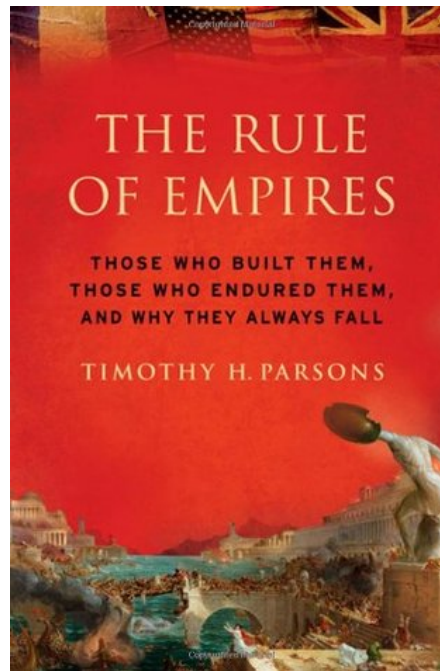




The Rule of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall

Timothy H. Parsons

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In *The Rule of Empires*, Timothy Parsons gives a sweeping account of the evolution of empire from its origins in ancient Rome to its most recent twentieth-century embodiment. He explains what constitutes an empire and offers suggestions about what empires of the past can tell us about our own historical moment. Parsons uses imperial examples that stretch from ancient Rome, to Britain's "new" imperialism in Kenya, to the Third Reich to parse the features common to all empires, their evolutions and self-justifying myths, and the reasons for their inevitable decline. Parsons argues that far from confirming some sort of Darwinian hierarchy of advanced and primitive societies, conquests were simply the products of a temporary advantage in military technology, wealth, and political will. Beneath the self-justifying rhetoric of benevolent paternalism and cultural superiority lay economic exploitation and the desire for power. Yet imperial ambitions still appear viable in the twenty-first century, Parsons shows, because their defenders and detractors alike employ abstract and romanticized perspectives that fail to grasp the historical reality of subjugation.

Writing from the perspective of the common subject rather than that of the imperial conquerors, Parsons offers a historically grounded cautionary tale rich with accounts of subjugated peoples throwing off the yoke of empire time and time again. In providing an accurate picture of what it is like to live as a subject, *The Rule of Empires* lays bare the rationalizations of imperial conquerors and their apologists and exposes the true limits of hard power.

The Rule of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall Details

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Bold Bookworm says

... This book covers Roman Britain, Muslim Spain, Spanish Peru, the East India Company, Napoleonic Italy, British Kenya and Hitler's France. It is at times a heavy, meaty read and can take the reader into some winding back allies. Parsons addresses many historical themes. One not covered here but discussed extensively in the book is the differentiation of subjects and citizens and how the moving wispy line separating the castes prolongs or accelerates the decline of the conquering empire. This book destroys the myth of the civilizing empire along with the myth that the fall of an empire can be an act of quick, sterile, surgery. As damaging as empire is, perhaps more damaging are the systems created that condition people to life under empire. An empire can go bankrupt and choke on its own largess, but people conditioned to be subjects, slaves and slavers will seek out new masters to replace the vanquished.

Read the entire review here: <http://boldbookworm.com/roe070412.html>

~ BB

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James Murphy says

The Rule of Empiresw uses examples of the Roman Empire in Britain, the Islamic occupation of Spain, the Spanish conquest of the New World, British India, the Napoleonic empire in Europe, British East Africa, and the Nazi occupation of Europe to show what empires are and how they work. And he shows how each of these examples are related. With each succeeding chapter and progression through history Parsons demonstrates how each of these example empires mirror each other by using the same techniques. All empires are about the exploitation of the land they take over and administer. All empires feature a tribute paid in some manner by the subject peoples and an extraction of whatever wealth the region holds. In addition, the subject labor is used for the greater good of the empire, even as slaves. The rule of empires is often harsh. Parsons writes, "There is no such thing as a liberal empire."

Though one of my complaints is that the book isn't well-written, Parsons does keep an objective and level tone throughout, at least to the mid-20th century. While insisting that the Nazi occupation of France demonstrates all the features of traditional empires, he also blames the French people for being too passive. In fact, he claims during the war they acted exactly as Asian and African subject peoples in the previous century and that it made the German administration and exploitation of France that much easier.

All the time I was reading I kept in the back of my mind how imperial behavior relates to America. Parsons confirms my opinion that America has never sought empire, except during the brief period of the Spanish-American War when they took the Philippines, Guam and Puerto Rico from Spain. However, his final chapter, "Conclusions," is about America's conduct of the Iraq War. And he convincingly explains how that adventure in nation-building and its attempt to extract Iraqi oil and change the balance of Middle Eastern power was clearly an example of empire. An example ending in failure, chiefly because the U. S. failed to achieve the cooperation of the Iraqi people. The cooperation of the subject peoples, almost always secured through harsh methods, is one of the most important features of empire. In our current transnational world, though, Parsons writes, nations acting unilaterally to use whatever harsh means necessary to subdue a subject

population for exploitation won't be tolerated, and so the age of empires is finally over.

Justin says

Really good stuff from my favorite professor in college. Best when in his places of expertise (Kenya and South Asia), weakest in description of modern US history.

Daniel Kukwa says

I wanted to like this more than I did, but the writing style alternates too much between (1) absorbing, (2) smug, and (3) rambling. A more consistent presentation of a fascinating subject would have made me a happier man...but your own mileage may vary.

Pat Carson says

From Rome to the America in Iraq - Parsons examines how empires work from the bottom up, mostly to the detriment of the conquered. Well worth the read.

Rami says

The only book I have never been able to finish to the end. There is no clear purpose to this book - the author does not stick to his thesis and instead goes on unnecessarily long descriptions of seemingly irrelevant events and circumstances of different empires throughout history. Add to that the obvious bias the author has towards Roman civilization (essentially every civilization is compared to Ancient Rome) and you end up with a very disorganized, poorly written book.

Lynn says

The author made a strong case for his contention that "defenders and detractors alike employ abstract and romanticized perspectives that elide the brutal reality of subjugation." In his view, empires are ultimately unsustainable, as well as unjust.

Foxwine says

I expected the strong anti-empire bias given the title of the book, but not the rampant editorializing and frequent digressions that buried the historical facts in a sea of opinionated dross. It was an un-enjoyable chore to read.

Jon says

Very scholarly, a wee bit dry in some places and admittedly I struggled with some of the subject matter, but that is of my own doing as I was not familiar with the Muslim Empire of Spain, nor British Kenya. The chapters were extremely long without transition so I had to set aside significant time chapter by chapter. So, as I found that the first six chapters were rather taxing, I thoroughly enjoyed the chapter regarding the Nazi occupation of France and the Epilogue regarding America in Iraq. Essentially empires fail because of abhorrent exploitation of resources subjugation of the conquered. Eventually the conquered rise up and incidentally in the case of France who was once conquerors become the conquered. As well, the length of empires has shortened over time and although they may appear different in scope, they often carry the same foundations principally of extraction, manipulation, subjugation and unfortunately genocide. Although his analysis of Iraq is erudite, Parsons clearly leans to his liberal side in his unabashed criticism of Bush and to say that Iraq was an unmitigated failure is because of the human toll, but nonetheless premature as its future is still to be decided and by all accounts seems to becoming more secure. At any rate, the lessons here should not be ignored, but unfortunately likely will be regarding future conquests because humans are not good students of history.
