Indeed, what determined the outcome of the hydrogen bomb was not institutional affiliation so much as deep-seated resentment and individual rivalries. “The conflict was vicious because the feelings were visceral,” the authors write in their conclusion (p. 163).

Moreover, what started as a dispute over the feasibility, morality, and military utility of the thermonuclear bomb eventually blossomed into a fight—among the same combatants—over nuclear strategy, continental air defense, and tactical nuclear weapons. The battle was joined when what the authors call the “dissenting coalition”—Oppenheimer, James Conant, and George F. Kennan—opposed the nuclear war planning of the U.S. Strategic Air Command (SAC), “an Air Force within an Air Force” (p. 164) and SAC’s charismatic leader, General Curtis LeMay. Given the sudden and unexpectedly early end of the U.S. nuclear monopoly in August 1949 with the Soviet Union’s first nuclear test, the outcome—a defeat on all fronts—was seemingly foreordained, the authors observe. “The nuclear dissidents stood little chance against so formidable an opponent” (p. 164).

In hindsight, the only realistic alternative to proceeding with the hydrogen bomb would have been a proposal for a joint U.S.-Soviet moratorium on thermonuclear testing. Such a possibility had been put forward, somewhat obliquely, in a memorandum appended by two eminent physicists, Isidor Rabi and Enrico Fermi, as a sort of minority report to the October 1949 recommendations of the AEC’s General Advisory Committee, which had urged the president not to proceed with the hydrogen bomb, largely on ethical grounds. (In a 1984 interview, Rabi told me that he wished he and Fermi had better explained in their memorandum that airborne sampling, which revealed the 1949 Soviet nuclear test, would likewise disclose when either side tested a bomb with a thermonuclear component and that several such tests would be necessary to develop a deliverable hydrogen bomb.)

The idea of a thermonuclear testing moratorium, or “nuclear standstill,” was raised again by another so-called dissident—Vannevar Bush of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—in mid-1952, shortly before the U.S. “Mike” test proved the feasibility of a hydrogen bomb. But the momentum behind “Mike” and the mounting fear of the Soviet Union in the United States precluded any delay in developing the terrible new weapon. Nonetheless, the failure to consider the nuclear standstill proposal in Superbomb is a curious and significant lacuna in the otherwise near-encyclopedic scope of the book.


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Any scholar interested in the Vietnam War, the presidency of John F. Kennedy, and U.S.-French relations would be well advised to delve into JFK and de Gaulle: How
America and France Failed in Vietnam, 1961–1963. It is no easy feat to find new and interesting angles of research for a subject as well excavated as that of Vietnam, but Sean McLaughlin has managed to do so with aplomb.

The literature on the conflict in Indochina is particularly expansive, bolstered in recent decades by works that have sought to decenter the Cold War and highlight the role of other actors besides the superpowers. There is no shortage, either, of books touching on French President Charles de Gaulle’s complicated relations with the Anglo-Saxon powers. Nonetheless, as McLaughlin suggests, there is still a gap when it comes to reevaluating “France’s role in American Vietnam policy during the Kennedy years” (p. 6).

Moreover, McLaughlin makes a case for the importance of this period by emphasizing the “lost opportunity” for the United States to disengage from the war in Vietnam in the summer of 1963 with help and support from de Gaulle. One of the reasons Kennedy and his close advisers did not even consider such an option was the “reflexive ideological firewall they applied to any major policy proposal that came from de Gaulle” (p. 8).

The first part of the book stands out for its contribution to the literature. McLaughlin seeks to explain the emergence of the “reflexive ideological firewall”: why Kennedy and those around him came into office with distinct anti-French sentiments and were predisposed to refuse any meaningful dialogue with de Gaulle. Departing from traditional diplomatic history, McLaughlin instead emphasizes the role of perceptions, prejudices, and social and political cultures.

Kennedy and his advisers, born in the early part of the twentieth century, came of age during a particularly troublesome period of French history, witnessing the fall of France in 1940 and the unstable Fourth Republic. They were also for the most part products of all-male boarding schools, which tended to “expect deference from those who were less powerful and to view independence or non-conformity as a threat” (p. 8). They were shaped by a Cold War framework that demanded a robust form of manhood to tackle international challenges, often contrasting that with a perception of Europeans as overly weak and “feminine.” They tended to dismiss France as a fragile, decadent, and obstinate partner.

Kennedy himself was no exception. As McLaughlin shows, Kennedy traveled to Europe in the summer of 1937 when he was 20 years old, his first major trip abroad. His travel diary expresses many of the stereotypes of his contemporaries toward France. Later in life, he was more careful about putting such prejudices to paper, but as an ambitious young politician in the 1940s and 1950s, seeking to make a name for himself in foreign affairs, Kennedy took a harsh stance against France’s actions in Indochina. Far from being cautious about conflicts in Vietnam, the future president seemed to regard France’s failure as confirming flaws in its national character.

Despite Kennedy’s desire to initiate a genuine dialogue with de Gaulle once in office, there were too many obstacles for meaningful debates on Indochina. Aside from the generational gap between the two presidents, France and the United States were already at odds over many key issues in the early 1960s, including the North Atlantic
Treaty Organization and nuclear strategy, European integration and Britain’s candidacy to join the European Economic Community, and the Berlin crisis and negotiations with the Soviet Union. Leaders in Paris and Washington also had very different perceptions of the situation in Southeast Asia. Whereas French leaders warned that a military situation would backfire and that this was not a crucial theater for the Cold War, their U.S. counterparts were equally adamant that defeat in Vietnam would seriously hurt U.S. global prestige.

Added to that, as McLaughlin explains, well-ingrained stereotypes continued to shape the Kennedy administration’s perception of France. For instance, the presumptive briefing Kennedy received for his first meeting with de Gaulle, in May 1961, “reflected the administration’s attempt to psychoanalyze de Gaulle and fit his words and actions into French national character flaws rather than simply review them based on their merits” (p. 115). As time went by, explaining away de Gaulle’s disagreements as driven by an anti-American grudge became easier than assessing the merits of his policies or proposals. McLaughlin argues that in 1963 this meant the Kennedy administration tragically brushed aside de Gaulle’s proposed idea of neutralization, which McLaughlin believes could have given the United States a face-saving exit from Indochina.

There is much to praise in McLaughlin’s book, but it is not without its flaws. McLaughlin appears more familiar with the debates and motivations of the Kennedy administration than with the inner workings of de Gaulle and the French government. The book would have been well served by a clearer connection between France’s policy in Indochina and its broader strategy of seeking to overcome the bipolar Cold War order. Furthermore, prejudice and stereotypes were not the reserve of one side. As Thomas Schwartz notes in his *Lyndon Johnson and Europe: In the Shadow of Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 29, de Gaulle brusquely dismissed Lyndon Johnson as a “cowboy radical” and a “sergeant who’s been crowned.”

In addition, a counterfactual question is worth pondering: Even without these deeply ingrained negative views of France, would Paris and Washington have been able to converge on Indochina? Considering the deep philosophical divide between de Gaulle and Kennedy, with the former viewing the Cold War as an aberration and seeing ideologies as transient, one can doubt the likelihood of any meaningful agreement.

These comments aside, McLaughlin’s book is a decidedly welcome addition to the historiography of the Vietnam War and Franco-American relations, providing valuable insights into the impact of stereotypes and perceptions. The book nicely complements the work of other eminent scholars such as Max Paul Friedman, whose “Bernath Lecture: Anti-Americanism and U.S. Foreign Relations” (*Diplomatic History*, Vol. 32, No. 4 [September 2008], pp. 497–514) shows how easily the “anti-American” label has been affixed to partners and rivals of the United States.