

Colossus: The Price of America's Empire

Niall Ferguson

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“Unlike the majority of European writers who have written on this subject,” writes historian Niall Ferguson, “I am fundamentally in favor of empire.” In particular, Ferguson favors American empire, a term that he uses repeatedly, and without hesitation.

Ferguson has enjoyed great success as an author, lecturer and occasional television personality (the British documentary *Empire* featured the urbane academic discussing his most famous book), on account of his straightforward claims and erudite prose. But given that many Americans are extremely unwilling to accept even the suggestion that the United States is an empire—much less that it should be—one might expect Ferguson to soft-pedal the issue in the interest of retaining the reader's sympathy. Instead, he opts for the direct approach.

Ferguson asserts that the world would be better off if the United States admitted its imperial nature and set about managing its empire in a coherent and consistent manner. Thus, the challenge for Ferguson is not in understanding why America is an empire, but rather why Americans have such difficulty coming to grips with their imperial status. He borrows from Walter Lippmann in wondering whether American imperialism might be “more or less unconscious.”

Ferguson repeatedly berates Americans for their impatience, their short attention spans, and their concern about costs, including an alleged unwillingness to incur casualties on the battlefield. Accordingly, while Ferguson would like to be confident that events in Afghanistan and Iraq will turn out well, he admits that “it is far from clear as I write that the United States is capable of committing either the manpower or the time needed to make a success of its ‘nation building’ in Iraq, much less Afghanistan” (p. 28).

But his claim that fear of casualties dictates America's conduct of military operations is a gross oversimplification. America has risked the lives of millions in her history—but generally in the defense of perceived national interests. Indeed, America was born of anti-imperialism, and it is hard to imagine Americans giddily donning jodhpurs and pith helmets to instantiate the theories of a zealous Scottish academic.

With respect to the moral rectitude of empire, he is usually careful to conceal his feelings, but the cultural condescension that undergirds Ferguson's worldview occasionally peeks through. He leads Chapter 5, "The Case for Liberal Empire," with two quotes, one by the anti-imperialist Franklin Roosevelt, the other by Herbert Morrison, who in 1943 dismissed talk of granting "full self-government to the dependent colonies" as akin to "giving a child of ten a latch-key, a bank account, and a shot-gun."

Such language might offend the reader, but Ferguson does not shy from the implications. "Empire," Ferguson explains, "denotes . . . the extension of one's civilization, usually by military force to rule over other peoples" (p. 169). The question the chapter seeks to address "is whether or not it is correct to regard national independence—what Woodrow Wilson called self-determination—as a universally viable model" (p. 170).

Ferguson asks whether "for *some* countries some form of imperial governance, meaning a partial or complete suspension of their national sovereignty, might be better than full independence, not just for a few months or years, but for decades." But who will decide? Ferguson? "Enlightened" Westerners? Those with the most guns? And if it is true that decolonization has had, on net, negative effects for former imperial domains, it is certainly puzzling that very few people in those countries are begging to rejoin the empire.

Another flawed predicate of Ferguson's reasoning, one shared by many other advocates of American empire, is that America, and America alone, is capable of solving the globe's problems. "Bosnia and Kosovo," he writes, "had shown that American military leadership was the only effective solution to such challenges" (p. 164).

Ferguson is partly right here. The structure of the international system since the end of the Cold War moved quickly from a managerial unipolarity to an aggressive unipolarity. Neither an ambitious European Union nor a rising China can rival U.S. military power, and the zeal of the American government for military intervention abroad has precluded other sources of regional stability from arising. But to assume that this state of affairs must prevail is to ignore other possibilities.

Ferguson points to the British colony in Egypt as "the very model of what a liberal empire could do." The Egyptian experience proves, according to Ferguson, that "[t]here is in fact a great deal to be said for promising to leave—provided you do not actually mean it or do it" (p. 217). The British military presence in Egypt lasted 72 years, with 66 promises to leave. Ferguson's advocacy of a similar policy in Iraq is unlikely to find congenial audiences in the United States.

The policy of deception is necessary because “as in Iraq today, there was at least some popular opposition to a foreign occupation. . . . Egyptian resentment never went away” (p. 219). This resentment, of course, was squashed by violence. The concept of violence gets short shrift in Ferguson’s book, though it has been a central attribute of imperial history.

And this is where Ferguson’s analysis is sorely lacking. Ferguson’s model empire, the British one, enslaved and wrought unspeakable brutality on its subjects, leaving countless dead natives in its wake. If Ferguson believes that such slaughter is justified, he should present an argument. If he believes that empire can be “successfully” run without the widespread use of indiscriminate violence, he should argue that case. Ferguson’s sanitized version of empire is steeped far too heavily in Kipling, and somehow ignores the admonitions of Orwell (who is conspicuous in his absence from the book’s index).

Ferguson’s earlier book, *Empire*, presented the basics of his case for empire, but *Colossus* covers new ground in its treatment of the costs of the empire. One such cost is the vast expansion of an already massive military. Ferguson believes that there are more than enough Americans to staff a military large enough to police the sprawling empire. “If one adds together the illegal immigrants, the jobless and the convicts, there is surely ample raw material for a larger American army.” With those groups in mind, Ferguson cynically argues that “[r]eviving the draft would not necessarily be unpopular, so long as it was appropriately targeted” (p. 292).

Though he claims that the economic costs of running the empire have been low thus far (Iraq, for example, is only 0.8 percent of U.S. GDP), Ferguson sees trouble looming.

After brushing off the direct cost of empire, Ferguson identifies long-term structural imbalances in the U.S. economy, namely in the Medicare and Social Security programs, as a grave long-term threat to the imperial project. Ferguson’s training as an economic historian well equips him to point out the unsustainability of America’s addiction to wasteful entitlements. Relying heavily on Jagadeesh Gokhale’s research into the subject, the entire discussion will be painfully familiar to readers of the *Cato Journal*. Ferguson fears that “[t]he decline and fall of America’s undeclared empire may be due not to the terrorists at the gates or to the rogue regimes that sponsor them, but to a fiscal crisis of the welfare state at home” (p. 279).

Ferguson has plenty to be pessimistic about. Not only does he fear that Americans will reject his call for empire, he believes that the political will to correct the fiscal imbalances is lacking. After a fair reading of Ferguson’s work, readers should be much more concerned about the latter than the former.

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