

The Lifelines of Empire: Logistics as Infrastructural Power in Occupied South Vietnam

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Strikes and sitdowns should not take place in wartime.

—Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, quoted in William Tuohy,
“Unions Call General Strike in S. Vietnam” (1966)

During the last nine months of 1966, the US military occupation of South Vietnam was beset by a series of events that exemplify how the broader war had become a laboratory for combining logistics and imperialism. In April, unrest engulfed the port of Saigon when Vietnamese dockers employed by an American logistics and construction consortium, Raymond Morrison Knudsen–Brown and Root and Jones (RMK-BRJ), struck against exploitative working conditions. RMK-BRJ responded with a campaign of intimidation that culminated in the June firing of 129 women dockers. This action fanned the flames of labor unrest into a longer-term movement that mobilized the Filipinx and South Korean employees of the consortium, as well as other “laboring people” across the Saigon–Gia Dinh region.¹ On December 30, these struggles paralyzed the port, compromising the integrity of the war effort.

These conflicts weighed on military leaders, who were beginning to reflect on the logistical challenges posed by the war. In January 1967 Earle Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, likened the military buildup in Vietnam to “[moving] a major American city some 10,000 miles, [placing] it in a radically new environment, and [expecting] that every aspect of its existence—public and private—would be provided for without delay or confusion.” Wheeler’s point was that logistics functioned as a key “lifeline” of US empire. As such, transpacific supply chains had to be built to withstand the “realities of the Vietnam conflict,” which included, as I observe above, labor unrest.²

These moments emphasize how crucial logistics labor was to the outcome of the Vietnam War. Yet the extent to which the war catalyzed a revolution in imperial logistics remains understudied. Over the course of the war, imperial

forces assembled an infrastructure for managing the transpacific flows of commodities and bodies between the US and South Vietnam. Drawing on prior experiences in Asia, US imperialists recruited a multinational workforce of Vietnamese, South Korean, and Filipinx nationals to labor along transpacific supply chains. I read archival sources to track how supply chain managers enmeshed these logistics workers in regimes of slow death, thereby subjecting them to conditions of “crisis ordinariness” and “truncated” life.³ As the war dragged on, logistics workers struggled to dismantle these sociospatial infrastructures of exploitation, attrition, and control.

I begin by arguing that the Vietnam War produced new conjugations of logistics, racial capitalism, and empire that took on the characteristics of what Laleh Khalili calls infrastructural power.⁴ I then consider how the US empire-state, in wielding logistical power across occupied South Vietnam, exploited two groups of racialized workers: first, the unskilled “local nationals” who were essential to the everyday functioning of supply chains; and second, the skilled South Korean and Filipinx “Third Country Nationals” (TCNs) who carried out more specialized logistics tasks. Over time, these two groups forged frictional relationships not only with each other but also with their American managers. What emerged out of such encounters was a militant politics of resistance, rooted in a dynamic geography of strikes, blockades, and walkouts.

American logisticians responded to these struggles with new forms of infrastructural power that sought to cleanse logistics spaces of agitators while wooing racialized laborers with workplace reforms. The resulting improvements in working conditions, however, were offset by the US military’s determination to reduce labor requirements through a program of supply chain modernization. Logistics laborers resisted their devalorization by struggling for the right to work hyperexploitative twelve-hour shifts. These labor actions had the effect of reproducing transpacific supply chains as spaces of slow death: a process whose afterlives continue to haunt contemporary struggles for a decolonized Pacific.

The Logistics of Empire

Simeon Man recently advanced the term *decolonizing Pacific* to name the post–World War II conjuncture when the US military-industrial complex pacified or co-opted anticolonial movements across the Asia-Pacific as part of a broader campaign to secure the region for capitalist accumulation.⁵ I argue that this imperial project occurred largely through logistics infrastructures. Drawing on Deborah Cowen’s definition of infrastructure as the geographically extensive systems that build, sustain, and order human life, I seek to move

beyond mainstream framings of logistics as the technical problem of managing the movement of commodities and bodies between points A and B. Instead, I situate logistics within a broader force field of imperial practices and relations.⁶

In *Empire's Tracks*, Manu Karuka argues that the late nineteenth-century completion of the first transcontinental railroad in the US “symbolically finalized the industrial infrastructure of a continental empire where none had existed before.”⁷ Karuka historicizes this ceremonial event as but a moment within a longer—and still incomplete—settler project of territorial and economic annexation, steered by a war-industry-finance nexus and fueled by the use of unfree racialized labor. Although this military-capitalist model of “railroad colonialism” was first developed in North America, Karuka suggests that it went on to serve as the blueprint for US imperial interventions overseas.

This was particularly true of the hot wars that the US waged across the decolonizing Pacific, which became crucibles for reworking railroad colonialism into what I call just-in-time imperialism. As the US empire-state superseded Britain and Japan to become the primary imperial hegemon in the region, it confronted the intensifying problem of decolonization, which had not been resolved by the end of the Pacific War. US imperialists advanced a supposedly “less coercive” combination of geopolitical intervention (i.e., basing agreements) and geoeconomic integration (i.e., militarized subcontracting) as a strategy for guiding decolonial forces toward liberal, capitalist futures.⁸ These transpacific geographies of militarized accumulation reshaped the everyday lifeworlds of Asians and Pacific Islanders, who, in turn, played a central role in appropriating, contesting, and deliberating such imperial hegemonies.⁹

The Vietnam War was a key inflection point in this transition from railroad colonialism to just-in-time imperialism. As the archival record shows, the US military worked alongside the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to refine the everyday work of empire building in accordance with an emerging just-in-time perspective that championed lean interventions designed to minimize inventory and waste along imperial supply chains.¹⁰ Throughout history, military leaders from Sun Tzu on have developed the logistical art of circulating soldiers and supplies throughout the spaces of battle. Many of the specific technologies and calculative practices—just-in-time systems, containerization, and the like—that are now synonymous with logistics were first developed by the US military during World War II and then refined over the subsequent Korean conflict.¹¹ But what comes into sharper focus during the Vietnam War is a deep hybridization of military and market methods. As part of this revolution in imperial logistics, the US military-industrial complex stress-tested more just-in-time methods for waging war across transnational space.

These combinations of logistics and empire, however, also enabled new transpacific configurations of racial capitalism. Cedric Robinson once argued that “racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism.”¹² Logistics was no exception. The Middle Passage, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney observe, was one of the first experiments with modern logistics.¹³ Subsequent innovations in the field have further reorganized the geographic dialectic of partition and reconnection that Jodi Melamed describes as the “base algorithm” for racial capitalism.¹⁴ One of the specific consequences of the revolution in imperial logistics was to produce new nodes of racial capitalist anti-relationality. Much has been written on the plantation and its successive permutations—including the prison—as originary sites of a morbid racial capitalism.¹⁵ But if Karuka is correct to assert that war has always been a “central function” and an essential “precondition” of the US settler state, it follows that the military-industrial complex has played an important role in ensuring the reproduction of racial capitalist relations, at home and overseas.¹⁶ From this perspective, modern supply chains deserve further scrutiny for their capacity to reveal the vernacular workings of racial capitalism under conditions of just-in-time imperialism.¹⁷

Here I am in conversation with an interdisciplinary group of scholars who are exposing how the US military-industrial complex has partitioned various groups of racialized laborers—including Asian, diasporic, and Pacific Islander soldiers, as well as unskilled “native” construction and service workers—to reconnect them in terms that further the interests of capital and empire.¹⁸ I extend these discussions by foregrounding logistics as another case study of how racialism has shaped the transpacific entanglements of militarism and capitalism.¹⁹ Logistics during the Vietnam War anchored a multiscale (sub)contracting economy, concerned with laying down the physical and virtual infrastructures necessary for the expanded reproduction of capitalist relations.²⁰ Imperial logisticians working in South Vietnam were confronted by two pressing tasks. The first was constructing an interlocking grid of sea, land, and air transportation infrastructures from scratch. While this was an enormous undertaking, imperial logisticians embraced the challenge. “Where other countries have the much more difficult task of converting old systems to new ones,” one USAID logistician enthused, South Vietnam presented a unique opportunity to build a modern logistics infrastructure “on a solid foundation.”²¹ South Vietnam, in this framing, was a logistics frontier, a “dark continent” to be terraformed by just-in-time imperialism.²²

Imperial logisticians also assumed responsibility for planning and executing flows through these transpacific supply chains. To this end, imperial logisti-

cians recruited Vietnamese, South Korean, and Filipinx nationals to work as dockers, truckers, seamen, and mechanics. In the years since World War II, the US military's infrastructure for managing "closely lived, racialized laboring relations" with Asian workforces had become adept at exploiting their differing technical capabilities.²³ What imperial logisticians deployed to South Vietnam shared with their predecessors, however, was an imaginative geography of Asian labor as docile and malleable. This was a powerful and enduring fiction: one that shaped US attempts to control and exploit logistics labor throughout the war.

These two prongs of the imperial logistics mission brought it within the realm of what Khalili theorizes as infrastructural power, which she locates in the US Army Corps of Engineers' global mandate to "forge and maintain the assemblage of practices, discourses, physical fixtures, laws, and procedures necessary for the government of subjects and citizens, including their economies."²⁴ Building on Khalili's analysis, I reflect on how transpacific supply chains recast longer-standing imperial geographies of racial enclosure into new configurations of infrastructural power and labor resistance. What unfolded in the logistics spaces of the Vietnam War was a succession of embodied encounters between racialized workers, US soldiers, imperial agents, and corporate actors. These fraught geographies of imperial relation-making were defined by violent struggles over the conditions of logistics work. At stake was the imperial conception of racialized labor as motivated by subsistence needs rather than ideological convictions. Labor unrest could then be redefined as the work of individual agitators, rather than a mass response to the hyperexploitative conditions of just-in-time imperialism.

Logisticizing Vietnam

In March 1965, 3,500 American soldiers arrived in Da Nang to defend local forces against insurgent attacks. In just six months, this deployment ballooned into a force of about 125,000.²⁵ Military leaders soon realized that existing logistics infrastructures were ill-equipped to handle a buildup of this scale.²⁶ American supplies were flooding the "transportation pipeline, creating a major bottleneck at [Vietnamese] ports."²⁷ The problem was particularly acute in Saigon, which possessed one of the only deepwater ports capable of discharging military cargo. At one point, upward of one hundred ships were idling off the Cape of St. Jacques, carrying supplies urgently needed by soldiers in the field.²⁸

In response, the US military wielded infrastructural power to make South Vietnam, in its own metaphor, "fluid."²⁹ To begin with, the US military launched a massive construction campaign in partnership with RMK-BRJ,

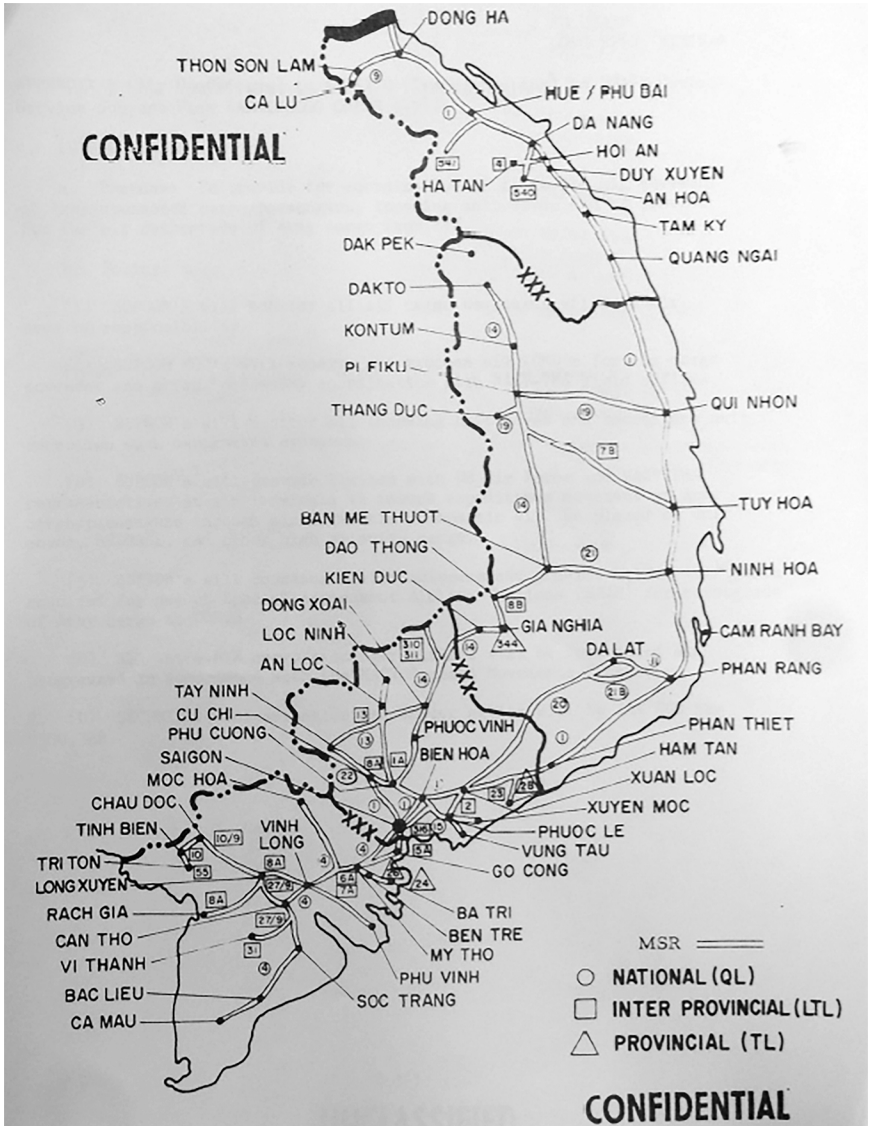
aimed at transforming South Vietnam into a “defensible piece of territory.”³⁰ Flush with military contracts, RMK-BRJ wove together a network of “logistics islands” for transporting bodies and commodities across land, sea, and air.³¹ The first of these complexes was established in Saigon’s hinterland. It eventually encompassed the logistics center at Long Binh Post, the modern airfields at Tan Son Nhut and Bien Hoa, and the new deep-draft ports in Saigon, as well as two miles upstream at Newport.³² Equally “sprawling” logistics complexes were built at Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay, while smaller hubs were established at Qui Nhon, Nha Trang, Phan Rang, Chu Lai, Phu Bai, and Vung Tau.³³ As figure 1 shows, the cumulative effect of these building projects was to reorganize South Vietnam in accordance with the integrative logics of US infrastructural power.

The US military supplemented the work of these “Vietnam Builders” by establishing a “Traffic Management Agency” to direct the efficient and economical transportation of personnel and cargo. The TMA is credited with transitioning the US military away from older “experience-based” methods toward modern “traffic management” principles.³⁴ Its main achievement was to design a computer system capable of forecasting transpacific cargo flows between the US and South Vietnam. Previously, the US military had no way to track which ships were in transit, their cargo, and their estimated arrival time. TMA’s answer was to combine cutting-edge logistics and data management techniques into an Automated Movement Management System. This was the “first transportation command and control system of its kind,” furnishing the US military with the “real time” logistics intelligence it required to “put some real meaning into the philosophy, ‘inventory in motion.’”³⁵ As described by General Joseph Heiser, “inventory in motion” was a logistics approach that aimed to “provide combat troops with just the right amount of supplies at the time which he needs to use or consume it.”³⁶ What “inventory in motion” promised the US military was the possibility of waging war on a just-in-time basis.

Military commodities also circulated alongside the commercial goods that USAID was distributing across South Vietnam under the “Commodity Import Program.” Established in 1954 to meet the import needs of the Vietnamese economy, the program instead exacerbated port congestion.³⁷ Concerned that USAID “had no business getting deeper into port operations,” the US military became increasingly involved in civilian logistics management. What resulted was a “military advisor–port authority–USAID” triumvirate obsessed with

Figure 1.

Main supply routes. The United States Army Vietnam, “Combat Service Support Plan,” A1 205, box 6, RG 472, NA, C-2-A-1.



developing the “total” logistics infrastructures necessary for nurturing capitalist modes of accumulation, consumption, and production.³⁸

Although this triumvirate wielded infrastructural power to smooth South Vietnam into a space of just-in-time flows, this was not a coherent process. Charmaine Chua draws attention to the “frictions that emerge between the imagination of logistics, and its implementation, when fantasies of flow are brought into contact with their concrete materialities and social relations.”³⁹ Such was the case with the US occupation, which lacked the in-house personnel necessary to carry out the humdrum work of in-country distribution. It instead outsourced this crucial responsibility to racialized workers recruited from all over the decolonizing Pacific. This workforce became a key source of logistical friction.

This regional mobilization of Asian logistics labor reflects the US military’s longer-standing commitment to replacing in-house support personnel with “native” workers.⁴⁰ The US military inaugurated this practice during World War II, when it laid down transcolonial infrastructures for extracting unskilled labor from racialized peoples the world over.⁴¹ These infrastructures continued to support US imperial activity in the aftermath of the war. US imperialists colluded with the newly independent Philippine state and regional contractors—such as the Luzon Stevedoring Company, one of the preeminent transportation companies in Southeast Asia—to exploit cheap Filipinx labor for construction projects in Guam.⁴² The US military expanded and formalized these practices during the Korean War. As in Guam, outsourcing was a cost-effective and politically expedient way to overcome the logistical challenges posed by the unforgiving battle spaces of the Korean peninsula. The unprecedented scale of this outsourcing campaign made it easy for the US military to normalize abusive wage structures that consigned Korean workers to conditions approaching starvation.⁴³

The Vietnam War accelerated the merger of military and corporate logistics.⁴⁴ Military managers overcame early logistics deficits through a “massive contract effort” that tapped local and foreign firms with established ties to the US empire-state, including Luzon Stevedoring and Hanjin.⁴⁵ This logistical “buildup” brought together heretofore distinct historical geographies of racialized outsourcing to produce a multinational workforce whose unskilled component was composed primarily of Vietnamese “local nationals.” As it “[took] no training to turn out a stevedore,” logistics recruiters preyed on the refugees fleeing the (para)military violence devastating the countryside.⁴⁶ By contrast, skilled local nationals who had not already been recruited by the South Vietnamese Army were in short supply. Logistics contractors “imported” TCNs to meet specialized needs, setting the stage for an anxious politics of imperial encounter.⁴⁷



Figure 2. A Vietnamese civilian dock worker assists in the unloading of a ship. Eugene McFarland, “K-80390,” 1969, box 642, Record Group 428: General Records of the Department of the Navy, 1947–, National Archives.

Most of these TCNs hailed from South Korea and the Philippines. This geography of labor recruitment was haunted by the geopolitical-economic legacies of US imperialism in the region. In the runup to the Vietnam War, the US empire-state negotiated “More Flags” agreements with South Korea and the Philippines, who promised to send “soldiering” labor to Vietnam in exchange for economic concessions. These included a US commitment to ramping up flows of militarized development assistance, as well as preferential access to lucrative military contracts.⁴⁸ For the South Koreans and Filipinx rendered surplus by a regional turn toward export-oriented industrialization, the Vietnam War provided a pathway to jobs that promised hot meals, new clothes, and higher wages.⁴⁹ Even so, few of these workers traveled to Vietnam for purely selfish reasons. Many were the primary breadwinners of their households, propelled by a “sense of family responsibility” to alleviate crushing poverty back home through remittances of cash and commodities.⁵⁰ The strength of these drivers ensured that by 1969, there were about twelve thousand South Koreans and eight thousand Filipinx working in South Vietnam.⁵¹

Having assembled a multinational workforce, US military managers deployed techniques of “relational racialization” to determine salaries and working conditions.⁵² What emerged was a familiar hierarchy of racialized labor, which ranked white workers above South Koreans and Filipinxs, who were themselves deemed more “advanced” than the Vietnamese. Despite their distinct skill sets, however, Vietnamese, South Korean, and Filipinx workers nonetheless shared an invaluable reputation for loyalty and docility. In the eyes of US empire builders, Vietnamese nationals were willing to “accept any rate of pay in order to work”;⁵³ Filipinxs “would sacrifice,” working overtime for “cigarettes and beer”;⁵⁴ and South Koreans were a “simple-minded people,” obsessed with making money.⁵⁵ Guided by such orientalist imaginative geographies, logistics recruiters assumed that these three groups could be massified into an industrious yet easily manageable workforce.

From the outset, however, logistics workers demonstrated their commitment to a militant politics of struggle that gradually reorganized the geographies of infrastructural power in occupied South Vietnam. This was particularly true in the ports, which had long served local unions such as the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor (CVT) as a key locus of organizing. For the CVT, which was founded in 1952 by the nationalist Tran Quoc Buu as an explicitly noncommunist union, the US military buildup was a blessing and a curse.⁵⁶ While the influx of Vietnamese labor into the ports swelled the CVT’s ranks, the looming flood of TCNs threatened to undermine its influence over logistics spaces. In an attempt to consolidate power, the CVT galvanized its members by painting TCNs as the vanguard of a broader “intrigue” aimed at “spoiling the bread out of [Vietnamese] mouth[s].”⁵⁷ Consequently, when South Koreans and Filipinxs arrived at the ports in 1966 looking for work, they provoked vigorous opposition from Vietnamese dockers.⁵⁸ This opposition shaped the terms of the collective bargaining agreement that the CVT negotiated with the US military in 1967, which guaranteed that cargo handling along the Saigon River could only be performed by Vietnamese dockers.⁵⁹ During negotiations, the employment of South Koreans and Filipinxs remained a “major bone of contention,” with Vietnamese stevedores “[making] plain their absolute refusal to accept TCNs in ports and their intention to call workers out on strike once more if such employment should occur.”⁶⁰ Consequently, ports along the Saigon River became Vietnamese-only spaces.

This agreement, however, failed to extinguish the frictions between local nationals and TCNs, which continued to smolder outside port spaces. On October 25, 1969, Vietnamese drivers working for the PERIL Trucking Company in Gia Dinh struck to protest their replacement by Filipinx “special-

ists.” Subsequent negotiations broke down over PERIL’s insistence “on using 40-percent foreign drivers,” which was a violation of Vietnamese labor laws. After Vietnamese truckers threatened to solicit “the sympathy of other unions of US Agencies’ workers,” PERIL ended the strike with the “good faith” act of firing the Filipinx hires.⁶¹ Imperial managers were more successful at employing TCNs in logistics hubs outside the Saigon–Gia Dinh region. At the behest of USAID, Luzon Stevedoring dispatched Filipinx seamen to Cam Ranh Bay, where they provided twenty-four-hour tug and barge services.⁶² The US military also contracted with Hanjin to assume trucking and stevedoring responsibilities in Qui Nhon.⁶³ According to one report, Hanjin illegally supplemented its TCN workforce with discharged Korean soldiers, further exacerbating a simmering “employment rivalry” with local Vietnamese labor.⁶⁴

Over time, then, imperial hiring practices produced a racialized geography of logistics labor that pitted locals against TCNs, undermining the potential for collective action. But even if these two groups of workers did not always act in solidarity, this did not diminish their respective effectiveness at disrupting logistics flows. A number of explosive labor actions stand out. The first was sparked on November 18, 1967, when South Koreans working at Cam Ranh Bay for Vinnell rioted on the grounds that they had not eaten rice for twenty days.⁶⁵ The riot began in the Vinnell mess hall, where disgusted Koreans forced an American manager to “eat some of their food to show him how bad it was.” The riot then spread to the living quarters of Vinnell’s American employees, where three Korean workers were shot. Enraged, the Koreans beat up American employees, blockaded management offices, and smashed vehicles into buildings.⁶⁶ As the conflict progressed, 150 Koreans based in Nha Trang traveled downriver in a show of solidarity, but they were quickly sent home.⁶⁷

Newport served as another cauldron of logistical friction. Between 1965 and 1967, the US military transformed Newport from a small dock into a modern deepwater terminal.⁶⁸ From the outset, Newport was plagued by labor unrest. The initial point of contention was the US military’s insistence on filling stevedore positions internally.⁶⁹ This proved impossible, and the US military was forced to hire Vietnamese stevedores on a temporary basis. On December 7, 1966, CVT leadership controversially agreed to recognize the US military’s right to exclude Vietnamese labor from Newport in exchange for two weeks of severance pay for the temporary stevedores. The representatives for CVT’s dockworkers—Vo Van Tai and Nguyen Hoang Tan—had been excluded from these negotiations and, unsurprisingly, “objected strenuously” to the agreement. In defiance of CVT leadership, Tai and Tan convinced their supporters to strike for the right to continue working at Newport. Initially, the US military

rejected this demand, arguing that “no employer can afford to be placed in a position requiring the negotiation of the composition of the workforce or of when and where such workforce shall be utilized.”⁷⁰ The US military, however, soon learned that many of the “major unions in Saigon [were] in sympathy with the dockworkers,” raising the “very serious” specter of a general strike animated by “anti-American overtones.”⁷¹ Although the threat was overblown, the US military caved, opening Newport to Vietnamese dockers.⁷²

The US military’s decision exacerbated the problem of labor unrest in Newport. This was because the process of labor recruitment remained contentious, with various unions competing for the right to supply the US military with dockers. Port spaces, as one union manifesto noted in 1967, were a “gold mine” for “opportunistic businessmen,” who exploited dockers through a subcontracting infrastructure known as the “cai” system.⁷³ At the core of this system was a prime contractor that outsourced labor services to a local firm. This subcontractor then assigned portions of the job to different cais, who were tasked with hiring and paying workers. Although the standard gang size was twelve men, the cai usually hired only eight and pocketed the difference in wages. The cais then skimmed more money from workers, either by demanding bribes or by paying them piece rates instead of hourly wages. The precarious conditions of employment meant that workers rarely challenged such exploitative practices. Those who complained were dropped from the gang.⁷⁴

The ubiquity of the cai system meant that logistics spaces in occupied South Vietnam were characterized by a constant struggle for employment opportunities. In 1967, five different unions, each with their own network of cais, were active in the port of Saigon.⁷⁵ These struggles intensified in the late 1960s, when the US military launched an extended drawdown period defined by the offloading of logistics responsibilities onto Vietnamese managers. By the early 1970s, the “ARVNization” of several major ports, including Saigon, was underway, albeit with varying degrees of success.⁷⁶ The US military anticipated that the handover of Saigon’s port would place greater strain on Newport. The conditions were therefore ripe for preexisting tensions to boil over into full-blown labor disputes. This is exemplified by the conflict that erupted in 1971, when the US military tried to manage the “increased utilization” of Newport by outsourcing stevedoring operations to a Vietnamese company, Trieu Tiet.⁷⁷ At the time, there were two unions jockeying for supremacy at Newport: the CVT and the National Confederation of Labor (NCL). Until 1970, the CVT possessed a monopoly over the right to represent dockworkers at Newport.⁷⁸ In July 1970, however, the local Port and Allied Workers Union split from the CVT and aligned itself with the NCL. CVT retaliated on June 7, 1971, when

it formed a new Stevedoring Interchapter out of five hundred dockers who had allegedly been “cheated” by the NCL.⁷⁹ While the CVT championed its new Stevedoring Interchapter as the true representative of Newport dockworkers, Trieu Tiet instead chose to work with the NCL.⁸⁰

Trieu Tiet’s decision jeopardized the continued employment of the defectors, who had been working at Newport since 1968. To prevent contractors from replacing “regular” workers with “outside forces,” Newport dockers had secured the right to be “identified with specific locations irrespective of whom the employer might be.”⁸¹ Trieu Tiet’s affiliation with the NCL threatened such protective practices. In response, the CVT sent letters to the US military alleging that Trieu Tiet had been “cheating the United States Government and engaging in reprehensive and unfair labor practices,” promising to strike if its concerns were not addressed.⁸² Despite these warnings, the US military decided that a potential for labor stoppage existed regardless, and awarded the contract to Trieu Tiet.

As promised, the CVT picketed Newport, setting the stage for inter-union violence. On June 29, 1971, for example, a convoy of ten Trieu Tiet trucks, each containing thirty NCL workers, was trying to cross the picket lines when it was attacked by between two hundred and three hundred CVT members. The ensuing fight lasted about ten minutes, was punctuated by gunfire, and resulted in the injury of four NCL workers.⁸³ Subsequent attempts by Trieu Tiet to cross the picket line were similarly rebuffed. Despite these successes, the force of CVT’s picket was blunted by the US military’s decision to maintain a minimum level of “essential port operations” by using soldiers as scabs.⁸⁴ The rival unions were also concerned by rumors that the Americans were planning on replacing Vietnamese stevedores with Koreans and Filipinx, rekindling long-standing fears of intra-ethnic competition.⁸⁵

As the strike dragged on, the US military became concerned about its impact on the war effort. Port operations fell from 4,500 to 1,000 tons per day, and Newport became congested, forcing the US government to absorb extra port fees.⁸⁶ But more worrisome was the CVT’s attempt to enlist American unions in its “long struggle” for the “liberation of Vietnam dockworkers.” Angered by the American use of soldier labor, Buu sent a telegram to Teddy Gleason, president of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA), requesting his “strong support” in the struggle against Trieu Tiet.⁸⁷ Gleason had already visited Vietnam at the behest of the US military, which had solicited his help in relieving congestion at the ports. Buu tried to galvanize Gleason by framing the strike “as a decisive step” toward implementing his reform program, which called for the containerization of port operations and the establishment of

hiring halls. While it is unclear if Gleason responded, supply chain managers were concerned by the implications of Buu's telegram and drew up plans to prevent its vision of transpacific labor solidarity from coming to pass.⁸⁸

The 1971 Newport labor dispute is crucial for several reasons. First, it illustrates the spatial politics that animated the struggles of logistics workers. In hopes of improving working conditions, Vietnamese unions blockaded logistical chokepoints, disrupting the transpacific circulation of commodities. But the 1971 Newport strike, like the Cam Ranh Bay riot that preceded it, was important in another sense. The US military was quick to dismiss the Newport conflict as "more of a business than a labor dispute."⁸⁹ What the strikes disrupted, however, was the assumption that surplus Asian migrants would serve US imperialists as a docile race of interchangeable and exploitable labor. Instead, friction was generated at those points where a transpacific infrastructure of labor and transit was forced to confront the "resistant specificities of place, people, and locality."⁹⁰

These labor struggles reinforced the racialized infrastructures of extraction that undergirded the logistics mission to occupied South Vietnam. Chastened logistics managers took these strikes seriously as an invitation to refine how infrastructural power was being wielded over racialized workers. The result of this process was two new infrastructures for controlling logistics labor. The first was an infrastructure of pacification, meant to cleanse logistics spaces of agitators. The second was an infrastructure of "welfare capitalism" that sought to ameliorate working conditions through moderate reforms.⁹¹ By offering methods for rendering intransigent workforces malleable and docile, these infrastructures buttressed the US military's broader efforts at squeezing further cost-savings and efficiencies from transpacific supply chains.⁹² Having successfully mainstreamed the use of labor-saving technologies such as computers and containers, logistics managers were keen to restructure the length of the working day in accordance with their declining needs for labor. Because logistics laborers had become reliant on a workweek of between seventy-two and eighty-four hours to exist at the threshold of what Neferti Tadiar calls "absolutely minimum life," they were placed in the paradoxical position of fighting for the privilege of working under hyperexploitative conditions of slow death.⁹³

Pacifying Logistics Labor

Having created the conditions for labor unrest, American supply chain managers mined their own experiences for lessons on averting future conflicts.⁹⁴ As Robert Harlan, chairman of the US military's Civilian Manpower Committee,

concluded, “the announced reasons for strikes are only rarely the true reason: rather, they are the final straw.” “By identifying and promptly adjusting grievances,” he continued, “enlightened” employers could administer “preventative medicine” to preempt problems.⁹⁵ Although Harlan cautioned that it was not “possible to avoid all strife,” he nonetheless called on the US military to seriously consider the demands of logistics workers.⁹⁶

Imperial supply chain managers heeded and ignored Harlan’s advice. Drawing from an established repertoire of techniques for controlling racialized labor, managers linked outbreaks of unrest to individual agitators and enacted measures to expel them from logistics spaces. In the aftermath of the 1967 riot at Cam Ranh Bay, for example, Vinnell identified about thirty to forty “hardcore trouble makers who led the disturbances.” Vinnell was convinced that “the trouble would cease and operations return to normal if these individuals were removed and returned to Korea.”⁹⁷ A similar discourse informed the US military’s response to the Newport strike. High-ranking labor relations officials such as Ralph Romano were keen to identify aggressive and uncooperative unions—and not the “feelings of the rank and file that management exploits them”—as the true cause of the strike.⁹⁸ Romano blamed the cai system for perpetuating the “longstanding malpractice” of exploiting Vietnamese dockers. Such claims reproduced long-standing racializations of Asian labor as simultaneously docile and unscrupulous. As early as May 1967, Vietnamese employees of the Saigon Port Authority were dismissing the “masses of coolies” as unworthy of attention, since they could “easily be induced or coaxed to follow the example set by the [cais] without reasoning or thinking it over.” As one administrator quipped, “Whether trouble will take place depends entirely on the [cai].” The Port Authority would therefore have to eliminate cais in order to “[ensure] the proper payment of wages to the workers.”⁹⁹

It is difficult to determine whether the Vietnamese administrators quoted above were channeling an internalized orientalism, an elite classism, or some combination thereof. But what the archival record clarifies is that it took the US military four years—and one incendiary strike—to engage with the substance of the Port Authority’s proposal at Newport. The US military’s foot-dragging can be explained by remembering that its logistics strategy during the buildup centered on transposing Korean War-era subcontracting—or “honcho”—infrastructures for reducing wages and stretching work hours into the South Vietnamese context.¹⁰⁰ It is no coincidence that the US military turned its attention toward workplace reform at the moment it no longer needed to wring every last ounce of productivity from logistics labor.

To harmonize labor relations in logistics spaces, then, imperial managers would have to isolate the working masses from insurgent agitators. This required a system for revealing the “illegal activities of a number of workers who take part in the pilferage of goods, who oppose the government, and who operate for the enemy, especially of their plots of starting or leading strikes.”¹⁰¹ This system was built on a census that subjected longshoremen to modern identification procedures. Policemen integrated this database with various methods for cleansing logistics spaces of “suspected elements.” One example was the pass system that had been implemented in mid-1967 to control transient laborers across the Saigon port complex.¹⁰² Under this new security regime, dockers entered and exited the military section of the port through a specific pedestrian gate. In this securitized space, workers exchanged their identity card for a color-coded pass that granted them access to different sections of the complex.¹⁰³

Although this security infrastructure targeted “suspected elements,” it also multiplied the potential points of friction between managers and workers. Such everyday encounters were always saturated by the potential for bodily protest and harm. The specific unfolding of these conflicts was nonetheless shaped by different dynamics and performances of gendered sexuality. In a move that recalls age-old fears of nonwhite masculinity and homosociality, US military policemen disciplined racialized male workers for their aggressive sexuality.¹⁰⁴ A conflicting set of reports narrate the story of a Vietnamese docker, Nguyen Van Ky, who, on May 13, 1967, was beaten for allegedly shaking his genitals at a military policeman, Christopher Nuttal. Nuttal states that he was preventing Ky from exiting Saigon’s port when the offending gesture was made. Nuttal then tried to escort Ky from the premises, but the latter broke away and initiated a brawl. In Ky’s retelling, however, Nuttal provoked the incident by throwing trash on the ground and then demanding its removal. After repeating this process multiple times, Ky secured permission from Nuttal to buy food. But as soon as Ky “stepped out,” he was beaten “mercilessly.”¹⁰⁵

Racialized women workers, in contrast, had to navigate logistics spaces saturated by toxic imperial masculinities. Occasionally, women workers met imperial security regimes with an everyday politics of refusal. On December 3, 1969, for instance, Nguyen Khanh Van, a contract employee at Camp Radcliffe, objected to new search procedures on the grounds that the guards were groping her. She also complained that “the shake down area was too open because male personnel, both LN and US, were able to observe the females being searched.” She was first joined in her protest by her female co-workers, and then eventually by the rest of the Vietnamese workforce. Vietnamese policemen dismissed this particular act of mass refusal as “VC influenced.”¹⁰⁶

But it was more common for security forces to gaslight unruly women workers. When a pregnant forklift operator, Huynh Thi Nam, testified that she had been beaten by Sergeant Edward Malone, her bosses counteraccused her of conspiring with her co-workers to “fake” the story. In so doing, warehouse managers read Nam through the orientalist trope of the duplicitous Asian woman who could turn from friend to foe in the blink of an eye.¹⁰⁷ Ramped-up security protocols therefore disproportionately subjected workers to a stream of gendered micro-aggressions, which magnified latent feelings of resentment into spontaneous outbreaks of resistance. For this reason, logistics spaces were constantly wracked by work stoppages, many of which lasted only a few hours.

Supply chain managers combined these security initiatives with an attempt to break the cai’s monopoly over labor recruitment. This culminated in the establishment of a centralized hiring hall where port workers would be “assigned to jobs in rotation so that their earnings can be kept equal.”¹⁰⁸ Although the idea was first proposed by ILA president Teddy Gleason during his visit to South Vietnam in 1965, imperial managers did not act on his recommendations until the Newport strike of 1971, which Tran Quoc Buu framed as a golden opportunity to deal with the long-standing “illness” of labor exploitation in the ports.¹⁰⁹ Given that exploitation was “accomplished through the brokerage of labor services,” Buu called on the US military to “provide a fair and equitable method of recruiting port workers.”¹¹⁰ In response, the US military worked with the South Vietnamese Ministry of Labor and USAID to erect a hiring hall near the Saigon port complex. In this space, imperial managers would make previously exploitative processes of labor recruitment technical and equitable. This “real quote revolution unquote on the docks” would eliminate the need for cais and, by extension, the root cause of labor unrest.¹¹¹

Supply chain managers also recognized that there was more to achieving harmonious labor relations than eliminating agitators. The 1967 riot at Cam Ranh Bay, in particular, hammered home the importance of opening lines of communication with the laboring masses. In the wake of the riot, the US military worked with the Korean Embassy and Vinnell to establish a “Korean-American Labor Relations Office,” which would forward employee complaints to the “proper authorities.”¹¹² Elsewhere, “Employee Management Councils” were championed as the most effective way to achieve a “two-way flow of communication” along supply chains.¹¹³ By bringing management together with employees to discuss working conditions, these councils were pitched as a “safety valve” for channeling labor dissatisfaction “during the potentially troubling days ahead.”¹¹⁴ Managers believed that these councils could transform “previously agricultural worker[s]” into “industrial” proletarians comfortable

with “[voicing] their complaints individually to their supervisors or through established grievance channels.”¹¹⁵ By providing logistics workers with a way of “participating” in management actions, these councils were expected to produce “a self-reliant and self-controlled workforce” whose struggles were “aligned with the goals” of local authorities.¹¹⁶ Following Stuart Schrader, logistics workers were being asked to participate in their own pacification.¹¹⁷

Prompted by these councils, managers began to reflect on how they could better care for logistics workers. In particular, they identified “employee services” as a key arena for improvement. In 1970, for instance, managers at Long Binh Post concerned by declining employee morale hypothesized that new Vietnamese messing facilities might help reverse this trend.¹¹⁸ By April 1971, two restaurants had been established on the Post, but the demand for Vietnamese food continued to exceed the supply.¹¹⁹ Worried that American managers were “losing respect in the eyes of many LN employees due to the long delay in the initiation of LN food services,” the US military considered asking the Long Binh Post Exchange to open a larger concession. This idea, however, was rejected on the grounds that the food would be costly and inauthentic. Instead, the responsibility for feeding Vietnamese workers was outsourced to local women.¹²⁰

This was a natural extension of the gendered care work that Vietnamese women were already performing for US soldiers across the war zone. Vietnamese women not only worked the docks and warehouses for less money than their male counterparts but also were more likely to serve as “hooch maids” in military quarters, or as cooks and bar girls in clubs, where they provided US soldiers with cleaning services, entertainment, and various forms of companionship.¹²¹ In so doing, they played an essential role in socially reproducing soldiering life. Given the highly “private” nature of military domestic work, hooch maids felt the gendered violence of just-in-time imperialism all the more keenly, which ran the gamut from lewd comments to rape.¹²² Despite—or perhaps because of—these toxic masculinities, military domestic spaces were also hotbeds of labor unrest. Maids were just as militant as dockers, truckers, or warehouse workers, striking for improved wages and working conditions, as well as for miscarriage compensation and maternity leave.¹²³ As Nadine Attewell and I write elsewhere, these militarized domesticities must be understood as a gendered form of logistics work, meant to satisfy the “private” needs—food, care, intimacy, and sex—of US soldiers.¹²⁴ These gendered infrastructures of

Figure 3.

Vietnamese women dock workers assist in unloading ships by uncoupling cables from cargo. Eugene McFarland, “K-80386,” 1969, box 374, Record Group 428: General Records of the Department of the Navy, 1947, National Archives.



violence and resistance along transpacific supply chains demand a more capacious understanding of logistics that holds space for military domestics and the intimate work of reproduction and care they performed on a day-to-day basis.

Although logistics workers did care about the quality of food and other services, their overriding concern was money. As improvements in employee services could only delay a confrontation over wages, labor relations in logistics spaces were in a perpetual state of deterioration. Deborah Cowen observes that logistics innovations have historically undermined the conditions of work along the supply chain.¹²⁵ The computerization and containerization of imperial logistics management in occupied South Vietnam was no different, accelerating the devalorization of racialized labor. In the early days of the war, the US military compensated for its labor deficit by implementing a “great many extra-legal practices, such as artificial job classifications, built-in overtime, and other pay premiums.”¹²⁶ This meant that the average logistics workweek was between seventy-two and eighty-four hours, which the US military “justified on the grounds that the job had to be done *now*.”¹²⁷ As the US military’s efforts to modernize South Vietnam’s transportation infrastructures bore fruit, however, its need for logistics labor diminished. The US military used these changing requirements to justify reducing the length of the average logistics shift from twelve to ten hours.¹²⁸

These coercive processes were bitterly resisted by logistics workers, who had come to view “regularly scheduled overtime” as an “accepted condition of employment.”¹²⁹ Any reduction in hours threatened their precarious standard of living. Logistics workers therefore found themselves in the contradictory position of striking for the right to hyperexploit themselves.¹³⁰ Some strikers were successful at forcing management to implement less drastic overtime reductions.¹³¹ These victories, however, were partial. While logistics laborers derived some material benefits from workplace reforms, their every waking hour was “increasingly devoted to the work of reproducing their lives.”¹³² As the war wound down, transpacific supply chains remained spaces of physical deterioration, mental attrition, and truncated life.

Logistical Afterlives

In this essay, I traced the interplay of infrastructural power and labor resistance that animated the imperial logistics mission to occupied South Vietnam. I read the archival record to uncover how transpacific geopolitical-economic processes were grounded through struggles over the conditions of logistics work. As part of the broader logistics effort, Vietnamese, Korean, and Filipinx nationals were

set in motion by the entangled forces of imperialism, militarism, and racial capitalism. These regional flows of racialized workers converged in the logistics spaces of occupied South Vietnam, where they entered into frictional relations with imperial agents as well as with each other. These fraught encounters sparked localized struggles that both challenged and reinforced transpacific infrastructures of imperial accumulation and control.

This landscape of labor unrest extended beyond the geographic coordinates of the war. Seoul was afflicted by many riots instigated by workers who were either going to or returning from occupied South Vietnam. In February 1970, for instance, about 350 workers spent one week occupying the Seoul office of an American contractor, Pacific Architects & Engineers. The rioters argued that they had been promised work in the war zone and demanded that Pacific Architects & Engineers either ship them to Vietnam or provide a settlement of one hundred dollars per month of lost employment. If these demands were not met, the rioters “threatened death to the PA&E employees in Seoul,” a point they underscored by carrying signs reading “Jobs Now or Death!”¹³³ Nor was this transnational geography of labor unrest confined to South Korea. The annual “spring struggle” of Okinawan base workers often interrupted the smooth flow of cargo to and from occupied South Vietnam.¹³⁴ The moments of labor unrest sketched out in this essay therefore formed part of a transnational infrastructure of anti-imperial resistance.

As I have shown, racialized logistics workers in South Vietnam did attempt to forge transnational connections with their comrades elsewhere. But these efforts never coalesced into a coherent movement. This was partly because the agents of a militarized racial capitalism were vigilant in quashing potential opportunities for transpacific solidarity building. But the very spatial infrastructures of US just-in-time imperialism also proved a significant stumbling block to transpacific labor activism. To drive this point home, I conclude by drawing attention to one final archival moment. On April 10, 1971, a group of Filipinx migrant workers hired to maintain office machines in Pleiku and the Cha Rang Valley wrote a letter to the US Federal Labor Department. In it, they accused the LA-based Executive Engineering and Services Corporation of withdrawing salaries, refusing to send remittances home, wrongfully terminating employees, failing to provide visas, and confiscating passports.¹³⁵ The group’s demand for redress eventually found its way to a military contracting officer, Colonel Edmund Boy, who responded on May 15, 1971. While Boy promised to give the group’s problems the “fullest consideration,” he also emphasized that US laws prevented him from intervening in the dispute.¹³⁶

This exchange offers evidence of how the enrollment of colonized subjects into the banal work of empire often emboldened them to claim a more expansive set of rights from the US military-industrial complex.¹³⁷ But it also exposes how military managers mobilized subcontracting arrangements as an excuse for evading the responsibility of addressing worker grievances. These subcontracting infrastructures also made it difficult for the local nationals, TCNs, and free world soldiers working along transpacific supply chains to understand each other as potential comrades in a broader struggle against the forces of an imperial racial capitalism. Under such conditions, the work of reassembling alternative models of anticapitalist relationality remained partial and haphazard.¹³⁸

The archival record offers few details on the fate of these nine Filipinx men. But their experiences in Vietnam foreshadow the stories that have since been shared by subsequent generations of Filipinx migrant workers. I have heard anecdotal stories of Filipinx logistics workers who eventually found their way to major North American cities through family sponsorship programs: a migration pathway that was opened up by the feminized care labor being performed by their kin in metropolitan households. In so doing, these historically marginalized imperial subjects became implicated in ongoing settler colonial projects of Indigenous dispossession and elimination.¹³⁹ These geographic trajectories of Filipinx settlement show how the afterlives of just-in-time imperialism—and, by implication, railroad colonialism—continue to haunt diasporic relation-making in the present.

Yet the archive is also full of moments where logistics exceeds imperial, military, and racial capitalist formations. Military workers relied on logistics as a way to make their service for empire bearable. One Filipinx American soldier received care packages from his family in Hawai‘i containing the ethnic ingredients—such as instant *saimin*—that featured in the “cook-ins” that he organized for his Asian American and *kanaka maoli* squad mates.¹⁴⁰ Archival moments like this one contain traces of a different logistics: one rooted not in militaries and markets but in diasporic solidarities and futures. Arriving at a nuanced understanding of these diasporic afterlives is essential for the political project of reclaiming logistics for anti-imperial ends.

Notes

- I am indebted to Matthew Farish, Deborah Cowen, Laleh Khalili, Hun Kim, Martin Danyluk, Richard Nisa, Emily Mitchell-Eaton, and the editors and anonymous reviewers of *American Quarterly* for their critical feedback and suggestions. I also want to thank Naomi Paik and Simeon Man for generously soliciting an earlier version of this essay. All remaining errors and omissions are my own.
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