

What price an American empire?

Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire*, Penguin Press, 2004, ISBN 0-713-99615-3

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This is the first of a three-part review.

All British historians, E.H. Carr once said, are Whigs, even the Tories—but not in Niall Ferguson's case. He is a Tory formed in the Thatcherite mould, who cut his teeth writing for Conrad Black's *Daily Telegraph* while he was a research student in Germany. He is also one of the most prolific historians working today. His most recent book *Colossus*, a study of American imperialism follows *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (2003), *The Cash Nexus: Money and Politics in Modern History 1700-2000* (2002), *The House of Rothschild: Money's Prophets, 1798-1848* (2003), *The House of Rothschild, 1849-1998* (2002), *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (1999) and *Virtual Histories: Alternative and Counterfactuals* (1997). Every one of them is a thick doorstop of a book.

Ferguson is currently Herzog Professor of Financial History at the Stern Business School, New York University, a Senior Research Fellow of Jesus College, Oxford and Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, but is perhaps best known for the television programmes connected with his books and for his newspaper articles. Since the war in Iraq began he has become a regular pundit offering his opinion on American foreign policy.

Colossus nods in the direction of history, but is essentially a book about contemporary American policy in the light of Ferguson's interpretation of history. He is highly critical of the Bush administration both at home and abroad. This is not to say that he is opposed to the Iraq war. He is entirely in favour of it. His objection is that under Bush the USA has not been aggressive enough. At home Ferguson is concerned that Bush is ignoring America's mounting fiscal crisis. Brazil's indebtedness is, he points out, less than that of the United States. If this were an emerging market the IMF would have intervened by now. No previous imperial power has been in this position, but the US is propped up by the Asian banks that need to buy US treasury bonds to prevent their own currencies from becoming overvalued against the dollar. He anticipates that this symbiotic relationship could come to an end and that the shift could be triggered by anxiety over the US welfare budget. "America's reliance on foreign capital," he writes, "is a balancing act on a very high wire."

The trouble with America, Ferguson complains, is that its citizens "like Social Security more than national security." In his eyes it is a country burdened by too many policies that date back to the New Deal. Bush's failure, according to Ferguson, is that he has simply not done enough to bring welfare spending, especially Medicare, under control. "The decline and fall of America's undeclared empire may be

due not to terrorists at the gates or to the rogue regimes that sponsor them, but to a fiscal crisis of the welfare state at home," Ferguson writes in *Colossus*. If America is to succeed as an imperial power, he argues, the government needs to cut welfare spending more aggressively.

He has no problem with the unprovoked invasion of Iraq. He accepts that there was no connection between Iraq and Al Qaeda. But the case for war, he argues, was good enough without trying to suggest that there was such a link. His response to the failure of the coalition to find weapons of mass destruction is, he writes, "more fool Saddam".

Where he finds fault with American policy is in the repeated statements by Bush, Rumsfeld and others that America is not an imperial power and does not intend to stay in Iraq. While "other empire builders", he writes, "have fantasised about ruling subject peoples for a thousand years. This would seem to be history's first thousand day empire."

In point of fact a thousand years would have seemed rather short to the Chinese Empire and even to the Romans, while the British described their rule as the Empire on which the sun never set. Only one group of empire builders had the explicit ambition of creating a thousand year empire and that was the Nazis. Considering the violent way in which the US has invaded a defenceless country, bombed its cities, massacred its people and destroyed its infrastructure the comparison with the Nazis is closer than Ferguson would care to admit.

Ferguson considers that American foreign policy lacks long term commitment and has a self-limiting character that was evident in both Korea and Vietnam. President Truman, Ferguson argues, should have accepted General MacArthur's plan to drop atomic bombs on Chinese cities. "The United States in 1951," Ferguson writes, "had both the military capability and the public support to strike a decisive military blow against Maoist China. Many another imperial power would have been unable to resist the window of opportunity afforded by America's huge lead in the atomic arms race."

Ferguson ignores the fact MacArthur had already provoked the Chinese to enter the war by advancing to the Yalu River, which was its border with North Korea. China had no diplomatic relations with Washington at the time and Mao assumed that the US invasion of Korea was a prelude to a full scale assault on China. He responded by attempting to meet the attack on Korean rather than Chinese soil. Without that provocation it is doubtful that China would have become involved in Korea, since it was only just emerging from an exhausting civil war. Under these circumstances Mao would have been quite

prepared to establish cordial relations with Washington. Sino-Soviet relations were cool and while the two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance in February 1950, its terms were very much more favourable to the Soviet Union than they were to China. Even in strictly imperialist terms the option of making China a US ally on the Soviet Union's eastern border would have been more effective than fighting the disastrous Korean War. It was to take another quarter of a century for the US administration of Richard Nixon to establish détente with China.

While Ferguson paints the US as only reluctantly becoming involved in military adventures, the historical evidence points to US rather than Chinese or Soviet aggression being the cause of the Korean War. MacArthur's provocative actions were in line with the thinking of the National Security Council, which portrayed the Soviet Union as a power bent on military domination of the Eurasian landmass. A growing faction within the US ruling elite wanted to roll back the Soviet Union, but this would mean rapid rearmament and an immense increase in the defence budget at the expense of social programmes. The plan was politically unfeasible until 25 June 1950, when North Korea invaded the South. As Secretary of State Dean Acheson later said, "Korea came along and saved us."

Acheson may have played a part in creating these circumstances since he specifically refrained from including South Korea within the American military defence perimeter in a speech in January 1950. When the North Korean leader Kim Il Sung approached Stalin and asked for help to reunify the Korean peninsula, Stalin had no reason to suppose that the US would object. He gave Kim permission with the proviso, "If you should get kicked in the teeth, I shall not lift a finger."

The Soviet Union sent some military supplies and a few military advisers, but the North Korean invasion of the South was no Soviet plot and what would have been a small scale localised war was only escalated with the US landing at Inchon in September. I should apologise for introducing material here that is now well researched and is available to every high school student and undergraduate, but Professor Ferguson seriously distorts the evidence.

The Korean War led to the remilitarisation of Europe and an intensification of the Cold War, but had MacArthur bombed Chinese cities with nuclear weapons it would have started World War III. The Soviet Union had tested its first atomic bomb in 1949 and could not have failed to see a nuclear assault on China as a threat. It could not yet deliver nuclear weapons to American cities, but would have had no difficulty in devastating most major European cities. This excursus into the history of the Korean War has been worthwhile, even if only to point out that if MacArthur had carried out his plan, the eminent Professor Ferguson would not have been around to write his books since Europe and Britain would have been a smoking nuclear wasteland.

Ferguson is not to be deflected from his adulation of MacArthur by such a minor question as the annihilation of all major European cities. He particularly admires the way MacArthur challenged the subordination of the military to the civil power of the elected president. President Truman dismissed MacArthur after he wrote to the Republican Leader of the House, openly opposing the official policy of limiting the war to Korea and not bombing China. MacArthur's letter was published in April 1951 giving Truman no option but to sack the general. It was, as Truman wrote in his diary, "Rank insubordination," and was a direct challenge to the principle that the president, as a civil, elected official had authority over the

military even in time of war.

Ferguson comments, "The irony was that in acting as he did—in upholding the authority of the president and the republican Constitution in the face of MacArthur's challenge—Truman was acting against the popular will."

Truman's popularity ratings did indeed dip in this period. They went below 30 percent in opinion polls. But we have to look at who was organising the campaign against him. Senator Joseph McCarthy fully backed MacArthur and called for the president to be impeached. In so far as there was a popular will backing MacArthur against Truman, it was manufactured by McCarthy's vicious red-baiting campaign that identified every liberal Democrat as a communist and was even insinuating that there were communist sympathisers close to Truman.

What Ferguson is suggesting is that in order to act as an effective imperial power, the American political elite needed in 1950 to overthrow the American Constitution and establish a form of military rule. This is not so much history as a policy statement, at a time when President George W. Bush regularly refers to himself as "the Commander in Chief". John Kerry spoke of the presidency in exactly the same terms during the recent election and promoted himself as more suitable war leader because of his military record in Vietnam. Ferguson backed Kerry against Bush and we get some idea of the right-wing perspective on which he did so when we read his account of the Korean War.

The militarism that has been expressed in the presidential campaign can be traced back to the period of the Korean War. Before then the US had never maintained a large peacetime army, defence establishment or arms budget. Standing armies were regarded as an affront to both democracy and a sound budget. The Korean War precipitated a militarisation of the Cold War and a process of increasing militarisation in US political life which has over the course of time fatally undermined its founding principles that gave elected officials precedence over military leaders. Ferguson's perspective on the Truman-MacArthur conflict is indicative of the general political outlook expressed in *Colossus*, which is backed up with some highly distorted historical reflections. The full title of Ferguson's book is *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*. The price in question is all too clear—an end to democracy.

To be continued



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