

Book Review

Soldiering through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific, by Simeon Man. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. 272. ISBN 9780520283367.

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Though *Soldiering through Empire* is about the military, it is not of military history. The book is pathbreaking as it deals with Asians and Asian Americans in the US military service—directly, in the US armed forces, or indirectly through their own countries' armed forces—through the prism of race and US policy. The period covered is the immediate post World War II era through the end of the Vietnam War (1945–1975).

Simeon Man's book is a notable contribution in many fields: Asian-American history, race studies, military and diplomatic history, Cold War studies, the Vietnam War, among others. While there have been several books on the Cold War in Asia, *Soldiering through Empire* is unique as it studies the participation of Asian and Asian-American soldiers or military workers in American policy especially in Vietnam. In focusing on the military, the author delves into issues of race as a means to further American imperialist aims: to present an Asian face to the American construction of postwar Asia, particularly Vietnam, and to bring in greater participation of Asian Americans in the wars of the US.

Man defines soldiering as a profession and a means to escape socioeconomic problems, wherein soldiers and military workers bring with them a wide spectrum of ideological, personal persuasions, and

views on operations. As he explains, “I examine soldiering as an optic through which the racial and imperial politics of the decolonizing Pacific were forged and became contested” (p. 10).

Race and soldiering are set in the involvement of the US in the decolonizing Pacific—newly independent from colonial rule but confronted with severe challenges in the midst of the emerging Cold War. The US framed its Asian policy to further American interests in the region and build a capitalist bulwark fueled by American economic interests protected by diplomatic and military initiatives. By viewing the decolonization of Asia through its own lenses, the US proved incapable of seeing developments in the region from Asian perspectives. This resulted in errors in judgment and policy. Man argues that the US militarization of Asia and the Pacific rendered decolonization incomplete.

But in that militarization, the US used race to either supplement or provide an Asian face to their policies, or to highlight the inclusion of Asian Americans in the emerging post-World War II society. The use of race in the Asian policy gave rise to other problems which were systemic to the American society at that time.

Thus, Man’s book deals with the large theme of soldiering in empire: the US’ postwar emerging empire and the Philippines’ and South Korea’s sub-empires. The book is sweeping in coverage as it tackles civic action, psychological warfare, dehumanizing military training, and the impact of military operations on soldiers and the people they were supposedly helping. Where possible, he lets the soldiers speak out, beyond official documents. While solidly based on archival materials and previously published scholarly works, Man has also interviewed some of the former soldiers. Some of the collections Man used are difficult to access, and this adds to the importance of this book. Undoubtedly Man’s being an Asian American allowed him to experience first-hand what his interviewees and the documents told him.

“The role of race in the decades after World War II was defined by paradox,” writes Man (p. 2). On the one hand, “good” Asians were used to fight “bad” Asians, and Asian Americans were included into the larger framework of US society, but on the other, Asians were discriminated, thus fomenting anger and discord instead of winning

their hearts and minds. The result was activist resistance and protest that tied up with the growing anti-war movement.

In drawing together the many threads of race in the US military and US Cold War policy, the book also goes beyond the neat time frame set for the book, through the colonial experiences of the Philippines and Korea under the Americans and Japanese respectively. It includes the difficulties faced by Japanese Americans during World War II, and the loss of sovereignty of the Hawaiian people.

The book is divided into six chapters, each with a distinct flavor and focus. The chapters follow a generally chronological order, but each event from earlier times are narrated to place the chapter in perspective. The first two chapters deal with the early postwar years.

Chapter 1 discusses the making of the US transnational security state after World War II, the attempt to cultivate an “Asia for Asians” policy as a front for US security policy. Included in this construction was the training of Asians, particularly South Koreans and Filipinos, in US military schools in order to maintain order that would stabilize the status quo and quell attempts at radical change.

Chapter 2 sees that policy put to concrete use in mid-1950s Vietnam, with lessons from the Philippine anti-Huk campaign put to use in post-Geneva Vietnam. Instead of direct US military involvement, Filipinos were sent to South Vietnam for civic action: humanitarian medical aid to take care of the refugees resulting from the Geneva Accord of 1954. While there were legitimate concerns among the Filipinos in Operation Brotherhood, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) maximized the deployment for its own ends. Nonmilitary activities by the Freedom Company, composed of Filipino World War II guerrilla veterans, were also supported by the CIA in trying to bring the people of South Vietnam into the US orbit.

Chapters 3 and 4 bring the reader into the violence of the ground war in Vietnam through different perspectives. First, the war and Hawaii’s role in it, both as a training camp and a potential source of soldiers, are discussed. Second, the issues and operations of Filipinos and Koreans deployed to Vietnam are narrated. The experiences raised here are presented together as part of the emerging whole, and many new details are presented.

The last two chapters go into the emergent radical movement among Asian-American servicemen as a result of the Vietnam War. Asian Americans were drafted into the military to fight in Vietnam. Rather than become part of the whole American effort, however, many Asian Americans experienced discrimination as soon as they entered the training camp, as they were singled out for their looks as “gooks” and like the enemy in Vietnam. In combat, many would be singled out as well. The result was a resistance movement through the creation of Asian-American assistance organizations to fight the war and protest the discriminatory treatment in the military.

The last chapter goes into the larger protest movement within the military, the GI Movement where active protests and resistance to orders appeared, aided by linkages with progressive groups in the US, the Philippines, Japan, and elsewhere. This movement reached its climax as Richard Nixon’s Vietnamization policy sought to reduce US involvement in the war. Vietnamization only replaced American troops with Asian troops, while US planes and ships continued to bomb civilian areas in the north. At the end of the war and the proclamation of martial law in the Philippines, this movement went into decline, even though resistance would take place in places like Okinawa, which held most of the US bases in Japan.

The book goes on to conclude that the US Empire and its military arm continue to this day in the Middle East and elsewhere. The transition of the US armed forces into an All-Volunteer Force has supposedly eroded the causes for resistance as manifested in the 1970s. Subsequent military operations in Iraq, in the War on Terror, and even today continue to support the American capitalist empire, even though that strength is ebbing. Man ends by saying: “Now firmly ensconced in the twenty-first century, those post-1945 machinations seem both a world away and surprisingly prescient, as we continue to live with the violence of the waning American empire. “Yet again, a decolonizing Pacific is ever on the horizon” (p. 191).

Indeed, the book is a landmark work and significant contribution to the historiography of post-1945 Asia. By focusing on soldiering and race, it opens up a new lens in viewing incidents which once were major news items but are now largely forgotten.

However, there are a number of events which Man failed to mention that would have provided more strength to his arguments, and would have placed the events in a better perspective.

First and foremost is the mention of National Security Council (NSC) Paper 68. While Man mentions NSC 108 which framed the Mutual Defense Assistance Program, NSC 68 preceded it and was more encompassing. The Asia Pacific had become a neglected front in the late 1940s, with the US Army significantly downsized after the war. Clark Field and Okinawa were neglected and even the Philippine government's anti-Huk campaign did not receive major military assistance initially. With the "loss" of China and the detonation of the Soviet Union's atomic bomb in 1949, the tide turned and US policy shifted to a more engaged, worldwide anti-Communist policy. The military was to be built up, economic aid given, psychological warfare used, and so forth. Thus, bases in the Asia-Pacific regained importance and money was allotted in building up the military. This provided the background of NSC 108.

There were early attempts to set up an Asian community, such as that envisioned in the Delhi conference and later by President Elpidio Quirino's Pacific Pact, but the US was disinterested. After NSC 68, the US was more definitely involved, such that it would push for the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO).

Discussion of SEATO is minimal, but this too was a show of "unity" despite the fact that only two Southeast Asian countries were members. Discussion of Thailand and its role in the Vietnam War is hardly mentioned, even though SEATO's headquarters was in Bangkok. The author might have stressed in the introduction that the focus would be on the Philippines, South Korea, Asian Americans, and the Vietnam War.

Another event not mentioned—and this was a key event at the time—was the Manila Summit of 1967 where President Lyndon Johnson came to Manila to urge greater participation among allies in the Vietnam War. Johnson is supposed to have tried to twist Ferdinand Marcos' arm in private (figuratively) to get the Philippines involved.

The focus on Vietnam as the fulcrum of the US' Asian policy and the issues of race is understandable, since the Vietnam War was the

focus of fighting and resistance. This has, however, led to the failure to include other developments during the time frame covered. One of these would have been Filipinos in Okinawa, both military and civilian. The Philippine Scouts and Filipino engineers were sent to Okinawa for peacekeeping and construction duties—an entirely separate story by itself, needing further study. Perhaps there should have been a second subtitle emphasizing the focus on the Vietnam War.

By focusing on the Vietnam War, Asian participation in the Korean War is left out and receives only sporadic mention. Again, the US' call for international assistance syncs with its actions in the Vietnam War. Asian participation in the Korean War is an entire subject by itself, so again a subtitle or a note in the introduction that the Vietnam War is the focus would not leave the reader looking for more.

The Philippine Scouts—which had been in existence since 1899 and had been a bulwark of the US' security force in the colonial Philippines—was reorganized after World War II. It was demobilized in 1949, amidst much nostalgia. Its limited mutiny in 1924 was caused by the unequal pay between Filipino and American soldiers, but was dealt with decisively. No other challenge to authority arose. (As opposed to the Philippine Constabulary, which had a number of localized mutinies.)

The active resistance in the US armed forces as epitomized in the USS Coral Sea incident (p. 162) could have been treated as a mutiny, and the crew who participated could have been court martialed. But such were the times and so widespread the movement that a court martial or iron fist would have been counterproductive. So the times had indeed changed. But what is not too clear is why the GI Movement seems to have died down. Was it the end of the Vietnam War? Was it the unpopularity of the military after the war? Or was it the shift to the All-Volunteer Force? This is not made too clear in the book. It appears that it rose during the war and lost its spirit after the war. Did cases of discrimination continue afterwards? Were Asian Americans singled out during boot camp training or was this corrected?

US wars have continued on after Vietnam, so a subsequent study can be made on whether the US armed forces have reformed or not. Given the current Black Lives Matter and discriminatory

actions of the US police and Homeland Security forces, it seems not much has changed since the 1970s. Philippine and Asian armed forces have continued in foreign deployments, not so much under the US this time, but under the United Nations as peacekeeping forces. And with the apparent waning of the US, another power may threaten the decolonizing Pacific. This book thus becomes more important as it adds depth to current events.

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