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The Imperial History Wars

Dane Kennedy

Abstract The key question posed by this essay is why historians' interest in Britain's imperial past has increased rather than diminished in recent decades. It argues that this interest has been sustained in part by a preoccupation with certain contemporary social and political issues, and differences of opinion about these issues have helped fuel the "imperial history wars." The nature of the debate has differed for American- and British-based historians. For the former, British imperial history has served as an analogy for thinking about America's racial politics and its role as a global power. For the latter, it has served as a focal point for contending claims about Britain's past and deepening anxieties about its future. The essay concludes by urging historians to be more self-reflexive about their own practices and more rigorous in exposing presentist claims about the past.

It has become all but impossible for historians who study modern Britain to ignore its empire. The field has been swamped in recent years by a seemingly endless stream of books, articles, conferences, and other scholarly expressions of this preoccupation with Britain's imperial past. Although plenty of British historians still steadfastly resist the siren song of empire, they have seen countless others succumb to its appeal. Consider, for example, how many well-known historians who made their reputations with work on British domestic history have subsequently taken the "imperial turn."[1] Their change of direction is indicative of the way the boundaries of British historiography, and, indeed, British studies more generally, have broadened over the past two decades to incorporate Britain's engagement in empire. This is a striking, even surprising, development, yet the reasons for it have rarely been examined. Why should an empire that for all practical purposes disappeared some fifty years ago retain such a powerful hold over our imaginations? Or, to put it more precisely, why should our collective interest in that empire have increased, rather than decreased, even though it has receded ever further into the past?

To answer these questions requires us to direct our attention to the circumstances that have given rise to this growing body of scholarship: in other words, its conditions of production. These conditions operate at several distinct levels of effect. The first and most familiar level consists of the analytical, methodological, and

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[1] The list includes Linda Colley, James Epstein, Catherine Hall, Philippa Levine, Richard Price, and Martin Wiener. On the imperial turn, see Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham, NC, 2003).

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theoretical considerations that inform our practices as historians. A great deal of attention has been devoted to this dimension of the imperial turn. One need only examine the review essays that so frequently assess the latest scholarship in the field to gain an appreciation of its ever-widening range of concerns.[2] Far less attention has been paid to a second level of effect: the role that social and ideological forces play in shaping the questions we pose and the answers we offer about imperial Britain. This requires greater reflexivity about our own subject positions than we as professional historians are inclined to address. The same can be said for the third level of effect, which concerns the geopolitical locations from which we work and write.[3] While the renewed interest in the imperial dimensions of British history occurred on both sides of the Atlantic, it took a discernibly different trajectory among American-based historians than it did among their British-based counterparts. The aim of this essay is to offer a preliminary and decidedly personal assessment of the circumstances—especially those at the second and third level of effect—that have brought the empire to such prominence in modern British historiography.

At the heart of this assessment lies the argument that the renewed attention historians have given to empire is inextricably entwined with contemporary public debates about certain highly contentious social and political issues that have arisen both in Britain and the United States. Contending interpretations of Britain's imperial past and the meanings it carries for our current condition have figured prominently in these debates. By characterizing them as "the imperial history wars," I am evoking a phrase that has been widely used in recent years with respect to controversies about the memories and meanings we attach to our collective pasts.[4] All of these wars highlight the polemical power of history and the complex array of politically and morally freighted meanings that inform its practice. When academic historians venture into such contested terrain, we have an obligation to reflect on our own subjectivities and their role in shaping our understandings of the past.

■■■

In 1984 the Cambridge historian David Fieldhouse published an influential article that decried what he saw as the disintegration of British imperial history as a distinct and coherent field of study. It had shattered, he argued, into a series of separate nationalist histories, each intended to promote the interests of the new nation-states that had arisen out of the process of decolonization. He wondered, "Can Humpty-Dumpty be put together again?" That same year, Yale historian Robin Winks reached a similar conclusion about imperial history's health in a

[2] Recent examples include Stephen Howe, "British Worlds, Settler Worlds, World Systems, and Killing Fields," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 40, no. 4 (2012): 691–725; Durba Ghosh, "Another Set of Imperial Turns?," *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (2012): 772–93; and Tony Ballantyne, "The Changing Shape of the Modern British Empire and Its Historiography," *Historical Journal* 53, no. 2 (2010): 429–52.

[3] For a model on how to address these interconnected issues with sensitivity and insight, see Geoff Eley, *A Crossed Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2005).

[4] See Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, *The History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York, 1996); Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne, 2003); Margaret MacMillan, "History Wars," in *Dangerous Games: The Uses and Abuses of History* (New York, 2009).

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historiographical essay that characterized it as the "Problem Child of British History." Nearly a decade later, Phillip Buckner lamented its passing in his presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association, which he titled, "Whatever Happened to the British Empire?" Each of these authorities regarded British imperial history as a field that was dying, if not dead.[5]

My own experience upon entering academia as a newly minted Ph.D. in 1981 seemed to confirm these gloomy assessments. In American universities, at least, history departments had ceased hiring specialists in British imperial history. The job situation in Britain was obviously far less dire, both because British imperial history was, after all, an integral part of Britain's own history, though a largely marginalized one, and because it had become institutionally embedded in some of the country's leading universities as a result of the founding many decades earlier of endowed professorships in the field.[6] From an American perspective, then, conditions seemed much healthier across the Atlantic. Yet that was clearly not the view of Fieldhouse, who raised the alarm from the privileged precincts of Cambridge, where he was the Vere Harmsworth Professor of Naval and Imperial History.

The crisis that confronted imperial history in the 1970s and 1980s had several distinct sources. One was the growing appreciation that African, Asian, and other former colonial peoples had histories of their own that simply could not be subsumed within British imperial history. Non-Western intellectuals began to decolonize those histories, their efforts bolstered, as Fieldhouse pointed out, by newly independent countries' need for usable pasts that could give their citizens a sense of national pride and purpose. Developments in the West also informed this reorientation, especially in the United States, where the geopolitical imperatives of the Cold War had generated an unprecedented demand for experts in the languages, cultures, and traditions of these former colonial territories. The area studies programs that arose to meet this demand provided much of the impetus for those newly developed fields of history (such as African and Indian) that began to crowd out the old imperial history. A second factor was the enormous sway that domestic social history of the sort practiced by the great E. P. Thompson exerted among British historians. For history departments seeking specialists whose work was considered cutting-edge, it was those individuals who did British—or more precisely English—"history from below," especially as it pertained to class, who most often fit the bill. Imperial historians, by contrast, seemed to be stuck in an intellectual and methodological time warp. Most of them continued to draw their main intellectual inspiration from John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, the Oxbridge historians whose key co-authored works had appeared as the British Empire was disintegrating in the late 1950s and early 1960s. For Gallagher and Robinson, the crucial factors that informed how the imperial system worked were the strategic considerations of the

[5] David Fieldhouse, "Can Humpty-Dumpty Be Put Together Again? Imperial History in the 1980s," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 12, no. 2 (1984): 9–23; Robin W. Winks, "Problem Child of British History: The British Empire-Commonwealth," in *Recent Views on British History: Essays on Historical Writing Since 1966*, ed. Richard Schlatter (New Brunswick, NJ, 1984), 451–92; Phillip Buckner, "Whatever Happened to the British Empire?," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* no. 4 (1993): 3–32.

[6] These included the Beit Professor at Oxford, the Smuts Professor and Vere Harmsworth Professor at Cambridge, and the Rhodes Professor at Kings College London.

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British governing elite ("the official mind"), the use of economic coercion and gunboat diplomacy to maintain a vast "informal empire," the collapse of cooperative non-Western regimes ("breakdowns on the periphery") that provoked military intervention and direct imperial rule, and the cultivation of indigenous "collaborators" to assist in the governance of colonial territories. The impact of their ideas resembled the black holes posited by physicists: they created such an overpowering gravitational field that a generation or more of imperial historians were sucked into their vortex. Dissertation after dissertation, article after article, book after book entered the void, emitting ever-weakening signals that echoed snatches of Gallagher and Robinson's golden oldies—"informal empire," "the official mind," and the like.[7]

A few imperial historians did, to be sure, manage to make productive use of Gallagher and Robinson's work even while advancing new lines of inquiry. Peter Cain and A. G. Hopkins embraced the notion of informal empire in *British Imperialism 1688–2000*, but it was their thesis that the financial concerns of "gentlemanly capitalists" comprised the real engine of empire—an interpretation that shifted the focus from the colonial periphery to the imperial metropolis and from political and strategic factors to financial and social ones—that garnered the greatest interest.[8] An occasional imperial historian succeeded in escaping Gallagher and Robinson's gravitational pull altogether. Perhaps the most notable example was John MacKenzie, whose graduate training in Canada and early fieldwork in southern Africa launched him into a distinctly different orbit. The result was a series of important books in British imperial history as well as the influential and still vibrant Studies in Imperialism series, which he founded at Manchester University Press in 1984—the very same year, it should be noted, that Fieldhouse and Winks were lamenting the field's sorry state of affairs.[9]

What is most striking, however, is how much of the freshest, most innovative work on the British imperial past at this time came from scholars trained in other fields and disciplines. It turned out that the Africanists, South Asianists, Caribbeanists, and other area studies specialists whose divergent pursuits seemed so destructive to imperial history, at least as its metropolitan-based practitioners understood it, were actually forging new frameworks for thinking about empire as a whole, as the work of C. A. Bayly, Timothy Parsons, and others amply demonstrate.[10] So, too, were literary scholars, such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha; historical anthropologists, such as Bernard Cohn and Ann Laura Stoler; feminist historians, such as Antoinette Burton and Catherine Hall; and others whose unconventional vantage points gave them new insights into British imperial history. They soon began to overrun the field as it was defined and defended by the likes of Fieldhouse and Winks. They brought to the study of imperialism a theoretical perspective inflected by poststructuralist and

[7] John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 6, no. 2 (1963): 1–15; Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London, 1961).

[8] Peter Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688–1990*, 2 vols. (London, 1993).

[9] For a recent assessment of Mackenzie and the "Studies in Imperialism" series, see Andrew S. Thompson, ed., *Writing Imperial Histories* (Manchester, 2013).

[10] A point made about Africanists by Andrew Zimmerman, "Africa in Imperial and Transnational History: Multi-Sited Historiography and the Necessity of Theory," *Journal of African History* 54, no. 3 (2013): 331–40.

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postcolonial thought, a cultural preoccupation with issues such as race and gender, and a political determination to demonstrate that modern Britain itself had been shaped in profoundly important ways by its empire.[11]

These invaders of imperial history's domains marched under two main banners—postcolonial studies and the new imperial history. Edward Said led the former contingent with *Orientalism*, his strikingly original mélange of literature, history, and polemic, which appeared in 1978.[12] Like many of my fellow historians of empire, I was slow to recognize the significance of this book. But it became impossible to ignore as the school of postcolonial studies it did so much to spawn produced a steady stream of scholarly provocations regarding imperial culture from its breeding grounds in literature departments and cultural studies programs.[13] Most mainstream historians of the British Empire responded to the work of Said and his allies with hostility, finding their terminology and theory baffling and their historical claims simplistic, if not simply erroneous. Yet postcolonial studies offered a perspective on the imperial past that attracted a growing number of proponents, not least because of the explicit associations it drew between the past and the present. By arguing that the discursive dimensions of imperial power—its ability to impose its own conceptual categories and systems of meaning on other societies—had not disappeared with decolonization, but had endured in contemporary attitudes and actions, it attached a relevance to the study of empire that had largely disappeared from the work of imperial historians. This was an important reason why Said's *Orientalism* enjoyed such success: it insisted that the ideologies that had informed European empires' projections of power over the peoples of the Middle East remained alive in contemporary American and European attitudes toward Palestinians and other Arabs.

Current preoccupations informed the new imperial history as well. Although no single individual looms as large in its genesis as Said does for postcolonial studies, its early advocates shared the conviction that conventional narratives of British history as a self-contained "island story" failed to acknowledge the manifold ways empire had shaped its course and character. If "Europe was made by its imperial projects," as Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper asserted in a widely cited essay, then surely no European country was more fully and profoundly made by these projects than Britain.[14] It seems clear in retrospect that this newfound conviction that Britain's relationship with its empire was mutually constitutive drew much of its inspiration from contemporaneous political and social developments. The Thatcher

[11] The latter point had already been made from a political economy perspective, especially by Eric Hobsbawm in *Industry and Empire* (New York, 1968) and his great trilogy on nineteenth-century Europe, *The Age of Revolution* (New York, 1962), *The Age of Capital* (New York, 1975), and *The Age of Empire* (New York, 1987), but this approach gained remarkably little purchase in British imperial historiography. I am grateful to Richard Price for reminding me of this tradition.

[12] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978).

[13] My first foray into this subject was "Imperial History and Post-Colonial Theory," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 24, no. 3 (1996): 345–63. I recently offered a reassessment, "Postcolonialism and History," in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Graham Huggins (Oxford, 2013), 467–88.

[14] Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, "Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda," in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper (Berkeley, CA, 1997), 1.

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government's skillful appeal to British nationalist pride and imperial nostalgia during the 1982 Falklands War, for example, provided the essential backdrop to John MacKenzie's *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880–1960*, which was published two years after the war.[15] This book was an important landmark in the effort to understand the empire's impact on Britain itself, a theme that would become integral to the new imperial history. Yet most of the new imperial historians were less interested in the manipulation of the British electorate by governmental elites than they were in the infiltration of colonial peoples, products, and customs into British society and popular culture. They were responding in part to the social and cultural changes they observed around them. In Britain itself, one of the most striking developments was the growing number of residents who hailed from the West Indies, South Asia, East Africa, and other former colonial territories. Their highly visible markers of difference stirred ethnic anxieties within the majority white population and led to increasingly tight restrictions on further immigration from the same regions. Making sense of these developments demanded a deeper understanding of the imperial origins of this pool of immigrants *and* the imperial attitudes that informed white Britons' reactions. If class had been the master category of modern British history through the 1970s, thereafter historians increasingly turned to issues of race and ethnicity.

Since the problem of race in particular had long loomed larger in American society —and hence in American social theory—than it had in Britain, it is hardly surprising that American scholars were quicker than their British counterparts to take up the new imperial history, with its insistence that racial difference lay at the heart to the relationship between metropole and colony. A related impetus for the revival of academic interest in British imperial history in the United States was the growing conviction that students needed to know more about the growing ethnic diversity within American society (coded as multiculturalism) and about America's growing engagement with the wider world (coded as globalization). In response, the Western Civilization survey was gradually supplanted by world history as a gateway course in the curricula of American high schools and colleges, a trend that has placed world history second only to US history as a core history requirement today.[16] While this development eroded the standing of domestic British historians, whose bread and butter course had been Western Civilization, it became a boon for specialists in British imperial history, who could claim that their transnational or global perspective made them particularly well qualified to teach world history.[17] That was certainly my experience: I was the first member of my department to teach world history both at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where I was a faculty member until 2000, and subsequently at my present institution, George Washington University. I also was a member of the committee that drafted the NACBS Report on the State and Future of British Studies (1999), chaired by Peter Stansky, which argued that one way to limit the loss of British history positions in American colleges and universities

[15] John M. Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880–1960* (Manchester, 1984).

[16] Kenneth Pomeranz, "Histories for a Less National Age," *American Historical Review* 119, no. 1 (2014): 13.

[17] An example of a prominent new imperial historian who embraced world history is Antoinette Burton, *A Primer for Teaching World History: Ten Design Principles* (Durham, 2012).

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was to promote British imperial history as useful preparation for teaching world history.[18]

The publication in 1998–99 of the five-volume *Oxford History of the British Empire* seemed to confirm the revival of interest in Britain's imperial past. This was the first work of its kind to appear since the dated and dusty *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, a nine-volume tome that had dribbled out over a span of thirty-four years (1929 to 1963). The new series bore the canonical banner of "The Oxford History" and included a multitude of contributors. It was clearly meant to be the authoritative word on the subject, designed to define the boundaries of imperial history as a field of study and set the terms of its research agenda for decades to come. Editor-in-chief Wm. Roger Louis confidently proclaimed in his preface to the series that "the passions aroused by British imperialism have so lessened that we are now better placed than ever before to see the course of the Empire steadily and to see it whole."[19]

This suggestion that historians of the empire had reached some sort of consensus about their subject was, at best, wishful thinking. Reactions to the *Oxford History of the British Empire* exposed the fissures within the field that it had sought to transcend. Even before its publication, it sparked loud protestations from old guard British historians like Sir Max Beloff, who warned darkly that the appointment of the American Wm. Roger Louis as editor-in-chief was sure to give the project an anti-imperial bias. Once the work appeared in print, however, criticisms came for the most part from a very different quarter. Reviewers sympathetic to the new imperial history, such as myself, noted with dismay that most of the contributors came from a common Oxbridge-trained cohort that still looked to Gallagher and Robinson as their intellectual lodestar.[20] Louis's own lengthy survey of British imperial historiography, written as an introduction to the volume devoted to that subject, concluded with an encomium to the accomplishments of Gallagher and Robinson.[21] It was not unreasonable for readers to infer that Louis viewed the scholarship that had followed in their wake as little more than embellishments to the grand edifice they had built. Key contributors to the *Oxford History* found time to snipe at postcolonial theorists and other interlopers, but the series as a whole was largely silent on issues such as race, gender, and culture, which had been central to some of the most innovative work on the British imperial experience in recent years. Not all of the series' many contributors, it should be said, toed the party line. And Louis, to his credit, responded to the complaints of his critics by launching the Companion Series to the Oxford History, which published volumes on *Gender and Empire*, *Black Experience and the Empire*, and other subjects that had received little attention in the original series.[22]

[18] The report can currently be found on the North American Conference on British Studies' website, http://www.nacbs.org/archive/nacbs-report-on-the-state-and-future-of-british-studies, accessed September 2014.

[19] Wm. Roger Louis, "Foreword," *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vols. 1–5 (Oxford, 1998–1999), vii.

[20] For my own critique, see Dane Kennedy, "The Boundaries of Oxford's Empire," *International History Review* 23, no. 3 (2001): 604–22.

[21] Wm. Roger Louis, "Introduction," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 5, *Historiography*, ed. Robin W. Winks (Oxford, 1999), 1–42.

[22] Philippa Levine, ed., *Gender and Empire* (Oxford, 2004); Philip D. Morgan and Sean Hawkins, eds., *Black Experience and the Empire* (Oxford, 2004); William Beinart and Lotte Hughes, *Environment and Empire* (Oxford, 2007).

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Far from imposing a stultifying orthodoxy on the field, then, the *Oxford History* had the opposite effect, generating a productive, if often contentious, debate about the aims and ends of imperial history. That debate would soon take historians down a number of different paths, sparking productive inquiries into imperial networks, settler colonialism, liberal imperialism, "the British world," and other topics too rich and varied to consider here. Some imperial historians, it should be noted, continued to preach the gospel of Gallagher and Robinson. Only recently a leading disciple proclaimed that their "brilliant historical insights remain the point of departure for most *serious* work on the history of empire."[23] But for those of us who identified with one or another variant of the new imperial history, it seemed increasingly evident that the intellectual logjam left by Gallagher and Robinson had begun to break up and the flow of ideas had turned in our favor. We were heartened by the reorientation of imperial studies from politics to cultures, from institutions to identities, from the intentions of imperial elites ("the official mind") to the experiences of colonial subjects ("subalterns" in all their variety). We were emboldened by a sense of intellectual purpose, though it no doubt seemed smugly self-righteous to others. We believed we were grappling with issues integral to the making of the British Empire and the British nation alike, issues such as race, gender, sexuality, religion, and other categories of difference. And we were confident that our work had relevance, contributing to a keener appreciation of the enduring legacy of the imperial past.

■■■

Yet even as we were laying claim to our kingdom, the ground was shifting beneath our feet. We had barely begun to supplant old orthodoxies with our own when a new set of challenges arose. The cultural turn that gave rise to postcolonial studies and the new imperial history is often associated with the collapse of Marxist theory, which appeared discredited by the disintegration of the Soviet Union and China's turn to capitalism. These geopolitical developments had a complementary consequence, however. They left the United States as the world's sole superpower, seemingly unbound in its global sway. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright famously proclaimed America to be the "indispensable nation." France's foreign minister coined a new term to describe this unprecedented state of affairs: the United States, he declared, had become a "hyperpower."[24] Insofar as the past provided any parallel to this moment of unrivaled supremacy, mid-nineteenth-century Britain appeared to come closest to matching America's hegemony. Various commentators began to argue that the time had come for the United States to acknowledge and embrace its imperial destiny, to accept its role as imperial Britain's heir, to complete its mission to promote liberal —or rather neoliberal—policies around the globe.[25]

[23] John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (New York, 2012), 12. Italics added.

[24] Albright on the NBC *Today* show on 5 February 1998; Foreign Minister Hubert Verdrine in "To Paris, U.S. Looks Like a 'Hyperpower,'" *New York Times*, 19 February 1999.

[25] This paragraph draws on my essay, "On the American Empire from a British Imperial Perspective," *International History Review* 29, no. 1 (2007): 83–108. For an early warning of the neocon agenda, see Thomas E. Ricks, "Empire or Not? A Quiet Debate over US Role," *Washington Post*, 21 August 2001, A1, A13. The intellectual roots of neo-conservatism's embrace of empire are traced in Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven, 2004).

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Some of the most forceful proponents of this view were neoconservatives like William Kristol and Paul Wolfowitz, who—as we now know—used 9/11 as a pretext to aggressively assert American military power by invading Afghanistan and Iraq, where "shock and awe" were put on theatrical display. Although neoconservatives led the charge, plenty of liberals agreed that the United States had an obligation to fix "failed states" and build democratic institutions. Michael Ignatieff, then a Harvard professor, later the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, advocated "empire lite," urging the United States to assume "imperial policing" duties wherever disorder and despair demanded it. Thomas Friedman and other prominent liberal commentators voiced similar views.[26] Since both Afghanistan and Iraq had been under Britain's imperial sway in the past, and Britain was now America's key partner in these foreign wars, it is hardly surprising that the British imperial experience became a point of reference for current events. General David Petraeus and other military commanders turned to T. E. Lawrence, whose reflections on the desert campaign in Arabia during World War I were mined for insights into what came to be known as asymmetric warfare. Commentators from across the political spectrum wrote op-eds and other instant assessments that drew widely divergent lessons from the British colonial presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. Academics quickly organized conferences to this end: the proceedings from one of them were published under the bluntly didactic title, *Lessons of Empire*.[27]

Niall Ferguson, celebrity historian and celebrant of empire, became the most visible and self-confident diviner of such lessons. Gifted, hard-working, and pugnacious, Ferguson forcefully advanced an historical argument in support of those who advocated more aggressive use of American power around the world. In his book *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, he made the case that the British Empire had been a "good thing" because it had established the institutional order necessary for international trade to thrive and prosperity to spread, resulting in what he cleverly called "anglobalization."[28] Ferguson's book became a bestseller, and the TV series it was written to accompany ensured its message reached an even larger audience when it was broadcast in Britain.[29] It did not much matter that specialists in British imperial history found his analysis seriously flawed: Ferguson was invited to contribute op-eds and articles to leading American newspapers and magazines and to consult with US government officials. And lest anyone had failed to grasp the contemporary implications of his historical lesson, a year later he followed up his book on the British Empire with one on its American successor: *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire*. Here he argued that the United States had always been an empire, though one that dared not speak its name.[30]

[26] Michael Ignatieff, "The Burden," *New York Times Magazine*, 5 January 2003, 22–54. The liberal case for an American empire is dissected in Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

[27] Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper, and Kevin W. Moore, eds., *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power* (New York, 2006).

[28] Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York, 2004).

[29] N. C. Fleming, "Echoes of Britannia: Television History, Empire and the Critical Public Sphere," *Contemporary British History* 24, no. 1 (2010): 9.

[30] Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York, 2005).

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He had a point. Despite the neoconservatives' insistence that Americans should accept the fact that their country was an empire and embrace its obligations, the term retained negative connotations for most Americans. Patrick Buchanan, a leading spokesman for isolationist, xenophobic conservatives (disdainfully called "paleoconservatives" by their critics), believed that empire was inextricably associated with decadent European traditions of statecraft. In a book written in part as a riposte to the neoconservatives, he insisted that America was, as the book's title declared, *A Republic, Not an Empire*.[31] Liberal interventionists were uneasy about calling the United States an empire as well. Ignatieff's diffident endorsement of "empire lite" seemed as far as any of them were willing to go down that rhetorical road. While at odds with "paleoconservatives" in most other respects, liberal interventionists shared their belief in American exceptionalism, including its exception from the temptations of empire. Even the neoconservatives began to retreat from their previous praise of empire as America's destiny once the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq turned into bloody quagmires.[32] In fact, the only group that never wavered from the view that the United States was an empire was a small, largely marginalized contingent of leftist critics like Noam Chomsky, and for them the term empire had always carried negative, accusatory associations.

Although Ferguson made only limited headway in his efforts to draw a direct association between the British Empire at its height and the modern American "colossus"—or even, for that matter, to establish their moral equivalency as "good things"—his provocation was soon followed by a plethora of comparative studies of empires that commented directly on the contemporary global reach of the United States. In *Empire and Superempire: Britain, America, and the World*, the British imperial historian Bernard Porter agreed with Ferguson that the United States was an empire, but argued that its power and ambition far surpassed that of the British Empire. And this, in his estimation, was decidedly not a good thing.[33] The modern European historian Charles Maier, Ferguson's colleague at Harvard, adopted a more cautious, analytical approach in *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors*, concluding his wide-ranging survey of past empires with the judgment that the United States "reveals many, but not all—at least not yet—of the traits that have distinguished empires."[34] Timothy Parsons, a historian of modern Africa and British imperialism, reached a very different conclusion in his ambitious *The Rule of Empires*, using case studies of imperial rule by the Romans, the Spanish, the British, and others to categorically reject the view that the United States could be classified as an empire.[35] But perhaps the most starkly contrasting perspectives came from the military historian Kimberly Kagan and the historical sociologist Julian Go. Kagan, who served as an advisor to General Petraeus in Afghanistan, argued that the United States was not an empire for the simple or, dare one say,

[31] Patrick J. Buchanan, *A Republic, Not an Empire* (Washington, DC, 1999).
[32] C. Preble, "'Empire'—A Losing Political Issue," *The Hill*, 20 April 2004,
[33] Bernard Porter, *Empire and Superempire: Britain, America and the World* (New Haven, CT, 2006).
[34] Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 43.
[35] Timothy H. Parsons, *The Rule of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall* (New York, 2010).

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simplistic reason that its leaders have not declared it to be an empire.[36] Go, by contrast, concluded that the United States was very much an empire, one fixed in the mold of the British Empire, which it was following inexorably into irreversible decline.[37]

In addition to scholars, polemicists with political axes to grind turned their attention to the British Empire, using its example to promote their views on America's role in the international arena. Consider *The Politically Incorrect Guide to the British Empire*, a mind-bending romp through British imperial history by the neoconservative journalist W. H. Crocker III. Like Ferguson, Crocker insisted that the British Empire "was incontestably a good thing." He assured his readers that American colonists did not break away from Britain because they objected to empire; on the contrary, they were "motivated by the British Empire not being imperialist enough," a deficiency that he argues the new republic did its best to rectify. Eager to live up to the promise of his title, Crocker offered an abundant array of outrageous claims, some of which deserve quotation. He stated that it was "easy to see why the English, when not regarding [the Irish] as comical, tended to see them as shiftless, ignorant, stubborn, contumacious, and cruel"; after all, they were "shockingly lacking in moral scruple." He praised Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer, the man responsible for the massacre of hundreds of Indians at Amritsar in 1919, as "a hero of the old school… a man who stood by the British imperial principles of justice, fair play, and decency."[38] In a *Washington Times* article glossing the book, Crocker acknowledged that his aim was to persuade Americans, though presumably not those of Irish or Indian heritage, to emulate the British and take up the white man's burden.[39]

A curious postscript to this infatuation with empire and demonization of those critical of it came with the release of the film *2016: Obama's America* during the 2012 presidential campaign. Adapted by the conservative author Dinesh D'Sousa from his book *The Roots of Obama's Rage*, the movie argued that Obama's career in politics has been motivated first and foremost by the "anti-colonial beliefs" of his Kenyan grandfather and father. D'Sousa characterized them as active supporters of the Mau Mau rebellion against British rule (an unsubstantiated claim that ignores the fact that Obama's paternal forbearers were Luo from western Kenya, whereas the Mau Mau rebellion was instigated by and largely limited to the Kikuyu people in Kenya's central highlands). The film starts with what many conservatives considered a nearly sacrilegious act by Obama shortly after his inauguration—his decision to return to the British Embassy the bust of Winston Churchill that had graced his predecessor's desk in the Oval Office. D'Sousa interpreted this action as a sign of Obama's desire to wreak revenge on the West for its exploitation of colonial

[36] Kimberly Kagan, ed., *The Imperial Moment* (Cambridge, MA, 2010). On Kagan's role in Afghanistan, see Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Civilian Analysts Gained Petraeus's Ear While He Was Commander in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, 18 December 2012.

[37] Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2011).

[38] H. W. Crocker III, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to the British Empire* (Washington DC, 2011), 3, 4, 78, 146.

[39] H. W. Crocker III, "What America Could Learn From the British Empire: Frugality," *Washington Times*, 27 October 2011.

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peoples. The president, he asserted, secretly considers the United States "the most evil nation in the world," and is determined to undermine its power and prestige.[40] *2016: Obama's America* became the most commercially successful documentary film released in 2012 and the paranoid suspicions it voiced were echoed by several prominent Republicans. Mike Huckabee, a conservative talk show host, past presidential candidate, and former governor of Arkansas, worried that Obama "probably grew up hearing that the British were a bunch of imperialists who persecuted his grandfather."[41] Newt Gingrich, a contender for the Republican presidential nomination in 2012 and a past Speaker of the House of Representatives, declared that the only way to understand Obama's agenda was to place it in the context of "Kenyan anti-colonial behavior."[42] As a former college history professor who had written his dissertation on the Belgian Congo, Gingrich was hardly ignorant of what had happened in colonial Kenya, which makes his remarks especially cynical and opportunistic. But they were indicative of broader efforts to mobilize the British imperial past to advance an agenda that had its impetus in modern American racial politics.

■■■

If the British Empire has been meaningful in the American context mainly by way of analogy to America's standing as the sole superpower in the aftermath of the Cold War and as a means of giving coded expression to the country's anxieties about race, it has assumed a very different valence in contemporary British discourse. Here it has taken on importance not only in terms of contending memories of the imperial past and divergent interpretations of its meaning, but also in terms of debates about the future of the British nation itself.[43]

American neoconservative and liberal interventionists found a kindred spirit at the beginning of the new century in Britain's prime minister, Tony Blair. He and his chief foreign policy advisor, Robert Cooper, had been keen to adopt an assertive foreign policy from the moment Blair took office. Cooper publicly advocated what he called the "new liberal imperialism."[44] For Blair, it was a small step from pressing for NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1998 and sending troops to war-ravaged Sierra Leone in 2000 to committing his country to the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.[45] And as was the case in the United States, these military missions soon generated an intense public debate about the nature and purposes of empire, though this debate had more to do with the empire Britain had lost than the one the United States had gained.

As Blair saw it, the problem with the British was that they had lost their sense of pride in their imperial past. The British Empire, he insisted, should cause "neither

[40] Quotes come from the film *2016: Obama's America* (2012). Also see Dinesh D'Souza, *The Roots of Obama's Rage* (Washington, DC, 2011).

[41] Quoted in Joan Walsh, "Mike Huckabee's Mau Mau Fantasies," *Salon*, 2 March 2011, www.salon.com.

[42] Quoted in Richard Reeves, "That Mau Mau in the White House," *Real Clear Politics,* 15 September 2010, www.realclearpolitics.com.

[43] For a valuable overview, see Joanna de Groot, *Empire and History Writing in Britain c. 1750–2012* (Manchester, 2013).

[44] Robert Cooper, "The New Liberal Imperialism," *Guardian*, 7 April 2002.

[45] See James Naughtie, *The Accidental American: Tony Blair and the Presidency* (New York, 2004).

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apology nor hand-wringing."[46] Gordon Brown voiced similar sentiments, telling a Tanzanian audience that "the days of Britain having to apologize for its colonial history are over … We should celebrate … our past rather than apologize for it."[47] The current Conservative-led coalition government has been equally vocal in urging Britons to take pride in their imperial heritage. David Cameron stirred the faithful at the Conservative Party conference in 2011 when he proclaimed that "Britannia didn't rule the waves with her armbands on." He also announced his intention to restore the British Empire Medal, which had been abolished nearly twenty years earlier.[48] Foreign Minister William Hague declared: "We have to get out of this post-colonial guilt."[49] And Education Secretary Michael Gove insisted that schools need to teach their pupils to "take pride" in Britain's empire, "celebrating" its achievements.[50] To this end, he invited the ubiquitous Niall Ferguson to help revamp the British history curriculum.

Ferguson's grand idea was to use video war games and television programs to teach history to students—with his own series on the British Empire presumably on the syllabus.[51] By 2012, a new documentary series about Britain's imperial past was being aired on British TV, this one a BBC production with *Newsnight* interviewer Jeremy Paxman, who guided his viewers through "amazing stories of adventure." "It's nothing short of a scandal," Paxman scolded, "that this history is not taught in schools." The purpose of the series, he explained, was to refute "the conventional view" that the British Empire "was A Thoroughly Bad Thing."[52] (The television personality and naturalist Sir David Attenborough apparently did not get the memo: he complained that Paxman was "far too negative about the British Empire.")[53] Other prominent figures who felt that the public needed to be re-educated about the virtues of the British Empire and the achievements of its heroes were the popular historians Andrew Roberts, Lawrence James, and Max Hastings. The biographer Tim Jeal wrote a book about Henry Morton Stanley that declared him to be "Africa's greatest explorer" and dismissed charges that he had massacred Africans during his expeditions or that he bore any responsibility for the brutal regime King Leopold instituted

[46] Quoted in Richard Gott, "Let's End the Myths of Britain's Imperial Past," *Guardian*, 19 October 2011.

[47] Benedict Brogan, "It's Time to Celebrate the Empire, Says Brown," *Daily Mail*, 15 January 2005. Brown went on to say: "we should talk, and rightly so, about British values that are enduring… Our strong traditions of fair play, of openness, of internationalism, these are great British values."

[48] Andrew Gimson, "Conservative Party Conference 2011," *Telegraph*, 5 October 2011; "British Empire Medal to Return says David Cameron," *BBC News*, 28 October 2011, www.bbc.com/news/.

[49] "William Hague Says UK Must Shed 'Guilt' Over Empire," *BBC News*, 31 August 2012, www.bbc.com/news/.

[50] Rory Baxter, "Pupils Should Be Proud of British Heroism," *PS Public Service.Co.UK,* 23 April 2013; Laurie Penny, "Michael Gove and the Imperialists," *New Statesman*, 1 June 2010.

[51] Ferguson credited his sons with the inspiration for this idea, though he also acknowledged that his daughter showed less enthusiasm for video war games. See Jeevan Vasagar, "Niall Ferguson aims to shape up history curriculum with TV and war games," *Guardian*, 9 July 2010.

[52] Jeremy Paxman, "'Our Empire Was an Amazing Thing,'" *Telegraph*, 16 February 2012.

[53] Richard Eden, "Sir David Attenborough Battles Jeremy Paxman over the 'Good' British Empire," *Telegraph*, 3 June 2012. In a rich irony, David Attenborough defended the 1973 BBC series "The British Empire" against critics who complained that it cast the empire in too negative a light: he was then the BBC's director of programming. See Fleming, "Echoes of Britannia," 4.

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in the Congo.[54] Jeal became one of the leading proponents of a controversial campaign to erect a statue honoring Stanley at his place of birth, the Welsh town of Denbigh. As Jeal saw it, the time had come to dispense with "post-imperial guilt."[55]

For Jeal and those who shared his views, this call to arms was fueled in part by resentment at what he dismissed as the "moral Brownie points" politicians and others sought to accrue by "well-publicised 'apologies' for 'crimes' committed by earlier generations."[56] He was no doubt alluding to Tony Blair's apologies for Britain's role in the African slave trade and the Irish potato famine, Gordon Brown's apology for the export of child migrants to Australia and other colonies, and David Cameron's apology for the Bloody Sunday massacre in Londonderry. During a visit to India, Cameron also conceded that the British bore some blame for the conflict over Kashmir and expressed regret—what the *Washington Post* called a "near-apology"—for the Amritsar massacre of 1919.[57] Thus, even as Blair and his successors were urging the British to take pride in their imperial past, they were also doing a lot of apologizing for it.

There were those, of course, who thought the British had a lot to apologize for. Paxman's complaint that the empire is often portrayed as "A Thoroughly Bad Thing" does contain a kernel of truth: some authors have been no less strident in their moral condemnation of the British Empire than others have been in praising its virtues. Take, for example, John Newsinger's *The Blood Never Dried: A People's History of the British Empire*—its title tells you pretty much all you need to know about the book's contents.[58] A more recent and widely reviewed condemnation of the violence perpetrated by the British against the peoples they conquered comes from Richard Gott, the veteran left-wing journalist and *Guardian* columnist, in his book *Britain's Empire*. Gott's stated aim was to counter the "tendency to view the imperial experience through the rose-tinted spectacles of heritage culture" by demonstrating that the empire was "the fruit of military conquest and of brutal wars."[59] What follows that declaration of intent are nearly five hundred pages that describe in gory, yet monotonous, detail the awful violence the British inflicted on the peoples they conquered and whose rebellions they suppressed. And Gott takes his story only to 1858!

More nuanced assessments of the British imperial legacy have come from two historians who also serve in Parliament, where politician and intellectual seem less contradictory terms than they do in the US Congress. Tristram Hunt, the Labour Party's shadow secretary of state for education and a senior lecturer at Queen Mary, University of London, recently published *Ten Cities That Made an Empire*. Stressing the culturally hybrid character of imperial cities, Hunt makes the case that this hybridity has been a key source of economic productivity and social achievement. The intended significance of his study for the challenges confronted by contemporary Britain, especially with regard to immigration, ethnicity, and cultural diversity, is not difficult to

[54] Tim Jeal, *Stanley: The Impossible Life of Africa's Greatest Explorer* (New Haven, CT, 2007).
[55] Tim Jeal, "Remembering Henry Stanley," *Telegraph*, 16 March 2011.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Rama Lakshmi, "In India, Cameron Voices Regret for 1919 Massacre," *Washington Post*, 21 February 2013, A10.
[58] John Newsinger, *The Blood Never Dried: A People's History of the British Empire* (London, 2006).
[59] Richard Gott, *Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt* (London, 2011), 3.

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discern. Kwasi Kwarteng, an up-and-coming Conservative MP who is the son of African immigrants from Ghana and holds a Ph.D. in history from Cambridge, has written the widely reviewed *Ghosts of Empire*, which attracted added attention in part because of its author's unusual background. Kwarteng advances an argument that places emphasis on the social origins of the colonial administrators, making a case that most of them came from old landed families whose hereditary elite status imbued them with autocratic, anti-modern sensibilities starkly at odds with the liberal principles that the British professed to be promoting among their colonial subjects. Their misguided policies, he argues, left a legacy of disorder in lands as varied as Burma, Iraq, Sudan, and Nigeria. Kwarteng takes direct aim at Niall Ferguson, arguing that the "British Empire is a bizarre model to follow for fostering stability in today's world" because it "openly repudiated ideas of human equality and put power and responsibility into the hands of a chosen elite … [that] was anti-democratic."[60] His critique spotlights a question that has attracted a great deal of attention from historians and other scholars in recent years: how was it possible for a country that took such pride in its liberal values and institutions to simultaneously impose a system of autocratic and oppressive rule over a quarter of the world's population in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?[61]

Nothing has brought these contradictions between liberal ideals and imperial practice to the attention of the British government and public with greater force in recent years than the outcome of the legal case that four elderly Kenyans filed against the British government. They sought damages for the torture that colonial authorities had inflicted on them as internees during the Mau Mau rebellion in the 1950s. A lawsuit that at first seemed doomed to failure took an unexpected turn when the London High Court ruled in 2012 that the plaintiffs had legal standing to sue the British government. This decision sent shockwaves through Whitehall and compelled authorities to negotiate an out-of-court settlement that promised £20 million in compensation to the four plaintiffs and 5,225 other surviving Kenyans whose abuse at the hands of colonial authorities could be documented.

What turned the case in the Kenyans' favor was the stunning revelation that a vast cache of politically explosive documents about the Mau Mau rebellion and other late colonial crises had been deposited during the retreat from empire in Hanslope Park, the government's signals intelligence center located in rural Buckinghamshire, where they had remained hidden for the past fifty years. After repeated denials, authorities were forced to acknowledge the existence of the secret archive and grant the Kenyan

[60] Tristram Hunt, *Ten Cities That Made an Empire* (London, 2014); Kwasi Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire: Britain's Legacies in the Modern World* (New York, 2011), 2, 8. The journalist and historian Pankaj Mishra also recently launched a high-profile salvo against Ferguson, calling him an "evangelist-cum-historian of empire" and comparing him to the early twentieth-century American racial theorist Lothrop Stoddard in an incendiary review in the *London Review of Books* 33, no. 21 (2011), 11–12. Ferguson threatened to sue Mishra for defamation. See Peter Beaumont, "Niall Ferguson Threatens to Sue over Accusation of Racism," *Guardian*, November 26, 2011. Mishra has also recently published a study of Asian critics of empire, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (New York, 2012).

[61] See, for example, Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, 1999); Jennifer Pitts, *Turn to Empire: The Rise of Liberal Imperialism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ, 2005); Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton, NJ, 2010); and Theodore Koditschek, *Liberalism, Imperialism, and the Historical Imagination: Nineteenth-Century Visions of a Greater Britain* (Cambridge, 2011).

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plaintiffs' legal team access to relevant files, which provided incontrovertible evidence that torture and other crimes had been sanctioned at the highest levels of the British government. This disclosure destroyed the government's case. It also discomfited some celebrants of Britain's imperial heritage, though they did their best to minimize its significance. Lawrence James, for example, acknowledged that some "nasty expedients [had been] employed occasionally," but he scolded the BBC and the *Guardian* newspaper for their "predictable hand-wringing and breast-beating" and he maintained that "the faults of the Empire are more than outweighed by the benefits it extended to its millions of subjects."[62] There can be little doubt, however, that the discovery of the Hanslope Park archive, which includes nearly 9,000 files on morally and legally questionable activities in thirty-seven former colonies, has opened the floodgate for further revelations and lawsuits.

It should be noted that several prominent historians of colonial Kenya played important roles in these proceedings. Much of the impetus for the court case came from the publication in 2005 of Caroline Elkins' *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* and David Anderson's *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empir*e, which provided compelling documentation of widespread British abuses of Kenyans during the Mau Mau Emergency.[63] The two books appeared soon after the Abu Ghraib scandal had come to light in American-occupied Iraq and opened the door to further disclosures about the sanctioned use of torture by the Central Intelligence Agency and other US government agencies. Because these revelations seemed so eerily similar to the historical crimes exposed by Elkins and Anderson, their books attracted unusually wide interest, with Elkins' work winning the Pulitzer Prize for history (the first work on an African subject to achieve that honor). When the lawsuit on behalf of the four Kenyans was filed in British courts, Elkins and Anderson became expert witnesses for the plaintiffs, as did Hew Bennett, an authority on the British counterinsurgency campaign against Mau Mau.[64] It was their relentless search for missing historical records that uncovered the secret Hanslope Park archive. When the government conceded defeat, the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* turned to Elkins and Anderson to reflect on the implications of the case. Both of them anticipated that it would lay the groundwork for further lawsuits by other victims of British abuse in Malaya, Cyprus, Aden, and elsewhere. In his *New York Times* op-ed, Anderson also brought its implications full circle by wondering when the United States would face similar lawsuits from detainees

[62] Lawrence James, "Yes, Mistakes Were Made, But We Must Never Stop Being Proud of the Empire," *Mail Online*, 18 April 2012. Also see Jane Warren, "Why Should We Apologise for the Empire?," *Express*, 12 May 2012, express.co.uk and John Allen, "To Talk about British Atrocities in Kenya During the Mau Mau Era is Nonsense," *Guardian*, 9 May 2012, guardian.co.uk.

[63] Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York, 2005); David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: The Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (New York, 2005).

[64] For commentaries on the case from each of the three historical experts, see David M. Anderson, "Mau Mau in the High Court and the 'Lost' British Empire Archives: Colonial Conspiracy or Bureaucratic Bungle?"; Caroline Elkins, "Alchemy of Evidence: Mau Mau, the British Empire, and the High Court of Justice"; and Hew Bennett, "Soldiers in the Court Room: The British Army's Part in the Kenya Emergency under the Legal Spotlight," all published in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39, no. 5 (2011): 699–748.

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incarcerated in Guantanamo.[65] It is an important question, one that the aftermath of the British imperial experience has made all but impossible to ignore.

■■■

If the preceding pages seem to have taken a trajectory that accentuates recent political debates and controversies, this has been unavoidable. The question I posed at the beginning of this essay was why Britain's imperial past has continued to attract so much attention among historians of Britain. The obvious answer is because it speaks to moral concerns and political issues that remain very much with us. These concerns and issues are not—and should not be—confined to professional historians. Political leaders and foreign policy elites, members of the media, and the public at large have had compelling reasons of their own to contemplate Britain's imperial past and consider its implications for the present. But their perspectives on the past and its relationship to the present have been shaped, I have argued, by their location, as have the perspectives of professional historians. In the United States, British imperial history has served as a useful analogy that various parties have brought into play to advance their agendas regarding America's domestic racial politics and its international role as a superpower. By way of example, the recent Russian aggression against Ukraine has given new life to the neoconservatives who believe that the United States must be more assertive in projecting its power and fulfilling its destiny as an empire.[66]

In Britain, the echoes of its imperial past have reverberated in the public consciousness in various ways, but most clearly as a consequence of the country's recent role in the military occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. The empire remains an integral element of the collective memory of the nation and its citizens, and it elicits a wide range of emotions, including pride, nostalgia, guilt, resentment, anger, and wishful thinking. One of the more plaintively amusing examples comes from a recent *Telegraph* headline: "Britain may have invaded 90 per cent of the world, but we're not hated everywhere."[67] A far more serious indication of this ongoing process of coming to terms with Britain's imperial past and its post-imperial present has been the question posed most acutely by the recent Scottish referendum: does a British identity—and a British state—remain viable? Many observers have become convinced, as Norman Davies put it, that "the United Kingdom was established to serve the interests of Empire and … the loss of Empire has destroyed its *raison d'etre*."[68]

When Wm. Roger Louis proclaimed in his preface to the *Oxford History of the British Empire* that the passions aroused by British imperialism had lessened, permitting historians to achieve some measure of consensus about its nature and significance, he could hardly have foreseen how the events of the past decade and a half

[65] David M. Anderson, "Atoning for the Sins of Empire," *New York Times*, 13 June 2013; Caroline Elkins, "Britain Has Said Sorry to the Mau Mau. The Rest of the Empire is Still Waiting," *Guardian*, 6 June 2013.

[66] Robert D. Kaplan, "In Defense of Empire," *The Atlantic*, April 2014, www.theatlantic.com/magazine.

[67] Colin Freeman, "Britain May Have Invaded 90 Per Cent of the World, But We're Not Hated Everywhere," *Telegraph*, 8 November 2012. The article was a commentary on Stuart Laycock, *All the Countries We've Ever Invaded: And the Few We Never Got Round To* (London, 2012).

[68] Norman Davies, *The Isles* (New York, 2001), 1053.

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would renew those passions. At the same time, it was perhaps unrealistic of Louis to suppose that any historiographical assessment of the British Empire could avoid debate, dissent, and even moral outrage, especially in light of the profoundly problematic impact that empire has had on our world. There are those historians, to be sure, who maintain that "the idea of a powerful and constraining colonial legacy is seriously flawed," especially as an explanation for the challenges that confront many of the peoples of former colonies because it minimizes both pre- and postcolonial factors while exaggerating colonialism's lingering effects.[69] In other words, it's time for them—and us—to get over it. There are other historians who advance the closely related argument that the British Empire was never as powerful and transformative as it is often made out to be; it was an "improvised and provisional" empire, "always ramshackle and quite often chaotic."[70] In other words, it was not that big a deal anyway.

I would suggest that both of these positions are as deeply embedded in contemporary perspectives and concerns as are those of the historians whose interpretations they reject. An Olympian aloofness from the moral and political passions that surround us is neither fully possible nor, I believe, entirely desirable. It is the power of these passions that has sustained such an intense and immensely productive engagement in the history of British imperialism in recent decades. But this engagement carries a twofold obligation for professional historians. The first is to be as self-aware of our own subject positions as possible, recognizing that our time and place inform our efforts to make meaningful sense of the past.[71] This should not prevent us, however, from insisting on scholarly standards of evidence and integrity. Our second obligation, then, is to hold those to account who make fatuous, tendentious, or deceptive claims about the past. But we should seek not simply to expose the problems with such claims, but to understand *why* they are made, asking ourselves what agendas they are meant to serve. Only then will we gain a meaningful grasp of the forces that have helped to ensure that British imperial history retains its relevance today.

[69] Martin J. Wiener, "The Idea of 'Colonial Legacy' and the Historiography of Empire," *Journal of the Historical Society* 13, no. 1 (2013): 32. For someone who once famously argued that British industrial decline in the late twentieth century was attributable to the embrace of gentlemanly values by the middle class a century earlier, Weiner's insistence that the adverse effects of British imperial rule has passed its sell-by date for the Indians, Africans, and other former colonial peoples who gained their independence some fifty years ago seems curiously inconsistent with his earlier views on the past's power to shape the present. See Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980* (Cambridge, 1982).

[70] Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, xii, xiii. Also see his *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830–1970* (Cambridge, 2009). Taken together, Darwin devotes nearly 1,300 pages to this ramshackle empire in these two books.

[71] This is the subject of a forthcoming book edited by Antoinette Burton and me, titled *How Empire Shaped Us* (Bloomsbury), with contributions from a wide array of British imperial historians.

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