

Short Response to Comments from Kitagawa Otsuru Chieko

Jeremi SURI

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

I want to thank Dr. Kitagawa Otsuru Chieko for her spirited, provocative, and thoughtful comments. She correctly points to the challenges of writing transnational and global histories, and the multiplicity of viewpoints surrounding major developments, especially war, occupation, and reconstruction. Her comments also correctly challenge some of the simple and ahistorical assumptions about American exceptionalism, American democracy, and American policy-making in general. As I have written elsewhere, and as the other excellent papers affirm, scholars gain many valuable insights from the comparative study of empires and societies. I am all for transnational comparison.

The paper that I have submitted is drawn from my new book on the history of American nation-building, to be published this September 2011. The point of my paper, and the book as a whole, is NOT to deny global and transnational perspectives on American foreign policy. Quite the contrary, the book is all about the interaction between ideas and interests, in contexts of war, devastation, and reconstruction--from 18th century North America to the post-Civil War confederacy to the Philippines, Germany, Japan, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

I want to be clear about one thing. My paper and my new book do NOT argue for American benevolence or American "success," whatever that means. Nor do my paper and my book claim Americans have "spread democracy." In fact, I am quite intentional in excluding democracy as a core part of American foreign policy. I do NOT think Americans have placed democracy at the top of their foreign policy priorities.

Sovereignty, representativeness, and governance are very different from democracy. My argument is that Americans have consistently struggled--with very mixed results--to avoid what they define as "empire" and what they fear as "anarchy." Instead, they have pursued something on the model of Madisonian federalism--a "society of states" where territorially discrete units of people govern themselves, based on some claim to representation. The American ambition is to create self-governing structures that operate in ways compatible to American

interests, and, Americans hope, the interests of local peoples as well (the latter consideration is usually a distant second from American self-interest.) This explains, I argue, why Americans are constantly trying to build strong states in former imperial territories. This is why Americans cannot accept the natural illegibility of boundaries, but instead gravitate toward what James Scott calls the “high modernism” of clear population demarcations according to territorial lines.

There are, of course, limitations to my argument. It does not account adequately for the nation-building efforts of other societies, and their impact on American thinking. Dr. Kitagawa Otsuru Chieko makes that point very well. My argument, in the paper for this conference, leaves too little room for the differences among historical cases and their consequences. The book is more attentive, I hope, to comparative case differences.

I will close, however, with a strong affirmation that studies of international nation-building by the United States in the *longue durée* are the bread and butter of transnational/global study. If we simply multiply the number of voices and perspectives we hear more sound with little understanding of rhythm and melody. If we focus on issues of race and gender--as valuable as they are--we hear only one part of the music, distorting many of the other powerful and perhaps most moving chords. Transnational and global study, from my perspective, involves an effort to understand patterns of thinking and action that both show stubborn coherence across space and time, but also inflect in very different ways depending on context.

American nation-building efforts fit this transnational and global framework. They are crucial to it. They are not all-encompassing, but you cannot understand American foreign policy without some serious attention to what I call the American nation-building creed. It is a transnational phenomenon that merits global study in Germany, in Japan, in Afghanistan, and even in the American South.

Thank you for including my paper and my comments in your conference. I deeply regret that I cannot join you in Japan at this time to learn from everyone in attendance. I hope to see you all soon.