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 a liberal empire.

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 institutionizes, 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 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 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 is not well equipped to take on the task. It lacks the experience, Ferguson suggests, to “catalyze African democracy.” Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the United States being a benevolent colonial power.

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.

Colossus 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 for 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 Sepahai 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—as colonial rule necessarily produced such outcomes? Was succumbing to external rule the price that colonies had to pay for democracy and modernity?

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 rule. Any regime that was subjected to 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, at least minimized, if authorities intervene early enough. But droughts do 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, however, the Indians 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 his-
tory. Their severity, and the role of colonial authorities in the pattern of disaster, has been brought to light by Mike Davis in his stunning book Late Victorian Holocaus.

Even before the onset of the Victorian famines, warning signals were in place: C. Walford showed in 1787 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 tomislav ljudis, the number of famines in the areas of colonial rule of the 1870s was 10% 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 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 were strained at the ex-

We need not concede to Ferguson that British colonialism fostered economic growth in the colonies or encouraged the transition 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 ef-

When it comes to the putative eco-
nomic benefits of empire, Ferguson is a garden-variety neoliberal. Imperialism was great because it promoted the integra-
tion of markets and subordinated indige-
nous 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 lo-
cal 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 imprinture of international, espe-
cially British, investors. Financial manag-
ers, 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 fi-
nancial flows, which entered these regions as vast pools of capital ready to be invested. That, coupled with the sound governance

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THE GOOD EMPIRE

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India, Ferguson’s exemplar, the main goals of the liberal and not local needs. So in the case 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 rehearse 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. When 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 Ferguson ruling of colonial policy was undoubtedly a defunctary 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 in 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 greatly achieved by the instruments created by an administration that ruled in economic matters by a mixture of benign and malign 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 leaves 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 colonial histories, 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 delayed, 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 reach the stage where Churchill enumerating 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
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 predictably in the wake of the movements demanding it. But Ferguson makes no reference to all of the massive independence movements that finally rid the world of British colonialism, or to the quality of the British response to them. Biologically, the best 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’s obscures perhaps the most important effect of the history 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 colonial 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 diaspora 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 indigenized 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 asserting Hindu–Muslim tensions 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, while taking steps to divide the opposition on the other. The divide-and-rule strategy undermined the vitality of self-rule.

Ferguson seems clueless about this legacy. Colonial authorities of course did not create 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 evoked 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 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 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 disasters it left behind.

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.

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

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Good Empire

THE
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, light in certain media.
I crave the after silenced. Angry buzz as night falls:
that artificial sun, a Carnegie of lovers. I had rather been reading.
It is beautiful. It is almost fearfully beautiful.
It is most fearlessly beautiful. I am still thinking, I am still waiting
for the phone to ring. The holly plays host to its sparse nation.
If I believed you what would change. Tell me.

—G.C. Waldrep

This much Ferguson appears to un-
derstand. 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 indepen-
dence movements made its continuation impossible. These movements make no
real appearance in Ferguson’s account, and he seems genuinely not to under-
stand their significance. This is why he so coolly enjoys American elites to embrace
the venture, wondering all the while why they don’t. What he fails to confront is
that 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 defs
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 ter-
ritories in the preceding two centuries, the only real option was to fight for as long as
seemed possible and then arrange an or-
derly 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
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
would succeed, if it is being torn apart by
the job. But what kind of legitimacy will
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