understood the international playing field and the problems that Great Power policies posed for the Vietnamese revolutionary struggle.

Part 1, “Liberations,” situates the nationalist struggle within the context of World War II. The fall of France in 1940 presented opportunities not only to the Japanese, intent on establishing a New World Order in East Asia, but to Vietnamese nationalists, whom the “French defeat hit like a bolt from the blue” (27). Logevall examines the myriad tasks that Ho Chi Minh faced in redefining the revolution as a one of national liberation rather than class struggle: he had to build a local army from scratch, neutralize competing nationalist groups, and secure the backing of allies. Already by 1940, however, Ho found himself immersed in stronger international currents. As a defeated France battled to retain its colonial possessions—with the strong support of Great Britain—US businessmen eager to open foreign markets and an American president opposed to imperial endeavors threatened to undermine French rule. Yet, Franklin Roosevelt “never succeeded in reconciling his deep opposition to European colonialism with his equally heartfelt commitment to securing postwar collaboration among the great powers” (66). By 1945, however, it was clear that the United States would play a major role in the brewing hostilities between returning French forces and the newly independent DRV.

In part 2, “Colonial Struggle,” Logevall explores the years immediately after World War II, underscoring the influence of outside forces on leaders in Indochina. While hardliners like Adm. Georges Thierry d'Argenlieu, the French high commissioner, proclaimed that “It is the sacred duty of France to reestablish order” in Vietnam (124), Cold War considerations limited French options. At least some French officers understood the problems of fighting a long guerrilla war among a population imbued with nationalist feelings.

1. E.g., in *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2008), Mark Atwood Lawrence seeks “to strike a balance by examining the American role within a broadly international context” (4). More recently, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, in *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2012), offers a fresh perspective on the inner workings of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) Politburo, highlighting leaders like Le Duan, who struggled to orchestrate a revolutionary conflict within the constraints of Cold War politics.

Gen. Philippe Leclerc, in 1947, warned that “France would need a minimum of five hundred thousand troops to subjugate a people so committed to their independence” (178).² These same officers realized that lack of manpower would necessitate an uncomfortable dependence on US support. To retain their Indochinese holdings, French officials had to convince the wary Americans to see the escalating war in Vietnam as part of the global confrontation against the Soviet Union. In short, they hoped anti-communism would trump anti-colonialism.

While *Embers of War* primarily concerns higher-level diplomatic and political maneuvering, Logevall paints a riveting picture of military events from both the French and Vietnamese perspectives. Though military action was necessary for the French Army, its officers appreciated that in the long term, as Leclerc observed, “One does not kill ideas with bullets” (119). Yet bullets were needed when Viet Minh leaders like Vo Nguyen Giap ably employed military force against French outposts, European *colons*, and intransigent village officials. Like Ho Chi Minh, Giap is presented here as a patient military commander who understood the role of terrorism and the inadvisability of waging a conventional war against a modern European army. Though Logevall sheds light on Giap’s tactical mistakes, such as in the 1951 Day River battles, he clearly admires the Viet Minh commander. For him, Giap’s adaptation of Mao Zedong’s teachings to the unique operational environment of Vietnam, while he was balancing the advice of Chinese advisors, is the key to understanding the military side of the French-Indochina War.

The Chinese assume a predominant role in part 3, “East Meets West,” and indeed throughout the remainder of Logevall’s story. Mao’s victory in China changed the calculations of war in Vietnam. For the French, US fears of Chinese aggression helped their policy makers cast Indochina as the vanguard theater within a larger Cold War struggle. For Americans like Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, such Cold War imperatives dictated increased US support for a war that many Frenchmen were beginning to question. Logevall stresses the irony of rising anti-American sentiment in France when US support was propping up the French in Indochina. For Mao, the Vietnamese uprising exemplified his own model of revolution. And finally, for Ho Chi Minh, Chinese involvement brought both opportunities and risks: “The Sino-Soviet recognition of his government, however necessary, was certain to alienate a lot of Vietnamese moderates ... and limit Vietnam’s room for maneuver with respect to non-Communist Asia... A certain degree of independence had been lost” (229).

This loss of independence extended to American policy makers as well. As in his earlier work,³ Logevall highlights the role of contingency in decision-making; but there is throughout this book a feeling of inevitability as American officials faced a narrowing field of options. President Dwight Eisenhower, for example, saw few alternatives to backing the French, since “the Indochina struggle [was] part of a worldwide fight against Communist aggression” (340). Incongruously, American leaders saw their support for France’s colonial interests as bolstering its position in Europe, even as the war in Vietnam sapped French strength both at home and abroad. Like Truman before him, Ike wanted to stand firm against perceived Chinese and Soviet expansionism. Anything less would invite political censure at home, hardly an attractive prospect in the McCarthy years. The French, for their part, disliked both their own continuing dependence on Washington and “the Eisenhower administration’s insistence on a military solution in Indochina at the same time it sought a political settlement in Korea” (346).

The military denouement of the French Indochina War takes center stage in part 4, aptly titled “The Cauldron.” Logevall’s harrowing description of the climactic battle at Dien Bien Phu moves seamlessly between the beleaguered French garrison in northwest Tonkin and high-level political offices in Paris and Washington. The sacrifice and courage on both sides of the fighting are palpable in this exceptionally vivid battlefield account. Logevall argues that, by 1954, the Americans had already replaced the French as Ho Chi Minh’s principal enemy, even as deep divisions began surfacing inside the Western camp. Dien Bien Phu elevated “the most pressing question of all: Should the United States, either alone or in concert with Britain

2. Cf. US Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki’s testimony before Congress in 2003 on the number of soldiers required for the postwar occupation of Iraq.

3. *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 1999).

and other allies, intervene directly in the war?" (453). Logevall centers the political wrangling over this question on an intriguing cast of characters—Adm. Arthur Radford, who saw US intervention as a way to strike at the real foe, China; Gen. Matthew Ridgway, who believed the costs of involvement would far outweigh any benefits; French foreign minister Georges Bidault, who was under pressure at home to seek a negotiated settlement; and British foreign secretary Anthony Eden, who, skeptical of the domino theory, feared the dangers of escalation.

Throughout his discussion of the debates on American involvement in Southeast Asia, Logevall emphasizes the special relationship between Dulles and Eisenhower. In both parts 4 and 5, "Peace of a Kind," he portrays the president as "a man who was fully prepared to intervene with force under certain circumstances and who sought to maintain his freedom of maneuver for whatever contingencies might arise" (473). If Ike was determined to hold Indochina, he also was astute enough to grasp, especially in the aftermath of Korea, that unilateral action would entail excessive political risks domestically. While Logevall presents Dulles as an equal to the president,⁴ Eisenhower certainly controls the foreign policy in *Embers of War*. Still, both men were hemmed in by the 1954 Geneva Accords: "Averse though they were to having any compromise agreement of any kind with Communist foes, they also were in no mood to rush in without allied support" (592). Lacking that support—Churchill and Eden both opposed US intervention in Indochina—the Americans planned to defend the southern half of a newly bifurcated Vietnam and draw the line against further Soviet or Chinese expansionism.

The book concludes with the rise of Ngo Dinh Diem, a committed anti-communist who seemed best suited to build a national community in South Vietnam. Incongruities abound in the final chapters. Intent on gaining congressional and public support for intervention, Eisenhower, after Geneva, had to explain why a superpower like the United States should accept a divided Vietnam. While Diem relied on US support for his political survival, "Dependence on the United States could, he feared, taint his credentials as a nationalist, thus playing into the hands of his enemies" (657). Logevall gives a standard interpretation of Diem's rise and decline, but the attenuation of American leverage over South Vietnamese leaders is very instructive given the United States' more recent attempts to influence foreign governments in regions like the Middle East and Central Asia.

Logevall presents a long list of civilian and military leaders—Charles de Gaulle, Truman, Eisenhower, to name a few—who believed inaction in Indochina would imperil their personal and national standings. Yet his story reveals not simply why nations go to war, but why they remain at war. Even after American leaders realized the serious obstacles to success in South Vietnam, "it was always safer, easier—in domestic political as well as geographic terms—to soldier on, to muddle through" (697). The Vietnamese, French, and American sacrifices incurred along the "safer" path of muddling through should make us reflect on how and whether justifications put forth for any military intervention truly relate to national security.

Logevall reminds us that "the story of the French Indochina War and its aftermath is a contingent one, full of alternative choices, major and minor, considered and taken, reconsidered and altered" (xvii). *Embers of War* clarifies just how, across decades and continents, subtle yet powerful notions of integrity, honor, and pride lead us ineluctably to a most important and unsettling conclusion: war has a momentum all its own.

4. Contrast Evan Thomas, *Ike's Bluff: President Eisenhower's Secret Battle to Save the World* (NY: Little, Brown, 2012) 129: "[Dulles] rarely strayed too far from the president's views."