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## 10 lessons on empire

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As I mentioned awhile back, I devoted a good chunk of my vacation out west reading Piers Brendon's *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997*. As you might imagine, I spent a lot of time thinking about possible parallels and lessons for America's current global position, just as English imperialists spent a lot of time pondering the Roman experience (ably documented by Edward Gibbon).

In a tapestry this rich and varied, it is easy to read into it just about any "lesson" one wants to draw. With that caveat in mind, here are the top ten lessons on empire that I drew from Brendon's book. Even if you don't agree with them, you should still read the book.

### 1. There is no such thing as a "benevolent" Empire.

In his classic history of ancient Rome, Gibbon had noted that "There is nothing more adverse to nature and reason than to hold in obedience remote countries and foreign nations, in opposition to their inclination and interest." Britons thought of the empire as a positive force for themselves *and* their subjects, even though they had to slaughter thousands of their imperial subjects in order to maintain their control. Americans should be under no illusions either: if you maintain garrisons all over the world and repeatedly interfere in the internal politics of other countries, you are inevitably going to end up breaking a lot of heads.

### 2. All Empires depend on self-justifying ideology and rhetoric that is often at odds with reality.

British imperialists repeatedly portrayed their role as the "white man's burden" and maintained that imperial control brought considerable benefits to their subjects. (This is an old story: France proclaimed its *mission civilisatrice*, and the Soviet empire claimed it was spreading the benefits of communism. Today, Americans say we are spreading freedom and

liberty). Brendon's account describes the various benefits of imperial rule, but also emphasizes the profound social disruptions that imperial rule caused in India, Africa, and elsewhere. Moreover, because British control often depended on strategies of "divide-and-conquer," its rule often left its colonies deeply divided and ill-prepared for independence. But that's not what English citizens were told at the time.

### **3. Successful empires require ample "hard power."**

Although the British did worry a lot about their reputation and prestige (what one might now term their "soft power") what really killed the Empire was its eroding economic position. Once Britain ceased to be the world's major economic and industrial power, its days as an imperial power were numbered. It simply couldn't maintain the ships, the men, the aircraft, and the economic leverage needed to rule millions of foreigners, especially in a world where other rapacious great powers preyed. The moral for Americans? It is far more important to maintain a robust and productive economy here at home than it is to squander billions of dollars trying to determine the political fate of some remote country thousands of miles away. External conditions may impinge on U.S. power, but it is internal conditions that generate it.

### **4. As Empires decline, they become more opulent, and they obsess about their own glory.**

Brendon's description of the British Empire Exposition at Wembley in 1924-1925 is both slightly comical and bittersweet; with cracks increasingly evident in the imperial façade, Britain put on a lavish show designed to bind the colonies together and highlight its continuing glory. Moral: when you hear U.S. politicians glorifying America's historical world role, get worried.

### **5. Great Empires are heterogeneous.**

The British empire was not a uniform enterprise; the various bits and piece were acquired at different times and in different ways, and the relationship between London and the different components was far from uniform. One could say the same thing for America's less formal global "empire": its relationship with NATO is different than the alliance with Japan, or the client states in the Middle East, or the bases at Diego Garcia or Guantanamo. An empire is not one thing.

### **6. When building an empire, it's hard to know where to stop.**

The expansion of the British empire after 1781 shows how difficult it is to engage in a rational assessment of strategic costs and benefits. Once committed to India, for example, it was easy for Britain to get drawn into additional commitments in Egypt, Yemen, Kenya, South Africa, Afghanistan, Burma, and Singapore. This was partly because ambitious empire builders like Cecil Rhodes were constantly promoting new imperial schemes, but also because each additional step could be justified by the need to protect the last. History has been described as "just one damn thing after another," and so is the process of imperial expansion.

### ***7. It takes a lot of incompetent people to run an empire.***

A recurring theme in Brendon's account is the remarkable level of ignorance and incompetence with which the British empire was administered. Although there were obviously some very able individuals involved, Britain's colonial endeavors seem to have attracted an equal or greater number of arrogant, corrupt, and racist buffoons. The bungling that accompanied the U.S. occupation of Iraq looks rather typical by comparison.

### **8. Great Powers defend perceived interests with any means at their disposal.**

Great powers like to portray themselves as "civilized" societies with superior moral and ethical standards, but realists know better. Like other empires, Britain used its technological superiority without restraint, whether in the form of naval power, the Maxim gun, airplanes, high explosive, or poison gas., and the British showed scant regard for the effects of this superior technology on their "uncivilized" targets. Today, the United States uses Predators and Reapers and smart bombs. *Plus ca change ...*

### **9. Nationalism and other forms of local identity remain a potent obstacle to long-term imperial control.**

Britain's supposedly "liberal" empire contained a deep contradiction: a society that emphasized individual liberties could not hold in bondage whole societies and deny the inhabitants independence. Once nationalism took root in the colonies (intermingled with other tribal and/or religious identities), resistance to imperial rule increased apace. As the United States is now discovering in Iraq and Central Asia, most peoples don't like taking orders from well-armed foreigners, even when the foreigners keep telling them that their aims are benevolent.

### **10. "Imperial Prestige" is both an asset and a trap.**

Britain's leaders fretted constantly about any erosion in their image of superiority, fearing that one or two setbacks might lead their subjects to rise up or encourage other great powers to poach on Britain's holdings. As a result, Britons found themselves fighting to defend marginal possessions in order to preserve their position in the places they believed mattered. Ironically, the refusal to liquidate far-flung commitments early so as to focus resources on more vital interests may have hastened Britain's imperial decline.

There are undoubtedly other morals one can draw from Brendon's account, and other historical treatments would undoubtedly suggest a somewhat different set of lessons. I wouldn't want to overplay the parallels between Britain and the United States, if only because the U.S. empire is mostly ad hoc and informal rather than a network of formal colonies. But there is one final moral one could also draw from Brendan's fine work: *there is life after Empire*. Britain may be past the glory of its imperial heyday, but life expectancy, health care,

educational levels, GDP/capita, etc. are all higher now than they were in Victoria's time. Defenders of the Empire foresaw doom-and-gloom if it ever dissolved -- and sent many men to their deaths to prevent that from happening -- but its eventual demise did not produce the disasters back home that many had feared. Great Britain remains in influential force in world affairs, if anything batting slightly above its weight, and is more secure now than at any time in its modern history. For those of us who think the United States should stay out of the empire business, that's a reassuring thought.