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## For Our World Empire, “Losing” Goes With the Territory

by Bruce Gilley

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Sloth. Folly. Terrorism. All these would make foreign interventions to help alien peoples fail as frequently as they succeeded. The good results left behind would be marked mainly by the graves of your dead. The locals would be taught to hate your legacy, and your lily-livered allies would cast blame. Lesser nations would take up simple tasks that won acclaim for achieving nothing — “the lightly proffered laurel, and easy ungrudged praise.” But a great people could never “call too loud on freedom.” Let time pass, and they would be judged well by the wise.

Rudyard Kipling’s urging of “The White Man’s Burden” on the newly imperial United States in 1899 has been scorned by isolationists on the Left and Right ever since. Mark Twain and Andrew Carnegie had little in common except their revulsion for the imperial task set out by Kipling. His empirically accurate observation that foreign interventions to advance liberal governance, what he called “sane and orderly administration,” were an exclusive preserve of European cultures has been assailed as racist, a misunderstanding of his deeper meaning of the word “white,” which for him implied good-willed and strong (Gunga Din was “white, clear white”). Published simultaneously in the *London Times* and *McClure’s Magazine*, the poem was greeted mainly with parodies from American readers.

But as the Afghanistan defeat settles in, Kipling’s words should stir a renewed understanding of the imperative of the American empire, notwithstanding the snipes of modern-day Carnegies and Twains.

For the last 122 years, the U.S. has underwritten peace and development by taking up an imperial role in concert with local partners and Western allies. By necessity, the highest ideals have never been achieved. But without it, the results would be far worse,

whether in the Europe of WWI, the Korean peninsula, Indo-China, or, since 9/11, the Middle East.

Our current load includes holding together Central America and protecting Israel, and it will likely require boots in Taiwan soon. Seeming failure is, after all, part of the imperial deal. The American presence in Afghanistan held terrorists there at bay for two decades. Our global reach remains critical to stability and peace in every region of the world. Let the think-tankers debate the best means of doing so. But let us not forget the ends of liberal empire. As Kipling wrote to a friend, Americans were at their best when “getting to business” overseas “instead of heaving rocks at one another.”

Coming to terms with succeeding the British empire has not been easy for the U.S. As the British empire was waning in the 1950s, the British representative on colonial affairs at the United Nations, Sir Alan Burns, was crossing swords with his American counterparts, who felt “half-ashamed of the ‘colonial’ company in which they [found] themselves” and “still more anxious to avoid the appearance of un-American behavior by any departure from the traditional ‘anti-colonialism’ of their country,” as I show in *The Last Imperialist*, my forthcoming biography of Burns.

This nativist anti-imperialism was overruled by the State Department in a watershed moment in 1955, just as American involvement in Vietnam began, in a key memo that forthrightly made the case for liberal empire. It was “precisely because we attach importance to the sound development of self-government” that the U.S. needed to support colonial-style undertakings. Kipling could not have put it better.

The U.S. has never worn easily its imperial armament, even as the need for it has grown. Burns foresaw shortly before his death in 1980 that the U.S. would need “to sacrifice her anti-colonial emotions” because of the far worse regimes that were taking over failed states. Let the Canadians work on pronouns at the U.N. and let the Swedes work on gender mainstreaming in the World Bank. The U.S. must accept what Kipling called the “toil of serf and sweeper.”

Empire is not for the faint of heart. While governor of today’s Ghana, Burns had his staff memorize another Kipling poem about empire, “The Pro-Consuls,” which rings brightly this day as we mourn our losses and commit to take up the American burden once again: “Peace herself must they forgo, / Till that peace be fitly made.”

*Bruce Gilley is a professor of political science at Portland State University. His book The Last Imperialist: Sir Alan Burns’ Epic Defense of the British Empire will be published Sept. 21 by Regnery Gateway.*