

Plan B: Bring hungry cannibal to encourage dealer's cooperation.



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# Imperialism: Doing it right

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For most Americans, the word "empire" has a distinctly bad odor. From an early age, Americans learn that the United States was a country that coalesced around the rejection of empire. That is, to put it mildly, a questionable interpretation of what happened, but regardless of historical accuracy, it's what many, many Americans believe to be true. Ever since independence, the United States has tended to define itself as anti-imperial. Even in World War II, when Americans were staunch allies of the British and French, the goals of the Roosevelt administration were anti-imperial. We Americans would help the Brits and the French repel the Nazis, but we would not countenance the continuance of direct British and French rule over their colonies in Africa and Asia.

To be sure, there have been exceptions to anti-imperialism. The ardent promoters of 19th century Manifest Destiny spoke of an American empire spanning the North American continent, and at that century's end, men like Theodore Roosevelt were unabashedly in favor of acquiring colonies. But after a brutal war against Philippine insurgents at the turn of the 20th century, the United States lost its stomach for the more brutal and pedestrian aspects of running an empire. Conquest was one thing, but governing another people thousands of miles away, to even the more ardent American imperialists, was unpalatable.

The United States is in a similar quandary today: We are able to muster some enthusiasm for conquest but little for governing. We win wars; we lose occupations. This bothers Niall Ferguson, a respected, controversial British historian and commentator. It bothers him not because he considers imperial conquest immoral but because he believes that it confers certain responsibilities and obligations that the British embraced and that the Americans shirk.

Ferguson has written a swath of books on subjects such as the Rothschild family saga and World War I. He is a professor at not one but two universities (Oxford and New York University) and is an intellectual of considerable standing in Britain and the United States, writing widely for newspapers and magazines. He is a young Tory who has staked out an unusual turf as an advocate for a new wave of imperialism, and he has de facto inherited the mantle of Paul Johnson, who more than a decade ago declared sub-Saharan Africa a basket case and called for a re-introduction of Western rule.

Today, Ferguson makes a similar, though more subtle, case. The United States, he believes, has a unique opportunity to use its power for good in the world, but only if it embraces what it has historically rejected: the model of the British Empire. Written as a companion to a television series that aired in England and lacking the visual oomph of the series, "Empire" is nevertheless an entertaining, engaging romp through four centuries of British imperialism. Ferguson cannot and does not pretend to tell stories that haven't been told before. Instead, he uses the familiar narrative of British conquest abroad as the basis for a very present-day polemic about what the British Empire can teach the Americans.

The world today, he argues, is largely "the product of Britain's age of Empire," and the United States is the uneasy heir to the throne. Like the British in the 18th and 19th centuries, the United States can, Ferguson avers, "do a very great deal to impose its values on less technologically advanced societies."

The bulk of the book is a description of just how Britain did that. Ferguson may have an agenda (and frankly, it's refreshing that this agenda is so explicit; it is tiring to read ostensibly neutral narrative only to discover a hidden polemic), but he also has great verve as a storyteller. He charts the rise of Britain from "an economically unremarkable, politically fractious and strategically second-class country" in 1615 to a world empire two centuries later. The empire began as an extension of British commerce into North America, the Caribbean and South Asia. It soon involved not just commerce but colonization, followed by conflict with other imperial powers,

such as the Dutch, the Spanish and, of course, the French.

The second half of the 18th century was a difficult time for the empire. The British lost a large swath of North America to the Revolution, though it retained Canada, and the French Revolution followed by the Napoleonic Wars taxed resources. Ferguson astutely punctures American self-importance by pointing out that the Colonists who staged the American Revolution had more freedom and paid fewer taxes than almost anyone in the world. He also notes that the British were not eager to fight the Colonists as ruthlessly as the situation demanded and that, in the overall scheme of the British Empire, the 13 Colonies were far less lucrative than the sugar plantation islands of the Caribbean.

Ferguson then guides us on a grand romp through the 19th century. Queen Victoria, Stanley and Livingstone, the Raj, Cecil Rhodes, Gladstone and Joseph Chamberlain all have their moments in Ferguson's sun. He shows that there was often a strong current of Protestant evangelical fervor to the spread of the empire, especially in Africa, and he makes an implied parallel with the missionary zeal of Americans today to make the world in their image. He offers droll sidebars on sports and the legacy of exporting cricket and soccer to the colonies. "For years to come," he writes, "the English habit of losing to colonial teams would help knit Greater Britain together."

Ferguson highlights the central role of military technology (and specifically the Maxim gun) in Britain's military success. He does not brush aside the brutality of imperialism, but his larger point is that the destruction of the tribal or traditional societies, whether by force of arms or by dint of disease, led to the introduction of British law, mores, liberalism and democracy.

To those who contend that British imperialism impoverished much of what is now the developing world, Ferguson says that, to the contrary, empire was enriching. Because India and many parts of Africa were under the direct rule of Britain, the British, Americans and Europeans felt safe investing in businesses in the colonies. Contrast that with today, he says, when most businesses and private enterprise are loath to invest in developing countries for fear that there will be no stable government or legal authorities to enforce contracts.

Though many ex-colonies have not thrived in the second half of the 20th century, Ferguson contends that just as many have thrived and that former British colonies are much more likely to be successful, stable democracies than former French, Portuguese or Dutch colonies. He also argues that Britain's "wartime alliance with the U.S. was a suffocating embrace" that led to a premature end to the empire, before its full benefits could be conferred on the colonies. While the empire made it possible for Britain to defeat the fascism of the Nazis, it did not survive the relentless pressure of the Americans.

Gently in the book, and not so gently in some recent essays, Ferguson contends that the United States today would be advised to learn from the British Empire. Given the overwhelming power of the U.S., it is an imperial power whether it likes it or not, and Ferguson chides Americans for not embracing the burdens and responsibilities that come with such power.

It is easy to argue with Ferguson. His revisionist defense of the British Empire as a source of good in the world will strike many Americans as deeply conservative and elitist. And yet his insistence that empire confers duties has to be taken seriously. In two years, or six years, the current occupants of the White House will be gone, but the United States will still have unrivaled economic and military might. For the foreseeable future, what the United States does or refuses to do has global ramifications. At present, Americans seem to have recognized that they have the power to remove governments they find threatening. Some Americans celebrate that; others are profoundly disturbed by it.

In the last few years, we Americans have started to recognize that we have power globally but not that we have responsibilities every bit as demanding. We have two choices: We can learn from the mistakes and successes of the British, or we can make our own mistakes in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere that will take years and hundreds of billions of dollars to correct. Ferguson's book costs \$35 and can be read in a week.

