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Lessons from the British Empire

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Now that the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan are dissolving, discussions of empire seem to have receded from view. But the United States possessed [10] more than 1,000 military installations outside of the United States as of 2012, according to an estimate by American University professor David Vine. American troops are deployed in about 150 countries. Approximately $250 billion is spent annually to burnish these assets. If the United States was an empire in 2003, it remains one today.

Oxford University historian John Darwin's erudite new book [11] on the British Empire shows the continuing relevance of imperialism to our foreign-policy dilemmas. Darwin is probably the world's senior expert on Britain's empire, the author of several well-regarded books on the subject. In *Unfinished Empire*, he provides an overview of arguably the most influential empire in world history. "No less than one quarter of today's sovereign states were hewn from its fabric," writes Darwin.

Unfinished Empire is categorized thematically. Chapters are devoted to, among other aspects of the British Imperium, first encounters with indigenous peoples, methods used to counter rebellions, and trading policies. Darwin's decision against a chronological telling of the empire makes for a less exciting book than could have existed, but it does serve as a method of reinforcing his theme that Britain created a constantly shifting, improvisational collection of lands. "From its earliest beginnings, it was an uneasy and sometimes contradictory amalgam of territorial ambition, administrative practice, legal procedure and cultural pretentions," reads *Unfinished Empire*.

The British Empire has its beginnings in the 900s, when English kings claimed ownership of all of Great Britain. Asserting sovereignty over nearby lands seeded a habit. "What this pattern of English expansion also revealed was the stark confrontation between English ideas of 'civility'—the qualities of an ordered and peaceful society—and those that prevailed on the British 'peripheries,'" Darwin writes. Once England was defeated by France in the Hundred Years War, it concentrated its ambitions outside of Europe. Like the United States, England was blessed with maritime surroundings, which insulated it from rivals.

Unlike France, Portugal, Spain and Belgium, the British Empire bequeathed successes. The largest elements of what the sci-fi novelist Neal Stephenson termed [12] the "Anglosphere"—Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand—are among the few countries that have existed without interruption as constitutional, capitalist states. India, as well, has a democratic character that is often contrasted with that other formerly Third World power, China. Of course, to claim that India, to say nothing of the original populations in what became the Anglosphere, largely profited from British imperialism, would be to ignore the extermination of entire peoples. Still, with important exceptions such as Quebec (itself secured in British Canada), most European empires left little of value in the lands they conquered. What made the British Empire different?

One reason was that, at least after 1713, Britain was a stable model for a state. Unlike, say, France, which had the various Republics as well as the Napoleonic and Vichy governments, Britain had a consistent regime type it could attempt to replicate. "Its (white) inhabitants had shared (as 'freeborn Englishmen') the right to representative government to the British crown," notes Darwin. Being born anywhere in the British Empire required allegiance to the British Crown and Parliament, but it brought with it protection, individual liberties and a position in the imperial economy.

In addition, Darwin points out, "an empire of enlightened officialdom, conscientiously serving ignorant colonial masses, was an extraordinary idea to have arisen in Britain where (unlike in France or Germany) there was no established tradition of bureaucratic authority." The civil service founded in India after 1790 existed solely to administer British possessions, reflecting the burgeoning field of social science, which was epitomized by the emergence of the utilitarian philosophers.

Its undeniable successes lulled the British into thinking their Empire was eternal. Understanding the brutality of the Dirty Wars [13] that marked the final decades of the Empire does render the last chapters of *Unfinished Empire* less sympathetic. Darwin notes that historians have given Britain good marks for employing less violence in their abandonment of foreign lands. "But they were much less unwilling to use military force where the odds were more promising and the incentives were greater: as in Malaya, Cyprus and Kenya," he counters.

Still, one cannot help but sympathize with English self-delusion. Every prime minister, up to and including Harold Macmillan in the early 1960s, believed that Britain continued to be a great power, even as the world increasingly disagreed with them. It is now easy to mock Macmillan's attempts to exist alongside Soviet and U.S. leaders as equals in summits that were typically of a ceremonial nature. But the failure of British leaders to admit their diminished global position

largely shows the difficulty of clearly assessing a nation’s power. As American pundits and analysts ponder the question of their own decline, they are repeating an imperial tradition of seeing a blurry world picture. Building an empire is difficult: relinquishing it is even more so.