

A Post-Imperial Power? Britain and the Royal Navy

by Jeremy Black

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For a century and a half, from the Napoleonic Wars to World War II, the British Empire was the greatest power in the world. At the core of that power was the Royal Navy, the greatest and most advanced naval force in the world. For decades, the distinctive nature, the power and the glory, of the empire and the Royal Navy shaped the character and provided the identity of the British nation.

Today, the British Empire seems to be only a memory, and even the Royal Navy sometimes can appear to be only an auxiliary of the U.S. Navy. The British nation itself may be dissolving into its preexisting and fundamental English, Scottish, and even Welsh parts. But British power and the Royal Navy, and particularly that navy's power projection, still figure in world affairs. Properly understood, they could also continue to provide an important component of British national identity.

The Distinctive Maritime Character of the British Empire

The relationship between Britain and its empire always differed from that of other European states with theirs, for a number of reasons. First, the limited authority and power of government within Britain greatly affected the character of British imperialism, especially, but not only, in the case of colonies that received a large number of British settlers. In addition, the commercial focus of much British imperial activity was such that the state's role was smaller than it was in the cases of Portugal, Spain, and France. All countries had a place for private adventurers—corporate profit was also a driving force in Dutch imperialism—but the opportunity for personal or corporate profit played a particularly important part in British imperialism, as seen, for example, with the slave trade.

An Island Power

Because Britain is an island, the sea has always played a primary role in British life. The offshore waters and ocean currents ensure a rich and varied fish life, and fishing and foreign trade have played a major part in Britain's history. The import and export of goods facilitated its achieving the economic power that played a considerable part in its expansion. Britain's emphasis on trade contributed to the development of a sophisticated economy, in particular in the growth of the financial sector and overseas shipping, both of which in turn helped trade. Likewise, protecting trade required naval strength and commitment, the provision of which in turn fostered trade. However, dependence upon imported foodstuffs made the country more vulnerable during the world wars and the Cold War.

Trade became an iconic aspect of the British Empire. When New York's Rockefeller Center was built in the early 1930s, its British Empire Building (620 Fifth Avenue) was adorned with a bronze relief by American artist Carl Paul Jennewein with an economic focus. "Industries of the British Commonwealth" included figures for cotton, tobacco, wool, sugar, coal, salt, wheat, fish, and navigation. In contrast, Alfred Janniot's bronze panel for the building's twin, La Maison Française (620 Fifth Avenue), "Paris and New York united under the aegis of the Three Graces: Poetry, Beauty, and Elegance," was topped with a figure of Marianne, emblematic of freedom, encaptioned "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité."¹ In light of Britain's part in the early nineteenth century in ending the slave trade and its granting Dominion status to some colonies through the early twentieth century (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa), it also had claims of being a force for freedom. If by the 1930s the British Empire's image was more as a great commercial trading force, it was soon to use its imperial energy and resources to defend freedom from Nazi Germany in what may have been the empire's culmination, justification, and even destiny.

Being an island also made Britain difficult to conquer. There were successful invasions, particularly those by the Roman emperor Claudius in 43 and the Norman William the Conqueror in 1066, both of which ushered in long-lasting rules, and, less clearly (because he was welcomed by many), by William III of Orange in 1688. But it was more difficult to invade a country by sea than by land, and this proved crucial to national safety after English forces were defeated on the Continent, as when King John lost Normandy to the king

¹ Portions of Italian-American artist Attilia Piccirilli's bas-relief for the Center's Palazzo d'Italia remain; that part of it that depicted fascist themes was covered over in December 1941 and eventually replaced by new art given by Fiat of Italy. Plans for Das Deutsches Haus to twin the Palazzo were abandoned after Hitler came to power. France insisted on Janniot's receiving this commission: when the Rockefellers commissioned murals from Mexican artist Diego Rivera for the Center, American artists objected to the hiring of foreign artists in the midst of the Depression. Rivera was ultimately fired for including Lenin in his mural for the RCA Building. See Daniel Okrent, *Great Fortune: The Epic of Rockefeller Center* (New York: Viking, 2003).

of France in 1204 or when they were defeated in the Low Countries by France in 1794 and by Germany in 1940. British naval power (sometimes aided by the weather) thwarted invasion attempts in 1588, 1692, 1696, 1708, 1744, 1745–6, 1759, and 1805.

Britain's island existence also engendered an insularity that made for suspicious minds when it came to relationships with continental Europe. The late nineteenth-century tradition of "splendid isolation" in foreign policy may be regarded as the precursor of Britain's role today as the "awkward partner" within the EU.

Dominion Status

The legacy of British imperial rule varied greatly, and this resonates in modern world politics. British control of many territories, both of the nineteenth-century empire and of the colonies gained after World War I—was more short-lived than Spain's control of its territories. In many of its territories, British settlement was also limited. The combined effect was less profound and lasting than in the former settlement colonies (Australia, Canada, New Zealand), which were mostly also occupied during the nineteenth century, but where the bulk of the present population is not of indigenous descent. These were the colonies that lent themselves to a process of autonomy through self-government (the acquisition of Dominion status), which was easiest to ensure and justify in colonies where at least part of the population were British subjects living abroad. Having colonies achieve Dominion status was also seen within Britain as a key to imperial strength, and indeed Halford Mackinder, a liberal imperialist who was responsible in large part for the development and practice of geopolitics, claimed:

The whole course of future history depends on whether the Old Britain beside the Narrow Seas have enough of virility and imagination to withstand all challenge to her naval supremacy, until such time as the daughter nations shall have grown to maturity, and the British Navy shall have expanded into the Navy of the Britains.²

Naval Power

In Britain, and to a considerable extent also in the United States in the twentieth century, naval power was considered important not simply in regard to economic and security interests, but also as an expression of national culture. Navies were associated with liberty; armies were not. Thus, naval historian Nicholas Rodger has argued that:

The demands of sea power were not only greater in themselves, but fell upon a much wider cross-section of society, and required a much greater degree of social, political,

²Halford Mackinder, *Britain and the British Seas* (London, 1902), p. 358.

and administrative integration that armies did. A military regime could sustain itself by force, but a navy had to earn public support. Autocracy was adequate for an army, but navies needed consensus. This, we may suggest, is why Spain failed the naval test in the sixteenth century, just as France failed it in the eighteenth, Germany and Russia in the twentieth.³

The equation “navies = liberal form of power = good, while armies are the opposite” is well ingrained in Anglo-American liberal thinking, within which naval power seems less imperial than land power, or not imperial at all. This was important to the self-image of empire.

Britain and the United States: Two Empires

With its geographic range, the British Empire had direct impact on world history, but its indirect impact on the early history of today’s major power, the United States, is also crucial. Many of the liberal British ideas of the nineteenth century were taken up by American writers and policymakers from World War II on, in part, initially, in criticism of the protectionism then shown by the British National Government.⁴ First Britain and then America came to focus on free trade and the unfettered movement of money as political and economic “goods,” which became central goals for government. Britain’s, and then America’s, pursuit of a benign and mutually beneficial world order reflected an imperium, rather than an empire simply of control, constraint, and coercion. America’s pursuit of imperium from World War II on, however, was marked by a democratic objective that had not been prominent in its nineteenth-century expansionism. As Andrew Bacevich has pointed out, echoing observations that can be made about British imperialism:

[T]he politicoeconomic concept to which the United States adheres today has not changed in a century: the familiar quest for an ‘open world,’ the overriding imperative of commercial integration, confidence that technology endows the United States with a privileged position in that order, and the expectation that American military might will preserve order and enforce the rules. Those policies reflect a single-minded determination to extend and perpetuate American political, economic, and cultural hegemony—usually referred to as leadership—on a global scale. . . . The question is what sort of empire they intend theirs to be.⁵

Studying the British seaborne empire offers the unique opportunity to consider two consecutive leading world powers, indeed the two powers that molded the modern world, which for that reason among others have always had a special relationship.

³ N. A. M. Rodger, *The Safeguard of the Sea: A Naval History of Great Britain*, vol. I, 660–1649 (London, 1997), p. 432.

⁴ See Carl Cavanagh Hodge, “America’s Empire by Default,” *Orbis*, Winter 2005.

⁵ Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 6, 224.

Reconsidering the “End of Empire”

In 2005, Britain has an empire that is still far larger in extent than its overseas possessions had been in 1500. It includes possessions in and near the West Indies (Anguilla, Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, Montserrat, the Turks and Caicos Islands, and the British Virgin Islands); in the mid-Atlantic (Ascension Island, St. Helena and Tristan de Cunha), Pacific (the Pitcairn Islands), and Indian (the British Indian Ocean Territory) Oceans; and in and close to Antarctica (the British Antarctic Territory, South Georgia, the South Orkney, South Sandwich and South Shetland Islands, and the Falklands). In the Mediterranean, aside from Gibraltar, the British bases in Cyprus are also sovereign territories. Some of the territories are unoccupied, still others do not want independence. Bermuda voted against it in 1995. The determination shown in a referendum in 2002 organized by the inhabitants of Gibraltar, in defiance of the British government, to remain British, rather than be party to any agreement between the governments of Britain and Spain to introduce a measure of Spanish control, resonated in British domestic opinion.

For the most part, however, commentators in Britain no longer see the empire as a community, but instead increasingly stress the ambiguities of its heritage. Nor is there much interest in the strategic and economic assets it offers. London has little commitment to the remaining territories, except for Gibraltar, which still has importance as a military base, and the Falklands and surrounding seas, with their fish and potential oil resources. Furthermore, the sea's symbolic role in British life has diminished.

Nevertheless, despite the end of the vast British Empire of the early twentieth century, a sort of empire still exists. With hydrogen bombs and Trident missiles, the British state has wielded more power than ever before, and, depending on the measure used, Britain is the fourth to sixth most important economy in the world. Not to be the leading power in the world is not necessarily to be without an empire of some type. Indeed, throughout history, most empires have been in this position, and that remained the case after Western expansion ensured that empires across the world came into contact with each other.

Accordingly, the thesis that the leading power in effect becomes an empire⁶ has serious limitations. It employs “empire” to describe something different: the hegemonic power, which is inherently in an unusual position. Britain was once in that position, particularly in the nineteenth century. This experience molded the British perception of empire, both its own and those of others, but most empires have never been in, or aspirants to, this hegemonic position. To adopt the empire-as-leading-power approach ensures that the history of the British and their empire in the twentieth century becomes an

⁶John Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

account of decline, the dominant theme in much of the scholarly literature and in British self-image, and one given greater force in 2003 by Niall Ferguson's television series and books on the empire, which received considerable attention. Ferguson drew attention to the long-term benefits of the empire—"no organization in history has done more to promote the free movement of goods, capital, and labour [and] to impose Western norms of law, order, and governance around the world,"⁷ leading to criticism that he failed to give due weight to its disadvantages. His account of the empire in the second half of the twentieth century was more mixed.

While it would be foolish to ignore the extent to which decline and failure have been prominent themes in British history from the mid-twentieth century on, it would be mistaken to argue that economic problems and decolonization meant the end of imperial power. To take naval strength, for instance, it has to be noted that Britain no longer required a network of coaling stations. Moreover, since maritime trade was increasingly concentrated on large deep-draught vessels such as supertankers, its protection no longer required control over coastal waters around the world. After World War II, controlling territory against the wishes of its population was no longer viable for Britain, which hastened its departure from India in 1947 and its abandonment of the Palestine Mandate in 1948. Even if the 1982 Falklands conflict was not a case of Britain's pursuing imperial expansion, but rather was a war of self-defense on behalf of the Falklanders, the strength Britain demonstrated in the conflict nonetheless represented imperial power.

At the start of the twenty-first century, commentators referred to the American empire, although, with the exception of its Pacific possessions and Puerto Rico, it was not an empire expressed through rule over territory. On this criterion, it is worth reconsidering the end of empire notion, not least through considering the continued capability of imperial powers for power projection.

British Power Projection in the Contemporary Era

In the 1960s, with the development of the Polaris fleet, the Royal Navy became Britain's strategic force of last resort, but it was a military arm independent of any conventional understanding of empire. Nuclear submarines based in Britain, at Faslane on the Clyde and Devonport, could cruise for long distances without needing refuelling or other port facilities. The structure of maritime empire provided by coaling stations and, before them, watering and resupply anchorages, had gone. So also had the imperative of protecting trade: antisubmarine capability remained important during the Cold War, but Polaris, and its successor from 1993, Trident, were not designed for maritime

⁷ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), pp. xxi.

tasks. Instead, the targets they aimed at, and the attacks they sought to deter, were land-based.⁸

In both the United States and Britain, over the last two decades, sea-based forces' ability to challenge their land counterparts has improved significantly. The development of sea-mounted weaponry for spreading mass destruction is one reason, but much more important are the less spectacular developments: enhanced mobility, importantly the growth of helicopter lift capacity; and new sub-nuclear weaponry, such as the introduction and extensive use of cruise missiles. Naval doctrine has shifted away from amphibious warfare and toward littoral projection—in other words, the ability of sea-based forces to operate not only across the shore, but also directly into the interior. Given that most of the world's population lives within 500 miles of the sea and much of it within 50 miles, this entails revising the classic formulations of geopolitics. In Britain's case, there has been a return to a new version of the historical "East of Suez" policy, which had been abandoned in the 1960s.

After the Cold War, the Royal Navy sought to find a new role in response to, among other things, the cuts suggested in the government's *Options for Change* White Paper (1991). It developed a doctrine of amphibious assault and power projection into the littoral, using helicopter-borne forces and cruise missiles, so that targets and goals remained land-based. In 1998, the submarine *Splendid* achieved Britain's first live firing of a Tomahawk cruise missile, the latter a weapon bought from the United States. The following year, *Splendid* fired these missiles at Serb targets in Kosovo as part of NATO's Operation Allied Force. In that operation, the British also launched sorties from the aircraft carrier *Invincible*, while they deployed the 22,000-ton helicopter carrier *Ocean*, completed in 1998, and the assault ship *Fearless* to provide the capability for a marine assault, although, as it happened, one was not launched. The *Invincible* was also deployed to the Persian Gulf on three missions in 1996–99 in support of the international pressure being put on Iraq.

For Britain, as for the United States and France, this power projection in large part has taken a naval form. The Americans deployed troops into Afghanistan in 2002 from carriers and other warships in the Arabian Sea: helicopters lifted troops into combat at Kandahar, a distance of 450 miles, most of it across a former British colony, Pakistan. Britain itself contributed cruise missiles fired from *Trafalgar* and *Triumph* to the initial bombardment of Afghanistan in 2001. American carriers played a major role in the attack on Iraq in 2003, supported by British warships. The previous winter, British warships played a major part in the Anglo-American attempt to stop Iraqi oil smuggling.

However, the Royal Navy has been changing. The 1991 *Options for Change* outlined a cut in naval personnel of 3,000, while the submarine fleet

⁸E. J. Grove, *Vanguard to Trident: British Naval Policy Since World War Two* (London, 1987).

was to be reduced from 27 to 16. Under *Frontline First* (1994), naval personnel was to be cut by another 1,900—again the smallest reduction among the forces, but the navy had the fewest personnel among them. In 1998, the Strategic Defence Review laid out cuts in warship and submarine numbers, although it included a provision for the construction of two super-carriers, capable of acting as a platform for aircraft in a way that the anti-submarine carriers they were designed to replace had not been able to. This runs the risk of investing in an outdated force structure, since carriers provide readily-identifiable targets for missiles, and their protection in wartime would require the use of other warships. At the same time, the plan for a new generation of warships centered on carriers capable of operating around the world is a reminder of the continuing close relationship between British power and naval strength. Britain presents this strength as justifying its continued claims to great-power status—for example, its permanent seat on the UN Security Council. The carriers are capable of fighting naval battles, launching ground strikes, and mounting amphibious operations.

At the same time, Britain is most likely to act in collaboration with other powers. It has sought to achieve interoperability with the American military and also stated its determination to breathe life into ideas of European military collaboration. In 2003, it agreed with France, Italy, and Spain to collaborate to maintain the readiness of their aircraft carriers (of which Britain then had three and the others one each) and ensure that one was on station at all times. In addition, a European Capabilities Agency was to be established. The value of seapower was further demonstrated in the 2003 crisis with Iraq, when states such as Jordan were reluctant to provide overflying permission and refuelling facilities for British aircraft deployed to the region.

British naval capability is joint not only with other powers, but now also with British land and air forces. In 1996, the Permanent Joint Headquarters (Northwood) was established, and after the 1998 Strategic Defence Review, the Joint Doctrine and Concepts Center was founded. The 1999 second edition of *British Maritime Doctrine* would be the last written under the auspices of the Naval Staff; all future editions would be published by the new Center. The second edition indeed declared:

The maritime environment is inherently *joint*. . . . Naval forces themselves exist to influence events ashore; they have never operated strategically in an exclusively naval environment. . . . [T]he sea is a preeminent medium because, above all, it provides access at a time and place of political choice. By history, tradition and skill the UK is better placed, certainly than any other European nation, to exploit this medium and to develop a strategic doctrine of warfare based on the joint use of the sea. . . . Ultimately, maritime forces can only realise their considerable potential when integrated fully into a joint force.⁹

⁹ *British Maritime Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (London, 1999), pp. 3, 7. I have benefited from discussing this with the author, Royal Navy Capt. Peter Hore.

Britain is indeed better placed than other European states to deploy naval power, especially since 1990, when it acquired the helicopter carrier *Ocean* (the largest warship in the fleet), 16 “Duke”-class frigates, and two 32,300-ton Fleet Replenishment Ships, each able to carry five helicopters and, if necessary, Sea Harriers, small multi-mission aircraft.

Critics have focused on the decline in overall warship numbers. On June 5, 2000, Iain Duncan Smith, then the Conservative Party’s shadow defense secretary, complained in the House of Commons that the number of frigates and destroyers had fallen from 35 in 1997 to 27 and submarines from 15 to 10. Gordon Prentice, a Labour MP, reported, “We are flogging off at a knock-down price ships that are perfectly serviceable, that were only commissioned maybe 12 or 13 years ago.” In reply, John Spellar, the Armed Forces Minister, noted that the 1998 Strategic Defense Review had shown that the requirement for major surface vessels had “altered.”

Three years after this debate, the *Delivering Security in a Changing World* White Paper (2003) made provisions for fresh changes: “Some of our older vessels contribute less well to the pattern of operations that we envisage, and reductions in numbers will be necessary.” As a result, in January 2004 it was decided to mothball four destroyers, not previously due to be decommissioned until 2007–10. This reduced the number of escort ships to 28, compared with 32 French counterparts. The sense of betrayed heritage was readily apparent in the editorial of the *Daily Telegraph* on January 6, 2004, which began “What would Nelson have said?” It was argued that Britain would no longer be able to mount major naval operations unless alongside the United States or France.

The decline of the former Soviet Navy in the 1990s nevertheless increased the relative importance of British naval power, not least as the weakness of Russian military systems was abundantly shown in the failure to sustain the operational effectiveness of both warships and bases. In conclusion, assessment of the nature of the British empire at the start of the new millennium requires a focus not on territorial control but on the maritime potency that was so important a strand in Western imperial history.

The Royal Navy and the Royal Family

At the symbolic level, the fate of the Royal Navy was long bound up with the reputation of the royal family. This was seen in the review of the fleet at Spithead by Elizabeth II on June 15, 1953, in connection with her coronation. The Royal Navy ships present included the battleship *Vanguard*, five fleet carriers (*Eagle*, *Illustrious*, *Implacable*, *Indefatigable* and *Indomitable*), two light carriers, eight cruisers, 23 destroyers (the names of several of which—*Barfleur*, *Camperdown*, *Trafalgar*—echo naval victories), 40 frigates, 16 ocean-going minesweepers, 28 submarines, and three surveying vessels, as well as an Australian carrier, a Canadian Squadron (including a carrier), and warships from India, Pakistan, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). About 300 aircraft were

involved in the flypast, while the representatives of the merchant navy included three tankers and eleven large ocean-going merchantmen. One of the latter was the *Empire Windrush*, best known for its prominence in bringing West Indian immigrants to Britain. Although occurring only five decades ago, the entire occasion now appears one from a past age.

During the twentieth century, prominent members of the royal family served in conspicuous roles in the navy, especially Lord Mountbatten (1900–79), who headed the Admiralty; Edward, Prince of Wales before he became king and abdicated in 1936; Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh (1921–), who saw war service in World War II, and Prince Andrew, Duke of York (1960–), who served as a helicopter pilot during the Falklands War. The lessened role of the royal family in national identity influenced popular responses to the Royal Navy, with which the royal family had in all events become less associated. Whereas Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee in 1977 was marked by a full-scale royal review of the fleet, the Golden Jubilee in 2002 saw no such celebration, and when the 44-year-old royal yacht *Britannia* was decommissioned in 1997, it was not replaced, an important practical and symbolic shift in the relationship between the royal family and the sea. In 2003, however, when the Queen presented a new Colour to the navy at Plymouth, the occasion was marked by the presence of 18 ships from the fleet. In her speech, the Queen referred to herself as “a daughter, wife, and mother of naval officers.” Also in 2003, the names *Queen Elizabeth II* and *Prince of Wales* were chosen for the two new planned aircraft carriers.

The Royal Navy and British Memory

The declining interest in naval history is instructive. Largely forgotten now are such names as Lord Anson, Vice Admiral Lord Collingwood, Admiral Edward Hawke, and Admiral George Brydges Rodney, all resonant of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century victories. These commanders have left their names on pubs, streets, and the houses of public schools, but more recent admirals' names are not joining theirs. Admirals of World War I and, even more, World War II, did not have this impact on everyday townscapes. Whereas schoolchildren once collected trading cards of naval heroes and warships, today soccer rules even more completely than in the past. Those names that are still remembered are often remembered for other than their naval career. Thus Admiral Nelson still attracts attention, but less for the Battle of the Nile (1798) than for his notorious affair with Lady Emma Hamilton, which began as he recovered from that battle. Sir Francis Drake, the naval hero of the Elizabethan age, appears as a secondary figure in television programs such as the 1980s *Blackadder* saga. However, by being forgotten, World War I admirals Sir David Beatty and Sir John Jellicoe are at least spared the obloquy meted out to the World War I commanders on land, especially Sir Douglas Haig.

Naval history is similarly undervalued. The excellent first volume of Nicholas Rodger's three-volume *Naval History of Britain, The Safeguard of the*

Sea (1997) sold very well, but it had little impact in the academic world. The study of the history of war as a whole, which today emphasizes war and social history, is dominated by studies of land warfare. Far fewer scholars work on naval or maritime history, and few courses are taught on either at British or Dominion universities.¹⁰

The British Empire and British Memory

Similarly, the results a 2002 BBC poll of the top 100 Great Britons was singularly low on imperial heroes. Martial figures as a whole were in short supply: only Nelson and Cromwell made the top ten. While one could say that the winner, Winston Churchill, was the greatest of imperial heroes, he—like Elizabeth I, who led England against the Spanish Armada of 1588, and Nelson—was cited as a defender of an endangered country/people/culture, not as an exponent of empire. The theme of A&E television's 2002–3 treatment of C. S. Forester's Horatio Hornblower saga was similarly defense, not empire. As with the novels, the first of which appeared in 1937, the television version reflected a preference for the billowing sails and creaking timbers of the age of sail over the world of steam. This preference also assured the success in 2003 of *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, a film treatment of Patrick O'Brian's maritime novels, also set during the Napoleonic wars.

The shift away from empire was not simply a matter of television audiences. The furor over exhibitions, especially on the slave trade, at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich and the new (2003) British Empire and Commonwealth Museum at Bristol, revealed strong sensitivity in some circles to Britain's imperial past. The celebratory mural on the New Palace Theatre in Plymouth's Union Street showing the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 now looks out on a world for which such events are drained of meaning and resonance.

Apologists for empire now appear dated, especially in light of the modern preference for cultural relativism. The theme in Admiral G. A. Ballard's *Rulers of the Indian Ocean* (1927) of the beneficial consequences stemming from "the establishment of a reign of law and order by British power in the Indian Ocean" is now more acceptable than his statement, "If the teachings of past history are any guide to the future, it will be helpful to the continued progress of civilisation throughout the eastern hemisphere that the supremacy of that force should long remain effective."¹¹ Interest in empire is frequently decried now as reprehensible nostalgia or inappropriate anachronism.

¹⁰ Promising recent exceptions include Ronald Spector, *At War at Sea: Sailors and Naval Combat in the 20th Century* (Viking Penguin, 2001); Larry Sondhaus, *Naval Warfare 1815–1914* (Taylor and Francis, 2001); and Arthur Herman's *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World* (HarperCollins, 2004).

¹¹ G. A. Ballard, *Rulers of the Indian Ocean* (London, 1927).

The image many people in Britain have of the former empire is often limited, simplistic, and negative. “Abroad” is far more focused on the United States and Europe. Africa and Oceania receive little attention, other than as holiday destinations, for countries such as the Gambia or Kenya. It would surprise most of today’s British citizens to hear that the British once had a colony in Somaliland.

Alongside this, the disputed character of empire has led to a contest over its image that has become particularly pronounced during the last decade. In part, this revolves around the issue of imperial guilt, with specific foci on the slave trade, the Irish Famine (1846–50), the massacre at Amritsar (Punjab) in 1919, demands for apologies or compensation, and more generally a powerful critique of empire on the whole and of Britain, past and present, as a result. Much of this criticism is naïve, and most of it is ahistorical, but that does not lessen its weight.

Jack Straw, the British Foreign Secretary, has blamed British colonialism for many of today’s disputes across much of the world.¹² The baleful consequences of British imperialism, or of the circumstances of its departure, have been cited in disputes in South Asia and the Middle East, both between states such as India and Pakistan and also within them—for example, between the Sinhalese and Tamil in Sri Lanka. Britain itself has become involved in a territorial dispute with Spain over Gibraltar as a consequence of an imperial conquest.

More beneficial consequences of empire are passed over. These range from the emphasis on freedoms and the rule of law in British constitutionalism to the extent to which the English language has opened the world to many; and one obvious legacy is the ability to debate the value of empire with people around the world with most of them being free to express their view.

America in Britain’s Place

Blaming the British Empire for the less salutary aspects of modernization and globalization can be done in order to lend historical depth to critiques of American power. In part, this is at issue when British imperialism is criticized. As with particularly nineteenth-century British policy, American global policy developed with a pursuit of morality linked to the furtherance of imperial goals. Both involve the quest for an open world, in the shape of free trade and the unfettered movement of money, and confidence that technology endorses as much as it underlines a privileged position in the international order. The power of the British and American empires can be presented in instrumental terms, as protection systems for economic practices, but for both Britain and the United States, the idea of empire included the pursuit of a

¹² Nov. 18, 2002, interview with John Kampfner, *New Statesman*.

benign and mutually beneficial world order, and both were willing to engage with tyrannical rival empires: Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany, and imperial Japan. The terms of the mutual benefit offered others by the British and American empires were unwelcome to many, particularly in the case of Britain, whose empire rested more clearly on control, constraint, and coercion. Americans saw the democratic objective at the heart of their capitalism as being in the interests of both America and the world,¹³ which helped foster American opposition to the European colonial empires. The Americans hoped that newly independent peoples would support democratic capitalism and thus look to the United States.

From this perspective, Americans and many others, including much of the British population, view the British Empire as both alien and redundant. (As a minor echo, Hollywood often presents British accents and actors as obvious trademarks of villainy, as, for example, in Mel Gibson's 2000 film, *The Patriot*.) This has not, however, prevented a conflation of British and American imperialism in some quarters. This offers another way in which the experience of British rule can be seen as unwelcome, since what is presented as American imperialism is not particularly popular around the world. More generally, while British elites in academia and the media freely criticize or even caricature the empire, few defenders are to be seen.

This criticism would be more impressive if it could be shown that the British were worse than other imperialists. Although they were not alone in being seaborne, the seaborne character, global range, and association with particular commercial and, eventually, industrial developments over the past five hundred years gave the British Empire a particular identity. The British, however, scarcely invented long-distance commerce, slavery, war, external rule, and racism. Instead, imperial pretensions and power, not self-determination, were the norm for all of the major powers of the world for almost all of the modern age. Indeed, they still are in parts of the world, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, both of which remain under Chinese control.

The now-independent former colonies widely reject the legacy of British colonial rule as part of their public foundation myths. In doing so, they put political purpose before historical accuracy. Looking to the future, Britain is likely to remain a second-rank naval power, and this will continue to give it weight in world politics, particularly because bulk goods will continue to be largely moved by sea.



¹³ Bacevich, *American Empire*.