

Review of Michael H. Hunt & Steven I. Levine, *Arc of Empire:
America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam*^{*}

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This book focuses on America's four wars in Asia – in the Philippines, against Japan, in Korea, and in Vietnam –, and the problem of empire. In the authors' view, these four wars should not be treated as "separate and unconnected." Rather, "they were phases in a U.S. attempt to establish and maintain a dominant position in eastern Asia sustained over some seven decades against considerable resistance."¹⁾ Furthermore, the authors tackles "the tough issues of what happens when an imperial project collapses and of what insights the U.S. Asian imbroglio offers on the current U.S. involvement in the Middle East and Central Asia."²⁾

In the introduction, Professors Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levine briefly introduce their life and academic backgrounds in jointly writing this book:

We came of age, amid the ferment of the 1960s, deeply concerned with the Vietnam War. Hunt lived in Vietnam early in that decade and began studying and teaching the history of U.S. foreign relations while the war was still in progress. As a graduate student, Levine was an activist in the antiwar and civil rights movements. He too completed his academic training and began teaching under the shadow of Vietnam.

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1) Michael H. Hunt & Steven I. Levine: *Arc of Empire*, 1.

2) *Ibid.*, 8-9.

As colleagues for nearly thirty years, we have sought to make sense of those times and to use our insights to illuminate the policy choices facing Americans. Our personal stake in this past is considerable but so also is our commitment to follow the evidence and to adjust our views accordingly. This book has its origins in a jointly authored and widely cited article on the U.S. Cold War collision with Asian revolutions and in graduate and undergraduate courses taught together at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In these and other contexts we have wrestled with the evidence on these four wars with the results to appear in the pages that follow.³⁾

In this book, one may see how two American scholars, with their deep and passionate commitments to academic scholarship, and to America's future and the future of Asia and the world, pour out their hearts, set free their minds, stick to their historical evidence, engage in serious reflections, and make wise and enlightened proposals for a better future of America and the world. It raises highly important issues for America's community of discourse to further discuss at this critical historical moment. It is of great significance in current debates in the United States with regard to America's foreign policy toward East Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

In the following, this review will first provide a brief overview of the ongoing debates in the study of empire in the Western literature in the post-Cold War world. Then, within this intellectual context, it will highlight the unique contributions of this study to the broad discussions of empire. Finally, it will discuss the important and far-reaching implications of this book for the current debates over America's new security strategy of 'pivoting to Asia.'

3) Ibid., 8.

I. Recent Studies on the Question of Empire in the Western Literature

In the post-Cold War world, particularly after 9/11, there has been a surge of interest in the study of empire, and in particular, the question of American empire, in the Western literature. Scholars of different political and ideological persuasions have offered very different views in the spirited debates.⁴⁾

On the one side of the debates, there are ardent arguments that America should become a 'liberal empire' in the 21st century. "Is America an empire? George W. Bush maintains that 'America has never been an empire.' 'We don't seek empires,' insists Defense Secretary Rumsfeld. 'We're not imperialistic.'" However, in *Colossus: the Price of America's Empire* (2004), Niall Ferguson, a prominent British historian and expert on the British Empire, argues otherwise. According to him, "in both military and economic terms America is nothing less than the most powerful empire the world has ever seen. Just like the British Empire a century ago, the United States aspires to globalize free markets, the rule of law, and representative government."⁵⁾

In particular, Ferguson articulates two important theses in this book: First, he argues forcefully, as Thomas Hobbes argued in *Leviathan* in the 17th century, that 'hegemonic stability' is absolutely necessary for preserving peace and order in human society; otherwise the alternative is anarchy. If for Hobbes, the foundation of such a 'hegemonic stability' should be a 'social contract' to ensure this 'leviathan' or 'hegemon' be well accepted; then, for Ferguson, what the world needs in the post-Cold War, post-9/11 world is not

4) Among the important books on American empire, for instance, see: Warren I. Cohen: *America's Failing Empire: U.S. Foreign Relations Since the Cold War* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005); Michael Hudson: *Super Imperialism: The Origin and Fundamentals of U.S. World Dominance* (Pluto Press, new edition, 2003); and Richard H. Immerman: *Empire for Liberty: A History of American Imperialism from Benjamin Franklin to Paul Wolfowitz* (Princeton University Press, 2010). For a comprehensive and thoughtful introduction of the recent literature on the study of American empire, see "Guide to the Historical Literature" in *Arc of Empire*, 305-6.

5) "Book Summary: *Colossus: the Price of America's Empire*," Book Browse: Your guide to exceptional books; http://www.bookbrowse.com/reviews/index.cfm/book_number/1430/colossus

just any kind of hegemon, or in his words, ‘not just any kind of empire,’ but it must be a ‘liberal empire.’⁶⁾ Second, concerning the question of “whether or not the United States is capable of being a successful liberal empire,”⁷⁾ his answer is not yet. In his analysis, there are three ‘deficits,’ which may eventually prevent America from becoming ‘a successful liberal empire.’ One is the ‘financial deficit,’ which is not from military spending, he stresses, but from the estimated \$45 trillion in budget brought about by misuse of Medicare/Medicaid spending and, to a lesser degree, Social Security. Another is ‘the manpower deficit,’ which is, he claims, engendered by Americans’ unwillingness to serve in the military and civilian positions overseas. And still the other is the ‘attention deficit,’ which is, he maintains, caused by a lack of intense and sustained interest among the majority of the American people in what is going on in the rest of the world.

Accordingly, on one hand, Ferguson expresses his great hope that “I believe the world needs an effective liberal empire and that the United States is the best candidate for the job.” On the other hand, he also expresses his deep fear that this ‘chronic myopia’ of the American people (or these three ‘deficits’) applies not only to America’s foreign policies, but also to America’s domestic responsibilities. Therefore, he warns sternly that when overstretch comes, “it will come from within—and it will reveal that more than just the feet of the American colossus is made of clay.”⁸⁾

On the other side of the debates, there have been persistent oppositions in America’s community of discourse to the very notion that America should ever become a hegemon or an empire in the 21st century. For example, Noam Chomsky, a long time critique of ‘America’s imperial ambition,’ sharply criticizes at the start of the Iraq war that the Bush Doctrine was “not one of *preemptive war*”; but rather a doctrine that doesn’t begin to have any grounds in international law, namely, *preventive war*. That is, the United States will rule the world by force, and if there is any challenge to its domination—whether it

6) Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: the Price of America's Empire* (New York, Penguin Books, 2004), 2.

7) Ibid., 2-3.

8) Ibid.

is perceived in the distance, invented, imagined, or whatever—then the United States will have the right to destroy that challenge before it becomes a threat.”⁹⁾ In his view, “That’s preventive war, not preemptive war.”¹⁰⁾ And he further argues that to ensure that this ‘imperial project’ enjoys popular support, the Bush administration did two things: one was to select a ‘completely defenseless target,’ and the other was to characterize this ‘defenseless target’ as ‘an awesome threat to survival’ of the United States. In his words:

The easiest way to establish a new norm, such as the right of preventive war, is to select a completely defenseless target, which can be easily overwhelmed by the most massive military force in human history. However, in order to do that credibly, at least in the eyes of your own population, you have to frighten people. So the defenseless target has to be characterized as an awesome threat to survival that was responsible for September 11 and is about to attack us again, and so on ... And it substantially succeeded. Half the U.S. population believes that Saddam Hussein was ‘personally involved’ in the September 11, 2001, attacks.¹¹⁾

Here it is particularly interesting to note his interpretation of the North Korea question in the Bush administration’s ‘imperial ambition.’ Unlike Iraq and Iran, North Korea doesn’t have any oil, Chomsky says; however, he emphasizes that it is located in a strategically important position for the United States in the post-Cold War world. In *Imperial Ambition* (2005), he argues that:

The Northeast Asian region is the most dynamic economic region in the world... Together, the countries in Northeast Asia have close to a third of the world’s gross

9) Noam Chomsky, *Imperial Ambition: Conversations on the post-9/11 World, Interviews with David Barsamian* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2005), 2.

10) Ibid.

11) Ibid., 2-3.

domestic product, way more than the United States, and about half of global foreign exchange. The region has enormous financial resources. And it's growing very fast, much faster than any other region including the United States. Its trade is increasing internally and it's connecting to the Southeast Asian countries, sometimes called ASEAN Plus Three: the countries in the Association of South East Asian Nations plus China, Japan, and South Korea. Some of the pipelines being built from the resource centers to the industrial centers would naturally go to South Korea, which means right through North Korea--So North Korea is in a fairly strategic position with regard to this area.¹²⁾

Then he emphasizes that:

The United States is not particularly happy about Northeast Asian economic integration, in much the same way it has always been ambivalent about European integration--So the world now has three major economic centers: North America, Northeast Asia, and Europe. In one dimension, the military dimension, the United States is in a class by itself—but not in the others.¹³⁾

This 'imperial ambition,' as Chomsky particularly emphasizes, is undermining the ideal of the American Republic, because it is guided by an 'intellectual culture,' which focuses on atomic individuals, not on community. "...the Social Security system is headed toward fiscal collapse by 2042, 'if no changes are made to the current law,'" he quotes Gregory Mankiew, the chair of the President's Council of Economic Advisers, as saying in 2004. And the changes to be made, according to Mankiew, include privatization of the Social Security system. However, according to Chomsky, there is a better way to save Social Security, that is to reform the current tax system. As he argues, "the Social Security payroll

12) Ibid., 51.

13) Ibid., 51-2.

tax is highly regressive..." Should there be a progressive income tax system, "there wouldn't be a Social Security financing problem for years to come." 14) To safeguard Social Security and ordinary people's rights in the United States and in the rest of the world, Chomsky emphatically argues that America's 'imperial ambitions' must be abandoned. 'Another world is possible,' he passionately proclaims.¹⁵⁾

Among critiques of empire, Andrew J. Bacevich's *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (2002)¹⁶⁾, offers, in particular, a distinctive perspective. Bacevich's background is very different from above two authors'. Unlike Ferguson, Colonel Bacevich had been a serving military officer before he became a prominent scholar on U.S. foreign policy and professor of international relations. And different from Chomsky, Bacevich was a long-time supporter, rather than a critique, of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War.¹⁷⁾ In *American Empire*, Bacevich focuses on American diplomacy in the 1990s and the Afghan War in 2001. "According to the American conventional wisdom at least," writes Bacevich, "the record of American statecraft in the 1990s was one of opportunity wasted." Many American scholars charge that in the post-Cold War, "at the very moment when the United States should have acted with purpose and resolve, policymakers dawdled and diddled."¹⁸⁾ However, Bacevich argues that "this book finds continuity where others see discontinuity and identifies purpose and structure where others see incoherence."¹⁹⁾

As Bacevich explains,

14) Ibid., 142-3.

15) Ibid., 184-201.

16) Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

17) After the publication of this book in 2002, Bacevich's *The Limits of Power* was published in 2008, which sharply criticizes the Bush administration's war in Iraq. Bacevich dedicates this book to his son, an officer in U.S. army, who was killed in the Iraq war in 2007. *The Limits of Power* immediately became a *New York Times* Bestseller.

18) Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2.

19) Ibid., 3.

Since the end of the Cold War the United States has in fact adhered to a well-defined grand strategy. To be sure, given the exigencies of politics in the real world, that adherence has been less than perfect. From time to time, considerations unrelated to strategy—the influence of domestic politics prominent among them—caused the ship of state to tack to port, then to starboard, then back again. Yet to interpret this zigzag pattern as indicative of confusion is to sell short those charged with the ship's navigation. Those who chart America's course do so with a clearly defined purpose in mind.²⁰⁾

What is that 'purpose' in America's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era as well as throughout the 20th century? He emphasizes that

That purpose is to preserve and, where both feasible and conducive to U.S. interests, to expand an American imperium. Central to this strategy is a commitment to global openness—removing barriers that inhibit the movement of goods, capital, ideas, and people. Its ultimate objective is the creation of an open and integrated international order based on the principles of democratic capitalism, with the United States as the ultimate guarantor of order and enforcer of norms.²¹⁾

He further emphasizes that his book aims “to describe the strategy of openness whereby the United States since the Cold War has pursued that purpose,” and discuss the realities and consequences of ‘American empire’ building with the ‘strategy of openness.’²²⁾ With respect to the concept and ideal of freedom, which is central to the ‘strategy of openness,’ Bacevich particularly emphasizes that while “its meaning is both continually shifting and fiercely contested,” “Freedom—not equality, not social justice, not the common good—has long since become the ultimate American value. In political discourse, it functions as the

20) Ibid., 2-3.

21) Ibid., 3.

22) Ibid., 6.

ultimate code word.”²³⁾

When turning to U.S. foreign policy in the 1990s and the Afghan War in the early 20th century, he tries to pinpoint their intimate connections with the “big picture,” namely, the general purpose of U.S. foreign policy in the 20th century. As he argues,

Though garnished with neologistic flourishes intended to convey a sense of freshness or originality, the politico-economic concept to which the United States adheres today has not changed in a century... Those policies reflect a single-minded determination to extend and perpetuate American political, economic, and cultural hegemony—usually referred to as ‘leadership’—on a global scale.²⁴⁾

Here it is particularly interesting to note how Bacevich compares the Bush doctrine in the post-Cold War era with the Truman doctrine in the Cold War world:

As in 1947, so, too, in 2001, the stakes were of the highest order. In making the case for the doctrine that would bear his name, Truman alluded to freedom—free peoples, free institutions, liberty, and the like—eighteen times. Bush’s presentation contained fourteen such allusions. According to Bush, the events of September 11 showed that ‘freedom itself is under attack.’²⁵⁾

In Bacevich’s view, “Casting the U.S. response to that attack not simply in terms of justifiable retaliation for an act of mass murder, but as a necessity to preserve freedom itself imbued Bush’s speech with added salience.”²⁶⁾ Thus, according to Bacevich, the ultimate goal of American foreign policy throughout the 20th century, including the post-Cold

23) *Ibid.*, 229.

24) *Ibid.*, 6.

25) *Ibid.*, 229.

26) *Ibid.*, 229.

War era, has been to create an open and integrated world on American terms, for America's interests, to ensure America's political, economic and cultural hegemony. And to achieve this goal, the administrations employ America's mighty military power to enforce norms and rules in the world. In his words,

In short, although the United States has not created an empire in any formal sense—what would be the point of doing so?—it has most definitely acquired an imperial problem. This is the dirty little secret to which the elder George Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush each in turn refused to own up. 27)

Bacevich's conclusion seems a rather ambiguous one. "America is not to be Rome or Britain," he quotes Charles Beard as saying in 1939, "It is to be America," "as the Great Republic." However, Bacevich laments that "The reality that Beard feared has come to pass: like it or not, America today *is* Rome..." Therefore, he emphasizes that

For policymakers to persist in pretending otherwise—to indulge in myths of American innocence...—is to increase the likelihood that the answers they come up with will be wrong. That way lies not just the demise of the American empire but great danger for what used to be known as the American republic.²⁸⁾

In the heated discussions and debates on American empire, many American scholars pay serious attentions to Chalmers Johnson's *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (2004). Johnson is a leading Asia scholar in the United States, and president of the Japan Policy Research Institute. "Our nation is the greatest force for good in history," Johnson quotes President Bush as saying in 2002. However, Johnson argues that

27) Ibid., 243.

28) Ibid., 244.

As distinct from other peoples on this earth, most Americans do not recognize – or do not want to recognize – that the United States dominates the world through its military power. Due to government secrecy, they are often ignorant of the fact that their government garrisons the globe. They do not realize that a vast network of American military bases on every continent except Antarctica actually constitutes a new form of empire.²⁹⁾

Johnson recalls George Washington's stern warning against militarism in his Farewell Address, and discusses in details Dwight Eisenhower's sharp critiques of the rising 'military-industrial complex' before he left the White House in 1961. Turning to the present, Johnson "maps America's empire of military bases and identifies the new caste of professional militarists overseeing its expansion." "This militarism' in America's empire building is, in his analyses, "already putting an end to the age of globalization, bankrupting the United States, and crating conditions for a new century of virulent blowback." He emphasizes that "the former American republic has already crossed its Rubicon—with the Pentagon in the lead."³⁰⁾ In conclusion, with "a scholar's critique and a patriot's cry,"³¹⁾ Johnson particularly emphasizes that

There is one development that could conceivably stop this process of overreaching: the people could retake control of Congress, reform it along with the corrupted elections laws that have made it into a forum for special interests, turn it into a genuine assembly of democratic representatives, and cut off the supply of money to the Pentagon and the secret intelligence agencies. We have a strong civil society that could, in theory, overcome the entrenched interests of the armed forces and military-industrial complex.

29) Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 1.

30) The publisher's introduction of this book.

31) John Dower's review, on the back cover of the book; John Dower, author of *Embracing Defeat*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize.

At this late date, however, it is difficult to imagine how Congress, much like the Roman senate in the last days of the republic, could be brought back to life and cleansed of its endemic corruption. Failing such a reform, Nemesis, the goddess of retribution and vengeance, the punisher of pride and hubris, waits impatiently for her meeting with us.³²⁾

II. Distinctive Contributions of *Arc of Empire* to the Current Discourse on American Empire

Within the context of ongoing debates on empire in the Western literature, one may see more clearly the distinctive and important contributions of *Arc of Empire* to the current academic discourse on American empire. First of all, for the first time, America's four wars in East Asia are connected together to illustrate the trajectory of America's bid for regional dominance in the 20th century, or the "arc of empire" in eastern Asia: to "lay down the foundation" (the war in the Philippines), to "reach the top" (the war against Japan), the "turning point" (the Korean War), and "the defeat" (the Vietnam War). As the authors emphasize,

These four wars—in the Philippines, against Japan, in Korea, and in Vietnam—were not separate and unconnected, although they are conventionally treated as such. They were phases in a U.S. attempt to establish and maintain a dominant position in eastern Asia sustained over some seven decades against considerable resistance.³³⁾

The authors further emphasize that while these wars were long gone, the 'basic convictions' underlying these wars remained intact:

32) Chalmers Johnson: *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004), 312.

33) Michael Hunt and Steve Levine: *Arc of Empire*, 1.

Just as the victory in the Philippines had set the U.S. imperial project in eastern Asia in motion, the defeat in Vietnam would mark its end. But this reverse did not in fact shake the basic convictions that had inspired the push into Asia in the first place. American continued to cherish a nationalism in which they saw themselves as world-shapers and denigrated or ignored anyone standing in their way.³⁴⁾

In this regard, it is important to note how the authors discuss and analyze President Nixon's 'exit' or retreat strategy in the latter stage of the Vietnam War. Nixon commented in July 1971 that "great civilizations fall as well as rise. The task of American statecraft" was, as he believed, "to delay that time of decline for a power," which had, in Nixon's view, "passed its apogee."³⁵⁾ To delay "that time of decline," for Nixon, "the husbanding of U.S. national resources became prime importance." This meant "a government program of revitalizing American society in areas as diverse as the environment, education, health care, and moral commitment."³⁶⁾ And in order to channel limited financial resources into America's domestic reconstruction programs, Nixon envisioned a five-power or multipolar international system, "in which, a revived Europe and Japan as well as China and the Soviet Union occupied a place alongside the United States."³⁷⁾

As the authors points out, a key component of this new international system was "a Japan less dependent on the United States and better able to replace the United States as (in his words) 'the major counter-force to China.'" For this purpose, before his China trip, Nixon decided "to return control of Okinawa to Tokyo's jurisdiction."³⁸⁾ In other words, in Nixon's 'exit' strategy, President Nixon did not envision a system of East Asian regionalism based on economic interdependence and common prosperity, which could become America's great partner in economic, security, and cultural fronts, and which could

34) Ibid., 250.

35) Ibid., 262.

36) Ibid.

37) Ibid., 261.

38) Ibid., 261.

more effectively revive America's economy and win popular supports in both America and East Asia. Rather, the Nixon doctrine seems to aim to revive Theodore Roosevelt's strategy in East Asia, as shown in the Russo-Japanese War in the early 20th century. As the authors emphasize, "Washington continues to view developments in a rich and strategically sensitive Northeast Asia largely through the prism of conventional military power and interstate conflict."³⁹⁾

In short, as the authors suggest, in his retreat strategy, Nixon did not reflect on the root-cause of America's failure in its Pacific project as well as in the Vietnam War, but tried hard to prolong the "imperial ambition" with a different strategy and to rebuild the American economy simultaneously. The American economy was not successfully saved with this strategy, the authors emphasize. And the geopolitical changes the Nixon doctrine brought about, as the authors further suggest, did not shake the foundation of America's long-term approach to East Asia: "rather they transformed and may actually have strengthened the long-term position of the United States in eastern Asia as a post-imperial power."⁴⁰⁾

Therefore, after America's withdrawal from the Vietnam War, as the authors particularly emphasize, "Washington would embark on a new project in another seemingly troubled and vulnerable region. There, in a repeat of a familiar imperial scenario, Americans would seek to tame alien forces and reshape other societies. For all too familiar reasons, the new crusade in the Middle East was by the 1970s already well under way and would unfold along disturbingly familiar lines."⁴¹⁾

The second unique and important contribution of this study to the discourse on empire is, clearly, the authors' efforts to employ the historical lessons drawn from the American Pacific project in the 20th century, to "offer a cautionary tale applicable to the U.S. entanglement in the Middle East and Afghanistan" in the 21st century.⁴²⁾ As they point out, "this

39) Ibid., 264.

40) Ibid., 262.

41) Ibid., 250.

42) Ibid., 272.

history of American empire building and warfare in one region speaks to the current imbroglia across the Middle East and Central Asia in a striking variety of ways." While "the present does not replicate the past," they emphasize that "historical parallels can provide fresh ways of understanding and dealing with current challenges."⁴³⁾

According to the authors, the first historical lesson to be learned from the failure of the America's Pacific project is "the need to consider the way a regional commitment can develop out of a long string of seemingly separate but accumulating decisions. Regional ambitions snowball, and their gathering momentum makes them hard to slow down or reverse."⁴⁴⁾

Another historical lesson they draw from America's Pacific project in the 20th century is that "The Middle East drive was, like its Asian predecessor, fueled by a strong sense of national mission and pride...:They claimed that their country had the capacity, will, and virtue to dominate—to create its own reality in a world imagined as fundamentally malleable and receptive..." And this conviction of the world's 'malleability,' drove or "guided policymakers toward a massive misreading of the region."⁴⁵⁾ Thus, in the Middle East, "as earlier in Asia, dreams of dominance rested on a sense of superiority over the region's people, whose histories and outlooks were not taken seriously. As a result, now no less than in the Asian enterprise, it is American ignorance that makes the enemy appear inscrutable. Its resistance to American attempts to impose a neocolonial order is interpreted as proof of its malevolence and fanaticism."⁴⁶⁾

And the third lesson in America's Pacific project is, as they emphasize, that "every territorial drive so far from home eventually falters and collapses. Only those deluded by myths of U.S. exceptionalism—and oblivious to the regional perspective—can think otherwise."⁴⁷⁾

43) Ibid., 7-8.

44) Ibid., 273.

45) Ibid., 274.

46) Ibid., 274.

47) Ibid., 275.

In this regard, it is particularly significant to note the authors' comments on America's strategy of 'counterinsurgency' in the Iraq and Afghan wars. In their view, this 'new' strategy is, in fact, nothing new in conception and practice. It is a repetition of the 'nation-building' or 'hearts and minds' strategy in the Vietnam War. While the 'Counter-Terrorist' strategy, which had initially been adopted by the Bush administration in the Afghan and Iraq wars, and focused exclusively or solely on getting rid of terrorists, the new 'Counter-Insurgency' strategy focuses, instead, on 'nation-buildings' in Iraq and Afghanistan, to win local people's hearts and minds. As the authors point out,

After contributing to the new Army counterinsurgency handbook, Major John Nagl got a chance to convert theory to practice in a Sunni area of Iraq. A December 2003 interview revealed that he had brought to the job a set of views familiar to generations of empire builders. He was guided, he insisted, by a benevolent impulse to liberate Iraqis. 'What we want for them is the right to make their own decisions, to live their own lives.' But 'these clowns'—Nagl's good natured term for the locals—were not ready and needed his help to transcend their recent political experience, which had left them twisted. But before uplift had to come obedience. Drawing on another favorite bit of colonial wisdom, he stressed the importance of force as the language the natives understood best... 'The hearts and minds strategy thus turned on the threat of destruction during what Nagl called the 'behavior-modification phase. I want their minds right now.' Their hearts would come later with generous spending on schools and clinics... 'As he and other champions of counterinsurgency may have at some level understood, colonial enterprises are ultimately not about the aspirations of the benighted subject peoples but about imposing the will of self-professed enlightened foreigners.⁴⁸⁾

Commenting on Major Nagl's interpretation of this 'new strategy of counterinsurgency,'

48) Ibid., 278.

the authors emphasize that this strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq is that before winning local people's 'hearts,' there must be, first of all, a change of their 'minds' by military force, that is the 'behavior-modification phase' or 'mind-modification phase' through 'the threat of destruction' by military power.

The authors further emphasize that this 'counterinsurgency' or 'nation-building' strategy was first proposed in the Vietnam War. In fact, when the 'counterinsurgency' or 'nation-building' strategy in the Afghan War was proposed by the Obama administration, Prof. Hunt points out in his article 'Vietnam War Lessons: Never too late to learn.'

Developments over the last month or so have put the U.S. commitment in Afghanistan under a dark cloud... The Vietnam War most obviously underlines the long odds against nation building. The U.S. commander, General William Westmoreland, understood from the start that he was waging 'a political as well as a military war.' The ultimate goal was securing 'the loyalty and cooperation of the people' and winning time for 'reestablishing the government apparatus, strengthening [Saigon's] military forces, rebuilding the administrative machinery, and re-instituting the services of the Government.'⁴⁹

Therefore, in discussing the strategy of "counterinsurgency" in the Middle East and Central Asia in the book, the authors emphatically state that

These fairy tales associated with empire have had a profoundly damaging effect. A world framed by American preoccupations leaves little space for the preferences of subjugated peoples. Culturally blind and historically obtuse, it takes no account of the local costs, it cannot tolerate a vision of the future apart from one American desire, it depends on compromised collaborators, and it ignores the influence of regional

⁴⁹ Michael H. Hunt: "Vietnam War Lessons: Never too late to learn," (8 May 2010)

powers. As a result, while Americans remain in denial about the imperial nature of their project, political movements and regional powers mobilize to impede their way. At home, these fairy tales entice the United States with the sugar plum promises of empire and away from foundational national values.⁵⁰⁾

The significance of this book may be well beyond the above distinctive and impressive contributions to the ongoing academic discourse on American empire. This study has important and far-reaching implications as well for current American foreign policy debates over America's approach to China and East Asia in the 21st century.

III. Far-Reaching Implications of this Study for Current U.S. Foreign Policy Debates on American East Asian Relations

In May 2012, President Obama declared that "It is now time to focus on nation building here at home."⁵¹⁾ In September, Obama repeated this theme in his speech at the Democratic National Convention. The true passion of the first African-American president is obviously in America's reconstruction or domestic nation-building. Meanwhile, in 2012, the Obama administration also announced its new security strategy of 'pivoting to Asia,' which seems to include two major parts: one is to withdraw America's major military forces from the Middle East and to return to East Asia (a revival of the Johnson administration's strategy in Southeast Asia?), while the other is to strengthen the U.S. military position in Japan and the Philippines in the Western Pacific (a revival of the Nixon doctrine?) Anyone who has read this book would wonder whether America's domestic nation-building program

50) Ibid., 278.

51) ABC News, "Obama's Weekly Address: Time to 'Focus On Nation-Building Here at Home,'" <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/05/obamas-weekly-address-time-to-focus-on-nation-building-here-at-home/>

and its new security strategy of 'pivoting to Asia' will collide with each other down the road.

At this critical historical moment, it maybe helpful to reflect on Lyndon Johnson's 'great society' program and why it was substantially undermined by his policy in Southeast Asia. In May 1964, President Johnson proclaimed in his commencement speech at the University of Michigan that "we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society." An America of "abundance and liberty for all," with "an end to poverty and racial injustice." In the Great Society, "men are more concerned with the quality of their goals rather than the quantity of their goods."

On Aug. 8, 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act passed in Congress, America's War on Poverty formally began. In 1965, the Voting Rights Act passed, segregation in the South ended, and programs of Medicare, etc established. Unfortunately, on Aug. 7, 1964, one day before the passage of Economic Opportunity Act, Congress had passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which granted President Johnson the authority to assist any Southeast Asian country whose government was considered to be threatened by 'communist aggression.' The resolution served as Johnson's legal justification for deploying U.S. conventional forces in the Vietnam War. And in 1965, when the war on poverty was moving forward at home, President Johnson decided to drastically escalate the ground war in South Vietnam.

The war against communism in South Vietnam fundamentally undermined the war on poverty or the 'great society' program in America. The Vietnam War not only brought about unprecedented sufferings to the Vietnamese people, as the authors so vividly demonstrate in the book, but also brought the American economy to the verge of the downward spiral. The 'Nixon shock' was primarily triggered by the cost of the Vietnam War. The 'Nixon shock' came in Aug. 1971, when President Nixon announced to end the Gold Standard system, the cornerstone of the Bretton Woods system in the post-WWII era. The end of the Gold Standard system, or ending convertibility between US dollars and gold, becomes the major source of America's national debt problem today.

When President Obama emphasizes the vital importance of domestic ‘nation-building,’ how can the administration and the American people avoid a repetition of the past errors and mistakes in America’s Pacific project in the 20th century? The answer to this question, as the authors indicate in the book, does not rely solely or even mainly on the president’s choice or decisions. Indeed, when President Johnson was making his critical decision of drastically escalating the Vietnam War, he actually had serious doubts about this decision. As the authors write,

On 21 June 1965, barely a month before making his major troop commitment, a troubled president rehearsed the reasons for caution in a secretly recorded telephone conversation with McNamara. . . . But at the end of this remarkable enumeration of dangers confronting him, Johnson reached an even more remarkable conclusion: ‘I don’t think we can get out of there with our [SEATO] treaty like it is and with what all we’ve said. I think it would just lose us face in the world. I shudder to think what [other countries] would say.’ He had to stay the course—and so he did.⁵²⁾

The reason why President Johnson had to stay the course despite his passion for the ‘great society’ programs, and his grave doubts about America’s eventual triumph in the war, Johnson himself had already explained on Nov. 24, 1963 (two days after Kennedy’s assassination): “I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went.” As Robert McNamara (Defense Secretary under Kennedy and Johnson) further explained in his memoir:

Harry Truman and Dean Acheson had lost their effectiveness from the day that the Communists took over China. I believed that the loss of China had played a large role in the life of Joe McCarthy. And I knew that all these problems, taken together,

52) Ibid., 203.

were chicken shit compared to what might happen if we lost Vietnam.⁵³⁾

Clearly, both the president's personal love for the 'great society' program and his personal doubts about the war looked so pale in comparison with America's general political environment, and the party's fate in elections, as well as the president's perception of America's prestige in the world at that moment. Put differently, Johnson's decision in the Vietnam War was shaped more by the domestic political conditions, America's popular beliefs in the Cold War, and presidential elections, rather than by the president's own thinking on the merits of this policy decision. Accordingly, the authors urge the American people to engage in serious discussions and debates on how to withdraw from America's century-long 'imperial project.' "The American public was tolerant of empire at bargain-basement prices," the authors write. "But when the costs started to rise, support began to fall."⁵⁴⁾ For the authors, only by withdrawing from the century-long 'imperial project,' can America succeed in rebuilding the economy, strengthening domestic democratic infrastructures, and constructing a more humane world order in the 21st century.

The authors particularly emphasize that the notion of American empire is fundamentally in conflict with the ideal of American Republic:

Fundamentally, empire raises for the American system the question of power that so preoccupied the national founders, who believed they were launching a great experiment but one that history told them was fragile. Profoundly fearing the tendency of the powerful to abuse their position, they framed the constitutional system to serve as a check on this malign prospect. Otherwise, the arrogance of the mighty would prevail. The plain-spoken John Adams mordantly expressed this instinctive fear characteristic of an entire generation: 'Power always thinks it has a great Soul and vast Views, beyond the comprehension of the Weak; and that it is doing God's Service when it is violating

53) Robert S. McNamara: *In Retrospect, The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, Vintage, 1996).

54) Hunt and Levine, *Arc of Empire*, 258.

all his Laws.’⁵⁵⁾

Thus, the authors passionately appeal to the American people as well as policymakers:

Is dominance, as the Asia campaign suggests, so difficult to renounce that persisting is more likely even as costs rise and support falls? Has the United States reached a point in the unfolding tragedy where, like Macbeth, one president after another can only say, ‘I am in blood stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as to go o’er?’⁵⁶⁾

Therefore, in their conclusion, Hunt and Levine challenge the American people and the community of discourse to rethink the “imperial project,” and to make their crucial choice and decisions concerning what role America should play in the world in the 21st century:

Taking empire seriously as a historical phenomenon offers a means of returning fairy tales to the nursery. If a definition of insanity is doing something over and over and expecting a different result, then accepting empire as something as American as apple pie may be a step toward sanity. At least it offers a learning opportunity. Some who find what the past suggests unpalatable may resolve not to do empire. Others convinced that empire is defensible or unavoidable may find insights on how to proceed in a more sustainable way and to confront the real costs and risks. Either way, a wider, more historical field of vision can yield rich, practical rewards.⁵⁷⁾

55) Ibid., 279.

56) Ibid., 275.

57) Ibid.

IV. Concluding Remarks

When the American people and the community of discourse engage in agonizing soul-searching over America's domestic and foreign policies, the daunting challenge confronting the people and the community of discourse in eastern Asia is whether they have the great wisdom and courage to stay focused on constructing East Asian regionalism without distracting from the vital course, and whether they have the great compassion and patience to continue to build a bridge of mutual understanding and friendship between the American people and the people in East Asia.

After reading this book, one cannot help feeling deeply moved by the authors' compassion and inspired by their aspiration. A nation's rise and fall is by no means predetermined. It depends on people's choices at critical historical moments. If pioneering thinkers and reformers on both sides of the Pacific can work together, shoulder by shoulder, and generation after generation, with sheer perseverance and determination, a truly great bridge of equality, mutual respect, mutual benefits, and mutual complementarity, might be eventually built up across the Pacific in the future. The future of the world will not be based on a unipolar system, which is directly contradictory with Einstein's law of the universe, namely, that "harmony between the opposites," and the Eastern view of the *Tao*. As the Indian philosopher and theoretical physicist Fritjof Capra points out,

The Taoists saw all changes in nature as manifestations of the dynamic interplay between the polar opposites *yin* and *yang*, and thus they came to believe that any pair of opposites constitutes a polar relationship where each of the two poles is dynamically linked to the other... Thus Chuang Tzu says, "The 'this' is also 'that'. The 'that' is also 'this'... That the 'that' and the 'this' cease to be opposites is the very essence of *Tao*..."⁵⁸)

58) Fritjof Capra: *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Boston, Shambhala, the fourth edition, 2000), 114.

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Abstract

Review of Michael H. Hunt & Steven I. Levine, *Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam*

Simei Qing

Arc of Empire focuses on America's four wars in Asia – in the Philippines, against Japan, in Korea, and in Vietnam –, and the problem of empire. For the first time in the Western literature, these four wars were not treated as 'separate and unconnected.' Rather, they were considered as "phases in a U.S. attempt to establish and maintain a dominant position in eastern Asia sustained over some seven decades against considerable resistance." Furthermore, for the first time in the Western literature, the authors tackles "the tough issues of what happens when an imperial project collapses and of what insights the U.S. Asian imbroglio offers on the current U.S. involvement in the Middle East and Central Asia." This book should have important and far-reaching implications for current American debates on US foreign policy toward East Asia or the new security strategy of 'returning to Asia.'

□ Key words : *Arc of Empire* in East Asia, Liberal Empire, Preventive War, The Strategy of Openness, The Strategy of Counterinsurgency, Imperial Project

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