

BASE NATION

How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World

David Vine, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2015, 432 pages

AMERICA INVADES

How We've Invaded or Been Militarily Involved with Almost Every Country on Earth

Christopher Kelly and Stuart Laycock, Book Publishers Network, Bothel, Washington, 2014, 396 pages

The United States is a military behemoth—and has been for decades. The scale of American military actions is nicely captured by *America Invades: How We've Invaded or Been Militarily Involved with Almost Every Country on Earth*, by Christopher Kelly and Stuart Laycock; and *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World*, by David Vine. These books catalog the tremendous influence the U.S. military has had across the world. The United States has used kinetic force in almost half of the nations on Earth

and has been militarily involved with virtually all of the rest. As part of this influence, our vast network of military bases has enabled millions of servicemen to live abroad—a uniquely American way of spreading American culture and influence.

Vine, Kelly, and Laycock ask the questions: Is American military involvement with the world beneficial? If so, to whom? If not, who suffers? In any case—why, and what should we do? Kelly and Laycock generally emphasize the good that the military has done over the years, pointing anecdotally to successes

and inspiring stories. By contrast, Vine systematically catalogues the damage that U.S. bases, and by extension military policy, have done to the world and argues that it would better from moral, security, and economic standpoints to end overseas basing.

America Invades gives the reader a whirlwind tour of American military exploits across the world. There's even a handy list that indicates whether or not the United States has invaded a country or not. Every country from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe gets a few pages summarizing the sometimes bizarre ways American servicemen and adventurers have influenced them. These range from independent invasions of Nicaragua and Honduras in the 1850s by adventurer William Walker, to George Patton's protection of Austria's famous Lipizzaner stallions as "wards of the U.S. Army." The style is informal, even chummy, and the book abounds with amusing stories. This makes it highly readable and relaxing, but it also has some drawbacks. For example, Finland is the victim of several egregious fish puns.

While the book is organized simply—alphabetically by country—several themes emerge. The first is the long reach of the U.S. Navy. Many African countries' first contact with the U.S. military was during counterslavery actions in the 1850s and later. Another theme is the United States' persistent interference in Latin American countries. It seems like the U.S. Marines have been sent into Central America every couple of months. Finally, *America Invades* drives home the explosion of American influence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Virtually every country in the world has been invaded, or otherwise influenced militarily, by the United

States during World War II, the Cold War, and the Global War on Terrorism.

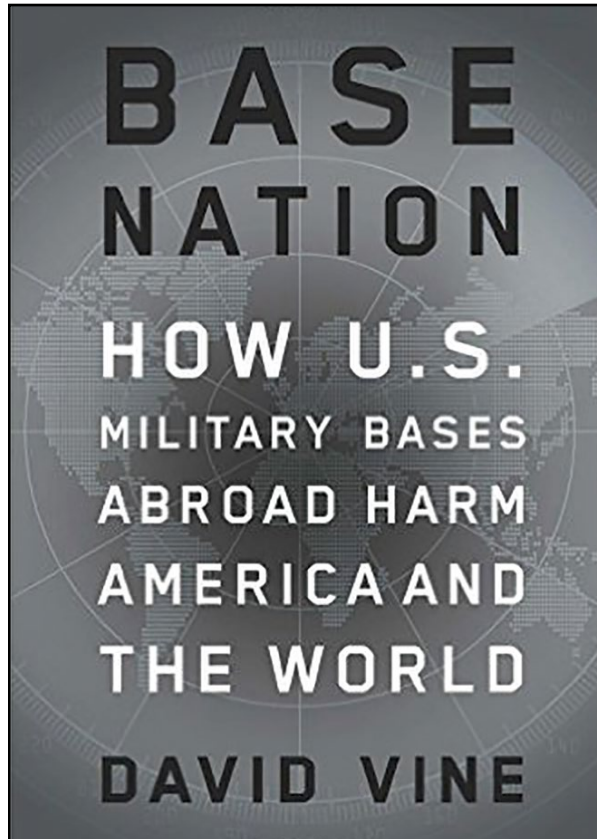
Several critiques I have with *America Invades* are inevitable in a work of popular history and reference. For example, two pages is simply not enough to cover a country like Ireland, and the book suffers from excessive hand waving and oversimplification. I think that Kelly and Laycock do a major disservice by not pro-

viding sources or a guide for further reading. They demonstrate a remarkable knowledge of the minutia of American military history—their recommendations for reading would presumably be excellent. I also quibble with some of their definitions. They list Poland as having been invaded by the United States, but the only real kinetic operations in Poland were bombing raids during World War II.

The main problem is a lack of an explicit argument. Kelly and Laycock have an impressive variety of anecdotes and stories, but they don't really have a point to it all other than that we should

support the troops and that American servicemen have built a "solid foundation of bravery, daring, and sacrifice" in our actions overseas. That is true, but it doesn't really tell us much about trends in American action overseas or draw actionable conclusions from our history.

Vine's *Base Nation* has a similarly impressive breadth—Vine examines the surprisingly large network of more than eight hundred U.S. military bases worldwide. While *America Invades* pointedly avoids analyzing U.S. military actions, Vine forcefully argues that our network of overseas bases has wasted vast sums of money, harmed the economies of the United States and our allies, resulted in corruption, propped up dictators, encouraged a



poisonous military culture of sexual assault, violated environmental and humanitarian standards, and ultimately made the world less secure. I admit to being skeptical as I started this book—I grew up on Robinson Barracks in Stuttgart, Germany, and still benefit from the friendships and cross-cultural interactions that I had there. I suspect many of *Military Review's* readers have had similar positive experiences thanks to service abroad. However, Vine's exhaustive and well-reasoned research brings more than enough cold facts to challenge the warmest anecdotal experiences.

The United States has bases ranging from huge enduring communities to tiny lily pads across the world. We generally think that these help to prevent Russia, North Korea, China, or Iran from starting trouble. The problem is that this is ultimately a counterfactual argument, one that requires stronger proof. While they may indeed serve a deterrent function, military bases also demonstrably escalate military tension in a region. To illustrate, Vine asks, what would happen if North Korea or China opened up a base in Mexico? We know what happened when the USSR opened a base in Cuba—we almost started a nuclear war in response. Perhaps the Russians, North Koreans, Chinese, and Iranians feel similarly when we station troops next door. At least some of their rhetoric and military spending is to counter our military dominance brazenly demonstrated by our bases next door.

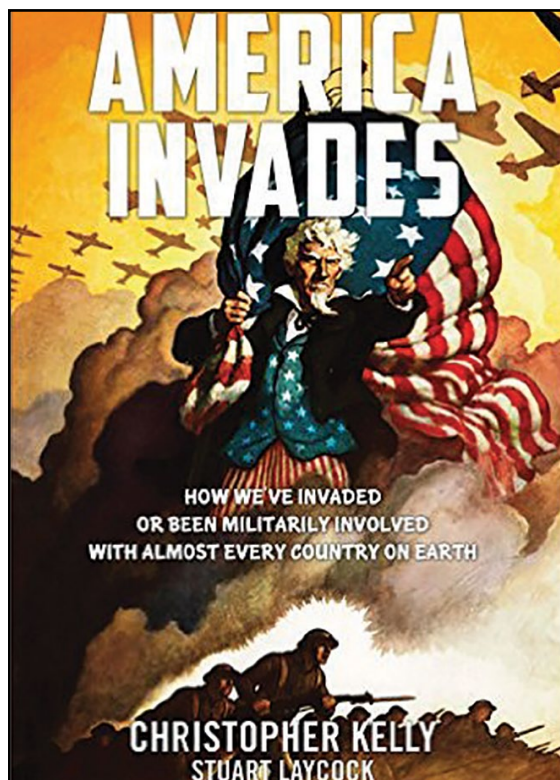
While security is the main justification for overseas bases, there are many others, including economic benefits to the host country, creating model "little Americas," and spreading American values. Sadly, Vine shows that our bases abroad have been less beneficial than we would like to think. The U.S. military has a distorting and

corruptive effect on local economies. In many cases, construction has also directly supported criminal organizations like the mafia. For example, new bases in Gricignano, Italy, are built on land rented from, and by construction companies owned by, the Camorra mob family. More fundamentally, military bases prevent economic diversification, absorb potentially productive land, and prove far less effective at creating jobs than infrastructure or education spending. Many studies have shown that our bases provide little benefit to host nation economies. Germany experienced no significant effect to its economy during the base drawdown of the 1990s. One closed Army base in Okinawa was turned into a shopping and entertainment complex, drawing a million visitors annually and producing more than two hundred times the revenue than the base did. Base realignment and closure in the United States has had similar effects—closing a base rarely has a negative effect and often

have positive effects on local economies.

Bases are also damaging to the U.S. economy and government efficiency. Servicemembers stationed even in friendly host nations cost, on average, \$20,000–\$40,000 more per person than servicemembers stationed stateside. The overall financial cost of bases is somewhat difficult to track down as Pentagon accounting is notoriously muddled, but Vine demonstrates that in 2012, excluding Iraq and Afghanistan, bases abroad cost more than \$70 billion. This is an obvious burden to U.S. taxpayers, and since these funds are spent abroad, it limits the

economic benefits to the U.S. economy. The main beneficiaries of these funds are contracting companies like KBR, Supreme Group, and Agility Logistics, which have at times been accused of accounting fraud, overbilling, and contract violations. Contract



norms like “cost-plus” have also created an atmosphere of fiscal irresponsibility that has cost taxpayers further billions.

Vine’s most provocative chapters deal with the cultural and moral damage that overseas basing does to Americans and our hosts. Vine lists eighteen instances where indigenous populations were forcibly removed from sites without compensation of any kind in order to make room for a new or expanded U.S. military facilities. Displaced people from Diego Garcia still struggle in poverty thanks to their expulsion in the 1950 and 1960s. Overseas bases create a mindset of imperialism and immunity to local and U.S. law. Vine gives numerous examples of military personnel feeling free to “do what we want here” in Guam, Okinawa, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Panama, Greenland, and Diego Garcia, destroying archeological, historical, environmental, and cultural sites while dismissing the locals.

Most seriously, Vine suggests that overseas bases help to create the poisonous culture of militarized masculinity and sexual assault. Sexual exploitation is rampant around military bases, with thousands of sex workers taken advantage of. Vine argues that this is inescapable when dealing with bases abroad. Servicemembers overseas are in a highly unusual culture dominated by extreme masculinity, where the role of women is “overwhelmingly reduced to one role: sex.” Sexual assaults, both on and off bases, show a

fundamental failing of military culture, one that we are still failing to deal effectively with.

In the introduction, *America Invades* points to the U.S. military as a force for “principled action” with the ability to respond to humanitarian crises around the world, for “if not us, than who will?” I think that is certainly the ideal that soldiers and Americans hope for. However, the United States has not always acted with benign intentions. Worse, even when well intentioned, the military has a long and large impact on the people we interact with. These impacts are often negative.

Ultimately, Americans and American servicemembers need to be more skeptical of our military involvement and basing abroad. *Base Nation* and *America Invades* show that the record of American military involvement abroad has been mixed at best. The memorable and truly heroic interventions like the World Wars are countered by shameful crimes, forced evictions, wasteful spending, and corruption.

America Invades gives a truly staggering catalog of U.S. military involvement across the world, but *Base Nation* goes further and shows that many of our actions are antithetical to our values as well as our interests. America’s role in the world is changing. Understanding our history of overseas involvement and skeptically analyzing our current footprint is the first step to making that change a positive one. ■

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