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## Hunt, Michael H. & Levine, Steven I. Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

Hsiang-Wang Liu Ph.D.  
University of Minnesota at Morris, liuh@morris.umn.edu

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**Hunt, Michael H. & Levine, Steven I. *Arc of Empire: America's Wars in Asia from the Philippines to Vietnam*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012.**

This book is the product of the course, “The Pacific Wars,” taught by professors Michael H. Hunt and Steven I. Levin at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Both authors are members of the 1970s anti-Vietnam War generation and are well-known scholars in the history of East Asia and the U.S. They have witnessed the rise of Asia as well as the recent, startling economic recession in America. Both were compelled to reflect on the past and publish this book. In this text, they provide one of the best summaries of recent scholarship regarding the four major wars fought by the U.S. in Asia—in the Philippines, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. The introduction, less than nine pages in length, does not necessarily shed new light on U.S. involvement in these wars but classifies the wars as U.S. imperial “projects” that were inseparable from U.S. imperial expansion into East Asia from 1899 to 1973.

The war on the Philippines (1899-1902), covered in the first chapter, for both authors, represents a continuation of the United States’ conquest of the indigenous populations of North America. The U.S. enjoyed its “messiah mission” to the Philippines to educate and “enlighten” the islanders just as it had done for the “Indians” of North America. President William McKinley was keen to take over not only the port city of Manila but also the entire Philippine archipelago. The Katipunan movement<sup>i</sup> alone could not match the U.S. strength. The U.S. imperial doctrine of “divide and conquer” was easily applied to crush insurgents. This chapter is well written and provides a detailed account of the Philippine-American war, with only one historical inaccuracy: the authors describe the looting of a village by American soldiers (p. 40), in which the Americans are said to have stolen wild turkeys. However, turkeys were not native birds to the Philippines and were, in fact, introduced to the islands by the U.S. only after 1898.

The second chapter, devoted to the examination of U.S. military efforts against Japan during World War II, is another example of good scholarship. Both authors assert that U.S. involvement in the war against Japan represents competition between empires for dominance in the Pacific region. With China remaining a bone of contention<sup>ii</sup> throughout the war, and with the capacity of the Japanese military not quite rivaling that of the U.S., say the authors, the United States needed only to “wait patiently” and “wear down” Imperial Japan—though it could be argued that the U.S. dropping atomic bombs on two primarily civilian Japanese targets did not constitute waiting patiently, not to mention that atomic weapons would likely have “worn down” any military foe, regardless of strength. Nevertheless, the outcome was Japanese surrender in September of 1945. The authors used newly published Japanese memoirs and private letters to shed light on Japanese soldiers’ yearning for peace; such publications also revealed the opinions of ordinary people, who often spoke warmly of the occupation. This is one of the text’s contributions to deepening the understanding of postwar Japan’s pacifism. The human rights issue of “comfort women,” the young women and girls forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese army, was discussed as well. The authors contend that the fall of the Japanese empire represents the point at which U.S. influence in the region reached its apogee.

Despite the strength of the first two chapters, the chapter dedicated to the examination of the Korean War (1950-1953), however, is problematic. The authors did correctly summarize the war’s origins and history and, importantly, indicated how the course of history was shaped by the actions of Moscow and Beijing, both backing North Korea against South Korea, which was backed by a United Nations force led by the United States. The authors also agree—and rightly assert—that the U.S. initially tried to avoid becoming entangled in Korea, wishing to uphold a

“Europe first” policy. Unfortunately, however, the authors’ main analysis of the U.S.’ ultimate involvement in the Korean war misses the mark. Their feeble reasoning asserts that the Korean war represented the “beginning of the end” for the United States’ imperial efforts, claiming that due to various setbacks, the war marked a “downturn” in U.S. dominance—despite the fact that U.S. involvement culminated in the U.S. providing over 80% of all military personnel sent to Korea by the UN. The authors continue to reiterate this point throughout the chapter. They also ignored the fact that the U.S. supported the development of the war only to restore the status quo and see a return to ante bellum Korea. Despite the authors’ claim of a downturn in U.S. dominance, the 1950s undoubtedly remained an American age in terms of global influence, and, in East Asia in particular, the U.S. remained at the helm. It was for this reason, not so incidentally, that the U.S. stumbled into its involvement in the war in Vietnam.

The final chapter, on the Vietnam War, is written very differently than the first three. Unlike the preceding three chapters, it does not provide a full account of the history of the war but instead presents the authors’ own perspectives of the anti-Vietnam War story. The authors argue (p. 203) that as early as 1964, the Johnson administration was fully aware of its folly in getting involved militarily in what the Vietnamese perceived as an extension of a long-raging colonial war and that Johnson and his advisors expected an outcome of defeat. Despite this prediction, the U.S. nonetheless moved forward by mobilizing its ground troops into Vietnam, in what became a test of attrition, never destroying or even significantly disabling the enemy. As public support for the war effort declined at home, the outcome of the war in Vietnam was just as the administration anticipated. In 1968, the Johnson administration publically announced the U.S.’ withdrawal from Vietnam, and, beginning in 1969, the Nixon administration initiated troop withdrawals—though Nixon simultaneously also escalated the conflict by dramatically increasing airstrikes against not only Vietnam but also neighboring Cambodia and Laos. In so doing, Nixon launched the heaviest bombing in human history, intimidating Saigon into accepting the Paris Peace Accord. Even more unscrupulously, Nixon was determined to ensure that the U.S. (and he) came away from the Vietnam war looking at least partially triumphant in its efforts—an illusion he particularly desired after twenty years of painful and ultimately unpopular U.S. involvement. Toward that end, Nixon was prepared to pay a bribe in the amount of \$3.25 billion to Hanoi, the Northern capital, in 1973 to withdraw from Saigon. And in an effort to appear heroic, he promised the South that the U.S. would come back to support Southern efforts if Hanoi violated the treaty, though when Saigon “fell” to Northern liberation forces, the U.S. did not, in fact, come back. After discussing the quagmire that the Vietnam war became, the authors assert that the U.S. has not in fact changed its imperialist ways and that the U.S. continues its empire building-efforts, though they are now focused in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

The concluding chapter is an addition to the text, not true conclusion. Although the authors repeat their somewhat oversimplified logic regarding the rise and fall of the U.S. empire in East Asia, they also manage to provide valuable insight and analysis. In particular, their discussion (pp. 265-272) regarding the recent fundamental political and economic changes in East Asia is extremely valuable for anyone who is concerned that region today. This makes this book a very important work. This is a good book; it provides a terse and concise examination of the U.S.’ involvement (both past and present) in global politics in East Asia, presenting the four wars as “phases” in the U.S.’ bid to build and maintain regional and global dominance in the region. Despite its shortcomings, this text could potentially serve as a preface to U.S. policy there in the future.

Hsiang-Wang Liu PhD  
University of Minnesota at Morris  
[liuh@morris.umn.edu](mailto:liuh@morris.umn.edu)

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<sup>i</sup> The Katipunan association was a Philippine revolutionary society originally formed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the objective of gaining independence from Spain. When the U.S. took possession of the Philippines, following the Spanish American war, fighting erupted between U.S. forces and the First Philippine Republic. Veteran members of the Katipunan association led various Philippine groups in their opposition to the U.S., but the strength of Katipunan opposition was no match for the U.S. military.

<sup>ii</sup> The Empire of Japan was already at war with the Republic of China when World War II broke out in 1939, with Japanese imperialist efforts seeking to expand its military and political influence in the region in order to secure access to raw materials and other economic resources. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Sino-Japanese merged with the events of the second world war and became known, more broadly, as the Pacific War. Even after Japan's surrender at the end of World War II, Japan continued to occupy portions of Chinese territory.