Rejoinder

New Light on an Old Issue?

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We would first like to thank Charles Cogan, William Hitchcock, and Mark Sheetz for taking the time to comment on our article, and we welcome the opportunity to respond to their thoughtful remarks.1

Sheetz vigorously defends the old conventional view of French policy toward Germany in the decade after the Second World War. Our argument, he writes, "stretches the evidence beyond its tensile strength." The evidence, as he sees it, instead supports "traditional claims" that France in this period "fought a series of rearguard actions against Anglo-Saxon policy, culminating in resigned acquiescence." He further claims that scholars such as CyrilBuffet and William Hitchcock "largely concur" with his conclusions. But Hitchcock in his comment writes that he has "almost no significant complaints" with the arguments we presented in our article; indeed, he says he "made the same arguments four years ago" in his own book. Cogan, for his part, believes not just that we had something new to say, but that we support our claims with "an impressive and seemingly irrefutable" body of evidence.

Sheetz, Hitchcock, and Cogan are all first-rate scholars with real expertise in this area, and it is quite striking that they should react so differently to the argument we laid out in our article. In some ways, they seem to answer each other. Hitchcock's complaints (that we were attacking a straw man and did little more than restate what most scholars "have known for some time") can be answered by pointing to the two other commentaries. From what Sheetz and Cogan say, it is evident that we were not simply restating the conventional wisdom on the subject. It is equally clear that many recent works, including some important books published in the 1990s that we cite in the article, still take the traditional view. In fact, Sheetz maintains that other scholars (includ-


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ing Hitchcock himself) who have done archival work have reached conclusions considerably at variance with ours and more or less in line with his own view. But this contention can be countered by pointing to the fact that Hitchcock sees little of substance to criticize in what we wrote.

Some readers might be a bit puzzled by all this. How exactly, they might wonder, do our views differ from those of other scholars or from the conventional wisdom in this area? How does the line we take differ from the interpretation Hitchcock presents in his book or from the view Sheetz holds? To the extent that differences can be identified, how does one go about deciding which view is correct? These are the issues we would like to discuss in this rejoinder.

We begin with the first question: Is there a major difference between what we argue and the interpretation Hitchcock develops in his book *France Restored*?

Well, yes and no. We certainly agree with the basic thesis of his book that France was not simply pulled along in America’s wake and that the French played an important and constructive role in determining how the West dealt with Germany. We also basically agree with Hitchcock’s interpretation of the period leading to the Paris accords of 1954. We do not agree, however, with the picture his book paints of French policy in the immediate post-war period and in 1950.

His book portrays the French as embracing a very tough line on the German question in the 1945–1947 period. He takes France’s Rhenish demands at face value and argues that the French were not particularly concerned about the Soviet threat until 1947 or even 1948; moreover, he insists that French leaders, even in 1947, were fighting “tooth and nail to keep their positions intact against a growing Anglo-American determination to loosen economic controls on Germany.” It was, he believes, only in late 1947 that the French, seeing the limits on their own power, finally came to understand that they had to work “within a framework of alliance and integration with the United States, Great Britain, and Germany.” “Outmaneuvered and isolated,” the French by that point had grudgingly come to see that they had little choice but to adjust to existing power realities.

Our understanding of French policy in this period is markedly different. We believe that French leaders were deeply concerned with the Soviet threat from 1945 on and that one of the primary goals of their policy toward Germany—especially the Rhenish demands, which they knew practically from the start had no chance of being accepted—was to keep the Soviet Union out

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3. *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 92, 97, and 98.
of western Germany. That in itself implied that French policymakers from the outset were in sympathy with the basic idea of a “western strategy” for Germany, a strategy that for domestic political reasons they could not openly embrace. This is why French officials, even in the immediate postwar period, did not fight “tooth and nail” for a simple hardline policy on Germany. When they did come out openly in favor of a policy of cooperation with the United States and Britain on this issue, they were not simply bowing to political realities. They understood—or at least key French officials understood—why that new policy was in France’s national interest.

Our view of French policy in late 1950 on the West German rearmament question also differs from Hitchcock’s, although the differences here are less extreme. For example, in his discussion of the very important September 1950 New York Conference, Hitchcock claims that French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman refused to accept even “the principle of German participation” in an integrated force.4 We argue that on the contrary not only did Schuman accept the principle of a West German military contribution, but he was willing to agree to a plan—provided that it could be kept secret. Hitchcock refers to “France’s extraordinary opposition to German rearmament” at the time.5 This is quite different from the way we characterize French policy at that juncture.

Given all this, it is easy to understand why Sheetz believes that Hitchcock’s interpretation accords with his own understanding of French policy in that period. But it is also easy to understand why Hitchcock contends that our view is in line with his basic argument about the important role—indeed, the constructive role—that the French government played in international politics in the postwar period. We share that basic view but apply it even to the immediate postwar period and also to the interpretation of what happened on the West German rearmament question in 1950. It is in this sense that we say we take the argument further than Hitchcock did.

The real question is whether we are justified in doing so, and that issue turns on how the evidence is to be interpreted. Our basic assumption is that public statements are not to be taken at face value. We regard it as self-evident that the public statements of French officials were framed with an eye to political realities within France. On the other hand, we believe that what French leaders were telling the Americans and the British in private is to be taken very seriously. These intra-alliance discussions indicate more accurately what French leaders were really thinking at the time.

4. Ibid., p. 140.
5. Ibid., p. 135.
An argument rooted in the assumption that what was said in public is not to be taken at face value cannot, of course, be refuted simply by citing a series of public statements. Sheetz supports his interpretation by citing a number of such statements; but even if he had cited many more, that evidence would not in itself prove that our assumption about their lack of evidentiary weight is incorrect. To make his case, Sheetz would have to criticize our basic assumption about the sort of evidence that should be taken most seriously on its own terms. To his credit, he does challenge that assumption in a very direct way.

Sheetz makes two arguments along these lines. First, he suggests that what Georges Bidault told the Anglo-Saxons should not be taken as an expression of his real thinking, because he might have been “playing a game not with his domestic opposition, but with his foreign counterparts.” Perhaps, Sheetz says, Bidault was simply using the “common negotiating tactic” of “presenting himself as the good cop who would love to agree to terms if only his less enlightened partner did not stand in the way.” Konrad Adenauer, he points out, “was famous for using domestic political constraints to extract concessions from the allied powers,” and if Adenauer could do it, why could not Bidault have been using the same tactic?

Sheetz’s second point is also quite important. He compares what French officials were saying to their Anglo-American allies with what they were saying in private among themselves. He assumes that in those internal discussions there was no need for the “posturing characteristic of state-to-state negotiations” and that, therefore, French officials were “even more candid” with each other in private than they were with their allies.

What should one make of these arguments? To begin with, take the point that the kind of evidence we cited—what Bidault, Schuman, and other top French officials told U.S. and British leaders—cannot be accepted at face value because those officials might have been playing a game with their allies. There are two ways to determine how seriously one should take the views expressed in such meetings: first, by trying to see whether a soft line with the allies had any effect on the ability of the French to achieve their alleged policy goals; and second, by focusing on what was actually done in this area.

What effect would a moderate position likely have had in talks with U.S. and British officials? Would it really have made the allies more willing to make concessions and more likely to lean toward a hardline policy on the German question? If the French government had really wanted to prevent the allies from moving toward a less repressive policy in this area—that is, toward a policy of “organizing” western Germany under the auspices of the Western powers; of integrating that country into the Western world; and of relying on the Soviet threat, the political structures that the Western powers were building,
and the presence of Western forces in western Germany to keep that country dependent on the Western powers and under control—then why would French officials tell their allies in effect that they really supported the policy but were for the time being prevented from publicly saying so for domestic political reasons? Taking that line would scarcely have kept the Anglo-Saxons from moving ahead in this area. It would hardly have led them to make concessions on the German issue. In fact, it was bound to have the opposite effect. It inevitably would have encouraged the Americans and the British to discount French objections and indeed to factor into their calculations the expectation that if they moved ahead, France would eventually acquiesce.

This general point can be developed further by examining some specific but striking cases. First consider the case of Bidault’s astonishing comment in a September 1945 meeting with British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin that the German threat was a “useful myth.” How could such a comment lead to British concessions—that is, to greater British support for a repressive policy in Germany? Next consider Bidault’s remarks in an important meeting with Bevin in December 1947. Bidault began by complaining about American uncertainty on the German question. His sense was that the Americans had not really decided to move ahead, but he himself was convinced that the time for action had come and that the three Western governments needed to proceed on a unified basis. Why would he have adopted this line unless he really believed in the necessity of a common program of action? If the French had truly wanted to obstruct a policy of moving forward in this area, why would Bidault have taken a bolder position than even the Americans were apparently prepared to take at the time? What conceivable benefit would he have derived by criticizing the Americans in this way?

A third example has to do with what a whole series of French officials told U.S. Ambassador to France David Bruce in July 1950, well before the West German rearmament issue came to a head at the New York Conference in September. Those officials, as we pointed out in the article, argued for West German rearmament in the framework of an Atlantic army or a European army, exactly the same line that the Americans, in their own internal discussions, were coming to take. Why would these French officials have espoused this position unless they really wanted Western policy to move in that direc-


tion? How would taking that position have helped them achieve their supposed goal of obstructing West German rearmament in any form?

We now turn to the second test: what was actually done. Key decisions can be examined; the goal is to try to see what larger meaning they have. The issue of Soviet participation in the control of the Ruhr is an important case in point. President Charles de Gaulle and Bidault parted company on this issue early on. In September 1945, Bidault, to de Gaulle’s “great fury,” as Georges-Henri Soutou writes, refused to accept the idea of allowing the Soviet Union to take part in the control of that key industrial area. Soutou concludes that Bidault was thus “showing a certain degree of solidarity with the Anglo-Saxons with regard to Soviet ambitions.” It is important to think through what this implied. Bidault certainly wanted France to have some say over how the Ruhr was managed. If he wanted to keep the Soviet Union out, he must have been thinking in terms of a tripartite control regime for the Ruhr—and that probably meant he was already thinking in terms of a tripartite regime for western Germany as a whole.

The occupation-statute episode, which we discussed in the article, is perhaps a more striking example. We claimed that the French government in that affair “took the lead in pressing for a major liberalization of the occupation regime.” The French government was proposing a more liberal regime than the one called for in the document the allies were then drafting. This was an important indicator that the French were not simply giving way to Anglo-American pressure because they had little choice in the matter; it showed that they had a policy of their own, a policy that was not purely obstructionist.

What about Sheetz’s other point about what French officials were saying to each other in private? We know what various officials were saying at the time. Are the documents recording their views preferable to the records of intergovernmental meetings because, as Sheetz claims, these officials in internal discussions had no need to engage in the “posturing characteristic of state-to-state negotiations”? Not necessarily. There is no guarantee, for example, that a record of the views of a particular midlevel foreign ministry official tells us anything about the thinking of the people who really control policy—that is, the people at the highest levels who control what a state actually

does. Memoranda may be written, but the mere fact that people are putting their thoughts on paper has little significance in itself. Without further analysis, one has no way of knowing whether those memoranda represent anything more than the opinions of their authors. A foreign minister can ignore the views of his (or her) subordinates and indeed often does. Because the foreign minister does not have to convince his subordinates that he is correct, he does not need to write memoranda outlining his own thinking on a subject. Nor does he have to explain to his subordinates in any way why he is pursuing a certain course of action.

But in meetings with foreign leaders, and even with foreign ambassadors, the situation is very different. A foreign minister normally has an interest in reaching a certain understanding with the representatives of foreign powers. The way to achieve this goal is often through a meeting of the minds. A degree of openness is therefore essential, and indeed it is often amazing how open the highest-ranking officials are with one another in intergovernmental meetings. What this implies for our purposes is that the records of such meetings are of fundamental importance and might be more revealing than most of the purely internal documents available to scholars.

One should not, of course, take this argument too far. Internal sources certainly do reflect the way major issues are handled within particular governments; in the case of France during the postwar period, one can learn much by studying evidence of that sort. Basic issues of policy were vigorously debated within the foreign ministry, and one can examine that debate and see which positions were associated with which individuals. One can then note which individuals (René Massigli and André François-Poncet, for example) were chosen to play important roles, and one can draw from this evidence certain conclusions about the sort of thinking that really mattered. The point is simply that the documents, as Sheetz writes, never just speak for themselves. A certain amount of thought has to be put into the interpretation of the evidence. One should never simply note which arguments were made most frequently in internal discussions and then assume, in a more or less mechanical way, that those were the arguments that largely shaped policy.

For example, in the internal debates over France's policy toward Germany in 1947, and at other points as well, those who supported cooperation with the United States and Britain frequently argued that if France remained aloof the Anglo-Saxons would simply move ahead on their own, whereas France, by caving in, might be able to influence the course of events. The supporters of that policy were trying to convince those on the other side—that is, officials who were opposed on fundamental grounds to what the Anglo-Saxons were doing. In that context it made sense for those who supported cooperation to emphasize tactical considerations rather than to challenge their opponents'
basic views head on. But that does not mean that tactical considerations
played the key role in shaping their own thinking. To get at the sources of
their thinking, we must try to look at the world through their eyes and recon-
struct as best we can what their thinking was.

These problems of historical interpretation have no simple, turn-
the-crank solution, and we certainly do not claim that the interpretation we
outlined is the final word on the subject. We have learned a good deal in re-
cent years and now have a clearer sense of what French policy in the postwar
period actually was. But, as the discussion here shows, important historical is-
ues remain unsettled. It is thus safe to say that scholarly debate in this area
will continue. We have come a long way, but we still have a long way to go.