

An empire of denial

The US is choosing to ignore the fact that it is to blame for the stifling of global democracy

No one could have called ours a raucous household. The passions of our first two years at university were spent, and we were now buried in our books. My work, as usual, was quixotic and contradictory (studying zoology by day, writing a terrible novel by night), Niall's was focussed and unrelenting. He was charming, generous-spirited and easy to live with, but I think it is fair to say that everyone was frightened of him.

It's not just that my housemate knew his subject better than his contemporaries, and knew where he wanted to take it. He also knew how to do it. While the rest of us were fumbling with bunches of odd-shaped keys, trying to jam each of them into the lock in turn, the doors kept swinging open for him. Niall Ferguson is now professor of history at New York University, and rapidly becoming one of the most celebrated intellectuals in the United States.

After university we retained an occasional friendship, during which we never quite engaged with each other's politics. I haven't seen him for three or four years, and I'm not sure what we'd talk about today. Our views, which were never close, have now polarised completely. We find ourselves on opposite sides of what will surely be the big fight of the early 21st century: global democracy versus American empire.

His new book and television series, *Colossus*, is an attempt to persuade the United States that it must take its imperial role seriously, becoming in the 21st century what Britain was in the 19th. "Many parts of the world," he claims, "would benefit from a period of American rule." The US should stop messing about with "informal empire",

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and assert “direct rule” over countries which “require the imposition of some kind of external authority”. But it is held back by “the absence of a will to power”.

Colossus, like all Niall’s books, is erudite and intelligent. The quality of his research forces those of us who take a different view to raise our game. He has remembered what so many have chosen to forget: that the United States is and has always been an empire – an “empire in denial”.

He shows that there was little difference between the westward expansion of the founding states and the growth of “the great land empires of the past”. He argues that its control of Central America, the Caribbean, the Pacific and the Middle East has had long had an imperial character. He makes the interesting point that the US found, in its attempt to contain the Soviet Union, “the perfect ideology for its own peculiar kind of empire: the imperialism of anti-imperialism”.

But he asks us to remember only in order to persuade us to forget. He seeks to exchange an empire in denial for an empire of denial.

He forgets those who are always forgotten by empire: the victims. He remembers, of course, that Saddam Hussein gassed his political opponents in Iraq. He forgets that the British did the same. He talks of the “genuine benefits in the form of free trade” granted by Britain to its colonies, but forgets the devastating famines this policy caused in India (he is aware of Mike Davis’s book *Late Victorian Holocausts*, but there is no sign that he has read it). He writes of the “institutions, knowledge and culture” bequeathed to the colonies, but forgets that Britain, as Basil Davidson showed, deliberately destroyed the institutions, knowledge and culture (including the hospitals and universities established by educated west Africans) of the colonised.

He forgets, too, that there was a difference between the interests of the British empire and those of its subject peoples. He writes of the massive British investments in “railways and port facilities” and “plantations to produce new cash crops like tea, cotton, indigo and rubber” as if we seized the land, exploited the labour and exported the wealth of the colonies for the benefit of the natives.

Strangely, for one who knows empire so well, Niall also either forgets or fails to understand the current realities of America’s informal rule. He dismisses the idea that the US wishes to control Middle Eastern oil reserves on the grounds that the US is already “oil rich”. It’s not just that oil production peaked in the United States in 1970. The US government knows that if you control the diminishing resource on which every other nation depends, you will, as that resource dries up, come to exercise precisely the kind of indirect rule that Ferguson documents elsewhere. While brilliantly exposing America’s imperial denial, he takes at face value almost every other story it tells about its role in the world. He accepts, for example, that the US went to war with Iraq because

“its patience ran out” when Saddam failed to comply with the weapons inspectors. There’s not a word about the way in which the US itself undermined and then destroyed the inspection missions.

When you forget, you must fill the memory gap with a story. And the story that all enthusiasts for empire tell themselves is that independent peoples have no one but themselves to blame for their misfortunes. The problem faced by many African states, Niall insists, “is simply misgovernment: corrupt and lawless dictators whose conduct makes economic development impossible”. “Simply” misgovernment?

This is a continent, let us remember, whose economies are largely controlled by the International Monetary Fund. As Joseph Stiglitz has shown, it has used its power to run a virtual empire for US capital, forcing poorer nations to remove their defences against financial speculators and corporate theft. This is partly why some of the poorest African nations have the world’s most liberal trade regimes. It is precisely because of forced liberalisation of the kind Ferguson recommends that growth in sub-Saharan Africa fell from 36% between 1960 and 1980 (when countries exercised more control over their economies) to minus 15% between 1980 and 1998. The world’s problem, Niall contends, is that the unaccountable government of the poor by the rich, which already has had such disastrous consequences, has not gone far enough.

The timing of all this is, of course, appalling. As the United States has sought to impose direct imperial rule in Iraq, it has earned the hatred of much of the developing world. But we should never underestimate the willingness of the powerful to flatter themselves. Unaccountable power requires a justifying myth, and the US government might just be dumb enough to believe the one that Niall has sought to revive. My old friend could get us all into a great deal of trouble.

But even he doesn’t really seem to believe it. His book, above all, is a lament for the opportunities the US has lost. It is, he admits, so far from finding the will to recreate the British empire that the world could soon be left “without even one dominant imperial power”. What better opportunity could there then be to press for global democracy? #

George Monbiot’s book [The Age of Consent: a Manifesto for a New World Order](#) is now published in paperback