Scholars of the Vietnam War have noted its dual nature as both a civil war (Democratic Republic of Vietnam versus Republic of Vietnam, communism versus anticommunism) and a war of imperial aggression (the United States versus Hà Nội). Less analyzed, however, is the transpacific scope of the conflict. Simeon Man’s *Soldiering through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* contributes to this gap in the literature, examining how the Vietnam War resonated in South Korea, the Philippines, Hawai’i, and Okinawa. The book situates the Vietnam War within a longer historical arc of the post–World War II age of decolonization, demonstrating how the United States recruited Asian allies to spread capitalism and liberal democracy in the Asian Pacific following the defeat of Japanese imperialism and the retreat of European colonialism. Although US politicians rallied behind the decolonizing cry of “Asia for Asians,” in practice they distinguished between “bad” and “good” Asians: those who embraced communism and/or allied with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and those who spread and defended American ideals. The United States recruited the latter in order to win over the former via humanitarian aid, counterinsurgency, and war.

Man’s book is structured around two key terms, both highlighted in the book’s title: “soldiering” and the “decolonizing Pacific.” Man defines “soldiering” as a form of militarized labor, encompassing not only literal soldiers who fought in war, but also “free Asians” such as Filipinos who did...
the affective and rhetorical labor of promoting American-style democracy to the Vietnamese during the 1950s and 1960s (10). By focusing on the incorporation of Asian and Asian American soldiers and military workers into the US imperial project, Man highlights the ways in which such a politics of racial inclusion went hand in hand with increased militarization of the transpacific following World War II. The “decolonizing Pacific,” in turn, is both a spatial and temporal term, marking “the historical conjuncture when anticolonial movements in the United States, Asia, and the Pacific became intertwined with the U.S. militarization drive to secure the global capitalist economy” (8). The United States sought to narrowly define decolonization as the overthrow of European and Japanese influence. Some decolonial movements across the transpacific, however, critiqued US imperialism, militarism, and settler colonialism as well in their struggles for national liberation. Grounded in archival research primarily from the US National Archives as well as interviews with Asian American soldiers, Soldiering through Empire offers a detailed history of how the rise of US empire in the Asian Pacific not only extended pre-1945 logics of military violence into the postwar era, but also “brought formerly colonized peoples into proximity, spurring fleeting alliances that exposed—if only briefly—the limits of these state endeavors and the horizons of their unfinished struggles for democracy” (185).

The United States ascended as a global superpower during the post–World War II age of decolonization by dividing the world into a geography of binary oppositions: socialism versus liberal democracy, communism versus capitalism, “bad” Asians versus “good” ones. In order to counter this imperialist logic, Soldiering through Empire proceeds via a different mode of argumentation, bridging binaries, charting connections, and nuancing seeming contradictions. To this end, the book enacts three main interventions: it identifies historical continuities between the pre- and post-1945 world order; unpacks the confluence of decolonization, empire, and war during this period; and spans the fields of both Asian and Asian American studies. What follows is an exposition of these interventions.

In contrast to traditional historical narratives that periodize the end of World War II, or 1945, as a moment of historical rupture in American history, Soldiering through Empire traces continuities between the colonial
past and the so-called postwar era of decolonization, between the labor of soldiering in the Japanese and US imperial armies during World War II and the “recalibration” of such labor during the US empire-building efforts post 1945 (12). In chapter 2, “Colonial Intimacies and Counterinsurgency: The Philippines, South Vietnam, and the United States,” for example, Man argues that the US war in Vietnam cannot be separated from the US colonial project in the Philippines, which officially lasted from 1898 to 1946 yet extended into the post-war era via recalibrated logics of neocolonialism and nation-state building. The chapter tells the story of two CIA-backed counterinsurgency projects: Operation Brotherhood and the Freedom Company. Operation Brotherhood sent Filipino doctors and nurses to Sài Gòn to aid the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees migrating from the communist north to the anticomunist south after Vietnam’s partition along the seventeenth parallel in 1954; Freedom Company mobilized retired Filipino army officers to provide social services to Vietnamese veterans. Both projects sought to mobilize humanitarian aid in order to promote American-style democracy, embodied by the soldiering Filipinos, to the decolonizing Vietnamese. Likewise, chapter 3, “Race War in Paradise: Hawai’i’s Vietnam War,” situates the US Army’s 1960s construction of a “Vietnamese village” at Schofield Barracks, an expansive army complex on O’ahu, within a much longer history of colonial violence against Kanaka Maoli sovereignty, which began in the early nineteenth century and extended through US annexation of Hawai’i in 1898 and the conferral of statehood in 1959. During Exercise Black Night, an elaborate war game that sought to replicate Southeast Asia in the jungles of Hawai’i, dark-skinned native Hawaiian soldiers were instructed to impersonate Vietnamese villagers, marking the uncanny slippage between America’s minoritized citizens and enemy “gooks.” In sum, Man invites readers to identify the multiple afterlives of nineteenth-century colonialism in Asia that lingered in the so-called post-1945 age of decolonization.

Soldiering through Empire also deconstructs the seeming contradiction between empire and decolonization. Man argues, counterintuitively yet brilliantly, that “decolonization was not antithetical to the spread of U.S. global power but intrinsic to it” (8). In other words, the United States did not lie when it said that it supported decolonization in Asia and the Pacific
Islands during the period after World War II, insofar as these nations decolonized—that is, overthrew the foreign influence of European colonization and Japanese imperialism—in a way that modeled American-styled democracy and ensured incorporation into the capitalist world system. Any other vision of decolonization—such as Kanaka Maoli sovereignty in Hawai‘i or communism in North Korea and North Vietnam—was subject to intervention and war. Chapter 1, “Securing Asia for Asians: Making the U.S. Transnational Security State,” details the US buildup of armed forces in South Korea and other allied Asian nations after World War II. During the 1950s, the United States invited an estimated 141,250 foreign nationals from South Korea, South Vietnam, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other decolonizing nations to train at US military bases in preparation to fight against communist revolutions on their home fronts. Such soldiers were interpolated as both “colonial mercenaries” to do “the gritty work of the U.S. military,” as well as “free Asians” to spread the gospel of American-style democracy to the rest of decolonizing Asia (19). Chapter 4, “Working the Subempire: Philippine and South Korean Military Labor in Vietnam,” follows this anticomunist project through to the 1960s, when nearly 340,000 South Korean soldiers and marines and 2,000 Filipino army medics and engineers were recruited to contribute to the American War in Vietnam. South Korean President Park Chung-hee and Philippine Presidents Diosdado Macapagal and Ferdinand Marcos understood soldiering as a means of economic development and industrialization for their newly decolonized nations, via the securing of US military aid, contracts, and wages. Economic growth for Asian allied nations, therefore, was intimately tied to American imperialism in Vietnam and the violent repression of communist revolution in Asia.

Lastly, Soldiering through Empire bridges the fields of Asian and Asian American studies. As Asian American studies has become more transnational, and Asian studies has moved to tackle questions of race, empire, and power, the connections between ethnic studies and area studies have slowly increased. Situated at the intersection of these fields, chapter 5, “Fighting ‘Gooks’: Asian Americans and the Vietnam War,” details the experiences of Asian American soldiers in Vietnam and their participation in antiwar protests once they returned home. It highlights the transpacific
implications of “racial liberalism,” defined as “a vision of government in which racial minorities would bear the rights of citizenship free from discrimination and extralegal violence” (2). Many Asian Americans joined the military to escape poverty or prison and pursue the promise of liberal inclusion, but they were confronted by the “war’s systemic racial violence,” which racialized not only Asians but also Asian Americans as “gooks” and perpetual foreigners (138). As a result, many Asian American GIs “began to link the violence in Vietnam to the violence in their own communities, seeing them as parts of a global race war against colonized peoples” (138).

Chapter 6, “A World Becoming: The GI Movement and the Decolonizing Pacific,” extends the geographical scope to the antiwar movement, charting an “emergent internationalism” that was based on “shared experiences of race and empire” (164). GI organizers, communist workers, and antiwar protestors throughout the decolonizing Pacific articulated political connections between the reversion of Okinawa to Japan, the continuation of martial law in the Philippines, and President Nixon’s Vietnamization policy in Southeast Asia.

Soldiering through Empire contributes to scholarship on transpacific history, the Vietnam War, and US militarism. It reframes our understanding of the post–World War II era, extends literature on racial liberalism (theorized by scholars such as Jodi Melamed and Lisa Lowe), and contributes to a growing body of work identifying the transpacific contours of the Vietnam War (such as my own, which charts how the war influenced settler militarism on Guam and inspired the Palestinian Liberation Organization in West Asia). In sum, Soldiering through Empire is an important book for our times. Not only does it shed light on the soldiering of Asian and Asian American subjects in the postwar period, otherwise a “mere footnote in our understanding of the second half of the twentieth century” (185); it also provides historical context for our militarized present. To quote Man: “Since World War II, the United States has been at war continuously” (8). In the wake of the decolonizing Pacific, the United States has fostered counterrevolutions in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, and deployed American troops to Afghanistan and Iraq, spreading its imperial influence via the rhetoric of racial liberalism. But racial liberalism “has obscured the human toll of militarism—even deemed it acceptable—by
equating military might with development, modernization, humanitarianism, and the free market; and it is on these terms that we must reckon with the ongoing effects and legacies of colonialism” (191). Man urges readers not to despair but rather to draw inspiration from decolonization struggles that persisted even after the Vietnam War: people’s democratic movements in South Korea and the Philippines that overthrew longstanding dictatorships in the 1980s, and ongoing movements for demilitarization and Indigenous sovereignty in Hawai’i, Okinawa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the Marshall Islands, among others. Indeed, “a decolonizing Pacific is ever on the horizon” (191). Decolonial critiques of US militarism are necessary now more than ever.

_Evyn Lê Espiritu Gandhi, University of California, Los Angeles_