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On a bitterly cold day in mid-January, 1842, British soldiers manning the garrison at Jalalabad on the Afghan frontier saw a strange sight. Out of the snowy wasteland rode a single man, badly wounded, on a dying horse. His name, he told the soldiers, was William Brydon.

Brydon was a surgeon with the British East India Company and had studied medicine at Edinburgh University. He showed the soldiers a terrible wound on his head, where a sword had removed part of his skull. He had survived only because a magazine he had stuffed under his hat for extra warmth had cushioned the blow. Dr. Brydon was the only survivor of a 4,500-man British army, commanded by General William Elphinstone, to escape from the occupation of Kabul. The rest lay massacred in the snowy Afghan passes or, in a few cases, in Afghan prisons. General Elphinstone himself died a few months later in captivity.

Perhaps no Englishman in the 19th century had better firsthand experience with the costs of empire than William Brydon. Fifteen years after the inglorious conclusion of the First Anglo-Afghan War, Dr. Brydon found himself trapped in the British Residency at Lucknow in north central India during the infamous six-month siege that was the most celebrated event of the 1857 Mutiny, a bloody uprising against British authorities. Dr. Brydon sustained a serious leg injury during the siege but, unlike hundreds of his fellow countrymen, survived.

It is impossible to say whether Dr. Brydon or others of the countless thousands of British soldiers, bureaucrats, judges, engineers, and others who sustained the British Empire in India — known informally as the Raj — for almost 200 years were able to perceive the design for which so many lives and fortunes, Indian and British, were squandered. Certainly the world-engirding British Empire, of which the Raj was the crown jewel, was widely regarded — by observers at a safe distance — as the greatest civilizing force the world had ever seen. Yet this alleged boon to humanity, which began as an exercise in unbridled mercantilism, gradually transformed into a global crusade on behalf of Anglo-Saxon civilization, before collapsing ignominiously in the mid-20th century, leaving its mistress, Great Britain herself, exhausted and virtually bankrupt. Nowhere was this tragic trajectory plainer than in the long history of British involvement with South Asia — today the nations of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Burma, as well as Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, under a separate British administration from the Raj itself, and Nepal and Bhutan, which were never fully brought into subjection. In considering briefly the history of this region, we would do well to enquire whether the United States, the self-anointed heirs of the British Empire, are not following a path similar to the one that the British once followed.

Gaining Ground in India

The peoples of the Indian subcontinent were certainly no strangers to imperial domination at the time the British East India Company first set up shop on the southwest coast of India in the early 1600s. The dominant power in South Asia at the time, as it had been for generations, was the Islamic Mughal Empire, administered by Turkic peoples out of central Asia. But by the mid-1700s, the Mughal Empire was crumbling, and the opportunistic British seized the moment.

The Battle of Plassey in 1757 is usually reckoned as the starting point for the British Empire in India. Fought in the steamy jungles of Bengal not far from modern-day Calcutta, Plassey was a total victory for the British forces under Robert Clive, and left the British in charge of much of the territory of Bengal. At first the East India Company, not the British government per se, remained in charge of British India to maintain a fiction of separateness from the British Crown. The first Governor-General of India, Warren Hastings, was appointed in 1773. Upon his resignation in 1784, he returned to England and was impeached for corruption at the urging of Edmund Burke — the same eloquent statesman who openly sympathized with the American revolutionaries and later wrote a damning critique of the French Revolution. By the time of Hastings' impeachment the East India Company, which was in charge of British commercial interests from India to the East Indies, controlled, in Burke's words, "an annual territorial revenue of seven millions sterling, ... an army of sixty thousand men, and ... the lives and fortunes of thirty millions of their fellow-creatures." India, Burke pointed out, was not some barbarous backwater inhabited by savages in loincloths; it was instead an ancient and comparatively civilized land, whose

inhabitants were due the same universal natural rights accorded Englishmen by the Magna Carta. Instead, they were kept in subject by a corrupt, arbitrary corporate regime with little accountability to British law with its many protections. Hastings was ultimately acquitted, however, by a Parliament less concerned with the abstract moral concerns of Burke and his allies than with the naked expedience of profit-taking.

But profits needed to be defended, and the century that followed the Battle of Plassey was a bloody one indeed. At the same time the British were fighting the French and the Americans in Europe and the Western Hemisphere, they were expanding their control over India.

In the late 1760s, as discontent simmered in the American colonies, British forces on the other side of the globe launched the first of four wars against the kingdom of Mysore, centered on the Deccan plateau in southern India. The Anglo-Mysore wars lasted until 1799, costing many thousands of lives and leaving the British in control of most of the southern subcontinent. The third and most decisive of these wars ended with the defeat of Mysore Prince Tippu Sultan by none other than General Charles Cornwallis, who was Hastings' successor as Governor-General of India and was out for redemption after the humiliation at Yorktown.

In 1777, the British launched the first of three costly wars against the Maratha Empire, which controlled much of former Mughal territory in central and northern India. The first war was a standoff, but the second, fought from 1803-1805, and the third, from 1817-1818, left Britain in charge of most of the rest of the subcontinent — this during the period when Napoleonic France rose and fell.

The First Afghan War, of which William Brydon was the lone survivor, was another major military event, the first of three Anglo-Afghan wars, the last of which took place in 1919. British expansion into Afghanistan was motivated by rivalry with Russia over control of Central Asia in a drawn-out geopolitical chess match known to history as “the Great Game,” the 19th-century analog of the Cold War.

Then, in 1857, on the centenary of the Battle of Plassey, came the Mutiny. This horrific civil uprising, known in India as the First Indian War of Independence, was prosecuted by rebellious sepoys — Indian soldiers trained and employed by the British. Very nearly did India succeed in wresting its independence from British overlords but, in the end, the British prevailed, albeit at a terrible price, and the tranquility of servitude was temporarily restored to the subcontinent. In the wake of the Mutiny, the East India Company was relieved of its colonial authority; thenceforth, India was to be an undisguised part of the British Empire, and its Governor-General was the Queen's Viceroy.

The latter half of the 19th century was a period of comparative tranquility, during which the “swadeshi” or “home rule” movement in India gradually gathered a head of steam. With the advent of World War I, most Indians supported the British, in the hopes that they would be rewarded with independence after the war. Instead, the British government reacted with increasing severity toward pro-independence Indians, including the celebrated Mohandas Gandhi and his movement. In April 1919, British troops under the command of Brigadier General Reginald Dyer opened fire on demonstrating crowds in Amritsar, the holy city of the Sikh religion in Punjab, massacring hundreds of innocents, including women and children. The unrepentant Dyer embodied the worst of British imperialism, the armored fist under the velvet glove. In addition to the massacre, he was proud of torturing prisoners, sometimes publicly, and was never punished for his actions.

The Amritsar massacre was the last straw for Indians. During the 1920s, riots, strikes, and acts of terrorism soared, and desperate British authorities reacted vigorously. By the 1930s, the British were ready to grant independence to India. But for the Second World War, which forced the British to put those plans on hold, India probably would have achieved independence by 1940, so dire had the situation become.

By the time the Second World War was over, however, the entire British Empire was in a shambles. The dramatic Japanese defeat of the British at Singapore, and their lightning conquest of British Malaya that followed, exploded forever the myth of British invincibility. At war's end Britain, exhausted and financially shattered, had no choice but to accede to Indian demands.

Broken Empire

Unfortunately, because Britain, like most powers afflicted with imperial hubris, stubbornly held out until she had no other options, Indian independence was hastily agreed to and clumsily executed. Although Gandhi's vision of a unified India with a secular government was popular in Britain, Muslim leader Mohammed Ali Jinnah, taking advantage of British weakness, insisted on the creation of a brand-new Muslim state, Pakistan, to be carved out of portions of northwestern and northeastern India. The result was apocalyptic. As the clock ticked down to independence and partition in 1948, millions of Hindus, fearing Muslim ill will, chose to evacuate what would become East and West Pakistan, and huge numbers of Muslims fled India for the new Islamic havens. Rioting and civil war ensued, and hundreds of thousands were butchered in the chaos. Gandhi himself was assassinated shortly after independence, and while the violence eventually subsided, the enmity between India and Pakistan, which has now grown into a full-blown nuclear rivalry, persists. Such were the after-effects of the Raj.

The British Empire and the Raj never wanted for detractors among the British public during its lifetime but, then as now, such people were regarded as hopeless idealists. The empire, the prodigy of the age, was a force for enlightenment, many argued. Indeed, starting with the Governor-Generalship of William Bentinck, which ended in 1835, the British began to actively work to Christianize India and to stamp out practices associated with Hinduism that were inconsistent with civilized society. Sati, or self-immolation by Brahmin widows, was wiped out, as was the monstrous cult of Thugee, a secret society made up of both Hindus and Muslims that committed ritual murder and spoliation in the name of the Hindu goddess Kali. The British also brought internal improvements like railroads and highways, and instituted the English legal system to India.

But in the end, the "civilizing mission" probably accomplished far less than believed. It is interesting to compare the woeful post-colonial histories of Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Burma, with those portions of South Asia that were spared the rod of imperialism. Nepal, the Himalayan kingdom where Everest and most of the world's highest mountains are found, never bowed beneath the British yoke. The fierce Nepali Gurkhas fought the British to a standstill in the Gurkha War of 1814-1816, and earned protectorate status as a result. Aside from a brief civil war that was amicably resolved a few years ago, multi-ethnic Nepal has largely been at peace. Recently, and with little outside urging, the Nepalese, tired of their royal family's scandalous conduct, decided to abolish the monarchy and replace it with popular government. Nearby Bhutan, a remote Buddhist kingdom in a lush corner of the eastern Himalayas, has also decided to peacefully abolish its -monarchy.

In mainland Southeast Asia, the only country to enjoy comparative peace and the absence of despotism has been Thailand, the only nation in that part of the world to escape colonial conquest. Wherever the hand of empire imposed temporary order, misery has been the almost inevitable result when it was withdrawn.

Many British believed (and still believe) that the era of Pax Britannica — a period of supposed world peace enforced by the formidable British armed forces from 1820 to 1914 — was justification enough for empire. Her navies and armies kept the peace, it was argued, where no one else could. According to historian John Keay, the actual record is rather at variance with the mythology: "[Not] by any reasonable construction could Pax Britannica be taken to mean actual peace, either in India or in the wider British Empire.... By one reckoning, there was not a single year between the Napoleonic Wars and the First World War ... when British-led forces were not engaged in hostilities somewhere in the world." These were not, for the most part, the epic, set-piece wars and battles that thrill military historians, but sordid, bloody, drawn-out insurgencies, the "savage wars of peace" alluded to by Anglo-Indian author Rudyard Kipling and familiar to the French in Algeria, the Russians in Chechnya, and, now, the Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Nor was the Raj, or the wider empire, justifiable in economic terms. "The order and stability which British rule undeniably brought did not come cheap," Keay has pointed out. "In the experience of most Indians Pax Britannica meant mainly 'Tax Britannica.'" Simply put, the British looted the subcontinent for what they could get, taxing the inhabitants heavily and stripping away India's valuable forests of teak, mahogany, and other rare woods. The wealth thereby extracted lined the pockets of the East India Company and subsequent mercantile interests, but did little to improve the condition either of ordinary English or the subject peoples of the empire. The British Empire, like all such enterprises, was a project conceived and executed by and for the benefit of the very few, laid on the shoulders of the many. It was the latter whose taxes paid for Britain's armies and navies and for the civil servants and contractors whose livelihood depended on the continuance of empire.

Finally, inasmuch as the British, much like Americans today, believed passionately in their own benevolence, it was fashionable to

assume that the British Empire in general and the Raj in particular had come about, not through calculated rapacity, but by historical accident. "The British," writes John Keay, "would often think of their conquests in India as fortuitous. It gratified a cherished conceit about the Englishman's amateurish innocence and it obviated the need to confront awkward questions.... [One British observer, Sir William Jones, marveled] at how Bengal had, like an over-ripe mango, 'fallen into England's lap while she was sleeping.'... [According to this version of history], the Company was 'sucked into' the 'power vacuum' left by the declining Mughal Empire," captive to historical forces beyond her control. Needless to say, this version of events does not square with British and with East India Company machinations to create adversaries and then play them off against each other in the chessboard of Asiatic politics. The men who created the British Empire were neither stupid nor haphazard. As Edmund Burke famously observed, "A great empire and little minds go ill together."

Today, of course, most of the exuviae of the former British Empire are independent countries, if not altogether free. But now it is our own country, or rather, a small gang of elites, that aims to pick up where the British left off, in the Middle East, and in Central and Southern Asia. The pieces have changed — instead of spices, lumber, and tea, oil is the token of the realm — but the nature of the game remains the same. As with the British, so with us: An overwhelming number of Americans, while deploring American imperialism in practice, have been conditioned to see ourselves as hostages to history. American aircraft carriers instead of British battleships are now deemed indispensable for keeping peace all over the world. American bases are found in most countries in the Middle East and Central Asia. While it seems unlikely that the American Empire will incorporate South Asia as it has the Middle East, thanks to the war on terrorism Afghanistan and Pakistan, at least, are rapidly evolving into house-trained regimes at the beck and call of the U.S. government.

If there's one thing certain about empire building, it is that such projects cannot be sustained. Like the British, we seek to persuade ourselves — or, more accurately, globalist elites seek to persuade us — that empire building can be profitable, that the indefinite occupation of countries like Iraq will pay for itself many times over in oil revenues, and that militarism will open doors for enhanced commerce. Now, of course, we are finding out in the Middle East and Afghanistan, just as the British did in India, that only a few will benefit at a cost to many. Who can possibly tout up the cost of America's enormous new "Residency" in Baghdad, the largest embassy complex ever built, transparently designed to serve as the headquarters for our newly minted Middle Eastern protectorates? The contractors building the embassy, enriched by U.S. taxpayer dollars, doubtless have few complaints. So likewise the security companies, the weapons manufacturers, and, yes, the oil industry. For ordinary Americans and Iraqis — the former burdened by spiraling oil prices and a deepening economic crisis made worse by a trillion-dollar war, the latter groaning under the yoke of terrorism, civil war, and an ever-deteriorating standard of living — the war in the Middle East is a bitter pill indeed. So also is proving to be the occupation of Afghanistan, which soon will equal the duration of the Soviet Union's adventure in that unhappy land.

Where will it all end? If the verdict of history is any guide, America, like Britain, may well continue to squander her strength and blood waging "savage wars of peace" across the globe until her resources are exhausted. Over the past two decades, America has garrisoned most of the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, and Central Asia; we have yet to withdraw voluntarily from any of those places. As with Britain, our empire has become bound up with our sense of prestige; too many of us are invested in the status quo, such that withdrawal — from Iraq and Afghanistan, especially — is seen by too many as a betrayal rather than a corrective. In a word, it is not at all certain that America will ever relinquish empire until she is compelled to do so, by the brutal laws of economics, human behavior, and history — "the gods of the copybook headings," Rudyard Kipling called them — which brook no defiance in the long run.

On the other hand, what might it take to steer America away from the destructive, debilitating, potentially suicidal path of empire? A return to constitutional government would be a tremendous start. Merely reasserting the congressional prerogative to declare war would greatly curtail American wars of pure aggression, like the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Illegal wars and consequent occupations, like those of Yugoslavia and the Korean Peninsula, would be nullified and occupying forces brought home. The Koreans, the Japanese, the Europeans, Turkey, the republics of Central Asia — all these would become responsible for their own defense.

Of course, any proposal to withdraw from our many so-called "obligations" overseas will provoke howls of protest from the commentariat, as we have seen with the 2008 Ron Paul presidential campaign. Yet ultimately we will have no choice in the matter. American military hegemony will only last for a brief moment, indeed, is already threatened by imperial overstretch combined with

economic malaise. We will not be the world's only superpower forever.

Unfortunately, we have never been a particularly peaceful people. We are quick to rise to anger against enemies real and perceived, and put our trust in military force to have our way with the nations of the world. This makes us vulnerable to those who would use war as an excuse to enlarge the powers of government at home and abroad.

To return for a moment to Kipling, a man who was born in British India and was intimately familiar with the workings of empire: On the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria's reign in 1897, he composed a poem that offended a lot of people in high places, because it dared to state what few in Britain in those days were willing to acknowledge: that empires are short-lived and that, because of pride, they usually come to calamitous ends. The poem, now known as the hymn "Recessional," reads in part:

God of our fathers, known of old —
Lord of our far-flung battle line
Beneath whose awful hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine —
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget — lest we forget!
The tumult and the shouting dies;
The captains and the kings depart:
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,
An humble and a contrite heart.
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget — lest we forget!
Far-called, our navies melt away;
On dune and headland sinks the fire:
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget — lest we forget!
If, drunk with sight of power, we loose
Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe —
Such boasting as the Gentiles use
Or lesser breeds without the law —
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget — lest we forget!
For heathen heart that puts her trust
In reeking tube and iron shard —
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And guarding, calls not Thee to guard —
For frantic boast and foolish word,
Thy mercy on Thy people, Lord!

May America find the humility to turn back from the path that so many other nations, from Nineveh and Tyre to Ottoman Turkey and Britain, have followed. May her citizens resolve to no more allow ourselves to be seduced by imperialist insiders, who care not for the destiny of our fair Republic but only for power and pelf. May we return to the restraint of Washington and Jefferson, and seek once more to be a shining city on a hill for all the world to see, not a wrathful military colossus for all the world to fear. May we put our trust in God, rather than in the arm of the flesh — lest we forget.

Photo: Robert Clive accepts the surrender of Mir Jaffar after the Battle of Plassey in 1757.