



## *When France Fell: The Vichy Crisis and the Fate of the Anglo-American Alliance* by Michael S. Neiberg.

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We are accustomed to thinking that America's World War II began with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (7 Dec. 1941). In fact, military historian Michael Neiberg (US Army War College) tells us, the country was seized by a sense of immense peril already in the six weeks of May and June 1940 that ended with the fall of France. That collapse is often caricatured as the inevitable outcome of French incompetence and German expertise. But British forces, too, were involved in that infamous rout. And the German high command was as surprised by their success as their hapless adversaries, crouched on a beach at Dunkirk, were baffled by their humiliation. That was because, between the wars, both Britain and the United States had based their strategy toward Germany on the assumption that the French army, on paper at least a match for the Wehrmacht, would tie down a German invasion just as it had in 1914, thus giving the Western allies time to mobilize and tip the balance as it had in 1917.

In 1940, London and Washington faced the consequences of their twenty-year diplomatic abandonment of their World War I ally. The British government was the more hypocritical for denying France the same kind of support it expected for itself from the Americans. The calamity of 1940 forced the Washington to take the initial steps of a complete reconstitution of US foreign policy, with "lasting impacts on American society and the way the United States government understood what it had to do to ensure its own security" (3).

*When France Fell* is a superbly crafted synthesis of military, diplomatic, and political history, designed to integrate defeated France into a more thorough understanding of how the Western allies applied themselves to Germany's ultimate defeat:

America's Second World War really began not on December 7, 1941, but in the critical weeks of May and June 1940. The decisions American leaders made in the wake of those events shaped the remainder of the war and lasted well into the postwar years as well. Taking France out of this story, as too many histories of this story do, produces not only an incomplete history of the war but also an inaccurate, even misleading, one. (16)

Neiberg is a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of America and the West at the Foreign Policy Institute and the author/editor of some twenty-five books.<sup>1</sup> He has organized *When France Fell* into seven chapters and a conclusion, each cleverly titled after a memorable passage from the classic film *Casablanca*.<sup>2</sup> The book also features a short introduction, forty-eight pages of notes, twenty-two maps, photographs, and illustrations, and an index.

1. See, e.g., *Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard U Pr, 2011), *Potsdam: The End of World War II and the Remaking of Europe* (NY: Basic Books, 2015), and *Path to War: How the First World War Created Modern America* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2016).

2. Dir. Michael Curtiz (1942).

Central to a rebalancing of the historiography of the war, Neiberg maintains, is a grasp of the relationship between the Anglo-American alliance and the collaborationist Vichy regime, as well as with France-in-exile as personified by Charles de Gaulle. In the confusion following the Battle of France, the Roosevelt administration was to reach out to the Vichy government, especially as its political coloring under the icon of French patriotism, Phillipe Pétain, was initially mysterious. Figures within it, such as Gen. Maxime Weygand, were thought to favor the Allied cause. Few of the Americans grasped what a dog's breakfast of the worst of French political tradition Vichy in fact represented. When Weygand was posted to the French colonies in North Africa, he became theoretically useful in the theater of the war where the Allies began the liberation of Europe in 1942 (85–89). This complicated Roosevelt's increasingly close collaboration with Winston Churchill, whose sense of France's place in the world moved him to support de Gaulle, a little known division commander of the defeated French army, as the head of the Free French government headquartered in London.

Here Neiberg's sensitivity to personality and perception in diplomacy pays dividends. Both Allied leaders found de Gaulle difficult. But where Roosevelt thought him aloof and arrogant, Churchill saw no reason why that should disqualify him from representing France and was often more amused than annoyed by him. Moreover, there were hard calculations in play, in which two late imperial powers like Britain and France shared a perspective foreign to the United States:

The British and de Gaulle understood that they needed each other because they had many African interests in common. For the British Gaullist control of French Equatorial Africa meant one less critical military theater to defend .... From the beginning, therefore, de Gaulle had a strategic importance to the British in Africa and the Middle East that he did not have for the Americans. The British recognized that a productive strategic relationship with de Gaulle meant having to suffer through frequent bouts of pride and arrogance that the Frenchman could display. The 1940 and 1941 campaigns in Africa thus set a foundation of mutual interests that the British and de Gaulle built upon for the remainder of the war. (75)

To Churchill's exasperation, Roosevelt kept de Gaulle at arms-length for much of the war, not unlike Rick Blaine, the jilted lover in *Casablanca* who remained a sullen cynic for much of the film. When the Allies invaded North Africa, Vichy forces there did not rally to their cause and resisted as long as was practicable. Once they had laid down their arms, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in North Africa, notoriously recognized Adm. Jean-François Darlan, a reactionary collaborator and opportunist turncoat, as High Commissioner of France in North and West Africa. Darlan's subsequent assassination in Algiers by a monarchist member of the resistance spared the Allies the continuing embarrassment of association with him. Yet they then turned to Gen. Henri Giraud, a dolt—whose only virtue was not being Charles de Gaulle—to succeed him. Symbolically, it was at the Allied conference at Casablanca in January 1943 that the Allies recognized de Gaulle and Giraud as joint leaders of the Free French forces (207–39). It was also at Casablanca that Roosevelt had to concede what Churchill already knew, namely that, much as he disliked de Gaulle, it was folly to underrate him. Robert Murphy, the president's personal representative, who worked tirelessly with his British counterpart, Harold Macmillan, to ensure that the conference produced a unified Allied policy, understood why:

Roosevelt had seen with his own eyes that Giraud was, in Murphy's estimation, "a rather simple-minded soldier." De Gaulle, by contrast, "stole the show," projecting a clear vision of France, a charisma that attracted more and more Frenchmen to his cause, and a sense of determination that Gi-

raud lacked. De Gaulle could, however, be tough and maddeningly sensitive on issues of French pride. At one point he complained about the insufficient number of French flags for a conference held on French soil. He showed little gratitude to the Americans and British who had done the actual fighting to liberate North Africa. Nevertheless, he demonstrated political thinking that even Murphy described as “two jumps ahead of everyone else’s,” and he could articulate a vision for France’s postwar future that impressed his critics. (220–21)

Neiberg concludes that America’s flirtation with Vichy did not go disastrously wrong, but cautions that this had little to do with wise decision-making in Washington. What emerged among the Western Allies following Germany’s defeat in 1945 was not the “beautiful friendship” Rick proposed to Captain Renault at the conclusion of *Casablanca*, but a reconstituted Western security alliance marked by coolness between Paris and Washington. As founder and president of the Fifth Republic, de Gaulle put France at the center of the postwar West European order, whence it sought to mitigate as often as enhance Anglo-American influence—an outcome that would have astounded FDR had he lived to see it. Writing Vichy out of the history of World War II, Neiberg cautions, “only helps tell the story we wish to tell ourselves. When we mislead ourselves about our past, we not only fail to learn, but we sometimes learn exactly the wrong lessons” (242–43). This warning applies to any sober accounting of history far beyond the place and time of this excellent book.