

THE GOOD EMPIRE

Should we pick up where the British left off?

Vivek Chibber

Not too long ago, it was difficult to find mention of empire in American intellectual circles, save in discussions of bygone eras or, more commonly, of the Soviet Union's relation to its satellites. The steady stream of U.S. interventions in countries around the globe could not, of course, be denied; but they were commonly explained as defensive responses to Soviet or Chinese imperialism—as efforts to contain Communist aggression and protect our way of life. But America itself could not be cast as an imperial power.

Times have changed. America and empire are joined at the hip in political discourse, not just on the Left but also in visible organs of the Right. The United States is often described as an empire and proudly proclaimed to be in the company of the best, outshining its English predecessor and catching up with the standard-setting Romans.

This semantic shift was not instantaneous. In the immediate aftermath of the Eastern Bloc's demise, the terms most typically used to describe American supremacy were more benign—sole superpower, new hegemon, and so on. The real change came with the George W. Bush presidency, and especially in the aftermath of 9/11. Commentators and ideologues no longer shy away from the E word and, indeed, openly embrace it—as well as the phenomenon it describes.

For the most part, the arguments favoring a Pax Americana have not been developed beyond short articles or op-ed pieces. But the work of Niall Ferguson—a Scottish historian now transplanted to Harvard—takes them further. In his recent and widely reviewed book *Colossus*, and in a series of other publications, Ferguson offers an extended defense of the imperial project, past and present. Unlike many of his conservative peers, however, Ferguson does not cast his defense of imperial expansion in terms of its benefits for the United States—as a strategy of prevention against potential aggressors or as a mechanism to secure American dominance for the foreseeable future. Instead, he views an American empire as a boon to its subjects. As he explains, he has “no objection in principle to an American empire,” for indeed, “many parts of the world would benefit from a period of American rule.” To be sure, American rule must be subject to constraints. Empire is beneficial, he avers, if it is imbued with, and institutionalizes, the spirit of liberalism: enlightened and non-corrupt administration, fiscal stability, and free markets. In short, what the world needs is not empire *per se*: it needs a liberal empire.

In pursuing this project, the United States needn't venture forth untutored



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Colossus: The Price of America's Empire

Niall Ferguson

The Penguin Press, \$25.95 (cloth)

because it can draw upon the considerable achievements of its predecessor, the British empire, which was the first to use its power to spread liberal institutions to the developing world. The British experience plays a dual role in this argument. First, it provides a record of historical achievement, which gives support to the view that a properly conducted imperialism can be a force for social improvement. Second, it offers lessons on how to properly go about colonizing those who need it. And there is no shortage of needy nations. Ferguson mentions, in passing, the Central African Republic, Uganda, Liberia, Rwanda, Chad, Niger, Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Burundi, Ethiopia, Somalia, Afghanistan, and several others. That they are almost all in Africa does not escape his notice. The fact is, he writes, that the African “experiment” with decolonization (as he calls it) has largely failed. For many countries across the continent, the only hope is to be folded into a new empire, which could finish the job that the British started.

The only problem is that the United States seems unwilling to accept the challenge. It is chary to go beyond the imposition of informal control over its minions and hence is unable to provide the benefits of direct colonial rule. Ferguson's large ambition is to persuade American elites to shed their hesitancy and embrace, for the good of the world, their colonial mission.

Ferguson's defense of liberal empire

has made him into something of a media celebrity: he is featured prominently on national radio and television, a much sought-after speaker on the lecture circuit, and even the star narrator of two television series. Although the attention is unusual for a professional historian, it is not entirely surprising. Here we have views that were, until recently, associated with the crackpot Right now being defended by a rising academic star who comes with all the status of Oxford (his previous employer) and Harvard. More surprising is the reception that his book has received in established academic journals and magazines. One might have thought that, in the most respectable organs of the liberal intelligentsia, a book calling for the resuscitation of colonial rule would have met with at least a few raised eyebrows. Instead, it has been given a surprisingly warm welcome. John Lewis Gaddis goes so far as to single out for special praise the call for the United States to colonize parts of the world to save them from their infirmities; in fact, Gaddis worries that the book's other shortcomings might prevent a more serious consideration of the need for American “tutelage” of these deserving states. Further to the right, Charles Krauthammer has echoed Ferguson's fond remembrance of the British Empire. In the fall 2004 issue of *The National Interest* he offers that the United States “could use a colonial office in the state department—a direct reference to British institutions.

Were it not for this warm reception, there would not be a pressing call to engage the arguments in *Colossus*. The book doesn't cohere especially well, being more a concatenation of loosely connected essays than a well-structured argument. Ferguson writes in a highly discursive fashion, scattering the text with claims and asides that are often only distantly connected with the theme at hand. Some of them are so outlandish that they seem less the handiwork of a respected historian than of an academic shock jock. What, for example, are we to make of the notion that the United States ought to have seriously considered using nuclear weapons against China during the Korean War? The actual arguments Ferguson makes to support his case are by no means new; to the contrary, he trots out some of the hoariest myths of the colonial experience. To make matters worse, his own narrative undermines several of his central points, as I shall demonstrate below.

The main reason to examine the book closely, then, is that it reflects a widening current of opinion among American intellectuals, including its liberal wing. It is the fact of the book's success, and the warm praise showered upon its author, that warrants a sustained examination of its arguments.

Ferguson identifies colonial rule with sound governance, and this identification lies behind his fondness for the imperial idea. Sound governance is, he says, the most significant British legacy—valuable as an end in itself, but also because it furthers democracy and economic growth. Ferguson can't quite maintain that colonialism directly *generated* democracy, but he suggests that it laid the foundation by tutoring imperial subjects on the finer points of statecraft and by building secure administrative apparatuses. And by its commitment to the rule of law, secure property rights, and “sound” fiscal management, colonialism encouraged entrepreneurial initiative and coaxed an impressive economic performance out of the colonies. This wasn't true of the whole span of colonial rule. Ferguson doesn't think that the 18th-century slave trade, for example, catalyzed African democracy. He restricts his claims to the Victorian era, starting after the Indian Sepahi Rebellion, through the Scramble for Africa and the first decades of the 20th century. This was the high-water mark of liberal empire.

Colossus is a short book that makes many claims. In assessing them, we need to ask two main questions. First, are the claims true? In particular, was British rule basically about sound governance and the building blocks of democracy? And second, if they are true—if colonialism did

have the beneficial outcomes Ferguson attributes to it—was colonial rule necessary to producing such outcomes? Was succumbing to external rule the price that colonies had to pay for democracy and modern economic growth?

Ferguson bases his defense of colonialism principally on the Indian experience, so I'll start on the subcontinent. As it happens, the Victorian era provides a strong test of Ferguson's claims about the quality of British statecraft, since it was marked by a series of severe droughts in areas of colonial rule. Thanks to Amartya Sen, we now know that famines are not naturally occurring phenomena; they can largely be averted, or at least minimized, if authorities intervene swiftly and decisively. If drought does turn into severe famine, it is most likely because of a breakdown in, or an absence of, well-functioning social institutions. On the Indian subcontinent, which relies heavily on the timeliness of the annual monsoons, droughts occurred periodically. Over the centuries, local elites and villagers had built up a rudimentary apparatus—in effect, an insurance system—to blunt the worst effects of the crop failures, and the British inherited this system as they took over. So at the very least, a regime that prided itself on good governance ought to have performed at least as well as its predecessors in minimizing damage from droughts.

In reality, the Victorian era witnessed perhaps the worst famines in Indian history. Their severity, and the role of colonial authorities in this pattern of disaster, has been brought to light by Mike Davis in his stunning book *Late Victorian Holocausts*. Even before the onset of the Victorian famines, warning signals were in place: C. Walford showed in 1878 that the number of famines in the first century of British rule had already exceeded the total recorded cases in the previous two thousand years. But the grim reality behind claims to “good governance” truly came to light in the very decades that Ferguson trumpets. According to the most reliable estimates, the deaths from the 1876–1878 famine were in the range of *six to eight million*, and in the double-barreled famine of 1896–1897 and 1899–1900, they probably totaled somewhere in the range of *17 to 20 million*. So in the quarter century that marks the pinnacle of colonial good governance, famine deaths average at least a million per year.

Two factors contributed to this outcome. First, the structure of the colonial revenue system—with its high and inflexible tax rates—drastically increased peasant vulnerability to drought. Whereas pre-colonial authorities had tended to modulate revenue demands to the vagaries of the harvest, the British rejected this tradition. Agrarian revenues during the 19th century were critical to the colonial state, and to funding British regional and global military campaigns. So the screws on the peasant were kept tight, regardless of circumstance. This remorseless pressure drove a great number of peasants to the edge of subsistence, making them deeply vulnerable to periodic shocks in the agrarian cycle. Hence it is no surprise that, according to a report of 1881, 80 percent of all the famine fatalities came from the poorest 20 percent of the population—precisely those peasants who lived on the brink of disaster.

The second, more proximate factor was the administrative response to famine,

which is neatly summed up in the Report of the Famine Commission of 1878: “The doctrine that in time of famine the poor are entitled to demand relief . . . would probably lead to the doctrine that they are entitled to such relief at all times . . . which we cannot contemplate without serious apprehension.” So Viceroy Lytton sent a stern warning that administrators should stoutly resist what he called “humanitarian hysterics” and ordered that there be “no interference of any kind on the part of Government with the object of reducing the price of food.” British officials energetically held the line against humanitarianism as grain prices skyrocketed upward. “Sound” public finance—according to Ferguson, one of the great gifts of Victorian governance—trumped even the most meager efforts at relief the moment they strained at the exchequer. Curzon, who oversaw the decimation wrought by the 1899 famine, warned that “any government which imperiled the financial position of India in the interests of prodigal philanthropy would be open to serious criticism; but any Government which by indiscriminate alms-giving weakened the fibre and demoralized the

insufficient alacrity, or that they showed a want of resolve. The point instead is that they resolutely—indeed, with homicidal intensity—pursued policies that predictably escalated the human disasters. Ferguson notes that the late Victorian famines were indeed a pity but “were far more environmental than political than origin.” But he does not advance a shred of evidence in support of this thesis. A far more appropriate conclusion is the one drawn by Davis himself, that “imperial policies toward starving ‘subjects’ were the moral equivalent of bombs dropped from 18,000 feet.”

The sheer scale of human suffering wrought by the colonial state in just these few decades has deep moral significance. Even if Ferguson's claims about the other positive legacies were true, we could justifiably wonder if they counterbalanced the staggering levels of suffering and death produced by the Victorian famines. But there is no call to concede to Ferguson his other arguments—either that British colonialism fostered economic growth in the colonies or that it encouraged the transfer of democratic institutions.

We need not concede to Ferguson that British colonialism fostered economic growth in the colonies or encouraged the transfer of democratic institutions.

self-reliance of the population, would be guilty of a public crime.”

To help Indians internalize this Spartan ethic, Lytton, Elgin and Curzon shut down all but the most anemic relief efforts across the country. Grain surpluses in states where rainfall was adequate were not used for famine relief but were shipped instead to England, which apparently could relinquish its own self-reliance in agriculture without descending into moral turpitude. To further help the Indian peasant pursue his virtuous path, all pleas for tax relief were rebuffed, and collection efforts were redoubled: not a rupee of revenue was to be left on the parched plains. And in case peasants didn't get the point that *they* were supposed to pay the government and not the other way around, relief camps were closed down in areas where tax collection threatened to fall short of normal receipts.

These taxes, it should be noted, were not covering the administrative costs of good governance, but were paying for British colonial wars—the Afghan wars in Lytton's time, and the Boer War in Curzon's reign. So as the British extended their empire across new frontiers, the bodies of the Indian peasants funding the effort were piling up outside the Viceregal verandas. The colonial state consciously forswore any attempt at intervening and averting these catastrophes. In so doing, it reversed centuries long traditions of famine relief, set aside known techniques of reducing mortality, telling the “natives” all the while that it was being done for their own good.

This last point bears emphasis. It isn't that the British responded to the crisis with

When it comes to the putative economic benefits of empire, Ferguson is a garden-variety neoliberal. Imperialism was great because it promoted the integration of markets and subordinated indigent peoples to the stern hand of fiscal and monetary prudence. “[It] seems unequivocal,” he announces, that “Britain's continued policy of free trade was beneficial to its colonies.” This he contrasts to the maladroit policies pursued by the natives after they acquired independence—which included high tariffs, industrial planning, labor protection, and the like. It is because of these policies that the “experiment with political independence . . . has been a disaster for most poor countries.” What liberal empire did, and will do again if the U.S. can gather up its resolve, was to save the natives from themselves.

A venerable literature criticizes the economics of empire—for draining wealth from the colonies, deindustrializing their economies, and discriminating against local industry. But Ferguson will have none of it. To the contrary, he insists, being in the empire brought the benefits that come from joining an exclusive club—colonies had the imprimatur of international, especially British, investors. Financial managers, always nervous about the possibility of default, saw a country's colonial status as a kind of guarantee against government default on loans, precisely because they trusted the administrative expertise that Britain brought with it. The most notable effect of colonialism, he tells us, was that it provided the colonies access to British financial flows, which entered these regions as vast pools of capital ready to be invested. That, coupled with the sound governance

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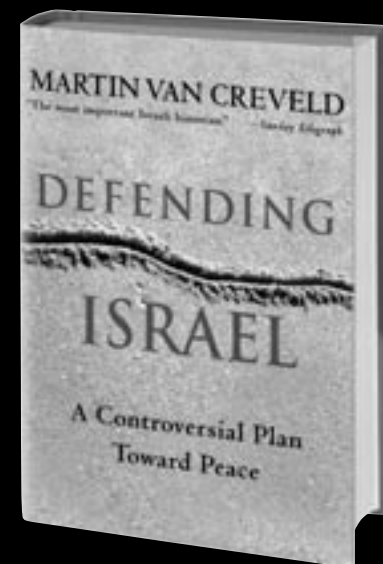
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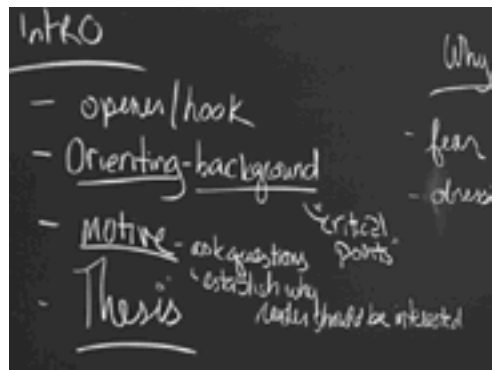
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that the masters provided, was the real benefit of the empire, one which would not have otherwise been available.

Once again, Ferguson manages to steer clear of the facts. The most striking fact about British capital flows in the Victorian era is how *little* of it went to the colonies. Ferguson reports that around 40 percent of British investments went to the colonies in these years. But the vast bulk of the money was flowing to the colonies of recent settlement—the self-governing colonies of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Only a small fraction went to the areas that Ferguson pretends to be talking about, namely, the dependent colonies in Asia and Africa, where the “experiment” of independence has failed. More than 70 percent of all the money that went to “the empire” was flowing to the colonies of recent settlement, leaving slightly more than a quarter—some 10 percent of total foreign investment—to be split between Asia and Africa. By comparison, the free countries of South and Central America—who did not have the good fortune of being subjugated by the British—did better than the colonies, as of course did the dominions. These facts, well known since Paish’s report at the turn of the century, have been confirmed by every major study of the past five decades.

Financial investors were, then, far more impressed by independent Latin America as an investment outlet than by the tropical colonies in Asia and Africa. Ferguson may be right in saying that England was not a drain on colonial wealth—though scholarly debate on this issue continues. But it is quite clear that the inverse of this argument—that the colonies were a magnet for British wealth—is not true.

In any case, there is no reason to focus so narrowly on numbers. The more important issue is the wider set of policies that characterized British colonialism and their economic effects. Here, Ferguson simply rehearses the standard neoliberal litany: since property rights were respected, fiscal prudence exercised, and open trade practiced, the imperial order was the best that the dependencies could have had it.

But in the Victorian era, high tariffs were strongly associated with high growth rates. Paul Bairoch made this observation years ago, and Kevin O’Rourke has recently confirmed it. It is consistent with the more general fact, well known to historians for generations, that all developed economies relied on subsidies and tariffs for substantial periods during their initial industrialization. So while Ferguson assumes, without fact or argument, that the enforcement of a free-trade regime was beneficial to the colonies, we would seem on surer ground assuming the opposite, as did the nationalists whom he so consistently disparages.

In countries that developed in the 19th century, the state took an active and strategic role in the local economy—this was not the neoliberal’s night-watchman state. But, then, colonial states weren’t especially good night watchmen. They actively maintained policies to promote colonial and not local needs. So in the case of India, Ferguson’s exemplar, the main goals were threefold: to use India as the lynchpin of imperial defense policy, to keep the country open for British exports, and to siphon off its export receipts to London

so England could balance its external account. Fulfilling these goals meant, as a standard history of the colonial economy explains, that “administrative concerns took precedence over development initiatives.” In fact, the main effect of colonial policy was undoubtedly a *deflationary* one, as a consequence of low tariffs, high exchange rates (to encourage imports) and a massive military budget, most of which was spent abroad. Indeed, the very book that Ferguson relies on to make his case, by Tirthankar Roy, shows that the development expenditures of the colonial state *declined* over time. We can do no better than to echo Tomlinson’s conclusion, that “the advances that were made in India . . . were largely achieved in spite of the inertia created by an administration that ruled in economic matters by a mixture of benign and maligned neglect.”

With regard to self-determination, Ferguson maintains that the British bequeathed two critical legacies to their colonies: the idea of liberty, and the parliamentary institutions associated with democracy. Here, Ferguson is on firmer historical ground: democratic norms and institutions did migrate from England to its colonies. But as a defense of colonialism, this fact cannot suffice. For that, it needs to be shown that stable democratic institutions would not have emerged without British colonialism. But while the link to England may have been important for the parliamentary *form* of democracy, there is no reason to fix on one institutional form of democracy. The relevant issue is whether democracy would have emerged, whatever its form, and Ferguson gives us no reason for doubts on this score. There was no British tutelage of, say, Brazil, or Costa Rica, or Chile, all of which moved toward a more executive-centered democracy rapidly in the early 20th century. Of course, these countries had a colonial history, but hardly one that is congenial to Ferguson’s theory—unless he wants to make a case for Spanish and Portuguese colonialism as being liberal in nature. So even without British colonialism, some kind of movement for popular rights would likely have emerged in the developing world through the course of the past century or so. It could have been derailed, to be sure—but this possibility should be weighed against the horrible devastation wrought by colonial “good governance.” Why, then, insist that the minions should be happy to have suffered under colonial rule?

Ferguson makes it sound as if colonial authorities stuck around basically because they were readying their wards for self-rule. And it is easy to find lengthy disquisitions from Macaulay, Churchill, Smuts, and the like to this effect. Indeed, whenever he feels compelled to present evidence for his view, Ferguson quotes from them, rather than referring to the historical record. We very quickly encounter Churchill enunciating the general principle behind British colonialism: “to reclaim from barbarism fertile regions and large populations . . . to give peace to warring tribes” and so on. Soon thereafter, Macaulay is drafted to the campaign, declaring, “never will I attempt to avert or to retard” Indian self-rule, which, when it comes, “will be

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the proudest day in Indian history.”

Once demands for self-rule emerged in Asia and Africa, authorities responded with violence. From the early decades of the 20th century, progress toward self-rule proceeded in lockstep with the strength of the movements demanding it. But Ferguson makes no reference at all to either the massive independence movements that finally rid the world of British colonialism, or to the quality of the British response to them. But even the briefest consideration of these phenomena undermines the notion that the colonizers were educating the “natives” in the ways of self-rule.

In omitting this political dynamic, Ferguson obscures perhaps the most important aspect of the story behind institutional transfer. British resistance to independence movements was not exclusively military. When confronted with anti-colonial mobilizations, the British would make political concessions on the one hand, while taking steps to divide the opposition on the other. In India, the divide-and-rule strategy exploited existing religious divisions by communalizing the vote. From the passage of the Minto-Morley reforms in 1909, the advancement of the independence movement also brought in train a deepening of Hindu-Muslim tensions, as electoral mobilization—limited though the elections were—pitted communities against each other.

This maneuver was part of the deeply conservative core of colonial administrative techniques, which mobilized—and thus amplified—local traditions of rule and regulation. For the British, the central dilemma, as Mahmood Mamdani has reminded us, was to figure out how “a tiny and foreign minority [can] rule over an indigenous majority.” The natural strategy was to rely heavily on local elites—tribal chiefs, landlords, and especially the priestly strata—and thereby reinforce the symbolic, cultural, and legal traditions that sanctioned rule by these elites. In India, it meant using local caste and religious divisions and giving them a salience that they had never enjoyed before. In Africa, this entailed a splintering of civil law and political rights on ethnic and tribal criteria, relying ever more strongly on the despotic rule of chiefs and hardening indigenous linguistic and cultural divisions.

Consider the process of hardening in the case of equatorial Africa, Ferguson’s preferred target for re-colonization. Chiefs were certainly in place before the British arrival. But in pre-colonial times, chiefly power was circumscribed and balanced by both lateral checks—consisting of kinsmen, administrative functionaries, and clan bodies—and vertical checks, consisting of village councils and public assemblies. These institutions did not by any means democratize pre-colonial polities; but they did impose real social constraints on chiefly rule and thus imbue it with a degree of legitimacy. The chief was the paramount power, but his power was constantly negotiated with peers and subordinates.

Colonial rule either severely weakened or simply dissolved these social constraints. The colonial authorities needed to have clearly identifiable nodes of power through which they could exercise their rule, and these local functionaries could not be accountable to anyone but the colonizer. So the clan bodies, village councils,

and public assemblies were either dissolved or made toothless against the chiefs. What remained was a stern, vertical line of authority from the colonial office, though the district administrator, to the chief—all according to London’s desires. Locally, the indigenous state structure was turned into what Mamdani has appropriately called a decentralized despotism, as chiefs were endowed with unprecedented power.

Having stripped away the checks to chiefly power, and thus the main sources of its legitimacy, the British were now confronted with the task of finding new means of making it stable. For this, they turned to customary law—with appropriate changes, decided as ever in London. The effect was that colonial rule preserved and hardened traditional structures of authority and group membership. Tribal membership now determined access to land, tax rates, and the entire gamut of rights enjoyed by African peasants. Tribal membership and identity became the primary sources of welfare—and also, by extension, a principal basis of political mobilization. Group membership of this sort in turn became a significant resource for anti-colonial movements, from the Maji Maji, to the Mau Mau, to the end of South African Apartheid. It also, not unsurprisingly, outlasted the colonial era and was the gift that the British left behind for the new governments to handle.

Ferguson seems clueless about this legacy. Colonial authorities of course did not *invent* caste divisions, tribalism, or religious fundamentalism. But there is little doubt that, prior to colonial rule, these divisions and religious identities were far more fluid. Left alone, they would have evolved in unpredictable ways through local negotiation and contestation over the course of time and through the formation of a central state. But the British enforced them with a vigor that was altogether new to the colonies. Far from revolutionizing local political traditions, imperial authorities rested on them and used them for their own ends. When we add this imposition to the very conscious strategy of divide and rule, it is impossible to avoid implicating colonialism in the hardening of indigenous divisions.

If the British gave the colonies parliamentary institutions, then, they also left behind the racialized, communalized, tribalized states within which the former were embedded, and which have consistently undermined the vitality of self-rule.

This double legacy suggests two alternative, though not incompatible, conclusions. The first is that the colonial legacy was a poisoned pill, bequeathing limited organs for self rule and also a host of institutions that subverted self-government. The second—stronger and more disturbing—conclusion is that if, as I have suggested, democracy was on the historical agenda anyway, then the legacy most specifically associated with colonial rule is a tribalized and communalized state, consciously created by colonial rule, and designed for precisely the divisive effects it has generated. In either case, we have compelling reason to reject Ferguson’s claim that the success of democratic institutions in the ex-colonies owes to the colonial legacy. It is far more accurate to say that what success we have seen of democratic self-rule in the ex-colonies has come about, not *because* of colonialism, but *in spite* of it.

The calamitous results of British rule should not surprise us. Colonialism was rule by an alien, despotic power, lacking local legitimacy, and utterly unaccountable to the local population. In such a situation, it was predictable that the rulers would use administrative instruments to weaken potential resistance, rather than to tutor in civic norms, and mask their assertions of power in the guise of “good

disasters it left behind. Having elevated imperial history to the mythical realm of good governance, Ferguson eliminates the predictable violence of colonialism as well as any structural relation between British rule and the postcolonial order. If there was violence, repression, underdevelopment, tribal and communal statecraft, it was a product of “sins of omission”—as he pleasingly puts it—a result of the British

Remarkably, in Ferguson’s analysis, colonial rule gets all the credit for the things that went right but none of the blame for the disasters it left behind.

governance.” Postcolonial pathologies were a natural consequence of normal colonial rule.

Ferguson’s inability to understand this is striking. And it is what lurks behind the remarkable sleight of hand that he performs in his political analysis: colonial rule gets all the credit for the things that went right but none of the blame for the

falling short of their own noble ideals.

This blindness to the causal link between colonialism and its pathologies drives Ferguson’s equally facile conclusions about America’s own 200-year imperial history. Ferguson knows that history, and what troubles him most about it is that American imperialists, unlike their British cousins, have never stuck around in the

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countries they have invaded—at least not long enough to pursue the same noble ideals that drove the British. Indeed, for Ferguson, the largest failing of American empire is a kind of attention-deficit disorder. Americans have never admitted to themselves that they wield an empire. So instead of accepting their civilizing mission, they abjure it; instead of colonizing countries that “will not correct themselves”—as he puts it in his schoolmasterly way—they seek to dictate from afar.

Leave aside for the moment the untenable assumptions about the civilizing motivations and effects of the British predecessors, and attend, once again, to the facts that Ferguson mobilizes. Have America’s own interventions, with their own record of bloody devastation, fallen short of their virtuous effects because they failed to turn into long-term occupations? In response to this question, Ferguson engages in more serious historical argument, but in so doing, undermines his own case.

As to motivations, Ferguson shows that, as far as the developing world is concerned, American foreign-policy elites have not shown much interest in their victims’ economic development or democratic enhancement. He insists that noble motives were at work, with the usual reference to Wilsonian internationalism. But he finds that alongside this, “older imperialist impulses continued to work.” As his narrative unfolds, it becomes pretty clear that the “older impulses” were not just working alongside the high-minded internationalism but were undermining it at every turn. We are shown that economic and strategic considerations, not high-minded internationalism, dictated imperial policy toward Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Honduras—where by the 1920s, “any pretense of interest in democratic government was abandoned” by the United States, which was more concerned with the well-being of United Fruit. Indeed, we are told that the United States not only intervened to overthrow democratically elected governments when they interfered with imperial interests, but that when “left-wing governments were overthrown with American assistance or approval, they were generally replaced by military dictatorships whose murderous conduct did nothing to endear the United States to Hispanic-Americans.”

These observations completely undercut Ferguson’s central argument: what difference would it have made if the Americans had stayed on as colonizers if their motives were to set up “a decent place for the National City Bank Boys to collect revenues in”? How would “staying the course” have helped to promote democracy or the rule of law?

Let us consider the two countries that the United States did occupy as colonies in the 20th century, Haiti and the Philippines. How do these cases figure in Ferguson’s argument? Hardly at all. From reading *Colossus*, one would not know that the United States occupied Haiti for almost 20 years and the Philippines for close to a half-century. This neglect is unfortunate, because the benefits of good governance and institutional transfer would surely be most evident here, where Americans had the power—and the long-term engagement—they lacked elsewhere. It might have been illuminating to examine how, as a colonial power, the United States was

Cloud of Witnesses

Day’s cage again and this time I try for a breeze,
I open a window to the east and a window to the west and I think
that this is something like the holly that lifts its blood-
fruit bright to the morning sun, to the afternoon sun,
to the evening breeze though with less fervor,
and I think the phone will ring. It always has. It is not ashamed of this,
its function, like the hollyberries in their naked plenty
which bob and weave, the bees which,
seeking their gilded herm, their bone-skep pene-
trate and stop at one single point, as light in certain media.
I crave the aftersilence. Angry buzz as night falls:
that artificial sun, a carnegie of lovers. I had rather been weeping.
It is beautiful. It is almost fearfully beautiful.
It is most fearsomely beautiful. I am still thinking, I am still waiting
for the phone to ring. The holly plays host to its spare nation.
If I believed you what would change. Tell me.

—G. C. Waldrep

able to achieve substantially better results than it managed with the less committed invasions of Central and South America. Unfortunately, however, Ferguson does not explore the differences between Nicaragua’s Somoza, the misbegotten spawn of a half-hearted imperial effort, and Haiti’s “Papa Doc” Francois Duvalier, the legitimate progeny of a fully committed colonial occupation.

Of course, the fact of colonization made no difference to the results, at least not of a kind that would be congenial to Ferguson’s argument. The virtuous outcomes of sustained occupation have never materialized because the occupations were used to undermine any efforts toward such ends. In this respect, the American record conforms to the record of British colonialism. But just as Ferguson can’t make the connection between British colonialism and the devastation it wrought, so too is he blind to the forces behind, and consequences of, the American counterpart.

Bad things, it seems, just happen to follow these empires around.

Pace Ferguson, America’s reluctance to follow in Britain’s footsteps does not derive from a national lack of resolve (whatever that might mean). It is, rather, a consequence of the United States being a latecomer to the game on a genuinely global level. As Ferguson seems to recognize, nothing in American history suggests a squeamishness about the nasty business of conquest. It’s just that, for the first hundred years or so, there was so much to conquer in North America. Westward expansion involved considerable annexation of Mexican territory, not to mention the annihilation of Native American tribes. A rapidly expanding frontier and, more importantly, a burgeoning national market, provided more than enough opportunity for profit; on the other hand, the same expansion consumed considerable political and military energy. America was interested in imperialism, but empire began at home.

This much Ferguson appears to understand. What puzzles and frustrates him is that the process was not continued with appropriate vigor in the 20th century (aside from the admirable efforts in Haiti and the Philippines). But there is nothing to puzzle over, if we appreciate the history of 20th-century colonialism. The British empire came to an end because independence movements made its continuation impossible. These movements make no real appearance in Ferguson’s account, and he seems genuinely not to understand their significance. This is why he so coolly enjoins American elites to embrace the venture, wondering all the while why they don’t. What he fails to confront is that the independence movements are not just of historical significance, but are symptomatic of a deeper phenomenon, which makes any future colonial projects impossible.

This phenomenon, of course, is the emergence of national identities and a deep sense of national rights. Colonial empires might have been possible in the 18th and 19th centuries, prior to the emergence of strong national identities; but they became increasingly untenable as such identities came into being and basic notions of self-determination took root. For countries that had annexed territory in the preceding two centuries, the only real option was to fight for as long as seemed possible and then arrange an orderly retreat. But it made no sense for a country, operating in a world of nationalist movements and convictions, to assume the costs of colonial occupation. Britain operated differently from the United States as a global power not because of a remarkable national capacity for sustained attention but because of the pre-nationalist world in which British colonialism operated. Given the changes in the world, the United States adopted a prudent and effective strategy of ruling through intermediaries, quislings, or friendly autocrats.

The proposition that the United States could embark on a colonial enterprise today, with national identities arguably more

powerful than ever, is mind-boggling. No peoples will accept a military occupation for any length of time, especially by the United States. Ferguson clearly doesn’t wish that American colonizers limit themselves to occupying only countries that invite their own colonization. But uninvited colonization *cannot but* take a despotic form. Confronted from the outset by a vast and growing popular opposition to their presence, American occupiers will have to rely overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, on military rule.

Sound familiar? The devastation now being wrought on Iraq exemplifies the essential problem with the new colonialism. Where does Ferguson think the venture will succeed, if it is being torn apart by a nation already in tatters from a brutal sanctions regime and bled dry by its own dictator? He seems to hold out hope that, once stabilized, the occupation will rest on an alliance with local elites recruited to the job. But what kind of legitimacy will any such regime enjoy? Any ruling government colored by the tint of collaboration will face unceasing opposition, because the opposition will have strong incentives to argue that any objectionable policy is really a result of subordination to the occupying power. The current situation in Iraq has historical parallels, but not of the kind Ferguson would like to see. Iraq isn’t a modern replay of the initial stages of colonial rule—the military phase of pacification, to be followed by the onset of stable indirect rule. Rather, the popular anti-colonial resistance, which historically signaled the terminus of colonial rule, has emerged in its earliest stages. The political dispensation to follow will be either stable or colonial, but not both.

Over the course of the 20th century, members of the American foreign-policy establishment understood the importance of nationalism and appreciated, as a rule, that the days of formal empire and annexation were over. So they devised a vast apparatus for wielding political and economic influence, steering states in a direction consistent with American interests, while leaving the formal apparatus of rule in local hands. That strategy was remarkably effective. In terms of its economic and strategic payoffs, the American empire has been at least as successful as its predecessor. Not only has its elite avoided formal empire, there has been no *need* for it.

If arguments like Ferguson’s are now enjoying wide currency today, it is an understandable reflex of a culture and an elite drunk with power: proof of Acton’s dictum about the corruptions produced by absolute power. Visions of Rome, British Viceroys and grand processions, the benevolent *babus* tutoring their hapless and childlike wards—these are the fantasies of an imperial elite suddenly finding itself without peer. And this explains the popularity of Ferguson’s history. For what he offers is not an analysis of empires past and present, but empire’s *self-image*—buffed and manicured. Until recently, such fantasies were expressed mainly by the far right, or in the laments of despondent Oxbridge dons. But with the new cabal of neocons in power, and a new imperial project seemingly underway, such fantasies resonate powerfully with elite moods.

Such fantasies would be amusing, were they not so dangerous to the rest of us. ♦