

[H-Diplo Article Review 939 on Wu. "It's Time to Center War in U.S. Immigration History."](#)

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Ellen D. Wu. "It's Time to Center War in U.S. Immigration History." *Modern American History* 2:2 (2019): 215-235.

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Review by David Kieran, Washington & Jefferson College

Every so often, an article or monograph appears that makes an argument so clearly and directly, and one of such significance, that it becomes a touchstone for a subsequent generation of scholarship. Amy Kaplan's 1993 essay "Left Alone With America," for example, highlighted "the absence of culture from the history of U.S. imperialism, the absence of empire from the study of American culture, and the absence of the United States from the from the postcolonial study of imperialism" and, in doing so, for a more than a quarter century generated research questions that have motivated scholars who examine the United States' global engagements.^[1] More recently, Mary Dudziak's assessment that the United States is mired in perpetual war has helped shift the study of military history and U.S. foreign relations.^[2] Certainly there are other examples of works that make an argument so important that they become the accepted wisdom of a scholarly subfield and influence subsequent work in the field. Ellen D. Wu's article "It's Time to Center War in U.S. Immigration History" falls into this category. Highlighting the ways that migration has been shaped by U.S. wars and militarism as well as how efforts to control migration are themselves increasingly militarized, it makes an argument that is of critical import for scholars of immigration and those who study war and society in U.S. culture. It is mandatory reading on the topic that should be widely circulated and taught.

Wu makes an eloquent, rigorously researched, and unimpeachable case for the article's titular claim. The historiography of U.S. immigration, she argues, has focused too much on landmark pieces of legislation such as the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act and the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. This emphasis "obscures how much U.S. empire, among other empires, has been an important engine in cross-border transit" and that a "valorize[ation] of voluntary, sanctioned entry" hides other sorts of migration and many migrants, including "refugees, asylum seekers, colonial subjects, military spouses, adoptees, students, detainees, deportees, and others who do not fit neatly into the classic profile" (1-2). To rectify this scholarly shortcoming, she proposes that we must "direct our awareness more squarely to migration's inextricable relationship to war" (2).

The article develops that awareness through two sub-arguments. The first calls on readers to acknowledge that "migrant streams from abroad have functioned both as the consequences and tools

of armed hostility” (3). Wu argues that wars have not only produced millions of refugees but that from the Cold War through the Vietnam era and into the twenty-first century wars and the contemporary crisis in Syria, U.S. policymakers’ decisions about admitting them has been shaped by wartime concerns. In each moment, she notes, “Denial, in short, has lurked as the evil twin of acceptance. Both are the consequences and tools of war in modern American history” (5). Wu next turns her attention to the economic migrations that U.S. wars have produced – ranging from the importation of unskilled laborers through the *Bracero* program during the Second World War to post-Cold War allowances for the skilled scientists who had worked for the Nazi regime – and to the ways in which sexual and familial relationships – war brides and war orphans – have produced new migrant populations. Throughout, she maintains a focus on how U.S. foreign policy and national security goals have been drivers of immigration policy, a reality that played out both materially and discursively. Allowing entry in the United States by former Nazis who were experts on rocketry was an imperative amid technological competition with the Soviet Union, she explains, but so too was the adoption of the orphaned children of Korean women and U.S. servicemen, which “can be explained as acts of Christian faith yoked to Cold War-inflected patriotism” (9). She also discusses how Cold War imperatives to solidify the militaries of U.S. allies led to the migration of officers, medical providers, and others to the U.S. for training and education (10), while the 1965 immigration act’s privileging of skilled workers had Cold War implications. Through her rigorous research, almost all of which is aggregated from secondary literature, Wu compellingly illustrates how almost every facet of post-war migration was shaped by the wars that the United States had fought or was preparing to fight.

The article’s second section is an equally convincing account of how efforts to control migration have been militarized. While some of what Wu covers—the militarization of the border patrol, the use of the National Guard to patrol the Southern borderlands, and the Coast Guard’s role in policing the Caribbean—will be familiar to many readers, this section nonetheless impressively highlights the extent to which almost every aspect of “migration management” in the United States has been militarized (13). Particularly insightful are her contentions that the militarization of the “War on Drugs” has resulted not only in increased attention to staunching the flow of narcotics across the Southern border but has also resulted in the arrest of many undocumented migrants and her discussion of how anxieties regarding migrants have led to greater surveillance across and within the U.S. by increasingly militarized domestic police agencies. “For the besieged,” she perceptively writes, “the border is already everywhere, and it keeps growing (17).

Wu concludes with an assessment of how the administration of President Donald Trump has accelerated the trends that she describes throughout while also “embolden[ing] nativists and white supremacists” (18). “Predictably,” she writes, “Trump has not hesitated to call on the military to back his demonization of migrants” (19). In this context, both the current migrations from Central America that are the product of longer histories of U.S. imperialism, and Trump’s September 2019 decision to fund the construction of his proposed border wall by diverting funds from the U.S. military, fit squarely within the larger trajectories that Wu has described, and her discussion provides necessary context for understanding that decision and the debates surrounding it.

Throughout, Wu is detailed and convincing, and her argument relies on formidable research that is expertly synthesized. As comprehensive as it is, however, there are some issues that are surprisingly omitted. In emphasizing the degree to which U.S. wars have prompted migration to the United States, she does not discuss how U.S. foreign policy has propelled migration to other countries, nor

how those migrations have shaped relations between the U.S. and other nations. More importantly, a couple of significant contemporary examples of military migration are absent. First, Wu does not mention recent debates that have ensued as the Trump administration has curtailed visas for Iraqis and Afghans who served as translators or in other support roles for U.S. troops during the recent wars.^[3] Similarly, while she notes that “war mobilization has long served as a springboard to national inclusion for migrants,” Wu does not mention the debates that have attended the posthumous awarding of citizenship to migrant U.S. servicemembers killed in Iraq (20). Work on this topic by scholars like Hector Amaya might have offered a useful complication to her claim that military service has been a “time-honored vehicle for acceptance” (20).^[4]

That an article that does so much overlooks some topics is understandable, of course, especially given the length limitations of journal articles. In that sense, these small critiques hardly detract from Wu’s achievement. This article is a clear, complete assessment of the centrality of American wars to the nation’s migration history. It holds exceptional promise for classroom use at the advanced undergraduate and graduate levels, as it illustrates both how a fresh argument can be produced through broad reading in secondary literature and points out a phenomenon that is at once pervasive and seemingly obscured until scholarly attention is directed towards it. In short, it is a piece of scholarship that anyone writing on migration, militarism, and U.S. foreign policy must read, for it will inspire deeper consideration of the centrality of war to U.S. culture and of migration to U.S. militarism. In writing it, Ellen D. Wu has opened the possibility for a new wave of scholarship in the fields of migration studies and war and society, and it will be exciting to follow this landmark essay’s influence.

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Notes

[1] Amy Kaplan, “Left Alone With America,” in Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (eds.), *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 11.

[2] Mary Dudziak, *Wartime: An Idea, It’s History, and It’s Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[3] Quil Lawrence, “Trump Administration Has Drastically Dropped Visas For Afghan And Iraqi Interpreters,” National Public Radio, 1 May 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/01/718927688/no-visas-for-afghan-and-iraqi-interpreters>.

[4] See, for example, Hector Amaya, “Dying American or the Ontological Violence of Citizenship: Latinos in Iraq,” *Latino Studies* 5:1 (2007), 3-24.