

Patterns of Empire
*The British and American Empires,
1688 to the Present*

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contributed to the Labor Party's anti-imperial stance and also to various colonial reforms in British territories designed to appease anticolonial sentiment.⁷⁰ In 1942, an editorial in *The Times* of London referred to the fall of Singapore to Japan to suggest that Britain should reconsider its imperial order and seek "new policies and a new outlook." In the future, "there is no place for the Britain of the past." An American executive policy committee on Africa commented on this editorial to conclude: "[W]hite people as represented in Great Britain should give up any thought of trying to control the world in the way often characteristic in the past."⁷¹ In 1946, the former director of the Department of the Interior's Division of Territories and Island Possessions noted simply that the "time has passed when the peoples of the Indies, Indo-China, Burma and India would permit white men to dictate the tenor of their lives."⁷²

The force of anticolonial nationalism ultimately prompted a search for new tactics to maintain some kind of imperial control in the face of the rising tide. The idea of international mandates or "trusteeships" was one such tactic. Originally proposed to President Wilson by Jan Smuts of South Africa, and later to President Franklin Roosevelt by Chiang Kai Shek, the trusteeship idea was a strategic response to anticolonial sentiment. The State Department noted that "the use of trusteeship . . . frequently avoids the controversial issue of the extension of sovereignty over the area by any State."⁷³ Accordingly, officials in Washington and London saw international mandates or trusteeships as one way to appear nonimperial while nonetheless exerting territorial control.⁷⁴ President Franklin Roosevelt had warmed to the idea of trusteeships after reckoning the power of anticolonial mobilization. In his discussions with advisors and representatives from Russia in 1942 about the postwar order, President Roosevelt argued that trusteeships would be preferable because there had been "a palpable surge toward independence" in Southeast Asian colonies, "and the white nations thus could not hope to hold these areas as colonies in the long run."⁷⁵ The 1952 Foreign Office memo on the problem of nationalism put it simply: "Progress towards sovereign independence is both inevitable and desirable. We are bound to swim with the stream but we can hope to exert influence on the speed at which the current runs."⁷⁶

In this sense, when Sumner Welles, Franklin Roosevelt, and other American statesmen or officials portended the end of the age of imperialism in the 1940s,

⁷⁰ Louis (1978), pp. 99-103; Howe (1993). Rather than upset Middle Eastern nationalists by taking Iraq directly as a colony in 1922, for example, Britain created a kingdom for the benefit of Faisal, son of Hussein. This gave Britain the appearance of being liberal while nonetheless maintaining some amount of control over Iraq.

⁷¹ As discussed and quoted in Committee on Africa (1942), p. 2.

⁷² *New York Times*, Oct. 12, 1946, p. 5.

⁷³ FRUS 1952-4, III, pp. 1086.

⁷⁴ As one historian puts it, it was a strategic effort on the part of imperial states to "reconcile imperialism with the liberal notion of national self-determination" [Duus (1996), p. 56].

⁷⁵ Sherwood (1950), p. 573.

⁷⁶ "The Problem of Nationalism," June 21, 1952, FO 936-217.

they were simply observing the transformations around them, responding to the agency of colonized peoples rather than authoring or initiating it. The change in views of William Phillips, America's advisor to India, is one case in point. He was at first a supporter of empires but later urged President Franklin Roosevelt to support the Indian National Congress and its demands for a timeline toward independence. What changed his mind was his experience in India. After he witnessed Gandhi's fast in 1943 and the overwhelming support it received, he warned President Roosevelt: "Color consciousness is also appearing [in India] and more and more under present conditions is bound to develop. We have, therefore, a vast bloc of Oriental peoples who have many things in common, including a dislike and distrust of the Occidental."⁷⁷ Wallace Murray in the State Department suggested likewise that the United States should consider supporting Indian independence because if it did not, "we can expect a harvest of hate and contempt the like of which our imperialistically minded ally has never known."⁷⁸ As for President Roosevelt himself, he worried about the continuation of empires not just because of his political values, but also because he was a pragmatist. Given the strength of anticolonial nationalism around the world, anyone who supported empires would only make enemies. Roosevelt's support for the international mandate or trustee system followed. So too did his general support of the idea that, one day, colonized peoples would have to be freed. Charles Taussig, Roosevelt's confidant and advisor, noted about his conversations with Roosevelt about colonies that the president "was concerned about the brown people in the East. He [Roosevelt] said that there are 1,100,000,000 brown people. In many Eastern countries, they are ruled by a handful of whites and they resent it. . . . 1,100,000,000 potential enemies are dangerous."⁷⁹

Shifting Strategies

The proliferation of anticolonial nationalism is vital for our story: It helps us understand why the American state shifted its tactics away from formal imperialism. As a response to the power of anticolonial sentiment and the new geopolitical terrain, the American state first reconsidered its initial strategy of imperial outsourcing. The United States supported European empires to help realize its imperial goals, but the unmistakable power of anticolonial nationalism complicated the strategy. For example, when and where American policy makers perceived anticolonial nationalism to be relatively weak or nascent, the United States was more willing to continue to prop up European colonialism.⁸⁰ In most of Africa in the early 1950s, the United States continued to support the European empires because nationalism was perceived to be weaker there, and

⁷⁷ Phillips to Roosevelt, April 19, 1943, FRUS, 1943, IV, pp. 217-20. See also Clymer (1984), p. 30.

⁷⁸ Quoted in *ibid.* p. 29.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Louis (1978), p. 486. For more on Roosevelt's complicated views, see Sebrega (1986).

⁸⁰ FRUS 1952-4, III, p. 1105.

the efforts of the USSR to "win" over nationalists had been "unsuccessful."⁸¹ The United States only stopped its support as nationalism and the threat of Communism developed more strongly in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles insisted that the United States should aid nationalist forces in Africa rather than suppress them because America's "prestige" was at stake.⁸² The State Department had summarized this policy in its policy paper on dependent areas: "In most dependent areas of the world the security interests of the US at the present time will best be served by a policy of support for the Western Colonial Powers. [But where nationalist movements] have so effectively challenged European administration . . . it is in the interest of the US to accept the situation as it is and to encourage the progressive and peaceful transfer of administration from the imperial power to the local inhabitants."⁸³

This was part of the larger pattern: When and where Washington perceived nationalism to be comparably developed, it lightened its support of European colonialism. This approach was most clearly articulated in a series of policy papers circulating in the State Department. The shared assessment was that continued support of European powers would be fruitless in the end, for anticolonial nationalist movements would effectively destabilize colonialism.⁸⁴ The related assessment was that continued support would damage America's "reputation" and push nationalist forces to the USSR. Of particular concern was Soviet "propaganda" in the colonial world that portrayed the United States as imperialist. Such propaganda, playing on anticolonial sentiment, would turn anticolonial nationalists into anti-American allies of the Soviet Union. Strategists in Washington therefore insisted that the United States would have to disavow its alliance with the European empires if it was to win hearts and minds and prevent a global turn toward Communism.⁸⁵

These fears are clear in the Eisenhower administration's response to the Suez crisis in 1956. The administration condemned the Anglo-French invasion against General Nasser in Egypt exactly because it feared that the invasion would summon a nationalist and Communist blowback throughout the region and across the colonial world.⁸⁶ The fears are also evident in relation to areas like India and Malaysia, where anticolonialism had developed relatively early. In such areas, the United States encouraged European powers to make concrete and well-publicized steps toward self-government to try to stem the tide against would-be Communists. Similarly, the Kennedy administration pressured Portugal to decolonize its African colonies in the hopes that this would take some of the fire away from the Communist movement (even though the United States

⁸¹ FRUS 1950, V, p. 1528, 1525.

⁸² FRUS 1955-57, XVIII, pp. 18-19.

⁸³ FRUS 1950-3, III, pp. 1078-9.

⁸⁴ On the reconsideration of policy see Kent (2000), pp. 171-4.

⁸⁵ Darby (1987), p. 175; FRUS 1950-53, III, pp. 1078-9.

⁸⁶ See especially Lucas (2000), pp. 147-154 and Louis (1985), pp. 413-17.

would reverse its position as the American base in the Azores became more and more important to U.S. interests).⁸⁷ The United States also stopped supporting French suppression of colonial nationalists in Vietnam and Dutch rule in Indonesia, but only when anticolonial forces had proven far too resistant to repression and when anticolonial movement waved anti-Soviet banners.⁸⁸ One State Department official summarized the strategy for Vietnam simply enough. Suggesting that the United States stop its support of French rule given the outpouring of anticolonial sentiment, he asked rhetorically: "Whether the French like it or not, independence is coming to Indochina. Why, therefore, do we tie ourselves to the tail of their battered kite?"⁸⁹

Whereas the proliferation and power of anticolonial nationalism compelled the United States to diminish its support of the European empires, it likewise compelled the United States to turn away from colonialism altogether. If the United States worried about how its support of European empires would be perceived, it followed that the United States would not initiate a new round of territorial rule over postcolonial areas. After all, a new round of colonization would arouse nationalist resistance and significantly raise the costs of occupation. As Secretary of State John Foster Dulles noted in 1953, the peoples of the Near East and South Asia are "suspicious of the colonial powers," and so "the day is past when [nationalist] aspirations can be ignored." President Eisenhower told Winston Churchill in 1954 that "should we try to dam up [nationalism in the Middle East] completely, it would, like a mighty river, burst through the barriers and could create havoc."⁹⁰ A National Security Council report stated it boldly. Noting the staggering development of nationalist consciousness in Southeast Asia, the Council concluded simply: "19th century imperialism is no longer a practicable system in SEA [Southeast Asia]."⁹¹

Recolonization would also have other serious consequences: Foremost, it would arouse the indignation of postcolonial countries and nationalist movements around the world, pushing all of them toward the USSR. The United States would lose the Cold War even if it gained new colonies. As the National Security Council stated in a secret memo, "The peoples of the colonial states would never agree to fight Communism unless they were assured of their freedom."⁹² In other words, to win hearts and minds and thereby win the Cold War, the United States had to support national independence around the world rather than squash it by recolonization. This strategy was clearly stated in a famous 1952 State Department paper identifying the "General Objectives of US Policy Toward Colonial Areas." It stated that America's main objective

⁸⁷ Fraser (1992), p. 119.

⁸⁸ Fraser (1992), pp. 116-17. McMahon (1989), p. 351.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Gardner (2000), p. 133.

⁹⁰ Lucas (2000), p. 147.

⁹¹ Quoted in Westad 2003: 113; orig. from NSC 51, US policy towards Southeast Asia, July 1, 1949, Declassified Documents Reference Service, on www.ddrs-psmedia.com.

⁹² FRUS 1952-54, XIII, Part 1, 1259.

was to "favour the progressive development of all dependent peoples toward the goal of self-government." The reason was described as follows:

[S]ubstantial advocates toward self-government have been made in a number of territories and more than 500 million people have achieved independence. Nationalist movements are gaining strength in non-self-governing territories throughout the world. US policy must be based on the general assumption that nationalism in colonial areas is a force which cannot be stopped but may, with wisdom, be guided. . . . It is clearly in the interest of the US to give appropriate encouragement to those movements which are non-communist and democratic in character. [This would] contribute toward the building of colonial areas into bulwarks against the spread of communism. The very fact of a demonstrated US interest in democratic nationalist movements will strengthen the hand of these groups against their communist counterparts.⁹³

U.S. policy, therefore, should "seek the alignment with the democratic world of dependent peoples and those achieving self-government or independence; in particular to maintain and strengthen their friendship and respect for the US. The importance of this objective is clear in view of the Soviet Union's obvious bid for the sympathies of colonial peoples."⁹⁴ The paper enhanced its views by quoting the Philippine Representative to the United Nations: "[T]he true goal of all dependent peoples is freedom and not enslavement by a new master."⁹⁵

In short, given the changed field, supporting the independence of weaker nations rather than colonizing them was a way to win political support from anticolonial nationalists and contain rival imperial power, in this case, the Soviet Union. This was feasible given the fact that global opinion had turned away from empire as a legitimate form of political power. The scholar Rupert Emerson's observations in 1947 were prescient here. He pointed to the new global "climate of opinion" against colonialism and pondered:

Should the US turn its policy in the direction of support for these [colonial] peoples? The answer should be clearly and unequivocally in the affirmative. The major reason for such an answer is that it . . . will tend to align the US with the forces of the future rather than of the past. . . . There are new worlds in the making. . . . The Near East, China, and India are all moving forward in new directions, and the hold which the US has had on the imaginations of the hundreds of millions of peoples of these areas can be maintained only if the US makes it unmistakably clear that it is with them and not against them.⁹⁶

In 1955, John Foster Dulles's statement on U.S. policy in Africa echoed Emerson's point. Dulles noted a rise in "African consciousness" and a "young nationalism" similar to the "nationalism of the Middle East and South Asia." As a result, the USSR had been trying to identify itself in the region "with 'the oppressed colonial peoples of the world.'" Accordingly, U.S. policy should aim to "consolidate its cultural and moral position with respect to the Africans."⁹⁷

⁹³ FRUS 1952-4, III, pp. 1084-5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1087.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1085; emphasis added.

⁹⁶ Emerson (1947), p. 271.

⁹⁷ FRUS 1955-7, XVIII, pp. 17-18, 19.

A subsequent memo by the consul general at Leopoldville added some clarity on what this should involve: "Now that the issue of 'colonialism' is being moved front and center by the Soviets the essential thing it seems to me is *that we free ourselves from the vice*. . . . The US should stand for freedom from all forms of oppression, for self-government, and for independence based upon self-determination." He concluded that financial aid should be given to the continent directly, rather than through the European colonial powers, and thereby "maneuver . . . by abolishing the vestiges of the 'older' imperialism."⁹⁸ Subsequent memos and policy statements reiterated the very same views.⁹⁹

Finally, the new global climate of anticolonial nationalism and its use as symbolic capital by geopolitical rivals did not only compel the American state to turn away from colonialism. It also prompted the American state to shift from colonialism to informal imperialism by the same token. Informal imperialism enabled the American state to exert controls without declaring sovereignty over foreign territory. As such, it was useful for exercising power without as much risk of provoking anticolonial nationalists. Informal imperialism enabled the United States to appear respectful of postcolonial sovereignty while nonetheless permitting it to "pull the strings whenever necessary" (as one State Department official put it in talks with the British on strategy in Asia).¹⁰⁰ But how exactly did this shift occur?

To see it more clearly, we can briefly consider a case when the American state might have reestablished some form of direct colonial control over postcolonial countries but did not: Iran in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This is an especially informative case because Iran was an area of vital strategic interest to the Western powers. By the end of the Second World War, both the United States and the United Kingdom had become increasingly dependent on oil from the region and from Iran itself. Exactly because of this, Washington often worried about Soviet activities. In 1946, the United States had persuaded Soviet troops to leave the northern provinces, but the Soviet threat did not go away so easily. In 1947, the precursor agency to the Central Intelligence Agency warned that the USSR would not give up until it took all of Iran.¹⁰¹ Given its importance, American policy makers declared that whatever policy they enacted in regard to Iran might serve as a "model" and "test case" for dealing with strategically important territories in the new postwar order.¹⁰²

But how to maintain influence and thwart Soviet incursion? The possibility of establishing a new type of direct territorial control was in fact entertained early on. President Roosevelt and military strategists considered establishing

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27; see also 1951, VI, pt. 1, pp. 8-9.

⁹⁹ See, for instance, Vice-President Nixon's report to President Eisenhower on Africa in Pratt (1958), p. 147.

¹⁰⁰ FRUS 1949, VII, part 2, p. 1199; see also Louis and Robinson (1994), p. 472.

¹⁰¹ "Developments in the Azerbaijan Situation," Central Intelligence Group, Office of Reports and Estimates (ORE 19), *secret*, June 4, 1947 (online www.gwu.edu/~NSAEBB/NSAEBB21/index.html, accessed 11/13/09).

¹⁰² United States Department of State (1955), p. 341.

considered direct intervention – this time beginning with a military invasion. However, that option had already been disavowed on the grounds that it would “provoke a communist rising with Soviet backing in northern Iran” and turn Iran into “another Korea.”¹⁰⁶ The American state needed, as President Eisenhower told his advisors and the British foreign secretary in a secret meeting on the issue, “to find some new and imaginative approach to the Persian oil problem which kept Persia in the Western orbit.” The preferred solution was to act covertly so as to hide American influence. Accordingly, the recently formed CIA (1947) orchestrated the overthrow of Mussadiq and the restoration of the Shah with the army of General Fazlollah Zahedi.¹⁰⁷ “Prompt and substantial economic aid,” as CIA classified reports called it, was to be used to maintain the Shah’s loyalty.¹⁰⁸ American companies thereafter got their hands on more oil concessions. For the American state, the subsequent stability and anti-Communist stance of the Shah’s regime were a related boon. Winston Churchill conveyed to Washington that the new situation promised to “change the whole picture in the Middle East.”¹⁰⁹

The overthrow of Mussadiq was the first postwar instance of America’s use of covert force to topple a foreign regime, besides perhaps in Latin America. It was surely not the last. We come to another telling instance when the United States might have directly colonized foreign territory but did not: the Philippines in the 1950s. The United States had granted the islands independence in 1946, but the postcolonial regime faced serious problems by the 1950s. The peasant-based guerrilla Communist movement, known as the Huks, had been gaining ground. Philippine President Quirino’s regime, in the eyes of the intelligence establishment in Washington, was unwittingly fanning their flames by its blatant corruption. This was a serious problem for America’s geopolitical strategy. The Philippines remained an important nodal point in America’s network of defense, and large U.S. military bases were maintained there. The fear was that, unless Quirino’s regime cleaned up or was cast out, the Communists would continue to gain ground and ultimately push the archipelago to the USSR.

To deal with this issue, there was the possibility of a U.S. military occupation to suppress the Communist movement. As a policy information officer explained to Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Dean Rusk, this would mean that “the American army will be fighting a Philippine guerilla army, which . . . will have the support of the Nationalists,” and thus “the process of recolonializing [sic] the Philippines will then be well advanced.”¹¹⁰ Yet given the power of anticolonial nationalism, no such “recolonializing” was

¹⁰⁶ FRUS 1950, V, pp. 593–655.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Moraes Rueshen (1993), p. 474.

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum from the Department of State, *top secret, circa August 1953* (online www.gwu.edu/Enscharchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB21/index.html, accessed 11/13/09).

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Louis and Robinson (1994), p. 475.

¹¹⁰ FRUS 1951, VI, pt. 1, p. 8.

an international trusteeship over Iranian railways and the Iranian port on the Persian Gulf. This would give the United States and its allies more direct control over critical functions relating to oil concessions in Iran while also serving economic and geopolitical goals. Not only would it “assist Iran economically,” as the State Department report on the issue announced, it would also entice Russia to take part in the trusteeship as a partner. By providing the Soviets with a direct hand in territorial management, it would discourage “more forceful methods by Russia to gain an outlet to the Gulf” and thereby “develop international cooperation rather than rivalry in Iran.”¹⁰³ Despite these potential rewards, however, the American state ultimately disavowed the strategy. The reason was simple: the threat of a nationalist uprising.

This threat had already been posed earlier. When Britain tried to establish Iran as a protectorate after World War I (by imposing the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919), it faced strong nationalist resistance. The Iranian Prime Minister Seyyid Zia-ud-din, in a declaration in 1921, loudly denounced it. The same threat faced the American state as it considered establishing a trusteeship to be operated by joint nations. “No matter how drawn up or proposed,” read the State Department’s summary for why a trusteeship was not feasible, “the plan would appear to Iran, and doubtless to the world, as a thinly disguised cover for power politics and old-world imperialism. Iranians are highly suspicious of foreign influence in the country and would unquestionably resent any extension of foreign control there The Department’s judgment is that the trusteeship could only be imposed on Iran, a sovereign, allied nation, by force of arms.”¹⁰⁴ The potency of anticolonial nationalism substantially raised the costs of an international trusteeship. The cost of direct colonial rule would have been even higher.

The problem remained: How would the United States maintain stability in the region, protect oil concessions, and ward off rival incursion if not by establishing territorial control? The answer was to use informal mechanisms. The United States would send financial aid, technicians, and advisors for helping to manage the port and the railways connected to the oil concessions. Presumably, this would exert U.S. influence in a manner more palatable to nationalists. Iran would retain official sovereignty, but the United States would be able to influence the control of its vital assets. As the “Iranians prefer to employ Americans or the nationals of small European countries (Sweden or Switzerland),” there was little threat of Soviets wielding undue influence. Therefore, by these informal mechanisms, the “laudable ends” in the proposal for international trusteeship could still be “accomplished in some measure.”¹⁰⁵

Even this type of indirect influence was not enough, though. More problems arose later, in 1951, when the Iranian premier Mohammed Musaddiq nationalized Iranian oil fields. Faced with this problem, the United States again

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 344–5.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

to occur. The problem would be that such direct intervention would invoke the ire of nationalists and push the Philippines even further to Communism. The Communists would then "have the support of the Nationalists just as Ho's regime [in Indochina] has had."¹¹¹ The policy information office for the Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs put it simply: Although the "process of recolonializing" would be "well advanced," given anticolonial nationalism and the threat of Soviet manipulation of it, "we shall not get away with it."¹¹² The State Department's Livingston Merchant had earlier worried about this very situation, offering the same conclusion. In 1950, in the wake of the loss of China to Communists, he wrote a memo to Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk in which he warned that "the dilemma the United States Government now faces is how to force an ineffectual local government to do internally what it must do, without reoccupying the country." Why not reoccupy the country? Because it would "cause violent repercussions throughout Asia and Western Europe as well."¹¹³ It would, in other words, evoke an outcry from anticolonial nationalists who would rightfully turn instead to the USSR. As with Iran, then, the preferred solution to colonial occupation was to use covert tactics and informal mechanisms. Rather than initiating a new round of colonization that would diminish America's symbolic capital and push the Philippines toward Communism, CIA operators manipulated the Philippine elections to ensure the victory of Ramon Magsaysay over Quirino. The United States then established Magsaysay as America's preferred client in exchange for an influx of aid.¹¹⁴

From the Japanese Mandates to Fiji: A Comparison

As direct colonial rule was no longer an option given the proliferation of anticolonial nationalism, the American state was limited to employing informal means to exert influence and needed to construct a new network of clients and collaborators rather than just colonies. If this were true, it would follow the American state would have employed formal imperialism when or where anticolonial nationalism had not taken root and where, therefore, the threat of resistance based on anticolonial principles was minimal. It is difficult to test this proposition properly because, as seen, anticolonial nationalism had become a global phenomenon in the mid-twentieth century. There were few if any areas where nationalist consciousness had not developed to levels perceived as dangerous by would-be American imperialists. However, a look at the Japanese-mandated territories in the Pacific after World War II is telling.

As seen in an earlier chapter, the United States took control over the former Japanese territories in 1947, under the guise of the mandate system. As strategic "Trust Territories," these islands became the one area where the United States

did not in fact employ informal imperialism and instead resorted to old-fashioned colonialism. This stands as an exception to our story: the only case where the United States established direct control over foreign territory after World War II. So why was the American state willing to do this for the Japanese territories but not for other parts of the peripheral world? Was it not concerned about anticolonial resistance to direct territorial control or Soviet manipulation of it? There was some concern in Washington about the public image of the United States if it were to take the islands as colonies. President Roosevelt's 1943 investigative commission into the question of taking the Pacific territories worried that taking them as colonies would put the United States at risk for being "charged with imperialism" and "aggrandizement."¹¹⁵ Still, despite these worries, the United States proceeded to take the islands as Trust Territories.

There were two reasons. The first is that the Cold War had not yet taken off, so there was little threat of Soviet anticolonial propaganda. Indeed, the United States established control in consultation with the Soviets. The second reason is that the threat of nationalist resistance was minimal. As officials in the military establishment and the Committee on Dependent Areas saw things, the islands were small and distant and the population apparently too sparse to pose trouble. Henry L. Stimson, the U.S. secretary of war who had previously served in the Philippines, was among those who pushed Washington to seize the Japanese territories. He explained to Roosevelt that acquiring the islands was feasible because the situation was different from the time of World War I. There was "no population to be imperialized."¹¹⁶ There was a population of 103,000 persons, excluding Japanese residents, but as one admiral put it, that was "pretty small potatoes."¹¹⁷ In other words, a new round of colonization was only feasible where anticolonial resistance did not exist. A National Security Council report was clear on this point. On discussing policy toward Southeast Asia, it clarified that "19th century imperialism" is only "a practicable system... where the subject people are unsophisticated and acquiescent, as in the case of certain South Pacific islanders."¹¹⁸ This was written in 1949, just as the American state was establishing its power over the "small potatoes" in the Japanese territories, where evidently the people were "acquiescent."

It should follow that the relative weakness of anticolonial nationalism in the nineteenth century explains why direct colonialism as opposed to informal imperialism was sometimes initiated by the British state. Let us consider this more deeply by going back to 1860, close to a century before the National Security Council issued its report on the feasibility of imperialism in the world. In 1860, Her Majesty's secretary of foreign affairs and other men in Lord Derby's

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Louis (1978), p. 271.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 483.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 478.

¹¹⁸ Westad (2005), p. 113.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹³ Quoted in Macdonald (1992), p. 50.

¹¹⁴ Kolko (1988), pp. 63-4.

government contemplated the possibility of extending British sovereignty over the islands of Fiji. British settlers and merchants had already been operating in the islands; a local chief Thakombau of Bau had made an offer of cession to the British Crown; and the British consul William Thomas Pritchard was pressing London to accept. Investigations were conducted, documents and reports passed hands, and memos were exchanged. Ultimately, however, the offer was refused. British sovereignty over Fiji was not to be. Why not?

The reasons given by contemporaries for the refusal to take Fiji were numerous. However, among them was the threat of native resistance. Months earlier, war had erupted in New Zealand. Maoris resisted the usurpation of their land by white settlers and the British Army had responded with gunfire. Such was the context in which British officials considered Fiji. Indeed, the violence directly impacted the recommendation by the governor of New South Wales, who warned the Colonial Office that the "inevitable result" of taking Fiji and the subsequent arrival of whites "will be a war of races." The "cost of an attempt to maintain the supremacy of the white population," he predicted, "will be comparatively great and the loss of life enormous."¹¹⁹ The Colonial Office, the Foreign Office, and the undersecretary of state agreed. Sir Frederic Rodgers, the new permanent undersecretary in the Colonial Office, summed it up: "The present juncture certainly is not one in which it would be convenient to become responsible for the Government of more warlike savages than we already have on our hands."¹²⁰

The decision not to colonize Fiji due to this fear of resistance would seem similar to the American state's reluctance to colonize new territory in the mid- to late twentieth century.¹²¹ But similarities stop here. Although London surely worried about a possible "war of races," this was not the only reason for turning Fiji down. There were other reasons, not least Fiji's lack of value at the time. Lord Carnarvon put it simply: "[W]e gain nothing by the acquisition."¹²² The other difference is that, unlike the American state later, the British state eventually came around. In 1874, when the next opportunity to annex Fiji arose, British officials decided to take it. The reasons for the turn are multiple. We will explore them in a later chapter. For now we take note that the reason cited previously for not seizing Fiji – native resistance – was irrelevant this time around. Lord Carnarvon, who had previously stood against annexation, now declared that annexation was imperative rather than a burden. "England has

¹¹⁹ Governor of New South Wales (Denison) April 10, 1860 to Lord Duke of Newcastle, CO 83/1. For more see Drus (1950), pp. 88–90.

¹²⁰ Quoted in Eldridge (1967), p. 177.

¹²¹ To be sure, there is a parallel. Just as the American state was willing to colonize Japanese territories because local resistance would be "small potatoes" given the small number of inhabitants, so too did the Colonial Office, in considering Fiji, decide that the only Pacific territory that might be annexed was the island of Oparo (Rapa) on the grounds that it had "few inhabitants" [quoted in Drus (1950), p. 90].

a mission," he asserted to Parliament, "to extend her policy of annexation in this part of the world."¹²³

The fact that British officials worried about native resistance in 1860 but found it less worrisome in 1874 is indicative. In the nineteenth century, resistance to colonial rule was indeed threatening, but it was sporadic and inconsistent. This is exactly because anticolonial nationalism had not yet proliferated around the globe to mobilize populations against empires. In fact, prior to the time when the Crown took Fiji, in 1874, resistance to colonialism had been irregular. Available data reveals that, from 1816 to 1868 (after which Britain finally annexed Fiji), local populations had posed armed resistance to European conquests in about 24 percent of all cases (twenty-one conquests out of eighty-nine total). Compare this with what happened later, when nationalist consciousness began to spread. From 1868 to 1918, local populations posed resistance in 73 percent of all cases of conquest (fifty-eight out of eighty total conquests), a far greater percentage than the mere 24 percent earlier in the century.¹²⁴ The wars of resistance that would unsettle the halls of imperial power occurred mostly at that time. Cuba and the Philippines erupted against Spain in the 1890s. The Boer War posed unforeseen trouble for the Crown in 1899. The Sierra Leone Hut Tax War probably reflected, in the words of Governor Frederic Cardew, "the growing political consciousness of the African," but that was in 1898.¹²⁵ All of these events and others marked a shift toward a new global field in which anticolonial nationalism dominated. Before then, resistance to colonialism had neither the form, fire, nor fever that anticolonial nationalism would later inject.

Given this, it is unsurprising that British officials did not let threats of resistance undermine their decision to take Fiji in the 1870s. They may have worried about bouts of native recalcitrance here and there, but the relative weakness of nationalist consciousness in Fiji meant that they did not fret about sustained or infectious resistance threatening to overthrow colonial rule. In Fiji as in many other places coveted by the British imperial state, native resistance was most often localized along ethnic, tribal, or other lines. It did not have the mobilizing capacity of nationalism. As Johnson puts it, resistance was considered to be "tribal and sporadic." When there were the stirrings of nationalist movements, British officials saw them as "small, unrepresentative minorities."¹²⁶ Lord Carnarvon's views on Fiji in the 1870s express this wider perception exactly. "The Natives are scattered over 200 Islands," he explained, "they are divided in local jealousies; and with the exception of the 20,000 mountaineers, they are a milder and gentler class of Natives than those in New Zealand."¹²⁷ Although Carnarvon mentions resistance from the Maori in New Zealand, even

¹²³ Quoted in McIntyre (1967), p. 332.

¹²⁴ Calculated from data in Goertz and Diehl (1992).

¹²⁵ Cardew quoted in Boahen (1990), p. 69.

¹²⁶ Johnson (2003), p. 86.

that was not disabling. In response to an outbreak of violence in 1860 there, an editorial in the *London Times* concluded that there was little to worry over. The Maori resistance would be suppressed soon enough, it declared; "before much mischief has ensued." The editorial then referred to rumors that some among the Maori were showing nascent signs of a "nationality" and were considering "coalescing under a native sovereign to arrest the progress of the Europeans." Yet again there was nothing to worry about. The movement was "by no means universal." Most of the population had "discernment enough to . . . come at once within the pale of civilization and share the advantages of British rule." The minor resistances "are but the necessary incidents of the process by which a superior race displaces an inferior one — incidents, in fact, of colonization itself, and need suggest no reproach if we do but conduct ourselves with humanity and good faith."¹²⁸

Informal Imperialism in South America

We can now understand the critical difference between the global contexts in which the British and U.S. empires operated. In the nineteenth century, for the former empire, anticolonial nationalism had not yet dominated the global field, and so it was much more feasible — hence more likely — for the British state (and other European states for that matter) to employ direct colonial rule as a means of exerting power over other societies. There was but one exception to this pattern during the nineteenth century: South America. Notably, it is here where the British state did what the United States did in the latter part of the twentieth century: trade colonialism for informal imperialism.

Already by early to mid-century, South America had undergone centuries of European rule. Already too South Americans had overthrown it. Independence movements had erupted across the region, partly facilitated by Napoleon's occupation in 1808. By the 1820s, the Spanish and Portuguese empires in the Americas were almost completely dismantled. In their wake emerged new nations wedded to the nation-state ideal and principles of national sovereignty. Britain recognized their sovereignty in 1822 at the Congress of Verona (the following year the Monroe Doctrine essentially accomplished the same for the United States). Even before the 1822 Congress of Verona, however, British officials had seen something of the region's nationalism. There was an invasion. Lessons were learned.

The invasion originated in military leaders like naval commander Sir Home Popham. During the Napoleonic Wars, Popham drew up plans to take Spanish America from Spain.¹²⁹ Some in London were skeptical of the grand scheme, but others shared the dream. Therefore, in June of 1806, Popham and his colonel, William Carr Beresford, descended on Buenos Aires with 1,600 troops. Upon his arrival to the outskirts of the city, Popham had learned that

the Spanish viceroy had fled to Montevideo, and the city of up to 70,000 inhabitants appeared open for the taking. Buenos Aires, as the capital of the Río de la Plata (encompassing present-day Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and parts of Bolivia), was a prize. But the power of nationalist forces was soon felt. At least two independence movements had already been active in the area before the British occupation, and Creoles in the region "showed no enthusiasm for exchanging the rule of a senile Bourbon for that of a mad Hanoverian" (as one historian has aptly put it), and so they mobilized their forces.¹³⁰ Martín de Alzaga and Juan Martín de Pueyrredón, local merchants who commanded local influence, summoned civilian opposition within the city. Meanwhile, the independence leader and naval captain Rafael D. del Villar Santiago de Liniers mobilized more than 10,000 local gauchos and farmers, along with Spanish soldiers, to advance on the city from the countryside. By August, they managed to oust the British threat and recapture the city.¹³¹ A second assault on Buenos Aires, this time led by Lt. General John White Locke, and another on Montevideo, fared no better: White Locke and his troops were forced to surrender and flee back to England and Capetown.

The failed invasions imparted lasting lessons. One officer, Colonel Browne, warned colleagues at home about nationalist resistance to foreign intervention: "You have not a friend among the inhabitants of South America."¹³² After his failed venture, Colonel Beresford wrote to Viscount Castlereagh, the foreign secretary, to warn similarly about "the political sentiments of the great body of the people." Any attempt to conquer, occupy, and directly rule South American would face utter failure, Beresford insisted: "for they are decidedly inclined to throw off the yoke of Spain, they are still more hostile to receiving that of any other nation, and we conquering it for ourselves would be carrying a millstone about our necks, as they would be continually watching and plotting to get rid of us."¹³³ Castlereagh's own advisors in London hit the same cautious notes. Sir Arthur Wellesley counseled: "From what has lately passed at Buenos Ayres [sic], and from all that I have read of these countries, I am convinced that any attempt to conquer them, with a view to their future subjection to the British Crown, would certainly fail."¹³⁴

These warnings, undoubtedly animated by the hard experience of confronting anticolonial nationalism head on in South America, directly influenced Castlereagh. In turn they helped set the course for British policy toward the region for much of the century. After the invasion of Buenos Aires, Castlereagh wrote to the cabinet summarizing his thoughts on Britain's relations with South America. Castlereagh insisted that, in any dealings with South America, "it seems indispensable that we should not present ourselves in any other light

¹³⁰ Winn (1976), p. 102.

¹³¹ For the failed intervention, see Fletcher (2006).

¹³² Colonel Browne to General Walpole, April 25, 1807 as quoted in Lynch (1969), p. 2.

¹³³ Quoted in Gallo (2001), p. 72.

¹²⁸ *London Times*, June 15, 1860, p. 8.

than as auxiliaries and protectors" rather than as conquerors or invaders. This was much like the way in which U.S. officials during the Cold War would later try to win over the hearts and minds of third-world nationalists: Faced with nationalist consciousness in South America, Castlereagh hoped that his government would display sympathy for nationalist causes. Castlereagh then searched for ways of exerting influence over South America without colonizing it directly. The "question for the Cabinet to decide," he wrote, "is . . . whether some principle of acting more consonant to the sentiments and interests of the people of South America cannot be taken up, which . . . may relieve us from the hopeless task of conquering this extensive country, against the temper of its population."¹³⁵ The power of anticolonial nationalism in South America, manifest clearly in the failed occupations of 1806 and 1807, compelled Castlereagh to re-strategize just as nationalist forces around the globe in the twentieth century compelled the American state to reconsider its policies.

The British state's approach to South America in subsequent decades followed in part from the early lessons. Castlereagh himself did not write nor promulgate a master blueprint for policy. But after the South American revolutions of 1810-1825, a repertoire of tactics surfaced and were eventually deployed. Direct colonization was out. "Dreams of imperialist expansion in the Americas," notes the historian Alan Knight, "were temporarily laid to rest."¹³⁶ Instead, the British state did what the American state later did when it came face-to-face with anticolonial nationalism around the globe: It turned to informal mechanisms of power. Bouts of blockades, political meddling, unequal treaties, and financial discipline replaced territorial rule. By 1841, James Murray's influential memo in the Foreign Office turned the unstated approach the British state had been taking into near official policy. Political instability and "civil discord" in the region, opined Murray, had been threatening British trade. This was all the more a threat given Britain's increasing economic interests in the region. Therefore, Murray stressed, "tranquility and good Government in South America would be favourable to British interests." However, imposing "tranquility" through direct colonial control was not an option; Murray did not even entertain it. Instead, he listed a range of tactics, all of which fell short of annexation: "offensive and defensive alliance" with key Latin American collaborators, trade treaties and financial meddling, vigorous protection of British merchants and residents, and a stronger naval presence threatening to deploy force should occasion demand.¹³⁷ This was informal imperialism sketched on paper.

As the historian John Darwin puts it, informal imperialism in South America was a "pragmatic acceptance of limited power" on the part of the British state.¹³⁸ We can now see that British power was indeed limited, if only because

of the diametrically opposed power of anticolonial nationalism. Anticolonial nationalism in the region made colonization too costly. South America in the nineteenth century thus manifested regionally what the United States would later face globally: a powerful anticolonial nationalist consciousness emanating from the periphery to shape what the metropole would do. The lesson, in the end, is the opposite of what exceptionalist thought teaches. The forms of imperialism followed not from the character of the imperial nation, but from the character of the fields of their application.

¹³⁵ "Memorandum . . ." May, 1, 1807 in Vane (1851), 2nd series, VII, pp. 319-21.

¹³⁶ Knight (1999), p. 126. See also Lynch (1969).

¹³⁷ James Murray, "Memorandum . . ."