Introduction

The French war to keep Algeria coincided with eight years of Cold War history during which much of the world was transformed. The war began on All Saints Day, November 1, 1954, more than a year after the death of Stalin and only a few months after the Geneva agreements ending the Indochina War in June 1954. The conflict ended in March 1962, only months before the Cuban crisis of October of that year inaugurated an era of détente. During the Algerian War Britain and France invaded Egypt in an effort to hold on to the Suez Canal, while the Soviets invaded Hungary (1956), and the United States went to the brink of nuclear war with China over the islands of Quemoy and Matsu in 1959. The European Economic Community began operations in January 1959, an American U2 spy plane was downed over the USSR, disrupting a summit conference in May 1960, while the Berlin crisis, which opened in November 1958, monopolized much of the international news until it was awkwardly settled with the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. This was also a period when North-South questions came to the fore, challenging the placid assumptions of politicians focused on Cold War questions at issue between East and West. The Bandung Conference of nonaligned nations met in April 1955, and fifteen new countries entered the United Nations the same year. By the Algerian War's end, the United Nations had eighty-seven member states, the majority of them Asian and African and passionately anticolonial.
The Fourth Republic came to an ignominious end in May 1958 with the coming to power of Charles de Gaulle, while in the United States two years later John F. Kennedy was elected president of the United States to succeed Dwight D. Eisenhower.

The Algerian War had an impact on, and was in turn affected by, all these changes and crises. France regarded itself during this time, and had been courteously permitted to act after the war by the United States and Great Britain, as a great power, one of the so-called big three. But the Algerian War consumed all of French energies and dominated political debate in France after 1954, with the result that in international politics France came to count for little. During the first half of the war, until 1958, French troops were withdrawn from NATO for use in Algeria while governments in Paris displayed characteristic indecision and instability. During the war’s second half, from 1958 to 1962, de Gaulle made a heroic effort to reassert France’s international position but found virtually every initiative blocked by the “running sore” of Algeria, until he finally recognized Algerian independence in 1962.

Six chief executives attempted to deal with France’s Algerian problem in the eight years of the war: Pierre Mendès France (June 1954–February 1955), Edgar Faure (February 1955–January 1956), Guy Mollet (January 1956–May 1957), Maurice Bourgès-Maunoury (May–November 1957), Felix Gaillard (November 1957–May 1958), and Charles de Gaulle; seven, if one counts the interim attempt by Pierre Pflimlin to deal with the May 1958 crisis from the 13th to the 28th of that month. All these men pursued the same policies in Algeria in which they were more or less representative of the French political class as a whole: they meant to keep Algeria dominated by France, although all of them toyed with the idea of limited internal autonomy, the minimum necessary to satisfy the Americans and international opinion, while at the same time hoping that programs of economic development and social reform could eventually win the Muslim population over to French rule. None of these men were free to do as they wanted in Algeria and all of them pursued failed policies; it fell to Charles de Gaulle, whose policies were no more successful than his predecessors’ had been, to grant Algeria what only pitifully few French people had recognized as inevitable as early as 1954—independence. The price of failure was the loss of about 25,000 French and 300,000 Muslim lives, the squandering of countless billions of francs, continual currency and financial crises in France despite ever-burgeoning national wealth, and the erosion of France’s international
position to the point that when de Gaulle was once again able to assert France's will in international affairs he could be safely ignored.

The current work attempts to put the Algerian War in an international context, to deal with it as a world crisis and not simply a French one. For France was severely constrained in the prosecution of the war by international realities: the Cold War, Soviet ambitions in the Middle East and North Africa, the aspirations of the Third World for independence, its own forced process of decolonization of North and Black French Africa, and the attitudes of its European allies. But first and above all stood the problem of French relations with the United States. At times American influence manifested itself in tandem with that of Great Britain. As much as France aspired to independence from American or Anglo-American dictates and freedom from their yoke, it had to recognize the reality that no policy was possible without their agreement or toleration and that no action was free from their influence. The British recognized the overwhelming importance of the Americans to their own policies after their attempt to pursue an independent policy with France and Israel during the Suez crisis; Anthony Eden was forced ignominiously to resign after that failure and Harold Macmillan firmly set England on a course of faithful second to the United States, calculating that Britain could count for more as trusted advisor to the Americans than as independent ally and occasional adversary. France took the opposite path of "independence," initiated by the premiers of the Fourth Republic but later symbolized by the policies of de Gaulle, which built upon and differed little from those of the Fourth Republic. French historians have seized upon that "independence" as a hallmark of de Gaulle's prescience and greatness while ignoring the role of his predecessors. It remained, for all that, severely limited by the international constraints of the Cold War and by American hegemony.

A second theme here is to demonstrate the links between France's turbulent internal politics and its international relations, and to gauge the influence on internal French politics exercised by external powers, in particular the United States. To be sure, the Americans no longer exercised the heavy-handed influence in French internal affairs characteristic of the period from 1947 to 1954. During that period, armed with extensive programs of financial assistance in the form of the Marshall Plan, the Military Defense and Assistance Pact of 1950, a variety of "Off-Shore" schemes to help the French balance of payments by contracting out to France the production of NATO (and French) armaments, and finally direct aid to finance the Indochina War, Washington
was able to exercise considerable influence in French internal affairs. With the advice of a sophisticated and talented group of experts on French politics and society, some extraordinarily capable American ambassadors used the extensive resources of the State Department and the Economic Cooperation Administration to influence the course of French politics by direct relationships with French interest groups, the press, the trade unions, and political parties. The Central Intelligence Agency also funneled a considerable amount of money into France in an attempt to strengthen pro-American French politicians; much of this was channeled through the AFL-CIO with the intent of strengthening noncommunist trade unions in France. American ambassadors directly tried to stabilize French governments and support a “third force” center of the political spectrum against simultaneous threats posed by the Communist party and, to a lesser extent, by Charles de Gaulle, at the time regarded as a dangerous adventurer and would-be dictator. This form of intervention, both financial and political, came to an end with the government of Pierre Mendès France in 1954 and the end of the Indochina War, during which French and American policies radically diverged.

Whatever the activities from 1954 to 1962 of the CIA, whose archives remain classified, the American Embassy clearly pursued a hands-off policy in terms of relations with French political groups after 1954. While some French politicians continued to frequent the American Embassy and provide confidential information, this was usually with the intent of influencing American policy in the direction they favored; Washington listened and acted according to its own counsel, although after 1957 it relied increasingly on the British for advice on how to deal with France in particular, but also with Europe as a whole. However, Washington was always aware of the fragile nature of French coalitions and troubled by French ministerial instability, and France’s Algerian problem after 1956 became increasingly an American concern, hampering Washington’s relations with the Arab world, Africa, and Asia, to the extent that American support of France was perceived as the main ingredient that enabled France to carry on the Algerian struggle. Much of the war was fought with American weapons; in that the rebels fought with captured American weapons at the start this became true of both sides. But further, the Americans were painfully aware that the stability of French internal politics, and by extension the entire structure of NATO and the West, were capable of being upset by precipitate American actions with regard to Algeria, which Paris stubbornly insisted was
an internal French problem. Washington was expected to do nothing other than support its French ally.

As the war wore on, this policy revealed itself to the Americans as more and more bankrupt, while every attempt to pressure the French was frustrated by the continued political chaos and paralysis of the Fourth Republic. The Fourth Republic was incapable of bringing peace to Algeria: it could neither win the war nor amass a majority that could negotiate peace while keeping at bay the extensive colonial lobby in France and the infrastructure behind it, the representatives of the settlers in Algeria themselves, and, increasingly, a more and more rebellious army. The realization grew in Washington that the policy of preserving the Fourth Republic came what may, for fear of encouraging a regime of right or left, was precisely the problem. The Fourth Republic had to be abandoned if peace was to emerge; and the alternative of abandoning it looked less and less dangerous as it became apparent that this alternative was much less likely to be a popular front government of the left including the Communists than a conservative semiauthoritarian regime under de Gaulle. And whatever the outlook for de Gaulle’s likely policies in Algeria—as yet it was not apparent that he would pursue peace there by any means short of military victory—it was clear that a regime dominated by him would alone be capable of bringing a resolution to the problem by one means or another. The Fourth Republic was paralyzed because anything it did might provoke its collapse and bring de Gaulle to power. De Gaulle could act because there was no alternative to the Fifth Republic except a Communist-led government or one in which the Communists participated, both clearly unacceptable in Paris and Washington. With these facts apparent, Washington made its fateful decision to attempt to bring about an end to the war come what may. The Fourth Republic’s regime was dysfunctional in terms of the needs of NATO and the foreign policy of the West. Washington would pursue its policies even at the price of bringing about its end and inaugurating a Fifth Republic.

French-American relations took on an increasingly surreal character as the Fourth Republic headed toward what seems in retrospect its inevitable demise. It has long been typical of the new diplomatic or international history to stress the importance of internal politics for international diplomacy. The interconnection was most apparent during the last years of the Fourth Republic, as the Americans became increasingly unable or unwilling to deal with the internal complexity and shifting power relationships within a faltering regime. The Fourth Republic re-
sembled a feudal system: it had a ceremonial president, a premier whose theoretically extensive powers were never clearly defined or fully exercised, and a shifting number of ministries which fell under the domination of politically powerful ministers, frequently able to defy the premier and the cabinet as a whole, or long-term civil servants who were able to take advantage of the shifting political heads to arrogate power to themselves. Proportional representation in elections produced a multiparty system, with six major parties or political groups, befitting the hexagon. Different coalitions tended to form around divergent questions, eighteen cabinets came to power and fell during eleven years, and ministries as a result were frequently free to pursue their own policies because ministers were not around long enough to influence them. Finally, there were two executives with which to deal, the president and the premier, a situation that did not change, but rather became exacerbated, under de Gaulle.

There are four essential and overarching themes that characterize this narrative, as it seeks to place the Algerian War in its international context. The first is that Algeria was at every step of the way from 1954 to 1962 central to French diplomacy, the one problem that for the French dwarfed all others, and the problem that dominated every other for most nations, particularly the United States, in their own attempts to deal with France. Because the French political class did not believe it could abandon Algeria without inaugurating a future of decadence and decline, it therefore subordinated everything else to keeping it French. The second theme is to explain how the internal dynamics of the French regime and its shifting, impenetrable lines of authority added complexity and confusion to the practice of French diplomacy and to the diplomatic relations of others with France, especially the United States. A third is to explain how and why the Americans lost interest in and concern for the preservation of the Fourth Republic, having concluded that its continued existence and inability to extricate itself from the Algerian War were dysfunctional to the Western alliance, and how they contributed to its demise, gambling knowingly on de Gaulle.

The fourth theme functions as a motif for a lengthy coda that brings the war and this narrative to its conclusion. That is to examine how the war underlay de Gaulle’s startling and unorthodox diplomatic initiatives from 1958 to 1962. In doing so, this work challenges some essential views of de Gaulle’s early diplomacy and his original aims and intentions with regard to French colonialism generally and the Algerian War in particular. I will argue that de Gaulle came to power with the in-
tention of keeping Algeria, if not French, at least under French influence and domination. Further, he carried out his spectacular diplomatic initiatives toward the Americans, the European powers, NATO, and French African colonies with this aim in mind. There was nothing new in these initiatives other than the man who carried them out and the manner he employed to do so. In its broad outlines, de Gaulle’s policy was that of the Fourth Republic. And that policy was to establish the basis of France as a world power at the core of three revolving spheres of influence. First, there was the all-important Anglo-American-French imperium over the free world, according to the terms of which each power would use its resources and strength to guarantee and buttress the spheres of influence and power of the others. Second, de Gaulle intended to put France at the head of an organized system of European political cooperation—the six Common Market nations—with a Franco-German nexus at its core, and to have France represent the interests of the reorganized Europe in the councils of the big three. Third, de Gaulle meant for France to act as the core and dominant state within a French-African federation, and in doing so to provide the fulcrum for its establishment as the economic hinterland of Europe in what the French termed Eurafrique. The basis of this new French Weltpolitik was Algeria, France’s bridge to the rest of Africa, the heart of Eurafrique, the basis of France’s influence and prestige in Europe, and in turn the hinge on which France’s joint hegemony as part of the big three was to be established. By 1962 de Gaulle’s dreams lay in ruins, essentially because of his inability to handle the Algerian mess, which in turn compromised French relations with America, Europe, and French Africa. The irony was that France did not lose the war on the ground but in the international arena. De Gaulle’s diplomatic success would have been to have the world acknowledge French Algeria, while Algeria provided the basis for a measure of French hegemony in the world. How that dream came to lie in ruins amid the collapse of French Algeria in 1962 is the conclusion to what in retrospect is a sad, if not a tragic, story.