

2013

# H-Diplo

## H-Diplo Roundtable Review

[www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables](http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables)

**Volume XIV, No. 27 (2013)**

8 April 2013

*Roundtable Editors:* Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse

*Roundtable Web/Production Editor:* George Fujii  
Commissioned for H-Diplo by Thomas Maddux

Introduction by James I. Matray, California State University, Chico

**Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levine. *Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam*.** Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8078-3528-9 (cloth, \$35.00).

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/Roundtable-XIV-27.pdf>

## Contents

---

Introduction by James I. Matray, California State University, Chico .....	2
Review by Jeremy Friedman, Yale University .....	7
Review by T. Christopher Jespersen, University of North Georgia.....	11
Review by Emily S. Rosenberg, University of California, Irvine .....	15
Review by William Stueck, University of Georgia.....	18
Author's Response by Michael H. Hunt, Emeritus University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and Steven I. Levine, University of Montana.....	23

---

## Copyright © 2013 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

Introduction by James I. Matray, California State University, Chico

---

In 1964, Norman A. Graebner published his *Ideas and Diplomacy: Readings in the Intellectual Tradition of American Foreign Policy*.<sup>1</sup> In it, he identified 1898 as the great divide in U.S. diplomatic history, arguing that the Spanish-American War installed idealism in place of realism as the main intellectual force dictating the thinking and behavior of American leaders in the formulation and implementation of the nation's policies abroad. Ending more than a century of consistent success in world affairs, the United States thereafter would follow an approach that led only to frustration and failure. Scholars in the field of U.S. foreign relations moved beyond the simplistic idealism versus realism framework of analysis for understanding the actions of the United States in international relations long ago. While debate continues regarding the reasons for the shift, Graebner's insight has stood the test of time in recognizing a new pattern in U.S. diplomacy after 1898 of pursuing policies that are invariably disappointing and often disastrous, especially in East Asia.

In *Arc of Empire*, Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levine, like Graebner, pinpoint 1898 as the watershed year in the history of U.S. foreign relations. Their study examines in detail four wars that the United States fought in East Asia in the twentieth century—in the Philippines, Imperial Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. These conflicts, they contend, “were not separate and unconnected,” but “constitute a single historical drama in four acts” (1). Hunt and Levine attempt to provide a “comparative perspective on the U.S. drive [to dominate East Asia] by treating it in terms of *empire*” (2). The authors, who rank among the foremost authorities on U.S. involvement in the Pacific, meet the expectation for providing their definition of what has become a loaded term: “Empire is fundamentally a centrally directed political enterprise in which a state employs coercion (violence or at least the threat of violence) to subjugate an alien population within a territorially delimited area governed by another state or organized political force” (3).

Hunt and Levine identify “four features” in “a familiar imperial path” that Americans followed in “the long U.S. transpacific encounter”: the animating force of “a strong ideological impulse”; a defining context of “colonialism and third-world nationalism”; the pursuit of control through “the massive and indiscriminate destruction of modern warfare” (4); and the eventual “emergence of a strong, stable, and prosperous eastern Asia” (5) because of the failure of the U.S. imperial enterprise. Anticipating criticism, Hunt and Levine address three misconceptions to clarify their analytical approach as it relates to the United States. First, they do not prioritize the many motives behind American empire. Second, they see no distinction between a formal and an informal assertion of imperial dominance. Finally, their “notion of empire is essentially military and political” (6), and it “comes to an end only when the mailed fist is voluntarily withdrawn or breaks against local resistance” (7) as it did for the United States in Vietnam.

---

<sup>1</sup> Norman A. Graebner, *Ideas and Diplomacy: Readings in the Intellectual Tradition of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

*Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam* has received mixed reviews from the participants in this roundtable. There is agreement on a number of its strengths. Writing for the group, Christopher Jespersen reports that the authors “provide an extensively researched, carefully argued, wonderfully organized, and beautifully written book.” Her fellow commentators echo Emily Rosenberg’s judgment that Hunt and Levine present “a fine overview of each one of America’s Pacific wars.” All praise the authors’ attempt at development of common themes demonstrating the continuity linking these conflicts. Rosenberg and William Stueck both recommend adoption of the book for use in the classroom. Affirming the consensus among the commentators, Jeremy Friedman labels this study “timely and important” because the last chapter explains how the U.S. imperial enterprise it has described exposes “a fundamental flaw in the institutional and ideological structure of American foreign policy which is currently leading to a recapitulation of this imperial project in the Middle East.”

Jespersen’s commentary is the most complimentary, briefly summarizing and elaborating on a number of the book’s central issues. His only major criticism of Hunt and Levine is for not indicating that the history of American racism dates to the colonial period. Friedman also raises the issue of race, arguing that the authors do not make clear how it supports their thesis. “If [it does] so,” he advises, “then more attention should have been paid to the racism of policy-makers and the policy-making process, rather than to the racism of the troops.” Rosenberg discusses another place where the authors fall short in supporting a central argument. “Because the book’s interpretation stresses the importance of a military control over territory and cooperative elites,” she explains, “one might have expected strong and consistent coverage of both of these themes for each war.” Nevertheless, Rosenberg’s overall assessment of this study’s content and analysis is uniformly flattering. “By all of these measures,” she declares, *Arc of Empire* “succeeds admirably.”

In contrast, William Stueck finds major flaws in the chapter on the Korean War. “From the massive Chinese counteroffensive of November 1950 onward,” he writes, Hunt and Levine “make some significant misstatements of fact and/or highly questionable characterizations of the U.S. and in one case the Chinese position.” Based on my research on the topic, I concur entirely with his criticism. Stueck also faults the authors for their “emphasis on culture over geopolitics,” questioning especially the consistency that they see in U.S. aggressive intervention in East Asia. He emphasizes that the Truman administration struggled mightily to limit its involvement in both the Chinese Civil War and Korea prior to North Korea’s invasion in June 1950. More important, Stueck insists that U.S. intervention in East Asia—even before the Korean War—was “strategic, based at least as much on fear as on opportunity.” Friedman concurs, pointing to “an acute sense of threat” among American leaders. “If America’s imperial project failed while no one at the top in Washington was consciously pursuing one,” he asks appropriately, “can it really be said that the U.S. failed at a game it never knew it was playing?”

Friedman agrees with Rosenberg that “one might have expected more consistency in [the book’s] argumentation on key points.” He sees fault as well with how Hunt and Levine define ‘empire.’ “It could apply to any country which has attempted, successfully or unsuccessfully, to exercise political control in another state,” he observes, “given that there

are no guidelines regarding the size of empire, the length of rule, or the motivations that prompted the attempt.” Rather than being too expansive in their argument, Rosenberg laments that the authors focus their analysis on East Asia alone. While an American ‘empire’ may have failed there, she calls attention to the U.S. “arcs of empire” in Latin America and Europe and asks: “Were these arcs of empire strategic failures?” In a stunning speculation, Rosenberg reasons “that the vision of empire in Asia could [have been] sustained for so long precisely because pushing an arc of empire had seemed to succeed so well elsewhere.” While acknowledging brevity as one of the book’s virtues, Rosenberg believes that “the politics of [U.S.] military basing over the century seem strangely underexamined” in this study.

Finally, these reviewers disagree in their assessments of the final chapter. Jespersen provides evidence of agreement with Rosenberg, who praises Hunt and Levine for using their analysis of the U.S. imperial enterprise in East Asia “to critique America’s twenty-first century attempts to establish enduring bases and consolidate imperial power in the Middle East.” Stueck dissents. “At times,” he remarks, “efforts to draw parallels with the recent U.S. course in the Middle East appear to be rooted more in a desire to vent about its obvious fallacies than in a commitment to assessing an ambiguous past.” For Stueck, this “blistering chapter” is an example of the study’s lack of analytical balance. Hunt and Levine, he writes, “have sometimes ignored or downplayed the dilemmas faced by American policymakers, the personal idiosyncrasies of those at the top (William McKinley, Lyndon Johnson, and George W. Bush come to mind), partisan political pressures, and changing international conditions.” As for the results, Friedman asks “whether the supposed architects of the American imperial project such as Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and both Roosevelts, surveying the situation in East Asia today, would be dissatisfied with what they see.” If their goal, he answers, was “to prevent the domination of outside powers, open the region to U.S. interests and influence, and create stability and economic growth, then perhaps they might see the current situation as a success.”

Hunt and Levine retreat only a few analytical inches in their response. Not surprisingly, they are pleased that Jespersen and Rosenberg “found our idea of empire compelling and suggestive of fresh lines of inquiry,” but disappointed that Stueck and Friedman, after good starts, become “stuck in an old debate about empire that we were trying to transcend.” They concede to Jespersen in targeting race and the impact of the wars on U.S. domestic affairs and Rosenberg in identifying U.S. relations with foreign elites as deserving greater development, but counter that military bases are “more a manifestation of empire than its source” and no longer are a component of U.S. imperial control in Asia. Although they welcome Rosenberg’s desire for a more comparative approach, the authors defend limiting their analysis to East Asia and the Mideast as the best way to clarify the meaning of empire. As for Stueck and Friedman, Hunt and Levine assert that they have misunderstood and misread their work. Their responses, they believe, are “mired at several points on the hoary question of whether a policy that is benevolent in either intention or outcome can indeed be imperial.” While Stueck confuses military power with empire, Friedman ignores “structural features” and instead focuses on “praiseworthy measures.” The authors are critical of Stueck and Friedman for finding “interpretive advantage mileage in the tired questions of whether empire . . . is a malign phenomenon perpetrated by ill-intentioned

leaders or a force for progress sponsored by enlightened humanitarians.” Hunt and Levine conclude with an explanation of how a discussion of nationalism and China would have improved the reviews.

### Participants:

**Michael H. Hunt** is Emerson Professor Emeritus at UNC-Chapel Hill. His most recent books include *The American Ascendancy: How the United States Gained and Wielded Global Dominance* and *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives*. His current interest is in the yawning gap between history as conceived in the U.S. policy establishment and as practiced in the academy. His occasional comments “on Washington and the world” appear on his own website, <http://michaelhunt.web.unc.edu/>, as well as on the UNC Press Blog site, <http://uncpressblog.com/author/mhhunt/>.

**Steven I. Levine** is Research Faculty Associate, History Department, University of Montana. He and Alexander V. Pantsov recently published *Mao: The Real Story*, and authoritative biography. He also translated and wrote the Introduction to a memoir by Sin-Lin, *Shattered Family, Broken Dreams*. With a retired PLA officer, he is currently co-authoring a book “China’s War in Korea,” and working with the Chinese scholar Zi Zhongyun on her autobiography, “Becoming Myself Again.”

**Christopher Jespersen** is Dean of the College of Arts and Letters at the University of North Georgia, formerly North Georgia College & State University. He is author of *American Images of China, 1931-1949* (1996), which was published in 2010 in Chinese by Jiangsu People’s Publishing House. He is editor of *Interviews with George Kennan* (2002) and author of articles in *Diplomatic History* and *Pacific Historical Review*, among other journals.

**James I. Matray** is Professor of History at California State University, Chico. His most recent publications include *Northeast Asia and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman: Japan, China, and the Two Koreas* and “The Korean War 101: Causes, Course, and Conclusion of the Conflict” in *Education about Asia*. In July 2013, Matray will become Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of American-East Asian Relations*.

**Jeremy Friedman** is currently a post-doctoral fellow in International Security Studies at Yale University. He received his Ph.D. from Princeton University in 2011. His publications include an article in *Cold War History* entitled, “Soviet Policy in the Developing World and the Chinese Challenge in the 1960s.” Among other projects, he is currently completing his first book manuscript entitled “Shadow Cold War: the Sino-Soviet Split and the ‘Third World’.”

**Emily S. Rosenberg**, professor of history at the University of California, Irvine, specializes in the history of the United States and the World in the twentieth century. She is author, most recently, of “Transnational Currents in a Shrinking World, 1870-1945,” a book-length chapter in her edited volume, *A World Connecting: 1870-1945* (Harvard University Press, 2012).

**William Stueck** holds a Ph.D. in history from Brown University and recently retired as Distinguished Research Professor from the University of Georgia. He has written widely on the Korean War and, more recently, U.S.-Korean relations. He is currently working on two books on the latter topic.

Review by Jeremy Friedman, Yale University

---

The question of what role a possibly declining United States – faced with a newly assertive China and its nervous neighbors at the center of geopolitical concern - will play in East Asia is both timely and important, and thus Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levine's book *Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam* is a timely treatment of the American legacy in the region. The subject of American imperialism in East Asia has long been a topic of political discussion there among leaders across the ideological spectrum from Mao Zedong to Suharto and many in between, while the question of American empire in general has interested an increasing number of historians. Hunt and Levine seek to employ this fascination with the concept of empire as an opportunity to critique American foreign policy, past and present. They attempt to build a picture of an American imperial project in East Asia around Washington's four wars in the region between 1898 and 1973, using this picture in order to point to a fundamental flaw in the institutional and ideological structure of American foreign policy which is currently leading to a recapitulation of this imperial project in the Middle East. The juxtaposition of the four cases presented in this book, each of which is presented in an engaging and enlightening chapter, is certainly a useful exercise for those seeking patterns and structures that break through the typical narratives of both American and global history in the twentieth century. The authors' attempt to define a more robust and specific concept of empire in order to gain some analytic traction is also much appreciated. Nevertheless, it seems as if the case for an American imperial project in East Asia would be more persuasive if the authors had established a greater sense of continuity of purpose in Washington. While the cases presented certainly display significant parallels, it is not clear what exactly the addition of the concept of empire adds analytically, other than an opportunity to tie the critique of American foreign policy to broader anti-imperialist historiographical themes.

The strengths of the book lie in its framing of American foreign policy in East Asia, which cuts across the divides of the Second World War and the Cold War. This enables the authors to highlight parallels and recurring themes that can be lost in narratives more limited in time, as well as to offer a broader trajectory of the rise and fall of American power in the region. The American imperial project in East Asia, according to Hunt and Levine, began with a drive across the Pacific which led to a surprising and hesitant decision to control the Philippines, reached its climax in the defeat and occupation of Japan, was subsequently halted by the Chinese on the Korean peninsula, and then collapsed in Indochina, as local resistance finally overwhelmed American resolve. Ever-present in the background, though it is not the main subject of any of the individual chapters, is China, which seems to have been the primary preoccupation of American policy-makers throughout most of the period, except for when it was perhaps eclipsed by Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. The American imperial project in East Asia can be seen then as an attempt to, at a minimum, preserve access to, and at a maximum, control, China. The project was stymied once China finally rose to a level of strength from which it could push back against American intervention in the region. In this way, the authors' innovative

framing of the history presents an intriguing prologue to the current dynamic of U.S. – China rivalry in the region.

Hunt and Levine make clear in their introduction that they intend their concept of empire to do meaningful analytical work and, as such, it must be clearly defined. The notion of the United States as an empire is, of course, far from new. The view expressed by John Darwin in his book *After Tamerlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires, 1400-2000* that “it is pointless to debate whether America should be seen as an imperial power: the case has already been made. After 1900 it became the only world empire. A state with the means to intervene forcibly in almost any part of the world, with such a massive advantage in military power over any possible rival, and with an advanced economy more than twice the size of its nearest competitor was such an empire de facto,” would not be adequate to critique American policy since it sees empire as an inescapable fact of classification rather than a series of behaviors which can be changed.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, Hunt and Levine tackle head-on questions about the nature of control and influence as it relates to empire in general and a possible American empire in particular. Essentially, they argue that whether control is formal or informal is not as important as how it is exercised. If one country decides “whether local rulers stay or go, who has the final word on alliances and foreign military bases, and from what quarter do indigenous military forces take their cue,” then although it operates, as many empires do, through connections with local groups and a process of negotiation, it is an empire (6). The authors also insist that their conception of empire relates strictly to political control which is ultimately exercised through military force, and not to any sort of diffuse cultural influence or “soft power” which they classify as “hegemony” (7). The conceptual rigor of this definition is certainly much appreciated given the more diffuse notions of empire and discourses surrounding imperialism which have become popular, but it appears that the definition might, in fact, be too parsimonious. It could apply to any country which has attempted, successfully or unsuccessfully, to exercise political control in another state, given that there are no guidelines regarding the size of empire, the length of rule, or the motivations that prompted the attempt. Any state which intervenes in the politics of its neighbor to ensure a friendly, pliable ruler could therefore be classified as an empire. By this definition, for example, in the past half-century the Middle East might have witnessed the imperial projects not merely of the superpowers, but of Israel, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and perhaps others as well. It would almost seem then that the difference between empire and nation-state becomes one of degree, rather than kind.

It is also not clear that this definition of empire is, in fact, illustrated in the rest of the book. In themselves, the chapters are interesting and well-written syntheses of the most recent historiography on each of these conflicts, but precisely for that reason they do not appear to be tailored to advancing the book’s central argument. The chapter on Japan, for example, after a summary of the clash of American and Japanese interests in the Pacific, consists primarily of a narrative of the years 1941-1945 including everything from the internment

---

<sup>1</sup> John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Rise and Fall of Global Empires, 1400-2000*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), 482.

of Japanese-Americans to the role of women in the industrial workforce and ‘comfort women’ used by the Japanese military, but it does not devote much attention to the post-war occupation of Japan, which would seem to be the most relevant section of the narrative for the construction of a thesis about American empire. The concentration on the wars themselves, rather than the political interests and policy dynamics which shaped the U.S. approach to East Asia during peacetime, belies the contention that this was a coordinated, prolonged project rather than a series of disconnected reactions, perhaps often misinformed and ill-advised, but nevertheless sincerely motivated by an acute sense of threat which receded as soon as the perceived threat was seen to have been averted. It is a long-discredited truism that the British Empire was acquired in a ‘fit of absent-mindedness,’ but at least that empire was ultimately acquired, one way or another. If America’s imperial project failed while no one at the top in Washington was consciously pursuing one, can it really be said that the U.S. failed at a game it never knew it was playing?

The evidence presented in the chapters also seems to be directed at a different conception of empire, specifically one of those rejected in the introduction, namely that based on a “colonial attitude,” especially racial prejudice, rather than on a simple desire for political control. American racism is a recurring theme throughout the book (for example 40, 86-7, 96-7, 149-150), building on a number of works, perhaps most prominently John Dower’s *War Without Mercy*.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that racism was not an important factor in American actions, just that it is not clear how it fits into the thesis here. Are the authors claiming that racial prejudice was the reason that the U.S. chose to pursue an imperial project in East Asia, or failed to see why and how it would be opposed? If so, then more attention should have been paid to the racism of policy-makers and the policy-making process, rather than to the racism of the troops. It seems perhaps that there is an element of this in the authors’ conception, since they claim that it was the Americans’ “colonial attitude” which ultimately determined their failure in Vietnam (250). Other than racism and a perception of threat, however, little attention seems to be devoted to any other potential motivations for empire such as profit or ideology. Business interests are almost totally absent from the picture and while Henry Luce gets a few mentions, William Randolph Hearst is completely missing. What, then, is left to explain the actions of Washington policy-makers in an attempt to build an empire in East Asia? The authors make claims about a “Cold War culture” (180) an “assumption at midcentury” of American “omnipotence” (177) and an American “sense of entitlement” (197) though they also say that “such hubris is a disease of empire” (147) rather than its cause. In explaining why Lyndon Johnson decided to stay in Vietnam, the authors point to geopolitics and alliance commitments (203). If this is what empire is made of, then it must be more a mode of operation than a conscious project, but that once again begs the question asked earlier: what distinguishes this mode of operation from that employed by other states, some more powerful and some less so, which seek to impose their will in the international arena?

---

<sup>2</sup> John Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, (New York: Pantheon, 1987).

Perhaps the most important aspect of the question of motivation relates to the final evaluation of the results of the imperial project. In their conclusion, the authors acknowledge many positive transformations in East Asia in the last few decades relating to economic growth, the spread of democracy, etc. though they claim that these developments happened in spite of American involvement rather than because of it. The question arises as to whether the supposed architects of the American imperial project such as Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and both Roosevelts, surveying the situation in East Asia today, would be dissatisfied with what they see. If their motivation had been to create a political empire on a nineteenth century model then probably so, but if it had been merely to prevent the domination of outside powers, open the region to U.S. interests and influence, and create stability and economic growth, then perhaps they might see the current situation as a success. That question hovers over the analogy the authors draw to America's supposed current imperialist project in the Middle East. There is once again a debate over whether the transformations of the Arab Spring can be attributed in any way, shape, or form to American involvement in the region. Of course, U.S. actions have once again been ill-advised and misinformed in many cases, and we are far from knowing what the final outcome of the current turbulence in the Middle East will be. However, it is not inconceivable that events will produce a more open, democratic Middle East down the road which might not displease George Bush or Barack Obama. Whence, then, the concept of American empire?

Review by T. Christopher Jespersen, University of North Georgia

---

The all-too-frequently propagated narrative of America's involvement in Asia during the twentieth century, or what constitutes that approximate time period, has put forth the notion that the United States was a reluctant participant in the major events beginning in the 1890s and continuing through the 1970s. America was drawn to Asia by other powers or for altruistic reasons. The nation was compelled to become involved by forces beyond its own interests and motivations. Or, perhaps, Americans became interested in the region because of their collective sense of noblesse oblige, or because of their sense of national sacrifice and generous service to others. These notions, often promoted in political campaigns every few years without thought to what they actually mean, fail to appreciate the way in which American foreign policy makers consistently chose to become involved in Asia and what the consequences of those decisions were for both Americans and the peoples of Asia.

In *Arc of Empire*, Michael Hunt and Steven Levine provide an extensively researched, carefully argued, wonderfully organized, and beautifully written book that sets the record straight insofar as a work with the word "arc" in its title can be said to do so. Hunt and Levine draw upon key themes and use them to manifest the nature of America's involvement in Asia. Specifically, the authors focus on the national exercise of power, the destruction caused by American decisions, the way in which racism played a role in the policies pursued and the consequences of those policies, the desire and considerable effort put forth by American policy makers to create an empire in the region, and the competition the United States faced from other nations and their peoples, namely the Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, and Vietnamese.

The authors establish the major themes of the book in the first chapter on the Philippines. The whole nature of the American intervention to oust the Spanish set the stage for everything that was to come. These early encounters were problematic on many different levels. American soldiers brutally suppressed Filipino nationalism despite political rhetoric that suggested sympathy for Filipinos' desire for independence. When Emilio Aguinaldo decided to resort to guerrilla-style warfare in response to the McKinley administration actions, American hubris and optimism ran smack into the reality of fighting a prolonged and difficult war thousands of miles from the continental United States for the first time in the nation's history.

The results were not pretty. Although Filipinos found refuge in the idea that a protracted war would exhaust the Americans and cause them to leave eventually, the reality turned out to be different and the costs to the Philippines and its people were high. As Hunt and Levine argue, the onset of unexpectedly difficult fighting for American soldiers caused many to revert to simplistic and racist views of the Filipinos. The language the soldiers used reflected this attitude, but more disconcertingly, so did the policies pursued by the United States military. The destruction of property, the physical abuse of prisoners, and the aggressive killing of Filipinos all presaged the way the United States would conduct warfare in Asia over the next eight decades. And just as importantly, many of the people in the

region understood the consequences of what was happening. As the authors note, “Japanese and Chinese observers clearly saw [that] the United States had become an imperial power in eastern Asia” (63).

For Hunt and Levine, World War II and the Korean War represent the beginning of serious challenges to American hegemony in Asia. Indeed, China’s rise to power after 1949 helped reshape American designs on Asia. (266) The hubris Americans displayed in fighting against Japan and Korea (and China after that nation’s intervention in the Korean War) caused them to under appreciate and under value the challenges they faced. “Such hubris is a disease of empire,” the authors note. (147) As a result, during the Korean War, the Chinese did something that the Filipinos and Japanese could not: they fought the Americans to a stalemate. The Korean War demarcated the limits of the American empire and its efforts to impose control over Asia. Or, as the authors put it, “the war in Korea demonstrate[d] the limits of U.S. power in a region undergoing profound changes” (121). President Truman faced the consequences of the decision to intervene in Korea and the consequences for fighting the war the way the Americans did: “His political ordeal demonstrated how just how difficult it was in a contentious democratic system to manage an overextended eastern Asian imperium that presented unsatisfactory choices and imposed unpopular sacrifices” (159).

By the time the United States became heavily involved in Vietnam during the 1960s, things were noticeably worse: “American officials felt a keen sense of entitlement as righteous representatives of a great power and superior civilization to save at least part of Vietnam and shape it into something better” (197). Policymakers in Washington sought to maintain a line of containment without regard to the vast differences between the Vietnamese, Chinese, Koreans, and others. Communism was deemed a monolithic entity, and Johnson administration officials intervened in Vietnam to stop the North Vietnamese political leader Ho Chi Minh from unifying the country under his leadership. America backed the Catholic leader it had installed during the Eisenhower administration, Ngo Dinh Diem, but he failed for a variety of reasons. The consequences for the United States were serious: “the miracle ended in the early 1960s. A Hanoi-backed insurgency made alarming inroads in the countryside, while in 1963 simmering Buddhist discontent, fueled by Diem’s preference for fellow Catholics, burst into urban protests” (200). The southern insurgency, it is important to note, was not initially supported by the North. Hanoi delayed offering assistance out of concern about an American escalation of the conflict. When Diem’s policies, which were so brutal and narrow and favored elites at the expense of the peasants, led to the creation of the National Liberation Front in December 1960, Hanoi had to act. In addition, Diem began to see the perils of relying on the United States. “Diem bristled under U.S. pressure to reform his government, remove his influential brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, and generally pay closer attention to American guidance” (201) .

Hunt and Levine directly challenge the conclusion about the Vietnam War offered by many, including David Halberstam in his otherwise outstanding book, *The Best and the Brightest*, that it was the lack of knowledge about Southeast Asia, and the purge of the China area diplomats in the early 1950s, that created the dearth of knowledgeable experts and led the

United States into Vietnam in the mid-1960s.<sup>1</sup> Quite correctly, the authors will have none of that: “The conclusion in retrospect seems inescapable: the U.S. commitment unfolded despite, not because of, the information available to U.S. policymakers. The dreams of domination, doctrines of containment, and fears of policymakers trumped reality as the specialists so ably depicted it” (203).

Like the Filipinos at the start of the twentieth century, the Vietnamese fighting against the Americans “had their own distinct sources of strength. They knew the land and the locals and this had a vastly better shot at winning any contest for ‘hearts and minds.’” (214). Unlike the Filipinos, the Vietnamese had considerable outside assistance, in this case from the Soviet Union and China. On the flip side of this equation, the brutality the Americans displayed in subduing the Philippines took on new dimensions in Vietnam. “Destruction administered so indiscriminately, pervasively, and at a distance took civilian lives on a massive scale and raises the question of war crimes as a defining facet of the U.S. war” (217). General William Westmoreland’s decision to fight a war of attrition meant devastating Vietnam, or as the authors put it, “the strategy of attrition had turned into a steady rain of destruction of Vietnam’s land and people” (218). Hunt and Levine thus return the narrative to the Philippines where the pattern was originally set. But in this instance, the authors would have done well to reference Richard Drinnon’s work on race and American society. In *Facing West*, Drinnon traces the heritage of race and destruction back to New England in the 1630s, specifically the colonial efforts to eliminate the Pequot Indians.<sup>2</sup>

The consequences of the Vietnam War were not simply felt in Southeast Asia, of course, since the war also had a profound impact in the United States. As the authors point out, “Following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., outraged blacks torched inner cities across the country (including Washington)” (226). That’s certainly true, but the destruction of inner cities had begun, as the authors know, in August 1965 in Watts, Los Angeles, indicating a more complicated relationship between the war in Vietnam and the destruction of Johnson’s dream for a Great Society.

The trauma caused by the Vietnam War led the United States to punish Vietnam for its victory. It took two decades before formal diplomatic relations could be established, but “by then export-oriented corporations and veterans seeking closure had offset league opposition and given cover to President Bill Clinton’s decision to turn the page, at least diplomatically” (241). That’s certainly true enough with respect to the waning influence of the League of Families of American Prisoners Missing in Southeast Asia. China’s rise as a regional power and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s also played roles, as did the war movies from the 1980s, which contributed to the change by allowing for a cultural cleansing of sorts as Americans could refight the war, this time winning and then

---

<sup>1</sup> David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building* (New York: Schocken Books, 1980).

bringing home those missing soldiers who were supposedly left behind by an evil American government.

Hunt and Levine indicate that things have not really improved in the four decades since the Vietnam War ended. “The various ways of dealing with the Vietnam War have replicated the fatal flaw inherent in the U.S. decision for war and in its conduct. They erased the Vietnamese from the picture or at best gave them bit parts in an American drama” (242). Nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than in numerous films about the war. In Oliver Stone’s *Platoon*, to cite one critical and commercial success, the main character offers in voiceover at the movie’s conclusion arguing that Americans really fought themselves in Vietnam. Neglecting the Vietnamese from any account of the war has led to “poorly drawn lessons,” (242), as this kind of thinking has failed completely to understand the nature of what happened in Vietnam. To paraphrase General George Pickett’s assessment of why the South lost the Civil war, the other side had something to do with it. The authors somberly conclude that “the age of empire was over in Asia, but someone forgot to tell the U.S. public and the policy establishment. Americans looking back have still not absorbed the message” (242).

Instead, as Hunt and Levine demonstrate repeatedly, resistance to American efforts at establishing empire were costly for those who stood up: “But determined foes – whether using conventional or unconventional warfare – led U.S. commanders to resort repeatedly to indiscriminate violence” (254). And that violence and the destruction it wrought manifested the bankruptcy of American policies, especially American claims to pseudo-enlightenment and superiority. “The breathtaking destruction inflicted by American firepower, whether in victory or defeat, gave lie to the rhetoric of uplift and civilization” (255). In addition, the dramatic accumulation of power and decision-making in the hands of the president led to fewer restraints on how that power is used.

In their conclusion, Hunt and Levine tie the historical patterns of American policies and actions in East Asia with more recent decisions and practices affecting Southwest Asia. In their observations, the way the United States tried to impose empire in Asia continues to influence Iraq and Afghanistan. The continuum, to return to Richard Drinnon, runs from New England in the 1630s to Asia in the twentieth century to Southwest Asia in the twenty-first century. The pictures, maps, and cartoons are well chosen as they highlight the main themes with considerable effect. In sum, *Arc of Empire* is a strongly argued, engagingly written, and sharply analytical work that deserves wide readership for its bracing conclusions about the nature of America’s involvement in Asia.

**A**rc of Empire presents a broad interpretation of American empire-building in eastern Asia. Specifically, it argues that the American imperial presence in Asia began with the acquisition and pacification of the Philippines after the War of 1898. The colonial path that the U.S. charted in the Philippines led to a clash of imperial interests with Japan, manifested in World War II and its aftermath. By 1945 America's arc of empire in Asia was at its height, but new challenges quickly eroded this position: the rise of revolutionary China and the spread of nationalist struggles for self-determination throughout Asia. The Korean and Vietnam Wars represented attempts to hold or expand America's arc in the face of these stronger pressures against it.

Each chapter of the book, drawing on the authors' own research and on the latest scholarship, provides a fine overview of each one of America's Pacific wars. These outstanding summaries of America's close and persistent military involvements in Asia over nearly a century, written with verve in an accessible style, present a broad analysis of what the authors argue was a U.S. imperial project to dominate eastern Asia. In the final chapter the authors then use that history to critique America's twenty-first century attempts to establish enduring bases and consolidate imperial power in the Middle East. In less skillful hands, such a comparison across time and space might be clumsy and strained. Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levine, however, tightly control their argument and produce a thought-provoking and timely discussion, not just of the history of America's wars in Asia but of the nature of empire.

They rightly point out that most scholars of U.S. international policy have long accepted and invoked the idea of "American empire," even as American popular opinion continues largely to assume that empire was only something done by others. Their book, it seems, is aimed at both audiences and will, no doubt, be less controversial to the former than to the latter. One of the virtues of the book, however, is that it defines the historical condition called "empire" in a rather specific way: "empire was at its most fundamental level about the command of territory." Its hallmarks were the use of military power and enlisting collaborators, especially local military men, to "put a native face between American proconsuls and populations suspicious of outsiders" (255). Employing this definition, Hunt and Levine try to avoid misunderstandings over how they are using the term.

'Empire,' of course, has been an extremely messy word. In recent decades, it spilled well beyond the connotation of territorial control. Critics of the 1970s, for example, wrote about 'cultural imperialism' and the need to combat it by fostering a 'new world information order.' Studies in this tradition stretched what Hunt and Levine might call 'hegemony' into 'empire.' Recently such a latitudinous practice has fallen out of fashion, and this book contributes to efforts to rein back any overly broad deployment of the word into the complicated realm of cultural meanings. By making the concept of empire more precise, and focused on territory, the book renders it more useful.

The clarity of their definition of empire also helps dissolve what might be one of the most contentious claims of the book: the book advances the argument that the War in the Philippines, the war against Japan, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War all comprised parts of a single U.S. project to build an “arc of empire.” These wars, of course, have many differences that might have undercut a sloppily made case. But by defining the imperial goals as working to expand a territorial footprint in a region through military power and alliance with local elites, the authors’ general case becomes persuasive, even if particular circumstances of each war are variable and historically contingent. Just as important for their argument, the opposition to America’s encroaching military presence, although it varied from war to war and place to place, displays a unity around the burgeoning, if disparate, ideologies of anti-imperialism.

Throughout the chapters on each war, *Arc of Empire* asks readers to keep in view the broad structural patterns by which the militaristic elements of empire-building generate the kinds of opposition that may ultimately be the policy’s undoing. The authors write that “in the shadow of empire, anti-imperial politics took form and gained strength.” (252) The tragedy of American empire-building (to adapt William A. William’s classic title, which used ‘empire’ in a much less precise and more moralistic way but invoked a similar twist) was that it undercut its own goals. The dialectic of force generating counterforce provides a central dynamic to the book: the arc bends forward but is also pushed backward. After the final failure of America’s imperial project in Asia in the 1970s, the region itself has emerged as a new center of global influence. State-building and economic growth have become hallmarks of east Asian dynamism and have limited U.S. influence in the post-imperial era.

As in Hunt’s previous work, the interpretation advanced here stresses the ideological drivers of empire. The authors argue that heroic visions of just struggle masked the violence that has always characterized imperial behavior. Self-justifying themes stressing the U.S.’s own victimization from aggression eclipsed any hard, realistic look at the U.S. imperial project that lay behind these wars. Although that imperial project had failed by the 1970s, policymakers learned few lessons. The ideologies buttressing empire had become so strong that America’s leaders began a “repeat of a familiar imperial scenario. . . the new crusade in the Middle East”—complete with renewed doctrines of transformation, complaints about injury, a “colonial mindset” that gave rebirth to counterinsurgency, and appalling cultural arrogance and ignorance. (250, 277)

Hunt and Levine’s interpretation implicitly (sometimes explicitly) cautions that empire doesn’t work. But I wonder. Is this an argument specific to Asia (and the current Middle East) or is it meant to apply generally? America’s “arc of empire” in the mid-nineteenth century led toward the Pacific, converting land seized militarily from others into a vast domain of settler colonialism that is now so settled as to render its imperial origins nearly invisible. Another arc of empire extended U.S. power throughout the circum-Caribbean and even into other parts of Latin America in the early twentieth century and, by some reckonings, well into the Cold-war era through military assistance programs and other measures that solidified militarized points of influence. And Europe in the latter half of the twentieth century likewise hosted another arc of U.S. military bases and militarized alliance systems. Were these arcs of empire strategic failures? One might argue that the vision of

empire in Asia could be sustained for so long precisely because pushing an arc of empire had seemed to succeed so well elsewhere. American empire may have been turned back in Asia, as this book argues, but one might have wished that the authors provided greater global perspective for the sake of comparison. At times the authors imply that the “arc” failed mainly because the coveted territory was so far away (in Asia and the Middle East), but the precise argument about empire’s rise and fall as that dynamic might apply to different regions is not crystal clear.

Stimulating conversations about when projects of empire (defined as securing territory) succeed and when they fail (and how those definitions might vary among different groups of people) may be one of the most valuable features of this book. For use in a seminar on U.S. empire, for example, this book would be enormously suggestive and thought-provoking. The focus on Asia as a highly specific regional imperial project, in this sense, is a strength of the book: if other regions followed different logics, those differences would only confirm the value of adopting the kind of regional vision that Hunt and Levine offer; their book could usefully advance a case study with which other regions might be compared.

A short book with this kind of century-long breadth will necessarily have limitations in its coverage. Still, one might have expected more consistency in its argumentation on key points. Because the book’s interpretation stresses the importance of a military control over territory and cooperative elites, one might have expected strong and consistent coverage of both of these themes for each war. While the authors do present an excellent extended analysis of the courting of the Filipino elite, there is little analogous examination of the internal politics of postwar Japan and of its pro-American elite. And there is, by comparison, only a cursory look at Korea’s internal dynamic. Ho Chi Minh and Vietnam’s internal divisions, again, receive more detail. A more significant lacuna, however, relates to the lack of material on America’s bases and overall strategic posture on the region. Although there is a strong narrative of the military history of each war, there is no extended examination of the establishment of (or attempt to establish) ‘enduring’ military bases throughout the region. The research in Chalmers Johnson’s work on America’s empire of bases—what Bruce Cumings has called the “archipelago of bases”—could have been invoked here to effectively buttress the argument about the empire’s territorial groundings. Overall, the politics of military basing over the century seem strangely underexamined.<sup>1</sup>

Levine and Hunt invite scholars, students, and general readers to open their own dialogues with this book—both its overall interpretation and its specific argumentation about each war. Clearly, the book is meant to be provocative, to speak to current policy issues, and to provide a framework for thinking broadly and historically about empire in general and about American policy in the region of eastern Asia. By all of these measures, it succeeds admirably.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (Metropolitan Books, 2004), and Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 393-423.

**A**uthored by two senior scholars of U.S.-East Asian relations, this account of America's wars on the other side of the Pacific possesses many virtues. Despite the breadth of the topic and the modest length of the book, the research is extensive in both primary and secondary sources. While narrative in structure and sufficiently clear and fast-paced to reach upper-level undergraduates, the work is interpretive enough to generate extensive debate among scholars in the expanded field of diplomatic history, not least because of its effort to link the wars of East Asia to the more recent ones in Afghanistan and Iraq and to draw lessons for the future. High politics receive their due, but the costs of the wars in life and treasure, their impact on domestic societies and politics, and the attitudes on all sides that helped produce them and influence their course—especially the rising tide of nationalism in Asia and the fumbling U.S. response to it—get appropriate attention as well. The chapters on the Philippine and Vietnam wars are particularly satisfying.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these virtues I have serious reservations about the chapter on the Korean War and, more generally, on the emphasis on culture over geopolitics and on the continuity in American thinking from the late nineteenth century to the present. On Korea, Hunt and Levine sometimes get their facts wrong and present dubious generalizations without adequate documentation. The de-emphasis on geopolitics serves to downplay the impact of shifts in the balance of power on the evolution of U.S. thinking regarding the western Pacific. The stress on continuity leads to an underestimation of the strength of countervailing forces to military interventionism in American culture and politics and of the varied and complex circumstances under which such interventionism prevailed. At times efforts to draw parallels with the recent U.S. course in the Middle East appear to be rooted more in a desire to vent about its obvious fallacies than in a commitment to assessing an ambiguous past.

Take, for example, Hunt and Levine's summary of the U.S. position looking forward from the end of World War II. "The arc of American power in eastern Asia had reached its apogee," they declare;

Having stymied Japan's ambitions, U.S. policymakers asserted their own claim to regional dominance.... In the countries all along the Pacific's western shore, securely ensconced U.S. agents now had an open field. Guided by the old dream of destiny and duty, they could now turn to the tasks of exercising the requisite control and advancing the liberal values that [President William] McKinley had first articulated and [President] Franklin Roosevelt had affirmed. They would provide instruction in democracy, help build states, encourage a market economy tied to the United States, and above all

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of the very best prose in a book that is superbly written overall comes in a wonderfully succinct yet poignant description of the terrain of South Vietnam, the logistics of supplying the U.S. war effort, and the experience of American soldiers there. See Hunt and Levine, *Arc of Empire*, pp. 210-12.

demand respect and compliance. Directing and uplifting Asians in all these ways was a practical expression of a paternalism evident in the U.S. advance across the Pacific from the outset.... It took two more wars over the next quarter century ... before U.S. policymakers reluctantly came to terms with the unwelcome reality that their power, like that of the empires that had preceded them, was limited (118-19).

Although there is much truth in this characterization, it leaves out an awful lot of necessary qualification if not outright contradiction. By design, the United States had fought the war in the Pacific on the cheap, in part by focusing on pushing its forces westward from Hawaii and northward from Australia rather than developing a continental strategy, in part by offering inducements to the Soviets in northeast Asia to enter the conflict once Germany was defeated. American leaders recognized the limitations of their influence in East Asia, but they also believed that their delayed response to Japanese aggression during the 1930s had been a mistake. Fearing now that the destruction of Japanese power would create a vacuum that the Soviet Union would fill, with considerable strategic consequence given the resources and traditional trade patterns of the region, they hoped that China would emerge as a counter. Yet its economic backwardness and internal divisions internally made this an increasingly faint prospect. So American efforts in China and Korea in the aftermath of the war were hardly based solely—or even largely—on “the old dream of destiny and duty” but rather on the fear that the Soviet Union would take control of the vast resources in the region and on the recognition that the United States was the only power capable of preventing this eventuality. Granted, culture/ideology influenced profoundly the methods employed by Washington in attempting to contain Soviet power—and those methods often proved less than effective—but the foundation of U.S. intervention was strategic, based at least as much on fear as on opportunity.

What is more, a sense of the limitations of American power played a key role in containing its scope. The administration of Harry S. Truman consistently resisted pressures to expand American military involvement in the China morass and from 1947-1949 moved to end its direct military presence in Korea. Indeed, the failure of the United States to intervene more deeply in the Chinese civil war and to convey a clear commitment to defend South Korea played a critical role in the outbreak of war on the peninsula in June 1950.<sup>2</sup> Contrary to Hunt and Levine’s claim that “no ambiguity crept into Truman policy toward the mainland” (127) as the Chinese Communists marched to power in 1949, Truman tried both in early 1949 and early 1950 to terminate assistance to the Nationalists only to back off in the face of domestic political pressures. Rather than an unambiguous policy of containment in East Asia, and despite a dramatic ‘lean’ to the Soviet side by the new Communist government of China, Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s National Press Club speech on January 12, 1950 outlined a nuanced approach that omitted South Korea and Taiwan from the U.S. defense perimeter in the western Pacific. In both cases this derived from a keen sense of the limits of American capabilities. In the latter case an additional concern existed that American

---

<sup>2</sup> For a recent treatment of the issue, see Shen Zhihua, *Mao, Stalin and the Korean War: Trilateral Communist Relations in the 1950s*, translated from the Chinese by Neil Silver (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 106-25.

military intervention would put the United States at loggerheads with Chinese nationalism, which otherwise would focus on Soviet penetration in the north. Despite considerable political pressure from Republicans at home, the Truman administration did not adopt “a hard-line policy of diplomatic and economic isolation” (127) toward China until the Korean War. Except on the last point, Hunt and Levine include much of the information pertinent to sustaining the above argument, but it fails to influence their overall theme.

Hunt and Levine cover the early stages of the Korean War with a deft hand, especially in providing balanced coverage of all the major players. From the massive Chinese counteroffensive of November 1950 onward, however, they make some significant misstatements of fact and/or highly questionable characterizations of the U.S. and in one case the Chinese position. In late 1950 and early 1951, for instance, they claim that “both sides ... still believed they could ultimately prevail on the battlefield” (165-66). This is true on the Communist side, but in the United States the prevailing view was that a retreat to the original goal of restoring and protecting South Korea was the best that could be hoped for without expanding the conflict beyond Korea, which was considered undesirable unless it became necessary in order to prevent total defeat. This continued to be the dominant view for the remainder of the war, including in the Pentagon, although once a relative military balance emerged on the peninsula late in the spring of 1951, a belief did exist that expanding the war would be considered should the fighting continue indefinitely. During May Washington sent out feelers to both China and the Soviet Union regarding an armistice based on a divided peninsula in the neighborhood of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Hunt and Levine ignore this fact and present the beginning of armistice negotiations in July as the result of a Soviet initiative, which is technically accurate but misleading without mention of the earlier U.S. overtures and exercise of restraint on the battlefield in Korea.<sup>3</sup> In addition, they err in claiming that in December 1951 agreement emerged on all issues for an armistice except the fate of prisoners of war (it wasn’t until April 1952) and in implying that the United States, rather than China, made the key concession on that issue in June 1953 to produce an end to the fighting.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, Hunt and Levine’s coverage of the Korean War underestimates the significance, both short and long term, of the U.S. achievement of its initial objective of saving the Republic of Korea as well as the degree to which American leaders recognized the limits of their country’s capabilities in the western Pacific. Although “Chinese leaders had inflicted the first effective check on U.S. ambitions in the region,” the authors declare, “those

---

<sup>3</sup> See Hunt and Levine pp. 167-68. The U.S. feelers are covered in a variety of sources, including my *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 205-207; for coverage of revised U.S. objectives in the aftermath of the Chinese counteroffensive of November 1950 and Pentagon thinking, see pp. 133-37, 150-51, 175, 179-81, and 210-11. See also Allan R. Millett, *The War for Korea, 1950-1951: They Came from the North* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), pp. 352, 395-96, 414-15, and 450-54.

<sup>4</sup> Hunt and Levine, *Arc of Empire*, pp. 167-68, 170. For more accurate coverage of the state of armistice negotiations in December 1951, March/April 1952, and the spring of 1953, see Stueck, *Korean War*, pp. 248-51, 265-67, and 322-26 respectively.

ambitions and the fundamental conceits behind them—that American will, ideals, and technology could triumph wherever they were brought to bear—survived largely intact” (184). Why then, we might ask, did President Dwight D. Eisenhower agree on an armistice at all, resist French attempts to lure American air power into Indochina in the spring of 1954, and avoid committing the United States to the defense of the Chinese offshore islands shortly thereafter? In overgeneralizing about U.S. attitudes and pretensions, Hunt and Levine make it appear as if the American descent into the Vietnam War in 1965 was all but inevitable, a view that greatly underestimates the role of such contingencies as personalities and domestic politics in the evolving tragedy.

Hunt and Levine end their study with a blistering chapter describing “the long, painful decline of the American Pacific project,” (272) outlining parallels with the unhappy U.S. enterprises in Iraq and Afghanistan, and suggesting lessons that provide future guidance. However passionate they are, the authors are also good-natured enough to invite debate and to quote an ancient Chinese sage “who vented his hostility toward busybody scholars” by advocating their execution “together with their relatives” (272). In concluding I will test that good nature by contesting their description of “decline” and their emphasis on continuity.

The flaw in the “decline” part of the narrative rests in its failure to acknowledge the degree to which the United States adapted to its debacle in Vietnam to sustain a major presence in the western Pacific up to the present day. Left over from America’s late-nineteenth century thrust into the Pacific are sovereign positions in Hawaii, Guam, and the Aleutians, not to mention a host of smaller islands. Left over from the Cold War are military alliances with the Philippines, Australia, Japan, and South Korea, all but the first of which include the stationing of substantial U.S. armed forces, and less formal yet important military ties with Taiwan and Thailand. Hunt and Levine are largely silent on how these positions fit into the past record and future prospects whether in East or South Asia.

As for the emphasis on continuity, the problem is not that Hunt and Levine are wrong in pointing to culture, ideology, and hubris as factors in U.S. moves in the western Pacific and the Middle East. These were, indeed, factors, and the United States needs to be wary of them in the future. And the authors’ warning about “the need to consider the way a regional commitment can develop out of a long string of seemingly separate but accumulating decisions” surely merits a prominent place in the consciousness of decision-makers in Washington (273). In the history of the U.S. relationship with the western Pacific and South Asia, however, there also has been a good deal of legitimate concern, restraint, and adaptation. In emphasizing the negative aspects of continuity in the wars in which the United States has engaged in both regions, the authors have sometimes ignored or downplayed the dilemmas faced by American policymakers, the personal idiosyncrasies of those at the top (William McKinley, Lyndon Johnson, and George W. Bush come to mind), partisan political pressures, and changing international conditions. The First Iraq War is bypassed entirely as if its successful conclusion at relatively low cost does not require qualification in the theme of continuity and negates its utility as a future guide. Thus despite my long-standing admiration for the erudition, skill, and integrity of the authors as historians and for the potential importance of their joint project, I cannot help but think

that their end product would have been more consistently satisfying—not to mention more influential with future policy-makers--had they adopted a more balanced approach, one that gave at least passing notice to the fact that making sound decisions in foreign policy is a really complicated and difficult thing to do.

Author's Response by Michael H. Hunt, Emeritus University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and Steven I. Levine, University of Montana

---

Thanks to Tom Maddux and our reviewers for this chance to revisit the issues raised by *Arc of Empire*.

We are delighted that Christopher Jespersen and Emily Rosenberg found our idea of empire compelling and suggestive of fresh lines of inquiry that we hope other readers will follow. (We invite anyone interested in pursuing the problem of U.S. empire into the classroom to have a look at the teaching materials we have placed online at [http://michaelhunt.web.unc.edu/teaching-arc-of-empire/.](http://michaelhunt.web.unc.edu/teaching-arc-of-empire/))

We appreciate Jespersen's reminder of the intricate and reciprocal relationship between empire and the home front. He introduces this point by asking us for a more refined treatment of domestic opposition to the Vietnam War and the pressures behind the normalization of diplomatic relations with Vietnam. He reinforces the point with his invocation of Richard Drinnon's *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many of the U.S. Army officers in the Philippines earned their spurs and acquired their racism in the Indian wars of the late nineteenth century. We not only accept Jespersen's point but would also like to add the corollary: that just as developments in the metropole can shape empire, so too can the exercise of empire shape the metropole. The example that leaps to mind is the militarization of American society that was stimulated by repeated rounds of warfare in Asia and elsewhere over the course of the twentieth century.

We also appreciate Jespersen's stress on the terrible and increasing destructiveness inflicted by superior U.S. military technology in the four wars we discuss. Asian civilians as well as combatants suffered casualties far in excess of the American losses. At the same time, superior military technology amplified the conceit of American invincibility and appeared, at least in American eyes, to confirm the superiority of American civilization and American values over technologically inferior foes.

Rosenberg's comments on the U.S. cultivation of a postwar Japanese elite as well as William Stueck's comments on collaboration in Korea helpfully highlight the mechanisms by which imperial control is secured on the ground and then sustained. While we concede that we could have devoted more space to how collaboration was negotiated or imposed, we gave pride of place to the wars themselves in accounting for the arc of this particular empire. (Our subtitle "America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam" accurately describes the chief preoccupation of our book.) As we show, in the Philippines and Vietnam the U.S. search for indigenous collaborators played out within the context of the war effort, while in

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

the case of Japan and Korea, World War II created dominance that left little for the collaborators to negotiate.

Rosenberg continues to focus on the mechanisms of control by asking if U.S. military bases deserved more attention. In our view, they were only one part of a panoply of instruments critical to creating and maintaining empire, and more a manifestation of empire than its source. The limited utility of even a robust base presence is evident in the failure to preserve Vietnam or to keep Japan and Korea as client states and the vulnerability of bases in the Philippines on the eve of the Pacific War. Bases in Asia have long since ceased to be part of a system of outright territorial control that is the essence of our definition of empire. They function today as the prime assets on which Washington relies in attempting to maintain a dominant regional position. (Status of Forces Agreements with their extraterritorial provisions may smack of empire, but they are not evidence for empire as we define it.) Stueck's reference to the continuing U.S. presence in Asia confuses military power per se with empire and is not at odds with our view that the United States remains a major military power in Asia.

Rosenberg moves the discussion in a welcome direction when she asks about the comparative possibilities in our regionally grounded notion of empire. What insights might emerge from comparing our Asian case to the U.S. position in the circum-Caribbean, the U.S. role in Europe, or for that matter settler conquest of North America? In still broader terms, how does the U.S. involvement in Asia compare with the rise and fall of other imperial projects? What gives some longevity and why are others evanescent or even stillborn? In addressing the comparative question, we decided to limit ourselves in the conclusion to the timely question of what light the U.S. experience of empire in Asia might shed on the current U.S. position in the Middle East. We think our more important contribution to the comparative enterprise is offering a definition of empire that seeks to cut through some of the scholarly confusion over the term and that demystifies empire for more general readers. We hope this contribution helps others broaden the agenda.

In contrast to the responses by Jespersen and Rosenberg, the reactions by Stueck and Jeremy Friedman seem in general ambivalent about our notion of empire. Their opening comments suggest an acceptance of our definition of empire, but what follows reverts to an old debate about empire that we were trying to transcend. *Arc of Empire* asks readers to step outside the world of policymaking with which many are most comfortable and consider the U.S. role in Asia not simply as policymakers regarded it but in structural terms.

Friedman appears at points to argue that policymakers must have a conscious intention if their activity is to be deemed imperial. In that context he wonders how we could think that Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Lyndon Johnson were trying "to create a political empire on a nineteenth century model." He advances as his own test the question as to whether "continuity of purpose in Washington" is evident. All of these observations reflect a fundamental misreading of the book. From the outset we explicitly rejected the sort of tests for empire that Friedman proposes. Indeed we explicitly stated that U.S. actions can have imperial consequences even when the policymakers have no imperial consciousness.

The point that needs stressing here is that American wars in Asia had consequences that were seldom foreseen and did not function as part of a sustained grand imperial strategy. We argue that each war defined a key stage in an American attempt to dominate and control notably through force, persuasion, and manipulation. Brute force, in other words, framed the political possibilities. Thus we disagree with Friedman's suggestion that "political interests and policy dynamics" are the place to look if we want to make our case for empire.

The responses by Friedman and Stueck become mired at several points on the hoary question of whether a policy that is benevolent in either intention or outcome can indeed be imperial. The defense of South Korea and more generally (as Friedman puts it) a commitment to "prevent the domination of outside powers, open the region to U.S. interests and influence, and create stability and economic growth" are in their estimates praiseworthy measures. As a fundamental matter, we do not wish to define empire in these terms but rather to focus on structural features. We can see no interpretive advantage in the tired questions of whether empire is good or bad, whether it is a malign phenomenon perpetrated by ill-intentioned leaders or a force for progress sponsored by enlightened humanitarians.

We want to be clear. We use the concept of empire as a means of understanding a historical period that embraces, *inter alia*, four American wars in eastern Asia. Our definition posits that motives can vary but it is to structural relations of power that we give first and primary attention. Leaders may think they are doing good or responding to threats or elevating the prestige of the nation. None of this is central to our sense of how empire works and how we recognize it. What matters is whether empire serves well as an interpretive frame and what it reveals. The kind of judgments on policy this line of inquiry may suggest is distinctly secondary and must flow from the way our definition of empire fits the evidence.

Stueck's comments ask at several points for more compassion for the political, psychological, and strategic problems U.S. policymakers faced. Their policy was more thoughtfully conceived, skillfully applied, and ultimately legitimate than we allow, and deserves credit for "a good deal of legitimate concern, restraint, and adaptation." Once more: "Making sound decisions in foreign policy is a really complicated and difficult thing." We are not sure how to interpret these comments. Are we too harsh in our reading of particular policymakers or particular decisions? Or is it that our application of the notion of empire to U.S. policy seems unfair? Is it too hard and too discordant with our virtuous self-conception to accept the idea that Americans have in a significant way practiced the nasty business of empire with all its coercive impulses and destructive effects?

Finally, we cannot agree with Friedman's attempt to define empire in terms of interference in the affairs of another country. He objects that empire in our usage would apply to "any country which has attempted, successfully or unsuccessfully, to exercise political control in another state." At another point he argues that according to our definition, "any state which intervenes in the politics of its neighbor to ensure a friendly, pliable ruler could therefore

be classed an empire.” Aspiring to control is not the same as gaining it. Empire is not interference; it involves the control of another state’s territory, usually by the threat or application of military force. That Friedman has failed to grasp our notion of empire is apparent in his allusion to Israel and other states in the Middle East that meddle in their neighbors’ affairs but that are not in any sense engaged in empire. What he overlooks in his discussion of that region is the one glaring piece of empire practiced by one of the regional powers. Israel’s grip on the West Bank over the last half century stands as a classic exercise in empire created and perpetuated by military coercion and reinforced by collaborative mechanisms raised to a fine art.

Stueck’s comment that he has “serious reservations about the chapter on the Korean War and, more generally, on the emphasis of culture over geopolitics” ignores the central issue we raise in the book. We recognize his distinction as a scholar of that war and accept that we may have committed several errors in our chronology of that conflict. (We’ll not argue the particular points here.) But we are confident that any fine tuning would not alter our broader claims about the Korean War as one important phase in the history of a regional project, about the subordination of South Korea as part of a much expanded postwar U.S. imperial system, and about the importance of Korea as the point where that system suffered its first serious setback.

There are two overarching concerns that we feel do not get enough attention in the reviews. One has to do with the central role of nationalism. At the heart of the empire, as we conceived it, was a dynamic interaction between powerful and ambitious Americans and the people in the region they confronted. Rosenberg encapsulates the point in a line we wish we had used in the book: “The dialectic of force generating counterforce provides a central dynamic to the book: the arc bends forward but is also pushed backward.”

Too much of the scholarly as well as popular literature on America’s wars in Asia focuses almost exclusively on the American side, relegating Asians to the role of bit players in the tragedies that were played out almost entirely on their own soil. We sought to counteract that tendency by focusing on America’s adversaries whose nationalism expressed itself in different ways across the region: in the service of empire (Japan), the cause of decolonization (the Philippines and Vietnam), contests over national unity (Korea and Vietnam), and the priority given state building (China). To a notable degree Americans became entangled in these various nationalist causes from the Philippines to Vietnam as a result of an abiding sense of superiority to peoples they imagined to be childlike and thus in need of adult guidance but vulnerable to suasion by those with dark intentions, especially the Soviets. This sense of cultural superiority as we conceive it is less about racism and more about the power of nationalism that gripped U.S. policymakers no less than the troops that did their bidding.

Our stress on nationalism is part of the basis for our disagreement with Stueck on U.S. policy on China at the time of the Communist seizure of power. He rejects the notion that Truman pursued an “unambiguous policy of containment in East Asia,” citing Washington’s decision not to become militarily involved in the Chinese civil war. Our point is that Truman and his advisers were unambiguous in their hostility to the new mainland regime

and that their hostility grew out of long-standing assumptions about the nature of a stridently nationalist Chinese communism. Its converts, like virtually all radicals in the third world, were from Washington's perspective immature, misguided, and vulnerable to Soviet control. Stueck's claim confuses the Truman administration's unyielding prejudice toward Chinese Communists with its indecision in 1949 and 1950 on relations with the Nationalist remnants on Taiwan. Here as with Eisenhower's hesitation over Indochina, policymakers had to pursue their preferences within the limits of American resources.

In place of the clash of U.S. and Asian nationalisms, Stueck would have us emphasize the threat of Soviet domination to which Washington had to respond. In our view that threat was vastly exaggerated. Russia played a distinctly weak hand. The Soviet bogeyman was just the most recent manifestation of a tendency for nationalist policymakers to spy "dangerous others" standing in their way and to respond with policies that William L. Langer decades ago called "preclusive imperialism."<sup>2</sup>

Our other overarching concern, alluded to by Friedman, relates to China as a revived regional power for which U.S. policymakers had no effective answer and with which they continue today to wrestle without much success. The role of China underlines the importance of regional powers as both solvents of empires created by outsiders interlopers and as builders of their own contiguous imperial positions. Passive at the outset of the U.S. regional drive, China frustrated U.S. forces in Korea, contributed signally to their defeat in Vietnam, and prompted Nixon to scale down U.S. ambitions, all the while restoring its own continental empire and cultivating its own regional clients.

The American empire in Asia is long gone but its residues still shape the approach to China. Washington remains determined to maintain its position in the region despite the triumph of nationalist forces, despite the deterioration of the U.S. domestic position, and above all despite the opposition of the leading regional power. What concretely is to be gained that justifies the cost and risks of shoring up a fading regional presence? What is the "grand strategy" that makes this a sensible course in lands so distant, so culturally foreign, and so demonstrably resistant to outside dictation? Exactly what purpose does a system of military strong points acquired in an age of empire have today beyond inspiring empty talk of "balance" and "stability" and "" and perversely sustaining outmoded nationalist ambitions?

---

**Copyright © 2013 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.** H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

---

<sup>2</sup> "Dangerous other" is a term commonplace in the theoretical literature on nationalism. Langer invoked the notion of "preclusive imperialism" in his "Farewell to Empire," *Foreign Affairs* 41 (October 1962): 120.