



The Twilight of the British Empire

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Wednesday, August 6, 2025 - 6:30 p.m. to 7:45 p.m. ET

- I. In 1900 the British Empire was one of the most important political forces in the world, but by 2000 it had disappeared. Why?
 - A. At its height, the Empire was divided between settler colonies (Australia, New Zealand, Canada) and colonies in which Britain ruled but indigenous people made up the bulk of the population (India, much of eastern and southern Africa).
 - B. Originally developed by private business organizations like the East India Company, it gradually became a central element of British foreign policy.
 - C. The “Scramble for Africa” of the late Nineteenth Century was of dubious economic benefit but seemed essential in light of other European nations’ competition.
 - D. The Royal Navy was the world’s most powerful, and it protected the world’s largest merchant shipping fleet.
 - E. Vital routeways like the Suez and Panama canals had to be British-owned or in the hands of friendly powers.
 - F. By 1900 Britain felt itself to be under pressure from two rising challengers, Germany and the United States.
- II. The Boer War (1899-1902) damaged, and World War I (1914-1918) shattered, the optimistic frame of mind that had undergirded the empire.
 - A. British use of lethal concentration camps in South Africa marked an odious precedent for the Twentieth Century.
 - B. Millions of casualties in World War I made the rhetoric of Anglo-Saxon moral and racial supremacy ring hollow.
 - C. Pacifism became respectable in the 1920s and 1930s.
 - D. Even so, the Empire grew even bigger at the end of the war, as Britain acquired former German colonies and a “mandate” over parts of the Middle East seized from the dissolving Ottoman Empire.
- III. The Indian independence leader Mohandas Gandhi used British principles to cast doubt on the justifiability of the British Empire.
 - A. He was careful to maintain the moral high ground by insisting on non-violence.
 - B. By the early 1930s, Britain had accepted the principle of eventual Indian independence.
 - C. At the same time, the Zionist movement in the previously Turkish dominated area of Palestine created anti-British pressure.
 - D. Britain was only able to prevail in World War II because of its alliance with the United States, which thought of itself as an anti-colonial power.
 - E. Presidents Roosevelt and Truman wanted to ensure that American soldiers were not dying to preserve the British and French empires in Asia.

- IV. The postwar Labour government under Prime Minister Clement Attlee (1945-51) was opposed to imperialism on principle and began to divest Britain of its colonies.
- A. India and Pakistan achieved independence in 1947, but only at the price of religious partition and large-scale massacres.
 - B. The British mandate in Palestine ended in 1948 under a United Nations plan to create the new nations of Israel and Palestine. War at once ensued there also.
 - C. Conservative governments after 1950 continued the trend of giving self-government to Britain's colonies, most of which soon lost their democratic character and became dictatorships.
 - D. The Suez Crisis of 1956 demonstrated that Britain was no longer a world power and that it could no longer act in ways at odds with American policy priorities.
 - E. The Falkland Islands War of 1982, against Argentina, briefly revived imperial memories but on a minuscule scale.
- V. The continuing effects of the British Empire, especially the use of English as the world's language, are profound.

How to Follow Up:

Patrick Allitt, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (36 lectures series from *The Great Courses*)

Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (strong historical account, balancing the pros and cons.)

Jan Morris, *Pax Britannica Trilogy* on the entire history of the empire. Extremely well-written.

Niall Ferguson, *Colossus* (explains how America has replaced Britain as the great imperial power)

Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence* (a strong systematic argument against the justifications for the British Empire)