If you happen to be a supporter of neoliberal capitalism, well, this book is not for you. Although the focus of the book, as its title indicates, is on American protest movements over the past half a century, the narrative pivots around the economic and political philosophy of neoliberalism. This aggressive form of capitalism, the author notes, is driven by the designs and desires of an elite whose aim is to maximize their wealth and power at the expense of other social strata in American society. Since the 1970s, the US has gradually become more separated from its liberal practices and traditions, and in its stead has embraced the doctrines of neoliberalism, hence the author’s reference to “Post-Liberal America.” What unfolds for the reader, therefore, is a tragic tale of a country that has lost its way in socio-economic terms, and fallen victim to the whims of political leaders who serve the interests of America’s economic elite at the expense of low income earners and the middle class of the country.

Emerging from this social and historical context, Dawson Barrett, in his narrative The Defiant: Protest Movements in Post-Liberal America, traces the plethora of responses and forms of resistance to the neoliberal agenda in the US and its repercussions in other parts of the world. As the author explains, The Defiant “explores how US economic, cultural, and political elites in the Post-Sixties period turned the tide against the movement gains of the previous decades and how these changes reshaped the ability of activists to impact on the political process” (19). The volume includes a prologue, introduction, and an epilogue at its conclusion. In the main the book examines protest movements in five chapters that are divided thematically. Each chapter, in a very accessible manner, provides helpful background information and context related to a specific conflict, and then gauges public and institutional responses to that given protest movement. At the conclusion of each chapter the author includes
an assessment of the protest movements’ successes and limitations in impacting on governmental policies ranging from the Reagan and Clinton administrations of the 1980s and 1990s to the Bush and Obama administrations of the early twenty-first century. At the beginning of each chapter are selected quotes that topically cue the reader for what lies ahead.

Before examining specific accounts of protest movements during what the author labels the Post-Liberal Era, The Defiant includes a helpful genealogy of America’s protest tradition that stretches back to the 18th century during the pre-revolutionary period up through to the 19th century abolitionist movement, American Indian resistance, the women’s suffrage movement, working-class activism, and the struggles against racism in all its forms during the first half of the twentieth century. Of course, references to the very robust period of protest during the Sixties is covered which included a vast array of groups and an equally impressive assemblage of strategies and tactics for achieving targeted political and social goals. However, particular liberal achievements began to be challenged by reactionary elements throughout American society from the seventies onward. “American elites,” Barrett points out, “were determined to unravel the changes of the midcentury—to undercut workers’ rights, to work around environmental regulations, to re-segregate neighbourhoods and schools, and to eliminate poverty programs” (17). Additionally, the economic elite, including corporate interests, became cognizant that in order to have any success in undermining liberal political gains of the previous decades, it would need to influence the US federal government and redirect the country’s political-ideological trajectory away from liberalism toward neoliberal capitalist doctrines.

From start to finish Barrett’s disdain for neoliberalism is exhibited in his narrative. In succinct and stark terms, he encapsulates its ramifications as “expanding economic inequality by transferring public resources into a few private hands while placing private costs on public shoulders. To accomplish these tasks, neoliberal tax cuts, austerity cuts, deregulation, and privatization have been applied to nearly every aspect of American society over the past several decades, with tremendous benefits for some people and horrific consequences for many others” (159). In the volume’s first chapter, for example, Barrett explores neoliberalism’s impact on the environment. Despite the passing of important legislation relating to the environment a decade earlier, the Reagan administration of the 1980s privatized public lands and cut federal budget programs relating to environmental protection. Social activists part of Earth First! responded to Reagan’s policy shifts in various campaigns that were of a defensive nature. The specific case study Barrett covers was the organization’s unsuccessful effort to prevent the University of Arizona from constructing an astronomical observatory in a national forest. He carefully details Earth First!’s twenty-year campaign in cooperation with other groups in resistance to the project, their joint deployment of an array of tactics, and the relentless manoeuvring of private interests to see the observatory constructed. From environmental spaces, the author moves to urban spaces to document privatization efforts, gentrification, and worrisome securitization practices in the inner cities of America. Barrett reminds the reader that Reagan’s neoliberalism of the 1980s also included a conservative oriented social agenda that emphasized Christian values, opposition to abortion rights, and in some quarters, the demonization of homosexuality. Grassroots organizations such as Berkley’s 924 Gilman Street and New York City’s ABC No Rio sought to challenge corporate development and create venues where cultural exchange and the rejection of racism,
sexism, and homophobia could be cultivated through music, art, and political engagement.

With the conclusion of the Republican guided Reagan-Bush Sr. years, the early 1990s ushered in the Democratic presidency of Bill Clinton. At the time if there had been some expectations that Clinton would reverse neoliberal gains of the previous decade, those hopes were quickly dashed. Instead of reversing economic neoliberal policies, Clinton reinforced them and contributed to the intensification and acceleration of globalizing trends that had been gradually developing since the conclusion of the Second World War. Institutions like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the G6, and what later became the World Trade Organization were created to strengthen international trade and the global capitalist system. For critics of economic globalization such as Barrett, free trade is anything but free. Rather than creating a level playing field through deregulation it is viewed as an exploitative system that facilitates increased profits and wealth for multinational corporations and members of the capitalist elite. In this context, the author covers various loci of resistance to globalization during the 1990s from the Zapatista uprising in Mexico and the Seattle protests at the WTO meeting in 1999, to the activists of the United Students Against Sweatshops, to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and their campaign for improved conditions for workers in the US. While these movements and their campaigns had a particular localized quality, those involved were fully aware of the regional and global dimensions of their activism. As Barrett suggests, the “global justice movement’s emphasis on broad, global coalitions of environmental, labor, and human rights activists is absolutely crucial in the era of NAFTA and the WTO” (99). As the world entered the new millennium in 2000, global coalitions of resistance found motivation for conducting large scale activism. In this case, the reason was due to the mobilization for and ultimate onset of a war.

As a result of the 9/11 al-Qaeda terrorist attacks against the US in 2001, President George W. Bush declared a Global War on Terror. The US’s launch of the GWOT was conducted against the country of Afghanistan whose Taliban regime had provided sanctuary to al-Qaeda. Following the invasion of Afghanistan, the US turned its attention to Iraq and its leader Saddam Hussein who it falsely accused of having links to al-Qaeda and developing weapons of mass destruction. Ultimately, the US invaded Iraq in 2003 opening a second front on the GWOT and igniting massive anti-war protests around the world. Prior to the invasion, there were worldwide protests and vigils in major cities against the prospect of a war. Millions from across the political spectrum took to the streets hoping to convince the Bush administration not to invade Iraq. In conjunction with these massive protests, the largest since the Vietnam War, were the efforts of other activists including Gold Star Families for Peace, Iraq Veterans Against the War, and Code Pink: Women for Peace and their campaigns to end the war and challenge policies and practices of torture of prisoners of war that were put in place by the Bush administration. Besides covering the anti-war movement, Barrett also connects US militarism to the expansion of neoliberalism. Military contractors and other corporations linked to the war effort profited tremendously from US military interventions around the world and the prospect of an endless war against terrorism. In Iraq, for example, there were tens of thousands of private contractors operating. As the author points out, the US’s war in Iraq “provided a huge financial windfall for defense contractors such as Lockheed Martin, Halliburton, and Blackwater, and the subsequent occupation was intended to create long-term investment opportunities for
US banks and oil companies” (114). The loss of lives and the billions of dollars spent on conducting these wars in Afghanistan and Iraq proved to make these wars more and more unpopular. By the end of Bush’s second presidential term in 2007, the US economy faltered, due in part to the financial crisis on Wall Street. As Barrett explains, deregulated banks, rating agencies, and insurance companies were engaged in high risk transactions and bad investments in derivatives markets causing trillions of dollars in economic losses worldwide and requiring a federal bailout of banks and private companies by the Obama administration to avoid even a greater economic catastrophe. From the US military occupation of Iraq, Barrett takes his reader to the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York City’s Zuccotti Park where activists and protesters expressed their consternation, disappoint, and rage about the financial practices taking place in the country’s financial center at the expense of public resources and the economic impact it had on the average hard-working American. As the author would insist, it was just another example of the shortcomings and failure of neoliberalism.

Barrett’s critical account of American neoliberalism may not appeal to all readers. Some may counter argue that the US has the largest economy in the world, offers economic opportunities for the vast majority its citizens, and is a society where social mobility is embedded in its system. It is also a vibrant democracy, where people enjoy freedoms and rights that are non-existent in other parts of the world. These realities are apparent by simply acknowledging that the US remains a magnet for immigrants worldwide who seek to improve their socio-economic conditions. The Defiant focuses on four presidential administrations. Some might remind its author that all four of these presidents were two term victors, two Republicans and two Democrats. Is it the result of the machinations of a power elite, or is it due to a pluralist democratic political dynamic? Is the US’s bipartisan embrace of neoliberalism over the past thirty-five years a result of hegemonic elites or is it the product of a national consensus? Why aren’t conservative protest movements like the Tea Party movement covered in this volume? What exactly does President Trump represent? He appears to be a conservative on social issues, but in economic terms it appears safe to say that he is not a neoliberal. What is also clear is that President Trump has been successful in undermining global capitalism by pursuing a nationalist/protectionist approach to international trade. What result will this bring for the US and other economies? Certain readers will be satisfied with the selections made by Barrett in terms of the protest movements he included in his narrative. However, others might have preferred greater coverage of #BlackLivesMatter, or campaigns related to the feminist movement. Regardless of these concerns expressed above, Dawson Barrett’s volume is a well written and highly accessible book for the reading public. The Defiant does an excellent job in providing important historical and social context for the various protest movements under scrutiny. Barrett exhibits an uncanny ability to make rather complex issues comprehensible, such as economic and financial matters. The topical content and coverage in Barrett’s narrative fill a void in academic literature on contemporary American protest movements and offers a robust critique of American neoliberal capitalism, prompting one to wonder if the country’s departure from its liberal tradition of governmental oversight and regulation of the market has done more harm than good.