

The National Association of Veterans and Friends of Indochina: Commemoration of the Indochina War and the “positive” role of colonialism

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ABSTRACT

From the brutal repression of the demonstrations by colonial soldiers in Sétif in 1945 to the wars of decolonization in Indochina and Algeria, the French have experienced considerable difficulty in both reconciling themselves with their colonial past and incorporating it into the national narrative. To illustrate these issues, this study focuses on the National Association of Friends and Veterans of Indochina (ANAI), a group mandated to promote awareness of the Indochina War and a positive interpretation of the colonial project. The examination of its internal commemorative activities, its role in lobbying for greater state-sponsored commemoration and its commitment to promoting the positive aspects of colonialism reveals the process of constructing and promoting particular narratives of the war and the colonial period. In broader terms, this case study illustrates the processes by which special interest groups impact official and public discourses.

Introduction

Fought far from the metropole and in the general indifference of the French public, the Indochina War came to an end with the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, ushering in the long and often bloody process of dismantling the French empire. Along with many other colonial conflicts, from the brutal repression of colonial troops demonstrating in Sétif in May 1945 to the Algerian War, the Indochina War has been perceived as subject to “memory troubles.” Much like the Algerian War, commemoration of the conflict has been problematic; in both cases, there have been considerable delays in initiating state-sponsored commemorative efforts comparable to those undertaken to honor the dead of the two World Wars. An unknown soldier

of the Indochina War was not honored until 26 years after the end of the conflict, and only in 2005 did the state create an official day of homage.¹ Veterans' organizations have played a critical role in lobbying for greater state-led commemoration of the Indochina War, and, among these, the National Association of Veterans and Friends of Indochina (*Association nationale des anciens et amis de l'Indochine*—hereafter ANAI) has been particularly active. One of the largest associations with a connection to the former Indochina, the ANAI features a unique membership composed of veterans and former settlers, as well as a number of members of Vietnamese, Lao and Cambodian origins.

The ANAI presents a fascinating case study for the field of historical memory not only due to its role in state-led commemoration, but also because of its dual memorial mandate to “honor the memory of those who died in order to defend the freedom of [the Indochinese] people” and to “demonstrate France’s accomplishments there over the course of three centuries” (“Statuts de 1988,” insert in *Bulletin de l'ANAI* 1988, 1:1). Through its internal commemorative activities and its involvement in state-sponsored commemorative projects, the group has promoted a particular narrative of the war characterized by a vigorous anticommunism. The war is presented as a struggle against communist forces and ideology, almost entirely ignoring its colonial aspects.² This is in stark contrast to the narrative of the war as one of colonial reconquest. Historians, however, generally agree that the Indochina War was both a means of reestablishing French dominance of the peninsula and a front of the Cold War (e.g., Brocheux and Hémery, 1995; Dalloz, 1990; Ruscio, 1992). The initial goal of reasserting French authority was largely abandoned by 1949 (or even earlier, as some have argued—see Thomas, 2008:203), when the communist victory in China pushed events in Indochina to the forefront of the Cold War.

Despite the emphasis of the academic community on the dual nature of the conflict, the ANAI has maintained its anticommunist focus. The association’s narrative of the war casts French soldiers (and others fighting for France) as the partners and protectors of the nationalist Vietnamese, as well as other anticommunist forces in the peninsula. This theme of partnership extends to the group’s commitment to promote a positive view of colonialism, emphasizing three centuries of Franco-Indochinese³ relations in addition to the ostensible progress instituted by the French. Anticommunism shapes the ANAI’s perceptions of colonialism as well, insofar as the living conditions imposed by communist governments in the peninsula are compared with those under the French administration of the region.

The following is a case study of the processes by which interest and advocacy groups inflect official discourse and action as well as broader public discourse and action with respect to the various iterations of the colonial past. Analysis will focus on the ANAI’s two central mandates, as well as on how the ANAI presents (and represents) itself and its aims, primarily through the pages of its quarterly bulletin.⁴

The objective is to shed light on the ANAI's construction of particular interpretations of the Indochina War and the colonial project, as well as to examine the parallels between these interpretations and the narratives promoted by the French government.

ANAI history and objectives

The ANAI was founded on November 21, 1964, following the merger of two civilian organizations: the Metropolitan Association of Veterans and Victims of War of Indochina (*Association Métropolitaine des Anciens Combattants et Victimes de Guerre d'Indochine*) and the Association of Support for the French of Indochina (*Association Amicale de Prévoyance des Français d'Indochine*), both founded in 1947. On March 14, 1981, the association absorbed the *Souvenir Indochinois*,⁵ founded in 1917 to oversee the proper burial and maintenance of cemeteries for Indochinese troops who died in Europe during the First World War. This additional commemorative duty stresses the ANAI's own sense of representing the interests of all Indochinese in France, which is further exemplified by their various humanitarian and philanthropic efforts. It was closely linked to the National Franco-Vietnamese, Franco-Cambodian and Franco-Lao Aid Committee (*Comité national d'entraide franco-vietnamien, franco-cambodgien et franco-laotien*), created in 1975 to aid those fleeing newly established communist regimes. Current ANAI president General Guy Simon presided over the committee from 1988 until 1992, at which point it was simply incorporated into the ANAI. It has also undertaken fundraising efforts to build churches and schools, primarily in Vietnam, and oversees a sponsorship program for children.

Never an extremely large group, the ANAI reached a peak membership of approximately 10,000 in 1990 (Simon, 1990b),⁶ after experiencing a small influx of members. This was due in part to the opening of membership in the late 1980s to "friends" of Indochina: "travellers, those performing civil service, investors, researchers, professors, historians [and] linguists interested in contemporary Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos" ("Historique et actualité de l'ANAI," undated information sheet distributed by the ANAI). The increase in members (and specifically veterans) beginning in 1985 can be attributed to a number of factors. First, Robert Bonnafous (1985) published his dissertation on the Viet Minh prisoner of war camps, the first study of its kind. This was followed by the 1988 inauguration of the site of the future Memorial to the Indochina Wars. In 1989, former prisoners of the Viet Minh won the right to be granted special status akin to those deported during the Second World War by Nazi and Vichy authorities. The Georges Boudarel affair exploded in 1991,⁷ and three mainstream films set in Indochina were produced in 1991–1992.⁸ The effect of all of this activity was an increase in public awareness

of the war (and of the colonial period). At the same time, veterans were increasingly willing to discuss their experiences publicly, especially after the mid-1970s, when Communist control was consolidated in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The subsequent waves of refugees and evidence of human rights abuses were for many veterans “proof” that they had been justified in their battle against communism during the war.

The association’s constitution specifically prohibits “all political, religious and union-related debate” (“Statuts de 1988,” insert in *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1988, 1:1),⁹ yet the ANAI has repeatedly been involved in a number of public debates that reveal very particular political beliefs. As president Simon stated in a recent editorial, “communism is still the enemy” (Simon, 2004:3). This anticommunist sentiment dominates the narratives of the war, which is presented as a war against the communist Viet Minh rather than a war of colonial reconquest; in reality, it was both. In a 2001 editorial, Simon argued that the French defeat led to much worse: the defeat of freedom. After communist control was consolidated in the peninsula, he maintains, “two million Cambodians and 80,000 Vietnamese were assassinated; a million and a half Vietnamese were deported to concentration camps. Three million Indochinese fled using all available means; 500,000 died as a result” (Simon, 2001:3).¹⁰ The organization’s staunch anticommunism targets domestic groups (such as the French Communist Party) and communist governments abroad equally. While such a position might seem untenable since the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the very fact that there continue to be communist regimes in power in Vietnam, Laos, China and elsewhere ensures that the ANAI will continue its anticommunist struggle.

Since the late 1970s, the group has used a variety of methods to transmit awareness of the Indochina War and a particular vision of the colonial period. First and foremost is its quarterly bulletin, which has been transformed from a photocopied and stapled booklet to a glossy color magazine. Since the bulletin is limited to the ANAI membership, the group has sought to reach a broader public by organizing exhibits, attempting to pursue pedagogical projects in schools, and by engaging in public debates over the colonial legacy. Since the mid-1980s, the ANAI has curated exhibits with the support of the Army Information and Public Relations Service (SIRPA; *Service d’information et de relations publiques de l’armée*) and the Institute of Communication and Audiovisual Production of the Ministry of Defense (ECPAD; *Établissement de communication et de production audiovisuelle de la Défense*). Composed of mounted photos matched with explanatory panels, the exhibits address the colonial period as well as the various stages of the war. The section on the colonial period frequently extends back to the first contact between French missionaries and the inhabitants of the peninsula in the seventeenth century. In 2001 alone, the ANAI exhibits were open for a total of 52 days across the country (“Rapport d’activité 2001,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 2002, 2:21).

The ANAI has also been committed to gaining a greater foothold in schools, a practice common in France with veterans of the First World War, Holocaust survivors and former members of the Resistance. Their attempt to reach out to the younger generation is clear from the expansion of their membership, and there is a frequent emphasis in the bulletin on including schoolchildren in commemorative events. Accounts of the activities of regional branches refer occasionally to members, usually veterans, visiting their local schools to relate their experiences to the students. The pedagogical goal, according to the bulletin, is to “break the silence, provoke reflection, and above all create awareness in schoolchildren, conscious as we are of the vacuity of the history curriculum” (Simon, 1986:2). The allusions to the dire situation created by the “leftist tendencies” of the national education system are summarized in one editorial: “the rot has been setting in since 1945” (Simon, 2006:3).

The politics of commemoration

The ANAI has long fought what it perceives to be general indifference on the part of the French public and government to those who fought the Indochina War.¹¹ The association has maintained a strong memorial emphasis, observing a series of commemorative dates of civilian and military importance in addition to lobbying for state-sponsored ceremonies and monuments. The commemorative dates honored within the organization reflect the complexities of the process of decolonization from the Second World War through to the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, as well as the narrative of the war that the ANAI seeks to entrench. The association’s involvement in the three ceremonies and monuments organized by the state—the burial of the unknown soldier, the Memorial to the Indochina Wars and the national day of homage—indicate not only the importance accorded to the group by the state, but also the degree to which the ANAI’s narrative of the war and interpretation of colonialism have been reflected in official discourse.

The ANAI’s origins as a primarily civilian organization mean that the seminal commemorative date is March 9, to mark the Japanese takeover of the peninsula in 1945.¹² As a result of this seizure of power, French civilians were attacked, tortured and killed or interned in camps. March 9 thus represents an obvious collective trauma, one that affected many ANAI members (Bastid, 1985)—in 1985, at any rate; decades later, General Simon’s (2001) editorial recognized that most members had not been in Indochina at the time of the attack. Beyond the obvious impact on civilians, the association identifies March 9 as setting the stage for the Indochina War (Bastid, 1985), since the strength of the Indochinese Communist Party grew noticeably after the Japanese were overthrown.¹³ Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnamese independence on September 2 in the wake of the Japanese defeat of August 1945.

Given the violence of the Japanese overthrow of the French, it is not surprising that the ANAI discourse surrounding this date emphasizes the “glorious band of ‘martyrs’” (“Indochine d’hier et d’aujourd’hui,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI*, 1980, 1:6) that resisted the takeover to the best of its abilities, only to be forced into the “obscurity to which these days were relegated” (p. 7). Speeches made at commemorative ceremonies, as well as articles published in the ANAI bulletin, have tended to evoke the heroic resistance of the French. The speech made by the president of the Basque section to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of March 9 is a good example of this rhetoric:

The French resisted heroically, but were outnumbered and were forced to yield. Our prisoners were chained, often tortured, and massacred with machine guns, bayonets, or knives. They demonstrated an astounding courage, the Marseillaise was on their lips as they died... (“Cérémonies commémoratives du 9 mars 1945,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1985, 1:4).

The narrative of martyrdom and victimhood, though not unwarranted given the circumstances, provides an interesting point of comparison with the ANAI’s discourse of glorification of the soldiers killed during the course of the war. French (and colonial) troops, particularly those who fought at Dien Bien Phu, are presented as stoic heroes, whose sacrifice for the nation and the freedom of Indochina should be fully recognized.

The parallels between the two sets of “victims” carry over into a discourse of “forgotten martyrs”: both the survivors of the Japanese coup and the survivors of Dien Bien Phu, in particular those who survived the camps, are referred to in this language of neglected heroes. There is a common language of a collective trauma that has been ignored by the metropolitan public, and an emphasis on courage and resistance. This discourse was reinforced by the Boudarel affair and the resulting media coverage of the Viet Minh prisoner-of-war camps, in which mortality rates were exceptionally high due to extreme malnutrition and disease. No matter how public opinion viewed the objectives and tactics of the military, the emaciated prisoners could hardly be seen as anything but victims. The discourse surrounding the camps identified the prisoners of war as the victims of communism, just as the victims of March 9 were the victims of the Japanese. In both cases, the emphasis on victimhood serves to elide previous activities; in the case of the prisoners of war, it allows their collective actions against civilians and enemy soldiers alike to be overlooked. This is of particular relevance given the French Expeditionary Corps’ use of torture on Viet Minh prisoners and policy of targeting civilian populations under particular circumstances. With respect to the narrative of French civilians as victims, one wonders whether the emphasis on the victims of the Japanese does not also serve to divert attention from, or compensate for, the allegiance to Vichy of

French Indochina. An article addressing the events of the Japanese takeover argues that not only were these “martyrs” not given the recognition they deserved, but they frequently faced postwar purges and saw their careers compromised due to suspicions of their activities under Vichy (“Indochine d’hier et d’aujourd’hui,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1980, 1:7). René Poujade, a member of the French resistance in Indochina, argues that there has been a persistent failure to recognize the victims of Vichy in Indochina. In fact, he argues, they are the only French victims of the Second World War to go unacknowledged (Poujade, 2007:177). The ANAI’s own discourse arguably contributes to this ignorance of the victims of Vichy (and therefore the perpetrators) by focusing attention on the victims of the Japanese after March 1945.

The amalgamation of the experiences of French settlers and soldiers into a common narrative of victimhood can also be seen as displacing the position of the colonized as victims, a process identified by the editors of *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, who suggest that

the privileging of veteran memory defines the “survivor” in a way which threatens to displace other kinds of war experience [...]. In addition, the effect of veteran narratives [...] is to leave the impact of violence on the colonized, not just during the “wars,” but across the centuries of...colonial rule, outside the frame of understanding (Ashplant, Dawson and Roper, 2000:51).

In the case of March 9, this process can arguably be extended to include civilian narratives of victimhood, which leave little room for the narratives of those who see themselves, or are seen as, victims of French colonialism. The diversity of the ANAI membership adds yet another dimension: how can the experiences of the Indochinese members be reconciled with these narratives of victimhood? While the bulletin offers little in the way of a solution to this problem, I would argue that those members who have their roots in the colonized population find their place in the ANAI community primarily because of its anticommunist stance. Though information on such members is sparse, it would be perfectly understandable that Indochinese, and particularly Vietnamese, members of the ANAI sympathized with nationalist (anticommunist) forces. They are thus positioned in solidarity with the soldiers and others who fought the Viet Minh, simultaneously placing them in a community of victims of communism and reinforcing the image of age-old Franco-Indochinese partnership.

While March 9 continues to be a central date for the ANAI, there has been a slow shift, beginning in the mid-1980s, to a greater focus on the anniversary of the fall of Dien Bien Phu (May 7), and later to the official day of homage to the war dead (June 8).¹⁴ The same period was also marked by the transition from the civilian

presidency of Hélène Bastid to that of Guy Simon.¹⁵ May 7 was typically marked by articles in the bulletin as well as commemorative ceremonies sponsored by the national branch in Paris and regional branches. There was, however, a recognition that commemorating the battle of Dien Bien Phu overshadowed the contributions of those who had fought in other battles; in 2003, Simon supported the government’s plans for commemorative events to mark the fiftieth anniversary the following year, but noted that because May 7 was not an inclusive date, “next year we will choose a date that brings them all together” (Simon, 2003a:3). Ultimately, June 8 was chosen as the official national day of homage to the dead of the Indochina War, which was celebrated for the first time in 2005.

The ANAI views commemorative ceremonies as public acts that not only create an awareness of the sacrifice of French troops to defending “freedom” in Indochina, but also provide a forum to communicate the perceived merits of the colonial system.¹⁶ In fact, the “pedagogical value of commemorative ceremonies” is proposed as one of the ways to educate the public about the “realities of French colonialism in Indochina” (Simon, 1986:2). Since the ANAI’s own events are attended primarily by members, they have lobbied for state-sponsored events intended for a broad public audience. The first “official” commemorative event to honor the contributions of the veterans of the Indochina War was the burial of an unknown soldier in June 1980 at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, the traditional resting place of the unknown soldiers of France’s twentieth-century conflicts. While the degree of ANAI influence on the government is difficult to ascertain, the group was certainly active. The ANAI lobbied heavily for the repatriation and ceremonial burial of an unknown soldier, and president Hélène Bastid met with government representatives on a number of occasions. The ANAI itself did not question its impact on the process. The bulletin claimed that “without boasting, we can say that the decision [to repatriate and honor an unknown soldier] was due to our president’s appeals to the government” (“Rapport moral,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1980, 2:8). Further evidence of the state’s regard for the association lies in the fact that Bastid received a personal telephone call from the Minister of Veterans Affairs on March 26, 1980, to notify her of the impending arrival of the casket at the Roissy airport two days later (“Retour en France du corps du soldat inconnu d’Indochine,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1980, 2:15). The ANAI executive, along with many of its members, was heavily involved in every stage of the three-day ceremony in June that culminated in the interment at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette. The subsequent issue of the bulletin was dedicated to an account of the proceedings. Overall, the group was pleased that the ceremony had finally been staged; however, the author of the account does complain about the lack of overall media coverage, especially on television:

One could ask—and we will—if it is a case of negligence on the part of the services in question, or whether it was a deliberate decision not to give

national recognition to our sacrifices in Indochina. But we will continue our activities so that one day the French people will have knowledge of the Indochinese drama ("Les cérémonies en l'honneur du Soldat Inconnu d'Indochine," *Bulletin de l'ANAI*, 1980, 3:13).

Shortly after the burial of the unknown soldier, the ANAI became involved in the creation of a monument in the southern town of Fréjus to honor military and civilian victims in Indochina from 1939 to 1956. The monument, completed and inaugurated in 1983, was the first stage in the complex that is now known as the Memorial to the Indochina Wars, which includes a necropolis, a wall inscribed with the names of the dead and a small museum. The project was spearheaded by the Association for the Erection of a National Memorial to Veterans of Indochina (AEMNAI; *Association pour l'érection d'un mémorial national aux anciens d'Indochine*) with the support of the municipality of Fréjus, the deputy of the Var, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Veterans Affairs. Once the project was approved, a national committee was created to oversee construction of the monument; and the presidents of the most important associations dedicated to the memory of combatants in Indochina, including the ANAI, were all invited to participate (letter from François Léotard and Jean Pascal to André Biard, March 15, 1982, *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3). Interestingly, and despite the association's commitment to commemorating the war, the archives reveal that the ANAI was initially unwilling to lend its support to the project. The source of this unwillingness is unclear, particularly since the association is silent on the subject in the pages of the bulletin. According to correspondence between a local artist and Fréjus mayor François Léotard, one source of displeasure was apparently the design of the bas-relief (letter from Paul Fraipont to François Léotard, November 21, 1981, *Archives municipales de Fréjus*, carton 87 W 3). The bas-relief in question features a pair of soldiers, one French and one Indochinese (likely Vietnamese), struggling to hold up a map of Indochina with a dragon wrapped around it. This ostensible displeasure with the design is perplexing, since it reflects the ANAI's emphasis on the partnership between French forces and the Indochinese people in the struggle against the Viet Minh forces. One possibility is that while the monument depicts the Franco-Indochinese partnership, it only represents the Vietnamese, rather than including all Indochinese. Despite these initial misgivings, however, the ANAI not only committed itself to the building and inauguration of the monument, but continued to be heavily involved in the subsequent stages of the building of the memorial in 1988 and 1993.

The ANAI was also involved in lobbying for the most recent commemorative project undertaken by the state: the institution in 2005 of a national day of homage to the war dead. The choice of date, June 8, reflects the ANAI's own preoccupation with finding an anniversary that was both worth celebrating and representative of all

combatants. June 8, the date of the internment of the unknown soldier in 1980, appears to have been an acceptably neutral date for a number of organizations.¹⁷ The ANAI bulletin makes a number of references over the years to finding a date that represents *all* combatants of the Indochina War, without symbolizing defeat. May 7 was unacceptable because it favored the combatants of the battle of Dien Bien Phu; July 20, the date of the signature of the Geneva accords, was rejected as being synonymous with the ultimate abandonment by the French government of the French forces and the Vietnamese people. In 2003, the National Committee of Indochina Veterans Associations requested that President Chirac participate in a ceremony at the tomb of the unknown soldier as part of the fiftieth anniversary celebrations the following year; the ANAI claimed that “thereafter, June 8 will be the day to remember the Indochina wars” (Simon, 2003b:3). The association also claimed responsibility for securing the President’s agreement for the establishment of the day of homage (*Bulletin de l’ANAI* 2006, 1:33).

The ANAI’s commitment to lobbying for specific commemorative events is matched by its commitment to opposing those events it deems to be inappropriate. In 1988–1989, the group successfully led a campaign against UNESCO’s proposal for a celebration of the centenary of Ho Chi Minh’s birth planned for 1990; though the group recognized Ho’s virtues as an “honest man” and a “patriot,” they also viewed him as a perpetrator of crimes against humanity, both against his own people and against foreign troops (Simon, 1989, 3:3). The French government ultimately agreed with the veterans’ position, and no state-sponsored events were scheduled. Reflecting on the victory, General Simon stated that “the ANAI has once again demonstrated the effectiveness of a national organization that is strong in both numbers and unity” (Simon, 1990a:10). Opposition to the centenary celebrations on the part of regional branches of the ANAI had similar results in Lyons and Marseilles (“Rapport d’activité 1990,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1991, 2:7). Likewise, the association spoke out against smaller-scale commemorations of the Geneva accords, such as those sponsored by the *mairie* of the tenth *arrondissement* in Paris in 1989. General Simon justified this opposition in the following terms:

If the war had ended honorably, July 20 could have been suitable. However, on the one hand, the ceasefire was not respected; many soldiers of the French Union fell after that date. On the other hand, and most importantly, it would be odious to celebrate the abandonment of the friends we fought to defend. Do we celebrate the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine in 1871, or the partition of France into three zones in 1940 (Simon, 2003b:3)?

Beyond the judgment of the date as undeserving of commemorative consideration, Simon’s comparison of Indochina’s separation from France with the loss of Alsace-Lorraine and the German occupation goes beyond a common experience of

territorial amputations to imply that Indochina was more than just a colony. One could even read into his statement a belief that Indochina had been an integral part of France, which disregards the fact that, even at its colonial apogee, Indochina had been a series of kingdoms, colonies and protectorates where metropolitan law and rights never fully penetrated.

The commitment to promoting particular interpretations of the war while opposing events that were thought to undermine these interpretations is also evident in more subtle ways. A bibliography of recommended reading was included in the bulletin since at least 1988, and it was assumed that works on the list were in line with the association's vision. In 1996, however, a further step was taken: in the first edition of the year, a special note was included at the end of the bibliography asking whether members wanted to have a space dedicated to publications "deemed to be hostile to the memory that we want to maintain" ("Bibliographie," *Bulletin de l'ANAI* 1996, 1:24). Several letters published in subsequent issues opposed the proposal, arguing that such censorship was too close to the totalitarian regimes that they had fought against, and the project was never pursued. It should be noted that this opposition was not extended to challenging the narrative of the war promoted by the association; rather, it was limited to critiquing the practice of censorship. Nonetheless, from its reading list through to its coverage of the key commemorative dates, the association has used its bulletin to promote an interpretation of the war in which the French Expeditionary Corps and local troops worked together to protect the Indochinese people from the threat of communism.

The "positive" aspects of colonialism

The ANAI's second major mandate is to combat so-called "disinformation" about France's colonial past. This disinformation is generally understood as being attacks on the merits of colonialism, primarily from the political left and extreme left. Charges that the French presence had no lasting benefits for its colonies and, worse, that it perpetrated abuse and exploitation, are vehemently denied. There are rare instances in which some errors are acknowledged, but overall the focus is on the "progress" initiated by the French. The bulletin is an obvious choice for promoting this view, and it often features excerpts from works highlighting French contributions to progress in Indochina. However, these excerpts are frequently taken from colonial-era works, though the dates are usually in small type at the end of the piece. One such excerpt is taken from *Colonies Françaises* (1932), and outlines French contributions to progress in the areas of agriculture, public health, economic reform and education, and ultimately concludes that "in Indochina, France did not fail in its role as mother and propagator of civilization" (Cabaton, 2000:23). There is no analysis of these documents; they are simply presented as evidence of the

positive impact of the French presence. The bulletin also prints accounts of trips to contemporary Vietnam, as well as "Contemporary Indochina" sections, both of which tend to emphasize a plethora of problems, from infrastructure to political issues. While this appears to be merely a means of informing the readership of contemporary issues, it also functions as a means of convincing them that the region was better off under French tutelage.

The bulletin is naturally not the sole means of communicating the ANAI's understanding of the value of colonialism, and the association has engaged in a number of public debates. These reached particularly volatile levels in 1984 as the result of Henri de Turenne's six-part documentary series *Vietnam*, which was co-produced and aired on Antenne 2. The first three episodes covered the French colonial period and the French war; the second three addressed the US Vietnam War. The coverage of the colonial period was quite critical of both colonial authorities and policies, and Turenne presented the war as a valiant struggle for independence, though he acknowledged the courage and sacrifice of French troops as well. The ANAI's immediate reaction was published in *Le Monde*, and reprinted in the bulletin under the heading "Falsified History." The author of the letter wrote: "on behalf of all *anciens* [i.e., veterans and former settlers] of Indochina, I cannot accept that France's work in Indochina, nor the sacrifices she made, be so grossly distorted: it is an insult to both history and the nation" (J.F., "L'histoire falsifiée," *Bulletin de l'ANAI* 1984, 1:2). Protest was not limited to letters to the editor, however; the ANAI was involved in demonstrations in front of the offending TV network, a letter-writing campaign and a televised confrontation between four representatives of various groups, including Jean-Jacques Beucler (a member and honorary president of the ANAI), and the producer of the documentary. The goal of the latter was ostensibly to "publicly unmask the parody of a trial [of colonialism] instituted by Henri de Turenne" ("Activités de l'ANAI," *Bulletin de l'ANAI* 1984, 2:2). The four critics emphasized the positive contributions to Indochinese society which they felt had been ignored in the series; that is, education, public health, the preservation of cultural heritage and the elimination of famine, amongst others. Furthermore, they took issue with what they felt was the presentation of the war as one of national liberation from colonial domination, arguing that it was in fact a war between nationalists and communists. Turenne himself was given little time by the four critics to defend himself or his documentary.

Not satisfied with the televised corrective to Turenne's documentary, the ANAI undertook the publication of a book entitled *Indochine: Alerte à l'histoire. Ni opprobre, ni oubli* (*Indochina: A Warning for History*), advertised as "a warning against historical 'disinformation' hatched by a simplistic anticolonialism that is still predominant in France" (advertisement in *Bulletin de l'ANAI* 1985, 2:13). The foreword by former colonial administrator and prime minister, Pierre Messmer, states the objectives of the book quite simply:

It is not a complete overview of the history of Indochina in the second half of the nineteenth century; neither is it a complete analysis of a century of French policies in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. [...] We chose to recall and describe a number of facts, of situations that the director of the film neglected to present, undoubtedly because they contradict the image that he sought to convey (Académie des Sciences d'Outre-Mer et al., 1985:9).

The introduction, to which Bastid contributed, stresses the importance of recognizing the benefits of the Franco-Indochinese partnership. The book itself is divided into sections on the history of the region; the structure of colonial administration; economic, cultural and social development; and finally the Indochina War and peace process. The volume concludes with a study of the "historical and cultural convergences between France and Vietnam" (Académie des Sciences d'Outre-Mer et al., 1985:373), which brings the theme of an ancient partnership full circle. Echoing the statements of Turenne's critics during the debate on Antenne 2, the sections addressing the French colonial *oeuvre* focus on the "progress" in terms of protecting Indochinese cultural heritage (particularly through the French Institute of the Far East), promoting modern sanitary measures and extending the education system. As a whole, the volume interprets the colonial era as one of progress, protection and propagation of the civilizing mission.

The emphasis on the positive aspects of colonialism has naturally led the ANAI to be particularly critical of those who maintain an anticolonial position, including academics, journalists and others. In a 1986 article outlining the history of France in Indochina, General Tessot counters an argument from "certain people" that the Indochinese could have "evolved" along a Japanese model, without Western intervention (Tessot, 1986:8). He justifies the French presence by arguing that the Japanese elite had recognized as early as 1853 that following a Western model was essential to success, whereas the Indochinese elite refused to recognize the necessity of change. The implication is, therefore, that French intervention was needed to prompt this "modernization." Claims of the negative impact of colonialism are frequently countered with the "evidence" of the boat people and other refugees and immigrants, and not only within the ANAI. If not for a longstanding attachment between the inhabitants of the Indochinese peninsula and the French, it is argued, there would not be so many of them seeking refuge in France. This argument is further reinforced with the claim that there *were* no boat people until after the French presence had ended, suggesting that the French colonial system was better than the Communist system that followed ("Nécropole d'Indochine: Le programme de la journée," *Nice-Matin*, January 19, 1988). Rather than concentrate on "past blunders" or "exalt French failures while ignoring the successes," the association maintains that a more productive approach is to emphasize the shared Franco-Indochinese past ("Indochine d'hier," special insert, *Bulletin de l'ANAI* 1984, 1:I).

This commitment to promoting a positive view of the colonial legacy carries a particular resonance since 2005, when a controversial law was passed affirming the “positive” role of colonialism. Officially known as the law on the “Nation’s recognition of the contributions made by repatriated French citizens,” it was intended to acknowledge the contributions of French citizens to the colonial project, as well as to acknowledge the difficulties faced by those repatriated to France (*rapatriés*), the sacrifices of those who fought alongside French forces, and the military and civilian victims of the “events associated with the process of independence.”¹⁸ The text also included a highly contentious article stating that school and university curricula were to acknowledge the positive aspects of colonialism. The law in general, and this article in particular, prompted heated debates amongst academics, special interest groups and the general public. Supporters of the law emphasized the need to recognize those who had fought for France and been treated badly upon their “repatriation”; this argument was formulated in implicit acknowledgement of the *harkis*—who had fought alongside the French during the Algerian War—in mind. Others took a more extreme position, arguing that it was time for the French to stop repenting for the “errors” of colonialism and focus on the “progress” initiated by the French presence in Asia, Africa and elsewhere. Opponents argued that while recognition of the *rapatriés* was long overdue, the law in effect represented a whitewashing of the history of the colonial period.¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, the ANAI viewed the law favorably.

The ANAI and state discourse

As has been demonstrated, the ANAI has played a significant role in state-sponsored commemoration of the Indochina War, and in several instances, has worked closely with government representatives. In light of this position of importance, the association’s interpretations of both the war and the colonial period are all the more relevant. While the official narrative does not reflect the ANAI’s position exactly, there is considerable continuity between the two. Moreover, the ANAI’s tendency to use the pedagogical aspect of commemorative ceremonies to promote a positive view of colonialism is also reflected, though to a lesser degree, in official discourse. President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s speech at the burial of the unknown soldier in 1980 emphasized “the contribution that France made to the progress of the people of this other half of the world” (“Les cérémonies en l’honneur du Soldat Inconnu d’Indochine,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1980, 3:6). This sentiment was echoed in a 1981 speech by the Minister of Veterans Affairs for the inauguration of a plaque to French dead in Indochina from 1858 to 1955, in which he reminded the audience that “the French presence was, for all those years, synonymous with peace and development” (“Commémoration du 9 mars 1945,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1981, 2:11). The 1983

inauguration of the first phase of the Indochina War memorial site included speeches by François Léotard (the mayor of Fréjus) and Prime Minister Jacques Chirac. Both emphasized the “forgotten” Indochina War, fought in the “indifference” of the French public. Both also, however, made reference to the colonial period as exemplifying a positive relationship between metropole and colony. Léotard did so less overtly than Chirac, who openly extended recognition to “all those—soldiers, missionaries and administrators—who put their heart and soul in the service of French glory, the expansion of its civilization and of peace” (“Discours de M. Jacques Chirac, Premier Ministre,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1988, 1:13). A few years later, speaking at the inauguration of the Indochina Veterans’ Square (*Square des combattants d’Indochine*), Chirac stated that he believed the colonial relationship to have been “mutually beneficial for France and for those states of the Far East” (“Allocution de M. Jacques Chirac,” *Bulletin de l’ANAI* 1987, 1:5). Although the ANAI was certainly more extreme than state representatives in its affirmation of colonialism as a positive force, the parallels between the discourses of the two in combination with the evidence of the government’s attention to the association suggest that there is more than mere overlap.

Conclusion

The ANAI’s narrative of the Indochina War, with its emphasis on the partnership between nationalist groups (primarily Vietnamese) and the French Expeditionary Corps in the struggle against communist forces threatening all three states of the Indochinese peninsula, undermines the colonial dimension of the conflict. Although the ANAI recognizes that the defeat at Dien Bien Phu marked the beginning of the end of French colonialism, it nonetheless views the primary outcome of the French defeat not as the independence of the three states that emerged from the former Indochina, but rather as the abandonment of colonial “partners” to the communist threat. In this regard, the ANAI is not alone; many groups on the political right and extreme right view the war in a similar light. Furthermore, the group’s emphasis on the positive role of colonialism ignores the grievances of those who were victimized by the colonial system and sought to overthrow it, whether they were communist or not. That one of the main “carriers” of the memory of the Indochina War maintains such an ambiguous relationship with the process of decolonization is indicative of the difficulties inherent in coming to terms with the multifaceted legacy of colonialism, a legacy which the 2005 law sought to address. The case of the ANAI also reveals the complexities inherent in the process of constructing and promoting particular narratives of events. ANAI members, feeling that their contributions to both the Indochinese development and the struggle against communist forces have been actively ignored, have sought to have these contributions legitimized through

advocacy in political, educational and public arenas. It is significant that this relatively small group has had such an impact, primarily on commemorative practices surrounding the Indochina War, but also on official discourse of the war and the colonial project.

NOTES

¹ The Algerian War has fared only slightly better: an unknown soldier was honored in 1977, and a national day of homage created in 2003.

² The complexity of the conflict is further illustrated by Ho Chi Minh's own combination of nationalist, communist and anticolonial rhetoric. A nationalist who opposed the injustices of the colonial state, Ho's demands for reform in Indochina went unheeded by members of the French government, including Minister of Colonies Albert Sarraut. As a result, he turned first to the French Socialist Party (SFIO) in 1919 and then to the French Communist Party (PCF) after its creation in 1920, drawn by the prominence of anticolonialism in party ideology. He went on to found the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930 and the Communist-led *Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh* (Vietnam Independence League, abbreviated Viet Minh) in 1941, which also (initially) included nationalists and which eventually defeated the French forces at Dien Bien Phu.

³ The terms "Indochina" and "Indochinese" will be used throughout this paper without quotation marks, to reflect the ANAI's own usage of the terms.

⁴ Although the current group was formed in 1964, neither the ANAI headquarters nor the National Library of France have the full run of the bulletin. Since this publication forms much of the source base for this piece, I will focus primarily on the period 1977–2006. It should be noted that commemorative activity centered on the Indochina War (and veterans' involvement in it) increased steadily after 1975 and the consolidation of communist control over Vietnam.

⁵ Though still approximate, the best translation of the group's name is "Indochinese Remembrance."

⁶ Membership experienced a decline from the mid-1990s: there were 9,000 members in 1995 and 6,700 in 2006. Statistics cited in the association's *Rapport d'activité 2006*.

⁷ Georges Boudarel was a professor of Vietnamese studies at the University of Paris VII who was denounced in 1990 for his role as a political propagandist in Viet Minh camp 113. These accusations were followed by charges of crimes against humanity, which were ultimately deemed to be unfounded. The affair dominated the press for several months, prompting considerable debate over interpretations of the Indochina War and the relative merits of the colonial project.

⁸ The films were: *L'amant* (Jean-Jacques Annaud), *Diên Biên Phu* (Pierre Schoendoerffer) and *Indochine* (Régis Wargnier).

⁹ This is not uncommon for veterans' organizations. All of the First World War veterans' groups surveyed by Antoine Prost (1977) have similar articles in their constitutions, though this does not exclude the groups having particular political leanings.

¹⁰ The numbers presented by Simon are difficult to confirm, as is often the case with statistics on refugees and state-directed executions and internment. However, the numbers of victims of the Khmer Rouge and refugees from the peninsula are comparable to other sources (see Robinson, 1998; Sliwinski, 1995). The statistics of Vietnamese killed or imprisoned by the Communist regime are more difficult to ascertain; the least conservative estimates are those in Jean-Louis Margolin and Stéphane Courtois's (1977) controversial work, which range from 500,000 to 1 million prisoners and an additional 1 million dead.

¹¹ This is a goal common to associations of veterans of the Algerian War (see Evans, 1997:76).

¹² Following the French defeat in 1940, the Vichy authorities signed agreements with Japan that resulted in a power-sharing arrangement in Indochina. This arrangement was maintained until just prior to the end of the war. In March 1945, the Japanese staged a coup through which they consolidated their control of the French colony.

¹³ For more on the Japanese takeover and its significance, see Brocheux and Hémery (1995).

¹⁴ Other dates of significance for the association are December 19 (date of Viet Minh attack on French forces in Hanoi, identified by some as the beginning of the war; others identify the French bombing of Haiphong on November 23 as sparking the conflict); September 2 (the Japanese surrender, and not the declaration of Vietnamese independence); November 2 (day to honor the Indochinese who died fighting for France in one of the two World Wars).

¹⁵ Hélène Bastid served as ANAI president from 1967 to 1986. Her husband, Charles Bastid, ran a number of businesses across Southeast Asia, and the family spent considerable time in Indochina, where her son was born. He was later killed in combat there in 1947. General Guy Simon took over the presidency in 1986, and continues to hold this position at the time of writing.

¹⁶ The emphasis on the pedagogical value of commemoration is obviously not unique to the ANAI. For more on the pedagogical value of military commemoration in France, see Prost (1997: vol III).

¹⁷ June 8 has no other significance than the date of the burial of the unknown soldier. The choice of commemorative date for the Algerian War was made with a comparable desire for neutrality; December 5 was the result, representing the date of the inauguration of the national memorial to the war.

¹⁸ “Loi n°2005-158 du 23 février 2005 portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés,” <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000444898&dateTexte=>.

¹⁹ For more on the controversies surrounding this law, see Bertrand (2006).

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