

Book Review

Niall Ferguson

Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power
New York: Basic Books, 2003

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

None but the most egregiously naïve can doubt any longer that the United States is the geopolitical centre of a vast technological empire, the largest and most powerful to date. Just in time, too! For, if critics like Gore Vidal are to be believed, the US domination of the globe will be one of the shortest-lived and most disastrous in human history.¹ An old witticism has it that the USA is the only nation to have gone from barbarism to decadence without an intervening period of civilization. On this view, internal social breakdown awaits what S. M. Lipset famously called “the first new nation,” and the wait will not be long.² If, however, a crippling domestic debt, a perilous balance of trade, internal political turmoil arising out of a chronic failure to deal with racism and exacerbated by increasing economic disparity between rich and poor, the crushing of civil liberties under the heel of a growing national security state, to say nothing of ongoing environmental degradation do not combine to destroy the empire from within, there are plenty of latter-day Vandals and Visigoths ready to do mischief from without. All in all, in Vidal’s view, it seems that just when Americans seemed willing to admit to the drive to empire that symbolically started with the passage of the National Security Act in 1947, the wheels are coming off the imperial machinery and the US is quickly becoming the victim of its own success.³ The only way around it would seem to be a transformation of metaphor as profound as the world-wide transformation of technology. The hope for future imperial dreams must involve the junking of machinery and the virtual embrace of electronics.

All empires, of course, have their particular similes and slogans as well as their material interests. The recently proclaimed Bush Doctrine (which has actually been the pet project of Vice-President Cheney and his colleagues for a couple of decades) is nothing new. It merely extends the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 from the Western Hemisphere to the entire globe. It is the manifest destiny of the United States to make the world safe for democracy, market capitalism, the rule of law and, of course, the United States. If, as Michael Whealen relates elsewhere in this issue, foreign analysts such as Alain Joxe are sceptical of America’s ability to pull this off, the British historian Niall Ferguson is even more worried that those sceptics may be right. To Ferguson, the problem with the United States is not that it is too committed to imperial hegemony, but that it is not committed enough. Its attention span is too short. It wants to get in, fix things and get out. Americans have not truly accepted the “white man’s burden.”

A quick glimpse at the Persian Gulf and its environs strongly hint at the problem. Having effected a regime change in Afghanistan, the United States declined the project of social reconstruction and tried to ride away uncompromised by the messy business of “nation-building.” Accordingly, in the wake of its departure, the opium trade has resumed and has pretty much reached its pre-Taliban levels. Women are still absent from public view. Violent clashes among contesting indigenous forces are common. Moreover, *mirabile dictu*, today (May, 2003) the US has more soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan than it did at the height of the battle.

Meanwhile, in Iraq, headlines in my local newspaper speak of a Baghdad prostitute's joy at the return of the freedom to ply her trade, while bemoaning the delay in establishing a semblance of law and order⁴. Moreover, weeks after action was called for, a group of officials only recently met in Lyon, France, to consider drawing up an inventory of Iraqi antiquities to assist Interpol in tracking down the treasures looted in plain view of US troops as the regime change was haphazardly being carried out. And, of course, again at the time of this writing, Washington's former freedom fighters, Osama bin Ladin and Saddam Hussein, are missing and presumed ... well, to be missing. Things are not going smoothly. Whence Iran? Whence Saudi Arabia? What to do? What to do?

Niall Ferguson can tell us. The British, he has pointed out, did not truly civilize Iraq during their occupation. How could they? They had less than half a century to do the job. That the US could waltz in, drop a few bombs, appoint an interim leadership and withdraw successfully in a couple of years is implausible at best. It is the plot of a Hollywood action film, not the administration of an empire. Even given the telescoping of time associated with modern technology (and with information technology in particular) subject peoples cannot be turned into responsible citizens in so slim a slice of history. This is just not the way imperialism needs to be done. American hopes to the contrary, the whole world is not quite in thrall to fast food, Disney World and the NASDAQ. It isn't that exotic populations are not susceptible to seduction by the joys and toys of the West, but they have to be taught, and teaching takes time.

Ferguson's main complaint, however, is not merely that the US is too impatient to dispense the delicious treats of freedom and democracy and then move on to the next target, it is that the US does not understand the authentic worth of its product.

The great and true benefit of imperialism is the bestowal of law and order on subject nations. The "lesser breeds without the law," the barbarians "beyond the pale" were not so named by happenstance. Cruelty, prejudice, superstition, tribalism, misogyny and assorted "traditional" customs and beliefs added up to what Edward Banfield disdainfully called "the moral basis of a backward society." They were all aspects of what modern progressives would like to root out in the interests of both the global economy and of the people who live in conditions of squalor, ignorance, oppression and fear. And the key to a healthy, modern polity with civil rights and economic opportunities for all is the imposition of the rule of law ... just, fair and, most importantly, predictable. I am not (believe me) being wholly disingenuous. I agree with the British Marxist historian E. P. Thompson, who affirmed that "the rule of law is an unqualified human good." Indeed, St. Paul himself once boasted that he was born free, which was to say that he was born a Roman citizen, which had considerable legal advantages. Who can top that?

George W. Bush (or, rather, the people who supply him with his ideas) is akin to St. Paul and both want to extend the benefits of civilization to human groups that will learn, eventually, to appreciate them. What Ferguson wishes to do is to impress upon the US authorities (governmental, military and corporate) the grave danger that comes from *imperius interruptus*. It leads to dissatisfaction, frustration and a singular absence of progeny. So, just before the first US war against Iraq, the Israeli philosopher, Shlomo Avineri wrote in the left-wing American journal *Dissent*, perhaps the Allies do not understand that the war against Saddam, if it succeeds, will have to be total war. This is a harsh and terrifying vision, but it is hard to avoid it because the West was almost impervious to the real problem of the Arab world."⁵ His worry was

prescient. The Americans went in. The Americans pulled out. Kuwait was “saved” but rebellious Kurds, Shi’ites and dissenting Sunni Muslims were massacred as the US stood silently by.

After twelve years of hideous sanctions and internal horror, it seems that Bush the younger has understood the need for total war better than his father (or maybe Dick Cheney merely had more influence on the younger man). What is also apparent, however, is that the West neither understands better nor cares any more about the underlying crisis of Arab culture and the enduring conflicts among religious fundamentalists, radical nationalists and feudal emirs with petrodollars wisely invested in western stock exchanges.⁶ It will be content with freely flowing oil, a makeshift peace in Palestine and some bracing of homeland security. With such limited vision, one almost feels nostalgic for Ferguson’s alternative, a British Empire where the sun never set but, of course, the blood never dried.

For Ferguson, the British Empire stands not as a relic, but as a model. It not only established the largest *formal* empire in history with over 20% of the earth’s land mass under its flag and almost 25% of the world’s population within its “commonwealth,” but it was also the very mother of all modernity. Its cultural gifts to the world over three centuries included democracy (though some ex-colonies have clearly become backsliders), capitalism (though some ex-colonies clearly lack a free market) and cricket (a true success, complete with tea and cucumber sandwiches). The US, with a little more poise and self-awareness, could do even better. To do so, however, demands that it stop being an “empire in denial,” guiltily carrying the burden of an “imperialism that dares not speak its name.”⁷

With Ferguson’s encouragement, the lie may be put to Vidal’s pessimism. The new imperialism may gain its voice as CNN goes global. It may learn to solve its fiscal problems by reinventing itself as a genuinely international presence, a post-national, centreless empire with its headquarters distributed throughout cyberspace. Emerging out of the United States, it may learn to export its class structure and to import genuinely third world status for its poor and minorities, thus “harmonizing” poverty as well as social programs, industrial health and safety standards, environmental laws and other tokens of civil society. It may even now be standing on the very brink of a new kind of hegemony based on cultural ascendancy, economic domination and military supremacy. A geographically anonymous metropolis, the entire world will be its hinterland, and all it will lack are borders and citizens.

¹ Vidal, G. 2000. *The Last Empire: Essays 1992-2000*. New York: Doubleday.

² Lipset, S. M. 1963. *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. New York: Basic Books.

³ See especially Vidal. *op. cit.* “Shredding the Bill of Rights” *ibid.* 3

⁴ Potter, M. 2003. “Iraqi prostitute revels in freedom to ply trade”. *Toronto Star*. May 3: A1, and Potter, M. 2003 “Chaos, crime reign in post-war Baghdad”. *Toronto Star*. May 9: A1.

⁵ Avineri, S. 1991. “Beyond Saddam: The Arab Trauma.” *Dissent*. Spring: 151.

⁶ Concern about religious “islamofascists” as described by Christopher Hitchens may be a little overdone. As one respected commentator points out: “In 22 Arab countries, after 20 years of trying, there has not been a single successful Islamist victory. There is no Islamist government in the Arab world.” See Dyer, G. 2002. “The Coming War”. *Queen’s Quarterly*. 109(4): 495. Hitchens views are succinctly put in Hitchens, C. 2001. “Minority Report: Of Sin, the Left & Islamic Fascism”. *The Nation*. September 24. <www.thenation.com>.

⁷ Quoted in Rubin, T. 2003. “The Empire Slinks Back: Why Americans don’t really have what it takes to rule the world”. *Philadelphia Inquirer*. May 2. <www.philly.com>.