**Book Review**


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Recent developments in the US political landscape have no doubt thrown into sharp relief the intimate relationship between US immigration policy, war, and geopolitics. It is indeed hardly a coincidence that the Trump administration’s proposed travel ban, in all of its incarnations, targets countries that have been key theaters in the now 16-year-old global “war on terror.” As President Trump remarked during the signing of the first ban via executive order, “We don’t want them here. [...] We want to ensure that we are not admitting into our country the very threats our soldiers are fighting overseas.” With these words, Trump renders synonymous the inhabitants of the said banned countries with the amorphous “threat” that the United States is fighting abroad. Such trends in US politics, whether increasingly restrictive immigration policies, sharp cuts to US foreign humanitarian and development assistance, or other iterations of the current administration’s declared “America first” policy, portend, for many, a marked departure from a long-standing American commitment to care for the world’s vulnerable and dispossessed. Yet, as Stephen Porter demonstrates in his new book, *Benevolent Empire*, recent developments may not signal so radical a departure from past trends as some might believe. In this incisive account of American political-refugee aid initiatives during the “short American century” (World War I through the Cold War), Porter demonstrates how it is that US geopolitical interests, alongside domestic racial and economic anxieties, have long shaped the scope and tenor of American refugee and immigration policies. Yet at the same time, and crucial to Porter’s argument, is his claim that what makes the United States a distinctive global hegemon is its benevolent impulse to care for the world’s vulnerable, needy, and dispossessed — that is, its exceptional, humanitarian intent. Even if the United States fell short of this idealized vision, Porter argues, the various efforts waged by a broad assemblage of American civilian actors, philanthropies, and institutions to aid the world’s vulnerable and disenfranchised were crucial to the ascendance and maintenance of the United States as a global hegemon. For Porter, the figure of the refugee has played a central role in catapulting the United States to a preeminent position on the world stage.

*Benevolent Empire* makes key contributions to a growing body of scholarship on the “United States in the world” and across the fields of immigrant and refugee studies, humanitarianism and human rights, and US foreign policy through its illumination of a largely understudied dimension of US globalism — namely, the role that international relief and refugee initiatives have come to play in the making of a deterritorialized American empire. Porter situates his study in the “short American century,” during which time the United States became a major world power while simultaneously retooling the way that social life was organized at home (1–2). The first half of the book examines US aid and relief initiatives abroad with a focus on philanthropic and relief programs in war-torn Europe. Starting with “America’s humanitarian awakening” at the dawn of WWI and working through the 12-year period of Nazi rule, Porter details how American citizens, private welfare, and aid organizations exceeded governmental efforts at this time to spearhead wide-scale war relief efforts to victims of war and repression in war-torn Europe, as well as
collaborative efforts on the part of a small circle of government officials and private welfare and immigrant aid personnel to resettle persecuted European Jews in the United States. It was during this period, Porter argues, that a nascent refugee resettlement regime took shape as new public–private partnerships emerged between federal officials and private agencies to facilitate the inflow of refugees, while ensuring that refugees did not land on public welfare rolls. Porter’s attention to the associative governing relationships forged between state and nonstate representatives and institutions during this period is undoubtedly a key strength of this book.

Then shifting to the domestic front, Porter turns to postwar refugee admissions and resettlement programs in the United States and explores how America’s professed humanitarian and human rights rationales abroad came into conflict with racial and economic anxiety at home. Highlighting dynamics of the Displaced Persons Program from 1948 through 1952 (the DP Program), Porter explores how Hungarian political refugees, initially welcomed as “freedom fighters” following the failed 1956 anti-Soviet uprising, soon found themselves in dire economic circumstances, leaving many desiring to return home. In a similar vein, Latvian DPs, many of whom were resettled in the deep South as sharecroppers, found themselves shackled by debt to their American sponsors. While US officials and immigration advocates believed that refugee resettlement would present the United States as the “postwar world’s benevolent, rights-protection superpower,” such claims were arguably undermined as the DP Program started, in Porter’s words, “to look more like a massive, and at times, highly exploitative international employment service than the humanitarian-based endeavor that they originally envisioned” (103). Further exploring the evolving relationship between the US refugee regime and wartime dynamics, the book’s final chapters track the increasingly central role the federal government came to play in refugee resettlement schemes as the first waves of non-Europeans arrived to the United States from key Cold War theaters — Cuba and later Vietnam. In chronicling this history, Porter demonstrates how US refugee admissions policies, despite their seemingly “humanitarian” intent, were always necessarily tempered by domestic economic crises and racial anxieties and, increasingly throughout the mid-twentieth century, by Cold War dynamics. Rarely, with the exception of the later waves of Indochinese in the 1970s, were individuals seeking asylum from persecution by American allies afforded entry as refugees.

Porter’s incisive history of the role of US refugee and resettlement initiatives in the making of the United States as a global hegemon offers key contributions to studies of American empire, as well as to scholarship on international migration and refugees more broadly, in no small part, because Porter demonstrates how the United States has sought to justify its exertions of global power and international authority. The figure of the refugee — and correspondingly, the construction of United States as its savior — Porter shows, has been central to this process. In so doing, he undoubtedly offers key contributions to how we think about the emergence of the United States as a distinctive kind of global hegemon. Yet here, one could argue, Porter perhaps takes too seriously the exceptional discourses the United States wields about itself. For sure, humanitarianism — and the assertion of humanitarian intent — has long been deployed by colonial and imperial powers to justify their rule. Too often underplayed throughout this text, however, are the ways in which US humanitarian and refugee policies were (and are) deeply connected to US warfare, exploitation, and global ambition. Even as Porter concedes that those refugees admitted to the United States, aside from later waves of Indochinese, were almost always fleeing persecution by US rivals and rarely allies, these insights remain bracketed in
the overall narrative. The United States remains, in this narrative, a predominately benevolent, even if, at times schizophrenic, empire. In a similar vein, largely omitted from view is the grotesque violence the United States has visited on besieged populations across the Global South. Instead, throughout the book, the United States enters the stage almost exclusively as a savior or force motivated by benevolent intent. The United States responds to wars; it does not wage them. Thus, we are left asking, what kind of narrative about the United States might have emerged if the story had not been refracted through various humanitarian actors, immigration personnel, and relief agencies that were themselves part and parcel of an emerging empire?

Despite this arguable shortcoming, Porter’s book presents key contributions to the fields of international migration and refugee studies. Moreover, it presents some potential avenues for how to challenge the harrowing developments taking shape in contemporary US immigration and refugee policy. Crucially, Porter demonstrates how various associative governing relationships forged between state and nonstate agencies and institutions across the mid- to late twentieth century gave rise to the current US immigration and refugee regime. In so doing, he offers a window of hope for how contemporary aid, immigration, and refugee advocates might exercise some influence over the hardening lines of immigration and refugee policies today. As the waves of those displaced throughout the Middle East and Africa in the twenty-first century eclipse the great demographic dislocations of the mid-twentieth century, Porter’s insights into the developments of decades past present potential pathways for how a truly humane and humanitarian policy in relation to the world’s dispossessed might be forged.