The Folly of Empire: The Trouble With Rise-and-Fall Narratives

By Antoinette Burton, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, November 25, 2015

At least since Rome, when historians have told the story of empire, they have reached for grand narratives that follow a rise-and-fall trajectory. Empires, in these accounts, are defined by a period of gradual ascendancy followed by a steep decline. Such narratives have been especially persistent in histories of the British Empire, which often draw on the example of Rome’s catastrophic end to plot a melodramatic narrative stretching from initial glory to eventual defeat, spanning several centuries of British rule.

Yet this narrative is a myth. There was no glorious rise. Imperial power was never unambiguously successful. In its modern incarnation, the British Empire was only ever haltingly successful, especially given the vast and far-flung territorial possessions that constituted it from the 1830s to the 1930s. And just because the British defeated mutinies, broke strikes, and suppressed political dissent, historians should not assume that they secured unproblematic social and political order.

In fact, the British Empire was in constant trouble. Students of the British case are familiar with troublemakers such as Mohandas Gandhi or the Irish Republican Brotherhood—men who challenged the social and political order at home and abroad in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But British imperial historians too often do not make the disruption such figures caused the center of their accounts. Even when historians concede that these dissenters shaped the end of empire, they rarely recognize that unrest characterized the imperial era more than did expansion and hegemony.

British imperial leaders, far from presiding over order and stability, struggled across the nineteenth century to manage the unrest generated by imperialism and to contain the spillover of anticolonial sentiment in its most subversive forms “at home.” Officials were routinely confronted with their own mismanagement, both in the everyday functioning of empire and in the crises that erupted with regularity. Historians would do well, in other words, to stop seeing empire in terms of rise-and-fall arcs and take a more skeptical view of the inevitability and unchallenged dominance of imperial power.

On battlefields across the empire, in the marketplaces of colonial commerce, in the realm of transnational politics—in all these domains, antagonists continually challenged the fiction of Pax Britannica. Those who lived through the realities of modern British imperialism, whether as colonized or colonizer, native or settler, witnessed firsthand the combination of resistance and insecurity that characterized the daily life of empire on the ground. Those who live in the shadow of the British Empire today and continue to draw so much from its legacy ought, therefore, to have a keener understanding of how and why the trouble with empire was so apparent to those in its grasp.
SEDUCTIVE MYTHS

British decolonization may have begun in 1776, with the eruption of the American Revolution—and, with it, of successful anticolonial agitation—into world-historical consciousness. Yet even in the heyday of British imperialism, which came after the Revolution, decolonizing efforts were hardly limited to occasional dramatic outbursts. During the century or so between the onset of the First Afghan War in 1839 and the emergence of Gandhian nationalism in the 1930s, discontented subjects of empire made their unhappiness felt across the globe, from Ireland to Canada to India to Africa to Australasia, in direct response to British military incursions and the imposition of market-based imperial capitalism.

Throughout the period, military resistance was common. Some examples of such resistance, such as the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, are well-known. Yet even when these battles appeared to have ended and the British seemed to have control of territory, the British constantly scrambled to keep the peace and establish political, economic, and social order. They had to fight two wars to control China, three to “settle” Afghanistan, and nine to subdue the “Kaffirs” across Africa before 1900. They may have technically won these wars, but only after they badly bungled many of the campaigns. Victory and the preservation of stability remained uncertain across large expanses of the British Empire. From New Zealand, where in the 1860s the British fought several Maori wars, to West Africa, where the British and the Ashanti empire fought multiple conflicts in the course of the nineteenth century, to Central Asia, where the United Kingdom fought two wars in Afghanistan, imperial supremacy was always fitful and contested.

These large-scale revolts and wars contributed significantly to British imperial insecurity, but so too did regular, local eruptions of protest below the level of formal battle. On India's northwest frontier, for example, unrest was more common than peace. This kind of guerrilla fighting meant that military victory was often partial and that contests for territorial possession were ongoing. Security remained elusive, in short, and maintaining the peace was an ongoing task.

Opposition was an almost constant feature of the economic life of empire, too. Economic imperial power was always precarious. Sites of capital investment—from plantations to coal and diamond mines, from factories to the railway—that enabled the conversion of raw materials into profit and the creation of globally linked market economies were, like military barracks and garrisons, highly vulnerable. Strikers, boycotters, and deserters constantly interrupted colonial work discipline and labor regimes, in factories and plantations, to register their unwillingness to
be incorporated into dominant forms of political economy, disrupting the everyday work of empire as a matter of course.

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And still other forms of political insubordination constantly troubled imperial officials, whether on the spot or in the Colonial Office in London. From the 1850s onward, there were regular uprisings and attempts at armed rebellion and sedition. Assassinations, bombings, and transnational plots against the empire were a common feature of late Victorian anticolonial activity, from Dublin, where Irish republicans assassinated high-ranking British officials, to Delhi, where bomb-making factories could be found in garden suburbs, to the Sudan, where the Mahdi inspired an Islamist state for more than a decade after he seized Khartoum in 1885. Such unrest may not have succeeded in bringing the empire down, but it disrupted the imperial agents, officials, and sympathizers whose job it was to ensure routine order and security.
George W. Joy's portrayal of the death of General Gordon at the fall of Khartoum in 1885
This combination of imperial mismanagement and colonial protest should make it clear that the history of the British Empire is not rise and fall, but skirmish, scramble, stumble, and recover. Whether in the gorges of Afghanistan, the gold fields of South Africa, or the bomb-making facilities of Bengal, people subject to imperial conquest and rule refused to stand still or settle down in the face of military, economic, and political onslaught. Yet today, convictions about the overall “success” of British imperialism continue to shape not just histories of empire in bookstores but also popular perceptions of what a successful Anglo-imperial world power looks like.

The persistence of these myths about global imperial stability has dangerous effects today. A rise-and-fall model does not explain the daily violence of empire building. The dominant narrative of British imperialism, in particular, provides no way of understanding the constant violence in places such as Fallujah or Ramadi. Above all, understanding imperial success as part of a romanticized tradition of rise and fall has a seductive appeal that obscures the reality—that empire is a relentless everyday struggle, with few winners and high costs that typically outlast even long-term gains. Truly understanding this reality requires carefully studying how and why empires fail, understanding their vulnerability on the ground, and rejecting assumptions about their success drawn straight from the pages of the colonizer's own histories.