

Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam

By Fredrik Logevall

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“A monumental history . . . a widely researched and eloquently written account of how the U.S. came to be involved in Vietnam . . . certainly the most comprehensive review of this period to date.”***—The Wall Street Journal***

“Superb . . . a product of formidable international research.”***—The Washington Post***

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“An essential work for those seeking to understand the worst foreign-policy adventure in American history . . . Even though readers know how the story ends—as with *The Iliad*—they will be as riveted by the tale as if they were hearing it for the first time.”***—The Christian Science Monitor***

“A remarkable new history . . . Logevall skillfully explains everything that led up to Vietnam’s fatal partition in 1954 [and] peppers the grand sweep of his book with vignettes of remarkable characters, wise and foolish.”***—The Economist***

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Editorial Review

Review
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“Fredrik Logevall’s excellent book *Choosing War* (1999) chronicled the American escalation of the Vietnam War in the early 1960s. With *Embers of* War, he has written an even more impressive book about the French conflict in Vietnam and the beginning of the American one. . . . It is the most comprehensive history of that time. Logevall, a professor of history at Cornell University, has drawn from many years of previous scholarship as well as his own. And he has produced a powerful portrait of the terrible and futile French war from which Americans learned little as they moved toward their own engagement in Vietnam.”**—Alan Brinkley, *The New York Times Book Review* *Editor's Choice***

“Superb . . . penetrating . . . *Embers of War* is a product of formidable international research. It is lucidly and comprehensively composed. And it leverages a consistently potent analytical perspective. . . . Outstanding.”**—Gordon Goldstein, *The Washington Post***

“A monumental history . . . a widely researched and eloquently written account of how the U.S. came to be involved in Vietnam . . . certainly the most comprehensive review of this period to date.”***—Wall Street Journal***

“The most comprehensive account available of the French Vietnamese war, America’s involvement, and the beginning of the US-directed struggle. . . . [*Embers of War* tells] the deeply immoral story of the Vietnam wars convincingly and more fully than any others. Since many of the others, some written over fifty years ago, are excellent, this is a considerable achievement.”**—Jonathan Mirsky, *New York Review of Books***

“Magisterial.”***—Foreign Affairs***

“The definitive history of the critical formative period from 1940 to 1960 [in Vietnam]. . . . lucid and vivid . . . As American involvement escalated, Bernard Fall, the highly respected scholar-journalist of Vietnam’s wars, wrote that Americans were ‘dreaming different dreams than the French but walking in the same footsteps.’ Fredrik Logevall brilliantly explains that legacy.”**—Gary R. Hess, *San Francisco Chronicle***

“*Embers of War* is simply an essential work for those seeking to understand the worst foreign-policy adventure in American history. . . . Even though readers know how the story ends—as with “The Iliad”—they will be as riveted by the tale as if they were hearing it for the first time.”***—The Christian Science Monitor***

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“Huge and engrossing . . . [Logevall] writes with an ambitious sweep and an instinct for pertinent detail. . . . If Logevall’s earlier work stood up well in a crowded field, *Embers of War* stands alone. . . . What if [*Embers*] had been mandatory reading for Kennedy and his policy makers?”***—The National Interest***

“Very much worth the read, both for the story and the writing. . . . *Embers of War* has the balance and heft to hold hindsight's swift verdicts at bay. . . An excellent, valuable book.”***—The Dallas Morning News***

“An encompassing, lucid account of the 40-year arc in which America’s Southeast Asian adventure became inevitable . . . Logevall’s prose is clean, his logic relentless, his tone unsparing, his vision broad and deep, his empathy expansive.”***—Vietnam Magazine***

“How easy it is to forget how it all started. The events pile on one another, new battles begin each day, demands for decisions encroach—and soon enough everything is incremental. Cornell historian Fredrik Logevall steps back from the edge and—parting from most Vietnam War studies that focus on the Kennedy and Johnson administrations—reaches back to World War II to give a fresh picture of America imagining itself into the Vietnam War. . . . [*Embers of War* puts] flesh on barebones assertions that occupy a few sentences or paragraphs in many Vietnam accounts. . . . startling.”***—The VVA Veteran***

“A superbly written and well-argued reinterpretation of our tragic experience in Vietnam.”***—Booklist***

“[Logevall] masterfully presents the war’s roots in the U.S. reaction to the French colonial experience.”***—Publishers Weekly*** **(starred review)**

“Fredrik Logevall has gleaned from American, French, and Vietnamese sources a splendid account of France’s nine-year war in Indochina and the story of how the American statesmen of the period allowed this country to be drawn into the quagmire.”**—Neil Sheehan, author of *A Bright Shining Lie,* winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award**

“Fredrik Logevall is a wonderful writer and historian. In his new book on the origins of the American war in Vietnam, he gives a fascinating and dramatic account of the French war and its aftermath, from the perspectives of the French, the Vietnamese, and the Americans. Using previously untapped sources and a deep knowledge of diplomatic history, Logevall shows to devastating effect how America found itself on the road to Vietnam.”**—Frances FitzGerald, author of *Fire in the Lake,* winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award**

“In a world full of nascent, potentially protracted wars, Fredrik Logevall’s *Embers of War* is manifestly an important book, illuminating the long, small-step path we followed into the quagmire of Vietnam. But I was also struck by the quality of Logevall’s writing. He has the eye of a novelist, the cadence of a splendid prose stylist, and a filmmaker’s instinct for story. *Embers of War* is not just an important book of history, it is an utterly compelling read.”**—Robert Olen Butler, author of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain,* winner of the Pulitzer Prize**

"*Embers of War* is a truly monumental achievement. With elegant prose, deft portraits of the many fascinating characters, and remarkable sensitivity to the aspirations and strategies of the various nations involved, Logevall skillfully guides us through the complexities of the First Indochina War and demonstrates how that conflict laid the basis for America's war in Vietnam."**—George C. Herring, author of *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975***

"In this vividly written, richly textured history, Fredrik Logevall demolishes the fiction, too long indulged by too many Americans, that the Vietnam War appeared out of nowhere to besmirch the 1960s. Here we have the full backstory—the uneasy collaboration between France and the United States that paved the way for epic tragedy. *Embers of War* is a magisterial achievement."**—Andrew J. Bacevich, author of *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* and Professor of International Relations and History, Boston University**

"For too long, Americans have debated the Vietnam War as though it started in the 1960s. As Fredrik Logevall masterfully demonstrates in *Embers of War,* the American imbroglio has deep roots in the 1940s and 1950s. This is a deeply researched, elegantly written account that will instantly become the standard book on a poorly understood and decisively important event in world history."**—Mark Lawrence, author of *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History,* and Associate Professor of History and Senior Fellow at the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law at The University of Texas at Austin**

About the Author
Fredrik Logevall is John S. Knight Professor of International Studies and professor of history at Cornell University, where he serves as director of the Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies.

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chapter 1

"The Empire Is with Us!"

In the late afternoon of june 18, 1940, the tall, stiff-backed Frenchman walked into the BBC studios in London. His country stood on the brink of defeat. German columns were sweeping through France and had entered Paris. The French government under Marshal Philippe Pétain had fled for Bordeaux and had asked the Germans to state their terms for an armistice. These were the darkest days in the country's history, but General Charles de Gaulle, who had arrived in London the day before, was convinced that France could rise again—provided that her people did not lose heart. De Gaulle had met earlier in the day with Prime Minister Winston Churchill and had secured permission to make a broadcast to France.

He was pale, recalled one of those present, with a brown forelock stuck to his forehead. "He stared at the microphone as though it were France and as though he wanted to hypnotize it. His voice was clear, firm, and rather loud, the voice of a man speaking to his troops before battle. He did not seem nervous but extremely tense, as though he were concentrating all his power in one single moment."

De Gaulle's thoughts that day were on the French Empire, whose resources, he sensed, could keep France in the war and fighting. And they were with Britain and the United States, great powers with whom he could ally. "Believe what I tell you," de Gaulle intoned into the microphone, "for I know of what I speak, and I say that nothing is lost for France." Then, like a cleric chanting a litany, he declared: "For France is not alone. She is not alone. She is not alone. She has a vast Empire behind her. She can unite with the British Empire that rules the seas and is continuing the fight. Like Britain, she can make unlimited use of the immense industrial resources of the United States."

The broadcast, which lasted barely four minutes, has gone down in French history as L'Appel du 18 Juin. At the time, however, few heard it and few knew who de Gaulle was. Alexander Cadogan, the permanent undersecretary at the British Foreign Office, knew only that de Gaulle had a "head like a pineapple and hips like a woman's." Robert Murphy, the counselor at the U.S. embassy in Paris, could not recall ever having heard of him before that day. The same was true of most of de Gaulle's compatriots. Although he was notorious within French military circles for his advocacy of the mechanization of the army and the offensive deployment of tanks, few outside that select group would have recognized his name, much less known the essentials of his biography: the birth in Lille in 1890; the diploma from the military academy at Saint-Cyr; the five failed (in part because of his conspicuous height) escape attempts from German prison camps in World War I; the postwar military career initially under the wing of Pétain.

De Gaulle had been promoted to the rank of brigadier general only a few weeks before, in the midst of the Battle of France (thus making him, at forty-nine, the youngest general in the army). He then joined Premier Paul Reynaud's government on June 5 as undersecretary of state for war. Reynaud sought to carry on the fight, but twelve days later, with the French war effort collapsing wholesale, as German armies were well south of Dijon and pressing down the Atlantic coast, he resigned. De Gaulle, certain that Pétain would seek an armistice, escaped to London, determined to continue the resistance from there.

The basis for de Gaulle's speech that fateful day was his conviction that the conflict was not limited to Europe. It was a "world war," he declared, one "not bound by the Battle of France." He would be proven correct. Likewise, Britain and the United States would become critical to the ultimate victory of de Gaulle's "Free French" organization, though not in the way he imagined. Even his deep faith in the empire's importance to his cause would in time find a certain degree of vindication.

A vast empire it was. In 1940, it ranked in size second only to the British, extending some six million square miles and with an overseas population of eighty million. The island of Madagascar alone was bigger than metropolitan France. The colonies of Equatorial and West Africa together were as large as the United States. In the Middle East, the French were a major presence, and they had holdings as well in the Caribbean and the Pacific. And of course, there was Indochina, the Pearl of the Empire, rich in rubber plantations and rice fields. As the farthest-flung of the key French possessions, it along with Algeria (administered as part of France proper) conferred great power status on France and, it was thought, gave her an important voice in global affairs. As a whole, the empire took more than a third of all French trade in the 1930s (a figure inflated by the fact that the Depression caused business leaders to fall back on colonial markets); colonial troops made up 11 percent of mobilized men in 1939.

In his memoirs of the war, de Gaulle recalled his feelings as he sat in London in 1940 and watched the deterioration of the French position in the Far East, at the expense of the encroaching Japanese. "To me, steering a very small boat on the ocean of war, Indochina seemed like a great ship out of control, to which I could give no aid until I had slowly got together the means of rescue," he wrote. "As I saw her move away into the mist, I swore to myself that I would one day bring her back."

It was an immense task, de Gaulle knew. The journey would be as long as it was treacherous. It would take time to win French loyalty and French territory and so to establish his legitimacy as the authentic representative of the French nation. In those early days, hardly anyone answered his call. Not only did few people come from France to join him, but most leading French figures already in London decided to return home to support the Pétain government, which negotiated an armistice with Germany on June 22 and set up a collaborationist regime in Vichy, a damp, gloomy spa town best known for its foul-smelling waters. Even many of those who wanted to go on fighting rejected de Gaulle's call. Some went instead to the United States, while others, including the imperial proconsuls in North Africa and other territories (under the terms

of the armistice, the empire was left in French hands), were unprepared to reject the authority of the eighty-four-year-old Pétain, savior of France at Verdun in 1916. The only exceptions in the early months were French Equatorial Africa (Chad, French Congo, and Oubangui-Chari, but not Gabon) and the Cameroons, which declared for de Gaulle in August 1940. That same month a French military court sentenced de Gaulle to death in absentia, for treason against the Vichy regime.

“You are alone,” Churchill told de Gaulle, “I shall recognize you alone.” On June 28, the British government voiced its backing of de Gaulle as “leader of all the Free French, wherever they are to be found, who rally to him in support of the Allied cause.”

The phrasing was important: The British were endorsing de Gaulle the man rather than his organization. Whereas the general saw his outfit as a proto-government rivaling that in Vichy, most London officials hoped Free France could be restricted to the role of a légion combattante, a group of French citizens fighting as a unit within the Allied armies. For them, the only French government was that headed by Marshal Pétain. Still, limited though it was, the British pronouncement was a critical early endorsement of de Gaulle, arguably as important as any he would ever receive. His bold action on June 18 made an impression on Churchill, one that would never quite dissipate even during the tensest moments—and there would be many in the years to come—in their relationship. The romantic in Churchill admired de Gaulle’s epic adventure, his self-importance, his claim to speak for la France éternelle. He saw a certain nobility in the Frenchman’s bravado and shared with him a love of drama and a deep sense of history. When in September the two men joined together in a scheme to try to win French West Africa away from Vichy with an operation against Dakar, de Gaulle rose in Churchill’s esteem despite the fact that the plan ended in humiliating failure. To the House of Commons, the prime minister extolled de Gaulle’s calm and authoritative bearing throughout the engagement and said he had more confidence in the general than ever.

“I had continuous difficulties and many sharp antagonisms with him,” Churchill would write of his relationship with de Gaulle. “I knew he was no friend of England. But I always recognized in him the spirit and conception which, across the pages of history, the word ‘France’ would ever proclaim. I understood and admired, while I resented, his arrogant demeanor. Here he was—a refugee, an exile from his country under sentence of death, in a position entirely dependent upon the good will of Britain, and now of the United States. The Germans had conquered his country. He had no real foothold anywhere. Never mind; he defied all.”

A very different attitude prevailed in Washington, where President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his advisers from the start kept their distance from de Gaulle and his cause. Shocked and appalled by France’s swift collapse against the Germans, despite having what on paper was arguably Europe’s strongest army, Roosevelt concluded that France had essentially ceased to exist. Thenceforth, during moments of pessimism (and not infrequently in happier times as well), he believed the worst about France and concluded she would never again regain her status as a leading power. Investing military might and diplomatic aid in trying to defend her was therefore pointless. Following the armistice, Washington chose a policy of expedience, maintaining diplomatic relations with Vichy in the hope that the French fleet and the Pétain government would not be driven totally into the arms of the Nazis. As for de Gaulle, he was as yet largely a nonentity for Roosevelt. In time, as we shall see, the American president would adopt toward the general an attitude of unremitting hostility.

II

in indochina, word of the french defeat hit like a bolt from the blue. Already in 1939, after Germany’s attack on Poland, there had been murmurings in Saigon and Hanoi, among colons as well as literate Vietnamese,

about whether Hitler could be stopped, and if he couldn't, what it would mean for them. A 1938 French film shown on local screens asked Are We Defended? and left the answer disconcertingly open. Still, no one had imagined that the defeat of la belle France could ever occur so swiftly, so completely. The turn of events may have seemed especially dizzying in Indochina and elsewhere in the empire, for certain key details—that French forces fought hard and suffered huge losses at Sedan and elsewhere along the river Meuse, for example, or that the greater part of the French army was taken prisoner—emerged only slowly in the colonies.

"Overnight, our world had changed," recalled Bui Diem, a young French-educated Vietnamese in Hanoi who had breathlessly followed news accounts of the fighting. "Mine was the third generation for whom the universe had been bounded by France, her language, her culture, and her stultifying colonial apparatus. Now, in a moment, the larger world had intruded itself on our perceptions. Our ears were opened wide, straining to pick up signals from the outside that would give us some hint as to what this might mean."

In the governor-general's residence in Hanoi, speculation was rife. General Georges Catroux, only a year into the job, was devoted to the empire and to keeping France in the fight against Hitler; for both reasons he was drawn immediately to de Gaulle's cause. The two men went way back, having been prisoners of war together in a high-security camp in Ingolstadt, Germany, in World War I, and they maintained deep mutual respect. But Catroux, an intelligent and highly literate five-star general who as a young man had been an aide-de-camp in Hanoi but whose recent postings had been in North Africa, was powerless; his Indochina, isolated from the metropole by thousands of miles of ocean, faced growing pressure from Japan. For Tokyo authorities, the fall of France represented a perfect opportunity to remove several obstacles to their New Order in East Asia. Three years into a war with Chiang Kai-shek's Republican China, the Japanese had long been bothered about American weapons and other Western supplies reaching beleaguered Chinese armies via the railway that ran from Haiphong to Kunming. The amounts were significant: An estimated 48 percent of all supplies came by this route. Catroux succumbed to Japanese pressure to sharply limit shipments of weapons, but food and other supplies continued to arrive, and the Japanese began to think that only by seizing Indochina could they stop the flow. Moreover, Indochina could provide imperial Japan with significant supplies of rubber, tin, coal, and rice—all important in ending her dependence upon foreign sources of vital strategic raw materials. Geostrategically, meanwhile, Indochina could serve as an advanced base for operations against the Far Eastern possessions of the other Western colonial powers. For senior Japanese leaders, in short, the events in Europe opened up glorious new possibilities. Hitler's victories, American ambassador to Tokyo Joseph Grew noted, "like strong wine, have gone to their heads."

In Hanoi, Catroux moved cautiously, aware that he had few cards to play. In previous months, as Japanese gains in China brought them ever closer to Indochina, he realized how inadequate Indochina's defenses were. He had only about 50,000 troops at his disposal, of which some 38,000 were native forces of suspect loyalty. The air force had only twenty-five modern aircraft in all of Indochina, while the navy possessed only a light cruiser, two gunboats, two sloops, and two auxiliary patrol craft. Munitions and other military supplies were negligently low. The Paris government, reeling under the Nazi onslaught, could offer no tangible assistance, he knew, and neither could Britain, focused as she was on the German menace and the defense of Singapore and Malaya. In April and again in May and June, British officials cautioned Catroux against taking any action that might risk war with Japan. Even if His Majesty's government wanted to provide military assistance, Sir Percy Noble, commander of the British Far Eastern Fleet, told Catroux in late April, it could not; it had no resources to give. The same message was reiterated repeatedly in the weeks thereafter.

The United States was Catroux's last hope. On June 19, the day after de Gaulle's speech, René de Saint-Quentin, the French ambassador in Washington, put two questions to Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles. What would the United States do if Indochina came under Japanese attack? And in the meantime,

would Washington provide immediate military assistance to Indochina, in the form of 120 aircraft as well as antiaircraft guns? Welles's reply echoed that of the British. The United States, he said, would do nothing that might provoke the outbreak of hostilities with Japan and therefore would not act to thwart an attack on Indochina. She would provide no planes or weapons. In that case, asked Saint-Quentin, what choice did Saigon have but to accept the Japanese demands? "I will not answer you officially," Welles said, "but that is what I would do in your place."

Saint-Quentin and Welles didn't know it, but hours earlier Japan had issued an ultimatum to Catroux. The Tokyo government demanded an end to the shipment through Tonkin of trucks, gasoline, or other goods of military use to China, as well as the establishment of a Japanese control commission in Indochina to supervise the implementation of the agreement. Catroux ordered Saint-Quentin to make one more appeal to the Americans; when that too failed, he decided to accept the Japanese terms, hoping to forestall a Japanese invasion and preserve French control over Indochina. Already by June 29, Japanese checkpoints had been established in Tonkin at Haiphong, Ha Giang, Lao Cai, Cao Bang, and Lang Son. Perhaps, Catroux reasoned, Tokyo leaders hoped to avoid a costly—in yen and men—occupation of Indochina; perhaps he could temporize and hold on, waiting for a more favorable turn in the war. He cabled his government on June 26: "When one is beaten, when one has few planes and little anti-aircraft defense, no submarines, one tries to keep one's property without having to fight and one negotiates. That is what I have done."

Users Review

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