

THE RIGHT QUAGMIRE

Searching history for an imperial alibi

By Greg Grandin

Discussed in this essay:

Colossus: The Price of America's Empire, by Niall Ferguson. Penguin, 2004. 400 pages. \$25.95.

Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power, by Niall Ferguson. Basic Books, 2003. 352 pages. \$35.

The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power, by Max Boot. Basic Books, 2002. 428 pages. \$16.

Historical analogies tend to be as fickle as flattery, as Washington has recently learned. The more the United States strives to attain the glories promised by its enthusiasts, the more it disappoints. Think of recent comparisons to World War II. In the yearlong buildup to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, no analogy was more favored by the Bush Administration and its neoconservative advisers than the liberation of Western Europe six decades earlier. Like their grandfathers in Paris and Rome, American G.I.s in Baghdad would be graciously received as freedom's foot soldiers. In the same way that the United States brought liberal democracy to Nazi Germany, so would it make the political desert bloom in the Middle East.

Behind such boosterism, however, neocons can barely conceal their contempt for a decadent American culture. When our politicians and opinion makers reacted to last spring's Abu Ghraib scandal and Fallujah uprising with the telltale signs of fear and self-doubt, the neocons answered with reproach. Fretting that America has become, as historian Max Boot put it in the *Los Angeles Times*,

Greg Grandin is a professor of history at New York University and the author of *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (University of Chicago Press).

"spoiled" by recent "bloodless victories," they again evoked World War II, but now to scold the American public for its lack of resolve. The "Royal Air



Force alone killed 80,000 children in German cities," the *Weekly Standard's* Christopher Caldwell told readers, with much of the bombing taking place after it was clear that the Allies had won. The problem in Iraq, then, is not that the United States is too brutal but that it isn't brutal enough. Washington's humanitarianism, complained Caldwell, prevents it from taking actions

that would "make Iraqis more receptive to the invasion."

Just as comparisons to World War II are sounding strained—either too vain or too gruesome—along comes Niall Ferguson, armed with his latest book, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*. Never mind the liberation of Europe, Ferguson tells us, the real analogy to America's current mission in the world is the British Empire.

Ferguson's argument in *Colossus* is clear enough: Empires, not sovereign nation-states, have been the executors of human progress, providing the steadiness and resolve needed to ensure that civilizations can take root and flourish. Ferguson admits that most empires are built upon plunder and butchery, but he contends that the liberal British Empire is history's exception (an argument he explored at greater length in last year's *Empire*, which now reads as a kind of prelude to *Colossus*). From the 1850s to the 1930s, London presided over an extraordinary integration of the world's capital, labor, and commodities; by imposing its rule of law, budgetary policies, currency, and "honest" administrative practices, Britain stimulated economic growth in its colonies. But after World War II, the stock of empire collapsed, devalued by a spreading faith in national sovereignty and universal democracy. The world, writes Ferguson, "embarked on an epochal experiment" and tested the "hypothesis that it was imperialism that caused both poverty and wars and that self-determination would ultimately pave the way to prosperity and peace." That experiment failed, according to Ferguson, as is revealed by the violence and destitution of so many formerly colonized nations.

The world today, Ferguson concludes, threatened as it is by pandemics, terrorists, and tyrants, needs a liberal empire to enforce stability, and the only candidate available is the United States. Washington can impose "democracy on 'rogue states'" without its resulting in what Paul Kennedy famously described as "imperial over-

stretch," a condition that occurs when an empire devotes too much of its finances to military objectives. Ferguson envisions a more harmonious imperial posture, whereby the United States agrees to oversee the creation of an integrated global market because it would profit from such a market; local elites submit to an American empire in exchange for the institutional steadiness needed to generate growth. Everybody wins.

As to what this benevolent empire would look like, apart from scattered references to the wonders of free trade, *Colossus* provides little insight. Many of our new imperialists conjure up visions of a world made prosperous and free by the twin blessings of open markets and democratic ideals, but about this latter topic Ferguson is mostly silent. On the pages of *Colossus* indexed under the subject heading "democratization/democracy," one is likely to find a discussion of "law and order," "military force," and "security." Ferguson, in fact, is fairly dismissive of democracy, fearing that it could unleash popular demands for a more equitable distribution of a nation's wealth. Conditions for economic growth, he maintains, are created not by universal suffrage but by secure governments, property rights, and free markets. Although Ferguson calls himself a liberal, his is more a Napoleonic liberalism than the political or even the economic sort. He prescribes a heavy dose of imperial command to make sure that governments remain orderly and obliging.

An "avid admirer of the United States who wants it to succeed in its imperial undertakings," Ferguson is too coy a flatterer to offer only compliments. America may surpass the military might of the British Empire at its apex, but an "absence of a will to power" could prevent Washington from living up to the example set by its predecessor. As a Scot, Ferguson critiques America's political culture with an air of detachment, avoiding the shrillness that often overcomes our homegrown imperialists. The content of his criticism, however, is hardly new. Instead of a buff Nietzschean *Übermensch*—captured by Ferguson with a loving description of Arnold

Schwarzenegger's physique—America is an immobile colossus, decadently obese, "consuming on credit, reluctant to go to the front line, inclined to lose interest in protracted undertakings." The "white man's burden," Ferguson says of the average American, "is around his waist."

This debt-laden, dangerously soft America, according to Ferguson, certainly lacks the willingness to stay in a country such as Iraq for the time needed to turn it into a "prosperous capitalist democracy." England's Oxbridge-educated mandarins dedicated their lives to "running infernally hot, disease-ridden countries"; America's "brightest and best aspire not to govern Mesopotamia but to manage MTV; not to rule the Hejaz but to run a hedge fund." Indecisive political leadership reinforces the native flaccidness. Were it not for Truman's dithering during the Korean War, *Colossus* relates, America might have crossed the Rubicon—perhaps nuking China, as MacArthur recommended—and thereby claimed its imperial mantle. Similarly, Ferguson reasons that the "growing power of liberalism" checked the United States in Vietnam, preventing it from fighting with the kind of unfailing ruthlessness needed to achieve victory.

Ferguson holds out hope that determined American leaders can overcome these many obstacles. The first step, he says, would be to rein in America's deficit by reducing spending on Social Security and Medicare. Although it is doubtful that such cuts would pry Yale and Harvard graduates away from the spoils of Wall Street, they would make the less privileged leaner and meaner, more willing to shoulder the burdens of empire. Just as poverty drove the Irish and Scots into Britain's colonial army, "illegal immigrants, the jobless," and "convicts" could help fill the ranks of Washington's imperial legion. Ferguson is especially enthusiastic about the possibility that African Americans might become "the Celts of the American empire." And once he dispenses with what here passes for social democracy, he sets his sights on political democracy. Successful empires, Ferguson writes, require "the resolve of the masters and the consent of the subjects."

An Oxford historian recently snatched up by Harvard after a brief stint at New York University, Ferguson has become the darling of the American media (*Time* magazine even designated him one of the world's most influential people). Ferguson is able to spin the minutiae of financial stats into colorful lay prose, and he seems to enjoy an open invitation from the op-ed pages of major newspapers. Like his contemporary Damien Hirst, the *enfant terrible* of the British art world, Ferguson has smartly built his career on sensationalism, abandoning the mundane methods of his early scholarship—which focused on correspondingly dull topics such as Hamburg monetary policy—to trade in speculative counterfactuals. His best-selling *Virtual History* invited historians to answer a series of mischievous "what if" questions: What if there had been no American Revolution? What if Nazi Germany had defeated the Soviet Union? Ferguson followed with the equally popular *The Pity of War*, arguing that had Britain stayed out of WWI not only would it have held on to its empire but Nazism, Bolshevism, and WWII all would have been averted. In *Colossus* he supplements his guesswork with questionable assertions based on contrived comparisons. When the book was published last spring, reviewers tended to excuse these distortions as the workings of a "brilliant" and "impish" provocateur (Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis, writing in the *New York Times*, forgave Ferguson for his numerous factual errors, pronouncing him an "imaginative scholar" whose ideas deserve "careful consideration").

Even when honestly played, historical reasoning by analogy is a mug's game. In Ferguson's hands the sport is like three-card monty. First we are told that Washington's mission in Iraq resembles nothing so much as the British occupation of Mesopotamia in the early twentieth century. But that experiment, Ferguson grudgingly admits, didn't turn out so well: the British never "had their hearts in the matter." So we're off to Egypt, which offers a better example of "what a liberal empire [can] do." Yet Egypt was no success either. Between 1913 and 1950, acknowledges Ferguson, "Egypt got rich-

er as a country" but "the average Egyptian did not"; public health remained "shockingly poor," while infant mortality rose. Then there's India, another exception to the purported benefits of colonial rule. Ferguson reveals that India under the Empire suffered from "deindustrialization and economic stagnation"; massive famines afflicted its peoples, who were already burdened with sustaining "one of the world's largest standing armies."

Ferguson plays the counterfactual card to explain the sad state of affairs in colonial India. The real problem, he posits, was not too much imperialism but too little. If the British committed any sins, they were "of omission," for India (along with Egypt and even China) would have benefited from tighter colonial control. Here Ferguson commits his own omissions. He writes that greater market integration could have prevented famines yet disregards scholarship that blames starvation on that very integration. Indeed, one of Ferguson's new colleagues at Harvard, the Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen, has shown that independence from colonial rule brought India's recurrent famines to an end, as politicians were now forced to base their actions on public opinion and not on global markets. And when it comes to British policy in sub-Saharan Africa, where misery was high, investment low, and imperial rule anything but liberal, Ferguson simply removes that card from the deck: *Colossus* all but ignores Britain's abysmal record in Africa.

For Ferguson, as well as for our domestic neocons, cherry-picking through the past to justify a renewed imperialism is a form of self-absolution. It allows them to celebrate the splendor of empire while disavowing its legacy, to blame the planet's ills on those who most suffer them rather than on those who hold a disproportionate share of the planet's power. In trying to understand why our world has gone so awry, it would perhaps be more useful to think about history not as analogy but as process—e.g., how imperial politics bred violence or created Third World economies that are highly susceptible to the vicissitudes of the global market. But one would search in vain through *Colossus* for, say, a consideration of the

repercussions of Washington's support of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan during the 1980s, or of the disastrous effects radical free-market policies have had on the economies of the most vulnerable nations of Southeast Asia and Latin America. In *Empire*, Ferguson at times provided a sober assessment of the consequences of colonial rule, dealing more honestly both with the evils it created (the Atlantic slave trade, for instance) and with the inevitable suffering that accompanied the economic reforms he champions. In *Colossus*, though, such empathy is a casualty of progress, lost in the sweeping arc of history.

Last spring, as the war in Iraq escalated, Ferguson cautioned against viewing the current crisis through the lens of failure in Vietnam. Instead, Ferguson argued in the *New York Times*, the United States needed to confront the Iraqi insurgency with the same "severity," including "punitive village-burning expeditions," used by the British there in 1920. "Fear of the wrong quagmire," he wrote, could result in a "terrible hell."

Wondering what insights the "right quagmire" would provide, I asked Ferguson at a recent public forum whether Washington's track record in Latin America should give pause to those who advocate for an American empire. The United States, after all, often found itself bogged down in unseemly alliances with Latin America's most notorious regimes, relying on repressive paramilitaries to contain dissent. Ferguson generously agreed that Washington's approach to the region has been a disaster. But he went on to say that the United States should have occupied and administered the continent itself instead of shielding its power behind despots. Rather than letting actual, as opposed to virtual, history temper his enthusiasm for empire, Ferguson turns dross into gold, cheerfully arguing that the wreckage created by the United States in Latin America is proof that the problem is not U.S. imperialism but—wait for it—not enough U.S. imperialism.

This response is the one-size-fits-all solution offered by almost every neocon, regardless of the conflict. Donald Kagan, for instance, now considers that the fall of Athens after the Pelopon-

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nesian War resulted not from imperial hubris but from Athens' hesitancy to fulfill its imperial mission. For imperialists concerned with matters closer to home, the same reasoning explains more than a century of U.S. failed hemispheric policies. Kagan's son, Robert, who helped execute the Contra war against Nicaragua in the 1980s, believes that the United States has been a prodigal empire in the Americas, wasting its power and money in erratic adventures, reluctant to settle down and assume its workaday responsibilities. Max Boot makes the same case in *The Savage Wars of Peace*, an encomium to the Marine Corps' military prowess—as demonstrated in the Philippines, Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, among other places. The United States did err in Latin America, Boot says, but the mistake was in believing that it could withdraw once the military phase of the operation was over. Boot presents his book as a challenge to the narrow focus of the Powell Doctrine, maintaining that the United States should be willing to intervene militarily throughout the globe and that those interventions should be broad in scope and long in duration. "In deploying American power," he writes, "decision makers should be less apologetic, less hesitant, less humble."

The Western Hemisphere is actually the perfect place to test Ferguson's hypothesis that nations willing to submit to imperial authority would in exchange receive the benefits of stability, investment, and economic growth, because twice in the last century Latin Americans were party to such an arrangement. During the years preceding World War II there was perhaps no region more willing to give up a degree of sovereignty and follow Washington's lead than Latin America. And countries did so not because the United States beat them into submission; on the contrary, after decades of Latin American opposition to U.S. expansion, including protracted guerrilla wars, Washington surrendered its claim to unilateral intervention and began to tolerate economic nationalism. Ferguson, expectedly, denounces this shift in policy as a sign of weakness, even though it created con-

ditions for an important period of prosperity and peace in Latin America.

Governments throughout Latin America enacted New Deal-style reforms, adopting a definition of democracy that entailed political freedom and some degree of economic equality. After the war, however, as the United States swelled into an imperial power, it increasingly worked to undermine these programs. Well before the Cuban Revolution, Washington's 1954 overthrow of Guatemala's reformist government sent a clear signal that it would not accept social democracy so close to home. For the next four decades, despite nominal support for the continent's "democratic left," the United States would align with the most illiberal and revanchist forces in the hemisphere. The most passionate defenders of democracy, in fact, were likely to be found in the ranks of Washington's opponents—and singled out for execution by Washington's allies.

After the Cold War, Latin America again yielded to U.S. authority. One country after another shook off dictatorships to open their economies to the world market. Governments reduced tariffs, weakened organized labor, privatized national industries, and slashed social spending. But this economic liberalization (of the kind that Ferguson prescribes for the rest of the world) has led not to prosperity but to dismal growth. Wealth inequality is at an all-time high, and poverty is endemic, particularly in relatively well-off countries such as Brazil and Mexico. Direct investment in the region has continued its three-decade decline, even in countries that have followed IMF edicts to the letter, and unbridled financial markets continue to wreak one disaster after another. As popular opposition to Washington's market liberalism again spreads in Bolivia, Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina, the United States has responded by stepping up aid and training to Latin American militaries. Even more worrisome, considering the effort over the last decade to push soldiers back into their barracks, has been the Defense Department's call for Latin American armies to take a more active role in domestic policing.

Rather than rummaging through British history to imagine what a glob-

al American empire would look like, today's imperialists should take an honest look at the region where the United States has actually had extensive imperial experience and ask themselves an obvious question: if Washington is unable to bring order and economic growth to Latin America, which falls squarely within its own back yard and whose population shares many of the United States' values, then how does it hope to do so in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East? Their response, no doubt, would be demonstrative: more imperialism.

Niall Ferguson gives us any number of alternative pasts from which the future can draw its lessons. Max Boot, by contrast, writes that the "past is an uncertain guide to the future, but it is the only one we have." Both position themselves against dewy-eyed leftists, who supposedly allow their moralistic criticisms of American power to cloud their judgment. Yet the refusal of Ferguson and other neo-imperialists to take nationalism—the one consistent variable in all their fast-moving analogies—seriously is as utopian as Charles Fourier's nineteenth-century belief that, under socialism, the seas would lose their salt and become "lemonade." Locals, they argue, should be willing to give up sovereignty for the sake of stability and investment. If not, the United States must steel itself to the task of imposing this arrangement. So we have Ferguson rehabilitating MacArthur's plan to nuke China and Boot proposing that the United States do in Iraq what it did between 1898 and 1902 in the Philippines—where Marines tortured thousands, torched communities, and herded survivors into concentration camps; more than 200,000 died in what, according to one British witness, was not a war but "murderous butchery." That Boot can call this racist campaign "one of the most successful counterinsurgencies waged by a Western army in modern times" indicates how successful neoconservatives have been in increasing the public's acceptance of atrocities committed in the name of national security, a tolerance that had been on the wane since Vietnam.

Ferguson is more aware of the vicious legacy of imperial racism. He

peppers his writing with ironic references to old-school colonialists, suggesting our distance from antiquated racist thinking and the possibility of a more dispassionate American world order. But what was Abu Ghraib if not an expression of institutionalized racism? Military strategists perfected interrogation methods by trolling through pop anthropologies to gain insight into the “Arab mind,” working-class American recruits understood their charges to be “sand niggers,” and government functionaries drafted carefully parsed memos, vetted by lawyers, outlining what is and is not torture and who is and is not covered by the Geneva Conventions.

In her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt dubbed British colonialists who believed they could maintain a liberal empire without recourse to racist violence the “quixotic fools of imperialism.” Ferguson, who is no fool, knows that democracy, both in the metropole and in the colony, undermines empire. His celebrated liberal phase of the British Empire, for example, following its initial run of piracy and slavery, corresponded to a democratization of Britain’s domestic politics. As the kind of violence needed to maintain foreign rule became a matter of public debate, the electorate, given a voting choice, increasingly opted to pay for social welfare at home rather than empire abroad.

The point of *Colossus* is that the United States not only can match Britain’s empire but can do empire better. Hence Ferguson’s calls for cuts in social spending to make for a more desperate and therefore more martial American citizenry. But because this hardened society has yet to be forged, Ferguson, who for hundreds of pages exhorts American leaders to show bold leadership, must settle for the role of court flatterer, whispering into the emperor’s ear to dissemble, to declare publicly his intentions to vacate Iraq while furtively staying. At the end of the book, Ferguson offers advice to President Bush: “There is in fact a great deal to be said for promising to leave [Iraq]—provided you do not actually mean it or do it.”

Ferguson’s easy acceptance of brutality in pursuit of an elusive liberal empire bears more than a passing re-

semblance to an earlier willingness of Soviet apparatchiks to justify repression in the name of a distant utopia. He has only one response to the inevitable resistance empire provokes: more resolve, which for the otherwise straight talker is a euphemism for more terror, more fear. But terror and fear, as all colonial powers have learned, are

useless unless they are thorough and total. If *Colossus* doesn’t tell us where the beefed-up political will it calls for may lead us, perhaps an answer can be culled from an earlier imperial storyteller. It was Rudyard Kipling, after all, who wrote in *Kim* that the “Great Game” of imperial intrigue will be finished “when everyone is dead.” ■

THE ANTI-PROFILER

The verbal burlesque of A. J. Liebling

By Lee Siegel

Discussed in this essay:

Just Enough Liebling: Classic Work by the Legendary New Yorker Writer, with an introduction by David Remnick. North Point Press, 2004. 534 pages. \$27.50.



As a war correspondent for *The New Yorker* magazine during the Second World War, A. J. Liebling once found himself crossing the U-boat-infested Atlantic from England to America in a Norwegian merchant ship. This is a typical passage from the long dispatch he filed after the ship safely reached New Orleans:

Lee Siegel is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine. He is at work on a book about acting in America.

In heavy weather the *Regnbue* steered well only at full speed, and the men at the wheel had an unhappy time from then on. Now and then her bow came clear out of the water—from watching other tankers I could see exactly how it happened—and the sea gave her a ringing slap on the bottom. I felt that this was an impertinence, precisely the sort of thing a German would do if he were running the ocean.

Liebling wrote “Westbound Tanker” in 1942, not long after Pearl Harbor, and at a time when the outcome of the war was unclear. His prose, however, is so closed to the possibility of violence, so negligent of the dangerous circumstances around him, that Liebling might just as well have composed his report after the Allies had triumphed. The possibility of being torpedoed and sunk—men screaming, drowning, burning in the oil-slicked sea—is transformed into a familiar domestic scene. Rather than describe the possibility of death, Liebling paints a picture of childhood and motherhood amid cozy security. The image jars the mind even as it