Cost of Imperialism: The Decline of French-American Relations During the Cold War

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In 1949, as deterrence against possible aggression from the Soviet Union, the United States, France, and various other European nations created a military alliance called the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). On the surface, it seemed as though French-American relations could not be any stronger, as they shared many cultural similarities and common political agendas. Therefore, it came as a surprise when France announced that it was withdrawing its Mediterranean Fleet from NATO's military force in 1959. From a closer analysis, the alliance was not as peaceful as it seemed as numerous policy differences arose, and the two countries often clashed with one another over their roles and influence in the postwar world. France's imperialistic foreign policy was particularly vexing for the United States, as it collided with the American strategy of propping up anti-communist regimes and gaining political support to oppose the rising tide of communism. All the while, France grew weary of its dependence on its ally and resented being relegated to a secondary position on the world stage as its colonies declared independence. Confrontations such as the Algerian War for Independence and the Suez Crisis would create a rift between the two nations and prompt France to assert greater autonomy in their alliance. While this is not the only cause for France's departure, imperialism remained a major contributing factor in the changing nature of French-American relations during the Cold War. France's reluctance to adapt to global changes during the late 1940s to the 1950s would ultimately lead to the downfall of its government and to the rise of a new national identity in its place. With France's dramatic transformation during the Cold War, it validated the inevitable demise of the traditional European empires' dominance.

Throughout most of France's history, there always had been a fear of reliance on other nations. After the Second World War, even with close ideological allies such as the United States and Great Britain, animosity heightened as France's status in the world began to shrink. Political scientist Michael J. Brenner summarized this attitude as a way of France asserting its independence. "[D]ependency nonetheless offended national pride: it compromised the French sense of nationhood, and it contradicted the principle of self-reliance embedded in a realist conception of international politics."[1] For France, what mattered most to them after the war was to defend its territory and to maintain its status quo as a great power in the world. One of the major events that foreshadowed French-American tensions would be dealing with a defeated Germany. Worried about its national and economic security, the French attempted to punish Germany harshly for its aggression, much as it had wanted to do after the First World War. The president of France's provisional government, Charles de Gaulle, agreed with this assessment to prevent the rise of a strong Germany that might start another war.

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[1] Michael Brenner and Guillaume Parmentier, *Reconcilable Differences: U.S.-French Relations in the New Era* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institutional Press, 2001), 11-12.

Soon after, this strategy came to a head with the Americans, who wanted to rebuild Germany to kick-start Europe's economy and divide it into occupation zones between the Allies. As historian Frank Costigliola described,
"When it came to Germany, Americans and French operated on different wavelengths…having experienced two German invasions of France in his lifetime, de Gaulle hoped to detach the Rhineland from Germany, set up international control of the coal-rich Ruhr, and divide the rest of the Reich into dependent states. France wanted a large and secure supply of coal as reparation from its late enemy. If allowed to reunite, the four zones of Germany might ally with Moscow and 'be even more dangerous than in the past,' the Frenchman warned."[2]

This policy would prove as an early indication of different policy objectives between France and the United States, as the Americans saw it as a thinly veiled attempt at annexing more territory for itself rather than trying to secure peace in Europe. The French, however, argued that the move was of economic importance, so negotiations came to a standstill.

Eventually, the Americans were forced to make concessions for France's plan by providing funds to bolster its economy in order protect the rest of Europe from Soviet Influence. During his time as the American ambassador to France, Jefferson Caffery acknowledged that France was in a precarious economic situation and it needed American support. If the United States does not give economic aid to the French, it will fall to communism.
"Caffery concluded that America's most important objective in its relations with France should be the preservation of democracy and the exclusion of communist influence from the government in Paris. There was no doubt in Caffery's mind as to the key to America's success in this venture: only the revival of a sound stable economy in France (and all of Western Europe) could provide a permanent foundation for a democratic France."[3]

Eventually, Caffrey's warning forced the United States' hand to allow France to go on with its plan to control the Ruhr and the Saarland for its economic survival in addition to a loan package. The package, originally called the Interim Aid Bill of 1947, became instrumental to the creation of the Marshall Plan, a $13 billion aid package to Western Europe to help its economies rebuild and to deter the spread of communism. While this concession may have seemed like a victory for France, it showcased its weakness and inevitable reliance on the United States for its recovery, as well as increasing American mistrust over the intentions of French foreign policies.

By the 1950s, relations between the United States and France would once again come to a head as France's status as a global empire began to diminish. Unlike other European powers such as Britain

[2] Frank Costigliola, *France and the United States: The Cold Alliance Since World War II* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 48.

[3] Steven P Sapp, "Jefferson Caffery, Cold War Diplomat: American-French Relations 1944-49," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 23, no. 2 (1982): 179-92, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4232169.

and the Netherlands who slowly accepted the decolonization process, France stubbornly refused to accept this new reality, instead opting to use military force to keep its grip on its colonies. French Historian Jean-Baptiste Duroselle described that by the end of the Second World War,
"France had ceased to be a great power. But there were many French people, de Gaulle chief among them, who believed that she could recover that status thanks to her colonial empire. Hence the obstinacy with which the French were to resist the vast independence movement that was gathering strength through all the world empires."[4]

While the United Nations charter stated that its members would protect their colonies' political and economic advancement[5], it became obvious that France had no intention of doing so as it attempted to suppress every single independence movement in its colonies. During the Second World War, President Roosevelt had wanted French withdrawal from its colony in Indochina, noting that "France has milked it for one hundred years."[6] Roosevelt wanted an international committee to prepare Indochina for independence, but his idea was immediately shot down by the European powers as well as the State Department. When the war ended in 1945, the Indochinese took advantage of French military weakness by revolting and declaring its independence, sparking a guerilla war lasting nearly ten years. Throughout the war, the United States remained neutral and refused to commit troops to aid the French. By the time the First Indochina War ended in a French defeat, American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had become increasingly concerned that France's imperial ambitions were, by association, ruining American public perception abroad. "Dulles complained that NATO [members] 'stifled America's ability to outcompete the Communists for the hearts and minds of emerging colonial peoples…with this reasoning [he] wanted France to abandon [its] imperial heritage"[7] Rather than fighting wars against independence, the NATO members should be focusing on containing communism and trying to convince third-world countries that their way of life is superior to it.

When Indochina finally gained its independence from France in 1954, the United States was quick to support the government of South Vietnam and its leader, Ngo Dinh Diem for their anti-communist stances. This quickly spurred a wave of anti-Americanism among French citizens, who felt betrayed by the United States that it was "surreptitiously maneuvering to oust the poor French and take their place."[8] To some fervent colonialists, they believed that the United States did not put enough weight to support them in Indochina because they wanted to take power themselves to create an American puppet state. During the Geneva Conference, France was

[4] Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *France and the United States: From the Beginnings to the Present*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 176.
[5] "CHAPTER XI: DECLARATION REGARDING NON-SELF-GOVERNING TERRITORIES," United Nations, accessed December 5, 2017, http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-xi/index.html.
[6] Costigliola, 27
[7] Costigliola, 105.
[8] Duroselle, 201.

effectively removed from any involvement in the new South Vietnamese government in place of the United States. After the conference, a top French official concluded that "the Americans behave like imbeciles and we too for not being able to tell them."[9] Losing Indochina was a major setback in French-American relations as France lost trust in the United States to support them militarily. When the United States' support for South Vietnam eventually evolved into the Vietnam War, the French saw it as rightful vengeance for the Americans taking what they believed was French territory. However, more was in store for France, as the decolonization process moved even closer to home.

The next imperial blunder for France came a mere five months after the Geneva Conference in 1954 as its long-held North African colony, Algeria, revolted for independence later that year. Even though NATO considered Algeria as a part of France, Secretary Dulles steadfastly refused to support the French in suppressing the revolt, stating that it was a colonial conflict, not a threat from an external force. At this point, it was clear that Dulles was getting tired of France constantly meddling in colonial affairs that just cause needless bloodshed on both sides. Instead, he called for the U.S. to adopt a "middle of the road" strategy in which the United States would support neither regime in order to avoid an international incident. Secretly, however, the Americans knew that the French were once again fighting a losing war much as it did in Indochina. In a 1957 National Security Council memo, a report stated that "despite the probability that the French Government could preserve the present system almost indefinitely by military force, the eventual emergence of an Algerian state which has been granted self-government or independence appears inevitable."[10]

In the midst of the fighting, another problem arose for France when President Gamal Abedel Nasser of Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal in July of 1956. It represented an economic crisis to both France and Britain as they would have to abide under Egyptian regulations in order to conduct trade in the area. France believed that if it allowed Nasser to bully France economically, then there would be no incentive to prevent other third-world nations to do the same. "[Nasser's rhetoric] was quite alarming to Western ears, especially to the French and the British, who experienced Nasser's words as a call to shatter the world order as the French and British had known it."[11] To add to France's troubles, there was speculation among the French government that Nasser was aiding rebels in the Algerian War of Independence. Faced with a seemingly simple motivation to overthrow Nasser and without consulting the United States, France and Britain invaded Egypt in October 1956. To the French government, the Americans had themselves to blame for the crisis,

[9] Costigliola, 109.

[10] United States National Security Council, 1957. *U.S. Policy on France*. https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1679083313?accountid=14270.

[11] Pnina Lahav, *The Suez Crisis of 1956 and its Aftermath: A Comparative Study of Constitutions, Use of Force, Diplomacy and International Relations*, Boston: Boston University Press, 2015, http://www.bu.edu/bulawreview/files/2015/07/LAHAV.pdf.

and France's invasion is its way of rectifying Washington's mistakes. "A great many French people, beginning with [Prime Minister] Guy Mollet himself, reproached the Americans bitterly and believed that everything that went on was the result of Washington's 'stupid' policies."[12] After all, it was the American refusal to finance Egypt's Aswan Dam project that had led Nasser to go against the West. If France manages to subdue Egypt, they believed, then everything will return to normal for the European powers, and they can continue to manage their empires in the Middle East and North Africa.

While the inexperienced Egyptian military was quickly brushed aside in the face of France and Britain's superior firepower, it marked an international crisis in which the world viewed as yet another colonial conquest by the European powers. For the United States, it was a disaster as it made the western powers look bad compared to the Soviets, as they were only looking out for themselves and their interests. When President Eisenhower was told of the news, he responded furiously: "Damn it the French, they're just egging the Israelis on–hoping somehow to get out of their own North African troubles. Damn it…we tried to tell them they would repeat Indochina all over again in North Africa."[13] Eisenhower was mainly worried because he believed that the invasion would spark a series of colonial wars, giving the Soviet Union the chance to take advantage of the chaos that would ensue. For the British and French, they opened up a can of worms that they were ill-prepared to deal with, as their invasion was condemned almost ubiquitously around the world. Even the United States and the Soviet Union agreed together in the United Nations to condemn the invasion and to issue quick punishments for the aggressors. Eisenhower's threats of economic sanctions combined with Soviet Premier Khrushchev's rhetoric on nuclear missile strikes finally forced Britain and France to pull out of Egypt. It was, and remains, "the only event in the history of the Cold War where the superpowers collaborated in denouncing a war and insisted on the return of the status quo ante."[14]

While the occupation was short-lived, the Suez Crisis would inflict lasting damage to the already deteriorating relations between France and the United States. It demonstrated to France that it was no longer the dominant colonial power it used to be, and that it cannot go around invading whoever they wanted, given the changing political climate of the Cold War. Rather, the European powers were now under the direct influence of the United States with the Americans dictating what it can and cannot do. As historian Ralph Dietl described, "The year 1956 witnessed struggle about world order. It witnessed a clash of two world visions: bipolarity versus multi-polarity. It witnessed contest between nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear proficiency. In other words, the year 1956 is characterized by a European upheaval, set against the US reconstruction of Europe, the hierarchal security architecture of the West, and the bipolar order of the Cold War. The US concept [of the Atlantic Alliance] entailed a perpetuation of the unequal division of tasks within the Alliance. It implied a

[12] Duroselle, 209.
[13] Costigliola, 113.
[14] Lahav, 1304.

transformation of Europe into a US nuclear protectorate."[15]

While the British reeled back from its colonial ambitions, the same could not be said for France. From then on, France no longer thought of the United States as an equal partner in global affairs and sought to distance itself from its former ally. If France continued to stick with the United States, then it would never be able to pursue its own agenda around the world as the Americans continued time after time opposing them at every step. After Suez, French legislators began to toy with the idea of independence from NATO's military command to prevent the United States from restricting its military actions abroad. In doing so, it would give the French military a free hand to go where they pleased. As historian Marvin Zahniser described, "The lesson to France was quite clear; American power was not to be relied upon to defend the vital national interests of their NATO allies, particularly if those interests fell outside Europe. The American 'protector,' it was widely noted in France, had not even the grace to take a neutral position over Suez within the United Nations."[16]

As the war in Algeria dragged on and turned against France, the French public blamed the Americans for their plight, citing that they were hypocrites for inciting colonial independence while at the same time oppressing their own people in the South through segregation. "Alluding to the civil rights struggle in the American South, where [President] Eisenhower had to send in federal troops to enforce school desegregation, French commentators pointed out that Arab children in Algeria did not need soldiers to protect them from their classmates."[17] As a NATO member, it expected the United States to come to its aid whenever its empire was threatened, but help never came, creating further doubts over France's position in the alliance. Gradually, this produced a nationalist and neutralist sentiment in among the French public, as they no longer trusted the Americans to help protect their interests. Meanwhile, the United States began looking towards a policy of anticolonialism in response to the increasing French brutality of the Algerian war. In the speech before the Senate in 1957, future president then-senator John F. Kennedy strongly favored the United States to take a stance against both Russian and Western imperialism.

"I am…reluctant to appear critical of our oldest and first ally, whose assistance in our own war for independence will never be forgotten, and whose role in the course of world has traditionally been one of constructive leadership and co-operation…the war in Algeria, which was weakening French participation in NATO and compromising the French economy, was no longer a problem for the French alone. The principles of independence and anticolonialism had to be placed before all other considerations. It was therefore essential that the President and Secretary of State be strongly encouraged to place the influence of the United States behind efforts to achieve a solution which will

[15] Ralph Dietl, "Suez 1956: A European Intervention?" *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 2 (2008): 277, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30036506.
[16] Marvin R. Zahniser, *Uncertain Friendship: American-French Diplomatic Relations Through the Cold War*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1975), 282.
[17] Costigliola, 112.

recognize the independent personality of Algeria…"[18]

In an ironic twist of fate for Kennedy, Algerian independence did not lead to a reconciliation of the United States and France; in fact, it resulted in the exact opposite effect. When a ceasefire was negotiated with the Algerian National Liberation Front in 1958, it marked the final nail in the coffin for the French Fourth Republic, as it was too politically weak to deal with the situation and opted instead for the formation of a stronger government. Led by war hero Charles De Gaulle, the French Fifth Republic was born to oppose the new world order and restore France as a global power once more. De Gaulle wasted no time trying distance his country away from the Americans. A few months after taking power, he stated,
"NATO is no longer an alliance. It is a subordination. After France has regained her independence, perhaps she will be linked with the Western countries in formal alliances…but we cannot accept a superior, like the United States, to be responsible for us."[19]

Immediately after taking power as President of France, he issued a memorandum in September 1958 to Britain and the United States, requesting for an equal footing for France in NATO's military command. Knowing that the two countries would never accept it, De Gaulle used the memorandum as a means to withdraw from the alliance. In February 1959, he officially pulled the French Mediterranean Fleet from NATO's command in protest and started to steer France to become a nuclear state. In a letter to President Eisenhower later that year, he clarified his decision, firmly stating that
"If there were no alliance between us, I would agree that your monopoly on the opening of atomic war would be justified, but you and we tied together to such a point that the opening of this type of hostilities either by you or against you would automatically expose France to total and immediate destruction. She obviously cannot entirely entrust her life or her death to any other state whatsoever, even the most friendly."[20]
With De Gaulle's new policy in place, it would mark a new era for French-American relations for the next decade, with France eventually withdrawing the rest of its troops from NATO's command in 1966, not to formally rejoin until 2008.

While the two shared the same anti-communist ideologies, a simple difference in foreign policy marked the end of a close alliance between France and the United States as France withdrew from NATO in the 1960s. As the United States and the Soviet Union emerged after the Second World War as the dominant superpowers, former colonial powers such as France and Great Britain were forced to be sidelined as their empires crumbled to decolonization and

[18] Duroselle, 210-211.
[19] Sebastian Reyn, *Atlantis Lost: The American Experience with De Gaulle*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 21.

[20] United States Department of State Division of Language Services, 1959, *Correspondence on several Issues Concerning NATO*, *Nuclear Weapons in France*, *and the Need for Unity in NATO*, https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1679127301?accountid=14270.

independence movements. France's ardent imperialist ambitions to maintain its colonies and influence proved to be a driving force for its split from the United States as it found itself unable to cope with losing its global status. With every intervention and occupation, France found itself at odds with the United States' Cold War policies to hold back the spread of communism. From designing the postwar order for Germany to the ill-fated Suez Crisis, the clash between imperialism and democracy represented the inevitable changing global dynamic during the Cold War. France's increasing isolation from the international community demonstrated the need for the old empires to adjust to new ideologies and policies if they were to survive in the modern world.

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