

# THE PURSUIT OF DOMINANCE

2000 Years of Superpower Grand Strategy

CHRISTOPHER J. FETTWEIS

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Fettweis, Christopher J., author.
Title: The pursuit of dominance : 2000 years of superpower grand strategy / Christopher J. Fettweis.
Description: New York, NY : Oxford University Press, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022027377 (print) | LCCN 2022027378 (ebook) | ISBN 9780197646649 (hardback) | ISBN 9780197646663 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Strategy—History. | Strategy—Case studies. | Great powers—History. | Great powers—Case studies.
Classification: LCC U162. F48 2023 (print) | LCC U162 (ebook) | DDC 355.02—dc23/eng/20220909
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022027377
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022027378

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197646649.001.0001

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed by Sheridan Books, Inc., United States of America

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# PREFACE

What should the United States do with its power? What goals should it have, and how should it pursue them? What kind of America should lead the world in the twenty-first century?

Ultimately, what do we want this country to be?

These are the basic questions of grand strategy, and Americans are hardly the first people to ask them. Many of history's superpowers found answers, seeking to make themselves secure and prosperous, to spread their ideologies and ideals, and—maybe most important—to assure that their power remained super. All strong countries want to preserve their status and maintain the favorable systemic status quo.

Attempts to maintain the status quo are rarely the stuff of exciting historical drama. There are many books that recount the remarkable rise of Rome, for example, and even more that examine its dramatic fall, but far fewer that look at the times in between. Even contemporaries seemed less interested in the preservation of greatness: we have quite meager sources for the most successful reigns at the empire's peak, those of Hadrian and Antoninus Pius (together 117–161 AD), since their peaceful, stable era lacked the massive spectacles that set the pens of historians in motion. Much more attention is paid to the conquests and crises, the triumphs and blunders. Competence and honorable governance are comparatively boring.

This book seeks to enliven history's comparatively boring bits. It is less interested in how history's greatest powers rose or fell than in how they ruled; it examines not revision but maintenance. Even the safest of countries face challenges, both real and imagined, and their reactions determine how long they stay safe. With great power comes great responsibility, as the saying goes, and strong countries often seek to improve the world in one way or another. They have the luxury to prioritize things other than their most basic needs. As it turns out, maintaining a favorable status quo can be just as difficult as arriving at one

in the first place, so—fortunately for the reader—grand strategy is never boring. Hadrian can teach us as much as Augustus.

If it is foolish to attempt to please both experts and laymen, then this book is foolish from the start. Its target is the person who knows little but who is interested in much, one who can learn fast and think analytically. Each chapter reflects the opinion of generations of historians but adds original analysis and thoughts. Perhaps only experts will know where I add to conventional wisdoms (and perhaps too only they would care) in my attempt to explain how history's strongest powers endeavored to stay that way. No two cases are the same, thank goodness, and each contains plenty for us moderns to consider.

This work comes out of a class that I have taught for about a decade at Tulane University, one based on a course first constructed by Admiral Stansfield Turner at the US Naval War College in the early 1970s. Turner, who was president of the college, wanted to improve the strategic expertise of those in uniform. Under his guidance the professors at the war college examined grand strategies from the past, speculating about their lessons and relevance to the challenges of their time. The long Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, for example, seemed like it might have something to teach the United States during the Cold War. The course is still taught in much the same way today.

At Tulane I changed the cases to reflect the conditions the United States faced in the early twenty-first century. The United States stood alone atop the international system, the strongest country in almost every measurable (and quite a few unmeasurable) category. The wisdom of the Athenians was made less urgent without a modern version of Sparta. Rome seemed more relevant. History's solo superpowers were more pertinent than those with a rival of roughly equivalent strength; I became interested in how the Tang Dynasty stayed in power, and how the Ottomans ruled a polyglot empire in the world's toughest neighborhood for so long, and how the British maintained their dominance at sea.

These comparisons might strike some readers as odd, since the United States is not (nor does it seek to be) an empire. Others might claim that its strength is not as great as these others, or that it is shrinking, making U.S. superpower a thing of the past. With such notions I disagree, and explain why in the coming pages.[1] Perhaps most observers might agree, however, that the United States remains quite powerful, more indeed than any potential rival, relative decline notwithstanding. Thus there may well be something to learn from history's previous dominant states, even for those unconvinced that the United States is one of them.

In the chapters to come I make no effort to relate history evenhandedly or completely. That has been done for every case here many times, and much better than I could ever do. This is a work of strategic analysis rather than historical description, one in which I will emphasize the elements of the cases that relate

to their grand strategies (and take diversions and digressions as my interests dictate). The chapters are narratives that contain discussions of national ends, ways, and means. The *why* and *how* of grand strategy drive the stories, rather than the other way around. Throughout I try to synthesize history and security studies, and to merge what scholars refer to as the security-studies and strategic-studies approaches to grand strategy, in ways that may strike experts as distasteful. But what do experts know anyway.

In these efforts I have received help from a great team of research assistants. My sincere thanks go to Jenna Fischer, Lumin Li, Helen Susman, and Tatum West, whose assistance was only possible because of the generous support of Andrew Byers and his team at the Charles Koch Foundation, who also offered helpful feedback on my early draft chapters. Along the way I consulted a number of historians, most of whom had the good sense to delete my communications immediately and block further e-mails. Some, however, responded, and corrected some of my more preposterous errors. I am particularly grateful for the kind advice and counsel of Yigit Acikin, Yuan-kang Wang, George Bernstein, Pierre-Luc Brisson, Andrew Szarejko, Tamer Acikalin, and John Mueller.

So please just remember that no matter how unpleasant and shallow you find this book to be, it could have been significantly worse.

What you are holding has also been my way of dealing with the election of Donald Trump. For four years I found it much easier to think about Rome and the Mongols than modern-day United States. This work is a product of deep disappointment with my country combined with optimism for the future. One positive lesson is clear up front, however: Superpowers usually survive even the most incompetent and/or venal leaders. Structural factors outweigh domestic politics, at least as far as international status is concerned, which is why the post-Trump United States will be in roughly the same position that it was in before he took office. What it will look like on the inside—whether its democracy survives, or how long it would take its society to recover, if it ever does—is another story.

Republics fall, but status usually endures.

*New Orleans, LA*
*February 2022*

# 1

# Introduction

"Carthage must be destroyed."

Roman Senator Cato the Elder apparently finished every speech, no matter its subject, with this appeal. He also uttered it when casting votes in the Senate, and presumably his friends and family heard it on more than a few occasions as well. Cato did not want Rome distracted while Carthage still existed. It did not matter to him that his enemy was a shadow of its former self, having lost two major recent wars and all its colonies, or that it had been paying an annual tribute to Rome for decades. Carthage's coffers were bare and its power controlled, but "I shall not cease to fear her," Cato felt, "until I know that she has been utterly destroyed."[1]

The senator got his wish in 149 BC. Rome declared war on the hapless remnants of Carthage for no real reason—what we might charitably call today a "preventive" action—and attacked.[2] The Third Punic War went much faster than the first two, and although the Carthaginians managed to hold out against the odds for two years, they eventually succumbed. Victorious Romans killed or enslaved the entire population and systematically burned down the city, leveling walls and salting fields to assure that their traditional rival would never regenerate.[3] A Roman colony was then established on the ground of the massacre, one that presumably had to import most of its food for a while.

Then Rome's real problems began.

Among the witnesses to what came next was Sallust, Rome's first great historian. "Before the destruction of Carthage the people and Senate of Rome together governed the republic peacefully and with moderation," he wrote. "There was no strife among the citizens either for glory or for power; fear of the enemy preserved the good morals of the state." As long as Carthage existed, Romans were united. "When the minds of the people were relieved of that dread, wantonness and arrogance naturally arose . . . The peace for which they had longed in time of adversity, after they had gained it," according to Sallust, "proved to be more cruel and bitter than adversity itself." Without their enemy, the Romans

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DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197646649.003.0001

lost their moral compass, eventually descending into a condition where "every man for himself robbed, pillaged, and plundered."[4] And Cato had to find a new way to conclude his speeches.

The inequality, injustice, and other social problems that had always existed in Rome were much harder to ignore without the Carthaginian bogeyman looming over the horizon. Partisan divides steadily widened, eventually leading to the first lethal political violence in more than three hundred years.[5] Over time things grew steadily worse. The century before Christ contained a string of civil wars, each bloodier than the last. The republican institutions proved fragile; the center could not hold; dictators rose out of the chaos. In the absence of serious danger, Romans turned on each other and destroyed their republic.

More than two millennia later another state faced much the same situation, finding itself alone atop the international hierarchy after decades of superpower rivalry. Americans longed to defeat the Soviets as lustily as the Romans wanted to vanquish Carthage. They had their own Catos, who focused all their attention on the cold war competition between good and evil and who were willing to compromise almost any American value for the sake of victory. Not long after that goal was achieved, however, the Roman pattern emerged. Domestic partisanship grew to heights not seen since the 1860s.

Internationally the United States ambled along in the post-Soviet world, rudderless, committing blunders large and small as its strategy vacillated drastically from one president to the next. Fed a steady diet of fear by their leaders and media, Americans now perceive threats and dangers everywhere. The Chinese are rising and becoming aggressive, while the Russians are reasserting their power. Various rogues, from Iran to Venezuela, are perpetually forming and reforming new axes of evil. Terrorism has not gone away, and neither have populism, violence, nor drugs. All this adds up to an especially complex world, one in which U.S. power and influence has dangerously waned. Or so we are told.

American pessimists should take heart. Although Rome's republic fell, its power persisted, and it remained the undisputed master in the Mediterranean for another five hundred years after the destruction of Carthage. Indeed all of history's greatest powers experienced periodic ups and downs but generally managed to survive.

Whether countries retain their status over time depends on the choices made by their leaders, or what students of international politics call their *grand strategy*. How did previous empires, regional hegemons, or simply dominant powers define their interests and then assemble the tools to address them? What can current U.S. strategists learn from the experience of earlier powerful states? Countries atop international hierarchies are not necessarily any better at answering these questions than those below them. In fact, without great dangers to concentrate the mind, they often struggle more and make bigger mistakes.

This is a book about how strong countries endeavor to stay that way. It will explain how some of history's greatest powers, from Rome to the British Empire, identified and pursued their interests. Along the way each did some things right, clearly, but they also botched other things up on occasion. They eventually fell victim to forces beyond their control or made blunders that assured their downfall. Each is unique, but in some ways, to paraphrase Twain, their experiences rhyme.

## On Grand Strategy

What are we trying to accomplish, and why do we want to do it? How are we going to get it done? Who will try to stop us, get in our way, pose a problem, or just generally bother us—and how do we deal with them? These are important questions that leaders must answer, and by doing so they create grand strategy. All countries have one, whether they realize it or not.

Grand strategy is today both a buzzword and a major subject of academic inquiry, one of those rare topics that bridge the gap between scholarly and policy communities. It is thrown around by the amateur strategists of social media; it is studied in universities across the country, from Yale to Texas A&M and the various war colleges; it is discussed in think tanks and academic conferences, in graduate seminars and staterooms. One might think that with all the attention paid to it over the last three decades, broad agreement would exist about what exactly grand strategy is—or even that such a thing actually exists, because skeptics abound. A comprehensive bibliography would include hundreds of works but few common definitions.[6]

In its simplest form, grand strategy is the art of marshaling resources to pursue national goals. It first helps leaders identify and prioritize their ends, or *why* to act; it then prescribes *how* to attain those goals, or the ways and means to employ. The combination of these two elements—the *why* and the *how*—makes grand strategy grand, separating it from lower levels of thought and action. Misjudgment of either aspect can lead to disaster, examples of which are not hard to find.

It turns out that grand strategy is difficult for mortals and divine beings alike. As representatives of the former category, leaders during the First World War were particularly terrible at determining the *why* aspects of grand strategy. Perhaps it would cheer them up to find out that even God Himself struggled with strategy early in His career. The Almighty proved surprisingly bad at determining *how* to accomplish His goals at the lowest possible cost. A little explanation might make the point clear, if somewhat blasphemous in both cases.

Why did the First World War happen? What were the combatants trying to accomplish? Certainly the men in the trenches had no idea, and they would have been disheartened to realize just how little thought their leaders gave to the matter. Millions of words have been written to explain the cause of the war, or why the great powers sent so many to their deaths, since there was never any real reason. An Austrian Crown Prince was assassinated by Serbian malcontents . . . and before long Germany attacked France. At the very least, once the initial offensives of summer 1914 failed the belligerents should have recognized that not only were their assumptions about modern warfare all wrong but that no imaginable benefit could possibly justify the enormous costs victory would certainly entail. The war was not fought to make a better peace; indeed nobody could even articulate what that would be. Goals were occasionally identified as the years went on—the French wanted Alsace-Lorraine, the British worried about Belgium, everybody wanted some bits of Eastern Europe—but these were trivial, ad hoc rationalizations to continue fighting, not actual ends that anyone had articulated a priori. In the lead- up to the war, and especially once the shooting started, grand strategy was silent.[7]

World War I was run by generals, a group who, as a rule, values political cause less than victory itself. Military establishments on both sides in 1914 urged bloody persistence long after national interests had become irrelevant to the proceedings. Political leaders, whose task it is to focus war aims and keep costs in line with benefits, failed miserably. All wars are idiotic and immoral to some degree, but this one was exceptional in both categories. Its participants could not answer the most basic of strategic questions, or explain why they were so determined to win, or what their ultimate ends were. Eleven million people died for the sake of victory alone.

Some thousands of years earlier, God had a clear goal, or so the Book of Exodus tells us: He wanted to rescue His people from Egyptian captivity and slavery. His end was defined. The next task was to figure out how to achieve that goal, and to deal with a problem, since Pharaoh seemed pretty intent on keeping God's people in chains as long as there was work to be done. The Lord had to figure out how to achieve His goal while facing a rival with opposing interests. He needed ways and means.

Good strategists pursue their ends with the least amount of effort or at the lowest cost. God had some pretty powerful tools at his disposal, including but not limited to omniscience and omnipotence. One would think that unusually vivid dreams in the right heads, or a few burning bushes, or a well-placed lightning bolt or two would have convinced Pharaoh to let His people go. Instead He chose to act with His signature plausible deniability, unleashing a series of plagues. He turned drinking water into blood for some reason and unleashed frogs, locusts, flies, lice, and hail. Livestock perished, boils appeared on Egyptian

skin, and darkness covered the entire country for three days. First-born sons died. Eventually Pharaoh got the point but it took months, and in the process countless lives were lost, including those of many innocent boys and not a few frogs. All this happened when many other options existed, ones that would have achieved the objective more quickly and cheaply. God could have used an advisor brave enough to point out that His ways and means were unnecessarily costly and inefficient. With a better grand strategy, the Almighty could have achieved His objectives much more quickly and cheaply. Then again, I suppose, who are we to judge.[8]

*Why* and *how* are the essential elements of grand strategy. Too often one is ignored for the sake of the other by leaders or by the scholars who study (and judge) them. Fortunately for those beleaguered and exhausted policymakers, there is a definite logic to grand strategy, one that applies to all eras and gives structure to this book.

## The Logic of Grand Strategy

The rules of international politics evolve over time. Actions that seemed totally reasonable in the ancient world would strike us as barbarism today, and vice versa no doubt. Genocide and ethnic cleansing were tools available to the Romans and Mongols but not modern presidents, just as states once thought nothing of pursuing prosperity with privateering and slavery. Not only means but national goals and priorities vary greatly from age to age. It will never be possible, therefore, to construct a single, unifying, timeless grand strategy that could succeed in every era. Instead, understanding one's time is the most basic of tasks for the strategists. One must have a grounding in theory, in other words, even if that word is rarely used in the practical world of the policymaker.

Strong states often drive evolution in thought and action. Superpowers are both products of their time and parents of it; beliefs held in imperial capitals do not stay there, but trickle down to shape the behavior of everyone else. To some extent, in other words, dominant states are theory's entrepreneurs.

Theory also helps states interpret their surroundings. Expectations about what in Pentagon argot is known as the "security environment" (or what normals call the "rest of the world") are shaped by the rules and norms of the time. Grand strategy is not forged in a vacuum; the outside world gets a vote in its formulation. Polish grand strategy in the 1930s was going to be far different from that of the United States, and not just because of power differentials. The range of options is wider for those surrounded by Canada, Mexico, and fish rather than Stalin and Hitler. Indeed the presence of other actors is what separates strategy from planning. One does not need a strategy to get to the other side of town, or

to buy groceries, or to get a project done before vacation, since there is no one trying to prevent success. A plan is sufficient. If, however, interaction with other actors is inevitable, a strategy is necessary. One can begin an inherently strategic activity like chess with a game plan, but the opponent has a say in what happens, and adjustments are going to be required along the way. No plan survives contact with the enemy, according to the Prussian strategist Helmut von Moltke. Or, according to a more recent strategist, everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.[9] It is the reaction to that contact, or to Mike Tyson's punch, that separates good strategists from bad.

Assessing the threats and opportunities in the security environment is hardly an uncontroversial, empirical, straightforward exercise. Different people looking at the same evidence can construct wildly disparate interpretations of their surroundings. Some see threats everywhere and danger gathering around most corners; others feel nearly invincible and consider neighbors essentially prey awaiting a clever hunter. George W. Bush thought the world was much more dangerous than did his successor, for example, and as a result he constructed a more active, interventionist grand strategy. The security environment pulls and pushes foreign policy, depending on the extent of its dangers. And, of course, wolves gather at home too, whether in the form of rival parties, temperamental masses, or avaricious barons. One of the surest ways to encourage internal challenge is to construct an inefficient, overly aggressive, or simply unpopular grand strategy.

Great power plays tricks with the ability to assess risk. Strange as it may seem, power and threat perception are directly related: the stronger a country is, the *more* danger it detects.[10] Dominant states are by nature supporters of the status quo and are quick to involve themselves in potential turbulence. For the power atop the mountain, movement can only occur in one direction; instability and conflict anywhere might be the first steps toward systemic chaos and unpredictable status shake-ups. Superpower insecurity has no natural limits and must constantly be kept in check lest it lead to counterproductive ventures and unnecessary expansion.[11] Overestimating threats can be as ruinous to the national interest as underestimating them.

## Interests (Ends) and Policies (Ways)

Some national interests are the same for all states. Security, for instance, is the most basic goal of statecraft, the prime directive of governments. If leaders cannot protect the lives and property of their people, then there is little point in having leaders. Once their basic safety is assured, people can then think about other things, like their general standard of living. While modern assessments

put prosperity right behind security in the list of enduring national interests, for many states of the past, wealth was little more than a means to the end of security. Prosperity mattered only to the extent to which it could be transformed into military power, since ships and soldiers do not purchase themselves. Plenty of rulers have sought to enrich themselves or their cronies while making it clear that the condition of the masses mattered only when popular dissatisfaction spilled out into the streets. Valuing national wealth for its own sake is a rather novel notion, historically speaking.

States care about more than power and wealth. They sometimes champion their ideology, or their religion, or their sense of fair play. States might value the preservation of peace, or the extension of justice, or the spread of freedom. They can even act on behalf of others, even if cynics rarely give them credit for doing so. Equally if not more important than such altruistic goals have been intangible interests like the national honor, or the opinion of the gods. The priority they assign to such "milieu goals," as political scientist Arnold Wolfers once called them, varies by state, leader, and era.[12] In general, dominant states have more flexibility to identify and then pursue interests further down on the hierarchy of national needs, since their primary ones are essentially satisfied.

Once national interests are defined, states must construct ways to pursue them. They create *policies*, or general guidelines for action.[13] As we will see, generations of British strategists followed clear policies: they supported balanced power in continental Europe; they opposed unfriendly domination of the "Low Countries," from which a sea-borne invasion of the British Isles could have been launched; and they sought to keep their various trade routes open. To employ the common terminology, interests are "ends," while policies are "ways" in which ends are pursued. Although the identification and prioritization of national interests is the starting point of grand strategy, the construction of policies is where creativity, wisdom, character, experience, and intelligence come into play—and where the process of grand strategy making often goes awry. After states construct their basic policies, the last step is to figure out how to execute them.

## Tools (Means)

At a town hall meeting in Kuwait in December 2004, a gutsy young U.S. Army specialist asked Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld why soldiers had to go to the local dump and find metal to "up armor" their own vehicles. The secretary responded with recent history's most infamous admission of poor force planning: "As you know," he said, "you go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want or wish to have at a later time."[14] The United States had

spent trillions on some of the most sophisticated weapons humanity had yet seen, but its planners failed to anticipate actual future needs. Since force planning takes quite a long time, this was the failure of many administrations; then again, Bush's predecessors may well have just never anticipated that the United States would find itself bogged down in wars like Iraq. But the important point was that the United States did not have the proper tools to execute its policies.

The vast majority of work on grand strategy examines military tools first and foremost, often considering other instruments of national power only to the extent that they affect armed forces. There is good reason for this, of course, since military might is the most important factor in explaining why great powers rise to dominance and remain there (or do not). As we will see, from the Romans through the Mongols to the British, military prowess is often synonymous with national power. But just because every leader understands its importance does not mean that it is easy to construct the optimum military force to satisfy national needs. No country, even the richest of superpowers, has an unlimited resource base. How much of a state's precious reserves should be put into land forces, for instance, and how much into the navy? Is there a pressing need for a "space force"? And, most important, *how much is enough*?[15] Choices must be made, and forces planned, in ways that best support national policies that, in turn, pursue interests. Grand strategy helps leaders determine not only how much to spend on their militaries but what their forces should look like and against whom they might be employed. It is no coincidence that the most successful powers of the past have planned their forces wisely, since these are among the most important decisions that states make.

The tools of grand strategy go well beyond the kinetic and vary greatly based upon the ends being pursued. Often simply talking to other countries can get missions accomplished. Many people consider diplomacy to be simply the art of avoiding conflict, imagining a State Department dove desperately trying to cut deals in order to restrain a Pentagon hawk. This is not what diplomats do, however (nor is it fair to the Pentagon, whose inhabitants are often the most dovish voices in foreign policy debates). Diplomacy is the art of persuasion, the effort to achieve national goals through, in Winston Churchill's absurd (but surprisingly oft-quoted) phrase, "jaw-jaw instead of war-war."[16] Diplomats pursue national interests just as surely as do soldiers, and they can be just as belligerent. Theirs is the most basic tool of grand strategy, the one used much more frequently than all others combined.

Diplomacy also encompasses the treaty, alliance, and institutional arrangements states make. What partnerships do they enter into, either formally or informally, and why? When do they enmesh themselves in regional security architectures, and when do they choose to act alone? Depending on the situation, dominant states will sometimes rely on clients, buffer states, or allies to

help them attain their goals. Occasionally they will even follow international norms and law. Every choice to cooperate with others entails risk and cannot be constructively made without a guiding strategic vision.

Wealth affords those countries fortunate enough to possess it other options with which to pursue their goals. While the ancient economic toolkit did not go far beyond subsidies and bribes, many more instruments avail themselves to the modern strategist. Countries can employ grants and loans, or open their societies to trade and investment. In today's interconnected global economy, the promise of access to U.S. markets often convinces other countries to make choices friendly to Washington. And economic integration increases the power of sticks as well as carrots, at least in the estimation of the modern leader. Sanctions have become the go-to option for grand strategy, often seemingly without much consideration of their effect or effectiveness.

States also have at their disposal a variety of tools that do not fit easily into these three categories. Some have employed science and technology in the service of grand strategy; others have concentrated on information, in the form of propaganda and public diplomacy, to influence rivals and neutrals; still others have essentially turned religion and/or political ideology into foreign-policy means. The wisdom of using tools from this umbrella category, "cultural tools," varies drastically from age to age and from interest to interest.

Figure 1.1 below summarizes the preceding paragraphs for the visual learners among us.

Designing a grand strategy begins with a conception of how the world works and the state's place in it. That plus an assessment of threats and opportunities

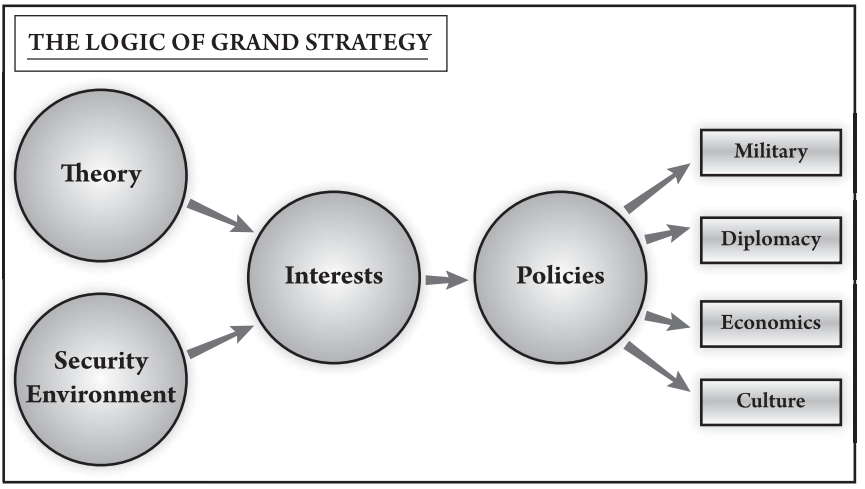



*Figure 1.1* The Logic of Grand Strategy

in the security environment combine to help determine the national interests, or our *ends*—*why* we act. In order to pursue those ends we develop policies, or *ways*, which in turn drive the construction of tools, or *means*. These represent *how* we construct grand strategy.

Hopefully this does not obscure more than it illuminates. Mastering all aspects of this diagram is hardly necessary to appreciate the analyses to come. The logic provides the underlying structure of each chapter, but it will be informal and kept under the surface, to avoid repetition and minimize (if perhaps never eliminate) reader boredom. It will always be present, if sub rosa, and all parts of the diagram will be addressed at some point as the narratives go along.

## Grand Strategies of Dominance

This project needed cases of superpowers that dominated their neighborhoods without true peer competitors. Neither Athens nor Sparta qualified, for example, since there was always Sparta and Athens to prevent regional dominance. The countries that made the cut faced threats and challenges, and certainly their leaders felt beset by problems, but during the periods under consideration they were rarely in existential danger. The homeland was safe, at the very least, and their wars tended to be what we would call today those of choice rather than necessity. The only other qualification was that we have to know enough about their experience and choices. The Hittites and the Mayans certainly had grand strategies, but barring unforeseeable archeological miracles, we will never know much about them. This left a half-dozen cases, countries that devised grand strategy from a position of relative safety and preeminence. While their experiences overlap somewhat at times, all were undisputed masters of their domains.

The following chapters all proceed chronologically, or roughly so, but since this is not a work of history their organization differs. In some, individual personalities are important; in others, they do not factor in much at all. Major events are sometimes covered in a sentence or two, and minor ones can receive multiple pages of attention. This is all done on purpose, with reasoning behind it, even if it might not always appear so. The cases have their own rhythm and pace, which I hope keeps things interesting. Fans of rigid structure should prepare for disappointment.

The first of these cases should surprise no one. The Romans not only created a vast, complex empire but wrote a great deal down, which medieval preservationists were kind enough to recopy with regularity. Rome's approach to dominance evolved over the years, largely in response to changing external conditions, and some things it did worked better than others. Augustus, the founding father of

Roman grand strategy, charted a course for the empire that differed drastically from the alternative inspiration for his many successors: Alexander the Great. Roman emperors would generally pattern themselves on one of those two precedents, with widely varied results. They ran history's most successful grand strategy, though as you may have heard the enterprise eventually declined and fell. Even the most dominant of powers could not last forever.

The next case shifts the focus to the other side of the world, where a great dynasty rose as Europe slipped into a centuries-long economic depression. China's relative power has waxed and waned over time, but it was indisputably dominant under the Tang Dynasty, which ruled between roughly 618 and 907. These emperors led their country to heights unmatched before or since, a golden age when the arts and economy flourished throughout East Asia. Tang China was different from all the other cases in this book because it could not depend on the greatest military of its time. The empire's strengths instead rested largely on economics and "soft power," or cultural leadership. Relying on such tools entails rather substantial risk, which the Tang emperors generally handled with admirable skill. Eventually a bloody rebellion crippled their ability to wield both hard and soft power, but until then they enjoyed an extraordinary level of regional dominance. As it turns out, a martial culture is not a prerequisite for national security and prosperity.

The Mongols receive consideration next. Never before or since has a state risen so rapidly out of obscurity to conquer such a large portion of the Earth. Perhaps the only thing more amazing than their defeat of so many powerful neighbors was their ability to maintain their status and keep the empire together. Their rule was as unlikely as their rise. The Mongol approach to governance was unique in history: unlike so many other imperial powers, Genghis and his successors did not seek to remake the societies they overran. They had no interest in "civilizing" other people, or uplifting or Mongolizing. Instead they followed the opposite path, remaking *themselves* in order to maintain power. This did not sit well with the more conservative elements among them, and the empire eventually tore itself apart.

Though its fortunes rose and fell over time, the Ottoman Empire dominated its region for centuries and bridged the medieval and early modern worlds. For hundreds of years after they breached the walls of Constantinople, the Ottomans ruled over the most valuable and turbulent part of the world. Theirs is a story of restrained ambition: Ottoman grand strategists consciously avoided overextension by concentrating on limits, both at home and abroad. How they managed to rule a very troubled region and hang on to their polyglot empire for so many centuries is the subject of the fourth case.

The grand strategy of an Ottoman contemporary—that of Imperial Spain—is essentially a story of five Habsburg emperors, two Charleses and three Philips.

These men oversaw the meteoric rise and gradual decline of an empire forged by both conquest and royal marriage, and a dynasty that was easily the most powerful state in early-modern Europe. That dominance was short-lived, however. The fate of the Habsburgs is a direct outcome of a failed, obdurate grand strategy, one that did not allow room for meaningful evolution in the face of changing external circumstances. Spain's decline had its upsides, though, since by all reasonable measures its people were better off after jettisoning the expense and pretense of empire. The Spanish won by losing.

The book's final case study examines the most consequential of the great European empires. The dominance of the British did not last as long as that of some of the others in this volume, but it had greater long-term implications for the rest of the world. British leaders were able to adapt their strategic thinking in important ways, as they grappled with the apparent contradiction of being simultaneously liberal and imperial, and as governing and economic philosophies underwent substantial evolution. In the end, unlike the Spanish emperors, British leaders managed decline with aplomb and wisdom. Like Spain, however, the loss of empire did not prove catastrophic for the British people. Retrenchment, if sensibly handled, need not result in social or geopolitical disaster.

The United States is the heir to this dominance. In the twenty-first century it straddles the world like any colossus that came before, hardly omnipotent but certainly unignorable. This might strike some as an outdated or even biased statement, since many in the United States do not feel dominant, and their leaders warn of danger aplenty. Washington's relative power seems to have waned, and with it its influence. The security community appears increasingly convinced that the world is multipolar, or drifting in that direction, decreasing the relevance of the experiences described in these pages.

Such perceptions, though widespread, are wrong. Confidence in its power and judgment may be low, but the United States still leads the world in nearly all important (and many unimportant) measures, from the military to the economy, from politics to science, and technology. Washington spends as much on its armed forces as the next eight or ten countries combined, depending who is doing the counting. The increases in U.S. defense spending during the Trump years alone amounted to about half of what China spends annually, and more than twice Russia's annual military budget. We will have more to say about China's military modernization later, but for now perhaps it is sufficient to note that the PRC can challenge the United States in its immediate neighborhood, but it lacks the ability (or desire) to project power globally. Only one country can do that. The United States maintains some eight hundred military bases beyond its borders, while the rest of the world combined has about thirty.[17] When it comes to hard power, one country dominates all others, for better or for worse.

Despite its recent hiccups, the United States also remains the world's economic engine. Its dominance in this area is shrinking as China grows, but in many categories the United States still leads. Confidence in the dollar is high, and the potential for the euro or yuan to take its place as the chief currency of global finance is low.[18] Treasury bills remain the most trusted global financial instrument, and America is still the world's most important scientific and technological state. All this is also coming at a time when much of the Global North is shrinking, demographically speaking, while the United States continues to grow.

American global leadership extends beyond traditional measures of power. Consider the international impact of the "Black Lives Matter" movement, which reached a crescendo in this country when George Floyd died at the hands of police in Minneapolis in May 2020. Protests soon broke out not only around the country but around the world. People took to the streets in London, Osaka, Monrovia, Rio de Janeiro, and Sydney. Demonstrators toppled statues of King Leopold in Brussels, marched on the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv, and marched against police brutality in Nairobi. Korean pop stars raised money for the BLM movement in the United States. German soccer players knelt in solidarity. A mural of Floyd appeared on one of the few remaining walls in Idlib, Syria. Marches took place in the Philippines, Argentina, Jamaica, South Africa, and nearly everywhere that race plays a role in politics.[19] Events in no other country could spark such a broad international movement. What happens in America does not stay in America.

One need not be fully convinced at this stage that the United States is heir to the great countries of the past. Dominance in the twenty-first century, after all, looks different than it used to. Ours is a post-imperial age, one where direct control of others is decidedly passé, and where the greatest power seeks no formal international dominion. Perhaps "predominance" (most important) has replaced "dominance" (controlling); perhaps we ought to speak of the United States as the world's predominant country. Either way, the United States is to the twenty-first century what Rome was to the first.

History never repeats itself, clichés notwithstanding, but a close study of it can reveal insights about international politics and human nature. "Once we understand the patterns of the past," wrote historian Tami Davis Biddle, "we can learn what kinds of questions are most useful to ask ourselves about the present."[20] Perhaps too we can recognize just how different today's world is compared to those that came before—and to the extent it is different, it is better. The era the United States (pre)dominates is more peaceful than its predecessors. This volume concludes with some thoughts about the use of history in grand strategy, and what modern-day America can learn from the great powers of the past as it seeks to chart a course in much less dangerous times.

Those who struggle to forge U.S. grand strategy should be comforted by the notion that they are not the first to make such an effort. Other states have found themselves on top of their geopolitical heap and constructed ways and means to keep themselves there, with varied degrees of success. In these pages we examine their decisions and actions, in the hope that present and future U.S. leaders will find some wisdom to ponder, or lessons to consider, or even guidance to follow. And perhaps modern grand strategy might just improve a little over that of our rather barbarous ancestors.

2

# The Roman Empire

Publius Aelius Hadrian had a problem when he became emperor of Rome in 117 AD: he was following a legend. His predecessor, Trajan, had been successful and fantastically popular. Under his leadership the empire grew bigger than it had ever been or would be again, stretching from the Euphrates to Scotland and from the Sahara to the North Sea. Trajan added hundreds of thousands of both people and square miles. His was an act that would have been difficult for anyone to follow—and was especially so for someone who had radically different ideas for the empire.

Trajan had spent much of his reign (98–117 AD) on the offense, conquering Dacia (modern-day Romania) and large sections of the Middle East. These were enormous undertakings that involved tremendous feats of engineering, including the construction of canals along unnavigable sections of the Danube, roads through deep gorges, and a great bridge that was larger than any Europe would see for a thousand years. The Romans invested a great deal of blood and treasure in Trajan's adventures and took understandable pride in their accomplishment. To celebrate they constructed a famous column that tells the story of the courageous emperor who finally shook Rome out of a century-long, inglorious slumber.[1] As Alexandre Dumas was to write fifteen hundred years later, nothing succeeds like success, at least in the mind of the masses.

When Trajan died, the opaque Roman succession rules brought his trusted aid to power. Hadrian had been a senior Roman general and politician, and one of Trajan's closest advisors for decades. This was not long enough, apparently, to convince him of the wisdom of his mentor's foreign policies. In one of his first acts in office, and perhaps on his very first day, Hadrian issued orders to reverse Trajan's entire grand strategy.[2] He pulled the legions back to the Euphrates and abandoned all territory in Dacia that did not already contain large numbers of Roman settlers. After the troops returned, Hadrian ordered his predecessor's magnificent bridge across the Danube dismantled. Rome was put on a new path.

*The Pursuit of Dominance.* Christopher J. Fettweis, Oxford University Press. © Christopher J. Fettweis 2023.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197646649.003.0002

As one might expect, these moves were not popular. If he were trying to make himself hated by the masses Hadrian could have hardly picked a surer way to do so than to surrender Trajan's hard-won gains and relinquish the glory that came with them.[3] Fortunately for him, Roman emperors had options for dealing with their critics unavailable to U.S. presidents. Shortly after his ascension, Hadrian had his four most vocal skeptics tracked down and killed.[4] The rest got the message. Although Hadrian's relationship with the Roman elite never recovered from these extrajudicial killings, from then on wise critics kept their grumbling to themselves.

Hadrian's prudence and restraint may have angered those Romans who focused more on intangible interests like glory and prestige, but the material results were clear: the empire flourished. He abandoned quarrelsome areas that were not worth pacifying; he embarked on no new, expensive campaigns; he opened the Roman purse to buy peace, which was always less costly than fighting would have been; and he shared the imperial largesse with the people. Despite the handwringing and disquiet generated by Hadrian's policies, the decades that followed the abandonment of Trajan's conquests were in many ways Rome's greatest, the height of the *Pax Romana*. Hadrian handed a far more stable, secure, and prosperous empire to his successor than Trajan bequeathed to him, having maximized security and minimized cost. He is supposed to have bragged on occasion that he "achieved more by peace than others have by war."[5] Most observers who have examined his boast agree.

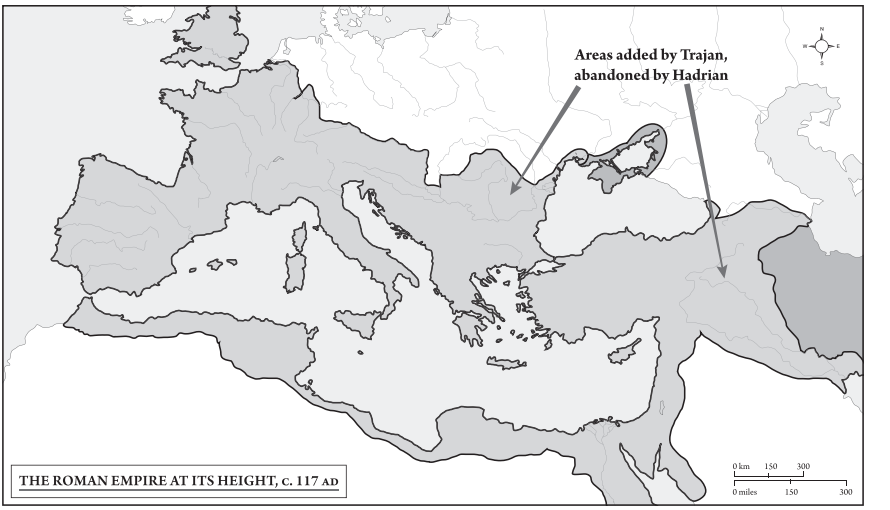



*Figure 2.1* The Roman Empire at Its Height, c. 117 AD Credit: My alterations to a map created by Tataryn77, February 18, 2011, Wikipedia commons, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_Empire_117AD.jpg

Why did Hadrian reverse course so drastically? He was Trajan's chosen heir, after all, which might lead one to assume they thought alike on the big issues. Unfortunately, we know little about what factored into Hadrian's thought process. He wrote an autobiography, but it is lost to history. The medieval monks who preserved ancient texts, recopying them endlessly as their paper disintegrated, prioritized ecclesiastic material over secular. We are left to speculate about Hadrian's motivations.

We are on firm ground, though, in recognizing that Trajan and Hadrian represented the two ideal types of Roman grand strategy. The former patterned himself on Alexander the Great and dreamed of conquest, glory, and riches; the latter took his inspiration from Augustus, as we will see, and sought to preserve the status quo. The vacillation between aggression and patience, between expansion and restraint, would define the centuries in which Rome dominated its world.

It has become fashionable to argue that the Romans had no grand strategy. According to this school of thought, their foreign policy was more reactive than proactive, and they engaged in little long-term planning. Not only did the Romans operate without maps and all they imply, we are told, but they did not even have a word for them.[6] Such notions demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept. While they may not have followed a consistent, secret plan to dominate the world, the Romans certainly thought strategically and marshaled resources in pursuit of their interests.[7] They might not have maps, but it turns out that strategy can be forged in the absence of detailed cartographic knowledge. Rather than focusing on territory, the Romans aimed instead to control the people who lived on it; they were interested in potential enemies or subjects, not the land they occupied. As one historian put it, political geography was much more important to the Romans (and all ancient peoples) than physical geography.[8] Great empires cannot be created and maintained without serious strategic thought. And Rome was the most serious of all.

Only with a wise grand strategy could one rather unremarkable citystate conquer and then rule a quarter of the world's population. The Romans were always vastly outnumbered by the people they controlled, as well as by those on the other side of the empire's various boundaries. Everything they did was aimed at getting the largest return on their severely limited expenditures. Their *economy of force*, to use modern jargon, was without equal in times before or since. The ability to accomplish more with less is the central theme of Roman grand strategy, and of its remarkable dominance of the Mediterranean.

At its founding there was little noteworthy about Rome, but before long it had united the entire coast of the Mediterranean for the first (and last) time. Equally unlikely was its fall from that position at the hands of less-developed peoples, which has puzzled generations of historians. The real mystery, however,

is not why Rome collapsed in the fifth century but why it did not do so sooner. "The story of its ruin is simple and obvious," at least to the great British historian Edward Gibbon. "Instead of inquiring why the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long."[9] The empire survived frequent civil wars, coups, awful and/or idiot emperors, tragic blunders, assassinations, plagues, famines, natural disasters, religious passions, and ever-present turbulence in the near-abroad. Even fifty straight years of usurpations and internal conflict in the third century did not bring Rome down. Instead, back it came, emerging stronger than before in many ways. How did the Romans manage to rule such a diverse collection of nations for so long? And, inevitably, how did their grand strategy eventually fail?

## From Republic to Empire

Our story opens in 168 BC, when the Seleucid Empire (in modern-day Syria) invaded Egypt. The Seleucid king, Antiochus IV, believed that Rome would neither interfere nor object, in part because its legions were busy fighting elsewhere. Antiochus had a treaty of friendship with the growing regional superpower, and Rome had never taken much interest in his conflicts before.

Antiochus miscalculated. The Senate was not happy, since Rome had good relations with the Egyptian kings too, and they had not been consulted about these plans beforehand. A delegation led by a consul named Gaius Popilius Laenas was dispatched to express this disapproval. According to the story, as Antiochus dithered and stalled in initial discussions, Popilius took a stick and drew a line in the sand around him, in full view of his advisors, and said, "Before you cross this circle I want you to give me a reply for the Roman Senate." Popilius had drawn the first "line in the sand," to which Antiochus replied, "I will do what the senate thinks right," and agreed to withdraw his troops.[10] Popilius then embraced him as a friend of Rome. Protracted diplomatic negotiations were never the Roman style.

This famous incident demonstrated the Mediterranean power dynamics in the middle of the second century BC. Rome was the undisputed leader of its region, after crushing Carthage and all other would-be rivals. Though they were particularly and stubbornly aggressive, the Romans were hardly atypical for their time. The ancient world was not a pacific Eden that lay helpless before Roman aggression; quite to the contrary, violence was endemic and expansion expected. The security environment in which Rome operated was anarchic and competitive, where safety was never assured and neighbors were likely enemies. Strong states did what they wanted and the weak suffered what they must, including

conquest and destruction. "Every state," wrote Plato on behalf of the conventional wisdom, "by a law of nature, is engaged at all times in an undeclared war against every other state."[11] The Romans were not more brutal or aggressive than their peers. They were just better at it.

Romans certainly did not consider themselves abnormally violent. The rules of their time offered little choice but to conquer, they felt, and each conquest opened a new front with new potential enemies. Cicero was not the only contemporary who believed that Roman expansion was made necessary by their frightening neighbors. This notion, known today as "defensive imperialism," suggests that the Roman Empire was propelled ever outward not only by the desire for glory but by the sincere belief that almost any people along its widening periphery could represent a threat.[12] The fact that most of these neighbors were manifestly weaker did not matter; as its power grew, so too did Rome's insecurity. Even Rome's most ardent defenders stop short of claiming that its expansion could be fully explained by virtuous or defensive motives—its leaders were rarely shy about their desire for the glory that can only come through conquest—but there should be no doubt that its strategists were not wholly motivated by increasing the Roman prestige.[13] The most powerful society in the ancient world never felt safe as long as it had neighbors.

## The Roman Military

Rome was able to accomplish its goal of known-world conquest largely because it wielded the greatest strategic tool of its time. The Roman army was a study in economizing force, since it accomplished far more than its small size would suggest possible.[14] At no time did it contain more than 400,000 men (and usually far fewer), or at most one soldier for every five square miles of territory or 250–300 civilians.[15] Large swaths of empire experienced no military presence whatsoever, making it quite possible to live to dotage as a Roman citizen without seeing a single legionary. What it lacked in size, however, it made up for in skill. The legions (which were the main unit of organization, comparable to our divisions) were not invincible but must have seemed so to opponents, since they regularly defeated enemy forces many times their number.[16] On the battlefield, quality is more important than quantity, and the Romans had the former in spades.

Most ancient armies were composed of part-time soldiers who only campaigned between the much more important jobs of planting and then harvesting crops. They were rough characters accustomed to a life of violence and privation, but they were better thought of as a collection of individual warriors rather than a trained, disciplined force. The Romans, on the other hand, were pros. The republic eventually grew rich enough to employ full-time soldiers

who spent all their time perfecting their craft. These professionals thrived in ancient combat, which typically unfolded according to a standard pattern: Two groups—whether professionally trained and outfitted soldiers or peasant mobs carrying whatever weapons they had—faced each other, yelling and frothing, until one side charged. Encounters usually only lasted a few hours. The vast majority of casualties occurred after one side broke and ran, exposing their backs to the enemy. Whichever side stood firm and did not panic generally carried the day.

The Romans were much less likely to panic, because in peacetime panic was beaten out of them on the practice field. Legionaries "do not begin to use their weapons first in time of war," wrote first-century historian Flavius Josephus.

> They have never any truce from warlike exercises . . . every soldier is every day exercised, and that with great diligence, as if it were in time of war, which is the reason why they bear the fatigue of battles so easily . . . nor would he be mistaken that should call those their exercises unbloody battles, and their battles bloody exercises.[17]

The typical Roman soldier trained with a heavy wooden sword, making the one he wielded on the battlefield seem light. He could respond in an instant to battlefield commands and quickly assemble with his colleagues into a variety of different formations, depending on the situation, and if things went wrong, he could retreat in good order. He was confident in the man next to him and in his leaders, and he knew he could rely on battlefield medics to stitch up his wounds. He could also expect to be paid well and taken care of when his enlistment was up, often with land to farm, money, and slaves. No other state of the time had anything like him.

The legions were more than finely tuned fighting machines. When not slaughtering the empire's enemies they moonlighted as construction crews, building various civilian and military infrastructure such as aqueducts and walls. The soldier-engineers built the famous road system, which facilitated transportation and trade for Roman society as well as mobility and logistics for its army. This engineering capability gave the Romans another advantage over their opponents: they were the best in the ancient world at overcoming static defenses. Walls were daunting obstacles in the pre-gunpowder era, and even the most rudimentary could render their inhabitants nigh invulnerable to most invaders. The mighty Spartans were never able to surmount the walls surrounding Athens during the Peloponnesian War, for example. Nomadic invaders in particular could rarely conduct prolonged sieges, preferring instead to ride past protected towns in search of easier targets. The Romans, however, could construct a variety of massive siege engines on the spot that were capable

of penetrating the strongest city walls. Retreating inside fortified towns was a wise defense tactic against most ancient invaders, but it was ineffective against the legions.

The army was, by quite a margin, the empire's largest expense. The Romans maintained a very small maritime presence, since there were no other navies to speak of and Mediterranean piracy had been essentially eliminated in the first century BC. They had what looks like a coast guard by today's standards, a small constabulary (or "green water") force capable of operating in nearby seas, and a riverine service whose primary role was to support the legions. Instead, three-quarters of tax money went to keeping the foot soldiers outfitted, paid, trained, fed, and, most important, loyal. Part of that spending went toward the construction of an early military-industrial complex. State arms factories, or *fabricae*, were spread throughout the empire, producing high-quality weapons and supplies on a scale that none of Rome's rivals could match. Imperial horses were bred in Thrace, Spain, and Cappadocia; a factory at Augustodunum in central Gaul produced the Roman equivalent of artillery; shields were made in Marcianopolis, in modern-day Bulgaria; and other *fabricae* specialized in leather, swords, siege equipment, and helmets.[18] During a time when most other armies consisted of part-timers carrying a hodgepodge of sharp objects, the Romans took the field outfitted with the best the age had to offer.

This professional, effective military explains the success of Roman expansion, most of which occurred early on, under the Senate's auspices. By the dawn of the first century BC, as it is apparently mandatory for historians to observe, the Mediterranean had become "a Roman lake." The removal of external enemies created an unexpected problem that would bedevil the republic until its end, however, since Rome was essentially unable to live at peace for long. When there was no danger abroad, Romans found some at home. Their first major civil war began in 88 BC and persisted on and off for eleven years. Bigger ones were to follow. Republics are essentially fragile institutions, and their traditions are easily shattered. They require trust and restraint on behalf of their members, or at least the determination to abide by standing rules and norms. Antidemocratic forces are always standing by, ready to take advantage of breakdowns of trust. In Rome those forces were led by familiar names, like Caesar, Pompey, Mark Antony, and Octavian, men who would destroy the republic in their quest to lead it.[19]

At the end of its first great era of civil wars Rome was, and would for the rest of its existence be, a military dictatorship. The Senate still existed, as did the facade of republican rule, but few doubted where real power lay. The first of those dictators would also be the most influential, for better or for worse.

## Augustan Precedents

The victor of the republic-killing civil wars was Octavian (who soon took the title Augustus, or "the majestic"), adopted son of Julius Caesar, who was to rule absolutely for forty-one years. Perhaps his first priority, as one might expect, was to break the cycle of internecine conflict. The emperor reimposed the sensible prohibition on legions traveling south of the Rubicon River, for one thing, and created the Praetorian Guard, a legion of elite troops whose main job was to protect the emperor and deter challengers. Augustus also deflected any lingering hostility outward, ordering the legions westward into what is today Spain and northward into modern Switzerland and the Balkans. His armies also pushed the boundaries of the empire south into Africa and east into Judea and Turkey.

The emperor was able to expand so widely because Rome faced no real rivals. The barbarian (a term adopted from the Greeks, meaning simply any non-Roman) peoples on the periphery came in two forms: Various Germanic tribes beyond the imperial boundaries to the west of the Rhine and north of the Danube, and Persians to the east. The Romans had already incorporated the richer Celtic-speaking societies in modern-day France but chose not to add the Germans. This was not due to a lack of capability—Romans entered German territory at will, on punitive ventures, and to snatch the occasional slave—but because they generally considered these people unworthy of conquest.[20] Though they would cause problems later, at this point the Germans were disorganized, migratory and poor, and posed no threat to the empire. They had few permanent settlements, conducted no trade, and offered no potential tax base. Ruling them would have incurred substantial cost for little benefit. The empire stopped expanding northward not because it could not go further, in other words, but because doing so would have been counterproductive. As pithily summarized by one modern historian, "Rome ruled over all peoples who were worth ruling."[21]

The Persians, by contrast, had a written language, a flourishing economy, and a proud cultural heritage, and were considered civilized, if inferior, by the Romans. Between 247 BC and 224 AD that empire was ruled by the Parthian Dynasty, which was often at war with itself, usually with Roman encouragement. The legions marched in with some regularity, reaching the capital (Ctesiphon, south of modern Baghdad) on five separate occasions for bouts of looting and burning. There is only one instance of the reverse occurring, of a sustained Parthian attack on Rome, which occurred in 161 AD as Emperor Antoninus Pius laid on his deathbed. The venture went poorly, as did most efforts to take and hold Roman territory. Parthian armies could not carry out effective sieges and were terrible with logistics, which meant that their cavalry-heavy forces had to live off the land, and Roman cities were generally safe from their assaults. Although capable

of raids into the imperial periphery and other such annoyances, Parthian Persia was always more of a target than a threat, more prey than predator.

The bulk of the army was stationed along the perimeter, not to address the threat of invasion but to perform a constabulary function. Raiding by small bands was endemic throughout the ancient world. The Romans split many legions into smaller units, known as "penny packets" whose goal was to nab invaders on the way out rather than on the way in. While it was quite difficult to stop quick, determined raiding forces from reaching soft targets, when they tried to escape, weighed down by booty, they were much more vulnerable. The empire sought to deter marauders with the promise that although getting in might be easy enough, getting out was going to be another story altogether.[22] Thus more legions were deployed along the Rhine and Danube than in the east facing Persia, even though the conventional threat from the latter was much more substantial. In reality, neither was very worrisome.

Augustus faced an extremely favorable security environment, as would his successors for the next few centuries. Expansion could have continued almost indefinitely, in theory, and would not have run into any serious obstacles before reaching Han China. Where to stop, or where exactly to draw the borders of the empire, was a matter of choice—and strategy. The Romans assessed costs and benefits of potential additions, and sought to incorporate the optimal territory, not merely the most.[23] Adding scarcely populated, non-arable regions would expand the imperial perimeter and increase its responsibilities for little gain. Unproductive and wild territory was left to the wild peoples. The Romans could have pacified Scotland, for example, or the great steppes of Eurasia, but they decided that doing so would have been worse than pointless. Boundaries were thus chosen quite deliberately, to maximize the strength of the empire.

Augustus thought that he had established the ideal frontiers and advised his successors to go no further. As he neared the end of his life, he told his heir Tiberius to *consilium coercendi imperii intra terminos*, or "confine the empire within present limits," which effectively became the Roman Empire's equivalent of the Monroe Doctrine.[24] Just as U.S. presidents were often quite consciously guided by Monroe's advice to keep foreign powers out of the Western Hemisphere, Roman emperors at times referred to Augustus's deathbed recommendation when they restrained their imperial ambitions. Though he conquered a tremendous amount of territory, Augustus ultimately set Rome on the path toward becoming a status quo power, and established one of the ideal types of Roman grand strategy.

It is worth emphasizing just how revolutionary this advice was. Augustus was arguing against a bit of Thucydidean wisdom that was already conventional by Roman times, that empires begin to decline when they cease to expand.[25]

However, Rome thrived for centuries as protector of its favorable international order and generally avoided the kind of overextension that plagued great powers before and since. Not all his successors followed this advice, since doing so would deny them the glory so popular in despot circles, but most determined that the tangible interests of the state were much better served by a policy of imperial restraint that lasted, although not uninterrupted, for nearly five hundred years.

Augustus was for Rome what the Founding Fathers were to the United States: a secular saint whose advice was often accepted as gospel. Still, not all followed his lead, and instead found inspiration elsewhere. Ancient sources discuss another major influence on imperial behavior: some emperors modeled their reigns on that of Alexander the Great, dreaming of re-creating and even surpassing his exploits and conquests.

These two great precedents pulled Rome in opposite directions: Those who followed Augustus's advice sought to preserve the status quo, while those who drew inspiration from Alexander were invariably aggressive and warlike.[26] None of our ancient observers seems to have realized that one of those precedents invariably led to better outcomes.

## Policies of the *Pax Romana*

The Augustan era began the *Pax Romana*, the famous peace of Rome during which the Mediterranean experienced a remarkable degree of stability and economic growth. Modern scholars refer to this as "hegemonic stability," a condition that can occur when one power is able to make and enforce a set of rules.[27] The era was not only peaceful and prosperous but enduring, persisting for centuries before it collapsed. The *Pax Romana* was not without its problems and challenges, but thanks to Roman dominance it was a relative golden age of peace and security.

Augustus lived long for his time, dying at seventy-five in 14 AD. Shortly before his end he set another precedent, one that demonstrated how to replace a living god who stops living. The Romans seemed to realize that primogeniture or father-to-son succession creates a host of problems. Rarely do sons of kings have a normal upbringing, since houses of absolute power are often not terribly amenable to prudent discipline. Even when the training is good, the personality traits that contribute to successful leadership do not always pass through the generations. Sometimes first-born princes are mentally equipped and behaviorally prepared to rule, but many times they are not. Early Roman emperors avoided this pitfall by naming their successors, often formally adopting men who seemed fit to lead. Augustus chose his third wife's son from a previous marriage, Tiberius,

who would in turn eventually adopt his own great-nephew. This Augustan line lasted until 69 AD and included some of the more famous names in Roman history. Tiberius, then Caligula, Claudius, and Nero ruled in much the same way, at least when it came to foreign policy. Although occasional efforts at expansion occurred—Claudius sent the legions into Britain, for example—for the most part the empire remained roughly the same size and faced no serious threats.

Nero did not leave an obvious successor when he decided to kill himself following an unfortunate fire during which, legend notwithstanding, he did not fiddle. Civil war followed, and three hapless and/or luckless generals took control for brief periods, making 69 AD the "year of four emperors." The dust settled when the legions of a fourth general (Vespasian) brought the chaos to an end. Rome was then to go without a major civil war for more than 120 years, by far the longest stretch in its post-Punic history. These twelve decades were the true height of the empire, the most glorious time in the *Pax Romana* and a period when it dominated a secure and profitable Mediterranean. Rome during the Pax was what we would call today a "status quo power," or one more interested in maintenance than expansion.[28] For powers on top, there is nowhere to go but down. "Since change meant decay," noted one historian, "the Empire was resolved to stop change."[29] Protection of the current order always constituted its primary interest, and to preserve it Rome developed a few major policies.

## *Festina Lente*

In addition to his non-expansion doctrine, Augustus advised his successors to *festina lente* ("make haste slowly"), or act with both determination and patience, especially in military matters.[30] The slogan appeared on Roman coins and had its own logo, which depicted a dolphin wrapped around an anchor that metaphorically slowed down the ship of state. Deliberate action allowed more time for prudent thought and contemplation, which gave rise to better decisions. Generally speaking, therefore, the Romans did not hurry. Taking their time allowed generals to think through their tactics, logisticians to prepare the ground, and diplomats to deliver *ultimata* that often made military action unnecessary. Reprisals and revenge were inevitable, but they could happen much later, sometimes years later, and preparations were rarely secret.[31] When emperors displayed patient determination, problems often solved themselves. Once targets were convinced that Rome was coming and was going to accomplish its goals the hard way or the easy way, they often chose the latter.

Examples of *festina lente* in action are not hard to find. Nero prepared an assault on the troublesome buffer state of Armenia in 58 AD for three long years, during which time his engineers built a series of roads upon which his legions

would travel when he gave the signal.[32] The siege of Masada that occurred fifteen years later is noteworthy for both the mass suicide that robbed the Romans of their glorious victory and the patient determination that success required. The Romans constructed a wall around an entire mountain, a ramp extending up its flanks and set of custom-made siege engines and towers, moving thousands of tons of earth and rock in the process. The whole operation took years, but the Romans were in no rush.

The difficulty of executing deliberate actions should not be underestimated. The demands of prudence are often at odds with those of glory, and the masses are rarely patient. The Roman General Titus supposedly said that "time could accomplish everything, but celerity was essential to renown."[33] Reputations were built by bold action, not cautious patience; slow movement can suggest indecision rather than caution. "Indecision is a slave's weakness," Tacitus argued, and "prompt action king-like."[34] Roman grand strategy might not have always seemed king-like, but it was brutally, inexorably effective. Dominant, essentially unthreatened powers need not rush.

## *Divide et Impera*

"Long, I pray, may foreign nations persist, if not in loving us, at least in hating one another," wrote Tacitus. "Fortune now has no better gift than discord among our foes."[35] This oft-repeated remark was made after two long-forgotten, troublesome tribes along the Rhine (the Chamavi and Angrivarii) annihilated another (the Bructeri) while the Romans stood by patiently and watched.

These delighted Roman observers were demonstrating what was perhaps the highest strategic priority of their empire, and indeed the most basic imperative for all great powers. Barbarians angry at one another could not focus their combined ire on Rome. We remember this more as "divide and conquer" even if the original Latin phrase is closer to "divide and rule" (*divide et impera*), but the policy was useful for both goals. The Romans consistently exacerbated intra- and inter-tribal divisions, of which there was rarely a shortage. Often divisions cropped up rather naturally, especially if the Roman threat temporarily receded; the empire's strategic patience often allowed its enemies to recall their hatred for each other and engage in self-destructive combat. "Above all," wrote Montesquieu, "their constant maxim was to divide."[36]

Diplomacy was the main tool for preventing barbarian cooperation. Standard Roman practice was to deal with every king or regional leader separately, extending preferential treatment to some over others, in the hope of fostering jealousies, resentment, and distrust.[37] Exiles and pretenders to thrones were often welcome in the empire, where they would be kept healthy and ready to

intervene in future power struggles. Offers of imperial protection, monetary payments, or *receptio* (essentially entry visas that allowed barbarian tribes to settle inside Roman frontiers) could sweeten potential deals and break parts off the barbarian whole. Allying with the smaller side in intra-barbarian conflicts was also standard practice.

Rome's wealth also helped prevent coordination between potential enemies. Due to the ease of trade with the empire, over time the people closer to its borders grew wealthier than those farther away, making them targets of raids and predation. The nearby barbarians often had little to offer in return, at least initially, so they were encouraged to conduct raids into the hinterlands and capture slaves if they wanted to trade for Roman goods.[38] Sagacious emperors exacerbated inequality and its accompanying tensions, making proximity to the empire an indirect tool of grand strategy.

## Five Good Emperors, Prosperity, and Walls

Vespasian and his successors returned stability to the empire after the lone year of turmoil, and ushered in Rome's greatest period, one that was nearly free of civil strife. Not until 193 would the legions face one another, but then only for one year and not again for decades. Between 27 BC and 217 AD there were only two years of major Roman civil war and no serious threats from abroad. For eighty-five of those years the empire was led by the so-called Five Good Emperors (Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius), who maintained Roman power and ruled with moderation at home. The first four chose able successors and adopted them, leading to smooth transitions of power each time.

Hadrian (117–138) proved particularly adept at identifying political talent. Late in life he agreed to adopt a senior senator, if in return that senator adopted two young, capable men as his sons and successors. Thus Hadrian chose the leaders for the forty years after his death, which was a safe and prosperous era that eminent British historian Edward Gibbon described as "possibly the only period of history in which the happiness of a great people was the sole object of government." He continued: "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian [96AD] to the accession of Commodus [181]."[39] Sources tell us that Antoninus Pius (138–161) never left Italy or even came within five hundred miles of a legion during his long reign.[40] He ordered no military campaigns that we know of, except perhaps in southern Scotland, and was widely respected

at home and abroad.[41] Rome's proudest era was also its most restrained. As is always the case, unfortunately, relatively peaceful periods like these receive much less attention from historians than the times of turmoil.[42] We know little about the thinking and intentions of the emperors, and have to construct their strategy from their actions (or lack thereof).

One of those actions was to mark Roman territory more plainly. Beginning with Hadrian, the Romans began marking the imperial frontiers, clearly separating their lands from those of the various barbarians. The Rhine, Danube, Euphrates, and Sahara made obvious and convenient borders, but that left substantial frontiers undefined. Rome's most famous wall-builder was the first to set about limiting the imperial reach, but not necessarily for reasons we would recognize today. Hadrian's wall might have played a symbolic role in the development of English nationhood, but it had little practical significance for the empire. In fact, the northern wall was the least consequential of the many constructed in his time, since it demarcated a far-flung, unthreatened border. The walls between the Rhine and the Danube (the *limes Germanicus*) as well as the intermittent structures south of Carthage (the *fossatum Africae*) delineated the edge of vital imperial provinces and were of greater strategic interest.

The first thing to note about these walls is that they served no real defensive purpose. They were not the kind of imposing, crenelated ramparts that would have allowed defenders to hold out against sustained assault while awaiting reinforcements. To the contrary, they were unmanned, two-to-three-meter-high barriers with outposts every mile or so, easily overcome by even semi-determined attackers. Germanic invaders would have had little trouble getting past the *limes Germanicus*, and the *fossatum Africae* were built at a time when there was no threat from nomadic peoples to the south.[43] Similarly, the Picts and other people of Scotland posed virtually no danger to Britannia, so Hadrian's Wall was not designed to protect against invasion.

If these walls were not meant to protect the empire, then what purpose did they serve? Opinions differ regarding what the emperor had in mind when he ordered their construction. Perhaps the walls were essentially deterrents, important only because they symbolized Roman power. To cross them, even if technically uncomplicated, was to engage the legions.[44] Or perhaps the walls were constabulary rather than military, meant to control traffic and collect taxes on trade, acting like elongated tollbooths.[45] To Edward Luttwak, the walls encouraged people on the other side to "self-Romanize" by making it obvious that life was better on the inside.[46]

None of these ideas is necessarily wrong, since complex historical phenomena (and long walls were about as complex as things got in those days) have complex causes. It is also quite possible, however, that the walls played another

role in Hadrian's strategy. Historians have generally concentrated on the signals the walls sent *outward*, on their potential deterrent or intimidation capabilities, rather than the signals they sent *inward*. While the emperor certainly wanted to keep the barbarians out, he also wanted to keep the Romans in. By delineating frontiers, the walls made it clear to those on both sides that expansion would not be taking place on Hadrian's watch. The walls were concrete and wooden manifestations of restraint, through which the emperor hoped to encourage his successors to continue his Augustan grand strategy. In the words of a modern historian, the walls were "a clear signal to any surviving admirers of Trajan's expansionist policies that the empire was indeed precisely defined; thus far and no further."[47] Hadrian's limits sent messages to the peoples beyond that they had little to fear from the superpower on their border. By doing so, he decreased the threat that the superpower posed to its neighbors and increased the chance for peaceful coexistence.

Whether marked by walls or not, ancient borders were always more flexible than those of today. They had to be, since people were rarely content to stay put. Some populations were sedentary but others were perpetually on the move, always searching for better places to live or just new opportunities. What the Germans call *Völkerwanderung* (the "wandering of the peoples," or constant human migration) obviously posed problems for the Romans at times, but it also could be strategically useful. Emperors often encouraged Roman citizens to move, especially to newly conquered parts of the realm. The first Roman colony may well have been on the ashes of Carthage, which had been a fertile region prior to the Third Punic War. In the years that followed incentives were routinely provided to boost emigration to those areas the legions had just pacified. New territories made convenient spots to settle ex-soldiers, who were commonly promised lands and slaves upon their retirement.

Immigration could serve strategic purposes too. Romans regularly let wandering barbarians settle inside the empire as long as they disarmed and promised to pay tribute and provide soldiers for the imperial armies. There appears to have been a consistently high interest on part of many different people to immigrate, for a variety of reasons. Rome was rich and peaceful, after all, and offered the best medical care available.[48] Submission to Roman rules and customs (*obsequium*) was usually a condition of settlement, but as long as a group was willing to pledge allegiance it had a fair chance to enter. Wise *receptio* choices could not only enrich the empire and increase the size of its army but break up barbarian confederations and divide potential rivals. Emperors appear to have been willing and even proud to increase the number of people whom they ruled, and allowed immigration for centuries, long before it became problematic.

## Economizing Force

The Five Good Emperors, like their not-so-good predecessors and successors, knew that the most efficient way to undercut domestic support was to raise taxes. Those most capable of paying the imperial bills, the senatorial class, were generally of the opinion that taxes were obligations imposed upon lesser folk. Their general refusal to pay much of anything guaranteed that Rome's revenue, though enormous compared to any of its rivals, would never quite cover its expenses. Even if there had been unlimited funds, however, raising the requisite number of troops to police the empire's vastness would have proven difficult, since recruitment was difficult and conscription unpopular. A number of stories have been passed down to us about citizens maiming themselves or their children to prevent them from being drafted into the legions. Apparently, removal of both thumbs disqualified a man from military service—and qualified him instead for execution, if he was caught.[49]

Thus, despite its dominance, Rome always faced serious resource constraints. Its emperors recognized this and aimed to achieve an economy of force, or a maximum return on investment. They wanted to get the most out of every *denarius*, which often meant avoiding battle where possible, even if war was often popular with the masses. When the aforementioned Masada Jews committed suicide rather than fight, for example, Roman Emperor Vespasian was untroubled. "If any one imagines that the glory of victory, when it is gotten without fighting, will be more insipid," he said, "let him know this much, that a glorious success, quietly obtained, is more profitable than the dangers of a battle."[50] Wars cost a great deal, so the more that could be gained without fighting, the better. Devising ways to achieve goals on the cheap, in order to achieve that economy of force, became a central Roman concern. They came up with a few.

### Image and Allies

"What divides the Goths and the Romans is not a river, nor a swamp, nor a wall—for these one might break through, sail over, or surmount—but fear, which no one has ever surmounted who believed that he was the weaker." So wrote the fourth-century philosopher Themistius on an important tool of Roman strategy.[51] Since their tangible power was limited the Romans developed intangible means that cost little and could bring real benefits. Their strategy targeted the psyche of potential opponents as much as their armies, in order to encourage them to make the choices that the empire desired. If enemies believed Rome to be ferocious, ruthless, and nearly invincible, they would be

more likely to cooperate with its endeavors. Thus emperors sought to cultivate an image and a reputation that would scare barbarians into cooperation. It was a goal for which they were very willing to fight. Any indications of insufficient deference by others (what they called *superbia*, or pride in a negative sense) was highly likely to elicit a response. "What mattered most was how the empire, and to some degree the emperor, were perceived by foreigners and subjects," wrote historian Susan Mattern. "Symbolic deference from the enemy was a policy goal; arrogance and insult, described in exactly those words, were just and necessary causes for war. Terror and vengeance were instruments for maintaining the empire's image. Roman strategy was thus partly moral and psychological in nature."[52]

Fear was a tool that kept order within and deterred challenge from without. Roman efforts to promote it might seem disproportionate to modern sensibilities—they occasionally made examples of recalcitrant barbarians through invasion, butchery, enslavement, ethnic cleansing, and/or genocide—but they reflected the seriousness with which the Romans considered the enemy state of mind. Roman strategy, wrote Mattern, "did not work, or was not believed to work, unless the barbarians were frightened."[53] Victory was not enough; only overwhelming victory satisfied the Romans, who felt that their security required an occasional demonstration of who was boss.

Fear was also useful at the negotiating table, where it concentrated minds and encouraged cooperation. "I achieved less by force than by diplomacy," wrote Tiberius to his nephew Germanicus, which is something that could have been said by most emperors before and afterward.[54] Diplomats always preceded soldiers, often finding local leaders eager to make deals. Diplomacy was much different in the ancient world, where there were no embassies, standing missions, or permanent ambassadors. Instead leaders would send off delegations to discuss specific concerns, often during crises, rather than carrying on sustained interaction.

Roman diplomats went abroad not in search of mutual accommodation but to demand obedience. Their role was to deliver *ultimata* and make clear the consequences of disagreement. The empire's superior status needed to be acknowledged up front and then consistently throughout; once this was done, deals could be cut and peace arranged. The Romans perfected what we could today call "coercive diplomacy," which often achieved their goals without the need for more costly, violent tools.

Once bargains were struck, the Romans (of this era, at least) prided themselves on honoring them. They practiced *fides*, or "good faith," and tried to build a reputation as a trustworthy and honorable people, partially in the belief that it would make future agreements easier.[55] Contemporary observers admired these ideals, considering them central parts of Roman ethics, and criticized

emperors who fell short. When Emperor Domitian (81–96) violated Rome's treaty commitments by sending troops beyond the Rhine, for example, contemporary historian Cassius Dio declared that his actions "entailed great injury to the state" that rendered him unfit to rule.[56] Manipulating barbarians required simultaneous ruthlessness and honesty. Romans wanted to appear reasonable and rational unless provoked, at which time they could be unimaginably cruel.

There was no worse enemy than Rome, but also no better ally—and their fear-based diplomacy created many of the latter. The empire maintained a web of buffers, including client states, formal allies, and less formal friends (or *amici*). The Romans controlled their frontiers less with walls and more by influencing those who lied beyond. Clients could stay in power if they knew their place and kept the tribute flowing; if, in other words, they proved their value, and kept the relationship profitable for Rome. They also could not threaten much less fight each other, which is the lesson Antiochus IV of the Seleucid Empire forgot. Sagacious clients who learned the rules could maintain a good deal of independence. One of the most successful was King Herod of Judea, who owed his position to Marc Antony but managed to persist under Augustus long after his patron was defeated. Cleopatra had a similar arrangement but dissimilar survival skills.[57]

Allies do entail costs, however. Honor demanded that mutual security commitments be fulfilled, and Rome was occasionally dragged into the quarrels of its friends. The need to defend *amici* is one of the most frequently cited *casus belli* in the ancient sources.[58] Although useful as a buffer, the network surrounding Rome also occasionally necessitated maintenance and defense. If not chosen carefully, *amici* could embroil the empire in unwanted dangers over feuds that had nothing to do with Roman security, costing more than they benefited. To be a friend of Rome was a privilege, one not often extended to those people considered to be unreliable, unstable, or simply weird.

## Making Money Work: Taxes and Bribes

The Romans wrote very little about money, or at least very little that has survived. They had no way to assess the economic health of the empire, living quite a few centuries before anyone thought of gross national product, supply and demand curves, or quarterly growth reports. Just because their view of economics was uncomplicated by modern notions does not mean it lacked sophistication, however. The Romans certainly thought about wealth a great deal and understood that money was both an end and means of strategy. Like all ancient states, pillage and plunder were not merely side benefits of conquest but central goals. Trajan was not unaware of the mineral wealth that had recently been discovered in

Dacia when he ordered the invasions at the beginning of the second century AD, for example. A steady stream of booty flowed back into Roman coffers following each of his major operations. The most valuable and important prize was usually human: acquisition of new slaves was often a primary motivation for assaults on neighboring lands.

The Romans had no concept of debt financing but did have coherent fiscal and monetary policies. Emperors determined both the amount of money in circulation and the percentage of silver in the coinage, which over time affected prices throughout the empire. More basically, the efficient Roman censuses and bureaucracy allowed for taxation, which was a source of power unavailable to the disorganized barbarians. The Romans taxed houses, slaves, and ships, and collected a head tax on each person.[59] They also got creative at times: In 70 AD Vespasian imposed a levy on urine, which was at the time a valuable commodity collected from public restrooms and sold to launderers and leather workers for its ammonia. When his son pointed out that the tax was fairly repulsive and had become the source of mockery in the city, the emperor famously responded *pecunia non olet*, or "money does not stink." The tax did not last long, but the new nickname for public urinals—Vespasians—did.

Purchasing outcomes was often cheaper than bringing them about by force. In 88 AD Domitian agreed to pay subsidies to Dacian King Decebalus to finalize a peace agreement after a misguided, failed Roman invasion, which appears to have set a precedent. Trajan made payments to the Roxoloni, who lived near his Dacian enemies, and many of his successors were to do the same with other problematic peoples.[60] Doing this invited criticism, of course, from those who would have preferred the barbarians to bend to the imperial will. Bribery might have been a sign of weakness, but for emperors on a budget it was often a wise way to accomplish objectives.

Not all barbarians could be bought off, as it turned out. At times the Romans employed a longer-term tactic, one aimed at incorporating and transforming rather than purchasing the loyalty of their enemies. Key to Roman rule was pacification, making the people under their control happy, or at least satisfied with their lot. And pacification often necessitated transformation.

## Romanization and Citizenship

Hannibal might have been one of history's great generals, but in 218 BC he made a fundamental miscalculation that led to disaster in the Second Punic War. After he marched his war elephants through the Alps and handing Rome some of its worst defeats, the Cartheginian set about ravaging the Italian peninsula. Hannibal expected that his battlefield successes would inspire uprisings among

the various peoples who lived under Roman rule who must resent their occupiers, he reckoned, and would be eager for liberation. Instead the Carthaginians met resistance everywhere they went, and eventually left Italy without ever stepping foot in Rome itself. History does not record whether Hannibal had malcontented exiles whispering in his ear, but clearly his strategy depended on being greeting as a liberator. The general's own reputation as a repressive tyrant certainly did not help his cause, but more important, as it turned out, Roman rule was genuinely popular in most places it existed.

The Romans faced a challenge familiar to all imperial powers: The people under their control had very little in common with their rulers and were bound to resent orders from heavily armed foreigners. Their empire contained many different cultures, religions, races, traditions, and languages. Their solution, like that of so many since, was to transform the peoples of the periphery into something resembling those in the core. They sought to "Romanize" the barbarians, to elevate the various lesser cultures and introduce them to higher civilization. Everywhere the Romans went, they brought with them their language, law, dress, baths, food, gladiatorial contests, theater, education, political organization, and—most important—they invited the locals to partake.

Romanization does not have many supporters among moderns, often being decried as the tool of cultural imperialism that it certainly was. Tacitus agreed. Speaking of the policies of his father-in-law, the Roman governor of Britain, he wrote this:

> His object was to accustom [the Britons] to a life of peace and quiet by the provision of amenities. He therefore gave official assistance to the building of temples, public squares and good houses. He educated the sons of the chiefs in the liberal arts . . . The result was that instead of loathing the Latin language they became eager to speak it effectively. In the same way, our national dress came into favor and the toga was everywhere to be seen. And so the population was gradually led into the demoralizing temptation of arcades, baths and sumptuous banquets. The unsuspecting Britons spoke of such novelties as "civilization," when in fact they were only a feature of their enslavement.[61]

Romanization was rarely coercive, however. It worked because of attraction rather than imposition, and it occurred rather naturally over time as local people chose to adopt parts of the inclusive, attractive, sophisticated culture of their occupiers. The Romans aimed to have people feel incorporated rather than colonized, and rarely sought to replace local culture or traditions with their own. Until it adopted Christianity in the late fourth century the empire generally promoted religious freedom, as long as exercising that freedom did not

involve denial of the Roman gods. Obdurate monotheists ran into problems, but everyone else was allowed to practice as they wished.[62] The Romans demanded only political acquiescence and tribute. "Once they obtain this," according to Josephus, they will "grant you everything else, the freedom of your families, the enjoyment of your possessions and the protection of your sacred laws."[63] For a variety of reasons, being Roman was an attractive proposition for many ancient people, especially the urban elite and landed aristocracy.[64] There were always barbarians seeking entry, and those allowed in rarely chafed under Roman rule.

For a people so convinced of the superiority of their civilization, Romans were remarkably flexible about what it meant to be Roman. Racial and ethnic origins made no difference; if properly educated, even the most barbarous of peoples could ultimately join the *humanitas*.[65] Citizens had a variety of rights that outsiders did not, such as permission to wear togas (which was apparently considered a bonus at the time), vote, run for office, make contracts, sue, be tried in court, and marry. Citizens could not be tortured, at least in theory, and were ineligible for the death penalty, except in cases of treason, and even then never on the cross. Roman citizenship was extended to all Italians after a series of revolts in the first century BC, and there were many ways that barbarians could become citizens thereafter, such by serving in the army or by, one suspects, pleasing the right people.[66] In 212 AD Emperor Caracalla ended all ambiguity by granting citizenship to every free male in the entire empire. This might have been mostly a ploy to increase the tax base, but the effects were substantial and wide-ranging.[67] It was also exceptionally popular. *Civus Romanus sum*, "I am a Roman citizen," was a common boast and a declaration of rights in the ancient world.[68] People everywhere wanted to be Roman.

Romanization worked. Revolts, while rare, almost always occurred within a generation of initial conquest. The famous rebellions in Britain, Spain, and Illyria all broke out relatively soon after those provinces were added to the empire. Prolonged ethnonational violence did happen—some provinces proved hard to tame, such as stubbornly monotheist Judea—but it was rare and inspired no copycats. By the third century even the Jews had accepted their fate and did not rebel again. Even when opportunity seemed to present itself, when legions were off fighting one another or dealing with incursions in the hinterlands, the provinces rarely rose up. Not only rebellion but even open expressions of resentment were uncommon.[69]

Granted, rebellion would have been difficult, since Roman citizens did not have the right to bear arms. Disarming the population was standard practice in new provinces, which sometimes caused violent backlashes. Tacitus mentions that the Iceni of Britain revolted at the prospect of turning over their weapons, and one suspects they were not the only ones to object.[70] But turn them over they did. Barbarian groups who sought *receptio* had to surrender their swords at the

border, which demonstrates the level of trust such people must have put in imperial guarantees. This law was eventually relaxed as barbarian incursions became more frequent, but for most of its existence the empire demanded disarmament.

Rome wielded many carrots, but it was helpful to remind citizens occasionally that the stick always existed. Subtle and not-so-subtle forms of intimidation aided Romanization. Since the emperor could not be everywhere his image was widely distributed, and showing disrespect to an embodiment of the dear leader would quickly land a provincial in trouble with the authorities. The administration of Augustus may have spread as many as twenty thousand statues of the emperor across his domains, a practice that was repeated by his successors.[71]

Architects and engineers also played useful roles in intimidating those inside and outside the empire. The great Roman building projects, from temples to aqueducts to amphitheaters, helped cement perceptions of power and convince visitors of the pointlessness of resistance. Barbarians were welcome to visit Rome and have a look around so they could bring stories of its grandeur back to their capitals. The legions would occasionally engage in major construction projects only to tear them down after a single use, like Caesar's bridge over the Rhine, just to make their capabilities clear to all those watching.

Due to its ability to attract and intimidate, the Roman Empire was admired as well as feared across the ancient Mediterranean. Many people outside its frontiers longed to be citizens, and even the barbarians who eventually overran it admired what Rome had built and considered themselves its heirs, not exterminators.[72] "The great paradox of the Roman Empire's fall," according to Adrian Goldsworthy, "is that it did not end because people inside it—and, indeed, outside it—stopped believing in it, or wanting it to exist."[73] Attempts to win hearts and minds of citizens and barbarians alike were, on the whole, successful and exceptionally helpful to its strategists.

## Threats In and Outside the Empire

The reign of Marcus Aurelius, the last of the Five Good Emperors, was the final act of the Pax Romana. He did not adopt an heir, leaving the purple raiment instead to his son Commodus who, while hardly the monster portrayed by Hollywood, displayed many traits of a child whose upbringing included no limits. His twelve-year reign got progressively crazier as it went on. He fancied himself a great warrior and staged games where he would slaughter animals and compliant gladiators with his own hands. He soon realized that he was a living god and renamed many things after himself, like the legions, the months, the Senate, and even the city of Rome. Eventually the city had enough and

Commodus was assassinated, leading to a brutal civil war and a "year of the five emperors" in 193 AD.

Out of this tumult an authoritarian emerged, one who brought stability at a price. Septimius Severus ruled for seventeen years and founded a dynasty that would produce more than its share of colorful characters, many of whom were manifestly unfit for the job. Its final member, Emperor Severus Alexander, grandnephew of Septimius, was killed by his troops in March 235. Thereafter Rome descended into a fifty-year-long civil war, during which twenty-six forgettable generals claimed the throne. This "crisis of the third century," to use a phrase coined by Gibbon, would have surely shattered most empires. As it turns out, though, the Roman foundation was solid enough to withstand even this extended upheaval. Economic performance seems to have suffered somewhat, but not much, and most citizens simply saluted the emperor *du jour* and carried on.

Unfortunately for Rome, the outside world did not stand still, and the policies that had heretofore kept the empire safe were inconsistently pursued during its long crisis. As opportunistic raiders on land and at sea took advantage of the chaos, the string of distracted, weak Roman emperors paid less attention to dividing their enemies. Without persistent Roman interference, barbarian cooperation increased. For the first time in centuries Rome faced large confederations of peoples, some of which were ruled by "overkings" who coordinated actions with their neighbors.[74] The Persian frontier also became more of a problem, one that the Romans largely brought on themselves. Their determination to attack and humiliate the Parthians with regularity resulted in the overthrow of that dynasty in 224 AD and its replacement with one more competent and ferocious. The Sassanids, who would rule Persia for the next four hundred years, soon launched a series of attacks on Rome's eastern provinces. Overconfident Roman counterattacks led to battlefield disaster in 260 and the capture of the Emperor Valerian, who would spend the rest of his days serving as a footstool for the Sassanid King Shapur. Although the threat was eventually contained and Ctesiphon sacked again in 299, Rome was forced to deploy more troops to its eastern borders and raise taxes to pay for them.

Roman civil wars often sputtered on until a sufficiently brutal general brought stability by force. The fifty-year crisis ended in 284 with the ascension of another such leader, Diocletian, whose ruthlessness was matched only by his organizational genius. His reign combined innovation with repression and persecution, and most important it was long. The new emperor spent next few decades rebuilding the realm both physically and psychologically, commissioning major public works projects to re-establish perceptions of Roman dominance.[75] Though his reign was a rough one for Christians and other various troublemakers, most citizens were willing to tolerate Diocletian's various totalitarian instincts, since

he brought the stability they long desired. His era marked the beginning of the later empire, when changing external conditions forced Roman grand strategy to evolve in important ways.

The primary concern of Diocletian and all his successors was fellow Romans, which decreased the time and energy they devoted to foreign affairs. In 286 the emperor took the extraordinary step of moving the capital from Rome to modern-day Milan, a perch that would allow him to react quickly to opportunistic barbarians and rebellious generals alike. Given the previous fifty years, it was perhaps no surprise that the latter received primary consideration.

The post-crisis empire had a great weakness that it was never able to reconcile, one that would contribute enormously to its collapse: it never devised widely accepted rules for succession. The absence of clear protocols encouraged intrigue and chaos that undercut the legitimacy of rulers. One general after another dreamed of himself bedecked in purple and took action. Challenges to the center from various "usurpers" occurred with regularity throughout the later centuries, many of which had to be put down by (often substantial) force. Rome enjoyed ten consecutive civil-war-free years only three times between 218 and 476.[76] By my count, at least thirty-nine credible usurpers (though it is difficult to separate the credible from the crackpot) laid claim to the throne after the death of Septimius Severus, or about one every seven years. Other rebellions that did not aim to overthrow the emperor, such as mutinies and regional rebellions, also occurred with regularity. Roman soldiers of the later empire were far more likely to be killed by fellow Romans than by their various barbarian enemies.

This was true for emperors as well. Ruling Rome might have been the most dangerous job of the time, which makes one wonder why so many pined for it so badly. Two-thirds of the (unified or western) emperors met violent ends, usually at the hands of their colleagues. Mystery and rumor swirl around some of their fates, but only twenty-five appear to have died of natural causes (or twenty-six, if lightning is considered a natural cause).[77] Three were killed by barbarians; eight probably committed suicide, once their cause was lost; the rest (around forty-three) fell at the hands of assassins, palace intriguers, or other Romans on the battlefield. One appears to have fallen victim to carbon monoxide poisoning. Only Diocletian retired.

The previous sentence deserves a quick explanation. After twenty years in power Diocletian grew sick, perhaps in body or perhaps just of governing, and decided to retire. He spent the last six years of his life in Split, Croatia, and watched as the empire descended into entirely predictable civil warfare. After long years of fighting, a new general emerged as emperor, one who would go on to be known as Constantine the Great. His rule would last twenty-five years and be even more consequential, though most of its fascinating details are not directly relevant to our story.

What is instead relevant is that, for most of the empire's history, Rome's neighbors were too weak to take lasting advantage of its various internecine distractions. This began to change in the late fourth century, when the ancient security environment grew substantially more dangerous. External conditions changed but Rome stayed the same, unable to remain at peace with itself for long. It is this inability to adapt and put an end to the cycle of usurpations and civil war in the face of danger that ultimately led to the downfall of the west.

## New Neighbors

Contrary to widespread belief, the fourth-century empire had not grown too big for one person to rule. It was in fact a bit smaller than it had been two centuries earlier, which was a time when one person was able to rule it just fine. What had changed was the security environment: The outside world had grown more dangerous, and a new system was in order. Later emperors divided the realm not because it was too large but because its various threats intensified beyond what one person could handle. The last to rule over a united realm was Theodosius, whose death in 395 began a permanent division into eastern and western halves, complete with their own capitals, armies, and emperors. More often than not (and somewhat miraculously) the two would act as brothers rather than rivals and would coordinate policy in times of crisis. External threats kept them together.

The *Völkerwanderung* continued, but now many more people were wandering. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Germanic population grew substantially over time, perhaps because of the interaction with rich Rome, and whole new groups emerged or arrived in the area.[78] By the fifth century the Romans had to deal with Britons, Saxons, Franks, Burgundians, Thuringians, Alamans, Alans, Goths, and a mysterious group called Bacaudae, who may have been freed slaves—all in Gaul alone.[79] But while increased threats from Germania and Persia were ominous and unwelcome, these were problems that Rome could handle. The truly transformative event, what today's political scientists would call a "systemic shock," occurred in the second half of the fourth century. A new group rode out of the steppe, one that combined extreme military competence with equally extreme love of pillage and rape.

Not much is known about the infamous Huns, since they wrote nothing down and left little behind. We do not know where they originated, for instance, or if they were the same people who had posed problems for the Chinese Qin Dynasty in prior centuries as some have suggested. Most surviving information about them comes from their victims, who were rarely inclined to offer balanced portrayals. Our sources tell us that the Huns never washed, which was truly anathema to the bathing-obsessed Romans, and ate their meat raw, warming

it only occasionally under their saddles.[80] Archaeologists have found evidence of "artificial cranial deformation" in Hunnic burial sites, a process that involved restricting pre-formed infant skulls and causing them to develop into an elongated, almost cylindrical shape. Why they would do such a thing remains a mystery, as does so much about this group.

One thing appears certain: The Huns were a terrifying bunch. These stinky, pointy-headed, merciless warriors would emerge out of the ether, as far as ancient Europeans could tell, and their military was almost unstoppable. Their expert horsemanship, powerful composite bows, and innovative saddles made their armies invincible, or so they wanted neighboring peoples to believe. The Huns also developed a capability that generally was beyond the reach of other barbarians: they were able to conduct sieges and reduce walled cities. No fortification could be made fully Hun-proof.

Hun invasions in 376 and again in 405 sent the various Germanic people in their path fleeing. Soon the swollen populations of Goths, Suebi, Alans, Vandals, Franks, and others were simultaneously moving westward across Roman boundaries, rendering the overwhelmed Romans powerless to stop them. Modern historians occasionally question whether fear or opportunity motivated this migration, or some combination of the two, but either way dramatic increases in movement occurred as the Huns advanced.[81] Their attacks disturbed Germanic stability like a cue ball breaking a rack, propelling hundreds of thousands across the thin imperial frontiers. This set in motion a series of events that, with the assistance of Roman infighting, would eventually cripple the empire in the west.

In 402 Roman Emperor Honorius took a step emblematic of the evolving security situation: he decided to move the western capital again, this time to the more easily defended Ravenna. Whereas Diocletian had moved away from Rome in order to be able to launch offensive operations more easily, in just over a century it had to be moved again, but this time for defensive reasons. It would not move a third time.

## Evolving Tools

As the security environment evolved, so too did the legions. Strategists of the later empire realized they could no longer hope to stop invasions at the perimeter, so they shifted to a policy of defense-in-depth. The Romans essentially allowed barbarian invaders to enter and tried to wear them down as they pillaged and looted. Means had to be adjusted to match evolving ways: Defense-in-depth required a change in the makeup of the legions, which for centuries had been dominated by infantry. The ability mounted barbarians to combine archery and

horsemanship presented problems for relatively immobile soldiers, however. The Roman military machine proved flexible and adaptable, adjusting to enemy tactics and even adopting their best practices and weaponry. The legions of the later empire were far more mobile, substituting cavalry for infantry in response to the threat posed by Attila and his contemporaries. To some historians, this shift represented a "barbarization" of the army and accounted for its underperformance at key moments in the waning years.[82] It is equally possible, however, that without evolution the waning would have occurred earlier. The willingness to re-examine even their most revered traditions probably allowed the Romans to persist longer than they otherwise would have.

The empire also established fortified, well-supplied outposts in the regions near the borders that roving barbarians, most of whom remained terrible at siegecraft, would be unable to overcome. Mobile Roman reinforcements could then be summoned and would arrive soon enough to help. They would not necessarily be eager to engage the enemy, however—knowing that any invaders would have trouble finding food, the Romans often bided their time, avoiding confrontation and staying inside the safe, well-supplied outposts.[83] The late army also frequently employed trickery, or "stratagems," relying more heavily on ambush, harassment, and maneuver. Their general approach was to let barbarians in, stretch them out, and then hound and starve them into submission. This approach proved unpopular with the citizens of the borderlands, as one might expect, but it was cheaper and less risky than large encounters.

As barbarian populations grew, the Romans were forced to rely even more heavily on nonmilitary tools of grand strategy. Diplomacy—and not merely the coercive variety—took on greater importance. Constantine established the first semiprofessional Roman diplomatic outfit, a "corps of translators" that eventually employed over a thousand people who studied foreign languages and cultures and brought back intelligence information wherever they could.[84] For its first few centuries the only permanent representatives of other nations in Rome had been the hostages that emperors often demanded as conditions of peace. Having relatives of the barbarian kings in Rome encouraged fidelity to agreements; even docile and cooperative clients like Herod sent their children to Rome for "protection."[85] Over time, as their fortunes began to change, the Romans often agreed to do the previously unthinkable and sent their children as hostages to barbarian capitals as well. As a boy Aetius, who grew to become a great Roman general, was given away as a hostage twice, first to Goths and then to Huns.[86]

Dividing barbarians remained standard practice. Even during the calamitous third century the vulnerable empire convinced Alamanni to fight Burgundians, and Goths to attack Vandals.[87] As late as 414 Romans still managed to persuade

some elements within a marauding group of Alans to flip toward their side.[88] And convincing Goths and Gepids that it was in their interest to fight Huns never presented much challenge. But in general driving wedges between foreigners became more difficult over time. Barbarians continued coordinating and began to organize themselves into large proto-states. Later emperors proved powerless to break up large confederations of Franks on the Rhine, Alamanni in Upper Germania, and Goths across the Danube.[89] The threat from the Huns drove the barbarians ever closer together, into what one historian called "superconfederacies," by the middle of the fifth century.[90] Coordinated action by these groups required simultaneous containment, which was beyond Rome's capabilities.

Perhaps partially as a result, the Roman commitment to fair diplomacy gradually broke down. Whereas Augustus and his immediate successors sought to make trustworthy and credible commitments, those of the fourth and fifth century were not above employing trickery and deception where useful. Summit meetings could even be a pretext for murder, which would have been unthinkable in earlier eras. In 374, a local Roman official commander invited the leader of the Quadi, a Germanic people who lived in the modern-day Czech Republic, to dinner to discuss an ongoing dispute. At some point during the meal—during which course, we do not know—the Quadi envoys were all murdered. This breach of diplomatic etiquette resulted in an invasion by the rest of the tribe that kept the Roman frontier forces occupied for more than a year.[91] This was not an isolated incident: the Roman historian Ammianus described four sham diplomatic dinner invitations over the course of a twenty-four year period that were actually plots to kidnap and/or murder, often on direct orders from the emperor.[92] Those barbarians who broke their commitments still invited immediate retaliation, however. Deception was something the Romans tolerated only by their own.

Treaties also became more equal over time, and coercive diplomacy less effective. By the fifth century many barbarian tribes found themselves in more powerful negotiating positions and were able to demand more concessions from the empire. The Visigoths were given part of Aquitaine by treaty in 419, Burgundians were allowed to settle on the upper Rhone around 443, and Alans were granted land in Gaul in 440 and 442, none of which would have occurred in prior centuries.[93] Rome could no longer dictate the terms of treaties with other peoples.

Direct payments played a greater role as well, especially in the rich east, where the Constantinople's wealth helped fend off the assaults of nomadic invaders.[94] The Huns were particularly amenable to monetary suggestion. Since their goal was always plunder more than conquest, they were often happy to be given what they came for rather than be forced to take it, even if it robbed them of good fun.

In 421 their leader, Rua, agreed to call off an invasion of Thrace, which he had launched to take advantage of a brief Roman war with the Sassanid Persians, once Emperor Theodosius II agreed to pay 350 pounds of gold over fifteen years.[95] In 452, Pope Leo I claimed that the intercession of Saints Peter and Paul convinced Attila to turn his Huns away from Rome and into Gaul, but the saints may well have been assisted by wagonloads of lucre.

Economy of force is not the only reason the Romans were so willing to pay off their neighbors. In that ancient neighborhood the options for spending money were not many and varied; whatever gold the Romans used to buy (or rent) peace found its way back into the imperial treasury soon enough. The empire was a clearing house for the finest products from across the Mediterranean and beyond, including manufactured goods and agricultural delicacies. The Romans were happy to bribe, noted the ancient historian Appian, because they knew the money would soon return.[96] Paying off barbarians was essentially an indirect stimulus, a way to inject more money into circulation, with the emperor playing the role of central banker. Had there been Keynesians at the time, they would have been pleased.

These adjustments allowed the empire to persist as barbarian numbers grew. Collapse was to come, but it was hardly inevitable. Just as sagacious strategic adjustments kept the empire going throughout the fourth century, poor choices in the fifth sent it spiraling downward.

## Decline, Fall

The Roman Empire may have constructed the most successful grand strategy in history, but eventually, as we well know, it declined and fell. Why it did so has received as much attention, speculation, and conjecture as any single event in history. Reasons offered to explain the decline often tell us more about the storyteller than the story, and reflect the fears or policy preferences of the day. In a speech in 1969, Ronald Reagan blamed Rome's collapse on the welfare system, excessive taxation, and "feminine hairdos." A decade in later Phyllis Schlafly argued that feminism ultimately took Rome down. Disinformation specialist Alex Jones has suggested that a loose immigration policy undermined the empire. And now, inevitably, we are told that climate change did the Romans in.[97] By 1984 a German historian had identified at least 210 reasons proposed at various times to account for Rome's collapse, and many more have been added since.[98]

The final curtain began to close long before Odoacer the Ostrogoth sent the cloak and crown of the final western emperor, Romulus Augustulus, to Constantinople in 476. Gibbon believed that the crisis of the third century marked the beginning of the end. Others—such as the makers of the 1960s

epic film *The Fall of the Roman Empire*—believe the decisive events occurred even earlier, identifying the turning point as 180 AD with the death of Marcus Aurelius. All this would have been news to the Romans, who remained the most powerful actor in their neighborhood for centuries more. If there was a turning point, it was probably the costly civil war of 392–394, which weakened the western legions and left the Goths infuriated about how they were treated during the whole affair. The victor, Emperor Theodosius, permanently divided the empire upon his death.

Nevertheless in 400 AD the empire looked much the same, territory-wise, as the one Augustus bequeathed to his successors. Every generation had its declinists, but our sources do not demonstrate much existential panic, even as imperial power diminished.[99] The most obvious factor in Rome's fall is not in dispute, however: Barbarians eventually overpowered its defenses. As parts of the western empire were chipped off by migrating Germans, the rich Roman tax base shrank and the emperors had trouble raising new legions and paying the ones they already had. And they had little left with which to bribe the barbarians. The famous Roman general Stilicho was unable to raise cash sufficient to mollify Alaric and his Visigoths for long in 410, for example, and a sacking of Rome was the result.[100]

The empire fell victim to violent era. How it grew to be vulnerable—how the balance of power in the West shifted toward the barbarians—has been at the heart of the disputes over decline. In the middle of the fifth century Rome's legions were being defeated with unprecedented frequency. Much of the discussion about why this occurred looks inward, searching Roman practices, culture, and/or religion for the army's losses. Gibbon blamed Christianity for undermining the Roman warrior spirit (even though the East, which was if anything even more devout, persisted for another thousand years). Others have argued that the mobile, "barbarized" legions run by non-Roman officers had lost their tactical advantages.

It should be no surprise that historians of Rome focus their explanations on Rome. Agency is given to the emperors and generals (and, to a lesser extent, the people), not to their opponents; decisions made in Ravenna were decisive, not those in Hunnic or Vandal war councils. Peter Heather, a historian of the Germanic peoples, offers a different view: perhaps the barbarians eventually overran Rome not because of what the Romans did (or failed to do) so much as what was done on the other side. Perhaps the various ethnic groups and tribal conglomerations simply got bigger and better, learned from their many failures about how to fight the Romans, and eventually won. Roman mistakes played important roles, of course, but the peoples across the Danube and the Rhine grew more sophisticated, more adept on the battlefield and much more numerous as time went on. Once these nations were put into motion ahead of the rampaging Huns, the outnumbered legions were essentially helpless to stop them.

Was collapse inevitable? Could the empire in the west have persisted for longer? No empire lasts forever—at least so far—so alternative choices may have merely postponed the inevitable. There is no life span for great powers, however, and no cycles that produce predictable collapses. While hindsight can help identify a few strategic blunders that sped the Roman decline, we should not forget that the story of Rome is mostly one of great success in maintaining a status quo for more than six hundred years. Perhaps, though, that story might have continued for more had their grand strategy adapted more quickly to the changing security environment—and if they had overcome their stubborn unwillingness to get along with one another.

One specific blunder is obvious. Rome's greatest danger emerged to its south, in northern Africa, and remained unaddressed while its emperors were distracted at home. There a Germanic people called the Vandals were causing problems after having migrated their way across modern-day Spain ahead of the Hunnic onslaught and then, after (perhaps) receiving an invitation from the Roman governor of North Africa who needed help with local rebels, crossed the Strait of Gibraltar. Rome fiddled, deciding instead to fight another of its costly, pointless civil wars starting in 423. Its African colonies constituted not only one of its richest tax bases but the breadbasket that supplied the city with the bulk of its food. They were also lightly defended. The Vandals marched steadily eastward, surrounding St. Augustine in Hippo in 430 and storming into Carthage in 439. The Romans realized too late that this disaster represented a potentially mortal blow. Together the eastern and western empires mounted three joint efforts to retake the city, which were all among the largest military endeavors in ancient history. Due to a combination of Hunnic interference, Roman naval incompetence and brilliant Vandal admiralship, all ended in failure. Had the Romans deployed more troops in the region initially, or had they not been distracted by civil war, they could have defeated the Vandals and saved the western empire. Or at least postponed its demise.

Retrospect can recognize other, more general Roman mistakes. Though the Romans often managed the peoples beyond their borders with strategic aplomb, their treatment of Persia backfired over time. Beginning with Trajan, whenever Roman emperors felt insufficiently glorious, they sent legions eastward to pound the Parthians. Over and over again Roman troops marched into Ctesiphon, often with the sole purpose of reminding its residents of their inferiority. As mentioned above, this repeated humiliation undermined the legitimacy of that dynasty, which faced rebellions with increasing frequency. The Roman Emperor Caracalla (211–217) applied the final, fatal straws. In 214 the Parthian throne was contested by two claimants, as often happened. Caracalla demanded that one of them, Vologaesus, return two fugitives who had fled Rome a few years earlier. Vologaesus returned the men, but Caracalla invaded anyway and crushed his armies. The following year he turned on the

other claimant, Artabanus, demanding the right to marry his daughter. At first Artabanus refused, but he was eventually won over by gifts and enthusiastic promises of peace from the Roman emperor. Caracalla led a contingent of soldiers unopposed into Parthian territory and was received outside the gates of Ctesiphon with a magnificent feast. Herodian, a contemporary Greek historian, described what happened next.

> All the Parthians, crowned with the traditional flowers and wearing robes embroidered in gold and various colors, celebrated the occasion, dancing wildly to the music of flutes and the throbbing of drums . . . Abandoning their horses and laying aside their quivers and bows, the whole populace came together to drink and pour libations. A huge mob of barbarians gathered and stood about casually . . . eager to see the bridegroom and expecting nothing out of the ordinary.
>
> Then the signal was given, and Caracalla ordered his army to attack and massacre the spectators. Astounded by this onslaught, the barbarians turned and fled, wounded and bleeding. Artabanus himself, snatched up and placed on a horse by some of his personal bodyguards, barely escaped with a few companions. The rest of the Parthians, lacking their indispensable horses, were cut down . . . They were unable to escape by running, either; their long, loose robes, hanging to their feet, tripped them up.
>
> Naturally they did not have their quivers and bows with them; what need for weapons at a wedding? After slaughtering a great number of the enemy and taking much booty and many prisoners, Caracalla marched away from the city unopposed. En route he burned the towns and villages and permitted his soldiers to carry off as much as they could of anything they wanted.[101]

Roman troops not only sacked towns and overwhelmed fortresses but "dug open the royal tombs of the Parthians, and scattered the bones about."[102] Caracalla realized that this was unlikely to win him admirers in the Senate, but as he had written to them some time before, "I know that my behaviour does not please you; but that is the very reason that I have arms and soldiers, so that I may disregard what is said about me."[103] Not long after this, Caracalla was murdered by one of his guards while relieving himself, but it was too late to repair Parthian pride or rescue the dynasty from its internal enemies. The Sassanids soon took over and were a much larger, self-inflicted headache for the Romans.[104] The cost of containing them was always greater than any benefit the Romans received from their brutal sackings of Ctesiphon.

Persia was the most obvious recipient of unnecessary, ultimately counterproductive Roman hostility, but it was not the only one. The Romans also famously mistreated a large group of Goths who were granted *receptio* while fleeing Huns in 376. After letting them cross the Danube, the Romans cut off any potential food supply and reduced their guests to such desperation that some were willing to trade their children for dog meat. The Goths soon revolted and handed Rome one of its greatest military defeats, during which the Emperor Valens was killed. Ammianus had no doubt where to place the blame, castigating the officers who "displayed the greatest profligacy in their injurious treatment of the foreigners dwelling in our territory, against whom no crime could be alleged."[105] Had they treated the Goths humanely, the Romans might have been able to avoid the disaster at Adrianople and the other problems caused by their rampaging, angry victims.

The line between intimidation and cruelty may be fine, but the later Romans trampled over it with regularity, provoking backlash and balancing. Overall, summarized by Peter Heather, "by virtue of its own unbounded aggression, Roman imperialism was ultimately responsible for its own destruction."[106] Had they shown more mercy and humanity toward the weaker peoples, or had they simply not gone out of their way to humiliate and debase them, the fifth century could have unfolded quite differently.

## Alexander vs. Augustus

Generally speaking, the great periods of Roman history were those in which its leaders followed the Augustan advice and sought to preserve the status quo. Trouble arose when they instead listened to the other major voice whispering in their ears, and tried to duplicate the glorious greatness of Alexander. Caracalla, for instance, insisted on calling himself the Great Alexander and equipped some of his soldiers with Macedonian weaponry, such as pikes and round shields, naming them Alexander's Phalanx.[107] Emperor Julian openly expressed his devotion to Alexander and spent the bulk of his brief reign (360–363) preparing for and then executing an invasion of Persia. He met his end on that campaign, in his earlier thirties, like his idol.[108] And of course Trajan was an admirer of the Macedonian as well, using that inspiration to assault neighbors across the Danube and Euphrates.

It was incumbent upon their successors to clean up the messes left behind by these neo-Alexanders. The unenviable task of following Caracalla fell to the Augustus-inspired Macrinus, who set a course of retrenchment and "working through negotiation rather than aggression," in the words of a modern historian.[109] Jovian—Julian's successor—began retreating the very morning of his

accession and eventually signed a peace treaty with the Sassanid Persians.[110] And as discussed above, Hadrian pulled troops out Trajan's unsustainable conquests, returning Rome to its more traditional path, and to prosperity.

The outcome of Alexandrian aggression was always unpredictable; Augustan restraint, while less glorious, better served Rome's interests. The most successful eras were those in which emperors followed a prudent course, such as those of Titus, Nerva, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and even the much-maligned Commodus. Emperors who engaged in adventures abroad, often in pursuit of intangible interests rather than tangible, incurred costs and invited decline. Time and again, the wisdom of Augustus outperformed the greatness of Alexander.

* * *

The east was able to avoid the mistakes of the west. Constantinople was mercifully unbeset by usurpers and civil war, and it did not provoke barbarians unnecessarily. Roman-Sassanid relations were mostly peaceful from the fourth until the sixth century, and the empire was perfectly happy to use its financial largesse to encourage Huns and other invaders to strike westward and leave Constantinople alone. There Augustus ruled over Alexander, and as a result the eastern emperors were able to hang on for a thousand years more than did their brothers in the west.

The Byzantines, as they came to be known (though they always considered themselves Roman), did not dominate their region in the same way that the unified empire did. The collapse of the west left a bipolar Mediterranean in its wake, with power divided between Constantinople and Ctesiphon. Justinian the Great attempted to reassemble the empire during his long reign (527–565) and was enormously successful at first, recapturing Rome and Carthage. His efforts were ultimately thwarted by stubborn Germans, resurgent Persians, and virulent bacilli. A devastating, region-wide plague ended the final attempt to re-establish full Mediterranean dominance, and a major war with the Sassanids soon followed. The Byzantine Empire would persist for centuries more, and as its power steadily but slowly diminished it adjusted its grand strategy accordingly. How its leaders managed to adjust and survive is a fascinating story, but it is one already well told, with little relevance for us.[111]

The west, despite the efforts of its emperors and elites, disappeared under the onslaught of outsiders. Barbarians are sometimes relegated to supporting roles in this drama, but in reality they were its stars. Without rampaging Vandals, Huns, and Goths, the Roman Empire in the west would not have fallen. Its grand strategy, which had provided the foundation for six hundred years of regional dominance, ultimately failed to adjust fully to changing external circumstances. Trends beyond its borders proved more complex than what the western Romans could handle, and the empire, like all before and since, passed into the night.

3

# The Tang Dynasty

Western Europe took large steps backward after Rome fell. Populations and economies shrank as a succession of Germanic kings tried to consolidate power and lay claim to leadership of the empire, each time in vain. Trade slowed to a trickle; durable construction ceased as, inexplicably, Europeans lost the recipe for concrete; science and philosophy lost ground to superstition and ignorance. The production of literature and history came to a virtual halt. Cities shriveled. It was a rough time for fans of civilization.

The dark-age label offends modern sensibilities, and perhaps the age was not quite as dark as we tend to think.[1] When one compares developments in Europe to those elsewhere, however, it is hard to reach any other conclusion. Inspired by a new faith, Arabs swept across the remnants of the Byzantine and Sassanid Persian empires in the seventh century. Baghdad would flourish as the center of science, mathematics, and the arts for centuries. Arab expansion was stopped in the West only by the Atlantic and in the East by an even greater power: under the Sui and Tang Dynasties, China experienced a golden age of artistic and economic activity, where innovation and invention progressed and the people lived in safety and prosperity. It was the most advanced and powerful state on Earth, and would remain so for over three hundred years. Fortunately for these purposes, unlike their European contemporaries the medieval Chinese were literate and wrote things down, which means we have a good sense of what happened during this time and how this dynasty forged its grand strategy.

China's power in this, the greatest era of its long history, did not rely on brute force alone. Its military was enormous but undependable, due in part to Chinese cultural attitudes toward warriors. To use today's jargon, Tang emperors soon learned that their rule was dependent less upon hard power than soft. They achieved an efficient economy of force by relying on persuasion rather than coercion, the tools for which are cheap and effective when employed by skilled tacticians. Soft power has become a cliché in modern security debates, a buzzword often misused and misunderstood. It refers to the power of attraction, the

*The Pursuit of Dominance.* Christopher J. Fettweis, Oxford University Press. © Christopher J. Fettweis 2023.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197646649.003.0003

ability to get others to want to do what you hope they will do rather than to force them.[2] It is difficult to cultivate and even more difficult to wield, but it was the primary tool the remarkable Tang Dynasty used to dominate its region.

Culture shapes strategy. Ends, ways, and means are not devised in a vacuum by robots; they are products of a particular time and place and vary widely, depending on prevailing ideologies and moralities. Conflict resolution techniques can be quite different from society to society, for example, as can conceptions of power. The distinctive strategic culture of every society affects choices and outcomes, sometimes in unusual ways.[3] Leaders in medieval China were the product of an outlier culture, especially for their time, which created challenges in the formulation of their grand strategy.

## Militant Chinese Anti-Militarism

Chinese society was once as militarized as all others. From its remote ancient times through the so-called warring states period (which produced the famous strategist Sun Tzu), victory in war, more than any other factor, determined a ruler's worth. This began to change during the Han Dynasty, which roughly coincided with the Roman Empire. It was in this period that Confucianism, with its embrace of pacifism and denunciation of martial culture, became the quasi-official state ideology.[4] Confucius believed that warfare is, in the words of Mencius ("the second sage"), the "most wasteful, counterproductive, and misguided" of all human activities, and its practitioners little more than criminals.[5] As his philosophy was gradually adopted by the ruling class, these ideas percolated throughout society. From then on Chinese culture has held that armies are anathema and professional soldiers parasites.[6] China has produced its share of warriors over time, of course, and it has been quite aggressive at various points in its history, but as an institution the Chinese military has rarely been held in high esteem. A consistent component in its intellectual and social life was the belief that high culture (*wen*) is superior to the military (*wu*).[7] "Chinese youth were given no equivalents of Alexander, Caesar, or Napoleon to admire or emulate," explained the eminent sinologist John Fairbank. "There was no youthful worship of heroism like that in the West."[8] Chinese society offered other routes to high status, especially via service in the government's bureaucracy, or through scholarship or the arts. More prestige was held by the lowliest scholar or poet than the mightiest general, and as a result the most talented members of society faced heavy pressure to avoid the military, often choosing almost any other profession.

Pacific social attitudes, while perhaps admirable to modern ears, had specific medieval implications. Most obviously, military efficiency suffered. Chinese armies were rarely as effective in practice as they appeared on paper.

Civil-military relations of medieval China were also quite strained, as one would expect. Warfare was too important to be left to the generals, and had to be controlled by civilians.[9] Many senior military posts were held by non-Chinese, by outsiders raised in societies that admired and rewarded the practitioners of violence. And unfortunately for posterity, Chinese historians often did not record details of battles, considering the topic unimportant and barbaric.[10] We often know less about the development of Chinese military campaigns than we do about the development of their poetry.

The anti-militarist culture affected how and why wars were fought. Conflict was not merely unwelcome but an admission of leadership failure that required explanation and justification. The object of a just war could only be the re-establishment of order, not victory for its own sake. Wars of conquest and plunder, at least in theory, could never be justified. It was always better to defend than to attack, and exhausting attackers was preferable to exterminating them. And, of course, fighting always had to be a last resort.

A good deal of modern attention has been paid to the implications of this Confucian tradition for twenty-first-century foreign policy, and whether pacifism implies passivism.[11] Does this set of beliefs (or its "strategic culture") create a preference for defense over offense? Is China less likely to attack its neighbors due to its cultural disdain for the military? The Tang experience certainly suggests a negative answer to these questions, since in their time Chinese soldiers were commonly sent beyond the national borders, often only to be butchered in large numbers by smaller forces. China's leaders have historically been as driven by power politics as their contemporaries everywhere. This does not imply, though, that they have been able to do as much about it. Beijing may not maintain a stubbornly pacifist outlook at all times, but strategic culture undermines its ability to act. Grand strategists must match ends with means. When the latter is weak, the former is constrained.

Most of all, this cultural hostility toward the military had the inevitable consequence of sapping China's ability to defend itself. Nearly everyone else at the time—including their neighbors—thought quite differently about war and warriors. Anti-militarist regional systems cannot persist if they are not accepted by all members, and for centuries the Eurasian steppe was the home of nomadic, martial people who considered pacifists little more than easy prey. The Chinese might have had an anti-military culture but, as we will see, military events would often determine their fate.

## The Sui Consolidation, 581 AD

China has gone through many cycles of consolidation and disintegration, times when the country was unified under one government and others when it had many different centers of power. Occasionally a warlord would rise who was able

to conquer enough neighbors to convince the others to leap aboard his bandwagon. Even more occasionally, those conquests continued until the entire region came to be ruled from one capital. The first such unification occurred in 221 BC, when the Qin Dynasty managed to consolidate most of the area that we know as China. Though the Qin gave the country its name, the dynasty lasted just fifteen years, only to be replaced by the Han who held the country together, more or less, for four turbulent centuries (206 BC–220 AD). Widespread conflict followed their fall from power and lasted until 581, when armies under Sui leaders were able to bring the various disparate regions together again. Like the Qin, the Sui did the hard work of uniting the country but were to last for just two reigns (581–618). But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

The founding warlord of the short-lived dynasty was Yang Jian, who was born in 541 in Northwest China to a family with a tenuous connection to the long-gone Han emperors. He rose rapidly through the military and bureaucratic ranks and eventually established a dynasty he named Sui (which means "to follow," implying loyalty) in 581. By the time his forces overran the southern Chen Dynasty in the south, they had brought much of modern China under control. The emperor established a capital at Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an) where it would remain for over three centuries. History remembers him as Wen, or "civil," a title granted to him posthumously, and presumably not by the many people he defeated.

Emperor Wen's timing was fortuitous. Many of the provinces his troops entered were experiencing higher-than-usual discord and mismanagement, and were eager for the restoration of order.[12] More important, the traditional steppe enemies of the Chinese people were also experiencing internal strife and conflict. Like all Chinese dynasties, the Sui faced two main threats: regional challenges from within and nomadic horsemen from the vast Eurasian interior. In the eyes of the emperors, the former were "bandits" and the latter "barbarians." Balancing them became the central strategic challenge for every ancient and medieval Chinese government.

Of the two, bandits posed a greater problem for the average emperor. For much of its history China was not a unified, monolithic state but a diverse region with many different ethnic groups, some of whom had quite large populations. The people who lived in the cold, arid northern regions had little in common with the agricultural, sedentary, cultured folk in the south. Regional strongmen commonly plotted against the national tyranny in the hopes of establishing their own local tyrannies. Internal warfare was endemic: modern Chinese historians have counted at least 3,790 internal armed conflicts from the beginning of record keeping through the establishment of the republic in 1911.[13]

The external threat was one that would recur for millennia, ending only when the invention of gunpowder and artillery neutralized the tactical advantages of

cavalry. On the steppe a succession of groups rose and fell, all of whom had to be warlike and fierce to survive, and few of whom were content to stay in any one place for long. China was invaded at various times by Wusun, Xianbei, Yuezhi, Khitans, Xi, Kyrgyz, Tatars, Uighurs, and plenty of others. These peoples are today shrouded in mystery, because they wrote little down—at least little that can be read by moderns—and left few traces in the record.[14] Scholars cannot be sure, for example, whether the Xiongnu, who terrorized Han China in the third and second centuries BC, were the same antisocials that the Europeans came to know as the Huns a few centuries later.[15] Small-scale raids from the interior were perpetual, but larger attempts at conquest also occurred. Many of China's dynasties, especially ones that controlled northern territory, were founded by invading tribes on horseback. The Jin (1115–1234) and Qing (1636–1912) were established by the Jurchen and Manchus, respectively. We will meet another of those outsider dynasties, founded by the greatest of all nomadic nations, in the next chapter.

The steppe peoples and the Chinese shared mutual contempt and loathing. Nomads were, in the minds of the Chinese, uncultured, illiterate, ruthless barbarians who smelled of goat.[16] To the horsemen of Inner Asia, the sedentary Chinese were weak, effete, tea-drinking, sandal-wearing poets who lived in pestilential, polluted cities. Unfortunately for the Chinese, the martial steppe cultures produced excellent warriors. Small groups of nomads regularly defeated much larger Chinese formations. As late as 1449 a force of a half-million Chinese troops was trounced by a Mongol army less than 5 percent of its size, and the Ming emperor was captured.[17] The relationship between the steppe peoples and the Chinese was usually one of predator and prey, and only the strongest of dynasties were able to provide security for their people. Early medieval Chinese emperors built fortifications to keep the various nomadic invaders out, but despite their fame these great walls do not seem to have protected much of anything.[18] Chinese sources record 117 nomadic attacks from Mongolia between 599 and 755 alone, none of which seems to have been impeded by walls.[19]

This was not a major concern when the Sui consolidation occurred, however, since the dominant steppe confederation of the time, the Turks, was experiencing a succession crisis and civil war. It was no coincidence that fortunes on the steppe and in China tended to be the opposite of one another—when one was up, the other was down.[20] By 581 the Turkish empire had split into an eastern and western half, and the Chinese were able to rise to a height that they would not relinquish for some time.

Emperor Wen died under rather mysterious circumstances at his summer home in 604. History has not been kind to his son and successor, Yang, largely because he was not kind to his people. The second and last Sui emperor is remembered as a tyrant, one of the most infamous in Chinese history, in part because his story

was written by his successors. While the outline of his cruelty may well be true so too are his accomplishments, many of which were adopted wholesale by his Tang successors. For one thing, both Sui emperors endeavored to cut down on corruption and nepotism in governance, as well as aristocratic dominance, by installing an examination system for entry into the bureaucracy in the hope of creating a true meritocracy. They reformed the tax system, dramatically increasing the amount of money flowing into imperial coffers, and established emergency stores of grain to combat the ever-present threat of famine. In many instances the Sui governed with a light footprint, allowing local leaders to stay in place, and did not exact much of a toll on the aristocracy in the hope of minimizing local resentment and hostility. As was the case with Rome, taxes were for the lower classes.

The Sui also set out to reform the military, with an eye toward dealing with internal threats. Emperor Wen was suspicious of standing armies, believing them to be the greatest threat to his power. He sought to render nationwide revolt difficult by making the military local, civilian controlled, and less professional. The troops of this new system, which was known as the *fubing*, were militiamen who trained and drilled extensively. They were semiprofessional, perhaps akin to modern reserve troops, who would provide the core of the Chinese military for more than a century. In 595 Wen ordered the confiscation of all weapons in private hands and made the possession of boats larger than thirty feet a crime against the state. Any local commander who took it upon himself to move troops around without permission from the emperor risked decapitation.[21] All these reforms were designed to increase the power of civilian authority, which had waned during the extended period of civil strife, and to demilitarize the country to the extent possible.

The Sui also began construction of a canal system to connect the Yangtze River valley with the capital and other major cities. Although ground was first broken in 584, Emperor Yang gets most of the credit for the network's creation as well as blame for the indifference to the suffering of those who did the work. Many of the fruits of this labor, including the 1,500-mile-long "Grand Canal," still exist today and remain a major boon to economic growth in Central China. It came with enormous costs, however, both material and human: the canal was dug largely by semi-enslaved conscripts, untold thousands of whom perished during its construction. This only added to the emperor's negative reputation, which was one of the underlying reasons that his reign, and that of the Sui Dynasty, came to a rather abrupt end.

## Sui Goals and Threats

If securing the position of the new dynasty was the most basic strategic goal of the Sui, reconstructing ancient glory was a close second. The two emperors were

inspired, or perhaps obsessed, with restoring the unified country that the Han Dynasty had established centuries before. They returned much of the language and names used in that era and organized both national and local governance in a similar manner.[22] A metaphor commonly used to describe the shape of that empire was an elephant, with a trunk extending into Central Asia and a tail in the Korean peninsula; the Sui tried three times to add the tail back onto the imperial elephant, sending ever-larger armies into the northernmost Korean kingdom. All would fail. As would often be the case, Chinese armies underperformed against foreign adversaries.

At the time the Korean peninsula was divided into three kingdoms, the largest and most powerful of which was Koguryo in the north. None posed a threat to China, although they did occasionally reach out to steppe peoples in search of protection. When news of one such alliance request made its way to Chang'an in 598, a security rationale for invasion bolstered the Emperor Wen's lust for conquest. More than three hundred thousand Chinese troops soon entered Korea by land and by sea, with only 10 to 20 percent of them eventually returning the same way, after have been thoroughly routed. The misadventure appears to have made a large impression on the emperor's son Yang, who was one of its participants. Upon ascending to the throne in 605 he began preparations for another go, which finally got underway in 612. Our sources speak of over 1.1 million troops accompanying the emperor, along with twice as many laborers and support personnel.[23] Like his father, Emperor Yang seemed to feel that his numbers would be more than enough to overwhelm the Koreans.

It is not entirely clear what the years of extensive Chinese planning produced, other than a well-prepared and motivated enemy. No amount of local foraging could fill over a million stomachs, and little other logistical preparation seems to have been done. The troops were ill-trained and ill-equipped. According to one historian, the "entire operation seems to have been planned in complete ignorance of the climate and seasonal weather patterns of southern Manchuria." The "spectacular show of ineptitude," despite its overwhelming numbers, was easily repulsed by the Korean defenders.[24] The emperor added to his own problems by proving to be a poor tactician and micro-manager. He was repeatedly outfoxed by Koguryo's generals and returned home in disgrace.

Not much time passed before Yang tried again. In 613 Chinese forces executed their third border crossing only to get word that rebellions had broken out back home. The emperor had evidently become too focused on his foreign adventures to notice the steady increase of discontent in his country. In 611 a wave of natural disasters hit China, including floods in some of the major grain-producing provinces. Famine and desperation led to banditry and revolt, to which the emperor did not respond in a timely or efficient manner. His reputation for tyranny did

not help matters; local officials were hesitant to open the granaries to starving peasants without official approval, which fueled anger among the underfed.[25] As rebel forces closed in on Chang'an, Yang's invasion was called off suddenly, so suddenly in fact that Koguryo's defenders assumed it was a feint and did not emerge from their positions for days.

Koguryo was an obsession of the Sui emperors (as it would be for their successors), but it was not their only target of an excursion that would end poorly. As a general rule, the Sui military performed better against Chinese armies than it did against those of barbarians. A venture into northern Vietnam resulted in disaster, as did a sea-borne attack on "Liu-ch'iu," an island that historians still have not identified with certainty.[26] What is clear is that no benefit came from any of these forays, and that they added to the growing anger at home.

By focusing on barbarians, the Sui let bandits flourish. In the waning years of the Sui Dynasty there were more than two hundred insurgencies and mutinies, some of which involved rebel armies of a hundred thousand or more. At times more than 10 percent of the entire population of China was in open revolt.[27] Advisors who pointed these problems out to Emperor Yang and begged him to devote less time to foreign affairs were clubbed to death or beheaded, which encouraged their successors to tell the emperor what he wanted to hear.[28] As a result, Yang may have been essentially unaware of just how dire his situation was, and how rapidly his government was losing control of its regions. The final straws came in late 616, as one Sui general after another deserted to the rebel ranks. In 618 the emperor was strangled by victorious insurgents, right after being forced to watch his son and heir beheaded.

Emperor Yang became too distracted by dreams of expansion to notice that domestic stability had essentially collapsed. "The conquest of Koguryo," wrote historian Arthur F. Wright, "became after each defeat a greater obsession, and obsessions tend to be fatal for supreme autocrats and for the people they govern."[29] The Sui destroyed their dynasty in the monomaniacal pursuit of an enemy who, like the white whale, posed no threat and could well have been left alone.

## Enter the Tang

The chaos into which China descended in the late years of the Sui made the era of national unity look like it would be brief. However, a northern aristocrat was able to defeat most of his major rivals and make a reasonable claim the throne. In 618 Li Yuan, the Duke of Tang, fought his way into Chang'an and crowned himself emperor, having witnessed all the appropriate portents and performed the rituals necessary to gain legitimacy.[30] He spent the better part of the next decade restoring the order that Sui Wen had fought so hard to establish.

These campaigns were less bloody than they could have been, but opposing factions that surrendered voluntarily were given amnesty and absorbed into the Tang armies. As the duke's power grew, so too did the willingness of local rulers to pledge their loyalty to the side that was clearly going to win.[31] Most importantly, since the Tang family was from China's northwest, it had a familiarity with, and trust of, the steppe peoples. Li Yuan made deals with the Turks, sending gifts and promises of subservience if they aided, or at least did not interfere with, his quest for power.[32] The Turks were eager to have a puppet on the Chinese throne, and supported his campaigns against rebel and would-be-independent provinces. Unfortunately for the Turks, the dynasty founded by Emperor Gaozu (as he has come to be known) did not prove as easy to manipulate as they predicted. The new emperor showed his steppe allies insufficient gratitude once the country was unified, and the Turks invaded. They would have reached Chang'an had not Gaozu opened the imperial coffers and paid them to go back home.

Emperor Gaozu was not to enjoy his accomplishment for long. Problems arose immediately after he named an heir from among his sons, a group of brothers who apparently did not get along. One of those passed over decided that, rather than accept a lesser role in the family, he would prefer instead to kill his brothers and force his father into exile. Despite coming to power through this rather ignominious coup, Li Shimin—who has become known to history as Emperor Taizong—went on to become one of the greatest emperors in Chinese history.[33] It is in his reign, and those of his immediate successors, that the story of Chinese regional dominance really begins, and that the analysis of its grand strategy fits in with the others in this book.

Things did not start well. The Turks, seeing dissension in the dynasty, invaded shortly after Taizong came to power in 626. Although the emperor followed his late father's lead and bought them off, raiding from the west increased dramatically. There had been two dozen major incursions in the seventy-five years leading up to 620, but a new Turkish khaghan (or great leader) carried out three times that number in the ten years that followed. Taizong counseled patience, however, arguing to his advisors that, given enough time, civil strife would visit the Turks.[34] He was proven correct two years later when a succession crisis divided the nomads, and it became Taizong's turn to interfere. The Tang supported weaker claimants to the throne, sending large armies to help his chosen tribes. Vast numbers of Chinese troops might not have been able to defeat even small steppe armies on their own, but they could tip the balance in internecine Turkish disputes. The divided Turks surrendered en masse; the rest pledged allegiance to Taizong. The emperor's familiarity with the tribal divisions on the steppe, as well as their regional jealousies, militaries, and cultures, allowed for a rare decisive Chinese victory against a nomadic enemy, ushering in an even rarer half-century of dominance of Inner and Outer Mongolia.[35]

What to do with this victory, and the tens of thousands of prisoners who came with it, became a subject for debate in Taizong's inner circle. Some suggested that the emperor had an unprecedented opportunity to solve the Turk problem once and for all, by moving them south where they would become farmers over time. "Transform the non-Chinese into peasants," urged one advisor, "and forever empty the lands north of the Great Wall."[36] Chiefs could be kept as hostages as part of an ambitious, generations-long Sinicization process. One of Taizong's most prominent aides, the Confucian conservative Wei Zheng, disagreed. To him, bringing a hundred thousand Turks inside China's borders was a crackpot idea, one destined for disaster. A vast program of ethnic cleansing would merely create a vacuum that would soon be filled by other steppe peoples. Instead, Wei supported a more limited intervention in Turkish affairs, emphasizing the power of example and attraction to accomplish the national goals. He argued for the employment of Chinese soft power, thirteen hundred years before the term was coined. Wei supported "the cultivation of civil culture to attract non-Chinese," wrote one historian, and "the spread of moral influence to make them obey."[37]

In the end, Taizong chose a third path. Although he did not endorse the full Sinicization project, he did relocate many Turkish people into his empire, but with carrots instead of sticks. Prominent nomad families were moved to Chang'an, where many were invited to become officials in the Tang government. Turkish troops were integrated into the Chinese army, and the former khan was made a senior general. This policy of assimilation dissatisfied many displaced Chinese officials, but it succeeded in pacifying the frontier for decades. Inspired by a new idea, "The Greater Tang," a society open to those foreigners willing to participate, the emperor became not only the Son of Heaven, or the leader of the Chinese people, but also the "Heavenly Khagan," leader of the Turks. Over time, he became accepted by both.[38]

The broad-ranging, extensive internal debate that eventually led to the assimilation project was typical of the Tang decision-making process. Court historians recorded details of these discussions and opinions, even when they were critical of the emperor, many of which survive to this day. Taizong and his successors encouraged their advisors to "remonstrate," or offer constructive criticism to leaders without fear, which was colloquially and colorfully known as "scraping the scales off the dragon."[39] Remonstration forced emperors to consider opposing views and consider alternatives. Thus, while medieval China was hardly a bastion of free speech, the emperors did have a policy process designed to encourage analytical thinking and robust debate in the hopes of producing good decisions. A trend developed that would be repeated in many advisory circles throughout time: Counterintuitively, perhaps, civilian advisors tended to more aggressive and warlike than their military counterparts. The doves in Taizong's court wore armor, while the hawks donned sashed robes.

China experienced two decades of peace and prosperity under Taizong's rule. Harvests were plentiful, famine relief available, and labor-intensive projects shelved. The emperor instituted new and more lenient laws and checked the power of the clans around the country. Meritocracy in government service continued, as did the central control of regionally based military units. Travel in and around the country was peaceful, and banditry minimized. "There has been nothing like this since antiquity," said one admiring contemporary on behalf of the majority.[40]

His foreign policy was equally wise, at least in the beginning. Taizong seemed well aware of the dangers of overextension, commonly referring to the ancient warning about "acquiring a stony field," or controlling areas that cost more than they benefit.[41] He did not push the frontiers of the empire farther, even when invited to do so. Representatives from the Central Asian land of Kangguo (around modern Samarkand) visited Chang'an at one point and asked to be included in the empire, but Taizong refused. "These tributes are of no use," he said. "Out of righteousness, we would have to assist them were they to be threatened in the future. Wouldn't it exhaust my troops if they had to march five thousand kilometers? To burden my people for the sake of superficial reputation is not something I shall do."[42] He and his advisors criticized the Han and any other emperors who had expanded for expansion's sake. Like the Romans at the height of their power, Taizong realized that not all areas were worth controlling, increased imperial glory notwithstanding.

The emperor's caution and prudence evolved over time, however, as he began to contemplate his place in Chinese history. Conquest brings greater accolades than competent governance. In a rather drastic reversal of his earlier policies, Taizong set his sights on the western Turks who guarded the trade routes to the Middle East. In the 640s Tang forces in great numbers attacked and overwhelmed one city after another along the famous Silk Road, extending Chinese control and influence farther west than it had ever been before or would be again. The emperor then heard the seductive call of Korea, the tail of the Han elephant, and was apparently undeterred by the Sui triple failure. Koguryo's leaders had initially welcomed the fall of the Sui, hoping that China's new emperors would not share their predecessor's obsessions. In 619 they recognized Chinese suzerainty and sent officials to Chang'an to kowtow to the Tang, but they also began upgrading their defenses. The latter action was more prescient, as it turned out.

Taizong's court was unanimous in its recommendation to ignore Koguryo and warned the emperor to learn from the experience of his predecessors. His most prominent advisor was also the bluntest. "Long ago, before the empire was pacified, you always made righteousness and virtue your central concern," remonstrated Wei Zheng. "Now, thinking that the empire is without troubles, you have gradually become increasingly arrogant, wasteful, and self-satisfied."[43]

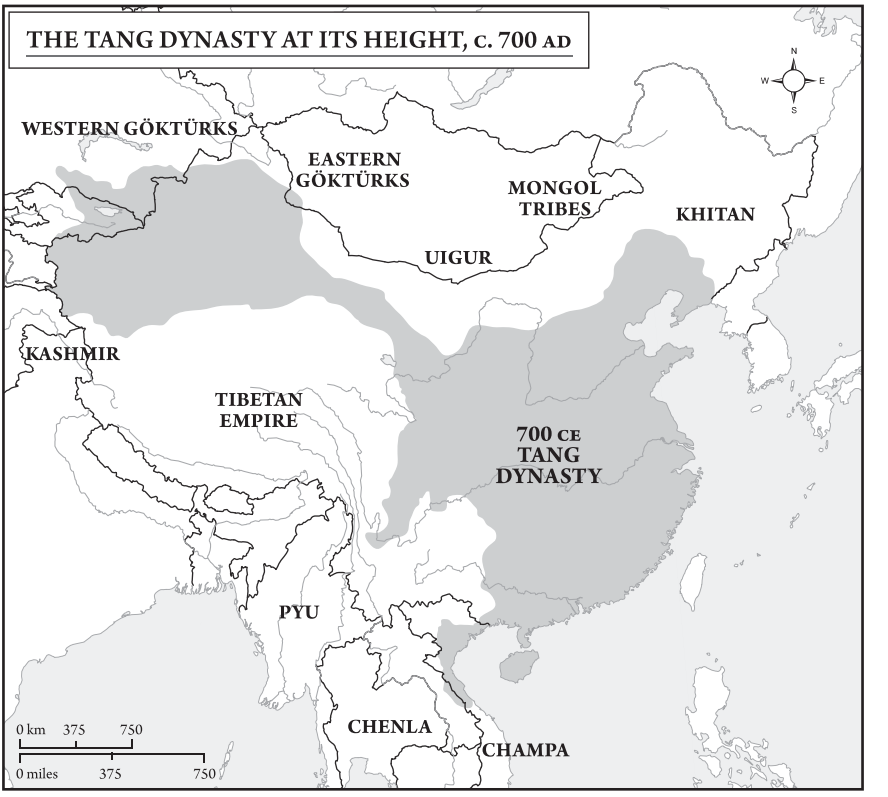



*Figure 3.1* The Tang Dynasty at Its Height, c. 700AD Credit: Tang Dynasty 700 AD, by Ian Kiu, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4641484

None of this resonated with the emperor, who responded with concerns about Chinese credibility and wondered whether allowing defeats to go unavenged would embolden other potential adversaries. "If China treats Koguryo as a peer," he said, "other foreign countries will despise China."[44] Two other factors weighed in on the side of invasion. First, Chinese spies were reporting that new Korean leaders were cruel to their people, leading the emperor to believe invaders would be received as liberators. Second, as always, the odds seemed to be in China's favor: Koguryo was small, and its army even smaller; its government was tyrannical, unpopular, and illegitimate; and the Chinese goal of helping the people was righteous, one for which his troops would be eager to fight. Given all this, he asked his advisors, "why should we worry that we cannot conquer Koguryo?"[45]

Thus another invasion was launched in 645, one that met with no more success than the other attempts.[46] The Korean people did not welcome an invasion, as it turns out, nor did they rise in revolt against their government. Taizong's surviving troops hobbled back to China—and did so again after a second

invasion two years later. Only the emperor's death in 649 forestalled a third attempt (or a sixth one overall for those keeping score). Koguryo was devastated by these repeated assaults, but it remained free of Chinese dominance. Toward the end of his life, Taizong reflected that he had "conquered the Turks and punished the Koreans," which was true, one supposes, but it was hardly what he originally intended to do.[47]

In the 640s a new power began to rise in the west. Tibet's fractious tribes had recently become united under the memorably named Srong-btsan-sgam-po, and the new king requested a marriage alliance with the Tang. The notion of using a princess to secure barbarian loyalty was not a new one, but it was pursued with vigor by Taizong and the other Tang emperors. Prior dynasties rarely dispatched actual princesses (and it was almost always princesses on the Chinese side, rarely princes, for reasons unclear) but rather daughters of noble families. The Tang emperors on occasion sent their own nieces or even daughters, and with increasing frequency as time went on.[48] These marriage connections did not signify the creation of political alliances, as did those of early modern Europe, but they did grant the recognition and respect craved by those countries in China's orbit. Chinese leaders never showed interest in taking on foreign wives, but their relatives were in high demand. Explained the primary historian of this practice, the relatives "of Chinese emperors were eagerly sought after by foreign rulers because Chinese cultural superiority enhanced of the recipient not only in relation to his own people but also before other foreign leaders."[49] The fact that Tibet felt strong enough to request such an arrangement would have serious implications in the not-too-distant future. For the time being, however, the happy imperial marriage bought twenty years of peace.

## Tang Power, Both Hard and Soft

The founding emperors of the Tang Dynasty were Confucians who well understood that their legitimacy and esteem rested in *wen* rather than *wu*.[50] They had to forge grand strategy in a culture that valued scholars over warriors and poetry over conquest. Their armies fought short campaigns as the crops grew, not during sowing or harvesting seasons, and often performed rather poorly. Taizong instituted standardized drill and discipline for all his units when he took power, and tried to create a new martial tradition, but met with very limited success.[51] Despite their efforts, bravado, and outward confidence, Chinese leaders were painfully aware of their military inferiority compared to the steppe barbarians. Overwhelming quantity could sometimes make up for deficient quality, but not always.

Peasants might not make the best soldiers, but when there are a hundred million of them paying taxes, they produce a substantial amount of national power.

For generations Chinese leaders used silk and gold rather than swords and shields in pursuit of security. It was often the case that invading hordes would accept payments and go away, even if such settlements robbed them of the fun of a good pillage. National wealth also allowed Chang'an to hire mercenaries by the tens of thousands to protect its interests. This policy of "using barbarians to control barbarians," according to an adage, had a long and successful history.[52] "Bribery for peace" was another ancient adage, and one that sounded a bit better than "succumbing-to-extortion for peace," which would have been just as accurate.[53] Bribes, when used sagaciously and selectively, could create jealousies and exacerbate rivalries inside the always-turbulent Turkic tribal structures. Chinese riches could not conquer but they could divide, keeping barbarians from presenting a unified threat and keeping the kingdom safe.

The Chinese had another tool in their kit, one that they alone could wield: the admiration of their region. The "Sinic zone" of East Asia was infused with Chinese writing and religion, as well as its literary, historical, and philosophical traditions.[54] Most of China's neighbors patterned their political and economic institutions after those of the Middle Kingdom. The Tang era is traditionally regarded as the height of this one-way exchange, a period where the region's superpower spread its influence the furthest.[55] It set the rules and norms for the era's international relations, inviting princes of neighboring states to come and learn to be civilized at the imperial academy in Chang'an.[56] Those states aspired to be like China, even if they often despised and feared its rulers. Chinese cultural influence was felt most heavily in Japan, the Korean kingdoms, Tibet, Vietnam, Siam and the various nearby nomadic peoples. In time all of these countries would adopt the lunar calendar, as well as Chinese pottery, papermaking, and agricultural techniques.[57] As Mencius once said, "I have heard of men using [the doctrines of] our great land to change barbarians, but I have never yet heard of any being changed by barbarians."[58] China essentially defined what civilization was for the entire region. Its emphasis on the family and hierarchy, its rituals, and the value it placed on text-based learning and law formed the essence of what would become "East Asian values."[59]

"No nation ever set out with more eager, if patronizing, generosity than Tang China to teach the arts of civilization to its less-favored neighbors," wrote one modern historian. "And no acolyte nation was ever so avid a pupil as the newly sinicized Japan of the eighth and early ninth centuries."[60] Indeed the effects of Chinese soft power are perhaps most visible in its relations with its neighbor across the sea. The first official visitors from Japan arrived in the waning Sui years and stayed for decades. Thousands of admiring Japanese ambassadors, merchants, students, monks, and others came afterward, as part of at least nineteen official delegations. Among the things they brought back to their homeland were political protocols, dress codes, plans for a new capital with a grid

like Chang'an's, Buddhism itself—and a sense of their role in the regional order. Largely as a result, Sino-Japanese relations during this period were healthy and peaceful, with only the occasional hiccup over the complicated politics of the Korean peninsula.

Chinese emperors therefore had *wenming* on their side, which is usually translated as "civilization" but actually signifies more than that: a particular kind of civilization, one marked by ethics and gentleness.[61] It was what the barbarians lacked, the essence of civility, the characteristic that separated the Chinese from all other people. Sagacious emperors realized that *wenming* could be employed as a tool in pursuit of national goals by helping shape barbarian interests and goals in ways useful to Chang'an. Deploying *wenming* was difficult—soft power is more often a byproduct of culture, not a weapon to be wielded—but it could be done, especially when emperors acted with modesty, choosing humility over haughtiness. Although they regarded outsiders as barbarian inferiors, the Tang did not make it a policy to dehumanize others in the way so many other great powers did. Everybody had a place in the Chinese order, even those with goatish odors.[62] As Emperor Taizong was fond of reminding his court, "foreigners are also human beings."[63] Winning hearts and minds was a central component of Tang strategy, and it was more easily accomplished by treating targets with a certain minimum level of respect.

The respect did not need to be heartfelt. Since they believed barbarians to be relatively simple people, the Chinese sought to manipulate them as they would children. Jia Yi, a Han-era philosopher, advised emperors to keep good faith and use friendly words, making outsiders "believe the Son of Heaven actually loved their barbarian faces and appearance and took delight in their barbarian techniques." Meanwhile they could be showered with gifts and "all kinds of imperial favor and personal attention, so as to spoil their senses (of eyes, mouth, ears, and belly) and to win their hearts."[64] Wei Zheng advised Emperor Taizong to "rear foreigners as it would fish and turtles, allowing them space to breathe and grow."[65]

Transforming barbarians was an inherently strategic enterprise. If changing their policies by force was difficult, perhaps China could change them by persuasion. Wei Zheng once wrote that it was in China's interest to "cease military actions and nourish civil culture, spread virtue and bestow favors, in order that when China settles into peace, people from afar will obey it of their own accord."[66] Chinese rulers promoted the idea that civilized societies were sedentary, for example, since sedentary powers by definition do not move across borders. The more Sinicized a country, and the more it sought to imitate the Middle Kingdom, the less likely it would be to attack. Cultural tools persuade only—or persuade best—those targets that appreciate the host culture.[67] It was therefore in the national interest to promote and spread not only Buddhism and Confucianism, but *wen*.

Some advisors warned that sharing culture with barbarians could prove problematic. They saw little evidence that more sophisticated barbarians were also less aggressive barbarians, and worried that the lessons their pupils learned would not be the ones that Chinese teachers intended. Most of all, they might learn about the empire's various hard-power weaknesses. Xue Deng, an advisor to Taizong, believed that no foreigners—and especially not foreign leaders—should be allowed inside China. "Although these practices have won our country the reputation of Sinicizing the barbarians," he said, "they have also broadened the barbarians' knowledge of our alliances and strategies. We might derive temporary pleasure from their visit and their admiration of our country. But they soon become ungrateful after their visit. They often wage war against us as soon as they return home."[68] Over time Wei Zheng came to agree with this, and eventually also opposed all diplomatic missions: "How could we let the foreigners see our weakness?"[69]

These advisors understood that Tang power was built upon a soft rather than a hard foundation. Soft power works best when other countries do what you want them to do without being told; in the seventh and eighth centuries, China was often able to achieve its strategic goals without using force because other states of the region aspired to be accepted and admired by the court in Chang'an. The successes of the Sui and then especially the Tang emperors would not have been possible had they not been able to convince others to go along with their project. They were able to pacify their frontiers while simultaneously maintaining internal harmony without a martial culture, despite the fact many of their neighbors had superior militaries. Tang emperors never abandoned the stick—they always kept many princes of regional leaders as "guests" in Chang'an to remind them of who was boss—but they led with the carrot.[70] A few guiding principles (based on more essentially untranslatable concepts) helped the Chinese in their effort to cultivate and then wield soft power.

The Tang believed it was their responsibility to promote virtue and righteousness, or *de*. Soon after he took power, Emperor Taizong announced that, "although I have conquered the world by military action, I should, in the end, pacify this world by civil virtue."[71] He and his successors sought to set an example to all others regarding trustworthiness and integrity, leading their region to be better. They saw no contradiction in the simultaneous pursuit of self-interest and the promotion of virtue.[72] Milieu goals are the luxury of superpower, but they can also be useful in minimizing opposition to imperial initiatives by convincing others that they will be treated fairly by a just government.[73] Emphasizing mutual interest and shared virtue gave subject peoples a stake in the Tang order. Regional leaders were not always fully on board with such initiatives, but they often followed the policy of the center.

Successful cultivation of soft power requires intimate knowledge of the target, of what would and would not appeal to other cultures. Therefore, Taizong and his successors made honest efforts to understand their neighbors. According to what Wang called the principle of "pragmatic pluralism," the Tangs "adopted 'know yourself and your neighbors' as the first principle in formulating strategy."[74] They believed that their predecessors failed because they made insufficient efforts to figure their enemies out, and instead saw foreign policy as a morality play pitting good Chinese against evil barbarians. The Tang endeavored to avoid Manicheanism and caricature, in order to understand how best to persuade and manipulate their targets.

Finally, right intention mattered, not only to reputation but to outcomes. Our sources speak a great deal about *yi*, or what is usually translated as "appropriateness," but sounds much more like what we would consider today "prudence."[75] When remonstrators urged an emperor to consider *yi*, they were reminding him to focus upon the potential cost and benefits of a particular action, and to add morality (and *de*) into his calculations. Preemptive wars were rarely appropriate, for instance, since they made foreigners more hostile and aggressive in the long run.[76] Expenditure of resources had to be worth the price; adventures done merely to inflate the glory of the emperor were fated for disaster. *Yi* was both practical and moral, in other words, and connected to fate: appropriate actions were more likely to be successful. Without *yi*, nothing of value could be accomplished.

*Wenming*, *de* and *yi* were cultural principles with strategic utility. They could assure neighbors of Chinese intentions and perhaps even build trust and convince barbarians to accede to Chang'an's wishes. Together they added to the deep soft-power reserves of the Tang emperors. This more than any other factor explains why this dynasty was able to persist as a dominant power for so long. Soft power is hard to recognize in the historical record, since it leaves behind little evidence. Its importance is obvious only when it wanes, as when the successors to Taizong squandered those reserves and lost the ability to lead by example rather than force, and when the dynasty weakened and its favorable status quo came to an end.

## Taizong's Successors

Chinese history took some unexpected turns after the death of Emperor Taizong, when the ninth of his fourteen sons took power in 650. The new leader, Gaozong, soon fell under the influence of one of the more intriguing figures in all of Chinese history, the (apparently) lovely and (certainly) cunning concubine Wu Zeitan, who would be the dominant figure in government for six decades.

She would rule directly for fifteen years (the first and last time a woman did so), a period that historians invariably record as a break in the Tang line, and indirectly by dominating her weak-willed lover Gaozong and her two sons, Ruizong and Zhongzong, both of whom took short turns on the throne. The histories of the Wu era drip with sexism and class-based snobbery, making it difficult to separate truth from fiction. Court intrigues and palace gossip dominate these narratives, giving short shrift to what were essentially successful foreign and domestic policies. For one thing, the empress managed something her predecessors never could: a victory over Koguryo, in 668. The conquest, though glorious perhaps, would prove short-lived; in two years a revolt brought the royal family back to the capital (Pyongyang) and expelled the Tang forces by 676. It proved to be one of the empress's lesser accomplishments.

Unlike his father, Gaozong knew little about the steppe and seemed to care about it even less.[77] The Turks chafed under his inattentive, distracted leadership, and revolted in 679. Raiding on the northwest frontier resumed. The fragile détente between China and Tibet had broken down in the 660s, and the latter expanded into China's southwest provinces and Central Asian territories. Clashes between the two did not produce decisive results, with Chinese armies predictably underperforming. Such problems were relatively minor, however, and did not constitute anything approaching existential threats to the monarchy. Tibetans and Turks could raid and rape, but they could not overwhelm the Tang. Steppe nomads of this period wanted to exploit, not conquer; they led a protection racket more than a state.[78] Until the arrival of the Mongols in the thirteenth century, the Tang and their successors considered the threat from the east bloody and bothersome, to be sure, but temporary.

Emperor Gaozong died in 683, leaving the throne to his son. A rebellion the following year was a turning point for the Empress Dowager, who soon would rid the court of all pretense and take direct control of the state. Wu became suspicious and tyrannical, if our sources are to be believed, ruling through fear and treachery.[79] The empire continued to prosper, which probably made her more popular than court historians liked to admit.[80] As ever, in official narratives, the peasantry is silent. Under Empress Wu the tide of battle was turned against the heavily outnumbered Tibetans, and Chinese recovered their lost territory in Central Asia. An attack by a steppe people, the Khitans, was repulsed in the mid-690s, if only by the use of overwhelming numbers of troops stiffened by a backbone of Turkish mercenaries.[81] As the empress lay dying, supporters of the Tang were able to maneuver behind the scenes and restore the dynasty. To historians obsessed over court shenanigans, this was a glorious deliverance from tyranny; to those of us viewing it centuries later, it seems clear that the Empress Wu bequeathed a healthy empire, one nearing the peak of its power and influence.

After a few years of mild turmoil, the throne passed to Xuanzong, whose long reign (712–756) represented the pinnacle of glory not only for the Tang Dynasty but for all Chinese history. It was a golden age of peace and prosperity, one that ended with the kind of romantic tragedy that makes for great literature and poetry. Emperor Xuanzong fell in love with one of his concubines, as Chinese leaders were wont to do, which became the subject of a great deal of the nation's gossip and, over time, its frustrations.

At first, however, all went well. Extremely well, as a matter of fact: Xuanzong returned China to many of the traditions from which Empress Wu had strayed, sparking an apparent moral as well as political restoration.[82] The government undertook serious efforts to combat famine, a cyclical but common problem in medieval Asia, which won it many supporters among the poor. According to one modern historian, Emperor Xuanzong was "that rarity among China's rulers, a popular emperor."[83]

Xuanzong did not waste resources pursuing adventures abroad. Occasional raids by Turks and Tibetans were parried and their dangers kept in perspective. Rather than launch punitive or preemptive invasions to reduce the effects of these incursions, the emperor focused on defense of the realm. Perimeter strategy was rethought, and a new emphasis placed on mobility at the expense of stationary fortifications. In the 710s permanent military governorships were created in the most vulnerable areas, positions that came with substantial autonomy and authority. Military power became concentrated in the hands of a few men who, even if they were trusted (and watched by imperial eunuchs), were stationed far away from Chang'an. When Xuanzong's advisors warned him of the dangers of a decentralized army and weakened *fubing* system, the emperor slashed the army's overall size, releasing about a third of the semiprofessional soldiers. He also created an imperial insurance policy by strengthening the units around the capital, which came to function as a Praetorian Guard.[84] Weakening the center at the expense of the periphery would create problems in the long run, but for years it successfully kept the barbarians out—and the Chinese in. It was an era when "imperial authority was wisely exercised," wrote the historian Denis Twitchett, "of restraint, and above all an era without costly and ambitious foreign adventures."[85] Xuanzong did little to rock the regional boat, at least at first, and China's status as regional superpower was preserved.

As his reign wore on, however, the emperor's confidence grew and his restraint began to give way. Like Taizong, Xuanzong became more aggressive over time. Few superpowers can forever resist the temptation to drift away from the defense of the status quo. Safety does not always generate good strategic thinking. "History tells us," observed Wei Zheng a century before, "when a ruler is faced with danger, he is likely to appoint worthy men and follow their advice. But when

life is happy and peaceful, he tends to slacken off and discourage honest talk in his court."[86] Xuanzong received less and less cautious advice from his increasingly sycophantic court, especially as China experienced good harvests and an economic boom in the first years of the eighth century, and he began to dream of expansion. Those dreams started to come to fruition in 726, when the emperor decided to teach bothersome Tibet a lesson, believing it to be, in his words, a "minor barbarian country" ruled by "a contemptible wretch."[87] His enormous army met with middling success.

In 737 the emperor approved even more sweeping military reform, under which the ailing *fubing* system was entirely abandoned and replaced by professional units. The cost of frontier defense, which had been growing steadily already, exploded. These reforms also threatened to add to the growing power of local governors, many of whom were becoming more difficult for Xuanzong to control.[88] To reassert his authority, the emperor decreed that the commanders of these new units should be foreign generals wherever possible, since such leaders would not have the political aspirations or court connections common to native-born officers. Everyone seemed to think that foreigners made better warriors anyway. By the end of the 740s almost all the frontier units were under the control of non-Chinese officers, and many of their soldiers were barbarians as well.[89] With professional soldiers stationed in the periphery the interior units atrophied. Eventually the only high-quality forces under the emperor's direct command were the so-called Northern Armies, the praetorians in and around Chang'an.[90]

Despite these measures, over time many local commanders began charting their own independent courses. They realized there was rarely a price to be paid for ignoring the court's instructions, especially regarding *de* and the treatment of the frontier peoples. Occasionally an ambitious general would deliberately mistreat people just over (and sometimes inside) the imperial borders with the intention of provoking an armed response that he would be able to crush gloriously.[91] In addition to creating unnecessary problems, such actions undercut the long-term, soft-power tactic of winning hearts and minds. A classic "principal-agent problem" was developing, where the strategic approach devised in Chang'an was not executed by its out-of-control regional surrogates.

Though few seemed to notice at the time, Emperor Xuanzong presided over a fundamental evolution in Tang grand strategy. Decades earlier, Taizong had constructed what Edward Luttwak once called a *hegemonic* empire, one surrounded by a system of buffer states, clients, and partners.[92] To the early Tang emperors, territory was directly related to security: the more distance between potential troublemakers and the imperial capital, it was thought, the safer was the government. The empire was essentially a series of concentric circles, with Central China surrounded by rings of subordinates and dependents, all of which

sent tribute back to Chang'an.[93] Each level of the circle had a name, with different rules and responsibilities.[94] Which territories fit into which category was not always clear, and the locals were rarely consulted, but the basic idea remained. For instance, the Korean states and Japan were included in the group of "pan-Sinitic countries of caps and sashes," and were treated differently than the goat-smelling peoples farther out.[95] The degree of central control was indirectly related to distance from Chang'an; faraway regions were allowed to chart their own course, within reason. Under what was known as the "loose rein" policy (*jimi*), the outermost prefectures did not have to offer full allegiance or change their customs, and they could raise their own troops under the *fubing* system, as long as they pledged loyalty and kept the money flowing. Chinese officials directly ran only those provinces closest to Chang'an. Cultural exchanges with barbarians were not only permitted by encouraged, which increased the intensity of China's soft power and influence. According to one modern historian, "this unique nature of the Tang loose reign policy was the reason for Tang China's diplomatic success."[96]

Under Emperor Xuanzong, however, the borders hardened. Like in second-century Rome, a *territorial* empire gradually emerged, one marked by extended direct rule, clearly defined boundaries, and strong frontier defenses manned by permanent militaries. Only the Northern Armies protected the center. The new strategy was much more expensive—the military of the 750s cost six times that of previous decades—and, as we will see, fatally flawed.[97] Initially, however, the change seemed to work. The reorganized garrisons were more professional and generally performed better than the *fubing* units that had previously guarded the borders. They proved able to repulse a few fairly sizable incursions by Turks and Khitans. More good news followed: the *bete noire* of generations of Chinese leaders, Koguryo, imploded due to internal discord and was overrun by its neighbors. The other Korean states, especially Parhae and Silla, were solidly in the Chinese sphere, so the Tang were able to exert what might be today called "cultural imperialism" over the entire peninsula. Korean politics in the Xuanzong era unfolded pretty much as the emperor demanded, without any resort to force.

China's string of successes snapped in the early 750s. A new power was sweeping through the Middle East and aligning itself with some of China's enemies. A Tang army ran into expeditionary units of this growing danger, the Arabs, at the Talas River in 751, and things went poorly. The Central Asian portion of the empire then came under serious threat from many sides, with Turks and Tibetans also sensing weakness. Another new enemy emerged in the southwest: the Nanchao, a southern people that the Tang had once supported in order to weaken Tibet, who decided to raid north into Chinese territory instead. They also routed an overconfident punitive expedition sent to punish them. And a general named An Lushan led his troops into a major defeat against the Khitan in the northeast.

History has not been kind to the changes made under Xuanzong. First, the frontiers were too large, and too complicated, to be ruled directly from Chang'an. The flexibility that defense-in-depth provided was lost when the borders hardened. The goal became not to contain nomadic incursions but stop them, which was essentially impossible. The strategy could not help but fail; the means could not achieve the new end.[98] Second, professionalizing the military may have decreased the danger from without, at least for the people living near the border, but it increased the peril from within. "The very success of the new institutions," according to one modern historian, "bred indifference, and the dangers inherent in the growth of such powers in the hands of frontier commanders was forgotten."[99] The problem with permanent, efficient militaries is that, should they decide to take over, there is little anyone can do to stop them. An unstoppable force combined with an ambitious general is often the recipe for trouble.

It did not take long for trouble to arise. Despite his various failures in the field, General An Lushan remained something of a celebrity in the court of Emperor Xuanzong. After a few years he fell out of imperial favor, succumbing perhaps to the inevitable jealousies and intrigues that accompany increased attention. He proved unwilling to be shuffled off into political oblivion, and instead led his hundred-thousand-plus troops southward in an attempt to overthrow the monarchy. The rebels routed the Northern Armies, swept into the capital, and forced the court to flee, leading to one of the most famous events in Chinese history: Emperor Xuanzong reluctantly ordered the aforementioned concubine and love of his life, Yang Guifei, to be strangled to death, since his court and soldiers blamed her and her family for their battlefield misfortunes. The emperor never recovered; in August 756 he abdicated his throne, broken-hearted, and was replaced by his third son. Choosing a successor might not have been an easy task, because apparently the emperor had sired some fifty-nine children over his long and fertile life.

The so-called An Lushan Rebellion would be a major turning point for the Tang. Over the course of its six years, two of the most populous and productive Chinese provinces, Ho-pei and Ho-nan, were ravaged and depopulated.[100] Without a meaningful military presence in the interior, units had to be taken off the frontier to battle the bandits. Loyalist forces vastly outnumbered those of the rebels, but they were unable to translate numerical superiority into sustained battlefield success. The monarchy was forced to employ the services of Uighur mercenaries, who quickly retook the capital. An's forces held their own for years, defeating royal forces ten times their size even as their leader was killed by his own son, who was in turn assassinated by other power-hungry rebel leaders. Despite their underperformance, the monarchist forces eventually prevailed (with help, once again, of the Uighurs), and the rebels were granted a general amnesty. The Tang line was restored and it continued to rule for nearly 150 years more, but it would never enjoy quite the same position it had before the conflict.

Barbarians took advantage of the chaos produced by the bandits. The rebels had smashed Tang prestige and diminished its source of soft power, emboldening anyone who harbored resentment toward Chang'an take up arms. The rebellion years were good ones for the Turks, Tibetans, Vietnamese, and Nanchao. Central Asia was lost to China for good, and the frontiers of the home kingdom shrank under continual barbarian raids. A Tibetan incursion even reached the capital, sending the court fleeing. It appears that the invaders were surprised at the ease with which they brushed aside much larger Chinese armies and were unprepared for their own success, since they abandoned their conquest after only two weeks of pillage, taking many of the city's artisans, scholars, and women along with them.[101]

Subcontracting defense became more common as time went by. Without question the most important hired warriors were the Uighurs, a steppe people who emerged out of the vacuum created by the collapse of the Eastern Turkish empire in the late 650s. The Chinese considered the Uighurs semicivilized, since although they had a martial culture, they were not fully nomadic. The Uighurs constructed a permanent capital city, practiced some degree of agriculture, and had a written language. Most important, from a strategic perspective, they adopted many Chinese traditions and admired the Tang, and were quite willing to fight for them—just as long as they were well compensated for doing so.[102] When paid, the Uighurs were extremely useful. Without their help the Tang would not have been able to fend off the Tibetans, nor protect their northern frontier from other steppe people like the Khitans and the Kyrgyz, and they would have struggled to put down the An Lushan rebellion. Although only 4000 Uighurs arrived at the gates of Chang'an in 757, for example, they provided the decisive advantage to the loyalist side and sent tens of thousands of rebels packing.[103] Uighurs also helped squash other rebellions led by ethnic Chinese, most prominently in 765 and 822. The relationship of the Tang with these warriors was always complicated, since their services did not come free, and when money was not forthcoming the Uighurs extracted payment by sacking Chinese cities. According to one historian, the Uighurs "preserved the dynasty while at the same time terrifying it."[104]

The Tang Dynasty lost control over its far-flung regions, slowly but surely, over the course of the century that followed the An Lushan rebellion. The monarchy made several attempts to reassert control over its breakaway provinces, but time and again its soldiers were defeated in the field by local forces. In the 780s, Tang emperors tried to reform the tax system to make up for shortfalls cause by losing tribute payments, but collection proved difficult. Mistrust of the central government inspired a new round of revolts, which were eventually crushed but not without a series of initial reverses and great expense. The Uighurs helped again, but for the last time, because the emperor (Dezong) neglected to pay

them. They looted and left.[105] Full imperial control over the northeast would not return until Kublai Khan unified China under Mongol rule over four hundred years later. The Uighur state itself collapsed in 840 when a succession crisis tempted its steppe neighbors to intervene. While many in China were no doubt relieved, others realized that they would have great difficulty replacing what had been the most reliable military tool in their kit.

Big problems with small neighbors gave stark indications of the decline of Tang power. Repeated incursions by Tibetan forces inspired the Chinese to launch two major invasions of their sparsely populated neighbor in the 780s, both of which met with disaster. Tibetan counterattacks would have once again reached Chang'an had it not been for the assistance of Uighur troops. On paper, the Tang should have had even less of a problem with Nanchao, but the small country took advantage of Tang internal disputes and relative military weakness on many occasions, and invaded Chinese territory or vassal states with some regularity. Relations between the two fluctuated between coexistence and border harassment, with direct clashes occurring in the 860s.[106] Fortunately for the Tang, both troublesome neighbors would eventually fall prey to internal divisions.

By the end of the 700s the dynasty was still nominally in charge of all of China, but many regions submitted little more than lip service. Tang emperors would struggle with finances until the dynasty's end, occasionally attempting to revise tax collection and develop new sources of income. A monopoly on salt and fees on canal traffic supplied the bulk of their money in later years.[107] Eventually the Tang decided to concentrate their efforts on controlling four areas: the capital; the productive Yangtze-Huai basin; the northwestern frontier, where the most dangerous nomads lay in wait (and where the population was sparse, so there were few locals to support rebellions); and the area around the Grand Canal, since its tolls provided much of their cash.[108] Chinese foreign policy at the end of the century was much less ambitious than it had been at the beginning, since the borders and large parts of the interior were no longer under Chang'an's control.

As regions broke away, the wealth of the Tang diminished, but the emperors still had one valuable asset in high demand: princesses. Imperial marriages were once tools of cultural power for the Tang, but in the waning years they were more often hastily arranged in response to barbarian demands, bringing shame and humiliation upon the emperors who would buy peace with the hand of their nieces or other relatives. The practice is a good proxy for the Tang perception of their power, and an indicator for where trouble spots were brewing on the borders: When strong, as under Taizong, Tang princesses stayed home; as their strength waned, marriages were arranged to keep Tibetan, Turkish, Nanchao, and other soldiers on their respective sides of the borders. In 787 a Uighur ruler demanded more—an actual daughter of Emperor Tezong for his harem—as

payment for aiding the hapless Tang military. He received his wish, as would two other Uighur leaders in the following decades.[109]

Despite all this, the ninth century was not unremittingly bleak for the Tangs, who were at least able to have uninterrupted, relatively orderly successions. In its first few decades the dynasty experienced a bit of a revival under Emperor Xianzong (805–820), who oversaw a gradual recovery, in both economics and confidence. The emperor made a few efforts to reassert power in the various rebellious provinces, many of which were successful if incomplete. In 820 he was murdered by two malcontented eunuchs.[110] His young and energetic successor Muzong continued his father's expansive policies but did not live long enough to see much success. His death during a polo match marked the end of the Tang revival, such that it was, and the beginning of desperate, decades-long attempts to fend off decline.[111] By mid-century the number of soldiers under arms shrank to about half what it was fifty years earlier, and the center's grip on the periphery eroded further.[112] The gradual decrease in central control was accompanied by lawlessness, banditry, mutinies, raids, and warlordism. It is easy for governments to hold together in good times; when fortunes take downturns, factions often rise. So it was in the Tang court, with the main battle lines being drawn between members of the traditional bureaucracy and the large force of palace eunuchs.

"The large force of palace eunuchs" is not a phrase commonly uttered in the modern era, so perhaps it is worthy of a parenthetical discussion. Late Tang court politics were marked by constant friction between highly trained professional bureaucrats and a class of people whose primary qualification is that they had been ritually mutilated by those they served. For millennia, it was common knowledge in many of the world's great capitals that only castrated men could be trusted around royal females, and that their attendant lack of sex drive freed their minds for higher-level strategic and political thinking. Eunuchism seems to have originated in China about four thousand years ago and from there spread into nearly every Eurasian court somehow. The word itself comes from the ancient Greek, meaning roughly "guarding the bed," which eunuchs did for Greek dynasties as early as the sixth century BC. It was in China, though, where eunuchs had the most influence, and for the longest time. Tang emperors were served by anywhere between six and seven *thousand* eunuchs.[113] Many adopted sons to mutilate and pass on their positions and wealth to (which probably led to a series of good news/bad news conversations in Chinese orphanages), and some even established large families.[114] Political castrations occurred through at least the late nineteenth century, and eunuchs served Chinese emperors right up to the foundation of the republic in 1912. The last man emasculated for government service passed away in 1996.[115]

To the royals they served, eunuchs epitomized loyalty and wisdom; to outsiders, eunuchs were devious, untrustworthy schemers who manipulated

events to suit their own goals. Chinese history is loaded with examples of emperors who fell under the spell of their emasculated advisors and others who gained their position as a result of eunuch machinations. At least four later Tang rulers owed their crowns to support from the eunuchs.[116] These and other emperors trusted precious few of their generals, so they often put eunuchs in charge of the Northern Armies around the capital. Many military officers in the countryside grew to hate their castrated overlords, which fueled further rebellions and revolts.[117] There were no better allies than eunuchs, apparently, and no worse enemies.

But back to our story. In the 860s the pace of banditry increased in the countryside yet again, and this time the Tang emperors were without Uighur allies to aid their pacification efforts. The chaos eroded their remaining prestige and soft-power reserves, without which Chang'an could not hope to manipulate the decisions of its various enemies. Warlords declared their own independent dynasties, and Chang'an changed hands multiple times in a series of complex, fluid civil conflicts.[118] In 880 the capital was seized by a true bandit army, which spent the next two whole years looting and pillaging. Nearby loyalist units were just as likely to join the bandits as they were to fight them. Raising new forces was pointless, because they soon would become independent and fight for the highest bidder. The capital was eventually recovered, if temporarily, and its long-suffering residents relieved, but by 884 the Tang emperor had become essentially the mayor of Chang'an and little else.

Chinese unity broke down entirely when the last embers of the Tang Dynasty were extinguished. The era that followed is known to history as the "Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms" period, of which the "later Tangs" were but one. Conflict and chaos would continue until the country was brought under one government again, which would not happen until a new, powerful force came storming in from the steppe three hundred years later.

* * *

The suggestion that anti-militarism is a central aspect of Chinese strategic culture is sometimes taken too far. There have always been warriors in China, and many times those warriors were formed into highly efficient killing machines. It is equally true, however, that no country has struggled as much with the morality of violence and aggression. An as a result, no country has had such a need to find alternative tools with which to preserve an imperial status quo. Most cultures do not appear troubled by the occasional need to chop off heads to secure power and prestige; the Chinese, however, sought to be different from those they despised. Unlike every other cases in this book, at no time did the Tang Dynasty wield the best military of its time—it could win battles, for sure, but only if it was aided by non-Han, overwhelming numbers, or both. Those times throughout

history when Chinese armies prevailed were those when they were able to produce more peasants than the other side had bullets, and when their leaders were rather apathetic about how many of those peasants returned home.

If China's enormous population were shaped by a more martial strategic culture, it could have produced a quite formidable army. Had there ever been one hundred million ethnic Romans, for example, we all would still be speaking Latin.

We ought not view this as a wasted opportunity. This Confucian-Mencian tradition led to the rarest of outcomes, a medieval society that did not worship war and its practitioners. Warriors sat at the top of social hierarchies almost everywhere else, and as a result conflict was a constant feature of the time. China's antimilitarism is both admirable and amazing, given how aggressive their neighbors were. The elevation of the civilian virtues over those of the military was hard to sustain as long as there were brutes nearby with other ideas.

For centuries, Chinese emperors relied heavily on nonmilitary tools, especially their wealth and their culture. With the former they could buy off threats and rent warriors; with the latter, they could convince potential enemies to follow their lead. As status and wealth decline, however, so too does soft power. Nothing elicits admiration and imitation like success. As the Tang lost control of the countryside through incompetence and mismanagement, they also lost their ability to inspire, as well as the advantages that came with it.

Their choices did not help. In particular, the change from a hegemonic to a territorial empire fatally weakened the center, and allowed bandits like An Lushan to dream of sitting on the Dragon Throne. Costs soared and security decreased. A combination of court apathy and regional ambition over time weakened the dynasty, leading to the return of division and factionalism. When China operated according to its own professed virtues, when it put appropriateness ahead of glory, it was able to fend off outside threats and hold the center.

Since all dominant eras end, it is natural for those looking back to concentrate too heavily on their decline. A brief retelling of the highlights of Tang strategy necessarily understates their achievements during their centuries of dominance. Theirs was the high point of a civilization with many great eras, and it did not come about through luck or happenstance. It was the strategy articulated by its founding emperors that achieved their greatness and, what is often much more difficult, sustained it for centuries.

4

# The Mongols

Western civilization was saved by alcohol. Had it not been for booze, or had steppe nomads been teetotalers, the Middle Ages would have unfolded quite differently in Europe. The Renaissance would not have occurred; the age of imperialism, for better or worse, would not have happened; the New World would have gone undiscovered, at least for a while. We would know little about ancient Mediterranean civilizations, since few monasteries would have survived. Christianity itself might have perished.

The first time that alcohol saved the West was in 453 AD, when Attila the Hun died after a long binge at one of his wedding receptions, presumably spoiling the evening for his young bride. The empire he and his family created, and the threat it posed to Rome, crumbled shortly thereafter. Eight hundred years later another mounted warrior, this time a Mongol, also drank himself to death. When Ogodei Khan over-tippled in faraway Karakorum, a great onslaught halted as his generals braced for a succession battle. Had the Great Khan lived and the westward thrust continued, there is little the Europeans could have done to stop it.

At the time Europe was divided and weak, and its petty monarchs were unwilling to put aside their own quarrels when the new threat emerged in the late 1230s. Lithuanians and Swedes had been happy to see Mongols arrive in their neighborhood, at least at first, since they proved so efficient at slaughtering Russians. The growing danger did not inspire Pope Gregory IX to pause his feud with the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, whom he excommunicated in 1239. Frederick responded by marching on Rome.[1] Unity in the face of the Mongol threat was not their instinctual response.

The pope did send a diplomat to gather information about these mysterious invaders. It did not take long for this man, Franciscan Friar John de Plano Carpini, to realize that the Mongols would certainly interpret European infighting as an opportunity to be exploited. He tried to discourage the khan from dispatching delegations to the West, "lest, seeing the wars and dissensions which are among us, [he] should be the more encouraged to make war against us."[2] He knew that

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DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197646649.003.0004

the primary mission of any Mongol emissary was to collect intelligence, and he further assumed that such emissaries might well be murdered by insulted European kings when they presented their arrogant demands for surrender and submission. This would have immediately set the Mongol armies in motion.

As it happens, Ogodei Khan died in 1241 and Christendom was saved. It is easy to imagine an alternate scenario, one in which he chose to drink tea that night instead of absurd quantities of fermented mares' milk . . .

*In 1243 Ogodei sent official emissaries to four European capitals carrying demands for submission, as well as unofficial scouting parties to assess defenses and search for good pastureland for his cavalry. As Carpini had feared, some of the khan's ambassadors returned with their heads in boxes, enraging the Mongols and making an invasion all but inevitable. The Great Khan's network of spies and scouts kept him well informed about the rivalries that divided Europe and the unimpressive militaries that protected it. His brother Jochi was put in command of what the khan expected to be a relatively simple campaign.*

*In the winter of 1245–46 two Mongol columns converged on the French plains near Reims. One had swept through the northern lowlands, destroying inchoate Dutch dams and dikes and devastating the cities that otherwise might soon have formed a Hanseatic league of some nature. The other column, composed of Mongol mounted archers as well as allies and Eastern Europeans who had been integrated into their army, turned south into Italy. Over the course of two years those troops reduced one Italian city after another, sweeping to the southernmost point on the peninsula before arriving outside the walls of Rome. The Pope had issued a call for a crusade, one that was answered by a large contingent of knights and holy warriors from all over Western Europe. Almost 150,000 Christian soldiers massed south of the city, outnumbering the heathen attackers nearly three-to-one. Confident in their numbers (and in their omnipotent ally), the great mass advanced to meet the invaders. The flower of medieval chivalry rode out to meet the main Mongol force and reported early success, having sent the heathens fleeing, only to find that they had been lured into an enormous encirclement that resulted in the butchery of the nearly the entire patchwork force. Those who escaped fled back into the city, swollen as it was with tens of thousands of terrified refugees from the countryside.*

*The siege of Rome began with an enormous circumvallation. The Mongols' slave engineers raised a wall around the city to prevent escape, and then began constructing a variety of terrifying catapults and trebuchets. They dug tunnels close to the ancient Aurelian walls and undermined them with subterranean explosions. Even tried-and-true European medieval defensive tactics—such as slaughtering the city's Jews and marching relics around its perimeter—failed to help the Romans. Although the Italians had removed many of the region's larger*

*rocks and chunks of concrete to rob the invaders' catapults of ammunition, Mongol engineers brought trunks of mulberry trees from southern France and soaked them in water to make them rock-hard. Their heavy trebuchets shelled the city with explosives and naphtha, which was essentially crude oil, and before long the walls collapsed. Mongols poured in, forcing the city's surrender.*

*To the surprise of those inside, no Vandal-style orgiastic looting occurred. Instead the civilians were calmly marched outside the city, and the artisans, craftsmen and engineers separated from the rest. Rome's aristocracy, as well as its soldiers and clergy, were butchered—each Mongol soldier had a quota to fill and collected ears as proof of having met it—and great numbers of peasants were taken away as captives and slaves. The Mongols methodically removed the Eternal City's great treasures and divided them among themselves according to rank and merit in an orderly fashion, and then tore down and/or burned every standing structure. Those found hiding were put to the sword or died in the flames. The Pope was given an end befitting his station: He was rolled up in carpet and trampled by Mongol horsemen, carefully dispatched to assure that his blood would neither spill into the earth nor be seen by the God of the Endless Blue Sky. It was unclear whether His Holiness appreciated the gesture.*

*Rome's experience was fresh on the minds of the defenders of Paris. Their attempt to crush the invading army met with the same result: French heavy cavalry engaged the Mongols as they advanced and forced them to retreat. The front ranks, manned by the best of the nobility, sensed a rout and pursued. The chase went on for three days as the news traveled back to Paris that the Lord had indeed delivered a great victory. However, the Mongol retreat abruptly stopped halfway to Orleans. Their horsemen wheeled around and before long the exhausted Christian knights found themselves surrounded, buried under a storm of arrows from all sides. The site had been carefully chosen, and the Franks fell right into the trap. They began fleeing in the direction they came, only to find pockets of Mongols waiting in ambush along the way. One of every ten managed to return to the city gates.*

*As two Mongol pincers converged on Paris, the city's choice was a stark one: submit to Mongol vassalhood, turning over ten percent of the city's wealth and goods in the process, or risk suffering Rome's fate. The city was similarly teeming with refugees, including French, Dutch and German peasants who had fled before the rampaging horde. Food and water supplies were dwindling, disease was rampant, and the Mongols were constructing siege engines just across the Seine. City defenders were horrified to see enslaved French peasants from the countryside forced to construct a long series of earthworks around the city, trapping those within. The Mongols appeared to be in no particular rush.*

For nearly eight hundred years historians have been trying to determine why none of this happened, and why the Great Horde turned its attention elsewhere.[3] One thing is certain: deterrence had nothing to do with it. The Mongols were not scared off by Europe's castles or its knights. Some have suggested that the forests and mountains of Western Europe were too unfriendly to Mongol horses, which would have needed pastureland to thrive. Geography had done little to constrain other nomadic invaders in centuries past, however. The Huns had driven deep into France before being beaten back by a temporary alliance of Romans and Goths, and the Mongols operated successfully in many different kinds of topographies, including rugged mountains in Afghanistan, jungles in Burma, and deserts in the Middle East. Their cavalry would also overcome the southern Chinese Song kingdom, which was a patchwork of mountains, rice paddies, dense forests, great rivers, and walled cities. The Song also possessed the largest army in the world with over one hundred million people to support it, a first-rate navy, and a unified central government to coordinate the defense. None of it mattered.

There should be no doubt that, had the Mongols made a different decision, Europe would have quickly collapsed. Why, then, did they not return to the offense after the succession crisis ended? Perhaps the question itself reflects an overestimation of Europe's importance. People have a hard time accepting the notion that they are not at the center of others' attention. Paris was the heart of the European world, so it is hard for Europeans to imagine that it could have been unimportant to the Mongols. Fortunately for Western civilization, the khans were unimpressed with both European pretensions of importance and European wealth. There were other lands to the east that were much more sophisticated and potentially lucrative for the plunderer. It seems likely that the Mongols simply deemed Europe unworthy of conquest.

Perhaps a drive to the English Channel also held little interest to the Mongols because it appeared too easy. The lack of central monarch made Europe an unattractive opponent, a low-hanging fruit, the conquest of which would have brought little glory due to its simplicity. Europe's greatest weakness may have saved it: other powerful kings, like the Caliph in Baghdad or the Song Emperor, represented not only greater prizes but an insult to the khans due to their very existence. No potential rival claimant to a powerful, imperial throne existed in Europe. There was no equivalent of Rome, which had attracted the attention and lust of steppe warriors in the past. The unstoppable Mongol cavalry thus concentrated its attention on China, Persia, and northern India, leaving the backward, inferior, illiterate Europeans to fight among themselves.

The decision to spare Europe was made quite consciously by the Mongols, not thrust upon them by geography or European defenses or Christ. It was

driven by a grand strategy, in other words, and a quite remarkable one at that. The story of the rise and fall of the Mongol empire offers great support for the "great-man theory" of history, demonstrating the power that leadership can have over the fate of nations. It did not last long, comparatively speaking, thanks to generations of debilitating internecine jealousies and infighting. The Black Plague sounded the empire's ultimate death knell, but without it the end would have still come. The greatest land empire in history was not so much killed as committed suicide, as so many of history's greatest tend to do.

Not much attention has been paid to Mongol grand strategy, perhaps because it seems unlikely that nomadic steppe people have much to teach those of the information age. Their world was so much different from ours, their beliefs so profoundly foreign, their thinking mysterious and unintelligible to moderns. Upon closer inspection, however, the Mongols have more in common with today's United States than perhaps we wish they did. They rather suddenly found themselves in possession of an unstoppable military machine, capable of crushing any other on Earth. They had the luxury to choose which direction to travel and which neighbors to overrun, and were restrained only by their own choices and priorities. The Mongol Empire was the very definition of a unipolar power, unbalanced and unbalanceable, a dominant state that soon discovered how difficult it is to remain on top.

The Mongols did not spend much time contemplating the *why* component of grand strategy. To them conquest was natural and expected. They do not seem to have discussed frontiers or limits, and instead considered "all under heaven" to be their rightful domain. Mongol chieftains and tribesmen had an insatiable appetite for plunder and demanded that their khans feed it. Expansion for expansion's sake was their goal, the only end of their strategy; when it ceased, when the great hordes settled and attempted to rule, things got complicated. They were much better at conquering than governing. Indeed they seemed to feel that, once the expansion came to an end, so too would the empire.[4]

The Mongols always had one glaring weakness, one that the *how* aspects of their grand strategy were constructed to overcome: there simply were not many of them. Their armies were always far smaller than those of their opponents, and their rulers were vastly outnumbered by those they ruled. Numerical advantages are not always decisive, but over time they can wear down the smaller side. To paraphrase Stalin, quantity has a quality all its own. What the Mongols did not have in quantity they made up for in quality, to be sure, and they did more with less than any power in history.

Still, grand strategies that value endless conquest cannot help but overextend. It proved impossible for the khans to rule their extraordinary domains effectively. Some of their leaders made serious attempts at empire consolidation and

maintenance, but the steppe lifestyle trained its sons for predation and exploitation, not governance. Those two basic imperatives—nihilistic destruction and long-term construction—never worked together terribly well.

## The Rise of a Superpower

As far as anyone knows, the Eurasian steppe became the home of migratory, marauding sheepherders shortly after the first people arrived in that inhospitable region.[5] Their long-standing tradition of intercommunal violence temporarily ended in the thirteenth century when one great leader, a Mongol named Temujin, managed to unite his people as well as those over his immediate horizon. Somewhere around 1189 he adopted the name Genghis Khan (roughly "universal ruler") and stated his intention to bring all nomadic peoples into his domain.[6] Many stood in the way of that goal, especially the Tatars, who were the dominant force on the steppe and the traditional enemy of the Mongols. The Tatars were far more numerous and were closely allied with the powerful Jin, a formerly nomadic people in control of northern China, so they were not overly concerned by the boasts of this new enemy leader. This, as it turns out, was a mistake. Genghis's troops swept into Tartar lands and defeated their armies time after time, absorbing all of what had been Tatarstan within a decade. The Great Khan then led Mongol armies south, east, and west. With his nation of between seven hundred thousand and a million people, he conquered lands from China to Ukraine, and from Afghanistan to Siberia. His sons and grandsons would extend the empire even further, often attacking vastly superior forces, at least numerically, including many behind formidable defensive positions.

The remarkable rise of Genghis is a story many times told.[7] No leader before or since accomplished so much with so little: Then as now the hard-power assets of Mongolia are unimpressive, especially when compared to those of its neighbors. Genghis Khan was able to work within those resource constraints and turn the strengths of his enemies into weaknesses, in the process building the largest land empire the world has ever seen. He inhabits his own level in the pantheon of strategic geniuses, even if his methods offend modern sensibilities. Or the sensibilities of any era, for that matter.

### The Conquests

After dispatching the Tatars, Genghis sent his troops into the two-century-old Xi Xia empire, which extended over what is today China's "Inner Mongolia" province and northern Tibet. The Xi Xia (or Tangut) emperors possessed at least

twice as many warriors as the Mongols, but their advantage in numbers proved to be of no consequence. On this campaign Genghis unveiled a series of features that would become common to Mongol invasions: first, diplomats raced ahead of the hordes, hoping to divide their enemies. They were largely successful in reminding the tribes and conglomerations in their path of the hatreds they harbored for one another. Had Genghis faced a unified response to his initial aggression, there would have been no rise of the great Mongolian superpower. But this was not to be. The Jin empire, which ruled the northern half of China, refused to come to the aid of the Xia when the Mongols attacked in 1208. "It is to our advantage when our enemies attack each other," the Jin emperor supposedly said. "Wherein lies the danger to us?"[8] When Genghis turned his attention to them, the Jin were also attacked from the south by their traditional Chinese enemies, the Song. Over and over again, underestimation of Mongol capabilities, no doubt inspired by their relatively small numbers, prevented the kind of cooperation and balancing that could have saved their victims.

Second, Genghis did something against the Xi Xia that other generals would consider extremely risky, or even foolish: he divided his forces in the face of the enemy and attacked multiple targets at once. By doing so he maximized the panic his swift cavalry units generated, making them appear capable of emerging outside the gates of any town, at any time. Because of their thorough intelligence collection, the Mongols were generally aware of the size and composition of the forces they faced, as well as where they were located, but the enemy was never sure how strong the invaders were. Genghis disguised his small numbers by spreading his forces out, engaging only when he felt he had the upper hand. No leader in history understood the psyche of his opponent, and manipulated it, better than the Great Khan.

Finally, even on this initial campaign the Mongols displayed enormous flexibility. They would eagerly adopt practices from their enemies, always seeking lessons that could help them in the future. Perhaps most important, they learned how to conduct sieges. After the first few campaigns, walls would offer no protection from Mongol invaders, which was a major difference between the Mongols and most steppe armies that preceded them. In the Xi Xia campaign they also learned about hydrology: Genghis and his generals diverted the Yellow River to try to wash out a besieged city, but they miscalculated and flooded their own camp. They would employ the same tactic a number of times in the future, never making that mistake again.

Genghis next set his sights on the Jin, an empire that contained at least fifty times the number of people as did Mongolia. He managed to turn that apparent strength into a weakness by sweeping through the countryside and setting many of those millions to flight before him. Refugees created chaos that clogged Jin supply lines and complicated their movements, while the mobile Mongols

remained indifferent to the suffering of the peasantry. The accompanying agricultural collapse spread famine and disease, fueling popular anger and discontent at the government. Mutinies and rebellions followed, some of which were quite substantial.[9] During this and other wars against Chinese people, the Mongols were aided by the region's cultural beliefs about warfare: in addition to China's traditional anti-militarism, its peasants and warriors interpreted battlefield outcomes as indications of divine preference. Victors gained automatic legitimacy, since Heaven would not let its chosen people lose. As the invaders won battle after battle, the Jin people began to suspect that God must support Genghis, and worried that to fight against him was to risk sacrilege. This widespread belief reduced resistance to the Mongols after every victory. Entire regiments occasionally switched to their side, including elite Jin cavalry units.[10] The Mongols reached the Jin capital, Zhongdu (modern-day Beijing) in 1214, and captured it after a fairly brief siege.

Northern Chinese peasants quickly realized that submission would result in good treatment from the Mongols, which also decreased their will to resist. Unlike some previous raiders from the steppe, Genghis did not seek merely to plunder the lands he conquered. He saw the people of these lands as an asset, one that, if managed well, could increase his power. Like an enormous amoeba the Mongol nation sought to absorb its defeated neighbors, emerging stronger after every victorious engagement. Warriors given the choice to switch sides or face execution often chose the former. Horsemen of the various Tatar, Turkish, and Siberian lands the Mongols conquered were especially useful in their future endeavors. Infantry, engineers, and artillerymen from China, Persia, and elsewhere would be integrated into auxiliary units to support the cavalry. Rather than create separate contingents of former enemies with dubious loyalty, new soldiers were integrated into standing units and given an unusual haircut that would complicate desertion.[11] Genghis's armies took in so many Tatars that the two people eventually became nearly synonymous (in Europe this morphed into "Tartars," implying that the Mongols were riders from hell, or *Tartarus* in Latin).[12] Rather than be weakened by the lands it consumed, the Mongol military machine grew stronger with the eating.

Genghis then turned his gaze toward some of the world's great sedentary empires. In 1216 his forces rolled through the cities of the Khitan Dynasty in Transoxania (roughly today's Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and the fertile Ferghana Valley), eventually decapitating its ruler two years later. This brought the Mongols into contact with the greatest Islamic power of the day, one that once again did not take their threat especially seriously. The Khwarazmian Empire, which encompassed most of modern Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and chunks of other countries, was no easy target for nomadic attackers. It was the home of some of the oldest, grandest cities in Asia with names that

still inspire the romantic imagination, like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Merv, all of which were protected by a formidable military. In 1218 Genghis sent a trade delegation to its capital city, Otrar, only to have his diplomats and merchants (and, no doubt, spies) murdered. As the Persian chronicler Juvaini explained, Genghis did not take the news of their massacre well: "the whirlwind of anger cast dust into the eyes of patience and clemency while the fire of wrath flared up with such a flame that it drove the water from his eyes and could be quenched only by the shedding of blood."[13] Invasion followed in 1220.

There was no surer way to infuriate the Great Khan than to mistreat his diplomats. Two hundred years before the Italians supposedly invented modern diplomacy, the Mongols were sending emissaries and semipermanent representatives to capitals around the world. Sometimes the distances they traveled were enormous: the Mongol envoy dispatched to England by Genghis's grandson in 1287 had one of the longest diplomatic treks in history.[14] Most envoys were military men, nobles with direct lineage to Genghis, or scholars, and almost all were members of the cadre of professional diplomats known as *ilchis*. When possible, Christians were sent to Christian capitals and Muslims to Islamic, in the hope that common religion would lead to better outcomes.[15] No matter who they were or what messages they brought, all *ilchis* were direct representatives of the Great Khan, and he expected them to be treated with commensurate respect. In return, Genghis and his successors guaranteed the safety of those emissaries sent his way. Over the years the Mongols received official Persian, Chinese, and European delegations and housed them for quite long stays. Some of our best sources on Mongol habits were papal representatives allowed access to high levels of the court for extended periods. By insisting on the inviolability of official delegations, the Mongols essentially invented diplomatic immunity. Keeping official lines of communication open was vitally important in their efforts to persuade potential enemies to submit rather than fight, a subject to which we will return shortly.

Everyone knew that mistreatment of *ilchis* would be taken personally by the khan and was an instant casus belli; it is remarkable, therefore, how often Mongol ambassadors met bloody or humiliating ends. The messages they carried were demeaning and always demanded recognition of Mongol superiority and submission to their rule, a status that could only be gained by sending a son of the subservient king—and sometimes many more people as well—to serve as hostage/slaves of the khan.[16] Medieval kings tended to react poorly to threats, generally speaking, especially when accompanied by such costly demands. Rather than carrying back a reply, on at least eight separate and substantial occasions Mongol envoys were sent off carrying their own heads. War followed each instance.

The Persians were just one of many who would come to regret not accepting the Mongol offer of peaceful submission. On paper the Khwarazm Shah seemed

to have reason for confidence, since he had more than triple the number of warriors, strong urban citadels, and an enormous population upon which to draw. The Mongols split their forces—which numbered in the neighborhood of two hundred thousand—and attacked multiple areas simultaneously, as was their practice. There was serious division and dissention in the Shah's army, and mistrust between his Persian and Turkish commanders, so he dared not split his forces to parry the Mongol thrusts. The Khwarazmians were defeated repeatedly in the field, and the Mongols reduced one great city after another. Genghis again used his enemy's superior population against it, flushing the peasantry out of small villages and towns in panic until the cities swelled to the bursting point. Bukhara was one of the first to receive surrender terms, but it decided to fight on; in two weeks Mongols were inside its gates, marching the population and their wares outside to meet their fate. Soldiers and aristocrats were killed, artisans and engineers with useful skills absorbed into the horde, and peasants enslaved or slaughtered. Many found themselves transformed into human shields, or even human bridges over the moats surrounding future victim cities. The neighboring city Nishapur met an even worse fate, since Genghis's son-in-law fell during its capture. The Great Khan let his widowed daughter decide the city's punishment, and she chose the complete destruction of all buildings and slaughter of virtually everyone. Each soldier had a quota of civilians to kill and ears were the evidence, collected in sacks. Most other cities fell within days or weeks, but then-great Urgench held out for six months. Eventually the Mongols diverted a nearby river and flooded the city, which was then completely razed to the ground, never to rise again.

The conquest of the Khwarazm was accomplished within three years. Its shah fled to an island in the middle of the Caspian where he succumbed to disease. His son and heir sought an alliance with the sultan of Delhi, who wisely declined, having no interest in inviting the attention of the Mongols. Eventually the young shah fled to Turkey, where he gave up his dream of ever returning home. With this conquest Genghis had built the largest empire on earth, and its expansion was far from over.

The destruction Genghis left in his wake was remarkable, and the suffering without precedent. Casualty reports that have come down to us are literally unbelievable: sources speak of deaths in the millions, at a time when few of these cities could have sustained anywhere near such populations. Though they were swollen with refugees from surrounding areas, the numbers are surely hyperbolic. Even if those exaggerations are wild, however—and not all historians are convinced they are—the campaign against Khwarazm represents one of the worst wartime crimes against civilians in history, and one of the reasons why Genghis's name is today synonymous with ruthless barbarity. According to the careful examination of one prominent historian, in those three years, "more lives

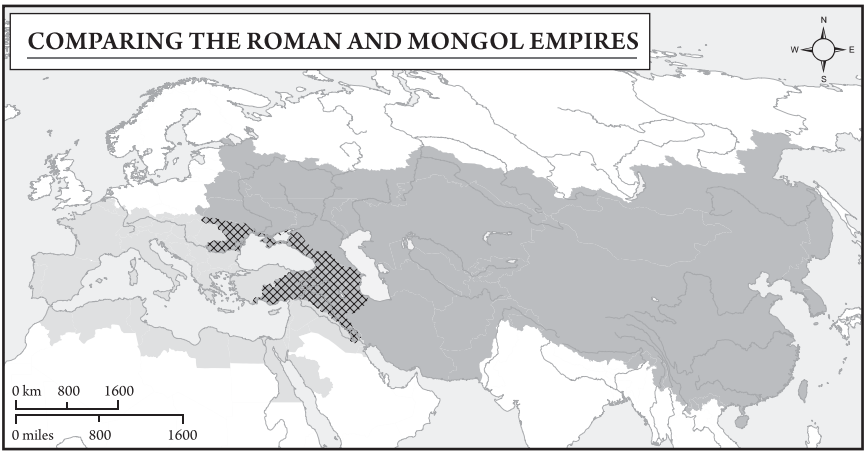



*Figure 4.1* Comparing the Roman and Mongol Empires Credit: Created by reddit user GalXE106, available at https://brilliantmaps.com/roman-vs-mongol-empires/.

were lost probably than in any similar conflict of such duration."[17] History generally does not look kindly upon those willing to employ genocide and ethnic cleansing as deliberate strategic tools.

After dispatching Khwarazm, Genghis turned back to dealt with some rebellious Tengut and died on campaign in 1227. He left quite a brood behind, since those few hours he did not spend in the saddle were apparently productively passed in the bedroom of his royal yurt. Juvaini tells us that his children and grandchildren numbered more than ten thousand, which is supported by the modern genetic finding that as many as one in every two hundred people alive today are his direct descendants.[18] Fortunately for the Mongols, Genghis put a good deal of thought into succession, and chose a new khan from his enormous brood. Ogodei, the Great Khan's third son, would take over as the next leader, an order followed without opposition. It would be the last time that a Mongol transition proceeded smoothly. Under the new khan the conquests continued, although there were some important changes to the way the empire was run.

## On Mongol Grand Strategy

An empire can be won on horseback, according to a saying familiar to the Mongols, but it cannot be ruled on horseback.[19] Genghis told his sons that "conquering an army is not the same as conquering a nation. You may conquer an army with superior tactics and men, but you can conquer a nation only by conquering the hearts of the people."[20] These words seemed to resonate with

Ogodei, who gave substantially more thought to governing than did his father, instituting a series of reforms to give the Mongol Empire a chance to last longer than those of other nomadic steppe folk. In most places the locals outnumbered the occupiers by as much as a thousand to one, a ratio that is, to understate, unfavorable for effective imperial administration. Historians commonly criticize Ogodei for straying from the tactics that brought the Mongols to power, which is a bit odd, since one can hardly pillage one's way to status-quo governance.

Many things are not entirely clear about these efforts. Interpretations of the khans' strategic thinking are necessarily based on guesswork, either that of contemporary observers or historians since. Some wisdom of Genghis was collected in *The Great Book of Yasa*, which also may well have contained thoughts about grand strategy, but all copies were lost.[21] His early years are shrouded in legend, most of which comes from the lone source to have survived from his time: *The Secret History of the Mongols*, written in the late 1220s, presumably by people who knew the Great Khan and his family. The Mongols did not write much of anything else. They were generally an illiterate people perfectly comfortable allowing their enemies to record their exploits. As it turns out, the people that the Mongols killed, raped, and plundered tended to take a dim view of their killers, rapists, and plunderers.[22] Contemporary accounts of the Mongols portray them as mindless, ferocious barbarians, with bloodlust matched only by military prowess. As we will see, that was not a reputation that the Mongols resisted. They were interested more in obedience than rebuttal, content to let posterity care for itself. Nomadic cultures leave behind little physical evidence, so it is unlikely that new archaeological discoveries will advance our knowledge much further.

Thus the modern analyst is left to speculate about the factors that weighed into the decisions of Genghis and his successors. We know almost nothing for certain about their priorities or their fears, nor can anyone assess their true motivations. We must do our best with the actions they took, and determine their grand strategy based on whom they did and did not attack, how they acted toward different subject peoples, the administrations and rules they established, and how they governed and declined.

One thing we can say with certainty is that the Mongols had a clear priority list that guided their choice of targets. They first attacked those societies with the warriors they respected the most, the steppe nomads. The Tatars, Xi Xia, and Jin came before the great, immobile empires of Central Asia and China. Sedentary powers by definition were not going anywhere, so the Mongols could afford to pass them by and return at their leisure. And since nomadic societies were also those that could be most easily absorbed into the horde, conquering them would strengthen the army rather than weaken it.

Some historians have suggested that the Mongol expansion was designed to make the steppe safe, and that they conquered a belt of sedentary states in order to surround their homeland with vassals.[23] While possible, it is not really clear that the Mongols ever thought in terms of buffers. Defensive imperialism—the desire to expand in order to preempt the threat posed by frightening neighbors—was never a factor for them because they do not seem to have feared anyone. Sedentary powers did not threaten to project power into the steppe, and the Mongols would not have been in much danger should any have considered doing so. Insecurity does not seem to have factored into Mongol thinking, especially regarding agricultural societies that they considered ridiculous and effete. Their conquests were offensive, designed to enrich themselves, win glory and, to some extent, have fun.

Some things can be said with more certainty. For one, battlefield honor, at least as commonly understood by their enemies, appears to have been essentially absent from Mongol strategic culture. The khans did not follow the kind of rules on the battlefield that other leaders did, nor did they worry about their reputations. Specifically foreign was the notion of the "honorable defeat," which the vanquished often use to salve their wounds. To the Mongols, victory alone justified warfare. "Winning by clever deception or cruel trickery was still winning and carried no stain on the bravery of the warriors," wrote anthropologist Jack Weatherford.[24] According to an oft-repeated legend, the first time Genghis encountered a walled city, he promised the inhabitants that he would lift the siege if they supplied him with one thousand cats and ten thousand swallows. When they complied, the Mongols supposedly set the poor beasts on fire and released them back into the city. This tale was first related by a seventeenth-century Mongol chronicler and is almost certainly apocryphal, but it was told without embarrassment as a point of national pride, because winning was all that mattered.[25] Any tactic was acceptable, because to the Mongols (as related by Juvaini), "war is fraud."[26]

We can also state with some confidence that Mongol strategic decisions were heavily shaped by superstition. Our sources mention over and over that Mongol leaders relied on advice from the spiritual world that came to them through various seers and diviners. Genghis did not send his troops into India, we are told, because of "unfavorable auguries."[27] Perhaps similar foretold of disaster if his successors set the hordes loose on Europe. Without the proper portents and omens, the armies did not move. When they did, however, those armies were very difficult to stop.

The central challenge the Mongols faced was numerical. They were always a minority, whether on the battlefield or in stately pleasure domes, and had to fashion ways to overcome their small numbers to both conquer and then rule.

They addressed this weakness by employing two main tools: a peerless, highly trained, disciplined, mobile military, and pure terror.

## The Mongol Military

Nomads practiced total war, in the sense that every member of society was engaged in the cause.[28] Their campaigns required full mobilization, and the entire nation often traveled along. All males between fifteen and seventy were in the military unless physically unable, and women played important roles too, by both supporting the warriors and sometimes taking part in the battles themselves.[29] There were no such things as civilians in medieval Mongolia.

The military that nation produced was, quite simply, the greatest the world has ever seen. At its core were mounted archers, cavalrymen who like all steppe warriors were essentially born in the saddle. Training began in childhood and continued throughout the course of the soldier's life, in both friendly and enemy territory. Units worked together toward a common goal in ways unusual for medieval militaries, most of which valued individual skill and small-unit action. The Mongols followed a corporate approach to fighting, one that led to glory for the army rather than any specific warrior. Like all great professional militaries, training and preparation allowed them to prevail against vastly superior forces, especially those composed of part-time warriors. Each Mongol, according to Juvaini, "was to a thousand men of the Sultan's army as a wolf to a flock of sheep or a red-hot coal to a dry cane-brake."[30]

The transformation of an independent-minded people into a disciplined fighting machine was perhaps the greatest achievement of the greatest khan. Mongol battle tactics required remarkable coordination, and the delayed, organized plunder that followed the fall of a city was without precedent. Unique rules require draconian punishment if they are to be followed, and Genghis's were no exception. Papal envoy Carpini noted that the death penalty awaited any warrior caught in the act of unauthorized plunder, and that collective punishment was common. He argued that the Mongols were "more obedient to their lords and masters" than any other people in the world, and that the warriors did not deceive their leaders "in words nor deeds."[31]

New warriors, whether Mongol or allied, were inculcated quickly into a community approach to both hunting and warfare through annual training exercises. Units engaged in a group hunting technique known as the *nerge*, which involved many thousands of riders forming a massive circle stretching over several kilometers.[32] The *nerge* lines gradually contracted, herding animals toward the center, and riders attempted to prevent anything from escaping. Success required excellent communications, cooperation, and, most of all, horsemanship.

Substituting human prey for the animals of the steppe did not require a novel skill set. The hunt also served as psychological conditioning for the warriors. "In war," noted historian Timothy May, "the Mongols tended to view the enemy more as livestock to be herded than human beings."[33] Large hunts were undertaken every autumn, even while major campaigns were underway, in order to train new generations of both warriors and horses. The Mongols needed many of the latter, since each soldier traveled with a group of mounts. Replenishing their ranks was a constant, arduous process.[34]

Genghis did not choose subordinates based on clan, nor did he promote according to class or tribal affiliation.[35] The Mongol military was a meritocracy, one in which a lowly shepherd could rise to become a senior officer if he possessed the requisite talent. As a result, it produced some of history's greatest generals, including the famous Subedei, who might have been the greatest of all.[36] The Mongols had a thoroughly modern military in many other respects as well: their intelligence and communication systems, for example, were second to none. All campaigns were preceded by the khan's swift scouts, and riders also kept the disparate columns in constant contact. This was no mean feat for an illiterate army; oral orders had to be remembered verbatim for days, which was often accomplished by matching them with familiar steppe songs. Logistics were rarely a problem, since Mongol armies carried all they needed with them and picked up more on the way, allowing their horses eating in pre-scouted pastures. There were no lengthy, vulnerable supply trains for enemies to exploit.

Genghis was also one of history's great organizers. Following an old steppe tradition, he employed a decimal system, according to which ten warriors would form the smallest Mongol unit (an *aravt*), and ten such units would combine (into a *zuut*), and ten of those would be a *mingghan*. Ten *mingghans*, or ten thousand men, were called a *tumen*, the rough equivalent of a modern division. Each *tumen* was capable of acting independently, traveling with its own support staff and medics. An elite *tumen* called the *keshig* was kept in the rear and functioned as a guard for the Great Khan. It also was the training unit for Mongol officers, the senior-most of whom all had gone through the *keshig* at some point in their careers.[37] This de facto military academy assured uniformity and consistency across units, and a large degree of interoperability even among those stationed far apart for decades.

The weaponry of the Mongols was not substantially different from those of their enemies, especially the other nomadic peoples. Their composite bow, while substantially more efficient than any used in Europe at the time, was essentially the same as that used by the Huns nine centuries prior. It was their tactics, not their bows, that set them apart from the rest.

The Mongols approached battle from a fundamentally different perspective than that of their sedentary enemies. In agricultural societies, to retreat was to

lose. When land is the object of contestation, the side that holds it will be the victor and those who lose their farms and cities the vanquished. For nomads, no particular area is vital as long as there is sufficient grass for the horses. Retreat lost nothing and carried no stigma. The nature of battle was also more fluid on horseback: to archers accustomed to shooting while in motion, direction of movement is not terribly important.

Mongol tactics grew from that nomadic perspective. They employed three common techniques, and did not shy away from repetition because their enemies neither coordinated nor shared military intelligence.[38] Like a vaudeville act, the Mongol armies put on the same show everywhere they went, and it always took new places by surprise. The first and most devastating of these was the one described in the counterfactual exercise above, the feigned retreat. Once even the most disciplined enemies believed they had the Mongols on the run, bloodlust overpowered caution and pursuit began. Chasing Mongols could last for days or even weeks but it always ended the same way, in an area carefully chosen, with few of the exhausted pursuers surviving to warn future armies of the trap.

The second basic maneuver resembled the *nerge*. Once the enemy was engaged and tied down in front, two great enveloping arcs of warriors would ride out from behind the Mongol lines and sweep around to the rear. When they had their prey surrounded, the Mongols would ride around its perimeter and shower the center with arrows. The noose would tighten, and escape would be quite difficult—except for those occasions that the Mongols purposely left a hole in their trap, through which the terrified mass would flow, right into a prearranged, bloody coup de grâce.

The final tactic was the Mongol version of a frontal assault. Horsemen would advance at high speed in long, single-file columns perpendicular to enemy lines. Each man in front would fire repeatedly until he closed within thirty to forty meters of the enemy, at which point he would turn and head to the back of the line. The next warrior would then take his turn. This tactic would rain an enormous number of arrows on the enemy formation, many of which would be fired at speeds high enough to pierce armor at short range. This maneuver took substantial skill and coordination to execute without collisions and chaos, especially as the enemy fired back. Such choreography was not what medieval armies were used to witnessing, and one suspects that it added to their already heightened levels of anxiety.

May referred to Mongol approach to invasion as the "tsunami strategy," since it swarmed in over a broad area, overwhelmed defenders, destroyed everything in its wake, and then receded.[39] Often only token forces were left behind, but the threat of the reemergence of the main force was always present. Once they crossed into enemy territory the Mongols could strike anywhere, which caused

fear and panic everywhere. It was that panic, the terror that they inspired in their enemies, that was the greatest weapon in the Mongol arsenal.

## Cruelty and Terror

"The men are inhuman and of the nature of beasts, rather to be called monsters than men, thirsting after and drinking blood, and tearing and devouring the flesh of human beings." So wrote the thirteenth-century monk Matthew Paris, despite having never encountered an actual Mongol. "They have no human laws, know no mercy, and are more cruel than lions or bears," he had heard, "and when they have no blood, they greedily drink disturbed and even muddy water."[40] Such descriptions often preceded Mongol armies, inflating their savagery and cruelty, and generating terror in their path. Today the name of the Great Khan has become synonymous with tyranny (being "to the right of Genghis Khan" is reserved for our ultra-reactionaries) and "Mongol" with barbarity and inhumanity. This, as it turns out, was exactly as they wanted it. While many great powers used cruelty as a strategic tool, none did it so as deliberately—and so cleverly—as did the Mongols.

The lands they invaded often contained many large, walled citadels, and the Mongols never had enough men to reduce them all. If every city resisted, their efforts would have bogged down and risked failure. The Mongols needed a way to encourage surrender and avoid time-consuming, casualty-inducing sieges. They did this by offering their targets a simple choice: surrender and live, or fight and die. When cities chose the latter, the Mongols endeavored to make an example of them and spread the story far and wide. Slaughter served a strategic purpose. Genghis clearly thought that maximizing the cruel treatment of one city would influence the cost-benefit analysis of the next. This was a fairly standard policy for invading armies in Asia, practiced in ancient times right up through World War II, but the Mongols perfected the art, methodically destroying the buildings as well as the population of the cities who refused to surrender. Some never recovered.

Their meticulous, disciplined city-sacking technique was designed to plunder everything of value and find all hiding civilians. The aristocracy always suffered the most, which was the opposite experience that most cities had when medieval invaders breached the walls. The poor masses became tools: small groups were released to spread word of Mongol ferocity around the countryside, but many became enslaved and brought to the next target city. Some peasants were forced to build walls or fill in moats (sometimes with their bodies), and others were slammed against doors like human battering rams. The effect such practices had on the psyche of those on the other side of the gates should not be underestimated.

Genghis sought to publicize, rather than hide, his atrocities. His public diplomacy had goals opposite of those today: whereas modern states aim to win hearts and minds abroad, Mongols only sought fear. They welcomed hyperbole, believing that their interests were served best "not by the acts of warriors, but by the pens of scribes and scholars," in the words of Weatherford.[41] Reports of impossibly high casualties and wanton acts of cruelty were encouraged. Survivors of Mongol victories and post-victory massacres became their unwitting propaganda agents. Peasants terrified by stories of Mongol inhumanity fled when the hordes neared, complicating the logistical challenges faced by defenders. Fragile medieval economies and food distribution systems collapsed. The number of people behind walls grew far past the point that they could be cared for, shortening the length of sieges. Large populations of civilians were a strategic liability for those societies hampered by basic human decency, which was something the Mongols appear to have lacked.

Thus the Mongols butchered innocents for both tactical and strategic purposes, to end sieges and prevent them. Some cities would choose to fight—as Juvaini noted, surrender cuts against human nature, representing "to mankind because of their love of country as the departure of the soul from the body"—but many more would not.[42] Savagery did not win friends or admirers, but if it led to a reduction in casualties among their precious, highly trained warriors, the Mongols would employ it without hesitation. Their mindless cruelty was not as mindless as it may have appeared to their victims.

Over time the Mongols began to conceive of themselves as imperialists rather than pillagers. At first they did not seek to occupy, so they had little concern for the condition of the areas they overran. On those occasions that they made up their minds to stay the locals suffered even more, since the few are easier to rule than the many, especially by a small army whose members were always more interested in ransacking and looting. By the time of Genghis's death, his Mongols had come to accept the notion that occupation also had its enjoyable aspects.[43] His raids produced an empire that was twice the size of Rome's, and it was just getting started.

## The Post-Genghis Khans

Ogodei's reign as Great Khan (1229–1241), according to eminent historian Peter Jackson, "is represented universally by the sources as mild and beneficent."[44] Then again, most rulers are going to seem mild and beneficent when compared to Genghis. Those same sources relate a tale of when the new khan, angered by some unauthorized marriages in a city under his control, ordered

all girls over the age of seven as well as those recently married, some four thousand in all, publicly gang-raped in front of their assembled families. Those who survived were divided out to various merchants, sold to brothels, or added to the khan's harem.[45] So relative Mongol beneficence should be kept in perspective.

Ogodei believed that his people needed a capital befitting a great empire. Genghis never settled into a permanent home, preferring instead to travel constantly with his entire nation in true nomadic style. After no small amount of internal debate, Ogodei chose a site for a great city he called Karakorum, deep in the Mongol heartland, and began to build. Glory and prestige were hardly the only motivations. Although a mobile nation did not need to fear a rear-guard attack against its capital, it also offered no set place for taxes and tribute to be sent, or for envoys to visit.[46] To some observers, the decision to establish Karakorum marked a turning point in Mongol history, a recognition that the nomadic lifestyle provided an impractical foundation for imperial governance.

The invasions continued. Some disagreement evidently arose in the Mongol leadership circles about whether to send the hordes east or west, so rather than fight among themselves they decided to do both. Ogodei ordered the first of what would be several invasions of the Song Dynasty in southern China, as well as an attack into eastern Europe. The former was unsuccessful, and although the latter ran into twice as many Russian troops as Mongols, it pressed on, unintimidated. When the hordes arrived at their first European kingdom, locals had no idea who these new invaders were.[47] Word soon spread that the Mongols had overrun a series of infidel Muslim cities, so there was hope that they were the advance guard of the descendants of Prester John, the legendary Christian king that medieval Europeans believed ruled a pious kingdom far in the East, whose only weakness was that he never existed. "We took no precautions against them," said the Queen of Georgia, "because we believed them to be Christians."[48] Shortly thereafter Giorgi III of Georgia (nicknamed "the Brilliant," perhaps ironically) became the first European vassal of the Mongols.

The Russian winter has often been a great asset in the fight against invaders, but the Mongols actually preferred to attack in the cold months. They were used to harsh temperatures and found frozen streams and rivers easier for their horses to cross. As was their practice, the Mongols divided their forces and thrust in several directions at once, assuring that no Russian prince could come to the aid of another without leaving his own people dangerously unprotected. Their cities soon met the fate of those in Asia. By this point the Mongols were commonly using gunpowder and other explosives to reduce city walls, which produced sounds that some chroniclers interpreted as trained attack dragons.[49] As always, the Mongols were happy to let frightening misperceptions spread. One by one, Russian citadels fell to the invaders. An attack into Poland and Hungary, and

repeated defeats of some of Europe's best knights, followed. One such battle produced nine large sacks of ears for the Great Khan.[50]

Geography favored the invaders. The Mongols were able to attack on their own terms without any concern of coordination on part their victims. Even if their enemies had considered cooperating, doing so would have proven difficult given the empire's central position and the rudimentary state of medieval communication. Russia could not get messages to Persia, much less China or Japan, regarding either potential policy coordination or even basic Mongol battle tactics.[51] Balancing against the Mongols was nearly impossible.

The empire's littorals received a ten-year reprieve when Ogodei succumbed to alcohol poisoning in 1241. The khan's instructions that his grandson was to succeed him were ignored, and fighting broke out over the succession. Ogodei's eldest son, Guyuk, eventually emerged from the chaos and provided some stability for a brief and rather uneventful period, but his death in 1248 (caused, to no one's surprise, by excessive drinking) prolonged the period of internal instability and external passivity. Guyuk's cousin Mongke succeeded him, wresting control of the imperial line from the house of one of Genghis's sons to another. These were the first times that Mongols fought each other over succession issues, but they would hardly be the last.

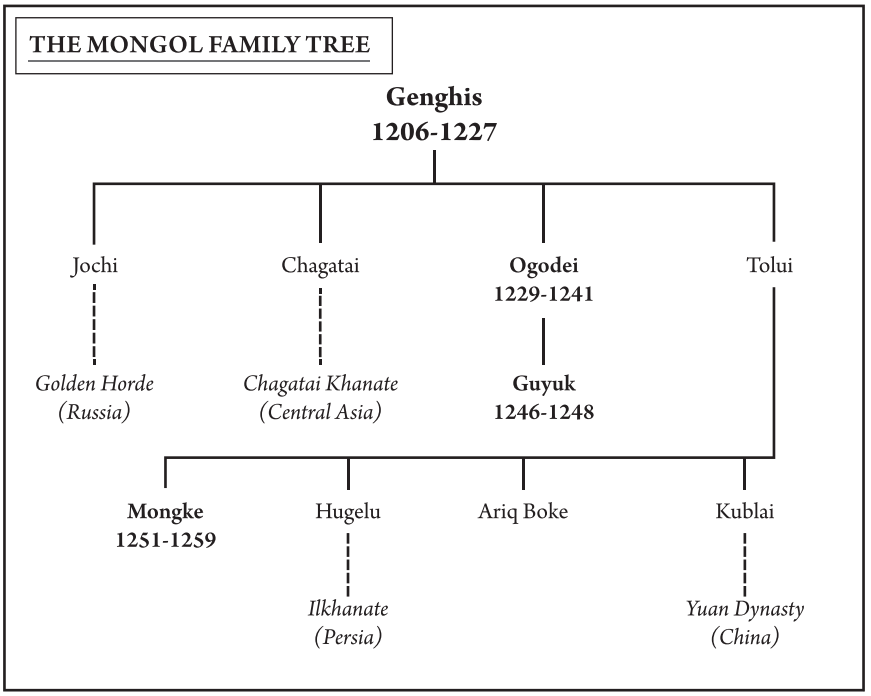



*Figure 4.2* The Mongol Family Tree Credit: My creation.

Succession was to become a major problem for the Mongols, one exacerbated by the fact that most of their leaders lived rather short lives, even by medieval standards. Their diet was not conducive to longevity, consisting as it did almost exclusively of meat, blood, and milk.[52] Gout and obesity posed problems, but alcoholism was the main killer. Steppe warriors traditionally drank fermented mare's milk, which was only available in the summer months while their mares lactated. Conquest afforded the Mongols access to a wide variety of year-round booze, which they consumed in large quantities. Remarkable quantities. At one banquet at the height of Mongke's reign, seven thousand guests drank the equivalent of nineteen measures of alcohol each, which apparently was typical.[53] The resulting short life spans complicated efforts to stabilize the rapidly expanding empire.

In 1251 the new khan set about unifying the Mongol elite, which was itching for a return to the national pastime of conquest.[54] Mongke obliged, putting each of his three brothers in charge of large formations, and set two of them in motion. Kublai went east, toward Song China; the youngest, Ariq Boke, was left behind to monitor events in Mongolia; and Hugelu drove southwest, through modern-day Iran and Iraq to the Mediterranean.

Along the way Hugelu's troops had to reduce hundreds of fortresses manned by a Syrian sect known to history as the Assassins. Some were built on nearly inaccessible mountaintops, but the Assassins soon found out that "nearly inaccessible" is in fact much more accessible than "inaccessible." Muslim engineers captured during the Khwarazm campaign decades earlier helped the Mongols construct a variety of new siege engines and weaponry, and the supposedly impregnable fortifications fell one after the other. One Assassin castle at Alamut that had held out against invading armies for eleven years a century before fell to the Mongols in two weeks.[55] Wary of their reputation for antisocial action against enemy leaders, Hugelu ordered all surviving assassins put to the sword.

The Sunni caliph in Baghdad could not have been sad to see the Shia Assassins fall, but his pleasure was no doubt tempered by the knowledge that he might be next. Relations were tolerable between the caliph and the great khan, since the former had agreed during Genghis's time to accept a subservient position and send annual tribute and hostages to the Mongols. When Mongke insisted that the caliph travel to Karakorum and bend the knee in person, however, things changed. The caliph refused, displaying the kind of insubordination Mongols generally found irritating. Hugelu drove south into modern-day Iraq with about 150,000 soldiers, which was (as usual) an army far smaller than that of the defender. The Mongols reached the Tigris in 1258 and after a brief siege entered the city and began the standard methodical looting. The caliph himself was granted a royal's death: he was wrapped in a carpet and run over by Mongol horsemen. The golden age of Islamic civilization died with him.

Mongke's brief reign constituted the high-water mark of Mongol superpower in Eurasia. Although the completion of its greatest single accomplishment—conquest of the Song Dynasty in China—was still to come, and although the territory under Mongol control would yet expand, the era of large, transcontinental campaigns had come to an end. Wars of expansion continued, but over time they became less catastrophic for the conquered societies. Mongke's generation did not seek genocidal destruction but healthy, prosperous lands to rule, so it engaged in far more post-conflict reconstruction than did its predecessors. This was not a universal policy—large swaths of Persia were converted into permanent pastureland, for instance—but on average the level of massacre and rapine decreased as the years went on.[56] The Mongols began to consider ruling as much as conquest.

Mongke Khan died while on campaign in 1259, which threatened to set off another succession crisis. Rather than travel to Karakorum to vie for control, however, the leaders of the empire's various regions decided instead to consolidate their enormous fiefdoms. The brothers of Mongke effectively divided the empire among themselves and their cousins. Although there was a nominal Great Khan, the position became more of a first-among-equals since no longer did the regions coordinate policy or action. Predictably, they soon were just as likely to fight one another as their various external enemies. Mongol unipolarity effectively came to an end with Mongke's death, and by 1260 the vast empire his grandfather founded was divided four ways. Though nominally one domain, each part soon began to chart its own path.

The strongest of the successor states, and the only one to keep expanding in significant ways, was in the east. Kublai, the oldest living brother, became Great Khan although he was never able to dictate policy for the other khanates. He set out to conquer the greatest dynasty in the medieval world, the Song of southern China, who protected their one hundred million+ people with the world's largest army. Song warships controlled the large rivers that snaked through their land, which had been heavily fortified over the years to ward off raids by their northern enemies, the Jin. The Song, like, countless generations of Chinese leaders before them, had dealt with many raiders from the steppe but never ones intent on true conquest. Until now.

The Song leadership was divided by intense disagreements over how to wage the war, something that historians since have blamed on court eunuchs.[57] Their power had also been diminished by decades of relative stability. As is always the case everywhere, in times of peace, officers often rise through the ranks for reasons unrelated to skill on the battlefield.[58] When the Mongols arrived, the Song army was led by inexperienced generals, many of whom had qualifications that were more political than military. The traditional Chinese disesteem of warriors made recruiting good soldiers difficult, which was especially true when

China faced no major threat. "Many descendants of military officials were failing to maintain their families' traditions of service in the army out of a sense of shame," wrote one historian, "now that the position of 'soldier' had slid so far down the social scale."[59] The large Song army and even its indispensable navy were thus weaker than they appeared. To the Mongols, of course, none of this mattered; they paid little attention to the odds of success. Strong Song or weak, an attack was coming.

The Mongols scored one victory after another and were closing in on the Chinese heartland from three directions in 1256 when the death of Mongke granted the Song a twenty-year reprieve. Kublai's position of Great Khan was not secure enough for him to renew the attack until 1276. Before long the mountain citadels fell to the invaders and Mongols entered the Song capital Hangzhou, which at the time was the world's most populous and sophisticated city.[60] All of China was then unified under one government, albeit that of a foreign barbarian, for the first time since the Tang collapse. Kublai established his capital at Beijing and founded a new dynasty, which he named *Yuan*, or "great origin."

Meanwhile, fighting forty-seven hundred miles away from Hangzhou was Hugelu, who had pulled the bulk of his troops away from the front lines in Syria to await developments when word reached him of the death of Mongke. In short order he recognized Kublai as Great Khan, even if he did not agree to take direct orders from his brother. Hugelu inherited the Arab and Persian lands in the Middle East, which became known as the "Ilkhanate," or "submissive khanate," uniting the area the Sassanids had ruled a thousand years before. An Egyptian army known to history as the Mamluks and composed primarily of former slaves took advantage of the Mongol troop movement, attacking those left behind in Syria, which was about a quarter of the original force. The victory this slave army won at Ayn Jalut in 1260 was strategically irrelevant but psychologically crucial for the people in the region, since it represented the first time that a Mongol army had been defeated in a relatively even contest. They were men, it turned out, not invincible demons. Years of fighting followed, but Hugelu was never able to crush the Mamluks, who reached north, to an unlikely target, for help.

The third of the successor states was centered in what is today western Russia. The so-called Golden Horde established a capital on the lower Volga and soon engaged in a series of conflicts with Hugelu over the exact location of its southern boundary. The Horde allied with the Mamluks in its struggle with the Ilkhanate, even attacking their brothers to the south in 1318. More than either the Yuan or the Ilkhanate, the Golden Horde maintained traditional nomadic ways and mores. The tension between conquerors and more far-sighted nation builders, between the old ways and new, would eventually tear the great empire apart.

Last and least, a fourth Mongol successor state ruled over the traditional heartland in the steppe. This "Chagatai" Khanate, named after the son of Genghis who

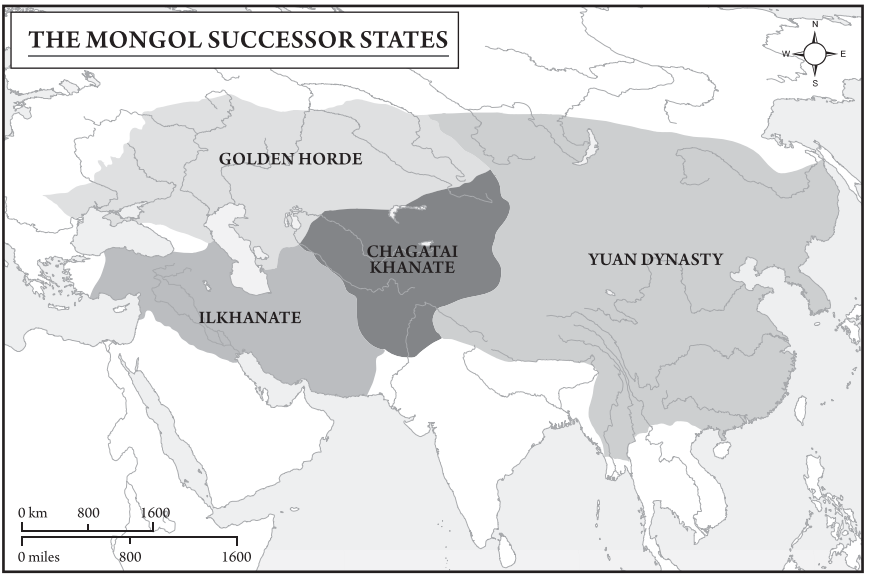



*Figure 4.3* The Mongol Successor States Credit: My additions to the basic outline available at https://rud.is/khan/subdivisions-of-the-mongol-empire.html.

ruled it when Mongke died, included Mongolia, Uzbekistan, and Xinjiang. Their leaders had fewer locals to deal with, and like the Golden Horde maintained a traditional nomadic lifestyle. The Chagatais made no effort to build a nation among their conquered people, and would on occasion sack their own cities, like Samarkand and Bukhara, for no apparent strategic reason.[61] Like their Mongol forefathers, they apparently could just never refuse an opportunity to pillage.

## Mongol Civil Wars and the End of Expansion

Back in Karakorum, Ariq Boke grew impatient and unhappy with the trends unfolding in China and Persia. Adaptation and regionalization threatened to change the character of the empire, he thought, rendering it sedentary and decidedly un-Mongol. He objected in particular to the Sinicization that his older brother Kublai was undertaking and refused to recognize him as Great Khan. Insults and recriminations began to fly, with Kublai accusing his brother of sabotaging the war against the Song. Soon the two were engaged in a full-scale civil war, during which Kublai cut off all supplies coming into Karakorum in an effort to starve the Mongol capital into submission. Ariq Boke was abandoned by his allies and within a few years the war was over. Kublai had reasserted dominance.

This did not end his problems, however. While Kublai struggled to convince the other khanates that he was their leader, legitimacy questions arose in Beijing

as well. His Yuan Dynasty ruled an enormous, restive population that would always consider Kublai and his rather tiny army to be outsiders. He knew that there were few better tools with which to win hearts and minds than glorious conquests, and he also knew that few places were more disdained by the Chinese than Japan.[62] Expansion thus became a tool of governance for the Yuan. Kublai spent the last years of his life pushing the boundaries of the empire outward in order to appeal to both his Mongol and Chinese subjects, and met with mixed success.

One area that the empire managed to absorb was Korea, although it took three Mongol invasions to do so. In 1270 the Korean crown prince offered submission to Kublai rather than experience a fourth. Repeated efforts to add their first overseas territories were less successful, however. Water had previously stopped Mongol expansion, but the Yuan put to use the Song ships and sailors they inherited when Hangzhou surrendered. Envoys first arrived in Japan in 1266 demanding surrender and dismissing the Japanese emperor as merely the "king of a little country."[63] Four more emissaries arrived in the next three years, none of whom was even allowed to come ashore. Kublai then ordered the construction of something that had never before been part of the Mongol military: an invasion fleet.

The fate of the two Mongol invasions are central components of the Japanese national identity. The first horde made it ashore in 1274 and was met by a force of some 6000 samurai who beat it back to its ships. A storm may have intervened—it was curiously unmentioned by many contemporary sources—but weather was certainly a factor hampering the second, larger attempt of 1281. The various clans of Samurai fought together, for the nation, rather than against one another; unlike most Mongol targets, the Japanese managed to remain united. Their coordination and a *kamizake*, or divine wind—as well as Mongol inexperience at sea—saved Japan from the fate of China and Korea.

Mongol envoys also arrived at the court of the kingdom of Burma in 1273 and met the usual fate, this time supposedly for not removing their shoes with sufficient enthusiasm in the presence of the Burmese king.[64] The jungle fighting that ensued was particularly unpleasant, and included the use of war elephants, but the outcome was the same: Burma was added to the empire in 1278.

Kublai also sent emissaries to Java, where they were merely de-nosed rather than decapitated. This proved sufficient to enrage the khan, however, and an invasion followed. The long voyage and tropical conditions weakened the Mongol force, which gave up after a few months of hard fighting. More successful ventures aimed at the Annam and Champa kingdoms (in northern and southern Vietnam, respectively), both of which chose submission after a series of inconclusive events on the battlefield. As was to be their practice, the Vietnamese avoided big engagements in favor of what would later be considered guerrilla activities. Despite prolonged efforts, the Mongols never exercised effective control.

Here the expansion stopped. The area under Mongol domination in one form or another had reached its maximum extent, bounded by (going clockwise) the Arctic, the Pacific, India, Syria and Poland. Now all the khans had to do was govern this empire, the greatest the world has ever seen, and keep their enemies and hundreds of millions of subjects at bay. It was a strategic challenge of their first order, one to which the Mongols did not rise.

## Empire Maintenance

Nothing changes a society as quickly as the rapid influx of unimaginable wealth. Genghis found that his people, previously of simple taste, soon grew accustomed to luxury and decadence. "The appetites of his own people were insatiable," writes a sympathetic observer. "Novelties became necessities, and each caravan of cargo stimulated a craving for more. The more he conquered, the more he had to conquer."[65] Living standards, once raised, cannot be allowed to fall. And since his soldiers did not have regular salaries but lived on plunder alone, it was particularly important to keep expanding.

Mongolia may not have had economists, but its leaders were smart enough to recognize quickly that trade brought substantial benefit at little cost. As a result, the great caravans marching across the silk roads connecting the Muslim world with China flourished under Mongol rule. While there is no evidence that trade affected the choice of targets for invasion, its facilitation often became a priority after conquest had been completed.[66] Whereas many medieval societies denigrated commerce and degraded merchants, the Mongols valued them and promoted their interests.

The Mongols instituted a set of policies designed to inspire exchange and growth. Prices paid for goods in Karakorum were purposely inflated, to encourage the development of more trade.[67] The khans also established a common currency that could be used across the empire and tried with varying degrees of success to introduce paper money, which for some reason worked better in China than Persia. Finally, the Mongols made a point of protecting tradesmen in their midst and treating brigands and pirates like enemies. Economic activity flourished, at least in those places that were not destroyed utterly during conquest, which the khans hoped would keep the locals pliant and receptive to rule by foreigners. For a while, the people in their charge experienced something akin to a Pax Mongolica.

Genghis's successors also discovered that, over time, taxation could be even more profitable than plunder. The Mongols had supposedly considered annihilating the entire Jin population before eventually deciding (probably at the urging of Chinese advisors) that more wealth could be squeezed from

unmassacred subject peoples.[68] Mongke instituted an empire-wide tax system, demanding that all sedentary people pay for the privilege of being his subjects.[69] Since successful taxation required knowledge of population numbers, the Mongols instituted censuses in the areas under their control. Regular military salaries were created for the first time as well, all of which were paid by local taxes. This gave the soldiery an incentive to aid, or at least not actively hinder, reconstruction and development. The better the peasants did, the better off the army was too.

Kublai and Hugelu made valiant attempts to continue what their uncle Ogodei had started. Their successor khans tried to build nations where none had existed before, ones designed to be convenient for the rulers and yet just for the people. Over the course the coming decades they were to try a number of avenues but mostly fail, in the process learning what all nation builders have discovered, that destroying is much easier than building. No matter how much foreign rulers may improve the economic and social circumstances of their people, they can never overcome the basic impediment to their long-term legitimacy: local nationalism and pride. Their primary tools of conquest—their military and terror—were of limited use in governance. But their failure was not for lack of trying, especially in China.

Above all, the Mongol approach to governance sought to be practical. Their policy toward religion was quite progressive and rational, for instance, especially for the pious Middle Ages. "Being the adherent of no religion and the follower of no creed," observed a horrified Juvaini, Genghis "eschewed bigotry, and the preference of one faith to another."[70] This was a bit of an exaggeration, since the Mongols were hardly atheists. They were monotheists but flexible ones, worshipping Tengri, the god of the eternal blue sky, who apparently did not object to multiple, simultaneous beliefs. Spreading religion was never a goal of their grand strategy, and the Mongols realized that spiritual flexibility could be useful for governing. Genghis instituted an empire-wide religious freedom policy, allowing his subjects to worship as they pleased and even encouraging debate and discussion among representatives of different faiths. Many of his descendants, especially those who became more sedentary, eventually adopted the religion of their subjects. Those in the Middle East and Central Asia became Muslim, while the Chinese branch of the family converted to Buddhism. One suspects that, had they driven south through India or west to England, we may have seen Hindu and Christian Mongol leaders at some point as well.

This flexible approach to faith was indicative of the general Mongol attitude toward governance. Whereas the Romans sought to transform the cities of Iberia, North Africa and Syria into miniature Romes, and the English would someday aim to create Indian subjects "more British than Indian," the Mongols adopted local ways and changed *themselves*. Kublai was the shining example: He

built a Chinese capital and established a Chinese government. He ordered official portraits made in the Chinese style, and gave Chinese names to himself, his dynasty and posthumously to his ancestors. Rather than make subjects more Mongolian, Kublai made his administration more Chinese.

Among the many aspects of Mongolian culture unimposed on their subjects was language.[71] Unlike other imperial tongues, Mongolian did not take root in conquered lands. There are no Mongolian equivalents of the romance languages, and it is not the first language of any other country today, unlike Spanish or English. As destructive as their conquests were, the marks the Mongols left on the world were not deep and eroded quickly, like so many hoofprints.

Kublai also tried to win hearts and minds of commoners by attacking the privileges of those who had oppressed them for centuries. Aristocrats always fared poorly when Mongols came to town, and those in China were no exception. The Mongols standardized the legal system and rendered all people equal before it, at least in theory. They decreased the cruelty of punishments, reducing the number of crimes that could result in the death penalty. The rate of capital punishment dropped dramatically under the Yuan emperors, eventually reaching a level roughly equal to that of China today. In addition, Kublai attempted to institute something resembling universal education for the first time in Chinese history.[72] Perhaps most importantly, the Yuan emperors also invested heavily in the local economy. They aided reconstruction of the areas ravaged by war much more than their peer khans elsewhere, and funded infrastructure projects sure to increase trade and growth. Another major canal was begun on Kublai's watch, one that connected the north to the south without requiring a trip on the open sea, where pirates remained a problem.[73] The Great Khan then created the Office for the Stimulation of Agriculture in 1261, which prohibited nomads from roaming on farmland, a policy that did not sit well with many of his underlings.[74]

Although Kublai could reasonably claim that the Chinese people were not mistreated under Mongol rule—certainly not worse than they were mistreated by their own leaders—there were still plenty of chafing reminders of who was in charge. The emperor created four tiers of subjects, based on ethnicity: Mongols were at the top, followed by non-Chinese Muslims, northern Chinese (since the Jin had a nomadic background) and then the southern, sedentary people. The highest positions of the military or government were off-limits to people from the two lowest levels.[75] And since the Mongols never lost their hatred for farm life, many Chinese were forced into slavery to serve the new regime.[76] These and other such rules did not affect the material conditions of the peasantry, perhaps, but the humiliation they generated stirred Chinese nationalism. "Their exclusion from the army and higher ranks of the civil service rankled," wrote the prominent historian J.J. Saunders. "They resented the power, the wealth

and often the insolence of foreigners placed in command over them, and they secretly despised and detested rulers who could scarcely speak or understand their language."[77] One persistent, unkillable rumor held that the Mongols were about to roundup all unmarried Chinese children and press them into government service. Waves of panic also followed the periodic gossip that the Yuan administration was about to order the slaughter of all people with the five most common Chinese surnames.[78] These are not the kind of beliefs that spread rapidly throughout healthy societies.

Over time the rules grew more degrading. Kublai's successors ordered all weapons from Chinese people confiscated, along with their iron agricultural tools. The use of knives among peasants was limited to certain non-threatening applications, and the production of bamboo was taken over by the state. Chinese people eventually were forbidden to ride horses, or visit the inner sanctum of the imperial city in Beijing, or even perform operas, which apparently was a taste the Mongols never acquired. Finally, Kublai established what was essentially a secret police to monitor these rules, one that was quite ruthless and efficient. According to one Chinese scholar, "the Mongols' surveillance apparatus can be reckoned as one of the institutional marvels of Chinese history."[79]

Kublai always claimed to be acting with the long-term in mind, and did little to pander to the needs of the moment.[80] In retrospect, perhaps a bit more pandering now and again might have been wise as well. The khan's efforts to create a hybrid kingdom that merged Mongol and Chinese traditions eventually came to naught. Empires built on fear tend to collapse quickly when populations cease to be afraid. By seeking to build legitimate governments based on fair treatment of all subjects, the Mongols undermined the main tool that had allowed them to overcome their numerical inferiority. Once the people of Persia, China and elsewhere stopped being afraid, the empire could not be sustained.

In the end, that the Mongols were not great builders, of either nations or cities. Despite their best efforts, and although it had a few good decades, Karakorum never reached the same status as Rome or London. Nomadism was always in the Mongol blood; all roads never led to Karakorum. The city was essentially abandoned within a century. Its fate was a metaphor for the Mongol imperial project as a whole.

## Decline

If there is one element common to all the major histories of the Mongol empire, it is this: Decline is treated as an afterthought, worthy of maybe a paragraph or two, but little more. The implosion of the khanates is always presented as somehow inevitable and unsurprising. Even Gibbon did not seem to care

much about their decline and fall, writing only thus: "One hundred and forty years after the death of Zingis, his degenerate race, the dynasty of the Yuen, was expelled by a revolt of the native Chinese; and the Mogul emperors were lost in the oblivion of the desert."[81]

The real story is not quite as simple. It is true that a revolt of native Chinese eventually brought the Yuan Dynasty to an end, but it succeeded only because the Mongols had weakened themselves through decades of internecine warfare. Descendants of Ogodei in the Chagatai Khanate tried to wrest the empire away from their cousins, setting off a thirty-year Mongol civil war, primarily against the Yuan. The Golden Horde and the Ilkhanate fought nearly constantly, which was good news for the Poles and Mamluks but bad news for the empire.

The successors to Kublai continued to carry the title Great Khan, but none of the other khanates recognized their authority. Increasingly, neither did the people of China. The first succession went smoothly, but those thereafter did not. Kublai's favorite son drank himself to death while his father lived, so power was transferred to another of his sons, Temur. The new khan essentially called off further expansion in the Pacific in order to resume the war against his cousins. He died at forty-one, one year after his only son, which set off a two-decade period of political purges, coups, and civil wars. In 1333 a new emperor emerged, Toghon Temur, who was able to bring some stability back to the Yuan. Major rebellions broke out in the south in the early 1350s, however, ones the Mongol leadership was not able to put down. In 1368 the khanate was finally overthrown by a native Chinese dynasty, the Ming, which spent the better part of its time in power dealing with endless incursions from the steppe.

Anti-Mongol rebels gained a major ally in the middle of the fourteenth century, one that no one at the time fully understood. Mongol experiments in nation building came to abrupt ends when the bubonic plague broke out in their ranks and spread rapidly across the interconnected empire. The first reports of its outbreak are from the 1330s in Central Asia, probably after it leapt from marmots to humans. The disease reached the Golden Horde in 1345 and Europe two years later, and by 1351 China had lost somewhere between one-third and one-half of its population. The intricate Mongol trade system collapsed, and economic depression followed. Shortages of all sorts of goods fueled inflation, which raged out of control in China by 1356. The plague was particularly devastating to urbanized areas, whose crowds abetted its transmission much more effectively than sparsely populated steppes. The more sophisticated the state, the harder it was hit by the plague.

Nature more than rebels brought down the Yuan. The fourteenth century was calamitous everywhere, natural-disaster-wise, but in China the suffering was immense. Chinese sources record nine floods, eighty-six droughts, sixty-one locust plagues, fifty-six earthquakes, forty-two typhoons, and twenty major epidemics

during the century of Yuan rule, some of which may have had climatological causes.[82] The Yellow River flooded its delta with unprecedented frequency in the later decades, and famine visited some portion of the country nearly every year. No Yuan emperor ignored these problems, but their relief efforts, sophisticated though they may have been for the time, failed to alleviate the suffering.[83] Eventually the authority of the center was fatally undermined. The Ming rebels were thus able to pick the parts off the whole one by one.

The Ilkhans managed succession more successfully than their brothers in China but were never able to defeat the Mamluk-Golden Horde alliance. They reached out to several European powers in the hope of encouraging a new crusade into the Holy Land, demonstrating the old adage that neighbors are generally enemies, and neighbors-plus-one are allies. Perhaps exhausted by decades of war, the khanate broke apart in 1335, as various warring factions struggled for power. The collapse was sudden and somewhat mysterious from today's vantage point, since few sources of the Ilkhanate's final years survive. According to one description, "we appear to have here the perplexing phenomenon of an empire which fell without having previously declined."[84] The Golden Horde was the primary beneficiary, absorbing a few of the successor states.

The steppe khanates fared better and persisted longer, in part because they lacked large, restive native populations working to expel them. Rival factions split the Chagatai Khanate into pieces in the 1330s, one of which did not fall to its neighbors for three hundred years. The Golden Horde was the only successor state to grow in power throughout the fourteenth century, but it too split in the fifteenth. The smaller pieces decreased in power over time, as native Russian strength grew. The last of these, the final remnant of the empire Genghis established, survived until the mid-1800s.

Further conquests in Genghis's name occurred under a Turkish warrior whose battle injuries earned him the nickname Timur the Lame, or Tamerlane. He emerged out of one of the many factions vying for control of the Chagatai Khanate in the late fourteenth century, proving to be an excellent tactician and motivator of men. He married a direct descendant of Genghis in an attempt to claim some legitimacy for the rampages he led, but in reality he was little more than an avaricious, mass-murdering rape enthusiast who had little interest in governing or building. Tamerlane was not boring, to be sure, but neither was he Mongol, and his story has little relation to this one. He will however make a brief appearance in the next chapter.

Like so many other superpowers before and since, the Mongols were not able to persist in a world without enemies. The great distances between khanates facilitated the growth of distrust and misperception about one another. The martial Mongol horde was not built for peace; once external enemies were defeated it found new internal ones to fight.[85] And as has been so often the case

throughout history, transitions of power proved the ultimate undoing. Without a clear way to choose the Great Khan, rivalries and jealousies emerged. The grandsons of Genghis were the first to fight one another, establishing a tradition kept alive for generations.

The Mongol was the last of a particular species that haunted civilization with some regularity: the pillaging steppe horseman. Technology would eventually allow sedentary people to solve the nomad problem for good. Artillery alleviated the terror of the cavalry charge, and rifles ended the advantages of the composite bow. By the seventeenth century the forces of agricultural civilization, in the form of Russian and Chinese armies, were pushing into the steppe rather than vice versa.[86] The era of the rampaging steppe warrior had come to an end.

* * *

In the end, the khans could not overcome the substantial challenges faced by any nomadic people who would establish and rule an empire. Societies built for movement, destruction, and plunder can rarely also administer, govern, and build. The more enlightened Mongols realized this early on and tried to develop the skills necessary to remain in power, but tensions always existed between the new and old ways. Perhaps, as many historians have judged, moving away from traditional Mongol tactics and lifestyle was their most basic blunder. Perhaps they had no choice, though, if they wanted their efforts to persist. They could have chosen immutability, but they would have watched their conquests evaporate even faster, like those of the Huns. Instead, the Mongols were willing to adapt their ways to address the needs of governing, and by doing so had more of a lasting impact on their conquered regions and on the wider world.

Despite their best efforts, Mongol attempts at assimilation never convinced locals to accept them as their own. Kublai Khan's successors were always outsiders to the Chinese people, as were the other khans to the people they ruled. Overthrow was everywhere greeted as emancipation. It turns out that societies brutally conquered tend to have long memories, and that empires built upon foundations of terror do not last long. Mongol rule, no matter how enlightened, could never be legitimate. It turns out that people prefer leadership of their own, even when their own is tyrannical and corrupt, to that of outsiders whose presence is a constant reminder of the humiliating history that brought them to power.

5

# The Ottoman Empire

The Roman Empire still existed, at least on paper, in 1453. Constantinople and a few scattered colonies remained in the hands of the successors of Augustus, who considered themselves Roman but are known to history as Byzantine. The city had survived many sieges over the centuries, thanks to its geographic advantages and towering walls, but faced its most serious challenge when Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II appeared as an uninvited Easter guest, accompanied by some eighty thousand of his friends.[1] The Byzantines did not have enough troops to man their famous ramparts but they did have a long history of successfully repelling barbarian invasions, and had hired some Genoese mercenaries in the hopes of holding off the Ottomans until a rescue force arrived. In fact, Mehmed's was the thirteenth Muslim attempt to take the city.[2] Legend had it that the Prophet Muhammad predicted that eventually one would succeed, though: "One day Constantinople will certainly be conquered," He is to have said. "A good emir and a good army will be able to accomplish this."[3]

Mehmed was confident too, and not just because he was a good emir with a good army. Both of those were true, but he also possessed something that earlier besiegers did not: a giant cannon. His massive artillery piece, which was dragged into place by sixty oxen, was terrifying and destructive but took over three hours to reload. Byzantine engineers were able to patch the holes from its blasts in real time, as fast as they were created. After repeated frontal assaults were repulsed by the defenders, the Ottomans switched tactics. They tunneled up to the walls in the hope of taking them down with mines, but this proved unsuccessful too. Eventually they were able to move troops by sea past the city's defenses and stretch the Byzantine lines thin. By the end of May the walls had been breached and the city fell to the sultan, who would be known to history thereafter as "Mehmed the Conqueror." The body of his counterpart, Byzantine Emperor Constantine IX, was never found.

The fifty-seventh Byzantine emperor may have been little more than the mayor of Constantinople by the time of Mehmed's arrival, but his fall still represented

*The Pursuit of Dominance.* Christopher J. Fettweis, Oxford University Press. © Christopher J. Fettweis 2023.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197646649.003.0005

a major turning point in the history of Europe and the Middle East. It was the moment that the Ottoman Empire emerged as the greatest power in the richest region in the world, the state that would dominate interaction between East and West for centuries. Its rise—and its reign—were not only unlikely but would have seemed impossible to any neutral observer at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The conquest of Constantinople came only fifty years after the Ottoman Empire had been thoroughly crushed by a foreign power. In that half-century a near-miraculous recovery took place, during which a combination of military prowess, bureaucratic efficiency, strategic restraint, and wise domestic policies enabled the Ottomans to conquer and pacify some of the least pacifiable areas of the Earth.

Misperceptions regarding the grand strategy and indeed very nature of the Ottoman Empire accompanied its entire life span. The Turks were waging a religious war on Christianity, according to their contemporaries, one with unlimited ends and a bottomless capacity for evil. A Croatian bishop wrote in 1493 that the Ottomans had "an insatiable appetite for the slaughter of the faithful and the avid desire to seize power over the entire world."[4] Four hundred years later a British prime minister would agree, adding that "from the first black day they entered Europe, they [have been] the one great anti-human specimen of humanity."[5] Modern historians have been somewhat less convinced of their inhumanity, but it is still common to find arguments about the relentless belligerence of the empire. The Ottomans built a "near-perfect military society," at least according to an oft-quoted phrase, one designed for constant warfare.[6] As begins one recent text, "The Ottoman Empire lived for war."[7] Images of a perpetually aggressive state have convinced some that there was little strategic thought behind Ottoman actions, and that the state merely expanded as much as possible, for the sake of God, and perhaps for expansion itself.

In reality the sultans were far more rational and calculating than their critics allowed. Indeed it is hard to imagine how an empire could have emerged and then persisted for six centuries in the world's most dangerous neighborhood without a coherent grand strategy. The Ottomans never built a military machine capable of world conquest, because such a thing was never their goal. Theirs was a regional strategy, one designed to project power a certain distance from the capital and no more. In order to achieve that aim they instituted a number of clear policies: they created a concentric circle of colonies, vassals, and buffers around Constantinople, the defense of which was always their highest priority; they studiously avoided simultaneous wars, which was not an easy task when enemies lurked over every horizon; and perhaps most important, they sought to minimize resistance in the lands they conquered by offering a more enlightened rule than those they replaced. These, when combined with a few advantageous political traditions—an efficient, professional bureaucracy, as well as a succession

process that chose new leaders with a survival-of-the-fittest approach—allowed the Ottomans to maintain the strongest empire of their day, one that was to last from medieval straight into modern times.

The strengths of their initial imperial formulation eventually proved to be liabilities, however, since memories of past successes and glories prevented the kind of innovation that would have allowed the Ottomans to keep pace with their rivals. Nearly perfect grand strategies can prove very difficult to change. And no strategy stays nearly perfect forever.

## Imperial Foundations

Nothing about the empire's early years suggested an imminent rise to superpower status. Like the Romans, the Ottomans took their name from a quasi-mythical figure, one whose accomplishments are under-documented but extremely influential. We can say with confidence that a Turkish tribe under a man named Osman defeated a Byzantine army near the city of Bapheus in 1301, but we know little else about that era.[8] Osman evidently led one of many Turkish nomadic groups that wisely fled from Genghis at some point in the late thirteenth century, settling eventually in western Anatolia. He and his immediate successors overran one neighboring Turkish tribe after another, in the process attracting the attention of the emperors in Constantinople. The latter resisted their rise at first but were eventually impressed enough by the Ottoman battlefield performance to hire them. Ottoman units fought for various claimants in Byzantine civil wars during the fourteenth century, expanding their reach and influence each time.

Early Ottoman conquests set precedents for those to come. Raids into neighboring lands grew in frequency and severity until exhausted target governments were beaten into vassal-like debility.[9] More direct control followed, with the liquidation of local nobility or its absorption into the Ottoman system of land distribution. By avoiding a major invasion, the hope was, social and economic disruption could be minimized, along with resistance.[10] Gradual assimilation was always preferable to radical change. As we will see, the slow pace of conquest helped sell Ottoman rule to the masses, who sometimes even welcomed their new rulers and delighted in the humiliation of their local oppressors. Over the course of those early decades, the Ottoman military slowly evolved from a group of mounted raiders into a disciplined force capable of winning battles and conducting sieges. Greater conquests started to become imaginable.

Ottoman armies were fueled at least in part by religious fervor. The sultans inherited and promoted the so-called *ghaza* (holy war) tradition, the fourteenth-century equivalent of today's *jihad*, or an imperative to expand the territory

under control of the faithful.[11] Ottoman campaigns aimed to increase the power of the sultan, to be sure, but they also hoped to spread the faith and save souls. The most basic source of sultanic legitimacy was the belief that he was the head *ghazi*, the leader of the Holy War against the infidel. Neither its bellicosity nor its religiosity differentiated the Ottoman state from its various neighbors, none of whom were squeamish about killing on behalf of a loving god.

The early sultans ran into substantial resistance to their efforts, especially in southeastern Europe. Christendom reacted predictably to the heathen incursions, launching a pair of crusades to beat back the Ottoman forces. At this point Latin Christians were essentially part-time warriors with little central organization, however, and these glory seekers spent nearly as much time hassling the local Greek Orthodox as they did fighting the Muslim invaders.[12] When the armies did clash, the Turks made quick work of the amateur crusaders.

As efficient as it was, the military was not the primary tool of Ottoman expansion. Rather than conquer and then pacify, sultans much preferred to pair their many offspring with those of regional warlords and absorb lands through marriage.[13] One of the most consequential occurred in 1346, when Sultan Orhan took the Byzantine Princess Theodora as his second wife and pledged to help her father in future battles, in exchange for territory in Gallipoli. Many more matches to lesser potentates spread the Ottoman influence throughout Anatolia and eventually beyond.

Rather than forge an entirely new imperial structure, Osman and his successors were happy to borrow successful practices and modify them where necessary to fit their needs. From the Byzantines they adopted their traditions of taxation and vassalage; their system of land use seems to have come from the Seljuks, their predecessors in Anatolia; from the Arab Empire and the Mongol Ilkhanate they adopted the administrative and bureaucratic practices that set them apart from all their contemporaries; and from their steppe ancestors the Ottomans took their traditions of succession, which kept the empire together and competently led for generations.[14] The resulting administration was a polyglot amalgam of several traditions, which fit the polyglot empire's needs quite well.

The land-use system was particularly important. In the Ottoman Empire private property was scarce, since in theory all territory belonged to the sultan. He allowed his subjects to live on his land, but for a price. One route to wealth was to be given a *timar*, or fief, from which owners could collect taxes as long as they provided cavalrymen in times of war.[15] Since lording it over the peasantry is always popular, Osman was able to use these land grants to reward his most loyal followers and to inspire loyalty in new ones. "Those who want a *timar*, follow me," he supposedly cried on his way off to battle.[16] *Timars* were never permanent, however, since the sultan would periodically move their owners around in order to prevent local identities and regional loyalties from forming. The empire

was thus founded on a semi-feudal system that contained mechanisms to prevent the rise of warlords while still providing the bulk of the sultan's army for centuries.

By the end of the fourteenth century, Osman's descendants had secured large portions of Anatolia and substantial land across the Dardanelles. They would go on to build an empire that included, at different times, all or parts of at least thirty-eight modern countries, including the holiest sites of three major religions and some thirty million people.[17] Somehow they managed to keep that disparate group together through the tumults of Renaissance, Reformation, and Industrial Age, through the transition from medieval times to modernity. And they managed to rebuild it following a catastrophe that would have spelled the end of almost any other state.

## Destruction and Renewal

The Ottomans ran into their first major crisis under Osman's great-grandson Bayezid (1389–1402), nicknamed "the Thunderbolt," whose forces had added large swaths of Bulgaria and Bosnia to the empire and intermittently laid siege to Constantinople. The sultan had to break off his efforts to capture the city abruptly when a new threat appeared in Anatolia, a horde of warriors from the Chatagai Khanate under the command of Timur the Lame, or Tamerlane.

We met Tamerlane briefly in the last chapter. Careful readers will recall the rampaging leader of the late Mongol period sporting a dubious claim of direct lineage to Genghis, whose passions were conquest, pillage, torture, and rape. His forces had overrun much of Central Asia, the Middle East, and India by the beginning of the fifteenth century, when his attention turned to Asia Minor. There Tamerlane met obstinate and disrespectful resistance from Bayezid, which he took quite personally, as was the Mongol way. In July 1402 their two armies met near Ankara, where things went poorly for the Ottomans. Bayezid's large army was crushed, and a sultan fell into captivity for the first and last time in history. Accounts differ about the treatment he received at the hands of his enemies: the sultan may or may not have spent time in an iron cage that was used as a table centerpiece when Tamerlane entertained, events at which Bayezid's wife may or may not have been forced to serve guests nude. The sultan died in 1403, at age forty-eight, after (legend has it) repeatedly banging his head on the bars of his cell.[18]

Here the story of the Ottoman Empire should have ended, with its land devastated, its armies defeated, and its leader captured. Few are the great powers that manage to climb back from such depths. Fortunately for the Ottomans, however, Tamerlane expressed little interest in governing Anatolia, and died only a few years after his conquest. The Thunderbolt's four surviving sons fought to

determine who would have the right to lead the reconstruction, delaying matters for more than a decade. But when the Ottomans finally coalesced behind the victor of these civil wars (the new Sultan Mehmed), they began what would be a stunningly successful rebuilding effort, one that would within a century raise them to superpower status rivaled at the time only by the Habsburg Empire to their west. Mehmed began the reconstruction project during his relatively short reign (1413–1421), and under his son Murad II the pre-Tamerlane boundaries of the empire were re-established. Within fifty years the Ottomans would be strong enough to take Constantinople, and within fifty more they had spread over most of the modern Arab world and reached the gates of Vienna.

This odds-defying rise from the Mongol ashes, and then the long imperial survival in a rather rough neighborhood, was the result of some clear strategic choices. For one thing, the dramatic reversal of fortunes would have been impossible had the peoples formerly under Ottoman rule resisted the reconquest, but they did not. It could never have been accomplished if the Ottomans did not remain highly organized and disciplined, even through the Mongol disaster and subsequent civil wars, but they did. And no imperial reconstruction could have occurred if the sultans had not figured out a way to hand a united empire down to their most deserving sons, but they had. These three elements allowed the imperial humpty dumpty to be put back together again, and within two generations attain much greater heights.

## Toleration and Local Resistance

Although its European enemies portrayed it as an infidel monolith, the Ottoman Empire was actually quite diverse. The government was a religious minority in its own land, at least for its first century, and at no time did the army lack Christian officers and men. The most senior positions were reserved for Muslims, but in general the sultans chose tolerance over oppression and coexistence over conversion. Osman first developed a policy of accommodation, or *istimalet*, which aimed to ease expansion by decreasing local resistance to Ottoman conquests. While Christian states in the Mediterranean expelled Muslims and Jews and burned people of "heretical" Christian denominations, the Ottomans preached and practiced tolerance. As long as local communities did not take actions hostile to Islam, they were generally left alone. The state did not seek their conversion, either directly or indirectly.[19] There was no "Ottomanization," no attempt to remake the periphery in the image of the center. The brilliant *istimalet* did not emerge from Ottoman cultural or religious traditions, nor was it an ideological or moral approach to governance.[20] It was *means* to imperial *ends*; it was, in other words, strategic.

Many imperial regions enjoyed limited self-government, depending upon local circumstances. There was no uniformity, no cookie-cutter approach applied

everywhere, which made for a complex, confusing patchwork of an empire that required substantial organization to work. The Ottomans were "institutionally omnivorous," in sociologist Karen Barkey's words, willing to accept wide variation in exchange for stability.[21] Largely as a result of these policies, the home front was kept quiet. Different religious and ethnic communities co-existed, often side-by-side, with remarkably little intercommunal conflict. Violence did occur, but never at levels before or since the Ottomans controlled the region.

People living outside the empire certainly knew of the treatment of minorities across the border. They knew, for instance, that Sultan Bayezid named his sons Jesus, Moses, Solomon, Muhammad, and Joseph. They knew that Christians retained their lands and privileges under Ottoman rule. They also knew that national and local boundaries did not change when Ottomans took over, and that imperial provinces areas generally maintained their local laws. They could not help but see that former Byzantine subjects paid less tax under the Ottoman system, even though it provided more security, and they might have even known that one consistent Ottoman policy was to introduce postwar fiscal regimes designed to hasten recovery in devastated regions.[22] Most important, they certainly knew that all the states around the Ottoman Empire, and especially those in Reformation-era Europe, practiced some form of *cuius regio eius religio*, wherein the religion of the ruler became the religion of the people. The masses generally had no choice about their beliefs. The Ottomans never followed this practice: Christians, Jews, and other religious minorities flourished under Istanbul's rule. Even the zealous *ghazi* order proved to be pragmatic when it came to conquered areas, tolerating a host of other faiths and traditions.[23] "They pay a great respect to the customs of foreign nations," wrote one baffled contemporary (Christian) observer, "even to the detriment of their religious scruples."[24]

Target populations were aware of these facts, despite terrifying rumors to the contrary, because Ottoman agents made them aware. Large-scale intelligence gathering and propaganda campaigns typically preceded invasions, aiming to reassure target populaces and identify the exploitable fissures and discontents in the lands they coveted.[25] As a result, even sultans who had reputations for severity were often regarded as improvements over indigenous leadership. Over and over again, invading Ottoman armies were not greeted with the kind of popular resistance that local leaders anticipated. From the empire's earliest days, a surprising number of garrisons and castles surrendered without resistance and even joined the Ottoman ranks. Many Orthodox Christians in the Balkans who bristled under Latin rule welcomed the more tolerant Ottomans. Christian counterattackers were rarely greeted as liberators, much to their amazement. Hungarian noblemen, for instance, had experienced rule by both empires at different times and were often quick to rebel against their Habsburg overlords in ways that puzzled Christendom.[26] One Protestant in the Low Countries

summarized the view of many: "Rather Turkish than Popish."[27] From Cyprus in 1571 through Crete in 1645 to Greece in 1715, the Ottoman armies were aided, or at least not impeded, by largely sympathetic local populations.[28] Orthodox Christians were not the only ones who welcomed Ottoman armies. Muslims in Syria, Egypt, and Iraq would also delight in the replacement of their local rulers when their times came.

Diversity created other advantages for the Ottomans. First, it expanded the pool of potential servants of the empire. The Ottomans took the best of conquered populations into government employment, where religion and heredity created no advantage. As a result, the talent level across the empire was higher than in its rivals. Mehmed the Conqueror's chief artilleryman during the siege of Constantinople was famously a Hungarian; Christian generals led charges against crusaders; Turcomen cavalry fought against Persian armies.[29] Even the Ottoman elite had no central ethnic identity. Though it became more difficult to rise through the ranks without conversion to Islam as time went on, no other empire under consideration in these (or any other) pages could boast of leaders from so many backgrounds with roughly equal status.[30] It would be an exaggeration to call their society a pure meritocracy since women were excluded, but the Ottoman Empire was closer to that ideal than any of its era. Running it were the best men they could find.

Second, diversity gave the Sublime Porte (the spectacular nickname for the Ottoman central government) an intelligence advantage as well. The empire was a destination for a variety of disaffected peoples across its region, such as Jews ejected from Habsburg Spain or Orthodox Christians fleeing the pope's influence. Many kept in touch with their co-ethnics abroad. Sultans were able to draw upon their Armenians and Greek subjects, for example, in their attempts to gather information about their Balkan enemies.[31] Diaspora communities with connections in Europe and Asia were important sources for the Porte's intelligence professionals.

It would be a mistake to consider the Ottomans to be unblemished paragons of humanism, however. They were relatively enlightened for their era, to be sure, but it was an era when the bar was preposterously low. As much as conquered people might have appreciated the religious freedom and tax relief that the sultans brought, one suspects they resented the marauding soldiers, burning cities, and lost land. One further suspects that the Ottoman *ghulam* system, which was based upon child slavery, did not endear them to their subjects. In the Christian areas they conquered, the Ottomans kidnapped young boys and brought them back to Istanbul for indoctrination and training. "The candidates had to be between the ages of ten and eighteen or thereabouts, able bodied, good looking, clever, unmarried, and uncircumcised," according to one description of this practice. Most of the recruits were Greeks, Serbs, and Albanians—Jews were

considered unsuitable for warfare, Gypsies unreliable, and Muslims forbidden by law. They all had to be stolen from families, since orphans "were believed to lack a proper upbringing and to be greedy."[32] Some kidnapped boys formed the heart of the famous and fierce *janissary* corps, which we will discuss shortly. Others with less martial talents were recruited into the imperial bureaucracy, destined for a lifetime of government civilian service. None would see their families again.

The second practice that did not fit well with their reputation for tolerance was the Ottoman enthusiasm for mass deportation. Early sultans forcibly transported nomadic peoples to the imperial periphery, and later ones "encouraged" the movement of Turkish people into newly conquered areas, often after deporting the locals beforehand. Artisans and merchants from across the empire were relocated to Constantinople after it fell, and peasants were moved into its suburbs. "As these people did not usually like to abandon their homes," understated the historian Halil İnalcık, "the officials concerned were ordered to carry out these measures with firmness."[33] This "firmness" is what today we would call "ethnic cleansing," and it would come to influence history's final verdict on the empire.

Thus Ottoman success in winning the hearts and minds of their subjects could not have been absolute. Christians and Jews were integral parts of Ottoman society, but they never achieved full equality in what was always a predominantly Islamic empire. They had to pay a special tax and did not enjoy the same rights and freedoms as their Muslim neighbors. Many Balkan communities might have been happy to replace Latin rule with Muslim, but when an Orthodox alternative arose in the form of a Russian tsar in the eighteenth century, they quickly switched allegiances.[34] Nevertheless, when compared to its early-modern rivals, the Ottoman Empire practiced a level of tolerance and achieved a corresponding diversity that was well ahead of its time, and that created a reputation that generally served its strategic goals quite nicely.

## Men of the Pen

Bureaucracies are not heroic. They do not produce glorious victories or inspire public affection, and commonly they are the object of scorn from contemporaries and historians alike. If there is one actor who set the Ottoman Empire apart from its rivals, however, it was not the warrior but the bureaucrat. Organizational rather than martial skill produced the post-Tamerlane recovery, and the imposition of order in quite excitable parts of the world for centuries afterward.

Although everyone in the empire was a subject of the sultan, Ottoman leaders relied heavily on two classes of servants, both of whom were exempt from taxation: "men of the sword" and "men of the pen." The former may have gained

the lion's share of historical attention for their contributions to the empire but the latter held it together. Imperial continuity and resilience were preserved by its lonely, nameless bureaucrats, whose tedious toil kept it functioning through good times and bad.[35] The bureaucracy is often discussed only in context of decline, as a scapegoat for Ottoman inefficiency, rapacity, nepotism, and/or corruption.[36] Some of this is fair; while the men of the pen made the empire resilient, they would also provide inertia to resist change. But while it is always popular to bash administrators, without them complex political entities cannot exist. Ottoman bureaucrats were exceptionally professional, well-organized, and relatively flexible, responsive to local conditions and suited to solving the day-to-day problems of imperial governance. They also served as an informal counterweight to the sultan, providing continuity during transitions and times of instability.[37] Other Islamic states had similar services, but European powers of the day had nothing like it.

The heroes of the Ottoman Empire were not only the mighty *timariots* smiting and slaughtering on the battlefield but also the lowly scribes toiling in the imperial bowels, pouring over tax remittances, reorganizing fiefdoms, adjudicating small claims, and approving third marriages. This was not an accident; the sultans placed a high priority on organization and rational governance, and created a capability to bring it about. Their army of bureaucrats sustained the imperial structure, allowing the diverse empire to resist its strong, persistent centrifugal forces. Those wielding swords were important, but so were those pushing paper.

## Succession and Fratricide

Ottoman royal families could be quite large. Sultans could take many wives and even more concubines, and all offspring were considered legitimate.[38] Henry VIII ruled the wrong country. Polygamy could pay diplomatic dividends, since it gave the sultans many options for helpful marriage alliances, but it complicated matters upon their demise.[39] The empire crafted a way to deal with succession that worked pretty well, from a practical standpoint, even if it did result in the occasional mass murder.

The Ottomans did not merely enthrone eldest sons regardless of their ability to govern. And unlike in other Turkish nomadic traditions, when the sultan died his lands were not divided.[40] Instead each son of a sultan was put in charge of his own province in Anatolia when he came of age and given an education designed to prepare him for rule. When dad passed away, the sons would fight for the crown. Thus, princes spent their lives learning to govern, aware that they needed to attract support for a looming power struggle. In theory, anyway, he who was best suited to rule would (with God's help) ascend to the throne. This

survival-of-the-fittest imperial selection resulted in surprisingly uncommon civil wars, and unsurprisingly common fratricide. No sultan ever felt safe until all his brothers were dead. Ottoman legal theorists constructed elaborate defenses for this system, arguing that whatever produced the best chance for competent leadership was essentially justified. Royal omelets are not made without breaking eggs. One sultan spoke for many when he declared that it was appropriate for one of his sons to kill the others, "for the sake of the good order of the world."[41] Only those with one son could expect their family's unity to persist after their departure.

This Ottoman succession tradition lasted for centuries, until some overanxious would-be sultans took things a bit too far. Fratricide was practiced by every new leader between 1389 and 1595, but when Mehmed III had all nineteen of his brothers (some of whom were toddlers) strangled immediately upon the death of their father, the public had enough. The sight of little caskets in the funeral procession was simply too much for them, and the practice was discontinued.[42] This tradition of crowning the best possible leader while sustaining the direct line to Osman proved too brutal to last forever.

## The "Near-Perfect Military Society": Men of the Sword

Dominant powers do not achieve their status by tolerance, organization, and fratricide alone. The Ottomans also possessed the best military of the early-modern era. They were to teach Europe and Persia a lesson that apparently needed regular repetition throughout history: professional, trained soldiers perform extremely well against part-time peasant warriors. The Ottomans fielded the best standing army in Europe since Rome, one that regularly defeated much larger forces.

Sultan Murad I founded what was to become the heart of that professional military, the *janissaries*, in 1363. This highly effective force was a product of the *ghulam* system described above. Ottoman procurers would seek boys between eight and twenty years old, with twelve to fourteen being optimal, in conquered lands. These boys, once they recovered from the trauma of bidding farewell to their homes and families, were trained to become part of an elite infantry unit whose main task would be to protect the sultan and win his battles. For more than four centuries they would do just that. The best troops of the Ottoman military were infantrymen, which separated it from its nomadic predecessors. In retrospect, the heroism and pride demonstrated by these slaves in the performance of their duties is remarkable: At no point did these highly trained killers use the chaos of the battlefield to turn on their kidnappers. It was not until the *janissary* corps was watered down with volunteer soldiers in later centuries did it ever rebel against the sultans.

Although the *janissaries* were the nucleus around which the Ottoman military was built, at no time did they constitute a majority of the soldiers under the sultan's command. A far greater number were *sipahis*, the cavalry supplied by the *timar* holders during campaigns.[43] Those given fiefs were expected to provide soldiers, retainers and supplies when the bugle sounded; failure to do so would result in confiscation of land. These two major categories were supplemented by auxiliary personnel, including light cavalry, irregular soldiers manning the borders, and specialists of various kinds. Also included on some campaigns were the *deli*, or "maniacs," the "riskers of souls" who were used in the most dangerous activities.[44] All told, by the middle of the sixteenth century the sultans could field armies of ninety to one hundred thousand men, of whom two-thirds would participate in a typical season's campaigning.[45]

If, as the cliché goes, strategy is for amateurs and logistics for professionals, then the Ottoman army was run by professionals. As if their highly trained, elite warriors did not provide enough of an advantage, the Ottomans also maintained the best support system of the era. The sultans drafted not only warriors but cooks, craftsmen, and artisans who would travel with the army and meet its needs. They baked its bread, made its shoes, and mended its weaponry on site. Ottoman units purchased food and supplies from locals in towns they traversed instead of preying on them, actually helping local economies—quite the opposite of most armies of the time—and keeping their soldiers better fed. The sultan's engineers could lay down roads and bridge any river in their path, including the major waterways of southeastern Europe. Along the route the armies could count on finding pre-positioned warehouses stocked with supplies by local leaders. Wounded soldiers received financial support, as did families of the fallen.[46] And as always, the Ottoman intelligence network, both tactical and strategic, was second to none.[47] Their units were rarely taken by surprise.

When those armies arrived at their destination, their battle tactics followed a familiar pattern. The *janissaries* were placed in the center of the line, guarding the sultan. By the end of the fifteenth century, they commonly formed a circle of interlocked carts with spaces in between for artillery, similar to the *laagers* that the Boers would employ four hundred years later.[48] On the flanks were the far more numerous *sipahis* who would carry the fight to the enemy. Raiders typically rode out front and tried to draw enemy into an area where the *sipahis* could encircle and annihilate them. They were much more maneuverable and better disciplined than Europe's heavily armored knights.

Opportunities to demonstrate these tactics were relatively rare. This was an era in which sieges were far more common than open, fluid engagements in the field. Generals were hesitant to risk their forces in big clashes, knowing that entire wars often turned on the outcome of one decisive day. Single battles

determined who would rule the Balkans (the Ottomans, after the Battle of Varna in 1444), Syria (the Ottomans, after Marj Dabiq in 1516), Egypt (the Ottomans, after Ridaniya in 1517) and Hungary (the Ottomans, after Mohács in 1526). The so-called "Long Hungarian War" (1593–1606) had only one big battle, at Mezőkeresztes in 1596, as did the nearly-as-long war with the Persian Safavids (at Caldiran in 1514). Although the Ottomans won far more of these big battles than they lost, their record was not unblemished. Tamerlane's conquest had also resulted from one major field victory, after all.

Like all great militaries, the Ottomans actively sought to learn from their enemies and stole ideas when appropriate. Turkish forces were initially light on firearms, for instance, since it was not easy for mounted warriors to use such weapons effectively. Once they saw what gunpowder could do, however, they integrated it into their tactics with alacrity, and before long other militaries were copying their techniques. For at least three hundred years, from the fifteenth century through the seventeenth, this combination of professionalism, support, and adaptation made the Ottoman military the best in the business.

## Mehmed the Conqueror—and the Strategist

By the time Mehmed II took the throne in 1451, the Ottoman recovery had progressed to the point that they could capture the city that remained the symbolic heart of Orthodox Christianity. Soon after its capture Constantinople quickly became to the Ottomans what it had been to the Byzantines: the capital and center of all imperial action. They developed the habit of just referring to it as "The City," needing no more explanation, which in the Greek-translated-to-Turkish sounds like "Istanbul." Conquest of The City changed Ottoman grand strategy, which after 1453 prioritized defense of the capital above all other goals, putting the Turks on a collision course with the Habsburgs.[49]

Mehmed took immediate steps to make Constantinople great again. He granted tax exemptions to tradesmen and brought in artisans and laborers from all over Anatolia, increasing the city's population by around 50 percent.[50] His treatment of the Byzantine administration and elite followed long-standing practices: rather than tear down and then try to replace the existing institutions and structures, the Ottomans absorbed willing locals into the new administration and adopted the efficient aspects of their systems. "They coopted their enemies," argued Barkey. "Instead of pursuing a policy of de-Byzantification, they recognized the value of their rivals, accepting Byzantine and Balkan aristocracies into their new administration."[51] As a result, transition from one imperial rule to another went as smoothly as could be expected, once the natives came to realize

that life would not be markedly different under the new regime. The same process ensued wherever the sultan's troops conquered.

The seizure of Constantinople also represented a turning point in the means that the Ottomans employed. For one thing, no longer would royal marriages be used to advance their interests. Mehmed did not need regional allies any more, since most of the region was under his control anyway, and considered all potential strategic matches unworthy of his offspring.[52] His empire and reputation were to be made on the battlefield, not on the altar. Mehmed the Conqueror would earn his nickname by adding territory, primarily in the Balkans, Peloponnese, Crimea, and Mediterranean. He expanded the northern border of the empire to the Danube, which he considered its natural boundary, and brought the entire Black Sea under Ottoman control. One of his campaigns was designed to punish a recalcitrant Wallachian warlord fond of impaling his enemies on stakes. While there is no evidence that Vlad Dracul drank blood, he did provoke an Ottoman invasion of Transylvania. In 1480 Mehmed even landed troops in Italy and captured the port city of Otranto. Panic spread up the peninsula and the pope prepared to flee, but the sultan's death within a year of the invasion brought the expedition to a close. In total Mehmed led eighteen campaigns in his thirty-year reign, all of them in person, and most of them successful.

This conquering was done with a guiding principle in mind, one that would become central to Ottoman grand strategy over the course of the next four centuries: Above all, Mehmed sought to avoid two-front wars. When trouble broke out in one theater, he disengaged in others to deal with it, sometimes signing quite disadvantageous treaties in the process. His successors would follow this lead.[53] To outsiders focused only on one part of the empire, this could produce puzzling behavior. When the Turks took Tunis in 1574, for example, near-panic ensued among the Habsburgs who expected of more attacks in the Mediterranean. None took place, because a crisis had arisen in Persia. Internal challenges often brought external wars to an end too, which could make Ottoman actions appear even more mysterious to their rivals. In 1444, King Vladislaus I of Hungary was taken aback by sudden Ottoman concessions during peace negotiations, since he was unaware of the revolt forming in Asia Minor.[54] The king then unwisely broke the truce a month later. After dealing with the revolt in Anatolia, an angry Ottoman force carrying a pole with the broken treaty nailed to it marched back and crushed Vladislaus's army.

Geography aided this Ottoman policy. As was the case with the Mongols, their central position made communication and coordination difficult for their enemies. The Persians would occasionally exchange ambassadors and correspond with European states, but there is little evidence of the kind of cooperation that would have caused problems for Constantinople.[55] This fortunate

state of affairs did not last forever, though. By the eighteenth century the various enemies of the Porte were not only raising enormous, industrial-age armies but using them in concert, sometimes with and sometimes against the empire. Avoiding the dreaded two-front war became increasingly difficult.

Once in possession of The City, the Ottomans cemented control over the trade routes connecting East with West as well as shipping in and out of the Black Sea. They gained enormous leverage over the trading city-states of Venice and Genoa, and could cut their European rivals off from Middle Eastern products (and vice versa).[56] The wealth of the empire began to grow dramatically, allowing Mehmed to embark upon a public works campaign that would also produce something no Ottoman sultan had to this point possessed: a navy. The nomadic cultural heritage came without a maritime tradition, but the expanding empire contained great expertise. Mehmed gained possession of Constantinople's skilled carpenters and sailors, and soon began constructing a fleet that would dominate the Mediterranean within two generations. He hired Greek officers and European gunners, and opened the ranks to sailors from all over the empire and beyond, amassing a great deal of nautical knowledge of the eastern Mediterranean in the process. Mehmed especially welcomed Andalusians angered at having been ejected from Habsburg Spain.[57] Soon "sea ghazis" responded to the sultan's call to address the maltreatment of Muslims in Christian lands. Diversity, as always, was an asset.

Naval warfare in the Mediterranean had not changed much since Roman times. The Ottomans relied on galleys, large ships powered primarily by oarsmen, with which they would attempt to ram, get close enough to fire at, or even leap aboard enemy ships.[58] Rowing such ships, one imagines, was among the worst jobs in an era filled with horrible ways to make a living. Most seats were filled by criminals, slaves, and people who had been kidnapped and sold to the navy. This presented rather obvious tactical complications: such unfortunates were rarely well motivated in battle, no matter how vigorously their whippers whipped, and they tended to revolt when opportunities presented themselves. The chaos of battle often provided such opportunities. "Countless ships have been lost this way," lamented one contemporary observer.[59]

The Ottomans followed what today what we would call a "green-water" maritime strategy, or one that aimed to control the nearby seas rather than project power far from home. Although they could not operate well on the open oceans, within a certain radius the Ottomans were very formidable. This mirrored how they approached land operations: they sought dominance in their region only, never seeking to create a limitless, expansive domain. Despite the fears of their enemies, the Ottomans did not aspire to rule Europe, much less the world.

## The "Action Radius" and Limited Ends and Means

Universalist rhetoric notwithstanding, the sultans had no desire to march into Paris, nor did they seek to bring Persia or sub-Saharan Africa into their empire. Always conscious of the dangers of overextension, the Porte never sought to extend its boundaries beyond a clearly defined radius from Constantinople. Ottoman strategy allowed for expansion only as far as their armies could march in a single season from The City, which was the origin and logistical center for all campaigns.

Like many early-modern armies, the sultan's forces almost always mustered after the spring's thaw and had to be back home before the cold weather set in. They rarely brought enough supplies to spend the winter in enemy territory. If a fighting season was roughly 200 days, and if their forces could travel fifteen miles on a good day, then at most fifteen hundred miles were within the sultan's striking distance for a round-trip campaign. Conquering armies rarely march in only to turn tail and immediately march right out again, however. Maneuvers and battles take time, and sieges can last for months. Once delays from mother nature and other unpredictable frictions were factored into this equation, the Ottomans were left with an effective radius of operations closer to six hundred miles from the capital. The exact distance depended to some degree on the dangers involved with the campaign: The Ottomans were willing to go farther when they were confident that their armies could not be defeated, like when attacking foes without artillery, but against more formidable foes they rarely ventured outside what might be considered their "action radius."[60] Sultans who pushed those limits, ordering assaults on Vienna or forays deep into Persia, courted disaster.

The Ottomans also limited operations at sea within a defined area. Their ships could travel a bit farther but not much, since sixteenth-century galleys could carry no more than ten days of provisions and were thus forced to stay near friendly ports. They also had relatively shallow drafts and would founder in heavy seas, which meant that the Ottoman navy, like its army, rarely sallied forth in the winter.[61] These were limitations common to all Mediterranean powers, some of whom would adopt new ships as naval technology evolved in coming centuries. The Ottomans never constructed a "blue-water" or oceangoing navy, however, being instead content to operate in the green water and avoid engagements outside of the naval action radius.

When noted at all, these limits on the empire are usually presented as if they were natural checks on the ambition of the sultans rather than deliberate strategic decisions. Two alternatives exist: either the Ottomans were prevented from reaching their expansive ambitions by the practical limitations of their semi-feudal military structure, or they deliberately constructed that structure and

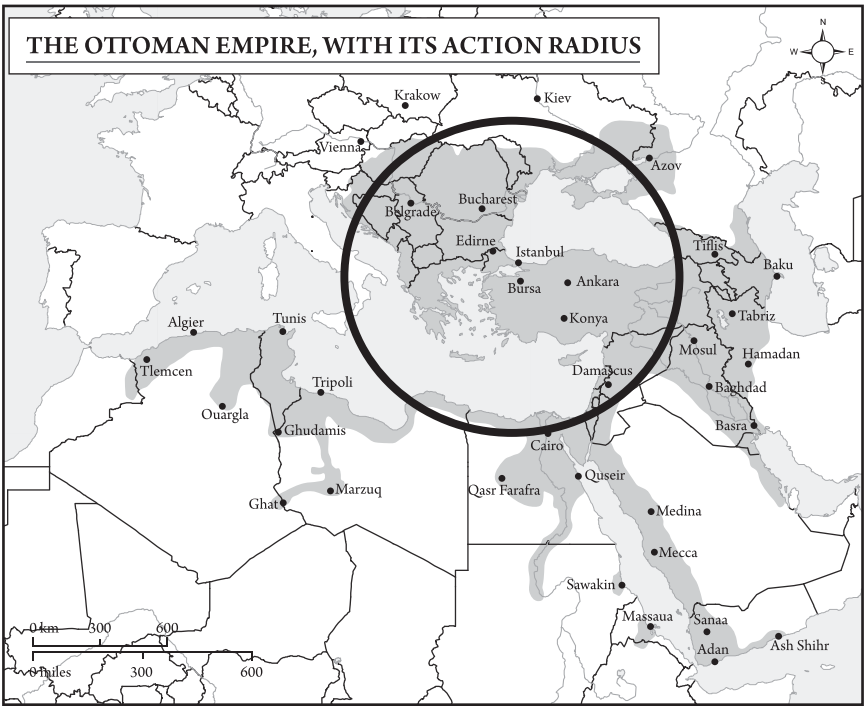



*Figure 5.1* The Ottoman Empire, with Its Action Radius Credit: Free vector graphic, https://pixabay.com/vectors/ottomam-empire-map-42644/.

never substantially modified it because it fulfilled its mission. The *timar* system provided the basis of the Ottoman military for centuries, which was more than enough time for its strategists to recognize a problem and reform it, should they have had the desire to do so. It is more logical to suggest that these policies remained in place because they served the empire's ends quite well. The various Habsburg defenses of Vienna, therefore, did not save Christendom from the infidel hordes because those hordes would have gone no further. Vienna was on the very edge of their radius.

There were good reasons to limit expansion. First, no sultan trusted his generals to operate independently beyond Constantinople's control for long.[62] Second, and more important, the sultans were quite keen to avoid overextension.[63] The area under their control was already extensive, and restive. Sultans had to play constant two-level games, balancing internal threats with those from abroad. The Persian heartland and Austria constituted the limits of the possible, and even if they were added to the empire neither would have been possible to defend. Geography had granted Constantinople almost total security by the end of the fifteenth century. Far-off natural barriers like rivers and mountain ranges

formed boundaries with the other great empires of the day, within which the empire was fundamentally safe. Existential danger could result only from overly aggressive action.

Bringing the area inside that circle under their control was the first priority for the sultans. Like so many of history's great conquerors, the Ottomans felt that expansion to the edges of their action radius was thrust upon them by unruly and untrustworthy neighbors. What appeared to their rivals to be clear acts of aggression were, to the sultans, defensive in nature. The Ottomans annexed Hungary in 1541, for instance, because the growing power of Charles V (a.k.a. Charles I, whom we will meet in the next chapter) made it necessary.[64] Since their various expansions were defensively motivated, at least in the eyes of the strategists of the Porte, there was no need to build a military capable of traveling outside the circle within which Constantinople was safe.

The Ottomans never constructed the kind of tools that would have allowed them to pursue limitless ends. One can dismiss their occasional grandiose rhetoric as just that; had they really been interested in worldwide conquest, or in adding Rome or Cologne to their empire as they occasionally bragged, the Ottomans would have built a military capable of traveling that far, or of overwintering in hostile lands.[65] It was hardly impossible—the Romans traveled much farther, as did the Mongols and the contemporary Spanish. Ruling distant lands just does not seem to have appealed to the Porte, perhaps because it had aggravation aplenty nearer to home. "The Ottoman state had no particular reason to push very hard," argued historians Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper. "It had a good thing going where it was."[66] The sultans constructed limited means because they had limited ends, and as a result their diverse, fractious empire lasted, against all odds, for over six hundred years.

## The Post-Mehmed Security Environment

Mehmed the Conqueror died while on campaign in 1481. Succession was more difficult than usual since the sultan left two powerful sons, Bayezid and Cem, each of whom sought to continue the family tradition of murdering his half-brother. This process took a while, and involved more open warfare than usual. The Ottoman military machine engaged in no major foreign adventures as long as the civil strife lasted, and for quite some time afterward, as the loser (Cem) took refuge in Christendom. Once his brother was dead, Bayezid II settled down into a thirty-year reign marked by much less expansion than those of sultans before or after. Although criticized at the time for his inactivity, in retrospect his was a golden era, one in which the Ottoman economy was healthy and its subjects safe. Whereas Mehmed had raised taxes, debased coinage, and seized

property to pay for his wars, his son's books were balanced without extraordinary measures.[67] Restraint is rarely glorious, but it often leads to prosperity.

Bayezid II's time was not completely devoid of violent drama. Ottoman armies fought two small, inconclusive wars in Egypt between 1481 and 1491, and at the turn of the century the growing navy defeated a Venetian fleet for the first time. After that war came to an end, the Ottomans had very little military engagement with Europe for two decades. It is not recorded whether anyone took much notice of Vasco de Gama's voyage around the Cape of Good Hope in 1497, which would set off a chain of events that would cause future headaches. And things were about to change for the worse in the east.

In 1502 the Safavid family overthrew the rather timorous Timurid Dynasty in Persia and instituted policies that would cause problems for, and eventually change the character of, the Ottoman Empire. The new dynasty posed more of an ideological challenge Constantinople than a military one: its shahs promoted a heterodox version of Shi'a Islam, which found willing audiences across the region, including in some Ottoman lands. Bayezid soon had to deal with internal strife known as the "Red Head" phenomenon, a sectarian struggle named not for hair color but for hats favored by the rebels. The Porte's distrust of its Shi'a subjects grew as the Safavids helped engineer more revolts against Ottoman rule, including long and bloody ones in the late sixteenth century.[68] Efforts to extirpate heresy tend to be even more brutal, at least to civilians caught in the middle, than wars against the infidel, and in this case they started a long process that weakened of one of the central Ottoman strategic advantages. Over time, thanks in part to the Safavids, the empire became less tolerant of diversity.

When the threats on the home front dissipated, the Ottomans moved to punish the shah's effrontery. The great distance to Safavid territory from Constantinople did not leave much time for disciplinary action, however, and the Ottoman task was made more difficult by Safavid tactics that relied more on evasion than confrontation and on harassment rather than pitched battle. The two powers met in the open field only once, at least in a major encounter, which went very poorly for the Safavids at Chaldiran in 1514. After that the Persians retreated and scorched the earth behind them, even moving the capital south at times, under the assumption that geography and the elements would sufficiently slow the Ottoman advance as winter approached.[69] Campaigns into Safavid territory were endurance contests without much chance for winning glory or booty, since burned lands contain few treasures, and as such were often quite unpopular with Ottoman troops. As time went on, musters for assaults became occasions for desertion, riots, and outright mutiny, even among elite units.[70]

The Porte had no fear of direct assault from the east, however. As the Parthians were always more opportunity than danger for the Romans, so too the Safavids had no ability to project power into Ottoman lands. At various times the shahs

reached out to the Habsburgs, Muscovy, and even England for aid, but they could never mount a serious threat to Constantinople.[71] Had the sultans chosen to do so, they could have marched into the Safavid capital and added it to their empire, but their strategy suggested that the benefits of such a venture would be unworthy of the cost. The Porte had the home front to consider as well, and was not eager to upset its Shi'a subjects further. Although Bayezid's successors would seize chunks of Safavid territory on occasion, they never made an effort to conquer the entire empire or overthrow the dynasty. They were content to leave a hostile-but-weak power on the empire's frontiers.

## Sultans Grim and Magnificent

Three sons of Bayezid II were alive in 1511, each of whom governed a province in Anatolia; by 1512 one was left, having dethroned and exiled his ailing father and dispatched his brothers. From the beginning, it was clear that the reign of Selim I (aptly nicknamed "the Grim") was to be different from that of his father. In the time of this warrior-sultan the size of the empire would double, adding some of the richest areas in the region to its domains. All lands within the action radius would become Ottoman.

Selim was not in power long before he turned his attention south. The Mamluks, the dynasty formerly run by slaves that had defeated the Mongols at Ain Jalut in 1260, were still in charge in Cairo. Selim manufactured a number of grievances against their leaders, from the reasonable (he accused them of fomenting unrest in Anatolia, meddling in the affairs of the buffer states that lay between the empires, and interfering with Ottoman pilgrims making the Haj to Mecca) to the absurd (failure to congratulate his grandfather sufficiently for his victories over the Christians), and attacked.[72] Ottoman armies crushed the Mamluks in two successive campaigns, one through Syria and the next straight into Cairo. The standard Ottoman action radius was extended a bit because the Mamluks considered gunpowder to be dishonorable, and consequently their armies did not use artillery. As was often the case, the people of Syria and Egypt welcomed the Ottomans, and large swaths of territory, including Damascus, surrendered without a fight. Around the same time, the Kurds of Anatolia, who had bristled at Safavid attempts to control them, essentially invited the Ottomans in too.[73]

The addition of Mamluk lands enriched the empire enormously, both physically and spiritually. No longer was there any question of who led the Islamic world, since the Porte controlled all of the pilgrimage routes to, and assumed the role of protector of, the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina. While Sunni Islam was unifying, Christianity was moving in the other direction: in the same

year that Selim's troops marched into Cairo, some 2,500 miles away Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses on a church door, creating divisions that the Ottomans would be happy to exploit over the years. The Porte consistently sided with the weaker side in complex intra-Christian disputes, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox. Any enemy of the ultra-Catholic Hapsburgs, including the English, Dutch, and French, was a friend of theirs.[74]

Controlling Egypt also generated vast financial rewards. Tax revenues surged, and Ottoman control of the spice trade routes, already significant because of their dominance of the Black Sea, became absolute. Imperial confidence was nearing its peak. Selim's advisors began to dream of campaigns to conquer China, advice the sultan never seems to have taken too seriously.[75]

Selim the Grim died at about fifty, bequeathing a rare gift to the empire: a peaceful succession, since he had only one surviving son (the other three had been killed on their father's orders six years earlier). This lone survivor would go on to become the most famous sultan of all, under whose reign the Ottoman Empire is often considered to have reached its peak. To history he is known as Suleiman the Magnificent, but at the time he wished to be called Suleiman the Lawgiver, as a signal to his (present and future) subjects that his rule would be just. His name, after all, was the Turkish version of Solomon. Among his first acts were reversals of his grim father's policies that many considered tyrannical, all as part of a major public-relations campaign that won no small number of admirers.

Suleiman himself appears to have admired Alexander the Great, which (as always) meant bad news for neighboring peoples.[76] His reign was predictably aggressive, extending the empire to the limits of the action radius, north through Hungary, west to Algiers, and east to Baghdad and Basra. He proved willing to violate the cardinal Ottoman strategic rule: Suleiman's forces often waged wars on two fronts simultaneously, which drastically increased the cost of his military and decreased its effectiveness. Not all traditional guidelines were abandoned though: after Baghdad fell, the Ottomans made pains to demonstrate immediately that their rule would be superior to those they replaced.[77] Suleiman's forces assaulted Vienna, even though it lay on the very edge of their effective zone, and there he encountered his only near-peer rival. Habsburg Emperor Charles V had been promoting himself as savior of Christianity and slayer of Ottomans, even promising a new crusade, all of which Suleiman took rather personally. The assault failed, and the two powers gradually carved out spheres of influence in the Balkans, the larger of which was Ottoman.[78]

Pitched battles remained rare. When they occurred, they were still often decisive: with a single victory at Mohács in 1526, for example, Ottoman rule was consolidated over Hungary. But warfare during Suleiman's reign was more commonly marked by retreats into fortified cities by one side and siege by the other. Unfortunately for his enemies, Suleiman's troops had perfected the art of

reducing fortresses. Under his leadership only thirteen castles were able to resist Ottoman firepower for more than twenty days. Only four times were sieges repelled, and in three of those four cases the target was eventually captured.[79] No one was better at sieges than the sultans.

When the Ottomans overran Egypt, they inherited its problems. For some years the Mamluks had been clashing with the Portuguese, who had cut into the spice trade in the early sixteenth century by defeating the Mamluk navy and establishing outposts in India. In 1538, Suleiman sent troops to conquer Aden in modern-day Yemen, in order to control access to the Red Sea, and began preparations to raid Diu, the main Portuguese base of operations in western India. After an inconclusive four-month siege, the Ottomans returned home. The raid was punitive rather than imperial; Diu was much too far away to add to the empire, and clearly outside the operative radius.

Conflict with the Portuguese would wax and wane for three decades and demonstrate once again the regional flavor of Ottoman grand strategy. Although their galleys were no match for the Portuguese oceangoing vessels on the open seas, the Ottomans still refused to construct a blue-water navy. Instead they chose to fight closer to home, near the coastlines or in narrow waterways where the Portuguese could not maneuver effectively. In the green water, in what one historian described as "the narrow, steamy waters off Arabia," their galleys held a decided advantage.[80] Eventually the two sides settled into an uneasy peace that recognized a military reality in the Indian Ocean and Horn of Africa: the Portuguese could not project power inside the Ottoman radius (although they tried unsuccessfully to colonize Ethiopia and Eritrea), and the Ottomans had no real interest in expanding beyond it. This arrangement suited both sides, since Lisbon wanted to control over trade on the open sea while the Porte sought to tax goods in transit.[81]

Under Suleiman the size of the Ottoman bureaucracy and court, which was never small, grew even larger. He employed eunuchs—thousands of them—to service the inner circles and royal family. There was a Chief White Eunuch and Chief Black Eunuch, the latter of whom appears to have been superior in rank.[82] The emasculated could also lead men in battle: the admiral that led the Ottoman fleets against the Portuguese in 1538 was one Suleiman the Eunuch. Another class of mutilated unfortunates served the sultan, one that was highly valued for its inability to gossip: Tongueless court mutes were tasked with some of the most delicate imperial tasks, such as strangling brothers of new sultans.[83]

Although he made many substantial, practical contributions to the empire, Suleiman's greatest skill was marketing. His decades of (mostly) successful warfare were turned into legend by his team of court historians. No successor sultan could measure up to the exaggerated skill and wisdom of the Magnificent, reinforced by comparison with the mere mortals who succeeded him.[84] Even today

many histories regard the end of this reign of imagined perfection as the onset of the gradual process of Ottoman decline. In reality, however, the empire had centuries to go before it slept. Suleiman the Magnificent died while on campaign against the Habsburgs in 1566, setting off the standard spate of palace intrigue and fratricide. His son Selim emerged from the chaos, reigning for eight years as Selim II. His time on the throne was most memorable for two events, one of which generated a great number of early-modern headlines but proved ephemeral. The other, while relatively unnoticed at the time, was to generate problems for the empire until its eventual collapse.

## Pax Ottomanica

Selim II inherited an empire that was still expanding, albeit slowly. The new sultan had a weakness for alcohol (his nickname is "Selim the Drunk") and a strength for grandiose pronouncements and plans. He ordered his engineers to construct a canal to connect the Volga and the Don rivers in the empire's expanding Asian territories.[85] This never came to fruition, but it did bring the Ottomans increasingly into conflict with the local powers, especially Poland and Muscovy, which was to have major implications down the road. History recalls his reign, however, more for the greatest sea battle of the early modern era, one whose significance has been overstated by generations of Europeans.

On October 7, 1571, the combined Mediterranean navies of Christendom (those of Venice, Spain, Genoa, Malta, Savoy, the Papal States, and others) defeated the Ottomans in the Ionian Sea near the Greek city of Lepanto. The engagement was the largest of the galley era, involving over two hundred ships and tens of thousands of sailors on each side. Most of the Ottoman fleet was sent to the bottom, which the Christians regarded as evidence of God's favor and deliverance from the infidel. The victory was celebrated across Europe for decades to come, but few seemed to notice what took place in its immediate aftermath: Within a year the losses had been replaced and the Ottoman navy was back, stronger than ever. The sultan could not replace his mariners, but he had the wealth, the resources and above all the bureaucratic organization and skill to build new ships. The Men of the Pen rose to the occasion and made sure the Porte had an even more powerful fleet by the beginning of the next fighting season. None of the members of the Holy League could have duplicated this feat. Overall the strategic position of the Ottomans in the Mediterranean improved under Selim the Drunk, Lepanto notwithstanding, because of the conquests of Tunis in 1569 and Cyprus in 1571.[86] The defeat stung, to be sure, but its effects were short term. The Drunk is supposed to have remarked that on Cyprus he had "cut off one of Venice's arms," whereas at Lepanto the Christians "had only shorn his beard."[87] If the Holy League, which splintered immediately after the

battle, had hoped that large engagements at sea would be as decisive as those on land, it was to be sorely disappointed.

After Lepanto, naval activity in the Mediterranean was restricted to small-scale raids and privateering rather than big, risky battles. The Ottomans often subcontracted these activities to willing associates, and found many North African corsairs happy to take payments to concentrate their predation on Christian shipping. Some became quite rich and famous in the process, including Khaireddin Barbarossa, who served the Sublime Porte faithfully for five decades, eventually rising to become Grand Admiral of the Ottoman navy. Corsairs provided another layer of intelligence gathering and regional expertise as well.[88] Their lands became informal additions to the Ottoman Empire.

In December 1574 Selim decided to chug an entire bottle of wine, which was not out of the ordinary for him. This time, though, he slipped afterward and cracked his skull on a marble palace floor. His eldest son leapt into action immediately, ordering his five younger brothers strangled and taking command of the Porte. He would rule as Murad III, and his twenty-year reign would begin a slow, nearly imperceptible strategic shift. Having achieved the extent of the possible, having conquered all territory in its action radius, the Ottoman Empire became more interested in defense than offense, in protection rather than expansion. It became, in other words, a status-quo state, and would remain one for the next three hundred years.

But there was a little more expansion on the agenda first. Murad III would order assaults into Persian lands and add a vassal state in Morocco. Toward the end of his reign the Ottomans began a major war with Austria, one that would last thirteen years, involve only one major engagement, and end in a draw. The empire he gave to his son, who would become Mehmed III, was at its largest.

At this point expansion stopped, largely because all lands within six hundred miles of Constantinople had been brought into the empire. Imperial goals gradually shifted from expansion to protection, from offense to defense, and their means shifted too. Ottoman attitude toward immobile fortifications, for example, evolved. Castles help preserve the status quo; they are weapons of defense, not offense. In the early decades at least until the time of Suleiman, the Ottomans did not protect their empire with extensive fortifications. Their priority was conquering nearby lands, and they well understood that their enemies posed little offensive danger. Fortresses were for those across the frontiers, those who needed to protect their cities, towns, and islands from infidel invaders. The Turks, wrote the great French historian Fernand Braudel, "preferring wars of aggression, flinging masses of cavalry into the field, took no such precautions."[89] Late sixteenth-century operations at the edges of their action radius were less successful, and their enemies were strengthening, so the Ottomans dug in. By the end of the century, they had constructed a string of fortresses in the Caucasus,

and forty years later the European and Black Sea frontiers were equally protected. The mid-seventeenth-century fortification system extended across the perimeter of the empire.[90]

Many observers at the time and since have associated this deliberate shift to a defensive posture with decline. Greatness demands expansion, apparently, in the eyes of geopolitical scorekeepers. And while it is true that the empire did lose ground to its rivals over time, its eventual collapse (300+ years later) was not due to its decisions to abandon the offensive. Restraint need not imply ossification, and the status quo is not necessarily stultifying. Ten generations passed between Murad III and the end, during which time the Ottoman Empire remained safe from external threat and prosperous within its defined radius from Constantinople.

This is not to say that the later Ottoman centuries were without problems, of course. The seventeenth century opened ominously, with a major internal revolt involving many sectors of Ottoman society. The initial spark involved the confiscation of the lands of *timariots* who failed to send troops to help with the war against Austria, but it quickly spread throughout the Anatolian countryside. These "Jelali" revolts were also fueled by economic dislocation caused by the most effective (if inadvertent) weapon the Habsburgs ever deployed: inflation. Silver brought by Spanish ships into Europe from the New World caused prices to spike across the Mediterranean. By the end of the sixteenth century goods cost three-to-four times what they did at its beginning, and few governments understood why, much less how to respond.[91] Most of what was done by the Ottomans and their rivals alike, such as price controls, restrictions on imports and exports, and eventually devaluations, only made things worse. The traditional Ottoman preference for imports over exports, which was the opposite of mercantilist logic, might have helped keep market shelves full but it did not help their cash flow.[92] Ottoman finances were complicated by religious prohibitions on charging interest. While many of their rivals were taking advantage of the growing European credit markets, the sultans did not borrow to get them through the lean times. This does not mean that credit was unavailable in Ottoman society; people in both rural and urban areas found their way around the restrictions.[93] But there was less money available for the Porte than there would have been if Islam had not frowned upon interest.

The gradual shift in priorities from offense to defense was not uniformly welcomed or even accepted in all quarters, or by all sultans. There remained a crusading spirit in the empire that manifested itself in occasional assaults into European territory, such as the quixotic campaign against Vienna led by Mehmed IV in 1683. The city remained on the edge of the Ottoman geographic reach, however, and the assault ended in disaster and began a series of reversals. In 1699 the Porte was forced to sign the one-sided Treaty of Karlowitz, which

for the first time formally ceded territory to enemy forces (in this case, to the Habsburgs and Russians). The treaty marked a turning point of sorts, since it was also the first time that the Ottomans acknowledged a wartime defeat to a European power. Relative decline had become a reality, or at least a topic of much conversation, throughout strategic circles of the empire. Why it was happening, and how to reverse it, became something of an obsession for sultans to come.

## Ossification, Reform, and Decline

Pessimism is surprisingly common among superpowers. Defeat in war often brings out the Chickens Little, whether justified or not, to predict doom in coming years. The Ottomans had their fair share of such people, many of whom made reasonable diagnoses but offered few cures.[94] Overall the Porte spent more time during the next two centuries fretting over its decline than implementing ways to stave it off.

Regionalism and religious fervor began to play greater roles among Ottoman subject peoples, with ominous portents. The Jelali revolts had weakened the imperial center, and power struggles with local actors in the periphery would wax and wane for centuries. One uprising in particular would have implications for future international politics. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the austere cleric Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and his followers were unimpressed with both the piety and competence of the sultans. The atavistic brand of Islam preached by the Wahhabis radicalized many in the region, inspiring their converts to sack cities and slaughter those they considered heretics along the way. Wahhabis even took control of Mecca and Medina in 1803. The movement took another decade before being squashed—or, perhaps more accurately, forced into hibernation.

The outside world did not stand still. Russian power continued to grow, and soon the tsars replaced the Habsburgs as the Porte's main enemy. The two would clash on the imperial periphery a dozen times between 1568 and 1918, for a total of about fifty-seven years of warfare. At first the Russians struggled mightily against the Ottomans, but by 1774 the forces of Catherine the Great managed to hand the Turks their worst defeat since the days of Tamerlane. Sultan Mustafa III was inspired by the disaster to implement a series of overdue, controversial reforms. His new vision for the military, the "New Order Army," incorporated a number of modern innovations such as engineering schools, new training regimens, European officers, and greater numbers of troops.[95] Like its main rivals, the New Order Army would rely less on cavalry and more on infantry. And, perhaps most important, it would not depend as much on the *janissaries*.

This did not sit well with the corps, who was already restive during the long conflict-free periods of the later Ottoman centuries. Peace might have served

the sultans well, but it did not please the *janissaries*, whose social status was predicated on marital abilities that needed occasional practice to remain sharp. When no enemies presented themselves for smiting, the corps grew bored and anxious and engaged in side ventures, such as trade, politics, and pillage. The *janissaries* of the nineteenth century bore little resemblance to those of earlier times. The corps was no longer a small elite unit composed of Christian slaves but an enormous, unevenly trained force of 135,000 men, many of whom inherited their positions from their fathers. Its members were growing more and more corrupt and exploitative over time.

Perhaps most importantly from a strategic perspective, the *janissaries* were a powerful conservative force that resisted the innovation and evolution the empire needed to remain competitive. Europe had moved past the 1500s but the *janissaries* wanted to remain there and preserve many of the traditions of their most glorious era. As a result they were becoming less effective on the battlefield. Training, discipline, and professionalism, which once gave the corps a competitive advantage, were no longer unique to the Ottomans. Defeat at the hands of even the lesser European militaries, like that of the tsar, became more common. The *janissaries* even began to develop a reputation for cowardice, and their commercial and political ventures fed the view that they had become less an elite, patriotic unit than a predatory, self-interested gang.[96]

Events came to a head on June 15, 1826. In one fantastically violent half hour, Sultan Mahmud II's army slaughtered or arrested thousands of unsuspecting *janissaries*. Over the course of the following weeks many of their leaders were executed and most of the rest imprisoned, effectively bringing the unit to an end. Russia took immediate advantage of the turmoil and temporary Ottoman weakness created by this "Auspicious Incident," as the purge became known, demanding the removal of Ottoman forces from sections of Wallachia. Rather than face an invasion, the troops left their posts.

The destruction of the *janissaries* was part of a larger effort to strengthen the hand of Constantinople against the troublesome regional warlords. Earlier attempts had ended in failure. Eighteenth-century reformists adopted the symbol of the tulip, a flower associated with worldliness and enlightenment in Turkish lore. This "Tulip Age" (roughly 1718–1730) resulted in among other things the first widespread use of printing presses throughout the empire, but it met fierce resistance among conservatives. By mid-century reactionary elements had prevailed, and those new presses were put on mothballs.[97] Indeed most attempts to drag the Ottoman world into the modern era were unsuccessful, even while its rivals innovated and reformed and passed them by. Many reasons have been offered to account for the relative Ottoman decline, at least when compared to the great states of Europe, all of which include a general failure to keep pace with the Age of Industrialization.[98] For decades the struggles between reformers and

conservatives resulted in periodic violence and governmental paralysis. Real and imagined past glories convinced many that progress itself was the enemy, and that the route to regeneration led through a revival of the economic, strategic, and even moral structures of the past.

Like many powers in decline, Ottoman society became more conservative, blaming its woes on impurities brought by outsiders. Islam grew more prominent in national decision-making, and immigrants became frequent targets of official and popular ire.[99] Reforms that did occur tended to be reactionary, and included bans on bans on tobacco, coffee houses, and taverns, as well as regulations on the clothing styles that non-Muslim subjects were permitted to wear in public.[100] The great strategic strength of the empire—its tolerance—was slowly sacrificed by those seeking to keep pace with a world that in many ways was leaving it behind.

Reform had many natural domestic enemies, most prominently the religious class and nobles, and precious few allies. Those enemies were able to quote the Prophet Muhammad, who once said that "the worst things are those that are novelties, every novelty is an innovation, every innovation is an error and every error leads to Hell-fire."[101] Only strong leadership from Constantinople could have overcome these stultifying elements, and unfortunately the later sultans were generally less effective than their predecessors. Whether this dip in ruling had anything to do with the abandonment of the practice of survival-of-the-fittest-brother is not clear. For centuries, however, despite some occasionally heroic efforts no leader was able to enact the kind of reforms that would have kept the empire competitive with its enemies.

Reform had another great enemy: peace and security. In every society, when threats from abroad seem dire, imperatives for innovation are high. Although the Ottomans were involved in some wars on the periphery during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they faced no existential threats. It was not uncommon for thirty years to go by without conflict, as occurred in the mid-eighteenth century, and in such times the urgency to keep pace with rivals decreased.

External stability also meant that internal debates became more intense. Frightening external enemies always help people forget how much they distrust those with whom they live. In times of peace, they remember soon enough. In addition, few things are worse for social stability than large numbers of underemployed soldiers. "In default of an enemy to plunder," wrote Lord Kinross, "men plundered one another; in default of land, they flocked to the cities or spread disorder throughout the countryside."[102]

Reform might have been doomed, but the Ottomans did not fail to try. One sultan after another endeavored to reform the unreformable state bureaucracy, land distribution system, economy, and military. Some succeeded more than others, but none could overcome the forces of tradition that kept the empire

rooted in the early-modern era. As brilliant as the Ottoman governance machine was for its time, it was not built for evolution. Bureaucracies are not engines of innovation. While the scribal service could keep the empire functioning and thriving, it could not easily push forward. Europe moved forward while its "sick man" stood still.

Even the most basic of military reforms failed to gain purchase. The willingness to evolve that had been such a strength of the early army was abandoned as time went on. The Ottomans did not adapt the bayonet, for instance, until losing a number of battles to armies that employed it. Repeater rifles, machine guns, ironclads, dreadnoughts, and mass formations all reached the Ottoman military very late.[103] The Porte also did not participate in the blue-water naval revolutions of the seventeenth century, as the decisive theater of operations shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. Maritime technology left the Ottomans behind as the great seafaring European powers added quicker, more maneuverable sailing vessels to their fleets.[104] By the time of the Treaty of Karlowitz, the Ottoman navy had been reduced to second-class status at best, and its days of harassing European shipping and projecting power by sea were long gone.[105] Overall, by the dawn of the nineteenth century its rivals had come to consider the empire a target rather than a threat.

The (primarily) defensive wars of eighteenth century often went poorly, as the more modern European armies defeated the ossified Ottomans time after time. The century was not uniformly grim: the Safavid Dynasty collapsed in 1722, for instance, and outside powers swooped in to fight over the spoils. Eventually the sultan and the tsar carved the remnants into spheres of influence, which held until the disastrous (for the former) war of 1768. The Ottomans lost the Crimea and other predominantly Islamic areas and saw their ability to protect Muslims everywhere diminish.

Restrained grand strategies rely more on diplomats than warriors. As their neighbors were matching and then exceeding their military capabilities, the sultans developed a corps of professional diplomats that became the empire's primary strategic tool. Prior to Karlowitz, Ottoman diplomacy had been "unilateral, without reciprocity," according to one historian. They were "a law unto themselves," and acted as if they were "the only nation on earth."[106] By the eighteenth century the sultans could no longer dictate terms to their rivals. The balance of power was shifting, and the Ottomans sought means to achieve ends that did not relay solely upon raw military power. They improved their capability to pursue their goals through persuasion and negotiation rather than force.

They also rethought their friends and allies, often choosing to remain aloof from the intrigues and conflicts of their rivals. After 1700, wrote Virginia Aksan, "neutrality, or at least disengagement, was also part of the tools of the new diplomacy."[107] Their long alliance with France ended rather abruptly when Napoleon

landed troops in Egypt in 1798. It took three years to drive his armies out of the empire. Britain became the best friend the Ottomans had, helping in their various efforts to keep Russian influence out of the Mediterranean. The two signed a formal defensive alliance, agreeing to come to each other's aid in times of crisis, which was entirely one-sided because only one of its signatories was ever likely to need the other's assistance. That support came with a price, though: the sultans were forced to open up the empire to British trade. As part of aptly named "capitulation" agreements, foreign merchants were granted access to all parts of the empire in exchange for the opening of foreign markets to Ottoman goods. Capitulations initially brought benefits to all parties, but over time they came to be seen as symbols of Ottoman weakness, of the Porte's inability to control its destiny.[108] Similar agreements were occurring all over the region, however, as the Smith/Ricardo gospel of free trade won converts among elites everywhere. The Ottomans changed their views about the importance of autarky, but they were certainly not alone.

As it neared its end, the empire was held together as much by outside powers as the sultans. The British decided that an Ottoman collapse would lead to unacceptable Russian gains, and used their influence (and at times their soldiers) to help prevent or at least delay that outcome. In 1832 British troops were deployed to Anatolia to help defend Constantinople against an army of Egyptians that had risen in revolt; a generation later they served the Ottoman cause in the Crimea. This alliance came with a cost, but it helped keep the tsar's sharks at bay.

The Ottomans made one final, fatal mistake, throwing in their lot with Germany and the Central Powers in 1914.[109] Four years later their empire was gutted, with Britain and France dividing the spoils, much to the chagrin of many independence-minded Ottoman subjects. It was also during this war that the growing Ottoman intolerance, the very opposite of the strategic virtue that contributed so much to their rise and ability to rule, reached its nadir. The mass deportation of the Armenian minority from Anatolia was not exactly new for Ottoman internal policy—they had been moving entire populations since the time of Osman—but this one was notable for its scale and brutality. It remains a stain on the conscience of modern Turkey and a subject of intense patriotic passion on both sides today. The suffering of the Armenians demonstrated just how morally and strategically bankrupt the Ottoman Empire had become in its last years, and how far it had drifted from the spirit of the Lawgiver. Although many from the Balkans to Egypt and beyond welcomed its initial embrace, few anywhere lamented its demise.

* * *

Over the course of the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire essentially became a tool in the grand strategy of the next superpower. Some of the factors

that had contributed to its greatness ultimately led to its downfall: The large and capable Ottoman bureaucracy had been a great stabilizer, allowing the sultans to recover from almost any disaster and overcome nearly any blunder, but stability has its limitations. There are times in history when progress is necessary, when only innovation and reinvention can prevent relative decline. The nineteenth century was one of those times. The men of the pen, along with their conservative allies in the military and religious establishments, prevented the Ottomans from keeping pace with their rivals as industrialization transformed Europe. The empire's attempts at reform were insufficient, and without evolution no power of that time could possibly persist.

The flawed Ottoman cultural memory did not help matters. When decline threatened, rather than identifying the empire's strengths and seeking to build upon and expand them, the Ottomans clung to visions of an imagined and illusory past, one that overlooked the diversity that attracted so many to its rule. As the empire weakened it became more religious, more nationalist, more absolutist and less tolerant. It became, in other words, just like the other great early-modern empires, but it did so anachronistically, since the others had left that era behind.

The empire's ultimate collapse should not detract from the accomplishments of Osman and his descendants. Using a combination of military prowess, bureaucratic efficiency, and tolerance, the Ottomans maintained centuries of orderly rule over the most fractious, contentious areas of the world. They avoided overextension by rigidly limiting their goals, seeking to conquer only the areas within a manageable radius of The City. Most significantly, they managed a long, prosperous, and secure status quo. For this success they could thank their self-imposed checks on their own ambitions.

What worked in 1453 was not well suited for 1853, however, no matter how hard the sultans tried to make it so. To the extent that they changed, the Ottomans abandoned some of the traits that led to their greatness in the first place. Theirs is a story of grand strategy that failed to keep pace with the times, a way of life that did paid insufficient attention to innovation elsewhere. Decline under those circumstances may have been inevitable, but that does not take away from its remarkable rise and even more remarkable reign. Its dominions have been uniformly more violent and less orderly in its wake.

# 6

# Imperial Spain

Spain's King Philip III had a lot on his mind as he traveled to Portugal in the summer of 1619. For one thing, a major war that had been on hiatus was scheduled to restart fairly soon. It was ten years into the "Twelve Years' Truce" between his government and the United Provinces of the Dutch Republic, a Spanish colony that had been in open, bloody rebellion for decades. The truce was controversial, however, and many of his advisors were urging Philip to let it expire. The issue was certain to be discussed in Lisbon, where the king was traveling to secure official Portuguese acknowledgment that his son was the legitimate heir to both thrones. The head that wore the crown was particularly heavy that summer.

Sixty-two years earlier, Philip's father had sent ten thousand soldiers under the command of the Duke of Alba to his northernmost colony to crush a revolt that had broken out over taxes and religion. Large sections of the Spanish Netherlands, which also encompassed today's Belgium and Luxembourg, were dominated by Protestants who felt oppressed by the Catholics in Madrid. Alba, as it turns out, was the wrong person to send. Perhaps the Duke's favorite saying—"Cut off their heads!," which he would blurt repeatedly during meetings of the Council of State—should have given the king pause.[1] But dispatched he was, and Alba's heavy-handed tactics soon inspired many an otherwise neutral Dutchman to join the rebel camp.

The war dragged on without resolution for decades. By the turn of the century it had long been obvious to both sides that neither could win. The Dutch fended off numerous Spanish attacks but could not hope to expel the occupiers from their land; the Spanish could not reduce the fortified Dutch cities or cut the rebel supply lines to France and England. A truce was negotiated, one that contained what we would call today a "sunshine clause," or an expiration date, twelve years hence. Fighting was set to resume on April 9, 1621 unless the Spanish decided to renew or renegotiate the truce. And it would indeed be Spain's decision to make: The Dutch were clear that they wanted the peace to continue and were

*The Pursuit of Dominance.* Christopher J. Fettweis, Oxford University Press. © Christopher J. Fettweis 2023.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197646649.003.0006

open to the notion of making it permanent. They also communicated that, were Madrid to opt for war, they were prepared to renew the fight.[2] The ball, to use a cliché unavailable at the time, was in Spain's court.

The truce was hardly perfect. Although it brought an end to the fighting in Europe, actions in other parts of the world were unaddressed, like Dutch privateering against Spanish shipping and assaults on Philip's possessions in the Pacific and South America. Much more problematically, the agreement was universally interpreted as a humiliation for Spain, since it essentially recognized Dutch independence, something the monarchy had fought for decades to deny. It appeared to be an admission of Spanish defeat.

Philip had clear options. He could renew the treaty without alteration, which would have been the simplest thing to do, at least from a bureaucratic perspective. He could open negotiations to alter it, perhaps addressing some of the flaws so bothersome to Spanish interests in the hope of creating a more durable peace. Or he could let it expire, essentially announcing that hostilities would soon resume.

The Spanish Council of State met multiple times in the summer and fall of 1619 to discuss the issue. Many thought that the monarchy was in a strong position to negotiate new terms, hoping that the taste of peace would have undercut the Dutch appetite for war. "The people, having enjoyed for so many years the benefit of the trade and commerce with us, and of the freedom from heavy tributes such as they pay now," argued Philip, "will not want to return to the difficulties of war."[3] Without a unifying Spanish enemy, internal divisions in the provinces had festered. England and France, who had been Dutch allies, were growing increasingly irritated with privateers based in the Low Countries. Madrid, however, was better off having been relieved of fighting in the Netherlands. Twelve years of peace had taken some pressure off Spanish finances and its army had largely recovered. Spain was in a stronger position in 1621, the pro-negotiation party argued, and could expect to get more favorable conditions in exchange for a continuation of the armistice.

There was a correlation between distance from the conflict and hatred of the truce. Political and military leaders on the ground in the Netherlands were strongly in favor of renewal. The Spanish governor of the southern provinces and general in charge of the Army of Flanders understood full well what war would mean, and opposed restarting it. They pointed out that trouble was brewing elsewhere, especially in Germany, where the emperor's cousin had his hands full with rebellious Protestants. The Catholics in the southern Dutch provinces still under Spanish rule were enjoying the peace and did not want to see the truce expire.

The king's advisors in Madrid were far more hawkish. The anti-truce party was led by Don Baltasar de Zúñiga, a senior favorite of the king, who argued

not that the Dutch could be defeated, necessarily—four decades of inconclusive fighting had disabused most observers of that notion—but that failure to try would send the wrong messages to the rest of the empire. Spain's reputation was at stake, its honor and credibility. "In my view," he said, with a bit of flourish, "a monarchy that has lost its reputation, even if it has lost no territory, is a sky without a light, a sun without rays, a body without a soul."[4] If the fight were abandoned, if the Dutch were allowed to break away from the empire, other colonies might be emboldened to rebel. Should the belief spread that its army was not invincible, the consequences for Spain might be everywhere catastrophic. In the eyes of many of his contemporaries, Philip's reign had been one long, slow-motion act of humiliation, since after a brief period of aggression when he first took the throne, he had stubbornly followed a mostly peaceful path. They hoped this decision would signal a determination to restore Spanish honor.

Everyone seemed to agree on some basic facts. First and foremost, there was widespread consensus that the war had been a complete disaster. Despite the fact that the Spanish had deployed the largest army in Europe to the Low Countries, the seven independent provinces of the Protestant Netherlands were able to resist all military and economic pressure. No progress had been made in reducing their cities or choking off their trade. The cost to Madrid, in terms of both blood and treasure, was staggering, and it was crippling Spain's ability to act in other theaters.

Second, everybody knew the issue had no military solution. Nearly thirty years of effort had convinced them all that the war against the Dutch was unwinnable. Spain's substantial military advantage was counteracted by superior defensive fortifications and favorable geography of the Low Countries. As long as English and French support continued, so too would the rebel war effort. Even the most hawkish advisors had few illusions about the possibility of victory. "We cannot, by force of arms, reduce those provinces to their former obedience," Zúñiga wrote at the time. "To promise ourselves that we can conquer the Dutch is to seek the impossible, to delude ourselves."[5] The best that could come from a renewal of hostilities was a series of temporary victories that could perhaps produce a more favorable peace. No one seems to have thought that the Dutch Republic could be reabsorbed into the empire.

As it happens, before Philip could make the biggest decision of his reign, fate intervened. On the way home from Lisbon he contracted malaria and never fully recovered. His illness forced him to remain aloof from further discussions on the matter, and indeed from all government work in 1620.[6] In the end the war party prevailed. Two days before his death at forty-two, in one of his very last decisions, a delirious Philip III agreed to let the truce expire. The hawkish nobles advising the new boy king, Philip IV, did not allow a revisitation of that fateful decision. And with that, Spain's last chance to save its empire was lost. The war

restarted in the summer of 1621 and would drag on for another twenty-seven years, ultimately ending with the borders in exactly the same place. More than any other single factor, the ruinous war in the Netherlands destroyed Spanish dominance in early-modern Europe.

Spain's run as the world's strongest power was relatively brief, covering only about a century and a half, during which time it made a series of decisions, like renewing the war in the Netherlands, that in retrospect appear foolish and misguided. But in its heyday it certainly was an early-modern superpower, overseeing the first truly global empire with dominions extending from northern Europe to South America, and from Italy to Mexico to the Philippines. Spanish conquistadors added thousands of square miles and millions of souls to the empire, and urged their king to consider an assault on China. A re-examination of its grand strategy does indeed reveal flaws and blunder, but not necessarily in the way commonly held by today's historians.

## The House of Habsburg

The story of the Spanish empire at its height is one of five kings, all of the House of Habsburg, two of whom were named Charles and three Phillip. It begins with royal marriage and ends with the fruits of generations of inbreeding, the product of a belief that relationships between relatives were wiser than tainting imperial bloodlines with the genes of commoners. It experienced the fastest rise and fall of a superpower in history, an empire with a legacy that far outlasted its brief reign at the top.

And what a reign it was. At its peak the Habsburg Empire extended over about one in four Europeans and millions more in the New World.[7] About a quarter of the earth was under its rule. Spain possessed the best army and navy of its time, and its diplomatic corps was the envy of its rivals, setting the tone for European norms and behavior. It was the epicenter of culture, fashion, and the arts, including the age's great novelists, dramatists, poets, and painters, all of whom combined to grant Spain substantial reserves of soft power.[8] "Wherever the knowing observer directed his gaze," wrote one historian, "he would see signs of Spanish influence."[9] It is no accident that today Spanish is the official language of twenty-one countries, with more than four hundred million native speakers.

The world that Spain dominated was one of perpetual conflict. The major powers of Europe managed to avoid fighting for only seven complete calendar years in the entire seventeenth century, which was actually an improvement over the sixteenth.[10] The Spanish were not so much victims of this violence as willing participants. As we will see, they engaged in wars of choice with nearly every great European power at one time or another during their two-century peak.

This was also the age of European exploration and colonization, during which time its great powers divided up the rest of the world. No state did this more efficiently or enthusiastically than Spain.

It would be incorrect, however, to imagine that state policy of this era was based solely on amoral realpolitik. Ideas did matter, or one set of ideas in particular: Christ was ever-present in the daily lives of the people, and an active participant at the councils of state. Theocracies dominated sixteenth-century Europe, even if they often considered God's rules to be rather flexible. Shared faith sometimes provided the foundation for trust and cooperation, but deals with heretics were not uncommon. Catholic France allied with Protestant German princes and Muslim Ottoman rulers when convenient, as did the pope on occasion. The five Habsburgs were somewhat more consistent, or uncompromising, when it came to matters of faith. Perhaps the strong find it easier to be true to God, while the weak—even popes—are sometimes forced to choose between security of this world and fate in the next.

Early-modern monarchs benefited from their people's belief in an active, omnipotent deity. Surely God would not allow anyone to rule without His permission and support. Leaders were considered semi-divine and treated with a reverence that would have made Roman emperors jealous. All royal households had a version of England's Groom of the Stool, for example, a senior position whose main task was to monitor the royal discharges and see that they were disposed of with the proper dignity and respect.[11] From a more practical perspective, while this "divine legitimacy" tended to discourage revolution and usurpation, it also seemed to encourage individual zealots from taking God's will into their own hands. Ambitious generals were rarely a problem for early-modern rulers, but assassins often were.

The first of these semi-divine monarchs in our story was the product of an imperial marriage that brought together two of the great European houses. The crown prince of the Austrian Habsburgs, Philip the Handsome, married Joana of Castile, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella, the couple who had united most of Spain in 1469. The offspring of this merger, Charles, inherited both empires and immediately became the most powerful man in Europe. For more than a century he and his successors would dominate their region and expand their sphere of influence across both oceans. It was Charles, however, who set the tone and laid down some important guidelines for Spanish grand strategy.

## The First Charles, 1516–1556

The Spanish did not conquer their way to superpower; they inherited it.[12] Due to a series of fortuitous premature deaths and childless unions, Charles of Ghent

found himself heir to the Habsburg lands in central Europe as well as the Spanish territory of his parents. In 1519 he inherited quite a large domain, one that included a united Castile and Aragon, Sicily, Sardinia, Naples, Burgundy, Franche-Comte (in eastern France), the Low Countries, Hungary, Bohemia, Austria, and an expanding empire in the New World. He was elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1520, making him the nominal leader of its 1800+ states, cities, and principalities. He had never been to Spain and was unpopular with the Iberian nobles at first, but in time came to be accepted by all his subjects and faced no major internal revolts after the first few years of his rule. In order to maximize confusion for future generations, the king was known as Charles I in Spain and Charles V in Austria. By either name he set the strategic precedents for his four descendants on the throne.

Unlike some of the other superpowers reviewed in these pages, Spain never established a "Pax Hispanica," or a period where its power brought peace and stability. Quite the opposite: the rise of Habsburg power resulted in more fighting, more resistance, and more balancing.

At first, Charles faced two significant threats, one to each of his major domains. The Ottoman Empire under Suleiman the Magnificent abutted his Central European inheritance and threatened the Mediterranean as well. As a

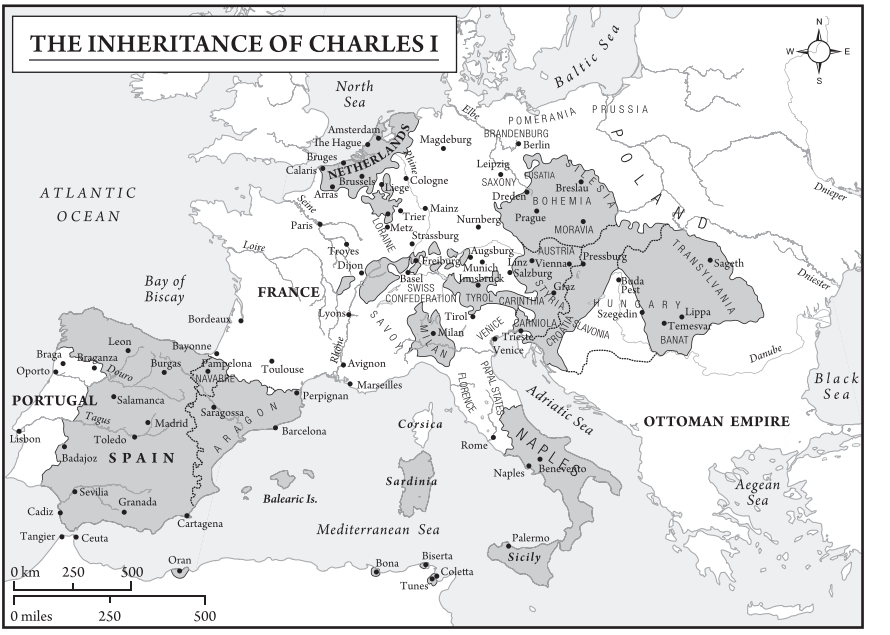



*Figure 6.1* The Inheritance of Charles I/V Credit: Originally in *The Cambridge Modern History Atlas*, edited by Sir Adolphus William Ward, G.W. Prothero, Sir Stanley Mordaunt Leathes, and E.A. Benians. Cambridge University Press: London, 1912.

general rule, one never wants to be faced with a ruler known as "the Magnificent," since such nicknames are not generally earned through restraint. The Ottomans represented a religious as well as political rival, threatening Habsburg souls as well as their interests. The two great powers were at war for at least sixty-six years during the era of the five kings. The Austrian branch of the family took the lead in resisting Ottoman expansion on land while the Spanish Habsburgs fought them at sea.

The other substantial threat lay to the north. France had twice the population of Spain, and its kings possessed far greater wealth. The two powers clashed repeatedly in Italy in the first half of the sixteenth century, with the Spanish prevailing on nearly every occasion, for reasons we will discuss shortly. The French king Francis grew so frustrated with the failure of his armies that he challenged Charles to a duel, to let God decide the fate of Italy, in 1527. The Spanish king's ministers were apparently so concerned that Charles would accept that they did their best to hide the message.[13] The French were also well positioned to threaten Charles's northern territories in and around the Low Countries. A Spanish optimist might suggest that the Valois kings in Paris were surrounded on all sides by Habsburgs; a pessimist might point out that the French had the advantage of central strategic position and could choose to engage the Spanish on multiple fronts without taxing their supply lines. Madrid in those days was full of optimists.[14] Eventually all of Italy was in Spanish hands.

The various revolts and wars in Italy prevented Charles from addressing a different kind of crisis, one that was to result in the rise of another major enemy. Few in 1517 foresaw the tumult that would result from the actions of an obscure German monk who nailed a list of grievances to a church door in Wittenberg. Over the course of the following years. Lutheranism spread across the Holy Roman Empire and beyond, posing a direct threat to the Catholic Church and its primary defender, the Habsburgs. Luther was soon joined by other protestors in Switzerland and elsewhere, all of whom believed that they grasped the path to salvation more clearly than did the established authorities in Rome.

Although as Holy Roman Emperor it was Charles who called upon Luther to recant at the Diet of Worms in 1521, he generally seems to have hoped that Protestantism would wither and die of its own accord. When negotiations failed to bring the heretical princes back into the fold, Charles rather reluctantly led a campaign against them. In the Schmalkaldic War (1546–1547), he crushed the political independence of these duchies, but it would prove much more difficult to crush their beliefs. Charles and his successors were to lead the Counter-Reformation, which often turned violent, but it came too late to prevent Protestantism from spreading.

Religious wars are typically brutal affairs, and these were no exception. When men fight for God, they do not seek compromise solutions that provide

mutual benefit, since it is hard to find common ground with Satan's minions. The decades that followed Luther's revelations were among the most gruesome in European history, highlighted by the kinds of slaughter and torture that presumably would have puzzled and horrified Jesus.[15] The Spanish were in the middle of all of them, and were among the most enthusiastic killers for Christ.

## Interests, Priorities, Policies

By the time Charles took the throne, the main Habsburg priorities were clear. They were everywhere on the defensive, from their perspective, and sought to maintain the empire's many rightful lands. The Spanish heartland was most important but the least of their concerns, since it was threatened by no enemy. The second highest Habsburg priority was Italy and the family's dynastic claims therein. Charles inherited the powerful kingdoms of Naples and Sicily, and spent his entire reign fighting off various French claimants to the peninsula's other thrones. Protecting the central and northern European holdings was third on the list. It was all a bit overwhelming; already by the 1520s Charles was passing the administration of Austria to his younger brother Ferdinand, since managing the entire empire was proving to be too much for even the most powerful of kings.[16]

The Habsburg monarchs considered themselves protectors of the status quo. They fought to defend their empire and religion, to parry challenges from their various enemies rather than seek to dominate all corners of the continent. "I have no reason to be driven by ambition to acquire more kingdoms or states, or to gain reputation," wrote Charles's son in 1586, "because Our Lord in his goodness has given me so much of all these things that I am content." Four years later he stated that "God is my witness that I have never made war to gain more kingdoms, but only to maintain them in the [Catholic] faith and in peace."[17] Outsiders were rarely convinced by such royal insistence, such as one Florentine ambassador, who wrote on behalf of the European conventional wisdom in 1588 that "these pigs wish to tyrannize the world," and make themselves "monarch [over everyone], having pretentions to every throne."[18] As is always the case, actions taken by one state to improve its defensive position were interpreted by neighbors as offensive, aggressive, and inherently threatening.

One of the iron rules that governs international politics is that *they are realists*.[19] It does not matter who they are; as long as they are not us, we perceive them to be motivated only by the pursuit of power and interest, while principle and justice often drive our decisions. This is particularly true for any state with which we have even a mild rivalry, or any reason to suspect its motives. Since our rivals are realists, it follows that the main goal of their foreign policy is to increase their power at the expense of ours. Central to the enemy's eternal nature, therefore,

is deep-seated cultural dissatisfaction with the status quo. *We* are interested in maintaining the world as it is, while *they* always want to change the balance of power in their favor. This is a ubiquitous belief, and it is often mistaken.

The Habsburgs' rivals had substantial evidence to bolster their perceptions, since of all European powers, Spain most aggressively expanded overseas. What started famously under Ferdinand and Isabella continued infamously under Charles and his descendants. The story of the conquest of the native peoples Columbus stumbled upon is as well-known as it amazing.[20] Spanish conquistadors were essentially independent actors who brought enormous amounts of territory under the control of Madrid. Geography and technological limitations assured that micromanagement was not an option—it took at least eight months for letter writers to receive replies—but these colonial entrepreneurs were not even given much guidance before they left. They conquered on behalf of their kings, both on Earth and in heaven, with little constraints on their actions. Presumably they were chosen according to their personal thirst for glory, since those unlikely to accept defeat made the best conquistadors. And all of these ventures were aided enormously by old-world microbes, many of which found homes in defenseless new-world bodies.[21] Waging biological warfare was never the Spanish intention, though no doubt this demographic catastrophe was not entirely unwelcome.

Germs cannot take full credit for the ease with which the Spanish conquered. Fortunately for the conquistadors, the new-world empires they encountered were brutal and unpopular with many of the people they ruled. The Aztecs were particularly hated by their subjects, so when white soldiers on horseback offered an opportunity for liberation, many took it. Their empire was enormous and powerful—the capital city Tenochtitlan had over two hundred thousand residents, more than any European city of the time—but the Spanish had many instant local allies, without whom their efforts would have ended in quick failure. Aztec grand strategy created a major internal weakness, even if it should not be faulted for failing to prepare for unimaginable threats.[22] Francisco Pizarro was similarly able to take advantage of an Incan civil war to divide and conquer that empire in Peru starting in 1532.

The conquistadors and their more official successors earned the Spanish a reputation for brutality and savagery. This "black legend" suggested that Spanish imperialism was worse than all others, and that their subjects suffered more than did those of other European colonizers. Supporting examples were not hard to find, since the conquistadors could be exceptionally harsh to people they considered beneath them (which included just about everyone). But historians have since cast a degree of skepticism on this legend, suggesting that it was largely invented by Spain's rivals and sold to willing Protestant audiences.[23] Spain was

hardly kind or fair to the people it ruled, but neither were its peers. There is little reason to believe that the Spanish were much worse to the natives than were their competitors. Nor, however, were they any better.

The Spanish believed their actions were just and necessary, and like all conquerors emphasized the areas in which they improved native society. They banned human sacrifice with its attendant cannibalism, for instance, and instituted monogamy throughout the New World. They also had a clear human-rights policy, albeit one that would seem unfamiliar to twenty-first-century readers. The primary goal of today's humanitarians—saving lives—was not a priority of the pious Spanish. Since this world was temporary and trivial when compared to the next, the fate of the soul was much more important than the fate of the body. If small numbers of people had to be killed at times to encourage many others to convert, it was a price worth paying, one for which the saved would someday thank the Spanish. As a Jesuit superior general once explained, "a peace which will enslave souls is worse than any war, and the ruin of souls is more to be avoided than that of bodies."[24] Going abroad to save souls was in fact performing God's work on Earth and was a major interest of the Habsburg kings, rather than merely a way to excuse what was otherwise decidedly un-Christian behavior.

The Spanish Habsburgs considered themselves defenders of the faith and leaders of the pope's army in Europe (although their armies sacked Rome in 1527, a rather embarrassing interlude probably not discussed much by the two thereafter). The primary tool they used in pursuit of their spiritual goals was their most infamous: in 1480 Ferdinand and Isabella had established a separate court to deal with heresy and root out Jews who had converted in name only and continued to practice their faith surreptitiously. The Spanish Inquisition tortured and burned its way through the country's few remaining Jews within a generation or two and became rather directionless until the late 1550s when Protestants were discovered in Castile. Though Calvin and Luther were never popular in Spain, the notion that their poisonous ideas could ever take hold in the peninsula set off a new round of trials. Mass public burnings (or *auto-da-fés*) sent unambiguous messages about what would and would not be tolerated, lest there be any doubt. The Inquisition was not without mercy, however: those accused heretics who confessed could choose to be garroted before the flames overtook them.[25] As always, physical pain for the few was a small price to pay if it led to salvation of the many.

It is easy to be cynical regarding the Spanish dedication to region, especially in light of the violence they were perfectly willing to perpetrate in the name of the Lord. Many at the time and since have suggested that Catholicism was merely a tool rather than a serious concern of the Habsburgs, a means not an end. This is too simple, however; people are wonderful rationalizers, so it should surprise no

one that their various interests did not conflict. The cross and the sword had a tremendous amount in common, as it turns out. They did not counsel contradictory actions, at least in the Spanish mind, and were instead mutually reinforcing. The commitment of our five kings to the Church was genuine and heart-felt, and it just happened to be also true that they decided that the best way to serve Him was to preserve and expand Spanish power.

Though disappointed by their inability to find cities of gold or fountains of youth, the Spanish managed to cheer themselves up with the discovery of massive stores of silver. Before long the monarchy was dependent upon these riches, without which the relatively weak Spanish economy would not have been able to compete with its rivals, much less tower over them. Spain was primarily an agrarian society, one whose industrial development lagged behind the other European powers. The promise of incoming silver provided its kings the credit to borrow, allowing them to live far above their means. Protecting the colonies thus became a major Spanish interest, important mainly due to its contributions to the real theater of competition. The New World was always a sideshow. What Spain "took from the Americas with the one hand," wrote one historian a century ago, "she squandered in Europe with the other."[26] It was fortuitous timing—the near-simultaneous ascension to a dual throne and discovery of new riches—that produced Spain's golden century.

## Tercios and Castilians

His newfound riches allowed Charles to maintain a capable, professional army. At its heart was the infantry, organized into *tercios*, which were to Spain what the legions were to Rome: the basic units of organization, the functional equivalent of modern divisions, and the symbolic center of imperial power. *Tercios* debuted in 1490s, as Castilians fought the remnants of the Muslim emirates in the Iberian Peninsula. From Swiss mercenaries they adapted the pike, a long spear that was a very effective anti-cavalry weapon. Horses, being somewhat more rational than their riders, generally refuse to charge into a wall of spears. The rest of a *tercio*'s 3000-or-so men carried swords or the various firearms of the day, especially the arquebus, a musket stabilized by a pole that extended from the barrel to the ground. Auxiliary troops and artillery provided support, as did medics and surgeons.

For 150 years *tercios* were the best fighting units in Europe. They defeated one French army after another in the first half of the sixteenth century and did the same to Swedish formations in the first half of the seventeenth. Like all of history's best armies, the superiority of the *tercio* can be traced back to training: raw recruits received a year or more of drill on basic combat technique

and discipline before they ever stepped foot on a battlefield.[27] Spanish troops became very good at following orders and were unlikely to panic.

Habsburg armies had another built-in advantage. Though all early-modern societies experienced brutality and violence, Castile was unusually warlike for its time. Centuries of clashes between Christians and Muslims had transformed Castilians into what one historian has called "a society organized for war."[28] Martial values dominated the culture, making the region a fertile recruiting ground for warriors, since raiding and conquest were normal features of everyday life. Castilians were the Vikings of their time, men whose reputation for military competence and inexhaustible violence often produced victory before battles were engaged. They were always a rather small part of the overall military, however, being outnumbered in *tercios* by mercenaries from Italy, Ireland, and the various Catholic areas of Germany. The quality of Habsburg armies was always correlated with the percentage of their soldiers that came from Spain.[29]

*Tercio*s were expensive to raise, train, and maintain, but they were a bargain compared to navies, especially for countries like Spain that had very little timber. The Spanish navy was semiprivate throughout Charles's reign, and was neither well organized nor led. Under the two Philips the size of the navy would grow enormously and evolve into another major expense for the imperial treasury. Spain would eventually maintain two major fleets, one in the Atlantic and one in the Mediterranean. Rather than concentrate their resources on one service as other superpowers had done, Spain operated the era's most expensive army as well as its most expensive navy. As if this was not enough of a problem for Spain's finances, wars were getting more and more costly as time went on. By the 1590s Spain was spending five times what it had on its military fifty years before.[30] These were not expenses it could easily afford.

## The Borrower from Hell

The military absorbed ten times more of the monarchy's money than all its other expenses combined.[31] Raising cash for it was a constant problem, and a major strategic limitation, despite the fact that Charles controlled the richest, most urbanized parts of Europe. Income from the Netherlands and Italy were never enough to cover the cost of their defense. That burden fell on the Castilians, whose taxes grew steadily over time. Unlike its competitors, Spain had an organized, efficient collection system and a competent governing bureaucracy that squeezed the most out of its agrarian people.[32] Their contributions were the primary source of money for the Spanish government, far outpacing money collected abroad and the hauls of silver from the New World.

The Spanish did not invent the mercantilist system—that dubious distinction is held by the Portuguese—but they did apply it with alacrity. That system is probably broadly familiar to anyone wise enough to read this book, but to review briefly, mercantilists believed that governments should actively regulate the economy in order to promote the growth of national power. By protecting native industries and promoting exports, mercantilists hoped to keep more money flowing into the state than out. The Spanish government regularly intervened in the economy to bolster its own industries and hurt those of its rivals, since everyone at that time considered trade and growth to be zero-sum games. In this pre-Smith era there was no sense that free trade could benefit all parties.[33] Perhaps most significant, the imperial European powers sought to monopolize the resources of their colonies and use them exclusively for the mother state. All legal trade with the Indies was regulated by Madrid and was designed to enrich Spain. Like all mercantilists, the Spanish sought self-sufficiency and believed that relying on any potential rival for goods created an unacceptable strategic vulnerability.

Incoming silver helped make Spanish foreign ventures possible but brought problems of its own. To exploit the riches, by the mid-1540s Spain had developed an early public-private partnership: Mines were rented to private actors in return for 20 percent of the silver they produced (the "royal fifth"). The government also taxed incomes, bringing its share to about 40 percent of the total yield. The rest of the silver stayed in private hands, and was pumped directly into the Spanish economy, which had the unforeseen consequence of driving up prices.[34] The amount of silver that arrived annually varied considerably, depending on the number of ships that made the transatlantic voyage and their fate. Storms, privateers, and (eventually) enemy navies made the crossing extremely hazardous.

The monarchy's income grew steadily, tripling between the year Charles took the crown and when he passed it on. It doubled in the first years of his son's reign, between 1556 and 1573, and then doubled again before Philip III took over. But it was never enough. By 1532 and then for nearly every year thereafter, expenses always outpaced revenue, at least by a factor of two, and often much more.[35]

In order to make ends meet, the Habsburgs had to borrow. Fortunately, the monarchy had a young banking system eager to loan. For the first time in history a secondary market for debt emerged, in which bankers sold bonds to speculators, thereby increasing their holdings and the funds available for governments to borrow. And many of them took advantage. Banks in Germany and Genoa lent enormous sums of money to the Habsburgs, adding interest expenses to the long list of things the Spanish could not afford. Already by 1536 Madrid's short-term debt was seven times its annual revenue.[36]

Eventually the bills came due. Between 1571 and 1575 crown expenditure had grown to around eighteen million ducats per annum while its income ranged between five and six.[37] In 1575, Spain experienced the first sovereign default in history. Its debt was rescheduled and many investors ruined as a result, yet lending commenced again in short order. Spain would declare four more bankruptcies, in 1596, 1607, 1627, and 1647. Why, you might ask, would banks continue to extend credit to such an unreliable borrower? There is little evidence of direct coercion or intimidation; they could have refused. Instead, it seems that generations of bankers calculated that high interest rates made the loans worthwhile, and that the risk of occasional default was outweighed by short-term profits.[38] Most of the time, the monarchy paid its bills and the banks made money. Apparently there was never a shortage of financial daredevils willing to invest in the Habsburgs.

Soldiers were often the first to feel the effects of imperial bankruptcy. One of the major disadvantages of a rented army is that, when payments do not come through on time, it stops honoring its end of the bargain as well. Unpaid mercenaries are much more likely to desert than soldiers fighting for their homelands. Paying troops was a major problem for almost all early-modern European powers, and mutiny was a common occurrence. But, as it turns out, not only mercenary armies resented broken promises and bouncing paychecks. The Army of Flanders experienced regular mutinies by Spanish soldiers as well, including an infamous incident in 1576 when unpaid Castilians rampaged through friendly Antwerp in a fit of impecunious, underfed rage. Over a thousand buildings were put to the torch and as many as seventeen thousand people lost their lives in this first example of "Spanish Fury," which became a propaganda tool for the Dutch. Between 1589 and 1607 there were at least forty substantial mutinies among imperial troops in the Low Countries.[39] Spain's inability to pay its troops was a major contributor to its failure in the Netherlands, and indeed in the eventual decline of its empire.

Spanish warriors had allies that their medieval predecessors did not: professional, highly effective diplomats. Credit for the invention of modern diplomacy and the notion of permanent representatives in foreign courts is generally given to the Renaissance Italians (even if the Mongols might object), but Ferdinand and Isabella adopted the practice quickly.[40] By the time of Columbus's voyage, Spain had ambassadors in Rome, London, Venice, Brussels, and Vienna. Soon afterward diplomatic missions were common across Europe, as were the norms that we would recognize today, such as diplomatic immunity, strict protocols, and ubiquitous cocktail parties. In many of these areas the Spanish led the way, in both innovation and competence.

Treaties and other international agreements were common in Charles's day, even if there was rarely a price to be paid for violating them. The seeds of

international law were being planted in the Low Countries during this era by the great Dutch diplomat and jurist Hugo Grotius, but for the most part no rules inhibited the actions of kings. Law and rights were subjects for philosophers and propagandists, not strategists. Wise advisors could always find ways around international norms when necessary. As in all eras, wars had to be justified, but fortunately for power-hungry kings practically all of them could be, as long as clever lawyers were nearby.

Alliances were never serious unless backed up by royal marriage. Romantic images of princes and princesses marrying for love rarely matched reality. Children of monarchs had a political duty and were expected to accept the choices made by their parents. The Habsburgs came to global prominence through marriage, and like all monarchists of the time they would try to sustain their power and balance against enemies by strategic spousal selection.

Such arrangements were not without cost. Marriage is an exclusive arrangement, after all, one that often leaves disappointed suitors behind. Many kings hoped to marry their sons to Philip II's daughter, the Infanta Catherine Michelle, and all-but-one were left disappointed when he chose the heir of the House of Savoy in 1585. Forty years later a son of the King of England tried to take matters into his own hands, traveling incognito to Madrid to woo the daughter of Philip III. The Spanish were apparently unimpressed with the hopeless romanticism of Prince Charles, who was turned away humiliated and disgruntled. While royal marriage could unify, it could also frustrate and divide.

For centuries European royals married one another, in complete ignorance of the potential genetic consequences. The most visible cost of keeping the Spanish bloodline pure was mandibular prognathism, an inherited condition that causes the lower jaw to protrude beyond the upper. Spanish kings generally grew beards to hide what became known as the "Habsburg jaw," which for most was more inconvenience than true disability. Charles's mouth hung open most of the time, and he could not eat without drooling, but he suffered no further ill effects.[41] While future generations would suffer more seriously, for Charles the consequences of inbreeding were mostly aesthetic.

## Philip II ("The Prudent"), 1556–1598

In 1556 Charles decided that he had had enough.[42] He was suffering from a number of ailments, including gout and bouts of melancholy, the latter of which he seems to have inherited from his mother.[43] European monarchs rarely retired and even more rarely divided their empire as they exited the palace, but this is exactly what Charles did. The king felt that his domains were too large and unruly for one sovereign, and he also wanted to pre-empt a potential struggle for power

in the family. He decreed that Spain and its associated lands would be passed on to his son, Philip II, while the central European empire would go to his brother Ferdinand, who had led two successful defenses of Vienna against Ottoman assaults. The arrangement worked quite well and the two houses of Habsburgs generally cooperated, at least on the big issues, in the decades to come.

Charles did his best to groom his son for leadership. In 1548 the emperor wrote a political testament for young Philip, full of advice on how to rule. Charles told his heir that the main goal of Spanish grand strategy ought to be maintenance of the status quo. He regretted the cost of "the wars I have been forced to fight so many times and in so many places" (although, he added with some pride, he usually won them).[44] Philip's primary objective therefore should be to avoid conflict, unless jealous neighbors forced Spain to protect its lands. His instructions "breathe the very spirit of conservatism," according to one historian, and urged his son to learn from his words rather than his deeds.[45] Philip followed much of this advice but did not share his father's enthusiasm for peace. During his long reign, the Spanish people would experience no more than six consecutive months without war, against enemies new and old.[46]

Philip II would rule for more than thirty years and preside over the empire at its greatest territorial extent, even without its central European lands. The Spanish added new colonies in the Americas and an archipelago in the Pacific that was named for the king. It is not clear how many people in the Philippines were aware that they had been absorbed into the Spanish Empire, since only a few ships reached them every year, but the islands gave the empire a truly global character, the first in history upon which the sun never set. It is little wonder that by the end of the sixteenth century it was common for people to remark that "God must be Spanish."

Soon after Philip took charge, religious civil wars broke out in France, ones that would last decades and keep its armies tied up at home. The Spanish proved unable to resist the temptation to intervene in their neighbor's troubles: forays into France in support of the Catholics, including a major thrust into Paris led by the Duke of Parma in 1590, took troops away from other fronts and piled more ducats onto the growing mountain of imperial debt. Other enemies did not go away. Philip was to fight three major wars against the Ottomans, none of which had a decisive outcome. His ambassadors were able to cobble together a Catholic alliance, a "Holy League" that united Venice, the Papacy, Genoa, Malta and others in 1571 to fight the battle at Lepanto that we reviewed in the last chapter. The major victory raised spirits across Christian Europe, even if it did not affect the balance of power in the Mediterranean. The Turks soon recovered, and war went on.

Philip's men in the New World and the Philippines lobbied him for more than twenty-five years to keep the expansion momentum going. A venture into

China, they assured him, would be both simple and glorious.[47] Estimates of the manpower that would be required varied from four to ten thousand, a force that would be supplemented by recruits from Japan and Manilla. Spanish hawks expected to repeat their astounding, against-all-odds successes in the Americas, despite a series of inconvenient facts: the Chinese had gunpowder, for one thing, so they were unlikely to be awed by Spanish musketry. They also had long been exposed to old-world diseases, so the conquistadors would be without their main ally. Nonetheless, a generation of Spaniards prepared for what would have certainly been a catastrophic failure, prodded the whole time by their men of God. As was always the case for the Spanish, the loudest voices encouraging an assault on a new area—one that, the Spanish were convinced, would find them greeted as liberators by the oppressed, idolatrous Chinese masses—came from men in frocks. Conquest was urgent, at least according to members of the various holy orders intent on saving as many souls as possible. This new generation of would-be conquistadors assured Philip that victory in China would be soon followed by similar success in modern-day India, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia. The only disagreement they had was over precisely who would be granted the title of "Duke of Peking."[48]

In retrospect it may seem surprising that this request was denied, since it was generally the practice of the Spanish kings to engage in all possible conflicts, no matter how debilitating, especially when supported by church officials. But something had happened in 1588 that profoundly shook Philip's confidence. Without that event, it is likely that history would have witnessed a Spanish attempt to bring all of Asia under its control—one which, to understate, the odds would have been against. In fact Philip was to make three major decisions in his thirty-plus years of rule that had enormous strategic implications for the management of the empire. In each case there were viable alternatives, ones that were cheaper and less risky. Spanish interests would have been better served had Philip taken his father's advice to heart and ignored the hawks whispering in his ear.

## The Dutch, the Portuguese, and the Armada

On October 29, 1566, the new king convened a meeting of his senior aides to discuss an evolving new issue. The security situation in one of his most important colonies, the Low Countries of modern-day Netherlands and Belgium, was rapidly deteriorating. A bad harvest in 1565 had led to widespread hunger, and the people were bristling under new taxes levied by the king. Calvinist preachers had whipped the peasantry into frenzies of iconoclasm and looting. The destruction of religious imagery and art, known to the Dutch as the *Beeldenstorm*, or "statue storm," was a direct challenge to the Habsburg leadership in Madrid. Like

his father, Philip considered himself the great protector of the Catholic faith, Christ's warrior on Earth, and he could hardly be expected to ignore heretic vandalism of holy sites. Local nobility could not, or would not, rein in the rioters.

Present at this Council of State were two of the king's favorites, the longtime rivals Duke of Alba and Prince of Eboli. Alba and Eboli often pulled the king in opposite directions, and did so again in this case. The former felt that the time for patient negotiation had passed and urged an immediate military response.[49] The people of the Low Countries needed to be shown the error of their ways, thought Alba, and deserved the kind of message that only concentrated imperial power could send. The rest of the empire was watching, which meant that vacillation or delay would be interpreted as weakness and would encourage further challenge. As Alba's allies had noted in the months leading up to the meeting, "All Italy is plainly saying that if the troubles in the Netherlands continue, Milan and Naples will follow." A statement from the Council of State in September had expressed a similar opinion: "If the Netherlands situation is not remedied, it will bring about the loss of Spain and all of the rest."[50]

It surprised no one that Eboli disagreed. The prince, who had a reputation as a dove, proposed a smaller response that would involve a light military footprint and perhaps a royal visit to spark a reconciliation. Eboli recommended détente, and felt that extensive repression was likely to make the situation worse. He urged Philip to send a senior emissary to make one more effort at reconciliation, perhaps bringing promises of religious freedom and respect for local customs.

The meeting went late into the night. The king eventually cut off discussion as tempers flared, and announced his decision the next morning: he sided with Alba and ordered a punitive force of ten thousand men under the duke's command to set off for the Low Countries immediately, before the winter snows blocked their route.[51] Alba was one of the foremost military officers in Europe, having for decades led Spanish armies against the French and other enemies various and sundry. He soon sallied forth, with instructions to put an end to Dutch insubordination. And end it he did. Opposition, which was not widespread, quickly collapsed in front of the Spanish troops. Tens of thousands fled the country, avoiding the kangaroo courts and show trials that Alba soon established. More than 1,700 people were executed in the first few months after his arrival.[52] The court's nickname among the people, "the Council of Blood," did little to soften Alba's views. He felt that fear was an essential strategic weapon and pledged to continue until "every individual has the feeling that that one fine night or morning the house will fall in on him."[53] To top everything off, in 1568 Alba erected a large bronze statue in Antwerp of himself trampling the Dutch under his horse.

Unfortunately for Philip and the Spanish, Alba's oppression backfired. Although it took some time for the Dutch resistance to recover, eventually it did,

and it came back stronger than ever. Had the king listened to Eboli, and had the Spanish taken steps to address Dutch grievances, the entire history of the monarchy might have unfolded differently.[54] Much might have been accomplished by a simple visit from the emperor, a show of good faith that the mother country took local concerns seriously.[55] This would have required an entirely different king, however, a wiser one who did not share Philip's pathological assumptions about the utility of force and repression. The Dutch Revolt, which would prove catastrophic, became something of a metaphor for Spanish grand strategy under the Habsburgs.

The Spanish would send the better part of the next eighty years trying to pacify the Low Countries, spending money they did not have and wasting thousands of lives in the process. To the Amsterdam magistrate Cornelis Pieterszoon Hooft, the contest pitted "a mouse against an elephant," but that mouse proved more than able to hold its own.[56] The Dutch people rallied behind the charismatic William of Orange and other nobles who promised independence and relief from Alba's tyranny. They soon learned to avoid large pitched battles, opting instead for a combination of hit-and-run tactics and retreats into prepared positions. Many Dutch towns were protected by new fortifications of the "Italian style," which took gunpowder into account. This design created crossing fields of fire for cannons and eliminated the "dead zones" in front of medieval fortresses in which attackers could hide safely. They were very difficult to overcome, and help explain why early-modern sieges often lasted quite a long time.[57] Geography also helped the defenders: the many canals and bogs of the Low Countries proved impassable for the heavy Spanish regiments. Alba's *tercios* were able to sweep over the friendlier, Catholic southern provinces, but they could not dislodge Orange's forces in the north. The mouse was to hold off the elephant for many decades, and in the process drain the imperial treasury more than any single foreign policy venture of the five kings. It would be up to Philip's son and then his grandson to try to find a way out.

Philip's second foreign-policy decision had more mixed results. In 1578, Portugal's King Sebastian and most of his court died in Morocco while quixotically trying to stem Ottoman expansion. The king left no heir, so power transferred to his aged and equally childless uncle, Cardinal Enrique, who reigned less than two years. Power vacuums did not last long in early-modern Europe. Philip felt he had to act quickly since, as one of his advisors told him, "the gain or loss [of Portugal] will mean the gain or loss of the world," even if the logic was never really spelled out.[58] Fifty thousand Spanish troops under the ubiquitous Duke of Alba marched into Lisbon, marking their route with the duke's signature deprivations and atrocities, which the Portuguese did not soon forget.[59] In 1581 Philip was crowned Philip I of Portugal (continuing the tradition of taking multiple names to confuse future generations), and the peninsula

was unified for the next six decades. The unification could have proven permanent had Philip moved his capital to Lisbon, which he was apparently sorely tempted to do.[60]

Philip did not improve his position through the domination of Iberia. Though Portugal's territories were vast on paper, their contributions to Spanish power were minor. Most Portuguese colonies were little more than trading posts, some of which were quite far away, and once added to Philip's empire they required defense. The costs added to the already strained Spanish treasury were greater than any benefit they brought. Furthermore, the annexation alarmed Spain's rivals, who felt an even greater imperative to balance its power. The most basic strategic imperative of all dominant powers—to keep potential rivals divided—was undermined by this costly addition to the empire. In just a few years, an advisor would warn that Spain had become "the target at which the whole world wants to shoot its arrows."[61] The most consequential positive development that arose from the absorption of Portugal was the addition of its navy and its sailors, which made possible dreams of even more conquests, especially one that would prove to be the most disastrous venture of all.

The English and the Spanish, once united by faith and interest, found themselves on opposite sides of a deepening rivalry in the 1580s. Trouble had started when Philip's second wife, the English Catholic Queen Mary Tudor, died in 1558 and was succeeded on the throne by her Protestant half-sister Elizabeth. The new queen set about returning England to the faith of her father, which complicated relations between the two powers. The geopolitical glue that had held them together was a shared hatred of France, which because of its internal problems was not much of a threat to anyone. As glue weakened a deterioration of Anglo-Spanish relations followed, and the idea of landing Spanish troops on English beaches to march on London began to appeal to Philip. The emperor was encouraged to do so by many, including Pope Gregory XIII, who not only endorsed the attack but urged Philip to make haste. He was also assured by Catholic exiles in Rome that Spanish invaders would be greeted as liberators, and that there was a popular insurrection waiting to happen in England, in need of only the slightest spark.[62] The debate and planning went on quite publicly for more than a decade. Philip's enthusiasm for the enterprise waxed and waned, but it soon became conventional wisdom around the court that true peace would be impossible until English heresy was squashed.

Relations grew substantially worse in 1586, when Philip aided an assassination attempt against Queen Elizabeth, a scheme known to history as the "Ridolfi Plot." According to the plan, the king would offer to dispatch Spanish troops to London in the post-assassination chaos to restore law and order (and eventually Catholicism). The murderers failed, however, and Elizabeth took the whole affair rather personally. After executing the local perpetrators in gruesome fashion,

she signed a new defensive treaty with France and increased her support for the Dutch rebellion. Philip had blundered into a union of his enemies.

Philip's Plan B for England was more traditional and straightforward. A large Spanish fleet would sail up to the Low Countries, pick up a few thousand battle-hardened troops currently fighting there against the Dutch, and ferry them over to England. There was little doubt in anyone's mind about what would happen if the *tercio*s managed to get ashore: they would make quick work of the English army and set Elizabeth to flight.[63] The only real challenge would be getting them there, but the relatively small and unprofessional English navy presented an obstacle that hardly seemed insurmountable .

The armada Philip assembled to teach the English overdue lessons was, in retrospect, unimpressive. It consisted of nearly a hundred transport vessels protected by nine warships and twelve galleys carrying about twenty thousand men initially but hoping to add many more at its first stop. In command was a senior aristocrat who possessed great faith but little maritime knowledge. Preparations were about as un-secret as could be imagined: the English certainly knew an invasion was coming in 1588, and mustered nearly two hundred vessels to meet it.[64] As heroic as Sir Francis Drake and his sailors were, Spanish tactical blunders and bad weather made the decisive contributions to the debacle. The Armada failed but the war dragged on; the Spanish navy eventually recovered and was soon eager to try again.[65] Over the course of the next two decades Philip would send three more fleets north, none of which met any success. In the four hundred years since, the Spanish Armada has become a symbol of arrogance and military incompetence (as well as a source of unlimited national pride for the English). It was also what we would call today a war of choice, as well as an unnecessary, unforced error.

## Intangible Assets: God and Honor

While preparing the armadas, Philip knew the odds were against him. "Unless God helps us by a miracle," he told a papal agent as in Lisbon as the first set sail, "the English, who have faster and handier ships than ours, and many more long-range guns, and who know their advantage just as well as we do, will . . . knock us to pieces . . . without our being able to do them any serious hurt. So we are sailing against England in the confident hope of a miracle."[66] The king carried on despite his misgivings because he possessed a secret (or perhaps not-so-secret) weapon, a tool all Habsburg emperors relied upon heavily: God. Central to their grand strategy was the miracle, divine intervention that would rescue even the most poorly planned ventures. Historian Geoffrey Parker called this a sign of Philip's "messianic imperialism," the firm belief that God would intervene in worldly

affairs on behalf of the monarchy. Confidence in miracles was a consistent feature of the king's calculations. No defeat, no matter how serious, could shake his faith that God would not let him fail. "May God help us with a miracle," he told a subordinate in December 1574 after a series of reversals. "I tell you we need one so much that it seems to me that He *must* choose to give us a miracle, because without one I see everything in the worst situation imaginable."[67]

A sense of divine mission permeated all Spanish foreign policy, especially after Luther split the Church. Philip saw himself as a Renaissance Moses, someone who was leading the faithful as part of His plan.[68] Due to his special relationship with the Almighty, which was a byproduct of divine legitimacy, Philip thought he understood strategy differently from everyone else.[69] Christianity was thus both end and means for the Spanish, and they acted with the understanding that a just and loving God would be at their side. "Everyone relies on miracles and supernatural remedies which God visibly provides for His Majesty," commented one of Philip's courtiers, who was not fully comfortable with the practice.[70] As it happens, the Almighty often remained neutral in Europe's endless wars, and reliance upon divine intervention proved catastrophic for Spanish grand strategy.

It is difficult to assess risk accurately when one's chief ally is omnipotent. The expectation of miracles led Spanish leaders to overestimate their capabilities and generated the kind of overconfidence that can lead to disaster.[71] Divinely inspired overconfidence is even worse. Any advisor who voiced concerns about the fate of the armadas would be accused not just of undue pessimism but insufficient faith, potentially angering the Almighty and dooming the mission.[72] Contingency planning was discouraged, since it admitted the potential for failure. Anything less than full-throated support for even the riskiest ventures, much less actual caution or prudence, was not only treason in Madrid but sacrilege, the kind of thing that might earn one a visit from the Inquisitors.

Faith notwithstanding, Philip must have known that his various wars were expensive, debilitating, and essentially unwinnable. Why, then, did he continue to wage them? Like his father before him, the king worried obsessively about his image, fearing that perceptions of Spanish power would be damaged by any failures, surrenders, or compromises. He much preferred to fight on, even in otherwise pointless wars, than to admit failure. Philip's reputation (or what modern readers might recognize as his *credibility*) was one of the most important strategic assets he possessed. Any sign of weakness, he worried, would invite greater challenges. "Without reputation kingdoms cannot be maintained," an advisor warned.[73] Spanish kings certainly agreed.

Reputational concerns always counsel belligerence and discourage compromise.[74] Philip II consistently refused to negotiate with the Turks, for instance, because to do so would "lose the common esteem of the world." In 1577 his court warned that even talking to the Dutch was incompatible "with the honor

and reputation of Your Majesty, which is your greatest asset," and that anything but war would "strain Your Majesty's conscience and hazard your honor and prestige."[75] Therefore, the fighting had to continue. As always, reputation and credibility were rhetorical tools of the hawks.

The Habsburgs feared that the slightest damage to their image would cause irreparable harm. Although the concept would not be devised for another four hundred years, they worried about falling dominoes, and were never confident in the resiliency of their empire. Cracks anywhere would soon spread. Losing the Low Countries or new-world territories or any of the Italian provinces would embolden potential rebels elsewhere, with unforeseeable systemic consequences. Chaos might well spread all the way back to Castile. Advisors warned that if the rebellion succeeded, "we shall lose the Indies, then Flanders, then Italy and finally Spain itself."[76] How exactly such things would occur was never explained, nor particularly important. "The day that Spain removes its armies from those [Dutch] provinces," warned another aide, with no hint of sarcasm, "we would inevitably see theirs in Spain."[77] Once leaders become convinced, however irrationally, that their basic security is tied to their performance in far-flung, peripheral battles, they cannot be expected to relent.

The obsession with reputation propelled Spain to continue the wars against the Dutch and Ottomans and start a new one with the British. In their efforts to ward off imagined catastrophes that would follow compromise, the emperors brought real catastrophe on themselves. Philip II's failures followed a pattern, according to Parker: "an ambitious and intransigent policy was adopted, became increasingly impracticable, and yet was not altered until the cause was already lost."[78] This failure to adapt to changing circumstances would prove to be the defining characteristic of the monarchy.

## Philip III ("the Pious"), 1598–1621

The future of the Spanish Habsburg monarchy was imperiled in 1562 when its heir apparent, Philip's son Don Carlos, fell down a flight of stairs while chasing a maid whom he enjoyed raping with some regularity. The prince recovered but was even less stable than before the accident. Don Carlos was never the picture of mental health—he was the product of substantial inbreeding, having had only four great-grandparents and six great-great ones—but after his accident he was regularly haunted by delusions and paranoia, and became convinced that his father wanted him dead.[79] The crown prince died under mysterious circumstances in 1568, leaving no obvious successor. Fortunately, his father lived another three decades and was able to sire again. Philip Number Two spent a great deal of time training Number Three to take over, demanding that he sit in on Council of State

meetings and become involved with a variety of political decisions. Governing never really caught his fancy, however. Philip III, who came to power in 1598 at age twenty-one, was more interested in hunting and pageantry than the daily grind of ruling. His reign offered a different strategic vision, and an opportunity that was missed.

Historians are not generally fond of Philip III who, when compared to his father and grandfather, was a weak ruler by the standards of the time. He did not expand the empire, and failed to shower the country with the kind of glory admired by so many before and since. He was an "undistinguished and insignificant man," according to one such modern, and a "pale and anonymous creature" to another.[80] Philip II had worried that his heir would be dominated by his advisors, telling a confidant that, "I am afraid they will govern him."[81]

His concerns were not unjustified. In the very first moments of his reign, Philip III ordered his court and councils to obey the commands of don Francisco Gómez de Sandoval y Rojas, fifth Marquis of Denia and first Duke of Lerma (mercifully known to history merely as "Lerma"), as if they were his own.[82] The new king had appointed Lerma to handle the day-to-day operations of state, something his micromanaging predecessors would never have allowed. The duke became Philip's most trusted minister, informally known as *valido* or favorite, part sycophant and part father figure in charge of the bureaucratic, less glorious aspects of government. Lerma, who at fifty-eight was twice the new king's age, set the precedent for the informal position, determining its scope and limitations.

The personalities and priorities Lerma and future *validos*, who were essentially early versions of prime ministers, were more important than those of the kings, at least as far as the development of Spanish grand strategy was concerned. The notion of a *valido* was not new—they had advised Castilian kings as far back as the fifteenth century—but Lerma was particularly influential because Philip III did not share his father's interest in management. In fact it appeared to many that he had no interest in leading at all. "Nobody ruled in Madrid," argued one critic, "a world empire was run on automatic pilot."[83] It was Lerma, then, who shouldered most of the blame (or perhaps, as we shall see, credit) for the foreign policy of Philip III.

The reign had inauspicious beginnings. Spain was in the grip of dire social and economic troubles when Phillip III took command that were largely beyond his control. A series of bad harvests had lowered the nation's caloric intake and the plague took advantage, killing around six hundred thousand Spaniards, or around 10 percent of the population, between 1596 and 1602.[84] At the same time, the new king felt pressure to cement his reputation, which as ever can only be accomplished with bold action. He inherited wars in the Low Countries and England, as well as continuing harassment from the Barbary pirates, those local

allies of the Ottomans. The king also faced festering problems in the nearby Italian states of Savoy and Milan that threatened to choke off his supply route to the Netherlands, and his cousin Archduke Ferdinand in Vienna was requesting help against the Turks.

Rather than set priorities Philip lashed out in all directions.[85] A large Spanish force sailed south, intent on solving the Barbary problem once and for all. Bad weather prevented a landing in North Africa, and storms followed the battered remnants of the fleet all the way back to Spain. Then in 1601 the Spanish turned their attention once again in England. This time they opted for a more limited effort, one designed to foment rebellion in Ireland, but it met with the same basic outcome. Some three thousand Spaniards landed in Kinsale along the southern Irish coast and were immediately surrounded by English troops who seemed to know they were coming. Promised uprisings of discontented Irish Catholics did not materialize. The Spanish were not greeted as liberators, as it turned out, and the garrison surrendered after receiving assurances of safe passage home. Engagements continued at sea for the next few years, but nothing of lasting consequence occurred. England survived what would be the final Spanish onslaught.

Desperate for a victory, the new king ordered new offensives in the Low Countries, which resulted in a siege of the heavily fortified town of Ostend. The Dutch defenders were outnumbered but their Protestant allies kept supplies flowing in by sea, which allowed them to hold out for over three years. Eventually the Spanish fought their way inside, but not before losing between sixty and seventy thousand men to both the enemy and disease. The city was completely destroyed in the process, but the king could finally claim a foreign-policy success.

After this aggressive beginning, Philip III's foreign policy shifted to a less belligerent phase. Encouraged by Lerma, the king designed a peace treaty with the English and began to contemplate an end to the war in the Low Countries, since decisive victory against the Dutch seemed more elusive than ever. Diplomacy thus rose in strategic importance. The seventeenth century has been called the "golden age of Spanish diplomacy," one in which persuasion trumped compulsion, usually with the goal of conserving, rather than expanding, the empire.[86] Philip III was the only one of our five Habsburg kings who actually pursued the end they all professed to desire: maintenance of the status quo, a restrained grand strategy that did not threaten its neighbors. And his primary agents for assuring that status were his diplomats, with the action taking place at the negotiating table rather than the battlefield.

Philip III's ambassadors were widely considered the best in Europe. They saw themselves as not only representatives but physical manifestations of their emperor, and demanded to be treated with a commensurate level of deference.[87] They were always drawn from the nobility and had a reputation for being

unbearable, arrogant bores that was certainly justified, but they were also competent and efficient. The ambassadors' job was not to find common ground and prevent war; these were agents of foreign policy, interested only in helping the monarchy achieve its goals. Early-modern diplomacy was "war by other means," in the words of historian Paul Allen; the purpose of negotiation was victory, and the way to win glory for the diplomat was to defeat the opponent.[88] Ambassadors were also intelligence agents, spies charged with keeping a steady stream of intelligence flowing back into Madrid.[89]

In the transition from father Philip to son, Spain went from "a generation of war to a generation of peace," according to one influential historian.[90] A Venetian ambassador explained to his government that the primary characteristic of Philip III's court was its "lively desire for peace."[91] To many of his contemporaries as well as generations of historians since, this desire made Philip a weak, dishonorable monarch, one whose aloof inattention began the process of Spanish decline. Reputational concerns are respectable, according to this view, while pacifism is a sign of cowardice, corruption, and/or simply disinterest.[92] Rather than applaud or at least rationalize his restraint, even some of his defenders have instead emphasized his early bellicosity.[93] The only admirable qualities of a king, apparently, are those that lead to victorious aggression. So even though by nearly any measure the Spanish were in a much better strategic position at the end of Philip III's reign than they were at the beginning, glory-obsessed historians have generally not looked kindly upon it.

This shift in strategy was felt early in the Netherlands. By the turn of the century everyone was utterly exhausted by four decades of war in the Low Countries, but it was hard to imagine how a peace could be concluded without damaging Spanish reputation. Both sides agreed to a ceasefire in 1607 and negotiations commenced in 1608, with Lerma becoming the target for those in Spain who could not contemplate ending the war without victory. After several rounds of talks a compromise emerged, the twelve-year truce, but it was a tough sell back home. Lerma knew he would have to fight accusations of weakness, so he came up with a plan: on the same day that Philip III announced the truce with the Dutch he also signed the "Edict of Expulsion," which announced a new policy toward the Muslim population of Valencia.

In 1609 there were around three hundred thousand "Moriscos" still living in Spain who had been victims of escalating discrimination over the years. Charles I had passed an edict banning bathing, for instance, which directly targeted the Moriscos since they apparently took hygiene a bit more seriously than did their Christian neighbors.[94] Morisco leaders had been in contact with the Ottoman sultan at one point, but had posed no problems since a failed revolt in 1570.[95] Still they were accused of the sins common to potentially disloyal minorities throughout history: they spent too little, worked too hard, and bred too fast.[96]

The final solution to the Morisco problem would be deportation en masse to northern Africa. Like most acts of ethnic cleansing, this was simultaneously cruel, pointless, and self-defeating: It deprived Spain of about 4 percent of its population and damaged both regional and national economies. Furthermore, the aggrieved masses swelled the ranks of Spain-haters among the Barbary pirates. The king judged such concerns, along with infamy, small prices to pay to distract the masses from the conciliatory policies he was enacting in the Low Countries. His time in power was peaceful, but it was not necessarily just.

In June and July 1618 Councils of State convened to discuss another problem. The other House of Habsburg was dealing with a revolt by its Protestant states, many of which were semiautonomous in the bewilderingly complex Holy Roman Empire. A few had risen in rebellion, famously announcing their displeasure by tossing a trio of papal envoys out a window in Prague. Lerma advised the king to remain on the sidelines, since the issues at stake had no direct implications for Spanish national interests. Zúñiga and many others in the king's court disagreed and appealed to the one factor Philip valued above peace: his faith. Once the conflict was portrayed as a battle for the survival of the Church, Philip relented.[97] The war in Bohemia was joined and the truce in the Low Countries allowed to expire.

Lerma, who had become the focal point of hawkish ire, was replaced by much more belligerent *valido*s. He had fallen victim to palace intrigue instigated by his own son and a court rival, Gaspar de Guzmán, the Count-Duke of Olivares. Unfortunately for Lerma Jr., Olivares continued to plot, and reunited the Lermas in exile as soon as the mosquito felled Philip in 1621. Spanish grand strategy was to take a turn, one from which the monarchy would never recover.

## Philip IV, 1621–1665

As Philip III lay dying, Olivares supposedly exalted "Now everything is mine!"[98] It was quite clear who would play the role of *valido* to the new king, who was fifteen years old at the time he took power. Olivares had clear ideas about foreign policy, ones that were far different from his predecessor, and he would be the driving force behind Spanish grand strategy for the next few decades. With such a young king, the popular saying that the "favorite ruled while the king reigned" was never more true. Olivares was a rare combination of vision and competence, someone who both knew what he wanted to do and how to manipulate the bureaucracy to accomplish it. Unfortunately, his goals were, as one historian put it, "insanely bellicose." To another, "Olivares was possibly the worst man who could have been chosen, precisely because he had sufficient ability to attempt the execution of his mistaken ideas."[99]

The young king and his favorite set out to reverse Spain's fortunes by rebuilding its military reputation. The truce in the Low Countries had effeminized the monarchy, they felt, and Spanish manhood could not flourish as long as it was in effect.[100] When fighting resumed, Spain made a major surge to end the war once and for all. The plan was to employ economic as well as military tools, attempting to strangle Dutch trade at sea and on land with the construction of a new canal to divert traffic away from their markets.[101] Spending on the navy, which had lagged under Philip III, increased dramatically.[102] The Spanish also established what was essentially a base for pirates at Dunkirk, which became known as "the Algiers of the North," to prey on Dutch and English shipping. Privateering had been a tool commonly employed by their rivals, but rarely to this point by the Spanish. Over three hundred English vessels were captured between 1624 and 1628, or about a fifth of the Queen's merchant marine.[103] Goods prevented from reaching the Dutch would be split between the Spanish and their corsair allies.

It is worth noting that despite all of this, at no point did Olivares think that reconquest of the entire colony was possible. The goal of his escalation was to procure a less humiliating bargain, a peace with honor, and to "reduce the Dutch to friendship."[104] It was Spain's honor that needed rescue, not its interests.

Economic woes returned. Depression descended on Castile in the 1620s, and agrarian output declined by 40 percent.[105] The Spanish population shrank by as much as a quarter in the first half of the seventeenth century.[106] As government revenues plummeted, the Spanish did what all economic nationalists do in the face of downturns: they made things worse. Philip raised taxes and increased borrowing by 500 percent, then in 1623 the crown banned imports in an attempt to boost native production. Spanish merchants lost markets and profits as other countries reacted in kind.[107] As modern economists would have predicted, prices rose across the country and the peasantry, as always, suffered most. The only beneficiaries were the smugglers, whose business surged. One clever way to raise revenue did emerge in this era: the selling of noble titles. Although the established elite could not have been pleased, between 1625 and 1668 the size of the Spanish aristocracy doubled, since anyone with enough money could join.[108] Such efforts, however, were never close to enough.

States facing trouble often believe that material factors cannot fully account for their deteriorating fortunes. Prescriptions for national renewal are almost always conservative, calling for returns to simpler, more successful, purer (and usually imaginary) times before modern generations perverted the traditional values that led to greatness. Spain was no different. The aloof decadence of Philip III became a symbol of, and scapegoat for, the various negative trends besetting the country. Stagnation and disasters were signs that Spain had drifted out of God's favor; restoration could only succeed by returning to His good graces with moral and cultural reinvigoration. Olivares led a crackdown on luxury, setting

up a committee for reform to eradicate all manner of vice and abuse. Eventually the government banned brothels, extravagant dress, foreign manufactures, and dancing.[109] Rather than innovate and move forward, the Spanish looked to the past and stood still.

Reasserting battlefield dominance was another central goal of Olivares's rejuvenation strategy. In addition to the debilitating fighting in the Netherlands, Spain dove into the roiling vortex in central Europe. Details of the Thirty Years War are as ponderous as they are confusing; for these purposes, it is enough to note that Madrid contributed *tercios* and money to the Catholic cause. Spain's forces were still the best, most reliable troops in the field, and its silver kept its allies fighting.[110] Spain was the arsenal of Catholicism throughout the war, bankrolling the expensive efforts to crush Protestantism on many fronts, none of which it could afford. Nearly eight million people, the vast majority of them central European civilians, would perish during the course of this brutal, tragic, and ultimately inconsequential war. The map of Europe looked essentially the same in 1648 as it did in 1618, even if the politics had changed, and not for the better from the perspective of Madrid.

Although the *tercio* remained the dominant military unit in Europe until the middle of the seventeenth century, during this long war Spain's rivals began to catch up. The Swedish and Dutch experimented with smaller, mobile infantry units that incorporated more musketry and performed better in the field. The Spanish suffered a series of surprising defeats in the 1640s, the most famous of which was to the French at Rocroi. Like the entire imperial project itself, *tercios* were slow to adjust to changing realities and were eventually overtaken and rendered obsolete by more flexible competitors.

The Catholics were slowly winning the Thirty Years War until the perfidious French entered on the side of the Protestants in 1635. Spanish defense spending doubled from 1635 to 1637 to address this new reality, and the crown began a predictably unpopular policy of confiscating private silver to pay for it all.[111] The wars did not end with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648; Philip IV's troops would continue fighting France for another decade. The peace that finally came in 1659, even though cemented with imperial marriage, would only last eight years. The Spanish also had to deal with a succession crisis in Mantua (1628–1631) and other major revolts, in Catalonia (1640–1659) and Portugal (1640–1648, 1660–1668), while the crisis in Central Europe dragged on. War with England commenced again in the mid-1620s and once more in the 1650s, the latter of which resulted in the loss of Jamaica.

Any of these problems on their own would have been manageable, but together they stretched Spanish resources beyond their ability to cope. By the 1650s the direction of intra-Habsburg aid had reversed: the Austrian house, once the recipient of money, began assisting the Spanish.[112]

One good thing did come with the end of the Thirty Years War: Spain finally abandoned its efforts to bring the United Provinces to heel. The Low Countries were divided into the Protestant Netherlands and Catholic Belgium, the latter of which would remain part of the Spanish empire. Bribery, once anathema, no longer seemed unthinkable; the Spanish secretly paid a handful of Dutch electors to accept the division of their lands, in the hope that they would recognize that the growing power of French presented a danger to them both.[113] The Dutch had won their independence at long last.

Olivares's attempts to restore the power of the monarchy backfired. At the end of Philip IV's reign, Protestantism was unified and capable, and its destruction was all but unthinkable. The English were implacably hostile, and the French had re-emerged from their self-imposed exile. Over the course of the seventeenth century, the center of European power shifted from Madrid to Paris.

## Charles II ("The Bewitched"), 1665–1700

Generations of inbreeding caught up to the Habsburgs when Philip IV passed away in 1665. His only surviving son, Charles II, suffered from a series of debilitating ailments that were probably the genetic consequences of married relatives. Charles could not speak until the age of four and did not learn to walk until he was eight. He was prone to seizures that eventually were treated with exorcisms, giving rise to his nickname, and the Habsburg jaw had progressed to the point that he could not chew his food. When the king was twenty-five the papal nuncio commented that, "he is as weak in body as in mind. Now and then he gives signs of intelligence, memory and a certain liveliness; usually he shows himself slow and indifferent, torpid and indolent. One can do with him what one wishes because he lacks his own will."[114] The constant anticipation of early death hung over Charles's reign. He outlived all expectations, however, ruling for thirty-five years. During this time the monarchy, distracted as it was by court intrigue and continual behind-the-scenes scheming, deteriorated further. The de facto prime ministers ran the country directly and occasionally came to blows. Spain experienced its first military coup in 1677 as one *valido* violently replaced another. The helpless king watched it all from the throne.

Charles II ruled over a period of relative decline, when Spain's rivals grew at a much faster pace. French power in particular became an insurmountable problem. Philip II had kept about 163,000 men under arms; by 1700, Spain could not field more than 63,000. During the same time period France went from 57,000 to 342,000 troops, from one-third that of Spain to seven times greater.[115] The Spanish population had shrunk to 5.7 million people by 1700, while France was passing twenty-one million.[116] French King Louis XIV's hobby

was attacking his neighbors, which forced Spanish expenditures to double revenue in many years.[117] This was also a golden age for pirates and predation in the Caribbean. Most of the most infamous and semi-fictional characters plundering Spanish shipping did so as Habsburg power waned. A series of natural disasters contributed to the sense of national doom: in the ten years following 1677, Spain experienced harvest failures, locust invasions, widespread damaging hail, floods, droughts, and outbreaks of plague and typhus.[118] The Venetian ambassador to Madrid spoke for many when he told his government that "the whole of the present reign has been an uninterrupted series of calamities."[119]

Poor decrepit Charles II is a convenient metaphor for the collapse of Habsburg power. He was "the last pallid relic of a fading dynasty," the great historian J.H. Elliott argued, presiding "over the inert corpse of a shattered Monarchy, itself no more than a pallid relic of the great imperial past."[120] While it is true that the era of Spanish superpower came to a definitive end on his watch, Charles's time on the throne was not the unmitigated disaster so commonly portrayed. It started poorly and was affected by forces outside Spanish control, but by its end things looked markedly better. The empire did not collapse; indeed Spain actually expanded its territories, adding the Marianas Islands. Charles's economic advisors convinced him to implement a rather painful austerity program, which brought inflation under control and balanced the budget the first time since the 1530s. Birth rates, which had been plummeting for decades, began rising soon after Charles took the throne, and Spain's population would double between 1700 and 1787.[121] These signs of recovery augured well for the post-Habsburg era.

Spain would have to suffer some more before that arrived, however. War broke out when the childless Charles finally died, as a coalition of powers tried to prevent Louis from putting his grandson on the Spanish throne. Over the course of the War of Spanish Succession, all the remaining European colonies would be lost, including those in Italy and Belgium, and a Bourbon would eventually rule in Madrid. With that, the Habsburg era in Spain came to a definitive end.

* * *

Postmortem evaluations of the Spanish Empire generally coalesce around a few themes. Paul Kennedy spoke for many when he made Spain a central example of how overextension and its attendant profligate spending can cripple a great power.[122] "If she could have restricted herself to her purely Spanish inheritance," argued another historian, "even with the incubus of her Italian possessions, she might have prolonged her existence as a great power indefinitely."[123] Spain lacked the resources to rule its enormous empire, and failed to prioritize among its many interests. It was doomed by its bellicosity: The Habsburgs racked up at least 361 years of major warfare, as well as countless small engagements and minor clashes, all within 180 years of rule.[124] Under the impression that

surrender anywhere would lead to imperial implosion everywhere, the Spanish brought about the outcome they so wanted to avoid. Their inability to compromise, to settle disputes peacefully or accommodate the interests of their rivals, kept them hemorrhaging blood and money until the imperial edifice collapsed.

Sometimes conventional wisdoms are conventional for a reason. It is hard to argue against the notion that Spanish grand strategy was irresponsibly aggressive, and counterproductively belligerent. Perhaps history has not been completely fair to the Habsburgs, however. A recent economic analysis suggests that their economic mismanagement has been overstated, for one thing.[125] Spain's borrowing was not much different, and no more irresponsible, than that of its rivals. France, England, and Austria did not have to deal with something the Spanish did: a massive influx of silver. Ironically, the asset that the Spanish thought would bring about a triumph over its enemies undermined their power and hastened their decline. Economists have long known that discoveries of new resources can be profoundly mixed blessings for the financial health of countries. Their benefits can be obvious if the new assets are handled well, and if leaders avoid the temptation to go on uncontrolled spending sprees. This rarely happens in practice, however. Instead, large injections of cash often have destabilizing effects on local economic conditions, leading to inflation and corruption, and encouraging an overreliance on the single asset. Countries that discover new resources are often worse off for it, something known today as the "resource curse."[126]

Riches from Peru and Mexico provided the Spanish monarchy with funding for its ventures and collateral for its loans. They also sparked runaway inflation, and discouraged innovation and diversification. After a century of dealing with the curse, Spain was much less competitive than her rivals. Whether or not the agrarian, hierarchical Castilian society could have supported an industrial transformation is not clear—it might well have stagnated without the resource injection, held down by a conservative landed elite—but certainly the introduction of so much new wealth did not help matters. Silver ossified and disrupted the economy and enabled counterproductive Spanish adventurism. Perhaps then the monarchy did not spend itself into oblivion as much as it was undermined by forces it could not have anticipated and did not understand.

It is not clear that other options were ever really open to the Charleses and the Philips. Spanish kings had a limited set of options available and rarely sought creative solutions to their problems. Their court was an echo chamber that bred uniformity of opinion and stultification of thought. Over half of the people who advised Philip II not only had law degrees but came from the same six schools. Many of the rest were clerics.[127] They were educated in the same ways, shared general values, and gave broadly similar advice. Their empire was a product of its time, and reflected the era's pathological expectations and norms. It was born suddenly as the result of two marriages, and it was born overextended, into a

warlike age where states were always either fighting or preparing to fight. Peace treaties were fragile and perceptions of weakness invited challenge. Honor cultures like that of early-modern Europe demand that their members respond to challenge and engage in routine, pointless violence.[128] No powerful state in that era could have avoided warfare altogether, especially once Christianity split and God's belligerent voice was added to the standing calls for action. Religious zealots are always enemies of peace. While it is certainly true that overextension killed the empire, and hindsight allows the historian to identify their many mistakes, it is not clear that the Spanish believed they had viable alternatives. Europe cannot be dominated for long, as many would-be hegemons discovered over the years, especially given the rules of their game.

This is not to let the Habsburgs completely off the hook. Decisions always seem inevitable in retrospect; perhaps the Spanish were conditioned by path dependence to choose poorly, to persist in ventures that prudence would have recommended against, but other options did exist. Philip II could have followed his father's advice to concentrate on the status quo, for example. His son seemed to be headed in that direction, at least toward the end of this reign. Perhaps it was a mosquito, a female of the *Anopheles* genus to be precise, that doomed Spain to decline. Had Philip III not died at age forty-two, it is at least possible that he would have made fundamentally different choices than his successor. It is also possible that he would have chosen the same path and let the truce with the Dutch lapse. and responded to the crisis in Germany with the same belligerence, had he not spent his last two years in bed. But his reign had grown more peaceful as time went on, much to the chagrin of both contemporary observers and subsequent historians. His lack of aggression was unacceptable, even disgraceful. Elliott spoke for many when he asked, "Was the reality of Spanish experience to be found in the *heroic imperialism* of Charles V or in the *humiliating pacifism* of Philip III?"[129]

Phillip III's pacifism, no matter how humiliating, might have at least prolonged the era of Spanish dominance. If he had lived long enough, perhaps the nobles he employed during that "golden age" of Spanish diplomacy would have reacted more swiftly and efficiently to the intra-Christianity crises of the seventeenth century. Had that mosquito not infected the third Philip, the pathologically bellicose Olivares would not have been able to dominate the young fourth, and Spanish power might not have been expended in debilitating, fruitless wars. The much-maligned grandson of Charles I had set the empire on a sustainable path, but it was one that he did not live to see through. "To the extent that success is measured by the preservation of the territorial integrity of the Spanish monarchy," wrote one historian, contradicting the majority view, "Philip III and Lerma did rather well in the end."[130]

Finally, it is worth pausing for a moment at the end to consider exactly what decline actually meant for the Spanish. The average person may have hardly

noticed; in fact, most would have benefited. Once relieved of the burden of paying for the defense of the various far-flung portions of the empire, the economy expanded and the population grew. Spain's pride surely suffered as a result of the loss of its empire, but its material interests did not. The entire state, and especially the peasantry, found itself much better off after the monarchy shrank than it was at its height. By 1700 the string of national bankruptcies had stopped, and its young men no longer risked death at the hands of Dutch bullets or Peruvian mosquitos. It is hard to argue that the people of Spain were in worse shape by 1750, by which time Madrid's imperial pretensions had essentially ended, than they were a century earlier at the empire's height. By almost any reasonable measure, decline was actually *good* for the Spanish. It is little wonder that many Castilians came to welcome the loss of their empire.[131]

Decline was bad for Spain's intangible interests like glory and honor, which tend to dominate popular and historical imaginations. To return to Elliott again: "it was difficult for a society nurtured on war to find a substitute for the glory of battle in the tedious intricacies of mercantile ledgers, or to elevate to a position of pre-eminence the hard manual labour it had been taught to despise."[132] When greatness is measured only in military terms it cannot last. Nor perhaps should it. That the Spanish people were better off in 1750 than they were in 1650 cannot be disputed; whether they were better for having lost the empire, though, is a question that pits emotion against reason, and perception against fact.

7

# The British Empire

Were it possible to dig a hole in London down through the center of the Earth and out the other side, and were one inclined to do such a thing, one would emerge near Portobello, New Zealand. This charming little town is the farthest point on the planet from the old British imperial capital. And it is named for a borough in Edinburgh, Scotland, because it, like the rest of the country, became part of the British Empire in 1841.

No part of the world was too remote for the British. Redcoats (or their khaki-clad successors) marched into Colombo in 1796, Delhi in 1803, Cape Town in 1806, Washington in 1814, Beijing in 1860, Cairo in 1882, and Lhasa in 1903. In 1845 British ships blockaded the mouth of the Rio Plata, stopping all trade going into Buenos Aires for five years. A half-century earlier they had found themselves in a dispute with Spain and France over the fate of the Nootka Sound on Canada's Pacific coastline.[1] Theirs was the world's first truly global empire, extending to every continent on which people outnumbered penguins. Its rapid rise was abetted by the sea, by the British ability to access any coastline and defeat any rival navy. And not long after reaching its peak, the empire gracefully declined in ways that kept its people prosperous and safe.

Great Britain at the peak of her power operated according to a clear grand strategy, one that proved consistent on some issues and remarkably adaptable on others. This is not a universally accepted notion: casting doubt upon the existence of that strategy began at the empire's height, when historian J.S. Seeley claimed in a bestselling 1883 book that the British constructed their empire without much logic or reason, piecemeal, indifferently, driven by private as much as public interests. "We seem," he wrote, "to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind." Modern historians often agree, commonly remarking that imperial policies were developed on the spot, guided by neither plan nor forethought.[2]

This argument, though oft-repeated, is absurd. Never has an empire been built with more premeditation or purpose. Although sometimes expansion occurred

*The Pursuit of Dominance.* Christopher J. Fettweis, Oxford University Press. © Christopher J. Fettweis 2023.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197646649.003.0007

for expansion's sake—as is the case with all empires—generally the British had clear strategic rationales behind their conquests. Their priorities were obvious; their goals were clear and understood by friend and foe alike; and the ways and means employed in the pursuit of those ends were followed, more or less, by generations of policymakers. Great Britain's grand strategy was not only consistent and logical but apparent to all, which made its actions largely predictable by design. It was hardly flawless, and its consistency was sometimes a weakness, but the British certainly left behind a coherent approach to superpower for modern policymakers to contemplate.

The British Empire was unlike any covered in this book. For one thing, the British had no neighbors to worry about, aside from some occasionally quarrelsome Scots. Their country was a natural fortress, not fully impregnable but nearly so, and as a result geography would play an outsized role in their thinking and planning. In addition, Britain's power emerged when the world was experiencing significant economic, moral, and philosophical evolution. Liberalism transformed the empire, exposed its contradictions, and eventually brought it down. Ideas, not enemies, proved decisive in the end.

## The "First Empire"

When we last encountered the English, they were one of a few secondary European powers struggling to fend off attacks from the dominant regional state. They were meddling in the Low Countries, harassing Spanish shipping, and killing Irishmen, but their imperial aspirations remained rather modest. The English were unable to get their products past the Dutch navy, which defeated them in three successive wars in the second half of the seventeenth century. The crucial moment in their evolution, the turning point for the empire and its place in the world, occurred exactly a century after their famous defeat of the Spanish Armada.

In 1688 the British were ruled by King James I, a Catholic sympathetic to the French, which were two things that made his subjects uncomfortable. When the royal family gave birth to a son, fears of an emerging papist Francophile dynasty gripped the mostly Protestant land. Various nobles reached out to William of Orange, the Protestant king of the Netherlands, who obliged their requests and arrived in Devon with some heavily armed friends in November. This drama is known to history as the "Glorious Revolution" rather than the "Dutch Invasion" because most of King James's erstwhile supporters eagerly threw their lot in with the newcomer. James was sent into exile and William became king, insisting for legitimacy purposes that he share the crown with James's daughter Mary. This laid the foundation for a unity government of sorts (as well as one of the oldest

American universities), one that would accept a greater role for Parliament. No longer could the sovereign make decisions without approval of the House of Commons. This allayed the aristocracy's fears of arbitrary rule to some degree, or at least to the point where it did not object strenuously to a major national fiscal reorganization.

In 1692 that reorganization came, and for the first time the British collected substantial taxes on land. The results were immediate and dramatic: During Charles II's long reign (1660–1685), annual crown revenues ranged had averaged around 1.35 million pounds; within a decade of the Glorious Revolution they reached 32.7 million, and would be nearly double again by 1713.[3] In a remarkably short period of time the English system of public finance went from lagging far behind those of its competitors to being the best, most efficient revenue collection service in the world.

The social consequences of this reform are hard to overstate. Its effects were felt most by the ultra-elite: inefficient country manors soon became burdens, and the landed nobility lost social ground to those whose wealth came from finance and commerce.[4] More relevant to our story, however, was the effect on England's (or Great Britain's, after 1707) ability to build a fleet. The Royal Navy under the Tudors had been little more than a home-defense squadron with vessels supplied by nobles and merchants. Post-revolution revenue allowed for the construction of regular, homogenous ships that could sail to far-off waters and protect English interests and shipping.[5] It was the beginning of the force that would come to dominate the world's seas and provide the most important tool for the expansion and maintenance of empire. Events on the continent would soon make its growth apparent to all.

Those whose memories extend back to the last chapter may recall that Europe descended into chaos when Charles II of the House of Habsburg died in 1700. The bewitched king lived longer than anyone anticipated, but his inability to father children offered opportunities for outside powers to promote their preferred candidate for the Spanish throne. Most enthusiastic of all was Louis XIV of France, who thought his grandson made a perfect choice. This move was opposed by countries uninterested in Franco-Spanish continental dominance, a group that included pretty much everybody. A complicated fourteen-year war ensued; at its end, a dominant new power did indeed tower over Europe, but it was not the one Louis expected. After this "War of Spanish Succession" no country was more important in shaping the nature of the modern international system than the simultaneously liberal and authoritarian Great Britain.

"At the accession of William III [in 1689]," summarized Paul Kennedy, "England was one of the three leading sea powers; at the accession of George I [1714], she was the leading sea power, without a rival or even a companion."[6] It would take a series of wars to convince the French of their new status, however,

each of which (save one in the New World) ended in British victories. In fact, Great Britain was at war steadily throughout the eighteenth century, usually against France but occasionally versus Spain and the Netherlands too. It seized control of the Baltic Sea from Sweden in a brief war from 1715–1718, and then successfully protected Sweden from Russian expansion a decade later. The most significant of its encounters was the so-called Seven Years War, which raged from 1756 to 1763. Like many of the great-power engagements of the time it was a complicated affair, pitting coalitions of great powers against one another. It was also rather one-sided, ending with a decisive victory for the Anglo-Prussian alliance and devastation for the French. Great Britain came away with a long list of spoils, including all French territory in North America, Spanish Florida, a few Caribbean islands and outposts in West Africa, and effective control of an entire subcontinent. The war left no doubt as to the dominant power in Europe. Britain's outlook began to shift from regional to global, from considering her sphere of influence to include just the North Atlantic to imagining herself mistress of the entire world.

Global preeminence would have to wait a bit, however. The so-called first empire was an Atlantic one, with various far-flung trading stations and fortified cities at the mouths of rivers, but true colonies only in North America. The basic imperial priorities emerged during this era, though, and the ways to approach them were identified. A grand strategy started to come together.

Priorities coalesced pretty quickly. There was widespread agreement across political parties about the ends and ways of grand strategy, even if there were occasional disputes over means.[7] Regarding continental affairs in particular, Britain was a status-quo power.[8] It opposed revision of existing balances, believing that change generally led to problems. Like all island states it put special importance on the sea, the source of all potential dangers and opportunities. The British forged a primarily maritime strategy, one that relied on naval power first for security and then for dominance. At sea, "our stakes are out of all proportion to those of any other Power," said Lord Selborne, First Lord of Admiralty, adding that "to all other nations a navy is a mere luxury."[9] To Britain, it was both a necessity and a major strategic advantage.

Naval power is not merely a function of resources. Warships are expensive and cannot be constructed in great numbers by poor states, but it is skilled mariners who are decisive during battles at sea. The kind of expertise and experience necessary for success cannot be taught quickly. Raw recruits can be trained into semi-functional infantrymen in a matter of weeks, but true maritime competence takes a lifetime, or at least a good number of years, to develop. As an island country Great Britain had a deep pool of seafaring men from which to draw. British ships were manned by those whose families had spent generations as merchants and fisherman, whose connection to and understanding of the

sea could not be duplicated in training under controlled conditions near home ports. The wars against France contained a nearly unbroken string of major naval victories, even though the British were rarely numerically superior to their opponents.[10] Like the Roman infantry and Mongolian cavalry, the Royal Navy had a qualitative advantage that allowed it to win engagements even when profoundly outnumbered.

Once dominance at sea was achieved, what was to be done with it? Increased revenue had allowed the British to turn the skills of their seafaring people into an efficient, deadly tool. To begin constructing a strategy that employed that tool, British planners took out their maps. Before long they had identified eternal and perpetual interests that it was their duty to follow.

## Geopolitics

Maps shape perception. They also simplify, conditioning leaders to conceive of international politics as if it were a game of Risk. There are no obstacles to expansion on two-dimensional projections, and games are always zero-sum. Three-time Prime Minister Lord Salisbury considered maps the enemy of good strategic thought. "The constant study of maps is apt to disturb men's reasoning powers," he complained, speculating that his advisors would have liked to "annex the moon in order to prevent its being appropriated by the planet Mars."[11] The Romans did perfectly well without maps, after all. Their ambitions remained limited, their threat perceptions realistic, their territorial hungers sated. British strategic decisions were made by men looking at the first accurate maps of the world, and in almost all cases they recommended expansion.

They did not need those maps to realize their primary strategic asset was geographic. Water provides security and insurance for mistakes that would doom a country surrounded by hostiles rather than fish.[12] The moat around the British Isles offered protection from the various excitable continentals, as well as a degree of freedom for its leaders to make choices. Waves of ancient and medieval attackers proved that the moat was hardly impenetrable, but over the last millennium no European country has experienced the level of safety that the Channel, slim though it may be, has afforded the Britons. "Let us be master of the Strait for six hours," cried Napoleon, "and we shall be masters of the world."[13]

Geography is an aid to statecraft, but it is not fate. It takes strategy to maintain safety even in the most secure of neighborhoods, and generations of British leaders were able to keep invaders at bay while constructing a vast empire. They turned to their maps as they looked outward and devised a strategy shaped by geography, one focused on three major concerns.

The first of these was the most basic. British strategists were confident that no single state could muscle past the Royal Navy. If a few cooperated, however, or if one martialed a substantial portion of the mainland's resources, that calculation could change. French and Dutch seamanship, if supported by the financial resources of the Hapsburgs or the Hohenzollerns or the pope, could over time wear down Britain's ability to defend itself. Were its various rivals ever to combine forces and coordinate their actions, they might fight their way across the Channel.

Since superpowers are threatened only by cooperation between potential rivals, it should come as no surprise that keeping the continent divided was the top British foreign-policy priority for generations of its strategists.[14] Fortunately, there was no shortage of distrust and hatred in Europe, and the desire to attack Britain never overrode long-standing feuds with neighbors. Various bids for continental mastery occurred from time to time, any one of which had the potential to generate the kind of threat London feared so much. The British always opposed such bids, whether by the Hapsburgs in the sixteenth century, the French in the nineteenth, or the Germans in the twentieth. Over and over, the British intervened on the side of weaker countries. Her allies and enemies would change depending on the situation, and on whose power needed balancing. Allies and enemies were never permanent.[15]

The need to keep power in Europe balanced often led the British to support lesser states on the continent's periphery. The Portuguese commonly received their assistance, including during the War of Spanish Succession and a combined Franco-Spanish invasion in 1762. British troops were sent there again in 1834 to help expel a Spanish pretender to the throne. When Portuguese new-world colonies gained their independence, Great Britain was well placed to benefit. The British also took on the role of prolonging the existence of the Ottoman Empire, which they were calling the "sick man of Europe" by the mid-nineteenth century. But more on that later.

The second British priority concerned the regions that were potential launching pads for invasion of their home island: Ireland and the Low Countries. The former was less likely, since the Royal Navy controlled access to and from the Emerald Isle, but this did not stop British leaders from obsessing over the possibility that their empire contained a vulnerability, a potential backdoor.[16] Irish nationalists wondering why the British put such a high importance on repressing dissent on their island rarely seemed to give much credence to geopolitics.

The Low Countries posed a greater danger. In the age of sail an enemy flotilla could be assembled in their bays and inlets, sheltered from Royal Navy cannons. Prevailing winds would allow such a force to sail out of the Scheldt Estuary right up the Thames with a major tactical advantage against any defenders. Getting out against the wind would be much more of a problem, but if the goal was to

deposit troops near London, it was an accomplishable mission. The advent of steam engines reduced, but never completely removed, this threat. Keeping these countries in friendly hands was therefore of great importance. As long as the Netherlands remained in the hands of the pro-British House of Orange, London felt safe, and in 1983 Britain made a formal guarantee of Belgium's neutrality. Entry into the First World War was likely when the Germans threatened to dominate the continent, but inevitable once they marched through Belgium en route.

No navy, no matter how big and capable, can control the vast expanse of ocean. British maritime strategists had to prioritize some areas over others and deploy their limited assets in ways that would maximize their impact. The most valuable ocean real estate is the narrow spaces, the spots where shipping is channeled together into relatively small passages. With control of these places, these "choke points," a maritime power can control of traffic in and out the surrounding seas. The third geo-strategic priority of the empire was to identify and secure these points one by one.

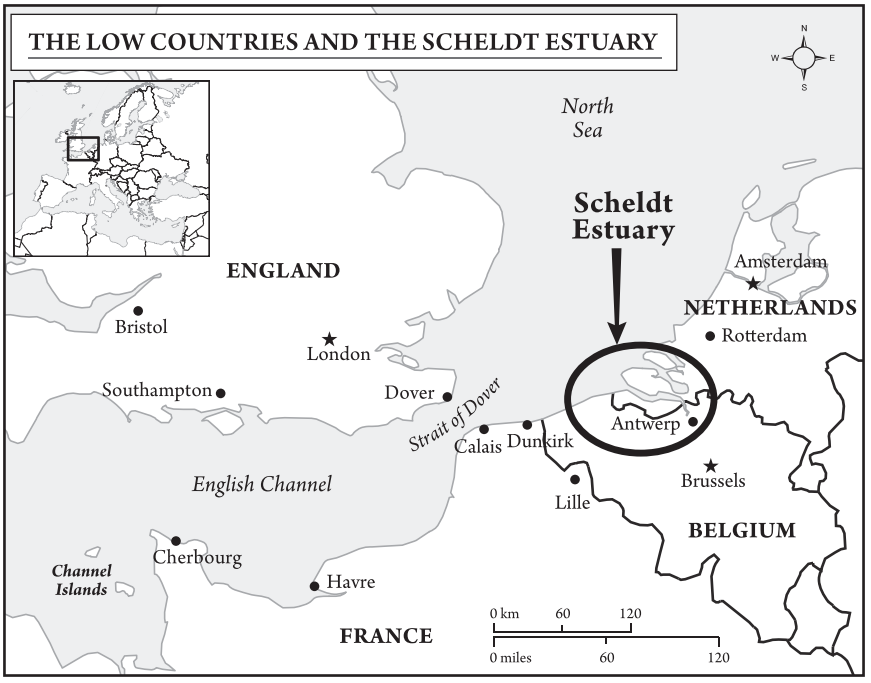



*Figure 7.1* The Low Countries and the Scheldt Estuary Credit: https://www.worldatlas.com/seas/english-channel.html, with my alterations. I have written to the publisher requesting permission to reproduce.

Ships entering or exiting the Mediterranean Sea had to pass through the Strait of Gibraltar, which at its narrowest is nine miles wide. It is no coincidence that Gibraltar and its iconic rock were taken by the British in 1704. At the other end of the Mediterranean, the narrow Dardanelles and Bosporus control access to the Black Sea. Keeping Constantinople out of the tsar's hands became a high British priority early on. Then as now, the Straits of Hormuz marked the passage into the Persian Gulf; the British controlled Hormuz Island by 1622. Digging a canal through Suez would have been pointless if another power controlled the Bab el Mandab at the mouth of the Red Sea. The British solved that problem by adding Aden and the small island of Perim to the empire in 1839 and 1857, respectively. Prior to the opening of Suez, ships heading to India had to sail around southern Africa, making them vulnerable at a number of points. The British colony in South Africa was designed to protect that shipping. And due to the peculiarities of southeast Asian maritime geography, by far the most efficient way to sail between the Indian to the Pacific Oceans is through the narrow Straits of Malacca, which was a haven for pirates until the British established a colony at Singapore, on the narrowest part of the straits, in 1819. By controlling these and other choke points, the British effectively controlled the seas.[17]

Later, as the age of sail gave way to that of steam, a new strategic imperative arose. Steam-powered ships were superior in every way except one: their range was limited by the amount of coal they could carry. To address this, Britain established stations where both naval and merchant vessels could reload, often

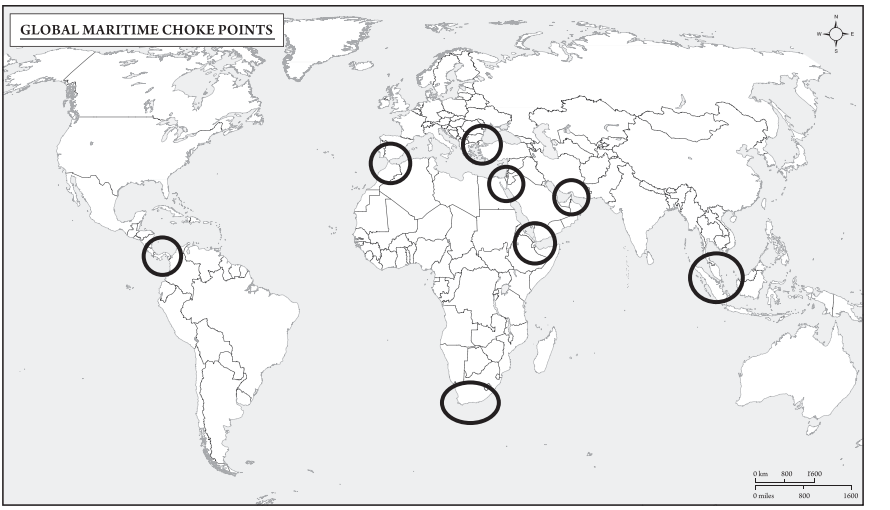



*Figure 7.2* Global Maritime Choke Points Credit: My adjustments to blank political world map, open source, by Petr Dlouhý, https://ia.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:A_large_blank_world_map_with_oceans_marked_in_blue.svg

in places where local preferences were not given much thought. Before long the Royal Navy had a global archipelago (if such a thing is possible) of coaling stations and naval outposts to protect them.[18] The impetus for all of these was geo-strategic, the result of staring at maps and imagining rivals doing the same. Absent-minded imperialism it was not.

## Jewels in the Crown

Second only to protecting the mainland on the list of imperial priorities was securing Britain's dominions, three of which were of particular importance. The first jewel in the imperial crown was in the West Indies, having been taken from the Spanish by Oliver Cromwell in 1655. Within a century of becoming a British colony, Jamaica was dotted with hundreds of estates producing one crop. Sugar plantation owners soon became a powerful force in Parliament, having amassed enormous wealth, thanks to the British sweet tooth and the African slave.

Equally significant events were unfolding on the other side of the world. British merchants had been trading with India for quite some time, as had those from other European countries, bringing back exotic spices and silks. The British coordinated their trade, as they had in other areas, by chartering a "joint-stock company" to help finance and centralize the process. From humble beginnings in 1600, the East India Company would grow into a colossus that accounted for half the world's trade, and it would raise an enormous semiprivate army to conquer the second most populous country on Earth.[19]

In 1661 the British King Charles II had acquired Bombay as part of dowry that accompanied his Portuguese wife Catherine. It became the Company's territory in 1668. From this foothold in Bengal British influence spread across the subcontinent, usually under Company auspices using Company soldiers on loan from the crown. Many local Indian states resisted, but rarely for long. Expansion followed a general pattern: once a new and desirable territory was identified, Company representatives arrived to demand a series of apparently minor concessions. They offered some form of monetary compensation, typically, as well as the addition of British "advisors" to the princely court. States could retain a large degree of autonomy if they agreed to these concessions, and most did. Failure to do so was often, in British eyes, a sure sign of hostile intent, and a casus belli. The British were coming, either in the form of advisors or soldiers, and many Indian princes chose the former.

In 1757 the Company's troops won a battle about ninety miles north of Calcutta against a much larger French-led force that effectively eliminated France's presence on the subcontinent. Many more wars followed in the decades to come, all of which included Indian troops, which were collectively called

"sepoys," recruited by the Company. One local leader after another made the catastrophically foolish mistake of challenging the British and their allies in European-style pitched battles, playing directly into their enemy's strengths.[20] Perhaps unsurprisingly, Indian troops fared poorly against adversaries trained to fight in such manners. Outnumbered Europeans and their local allies regularly carried the day against large Indian armies, helping to cultivate the impression that they were nearly invincible. The princely states of India were added to the Company's territories one by one, often against their will—and, as we will see, often without the official sanction of London.

As important as India was becoming, the first empire was mercantilist and North America was its heart. Since the British entered the colonial game rather late, they missed out on the more valuable areas in Central and South America. They had to settle for the temperate, gold-free north, but by the middle of the eighteenth century that colony no longer appeared to be an imperial consolation prize. European settlers had turned it into a flourishing region that provided both raw materials and a steady market for British goods, as well as a reservoir of timber for the fleet. "She was the fountain of our wealth," William Pitt had declared in 1777, "the nerve of our strength, the nursery and basis of our naval power."[21] It was as British as Britain, or so it seemed, a brother colony that was expanding the sphere of the Anglo-Saxon world.

The revolt of those colonies was quite a shock to the imperial system. North Americans were among the most prosperous of all British subjects, whether at home or abroad, and were thriving as part of the empire.[22] The British attempt to make the colonies pay for their own security (an attempt that was abandoned rather quickly) allowed conspiracy theorists in America to imagine a variety of nefarious plots by King George III.[23] The demands of the rebels did not seem to warrant revolution in London's eyes, especially after the acts that so offended colonial sensibilities were repealed, but before long musket balls were flying toward redcoats.

After six years of conflict those redcoats departed. Yorktown did not have to spell the end of the revolution—the British could have deployed more men to the theater, landing them in Canada without interference—but they had not the heart to continue. "The use of force alone is but temporary," commented Edmund Burke at the time, "may subdue for a moment, but it does not remove the necessity of subduing again; and a nation is not governed which is perpetually to be conquered . . . Power and authority are sometimes bought by kindness but they can never be begged as alms by an impoverished and defeated violence."[24] The loss led to a good deal of soul-searching and pessimism in London, as well as the perceptions of decline that always follow defeat. There was a troubling lack of public spirit, many commentators felt, a selfishness and spiritual malaise that

portended ill for the future.[25] And the British had to find a new home for their convicts, which they soon did, as far away as possible.[26]

The loss of the colonies, however painful and humiliating (and puzzling), hardly heralded the end of the empire. The next round of wars against France would in fact inaugurate its greatest age, one that saw British troops deployed in dozens of new parts of the world, bringing millions of square miles and even more souls under their rule. Better days were ahead.

## The "Second Empire" and Pax Britannica

Two rebellions marked the transition from the first to the second British empires. One involved ungrateful American colonists, and anti-monarchical forces also caused a ruckus in the other, in Britain's main rival, which eventually produced a major security threat. It took a decade to defeat the forces of the French Revolution, and another, bloodier one to defeat Napoleon. Afterword Britain stood alone as the world's greatest colonial power. Her dominions expanded to include strongpoints in South Africa, the Caribbean, and Indonesia, and she soon added colonies in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma, and West Africa. In the century leading up to the emergence of Napoleon, Britain was the greatest among many great European powers; once he left for his final exile, she stood alone, unchallenged and unchallengeable, especially at sea.

During this second British Empire the world experienced peace on the high seas, the end of officially sanctioned slavery, and unprecedented economic growth. This was the "Pax Britannica," where direct warfare between great powers was rare, at least relatively speaking, as martial energies were directed toward weaker peoples in the periphery. British troops and their local allies were engaged constantly, fighting and conquering on every continent, carving out the largest sea empire the world has ever known. How to rule it, and maintain its status, became the primary concern of its strategists.

### Men on the Spot

Italian journalist Luigi Barzini once wrote that the British Empire succeeded because its servants all held the same seven ideas, ones inculcated in their public schools and elite universities, which led to them to execute uniform and consistent policies.[27] What these seven ideas were, he did not say; it might have been six, it might have been ten. But similar backgrounds and breeding created generally common perceptions of what had to be done. This is what historians Robinson and Gallagher referred to as the empire's "official mind," or what in the

United States today is sometimes derisively called the foreign policy "blob."[28] British policies "were decided by a relatively close official circle," they wrote. "Their purposes in Africa were usually esoteric; and their actions were usually inspired by notions of the world situation and calculations of its dangers, which were peculiar to the official mind."[29] London trusted its officers in the field, its "men on the spot," to understand the national interest and pursue it without much management from home because they tended to interpret that interest in roughly the same way.

This is not to suggest that the official mind was always unified. Sometimes those seven ideas were interpreted by the men-on-the-spot differently from those back home, as were the ways to pursue them. Since messages took months to arrive under the best of conditions, London had no choice but to rely on its local agents to run colonial affairs. Agents of imperialism in far-flung regions, conquistadors and bureaucrats alike, were largely on their own. Restraining them often proved more difficult than protecting them. Generally speaking, the British in the colonies were more aggressive than their nominal bosses, since losing control of territory was the lone way to the imperial doghouse for governors. Unauthorized conquest, as long as it went well (and it usually did) was never punished.[30] Officers in the field were often rewarded after successful ventures with hefty pensions and occasional elevation to the peerage. Aggression offered the quickest route to glory and riches, which meant that the men-on-the-spot were always itching for a fight.[31]

In 1784 Parliament grew weary of the excesses and aggressions of the East India Company and tried to rein it in. "William Pitt's India Act" created a Board of Control that would answer directly to the crown, and limited the autonomy of the Company. "To pursue Schemes of Conquest and Extension of Dominion in India, are Measures repugnant to the Wish, the Honour, and Policy of the Nation," the act read, making it illegal for local governors to commence hostilities against neighboring princely states.[32] Like any act without the ability or will to enforce it, this just wasted paper. Expansion of the empire's boundaries under the auspices of the East India Company continued steadily, with British troops and their sepoy allies marching eastward into Burma and westward into the Punjab, Sind, Pashtunistan, and Baluchistan. London had little say in these matters. The Commander-in-Chief of the army, the Duke of York, tried to stop an expedition into Nepal in 1814, wondering "why it was ever necessary," all to no avail.[33] The governors made the calls, justifying their actions with appeals to British prestige and refusal to tolerate dangerous neighbors.

The heightened threat perception of the men-on-the-spot was not merely a function of avarice. Those back home concentrated on the bigger picture, and tended to focus on external enemies, while the men-on-the-spot worried more about the challenges inside colonies. London's fears were often generated

by what they imagined their rivals were planning. Many times the British felt compelled to send troops into neighboring territories in order to block the French or Germans or Russians from doing so. London's oft-expressed reluctance to conquer new areas was genuine, but its leaders were more even more reluctant to lose ground to potential enemies.[34] Ruling Fiji did not appeal to Prime Minister Disraeli in 1875, for instance, but keeping it out of German hands did. British troops marched into northern Burma in 1885 out of fear that the French were about to do the same. If they did not march into Tibet, as they did in 1903, surely the Russians would have. British leaders could therefore maintain the illusion that they ran a satisfied, status-quo state, drawn into new areas only by the expansionary tendencies of its enemies and its aggressive men-on-the-spot.[35]

Imperial governors were more aware of local conditions and felt their colonies could never be secure as long as threats loomed over the horizon. National leaders talked about Russian and Persian threats to India, but external powers mattered to the heavily outnumbered British officials in-country only to the extent that they could inspire internal rebellion. They knew they were operating inside a gunpowder magazine, one that would explode with the slightest spark.[36] This inspired many aggressive actions to remove potentially dangerous or merely inspirational neighbors. Indeed it can be said that every war undertaken by the British in India—and there quite a lot of them—was justified in their mind by the needs of colonial defense.[37] Preventative wars inspired by defensive imperialism drove the imperial boundaries ever outward, as the Company's servants lived in fear that their fragile regime could not withstand the strain of turbulence on the frontier.[38] They always erred on the side of aggression.

The Indian gunpowder magazine exploded in 1857. The kindling was laid by decades of oppression, humiliation, and mistreatment at the hands of the British; the spark came when new rifles were distributed to the sepoy troops. To load them, a soldier needed to bite the end off a small packet of powder. Rumors swept through the ranks that the packets had been lubricated with pig and/or cow fat, either of which would be deeply offensive to some of the soldiers, depending on their religion. Years of pent-up outrage came to a head, and a good percentage of sepoy units mutinied.

Had the infection spread throughout the army, the British would not have been able to contain it, ruling as they did some three hundred million people with about thirty thousand of their own troops.[39] But many units remained loyal, crucially the Gurkas and Sikhs, and over the course of the next couple of years the Great Indian Mutiny (or the First War of Independence, depending on one's perspective) was put down. The rebellion shocked the British. In London it was widely interpreted it as a betrayal by an ungrateful, unredeemable people, which had the effect of strengthening British racism.[40] The rebellion also reinforced the notion held by the men-on-the-spot that they were sitting atop a volcano, which

increased their repressive tendencies. Parliament responded by rescinding the charter of the Company and taking direct control of India, ending the era of the semiautonomous joint-stock companies for good.

## Maintaining the Pax

By the early nineteenth century Britain considered itself a status quo power that sought to suppress disruptions in Europe and its dominions, and to do so it assembled an impressive set of tools. First and foremost was the Royal Navy, whose responsibilities expanded alongside the empire. In mid-century, steam power replaced sail, a transition Britain made smoothly thanks to its broad industrial base. How much naval capability would be necessary to protect commerce, dissuade challengers, squash the slave trade, and maintain maritime order was never completely clear. In 1889 Parliament passed the Naval Defence Act, which codified what had been a general policy for quite some time: according to the "two-power standard" it described, British force planners were instructed to maintain a capability at least as strong as the next two biggest navies together. This was usually not difficult to achieve, since in 1883 the number of British battleships was about equal to that of the rest of the world combined.[41] This would change, though, as the fruits of industrialization filtered down to its rivals.

The army remained the secondary branch, always smaller than those on the continent and far less prestigious. In most years even the Swiss maintained more men in the field.[42] At mid-century, the British army consisted of about 135,000 regulars, disproportionately Irish and Scots, half of whom were stationed in the home islands. The rest, alongside about 150,000 native (mostly Indian) troops, were scattered around the empire.[43] What the army lacked in size it attempted to make up for in mobility; leaders from Wellington to Wolseley emphasized not the number of troops but the speed with which they could be trained and dispatched, from either India or the home islands. Although to cynics the army appeared to be "merely a projectile to be fired by the navy," that projectile could arrive at almost any shore within a matter of months.[44]

De-emphasizing one branch kept military expenditures low, amounting to about one pound or less per capita per annum, or between 2 and 3 percent of the national income.[45] This certainly maximized the return on the national investment, achieving an economy of force unmatched by any land power. Security can come relatively cheap for island countries, should they choose wisely.

Intangible assets played an even more important role in restraining subjects and deterring enemies. It was psychology, not brute force, that ultimately held the empire together. The vastly outnumbered men-on-the-spot could not maintain order unless locals believed them to be essentially unbeatable. A War Office

official said this in 1904 about Africa, but he could have been speaking about the entire imperial project:

> The fact cannot be stated too plainly that . . . our whole position depends entirely on prestige . . . the authority of these officials is supported only by troops recruited from the subject races, whose obedience to their officers rests on no other basis than a belief in the invincibility of the British government and confidence in its promises. If that belief and confidence be once shaken the foundations of all British authority between Cairo and Mombassa will be undermined, and at any moment a storm of mutiny and insurrection will sweep us into the sea.[46]

Local officials were hardly the only ones obsessed with prestige. If another longish quotation may be forgiven, Lord Palmerston, then the foreign minister, said this to the House of Commons in 1850:

> These half-civilized Governments such as those of China, Portugal, Spanish America, all require a dressing down every eight or ten years to keep them in order. Their minds are too shallow to receive an impression that will last longer than some such period and warning is of little use. They care little for words and they must not only see the stick but actually feel it on their shoulders before they yield to that argument which brings conviction.[47]

Palmerston was explaining why British ships were being sent to punish a Greek government that had refused to compensate British subjects in some forgettable circumstance, thereby insulting the crown. Such things could not go unpunished. Reputation and fears of falling dominoes factored into imperial thinking as much for the British as for all superpowers. Their reluctance to grant the Irish home rule might have been driven by security concerns, but there was also a general sense that removing any leg would send the whole imperial table crashing down.[48]

Mid-century events in the Far East demonstrate the importance London placed on its prestige, and how sensitive it was to insult. British trade with China was interrupted in 1839 when leaders in Peking decided that opium was no longer welcome in their country. Since this was the main commodity that the British could offer the Chinese in exchange for their sublime tea, as well as a major source of the East India Company's revenue, London determined that this Chinese prohibition policy was unacceptable.[49] Thus began the first Opium War and the beginning of China's "century of humiliation" at the hands of the West. Future Prime Minister Gladstone decried the operation on the floor of

Parliament, declaring that a "war more unjust in its origin, a war more calculated to cover this country with permanent disgrace, I do not know and have not read of."[50] Nonetheless, British ships were dispatched to convince the Chinese to reassess their national attitude toward opium.

The fighting was over rather quickly. The Chinese assumed that superior numbers would compensate for inferior arms, but they were badly mistaken. A couple thousand British and sepoy troops repeatedly attacked Chinese formations more than ten times their size, besting them on every occasion. As has often been the case throughout history, Chinese armies underperformed. Leaders in Beijing soon relented, and the narcotics trade resumed. More hostilities over opium broke out in 1858 when China again tried to restrict its importation. This war unfolded much the same way, but even more dramatically: twenty thousand British and French troops marched inland, fighting their way past two hundred thousand Chinese into Beijing, where they spent a couple of weeks looting, pillaging, and burning the Summer Palace to the ground. Another unequal treaty followed.

Though the stated cause for the conflicts, opium never had more than a symbolic importance to policymakers in London. British prestige was at stake, an asset far more important than the trade in any commodity. In the view of John Quincy Adams, opium, which is barely mentioned in the treaty that ended the war, was "no more the cause of the war than the throwing overboard the tea in Boston harbor was the cause of the North American revolution." Instead, he argued, "the cause of the war is the kowtow."[51] Both sides felt theirs was the superior culture and insisted on a degree of genuflection, or at least respect, from the other. When it was not forthcoming, hostilities commenced.

China was not the only site of imperial warfare during the Pax. A more worrisome problem for map-obsessed Victorian planners was the growing Eurasian colossus steadily expanding its reach southward toward India. Nineteenth-century Russia represented everything that the British believed they were not: it was an illiberal, Asiatic land power with a nearly inexhaustible reserve of soldiers, led by an inscrutable, irrational tyrant. "I take [Tsar] Nicholas to be ambitious, bent upon great schemes, determined to make extensive additions to his dominions," said Palmerston in 1835, adding that the tsar was "animated by the same hatred to England which was felt by Napoleon."[52] Russia was strong where Britain were weak, which made strategists in London obsess over its intentions and capabilities. Although the two came to blows but once, relations were strained for decades, so much so that some have taken to calling this rivalry the world's first cold war.[53]

The goal of containing Russia led the British to prop up the ailing Ottoman Empire, which had been one of the primary targets of the tsar's expansion. By the mid-1800s the sultan's control over his outer territories was largely fictional, and

British leaders worried that the "sick man of Europe" would prove unable to keep the Russians bottled up in the Black Sea. Independence for Constantinople, and protection of the choke point it controlled, became a major British interest. To Salisbury, the straits were "the only weak point in the English position. No foreign power is in a condition to threaten England's interests, except Russia by striking at Constantinople."[54] Keeping the Mediterranean open to shipping only mattered because, like so many of the areas important to Britain, it sat along the sea route to India. Russia had the ability to threaten India by land as well, however. As the tsars won victory after victory against the khanates to their south and two wars against Persia, those fears grew.

Open conflict with Russia erupted in 1854, the first and only time the nineteenth century's cold war heated up. British troops traveled to the Crimean Peninsula where, alongside those from France, Sardinia, and Turkey, they opposed the extension of Russian influence. The war was preposterously mismanaged on all sides, marginally more so by the tsar's generals. A couple of mid-sized pitched battles occurred that fall, and into the valley of the shadow of death rode tragically misdirected cavalry. By winter the belligerents had settled down for a siege of Sevastopol, the main Russian city on the peninsula. The besiegers and besieged suffered the typical privations, dying in large numbers of sickness and cold and boredom. Eventually the Russians blew up their fortress and left the peninsula. The allies declared victory and went home.

The urgency to bolster the sick man was relieved to some degree by events in Egypt in 1882. A revolt broke out that the Ottoman sultan was unable to control, which brought British intervention. The rebellion was crushed and redcoats remained but did not annex, creating an odd imperial hybrid between colony and independence. Strategic priority in the Mediterranean shifted from Constantinople to Cairo, at least to a degree. Defensive imperialism kicked in quickly: London began to fear that Egypt could not be secure while there was a vacuum of power in neighboring Sudan. British troops entered that immense territory, if reluctantly, inspired by the rather cockamamie notion that the French might somehow divert the Nile and starve Cairo. Events gathered their own momentum, including a pointless siege and couple of rather large battles against locals, before French and British troops came to face each other in 1898 along the White Nile. Cooler heads eventually prevailed.[55]

Overall the Pax was not actually that peaceful. The great powers did not fight each other much in the nineteenth century, and never after Napoleon did they face off at sea, but they regularly clashed with lesser powers as they expanded their imperial reach. "In the last quarter of the nineteenth century," wrote historian Byron Farwell, "there were so many campaigns, military expeditions, revolts suppressed and full-scale wars that no one has ever counted them all."[56]

The Foreign Office did count the bigger clashes, the "principal wars," which in the half-century after Crimea numbered fifteen.[57] The British were fighting on their periphery nearly constantly, often waging multiple small conflicts simultaneously.

Particularly troublesome was the northwest frontier of India, where British and allied forces fought without much break for more than a century. Although never able to force their will on the Pashtuns or other peoples of the northwestern frontier, the British lived in fear that somehow the Russians would somehow be able to do so. Some of their conflicts in the region have names—the first, second, and third Afghan wars; the first and second Sikh wars; etc.—but many were simply "expeditions" designed to punish one rebellious tribe or another. A few of these, like the Sikhs and the Sind, were eventually conquered and brought into the fold. Others never were, such as the Pashtuns, who proved as unconquerable for the Brits in the nineteenth century as they were for the Soviets in the twentieth and the Americans in the twenty-first. No media images arrived in British homes during this forever war, which raged at a level those at home considered tolerable. Or ignorable.

Some of the expeditions were quite substantial. In late 1897 more British troops were sent to a secluded valley in northwest Pakistan than had gone to the Crimea four decades earlier.[58] Their counterinsurgency tactics were reminiscent of those used by the Romans or Nazis: they sought to punish the societies that gave shelter to guerrillas. "With savage tribes to whom there is no right but might," commented one of the commanding officers, "the only course, as regards humanity as well as policy, is to make all suffer, and thereby, for their own interests, enlist the great majority on the side of peace and safety."[59] The troops fought a series of battles, burned as much as possible, and then withdrew before the winter, dooming much of the valley's population to starvation. This basic approach, repeated many times throughout the region, served only to harden the locals against the occupiers. It turned out that leveling homes and killing livestock failed to win converts to the British cause.

Thus, within a decade Britain had gone to war in the world's three most populous states—China, India, and Russia—and had prevailed each time (if barely with the latter). It dominated trade with China for forty years, until at least the Sino-Japanese War of 1895, but never endeavored to make it a formal colony. On no Victorian map does the British red extend over China, nor were Brazil, Argentina, or Persia ever part of the empire, but for significant portions of the nineteenth century those countries were not entirely free to make policy without London's approval. The influence (and interests) of the empire extended far beyond what was run directly by its ministers.

## Informal Empire

No empire rules uniformly. Gradations of control are the norm, with some areas administered directly and others granted various levels of autonomy. British leaders preferred to avoid obvious imperial expansion where practical, since it entailed substantial expenditure and a variety of political hassles. Colonies were "millstones" around the neck of the British taxpayer, thought Prime Minister Disraeli, since they could rarely cover the full cost of their defense.[60] If a similar amount of cooperation and profit could be attained without landing troops and rearranging societies, so much the better. "Informal empire" was the answer, even if it was not a distinction recognized at the time, which involved dominating certain areas without direct rule or annexation. This was typically accomplished by addressing the fondness of local elites for cash and/or guns, and thereby rendering them amenable to suggestion. The process worked in Persia, Turkey, Japan, Zanzibar, Siam, Morocco, and, most prominently, China and Latin America.[61] Earlier empires called these "client states," though Britain's informal empire was held together by different means: when Rome's clients stepped out of line, the legions were sure to appear shortly; London was much more likely to dispatch bankers—though those bankers would arrive on gunboats.

"Wherever British subjects are placed in danger, a situation which is accessible to a British ship of war," wrote Palmerston to the British representative in China in December 1846, "thither a British ship of war ought to be and will be ordered, not only to go, but to remain as long as its presence may be required for the protection of British interests."[62] British diplomacy was backed up by threats of force symbolized by the gunboat, a shallow-draft vessel capable of sailing into the brown water (rivers) as well as the blue. Shelling coastal positions was rarely necessary; the mere presence of firepower was enough for "gunboat diplomacy" to protect British interests. To paraphrase Admiral Nelson, warships are often the best negotiators.[63]

Informal empire is a slippery concept, one not universally accepted by historians.[64] Certainly there were differences of degree. After the Opium Wars in China, British nationals enjoyed immunity from local laws or "extraterritoriality," and a free-trade regime was essentially imposed from outside.[65] In Latin America, British policy was driven almost entirely by private interests, leading some analysts to argue that it was not imperialism at all. About a quarter of Britain's overseas wealth was tied up in South American banks, commercial properties, and utilities, but London rarely intervened to protect its interests.[66] Occasionally the Royal Navy blockaded ports or the mouths of rivers to support one side or another in civil wars or to choke off the slave trade. But to those who see imperialism as a binary concept—it exists or it does not—the informal version might appear a bit loose.

Informal rule sometimes formalized over time. The surest way for a semiautonomous region to lose its semiautonomy was to flirt with other suitors, or threaten to join (whether by choice or through negligence) the sphere of another power. Across Africa there were regions that the British would have preferred to rule indirectly, but fears of leaving vacuums to tempt rivals convinced them to extend formal control.[67] The empire in Latin America remained informal in part because the Royal Navy was able to keep foreign interference out of the region's various conflagrations.

Informalizing the empire where possible brought substantial benefit at little cost. Perhaps too it was an exercise in plausible deniability, since the British could reasonably claim that they exercised no direct control over the target states. The growth of international economic and financial integration during the nineteenth century afforded the queen different tools to extend her influence, ones that certainly would have been exercised by the caesars or the khans, had they been available. And informal empire fit nicely with the evolving philosophy of the time, one whose proponents increasingly bristled at imperialism and argued instead that trade would save them all.

## Ideas in the Second Empire

The first empire had an ideological element, to some degree, since many early imperialists imagined themselves waging a holy war against the Papists in Madrid. They also struggled against the revolutionary ideas of the French, and provided support for conservative forces in colonies everywhere.[68] It was not until the second empire, however, that intangible goals became truly influential in British policy. This makes sense, of course: it is only when powers become fully super that they can afford to look past security and prosperity. As time went on, London came to adopt a set of ideas that were to have a variety of effects on its policies—and ultimately undermine the justification for the entire imperial project.

The Enlightenment transformed the way people thought about many aspects of society. The rather revolutionary notion that all people had rights challenged some of the central assumptions of imperialism: How could a society that prided itself on is liberal ideas, its justice, and its tolerance justify ruling others against their will? The British dealt with this apparent contradiction by emphasizing the positive, uplifting, civilizing aspects of their empire. Increasingly liberal Britannia had a mission to improve the world, to share wisdom and culture with the various backward folk in the periphery. The empire was a common good, bringing peace, stability, justice, morals, and tea to all those fortunate enough to be its subjects. "A strong and confident Greater Britain would, so it was claimed,

benefit the entire planet," wrote historian Duncan Bell. "It was to be the indispensable nation."[69]

This civilizing mission drew inspiration from the past. "Pax Britannica" was not a concept born in a historical vacuum; those who bandied it about were well aware of its Latin origins, just as they were aware of, and tried to learn from, Roman precedent. Many British planners considered their empire a second coming of Rome and modeled themselves accordingly.[70] Like the Romans, the British understood that force and fear could not bring long-term stability. Transformation of the Indians was necessary, for example, to make them not only appreciate Britishness but aspire to be associated with it. A concerted, intentional Anglicization project aimed to produce Indians "more English than Hindu, just as the Roman provincials became more Romans than Gauls or Italians," according to one civil servant.[71] The British considered it their mission to impose the fruits of their civilization, including their language, education, sports, laws, and religion. Children of the elite could be educated at Oxford or Cambridge, where they would be Anglicized further before returning home and educating their country. It was all for their own good, as well as the good of the crown.

There is no need to determine the precise extent to which this mission drove imperial practice. People are efficient rationalizers; interest and ideals tend to align very closely in all of us. For the Victorians the mission was real, and the "white man's burden" came with the imperial territory.[72] But it also generated a certain anxiety over time and sparked a robust debate about whether the empire could be justified, and even whether it should be abandoned. "It was the 'liberty' thing that was most problematical for Britons in connection with their Empire, for obvious reasons," wrote Bernard Porter.[73]

That "liberty thing" was not reflected in the everyday life of the colonies. Governors had less interest in the civilizing mission of the empire, generally speaking, considering themselves instead practical men forced to rule lesser peoples. The depth of the empire's racism was a function of distance to the capital: The farther one got away from London, the less enlightened the thinking.[74] The men-on-the-spot were rather insulated from happenings back home, including the intellectual currents that were changing the nature of British society. Liberalism did not transform British leaders in India, who regarded new notions of human rights and individual liberty as luxuries unavailable on the front lines. They also believed that their power depended upon the maintenance of various social and political hierarchies. Ministers in London were often distressed and occasionally appalled at the behavior of their representatives in the field, but there was little they could do to control them. Perhaps the British were not as cruel to their subjects as some imperial powers, but this hardly implies that

their rule was always a paragon of enlightenment thinking. Locals with opinions, never mind rebels, could expect no quarter, much less an audience. A liberal-minded visitor to India in the late 1860s was startled by the everyday brutality of British rule, and noted this sign commonly posted in even the most fashionable hotels: "Gentlemen are earnestly requested not to strike the servants." African laborers were routinely treated even worse.[75] Overall the mission to civilize the Indians not only went terribly wrong, according to one observer, it instead ended up barbarizing the British.[76]

As imperialism barbarized those running the colonies, liberalism transformed opinion at home, often conflicting with tangible national interests. On no issue was this more consequential than slavery. Since the end of the War of Spanish Succession, when Great Britain took control of the Atlantic slave trade, great fortunes had been made with the practice. More than fifty thousand souls arrived in colonial ports every year during the eighteenth century, at least 40 percent of whom made the passage on Her Majesty's ships. The trade generated more and more profits as time went on. By most accounts, the beginning of the nineteenth century was slavery's most profitable era, and Britain profited enormously. Over half of the world's sugar originated in her West Indian colonies, all of it harvested by people in British chains.[77]

Liberalism and slavery cannot coexist. Despite the profits that the slave trade brought into the empire, in 1807 Parliament undertook the first major abolitionist action in the world, banning the practice. The Royal Navy quickly developed constabulary capabilities, deploying a squadron to West Africa to run down ships defying the order. Over the course of the coming decades hundreds of vessels were seized and tens of thousands enslaved people returned to their places of origins (or thereabouts).[78] In 1816 the British shelled Algiers into the ground because its leaders refused to cease the trade, and they blockaded all maritime traffic into Brazil in 1850 to stop slaves from entering.[79]

Plantation owners resisted at every stage. Though Jamaican planters had non-trivial power in Parliament and were able to slow the abolition momentum, they could not stop it. Support for freedom had its limits: Britain did not come to the aid of rebellious slaves, either in her colonies or elsewhere, and actively sought to suppress the successful revolt in Haiti. But in 1833 slavery itself was outlawed throughout the empire, in the hope that other countries would soon follow suit. For the most part they did not, and as the plantation owners predicted, British sugar was soon rendered uncompetitive. By mid-century the British West Indies had become a commercial backwater, with sugar production having shifted to the slave-retaining states of Brazil, Cuba, Java, and the United States.[80]

History's first great humanitarian action cost Britain dearly. Its consumers suffered, as did its bankers, plantation owners, shippers, merchants, and manufacturers. According to one estimate, ending the slave trade reduced the national income by 2 percent annually for sixty years.[81] British abolitionist

zeal turned some of their subjects against the crown, including the masses in Zanzibar and South Africa.[82] Its seizures complicated relations with the other slave countries, especially France and the United States. The end of the trade also upended power relationships among West African polities and enraged the slaving states. The hundreds of antislavery treaties signed with African chiefs put Britain on a collision course with Dahomey, a powerful regional empire, and led to a brief war. Overall the British lost somewhere around five thousand soldiers and sailors enforcing the slave embargo, the majority of whom fell victim to disease.[83] These were costs that increasingly liberal Britain was willing to bear.

Liberal ideas reshaped many aspects of British economic thought. As the first empire transitioned into the second, conceptions about the proper relationship between the private and public sectors evolved as well. Great Britain was initially a mercantilist state, like all other European powers of the time. A primary motivation for imperial expansion was to gain control over raw materials for the industries back home. Every great power sought self-sufficiency, the ability to produce all elements vital to economic and military performance without having to rely on any other state. A series of parliamentary acts the mid-seventeenth century mandated that all imperial trade be carried on British ships and, to the extent possible, kept inside the empire.[84] Mercantilism worked well, at least for Britain, whose national wealth grew steadily, both absolutely and relatively.

Over time, British intellectuals began chipping away at the mercantilist consensus. In 1776 Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* made the case that a free market with minimal government interference would produce the fastest growth. A retired banker named David Ricardo read Smith's work twenty-five years later and expanded upon it, suggesting that if countries concentrated on their most efficient sectors—their "comparative advantages"—and traded for the rest, all would benefit. This would require trade unencumbered by the tariffs and subsidies that were central tools of the mercantilist system. Together these two economists had a greater impact on British grand strategy than any general or admiral. The suggestion that free trade would help a country grow called centuries of economic orthodoxy into question, and it resonated in London.

Slowly, surely, these ideas began to take hold. Free trade gained advocates among elites interested in more wealth and national leaders interested in more strength. Mercantilism had many allies and did not go away without a fight; it took the tragedy of the Irish famine to convince Parliament to sweep away protectionist legislation. The so-called Corn Laws that had protected local producers were repealed in 1846, along with the Navigation Acts a few years later. In their place Britain entered into a series of bilateral free-trade agreements, including with Turkey in 1838, Iran in 1841, China and Texas in 1842, and the landmark Cobden-Chevalier Treaty with France in 1860, which set off a string of similar agreements across the continent.[85]

The growth of free trade coincided with another revolution in nineteenth-century economics. The age of industrialization began in the previous century, if slowly, at a time when the continental powers were roughly equal to Britain. The Napoleonic Wars retarded growth on the continent, however, allowing Britain to take a lead.[86] Wood gave way to steel, and sail gave way to steam. Pig iron gives a sense of the transformation: Britain produced 125,000 tons of the stuff in 1796, 677,000 by 1830 and 3.8 million in 1860.[87] At least until the 1880s, it is fair to suggest (as has Paul Kennedy) that Great Britain was "the only really industrialized nation in the world."[88] It was also the world's primary creditor nation, the one with the highest amount of investment capital flowing into it. Nineteenth-century London was the center of global finance, the home of great banks that lent money around the world at (mostly) reasonable rates. At its peak about 10 percent of the national income came from interest on its foreign holdings.[89]

Thus, Britain was well positioned to benefit from a free-trade system. Its vast industrial lead and investment expertise, along with its nonpareil merchant marine, meant that it held most of the important comparative advantages. Free trade *was* economic nationalism to the British. When other countries opened their markets to foreign competition, rarely would the queen end up on the negative end. The British conveniently forgot that protectionism had facilitated their rise, convincing themselves that free trade was a common good in the interests of all states at all stages of development.[90] Observed one German economist in 1840, "It is a very common clever device that when anyone has attained the summit of greatness, he kicks away the ladder."[91] To rivals, Britain's support of trade was merely a tactic to preserve its economic dominance; nevertheless, before long they all adopted that tactic. Superpowers always shape the system. With Britain as its champion, economic liberalism swept over the world, and international trade increased tenfold between 1850 and 1913.[92]

Free trade and open markets soon became associated with the broader civilizing mission. To Palmerston, the exchange of commodities would be "accompanied by the . . . diffusion of knowledge—by the interchange of mutual benefits engendering mutual kind feelings . . . It is, that commerce may go freely forth, leading civilization with one hand, and peace with the other, to render mankind happier, wiser, better . . . this is the dispensation of Providence."[93] Economic liberalism was the solution to many of humanity's ills, from tyranny to barbarism to slavery—and, to some degree, to empire. One of its major proponents, philosopher, and member of Parliament Richard Cobden, argued that trade was the antidote to imperialism, since it would bring an end to "the desire and motive for large and mighty empires; for gigantic armies and great navies—for those materials which are used for the destruction of life and the desolation of the rewards of labour." Over time, trading people would cease

to be enemies, producing a world where "man becomes one family, and freely exchanges the fruits of his labour with his brother man."[94]

Liberalism was dangerous for imperial powers interested in preserving the status quo, however.[95] Rival theories soon arose in the British marketplace of ideas, one of which salved imperial consciences. Social Darwinists applied natural selection, then a relatively new concept, to cultures, arguing that only the fittest races would survive international competition. According to three-time Prime Minster Lord Salisbury, "Countries can be divided into the living and the dying; weak become weaker, strong stronger; living will encroach upon dying."[96] This intellectual current, which was promoted by the most popular Victorian philosopher, Herbert Spencer, had two branches that prescribed different actions: to some, this natural order of things called upon the more enlightened races to aid the lesser ones; to others, it justified all actions taken on behalf of one's people, since constant conflict was the natural order of humanity. Social Darwinism gave pseudo-scientific cover for British racism, which (liberalism notwithstanding) was more prominent at the century's end than it was at the beginning.[97]

Social Darwinism also helped provide intellectual justification for a dramatic expansion of the formal empire in the last decades of the century. Heretofore informal sections (such as Cyprus, Mandalay, and upper Burma) were annexed and new areas were added, especially in Africa, which was the last of the world's major regions to fall under European control. Disease more than any other factor had kept white settlers confined to coastal enclaves until the 1880s, when rudimentary treatments for malaria were introduced and a series of high-profile explorers brought the continental interior into popular consciousness. Events then unfolded quite rapidly. The continent went from independent to conquered in less two decades, fueled largely by the fear of being left behind. Once one power (Belgium) began the "scramble" for claims, all others soon followed suit. Though there were neither riches nor great benefit to imperialism in Africa, no country was willing to cede control to its rivals. Between 1880 and 1900 ten thousand independent tribal kingdoms were consolidated into forty states, thirty-six of which were ruled by Europeans.[98]

Though they did not begin it, the British quickly joined the scrambling. They too worried initially about losing ground somehow, particularly to the French and Germans, and laid claim to those areas from which their enemies could theoretically disrupt the trade routes to India. Fear drove expansion farther and farther still, so much so that by 1890 Salisbury could tell the German ambassador that though "Africa was a very large place," the British "had interests in every part of it."[99] We have already discussed how intervention in Egypt to protect the Suez Canal necessitated an adventure into just-over-the-horizon (but strategically worthless) Sudan, and that was just the start. Protection of Zanzibar led to

expansion into Kenya and Uganda, and then colonies along the western coast necessitated forays far up the Niger River. Lord Granville of the Foreign Office argued in 1884 that it was "essential" that Mt. Kilimanjaro "should not be placed under the protection of another flag," even if the exact reason was never clear.[100] Among the flags that could protect African landmarks was now that of Prussia, whose chancellor (Otto von Bismarck) was assumed by all to be a cunning strategic genius. All told between 1871 and 1900, some four and a quarter million square miles, and sixty-six million people, were added to the British Empire.[101] It is hard to see how Great Britain was better off in any measurable way after these additions, or how rival empires would have benefited from their inclusion. The scramble for Africa was neither profitable nor, in retrospect, rational.

## Late Imperial Anxieties, Justified and Not

Despite all this expansion and associated derring-do, the last decades of the nineteenth century were uneasy ones for the British. Though they led Europe in all measures of national power, other states were catching up. Rivals copied their route to national wealth, and technology facilitated change that was more rapid than in times past. The railroad was particularly worrisome, since it allowed land powers to move forces around with the speed until then only available to sea powers.[102] The free-trade system built by the British helped others grow too, so much so that the economic dominance of Great Britain was essentially over by the 1890s. In 1870 Britain produced 32 percent of the world's manufactured goods; by 1910 that had shrunk to 15 percent.[103] It was also losing its edge in trade and the production of steel and iron. By the outbreak of World War I the United States produced three times as much of both those commodities, and Germany twice as much, as did Britain.[104] A multipolar world was emerging, with Britain being one of several great powers rather than sitting alone on top.

It is hard to know for sure what ordinary Britons thought of their empire at this stage in its evolution, since there were few polls or surveys. The best the historian can do is examine its popular culture, which renders an incomplete picture at best, akin to judging America today based solely on Twitter. But those who have performed such examinations suggest that support for its imperial mission was thin, especially among the working classes who could not identify much benefit. And liberalism continued its assault on the foundational assumptions of the empire.[105]

Since popular support for imperial initiatives was a necessary component for success in increasingly democratic Britain, successive governments undertook hefty public-relations efforts to reinvigorate the empire in popular consciousness and remind everyone just how important and special it all was. An

education curriculum stressing the virtues, benefits, and responsibilities of the empire was distributed nationwide by the mid-1880s. Schools received new lessons with imperial themes, and patriotic societies like the Boy Scouts were established to supplement the various advertising campaigns.[106] To some degree it all seemed to work, at least among those who mattered. Interest and pride in the empire, often called "jingoism" after a line from a popular song rose markedly as the century came to an end, reaching a fever pitch as trouble started to brew in South Africa.[107]

Jingoism notwithstanding, late Victorian Britain had uneasy and anxious elements. It proved difficult to enjoy the fruits of the Pax Britannica because, as is often the case with superpowers, fear accompanied strength. Although the British were, by all reasonable measures, relatively safe in the second half of the nineteenth century, they did not feel that way. Strategists and the public alike imagined that enemies could arrive on the beaches of Brighton quite suddenly and work their way northward. Waves of anxiety, and even obsessive fear, accompanied the Pax.[108] The list of potential invaders evolved over time, but the French and Germans played prominent roles in these nightmares. An armada sent by a secret hostile coalition could emerge, in Lord Balfour's words, like a "bolt from the blue" to overwhelm scant British homeland defenses.[109] A new literary genre became very popular, and British bookstores had no shortage of novels imagining invaders appearing offshore without warning. One entry in this large literature, *The Battle of Dorking* from 1871, created such a stir that the prime minister felt obliged to address national anxieties. "I should not mind this 'Battle of Dorking,'" Gladstone told an audience in Yorkshire,

> if we could keep it to ourselves, if we could take care that nobody belonging to any other country should know that such follies could find currency or even favour with portions of the British public; but unfortunately these things go abroad, and they make us ridiculous in the eyes of the whole world . . . the result of these things is practically the spending of more and more of your money. Be on your guard against alarmism. Depend upon it that there is not the astounding disposition on the part of all mankind to make us the objects of hatred.[110]

Like most official attempts to calm public fears, this one failed.

The Defence Ministry welcomed the occasional panic, since it usually resulted in an influx of cash for the military. "An invasion scare is the mill of the Gods," said an approving Lord Esher, "which grinds you out a Navy of Dreadnoughts, and keeps the British people war-like in spirit." Panic rarely results in rational expenditures; hoarding behavior follows, whether of toilet paper during

respiratory pandemics or battleships during invasion scares. Great amounts were thrown at the fleet and new units raised for homeland defense during one such panic in 1859, without regard for strategic priorities of the empire. Thirty years later, despite the opinion of the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord George Hamilton, that "at no period in our history was the invasion of England less likely than it was at the present moment," Salisbury increased the budget for defense. Field Marshall Wolseley blocked the construction of a Channel Tunnel, despite the potential economic benefit, on the theory that it could provide a highway for would-be invaders.[111]

Germany's decisive victory over France in 1871 only made things worse. To Prime Minister Disraeli, the war represented,

> a greater political event than the French Revolution of the last century . . . Not a single principle in the management of our foreign affairs, accepted by all statesmen for guidance up to six months ago, any longer exists. There is not a diplomatic tradition which has not been swept away. You have a new world, new influences at work, new and unknown objects and dangers with which to cope . . . The balance of power has been entirely destroyed and the country which suffers most, and feels the effect of this great change most, is England.[112]

While this may have been a tad hyperbolic, it is true that the Franco-Prussian War inspired a broad rethinking of British grand strategy, and an eventual recognition that priorities needed adjustment to reflect emerging realities. It would take a few decades before those changes took full effect.

In 1890, Britain's two main rivals were France and Russia, and she was on mostly friendly terms with Germany and Austria; she was resistant to peacetime alliances, and her grand strategy prioritized imperial possessions over continental concerns; and, of course, Britain was still dominant at sea. Within fifteen years, every one of these was reversed.[113] The age of British unipolarity had come to an end.

The British had traditionally shied away from alliances in peacetime, largely because there was no need to attach their fate to another. Dominant countries have little to gain from alliances. As that dominance ebbs, however, they reach out to others to assure their security. In 1902 Britain signed an agreement with Japan which both guaranteed the independence of China and Korea and neutrality during hostilities with third parties. This treaty is often seen as the symbolic end of "splendid isolation," the period where overwhelming British power made alliances unnecessary. It was soon followed by non-aggression treaties with the French (1904) and then the Russians (1907), reflecting the enormous change in the security environment at the beginning of the new century. The

British were willing to bury their two most enduring hatchets to make common cause against what appeared to be the most serious challenge in quite some time: Wilhelmine Germany, a growing industrial and military power that was beginning to assert itself on the continent and around the world. It did not help matters that this new colossus was led by an unpredictable, narcissistic half-wit.

Rising countries often blunder. Like the nouveau riche, inexperience and insecurity lead to clumsy action and crude displays of status in those unfamiliar with power. Resentful established states often do not take them seriously, compounding their irritation. Germany was able to avoid some of the predictable mistakes while in the capable hands of Bismarck, but once the Iron Chancellor was pushed aside its leaders made a series of counterproductive moves. Chief among these, at least as far as relations with Britain were concerned, was to build a navy. Why Germany needed a fleet of battleships was never clear to anybody in London. Foreign Minister and future chancellor Bernhard von Bülow tried to calm fears, explaining that "We must build a fleet strong enough to prevent an attack—I underscore the word *attack*, for with the absolutely peaceful nature of our policy there can be no talk of anything but defense—from any power."[114] Few were reassured. An arms race centered around the newest class of battleship, the Dreadnaught, ensued, which raised tensions and laid the kindling that would ignite a few years later.

Germany's combination of growth and ineptitude caused complications in many parts of the empire, but nowhere more than South Africa. Long-standing troubles there with the local Dutch settlers began to accelerate when Britain annexed the Transvaal territory in 1877, largely out of fear of growing German influence. In response the modern Afrikaner nationalist movement was born, which sought independence and the right to oppress the local Black population without interference. Unfortunately for fans of stability, nine years later gold was discovered in the Transvaal. White settlers began pouring in, loosening British control of the colony. The delicate balance that had held until that time, in which the British held the coastline while the Boers farmed the interior, started to appear less tenable. Since the southern African coast was near the trade routes to India, at least to those with an expansive definition of the word "near," the official mind became convinced that the safety of the entire empire hinged on controlling it.[115]

Enter Kaiser Wilhelm. Following an unsuccessful British raid into Boer territory he sent a telegram congratulating the Afrikaners. In what would not be his administration's last ill-advised correspondence, this telegram sent public opinion in Britain into a frenzy, scuttling any talk of an Anglo-German rapprochement and increasing London's perception of threat in South Africa.[116] A British invasion to recolonize Transvaal became inevitable.

Things did not go well, especially at first. The Afrikaners defeated the British in a series of large battles, after which London sent increasing numbers of

reinforcements that eventually turned the tide. The British needed a 7:1 numerical superiority to win, ultimately deploying more than 448,000 troops, which left only a single regular battalion at home.[117] The Boers, however, did not have the courtesy to admit defeat. They took to the hills for sabotage and sniping, carrying on a vicious guerrilla campaign for months. Here the British did not conduct the scorched-earth tactics common on the northwestern frontier, employing instead the state-of-the-art counterinsurgency tactic of herding civilians into camps. All those who remained outside became legitimate targets, at least in the British mind. The war would cost some forty-five thousand British lives and end in a draw, though the British claimed victory.[118] It rocked Great Britain in much the same manner that Vietnam would the United States six decades later, and caused similar soul-searching and re-examinations of the global strategy. The Boer War was the largest of the pointless imperial ventures of the era, and also the last. Its sacrifices added nothing to the empire but greater anxiety, pessimism, and fear.

Early twentieth-century-European politics was a roiling, unstable cauldron of jockeying and scheming, with crisis following crisis. Much of the chaos was driven by the transition of power: It is exceptionally hard for countries to lose status, to agree to share a stage they previously occupied alone.[119] Rivalry between Germany and Britain was perhaps inevitable, but major conflagration could have been avoided, had wise leaders been in charge. Unfortunately, they were not.

## Appeasement Misunderstood

Britain was sucked into the maelstrom in 1914 shortly after Germans rolled through Belgium on the way, they hoped, to Paris. In addition to the mindless butchery on the Western Front, British armies participated in bloody, meaningless sideshows in Mesopotamia, Salonika, and Gallipoli. Leaders in London were looking for some way to break the stalemate in France and consulted their maps, with predictable results. Eminent historian A.J.P. Taylor referred to this as the "cigar butt strategy." "Someone, Churchill or another, looked at a map of Europe," he wrote, "pointed to a spot with the end of his cigar; and said: 'Let us go there.' "[120] This was about as deep as strategic thinking in that war ever got.

Yet the British Empire survived the catastrophic stupidity of World War I, and even expanded. It absorbed a few Arab provinces left behind by the Ottomans and inherited their problems. It did not take long for those new colonies to be considered vital to the entire imperial project, despite the fact that the empire had previously gotten along just fine without them.[121] The British spent the first postwar years putting down rebellions in new colonies and old, from Egypt and

Iraq to Ireland and India. Overall the empire in 1920 was stronger in many places than it had been in 1910, even if its relative position would never return to its nineteenth-century level.[122] The days of dominance were over; the world had become irrevocably, distastefully multipolar.

Most countries learned the Great War's obvious lessons. The victors in particular recognized that battle had lost its romance, and that industrial-age warfare was to be avoided at all costs.[123] What leaders in Paris and London were slow to realize was that their counterparts in Berlin not only did not share their disgust, but were in fact—despite their endless protests to the contrary—eager to give it another go. The allies assumed for years that Hitler and Mussolini were reasonable men at heart, only to be proven tragically wrong. Since the failure of the British to stop Hitler's aggression before tanks rolled into Poland is often portrayed as one of the greatest strategic mistakes of the century, perhaps it is worth a moment's contemplation.

The British applied to Hitler the approach that had often paid substantial dividends in their recent history: they *appeased* him, or sought mutually acceptable solutions to disagreements, even when those solutions involved concessions on their part. As a result of this vacillation and weakness, so the conventional wisdom goes, Hitler's appetite grew stronger and the Second World War became inevitable. Appeasement has since carried a deep emotional resonance, warning leaders of the dangers that accompany weakness and vacillation. The experience at Munich has shaped many decisions great and small, advising against cooperation and compromise, stiffening backbones, and encouraging war.

It is also preposterously misunderstood. The association of appeasement with Munich, and its resulting delegitimation, has impoverished the execution of grand strategy since.

First of all, appeasement often worked. The official mind was proud of its tradition of compromise, and considered flexibility an asset. Britain found it wiser to return many of the gains it had made in the wars against Napoleon, for instance, caving in to French and Dutch demands, rather than fight over them.[124] Rivals were often appeased by the Foreign Office at the height of Pax Britannica, especially over colonial matters, since doing so acknowledged that not all interests are equal, and that healthy international relationships often were the greatest interest of all.[125] They found that rarely would the costs of concession outweigh the risks of confrontation. The most obvious and consequential example—one whose long-term benefits far outweighed the cost of Chamberlain's supposed blunder—was the systematic appeasement of the rising power across the Atlantic. Britain chose to cultivate its relationship with the United States through sagacious compromise and conciliation, and succeeded brilliantly.

Over and over, generations of British leaders proved willing to sacrifice minor imperial interests, and in the process lose prestige, in order to establish

and nourish an understanding between Anglo-Saxon states that would come to lay the foundation for the future world order. Appeasement began once the U.S. Civil War ended, as London sought to restore relations with the winning side, even though it had been rooting for the South. In 1871 the British agreed to pay for supporting Confederate commerce raiders during the war and capitulated regarding fishing regulations sought by Washington. They backed down in a dispute over the border between Venezuela and British Guyana in 1895, in which the United States took an interest for some reason; they encouraged Washington to increase its presence in the Pacific, including over Hawaii; they remained aloof during the Spanish-American War, agreeing to recognize American possession of the Philippines; they declined to pursue any claims to the Panama Canal.[126] By prioritizing their partnership with the United States over other interests, the British alleviated the hostility and suspicion that had persisted in many American circles since their revolution. The "special relationship" did not form by accident. It was the result of deliberate policy, an end pursued through appeasement, the outcome of the British belief that not every rival had to be defeated or humiliated. Often, more often in fact, the national interest is better served by accommodation and compromise. Appeasement often achieved central goals at minimal cost. It was a useful strategic tool.

In appeasing the United States, British leaders demonstrated that they understood how international relationships are affected disproportionately by the stronger power. Misperception is common in all interaction, particularly so when power asymmetry is present.[127] Cooperative measures by strong countries are likely to be well received by the weak. Such measures are less risky for the strong, who have less to lose in interaction with others. "The British could afford to concede quite a lot," wrote Paul Kennedy. They "had lots of buffer zones, lots of less-than-vital areas of interest, lots of room for compromise."[128] Appeasement from a position of strength is often a wise choice. It is the opposite of domino-theory thinking, and when used wisely can offer the kind of flexibility unavailable to those under the spell of the credibility imperative. Had the Habsburgs been willing to appease on occasion, they would have been far better off.

It is not always the correct move, of course. No tool is appropriate for every situation, and states that predictably, routinely appease quickly become victims. But the near-universal approbation that Chamberlain has received is unwarranted. Hitler was simply unappeaseable and insatiable—and, fortunately, unique. Perhaps German generals would have risen up to remove Hitler had Chamberlain had shown more backbone at Munich, but that is one of history's unknowable what-ifs. A common criticism of Chamberlain—that the allies would have been better off fighting in 1938 than 1939—is simultaneously unfair and unfounded.[129] As unready as the Germans were for war, the allies were more so. Anyone who would assume that the French military would have performed

better a year earlier carries the burden of proof. Appeasement probably also disappointed Hitler, who may well have hoped for a limited war in 1938 that might have kept the British on the sidelines.[130] Thus the criticism that Chamberlain has received from generations of historians is mostly unfair. World War II was coming, and there was little that anyone in London could have done to stop it. Appeasement was worth a try—it was cheap, at least, and did no actual harm.

The lesson that generations of policymakers took away from that conference is based on a misunderstanding of history, often a willful one, and it has all but removed an important tool from the kit of the superpowers to come.[131]

## A Graceful Decline

Great Britain, alone among the cases under consideration in these pages, did not so much resist decline as adapt to it. Fortunately it had a sister state, or an offspring perhaps, poised to take over many of its tasks. One senior Foreign Office official noted in 1928 that Britain was faced with "a phenomenon for which there is no parallel in our modern history—a State twenty-five times as large, five times as wealthy, three times as populous, twice as ambitious, almost invulnerable, and at least our equal in prosperity, vital energy, technical equipment and industrial science."[132] British concerns about lost status were assuaged, at least somewhat, by the knowledge that their apparent successor was a friend, even a relative. The decline of the British Empire did not result in a "Thucydides Trap," or hostility between the dominant and rising powers, which is a significant achievement, whether fully intentional or not.[133]

The British seemed continually surprised by the yearning for independence in the periphery. Their concern for the economic and social development of their subjects might have been stupendously patronizing, but it was also sincere. They were sometimes taken aback at the degree to which locals wanted a native government that would look out for their interest first, even if it was unable to deliver on promises, and an end to humiliating foreign rule. After the world wars, British imperialists were unable to make a credible case to stay.

As intellectual currents led to an expansion of the empire in the late 1800s, so too did ideas contribute to its contraction a half-century later. Ideas had changed drastically by the end of World War II, and it was becoming harder and harder to justify the repression that accompanies colonialism. The slow international drift toward liberalism, sidelined temporarily by perceptions of national natural selection, eventually brought an end to the age of European imperialism. The basic right to self-determination became a shared value against which it was hard to argue. So while the world wars accelerated the process of colonial independence, it is hard to imagine that the empire would have lasted too much longer

without them. Furthermore, trade had rendered the old imperial economic logic obsolete. The economy no longer needed the colonies.[134] Liberalism was killing empires, and the most liberal of imperial states could hardly stand apart from the trend.

The British left India in 1948, having been bested by one of the twentieth century's great strategists. Mohandas Gandhi's civil resistance movement was many things—a deeply moral philosophy, a political inspiration to millions, an example of the power of the people, etc.—but it was also a brilliant strategic innovation, perfectly suited to the situation. Gandhi did not adopt a nonviolent approach merely because of its ethical superiority but also because he believed, based on no prior experience anywhere, that it would prove the most effective and least costly means with which to convince the British to leave India. Central to his approach was noncooperation, or resistance to injustice until the injustice ended. Eventually, he reckoned, the oppressors would have had enough. Modern research makes it clear that, when deployed correctly in the modern world, nonviolent movements are more likely to be successful and to lead to stable post-revolutionary outcomes than those that rely on the gun.[135] No one knew this in the 1920s and 1930s when this lawyer inspired his compatriots to rid their country of British influence using love and respect. To say this approach was innovative, and to suggest that getting people to follow him (and be imprisoned and/or beaten without fighting back) was a difficult proposition, would be to drastically understate the case. Somehow Gandhi managed to gain enough followers to win his country's independence, and essentially began the tradition of nonviolent protest around the world, by reminding the British people of their basic humanity. Domination of unwilling, peaceful people in the periphery was exceptionally hard to justify.

Everywhere the age of imperialism came to a swift conclusion. Some new states had to fight for their freedom, but many had freedom granted by imperial powers eager to leave. Just as the British set examples about how to forge an empire, they also showed how best to leave one: although few new states had completely successful postcolonial experiences, it is generally the case that those left behind by London fared better than the rest.[136] Most British colonies did not have to fight for their independence; those that did, like Kenya, Cyprus, and Malaya, saw it arrive only after the fighting stopped. No Portuguese-style prolonged nightmarish wars preceded the independence of British colonies.

The end of dominance did not spell catastrophe for Britain. Modern great powers rarely descend into chaos or implode due to external pressures. Barbarians no longer stand at the gates. As was the case with Spain, Britain's pride suffered, but its people have not been materially, tangibly affected by the loss of empire. The working classes in England, the masses that constitute the "silent majority," were mostly indifferent to the loss of the dominions.[137] Decline in the modern

era is simply not as dangerous as it used to be, and as the British found out, it is not something to be feared.

* * *

The legacy of the British empire is as contested as the variety of experiences it generated. Though it usually found ways to ignore its growing liberal conscience, it was also the first empire to exhibit one. No such qualms about ruling natives were shown by the French or Spanish, much less the comparatively barbarous Germans, Belgians, or Russians. To some people this makes British excesses even less forgivable, since they seemed to know better and simply ignored their moral code. Social Darwinism provided temporary relief from their pesky consciences and quieted their inner voices, but it could not last.

From a strategic perspective, the British accomplishment was remarkable. Early on they identified clear ends and constructed means with which to pursue them. The impressive economy of force employed along the way was no accident: British leaders kept military costs low by concentrating on one service, and appeased wherever possible. They also did their level best to shield their taxpayers and make the colonies pay for their own security (and oppression).[138] This was never popular among the conquered, most of whom did not want British protection, and it led some, like those in North America, to rebel. At other times it was not possible, since many colonies were never self-sustaining. But imperial costs were never far from the official mind and, given the choice, the cheapest routes to security were normally the ones chosen.

Though its dominance was relatively short-lived, Britain's was also the most interesting. Its leaders wrestled with the implications of empire throughout their era, and genuinely attempted to make the world a better place. They were simultaneously realists and liberals, conquerors and civilizers, barbarians and humanitarians. Above all they were superior strategic thinkers able to forge the most far-reaching, profitable, contradictory, and fascinating empire the world has ever seen.

8

# Conclusion

How disappointed George Santayana would be if he knew that the primary thing future generations would remember about his work is a mid-paragraph, throwaway line. At some point in their careers all students of history run across this piece of hoary advice, often on posters under Santayana's portrait: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Like so many famous statements, its context has been lost by its quoters. Santayana most certainly wrote that sentence, but he did not espouse the shallow notion that history actually repeats. No serious person believes this. The past does not give specific guidance for our present predicaments, no matter how much we wish it did, and efforts to apply it usually end up going poorly.[1]

Santayana's point was more serious. His famous comment came amid a discussion of reason, of rationality, of efforts to control our animal instincts in order to improve society. Without knowledge of the past, he argued, there can be no *progress*. History lends perspective; those who forget it cannot recognize how far humanity has come, nor can they see how much further it still needs to go. They will assume the world is unchanged and unchangeable, and may grow discouraged in their efforts to move it forward. Without history, he wrote, no "direction is set for possible improvement: and when experience is not retained . . . infancy is perpetual . . . Retentiveness, we must repeat, is the condition of progress."[2]

In this book we too seek progress, but strategic progress, improved statecraft in the most consequential of countries. Our gaze backward cannot provide specific answers or detailed guidance, but it might nonetheless help us move forward, and perhaps deliver us from perpetual strategic infancy. Perhaps our tour of the past can help us walk through the logic of grand strategy and determine what that strategy should be. Historical perspective might help interpret the level of threat the United States faces, what its goals should be (*why*), and then the best means to achieve them (*how*). And looking backward might just generate some unexpected or even unpopular recommendations for moving forward. There are

*The Pursuit of Dominance.* Christopher J. Fettweis, Oxford University Press. © Christopher J. Fettweis 2023.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197646649.003.0008

indeed lessons that leaders in Washington can learn from their predecessors, and progress can be made, if only they would listen.

And what progress there has been. If the preceding pages demonstrate anything, it should be that the world has changed rather drastically through the centuries. Direct, formal imperialism is a thing of the past, for one thing, and slavery is no longer with us. Succession no longer causes crises, at least to the same degree it used to, and at least in the democratic Global North. Mercantilism has been replaced almost everywhere by the gospel of free trade. Perhaps most important, realpolitik no longer dominates decision-making in quite the way it did throughout most of history. The Romans and British alike believed that it was right and natural for states to increase their power at the expense of their neighbors. The strong broadened their reach as much as they could, stopped only by countervailing power. As Lord Acton put it a century ago, it is a "law of the modern world that power tends to expand indefinitely" across barriers until it meets a superior force.[3]

This, to put it mildly, no longer holds. Not only are modern states generally content to stay inside their boundaries, but they rarely dispute where those boundaries are drawn. Invasions and other cross-border attempts at expansion are rare, so rare in fact that the modern state, no matter how weak, faces no existential threat. In the entire history of the United Nations, no member state has ever been absorbed by its neighbors, and as of this writing it does not appear as if Vladimir Putin will succeed in making Ukraine the first.[4] Even countries in the worst of regions run no risk of disappearing, since in the twenty-first century power vacuums languish unfilled and boundaries are generally uncontested. Overall, states do not act as if the amount of territory they possess is related to their security or prosperity. As a result—and it is hard to overemphasize how significant this is—conquest is virtually dead.

Yet virtually dead is not completely dead. There remains one obvious and significant exception to the norm against territorial conquest. The Russian leader may be alone in his willingness to shift borders, but even his ambitions seem to be limited to those nearest to Russia. The universal condemnation that accompanied his foray into Ukraine and economic consequences will likely tamper those ambitions, and discourage copycats. It is a bit early to tell whether the invasion will lead to a wholesale change in the security trends of the twenty-first century, but there is good reason to doubt it will.

Without a knowledge of history, there would be no way to realize how far we have come. We would not realize how safe modern states are, nor how peaceful the world is, relatively speaking, invasion of Ukraine notwithstanding. It is only with comparison to the past that we can say that, despite popular perception to the contrary, ours is a time of great relative stability.[5] War still occurs, but it does so in isolated areas involving an ever-smaller percentage of the world's people.

The statistics are well known, or should be well known, to everyone interested in grand strategy: By any measure, the last thirty years have been the most peaceful in history, with the number and magnitude of all kinds of violence at record-low levels.[6] Almost all strategists ignore this rather remarkable development, however, and proceed as if nothing of importance has changed. Instead all discussions of U.S. grand strategy should begin from this basic starting point: The world is substantially less violent and dangerous than ever before. Our thinking has not caught up to this rather profound reality, especially in the strongest of states.

## The Modern Superpower

Although its citizens today may not fully appreciate their status, future historians will certainly place the United States in the same category as the superpowers of the past. Its rise was as unlikely and remarkable as any that came before: within a century of its foundation, a collection of disparate colonies somehow overcame their substantial differences to unite and grow into the richest country in the world. The U.S. economy surpassed that of Great Britain in the late nineteenth century, and before long those riches were translated into military power. A century later the United States dominated its system just as assuredly as any of the predecessors we met in these pages.

Three main factors account for that spectacular rise. First, the new nation was blessed with an abundant natural resource base, one that was diverse enough to provide the foundation for growth through the industrial age. Fortunately for the weak colonies, their neighbors were even weaker, which gave the new nation time to exploit that resource base. These two factors, when combined with efficient political and economic systems that from the beginning allowed Americans to maximize the potential of their land and talents, account for the growth of the next superpower. Democracy created the atmosphere for the compromises and concessions that kept the union together (with a glaring four-year exception), and free markets facilitated for the kind of economic growth that would have been impossible in other, less free societies.

The grand strategy the early nation followed was not hard to decipher. For a century and a half the United States was a restrained country, unwilling to engage the rest of the world militarily or politically. It was never isolationist—economic engagement was always a high priority, and interfering with that engagement was one of the few things that could call the young country to arms—but it rarely interpreted the world's troubles as its own. Restraint served the national interest well. Washington was unthreatened and unthreatening, and avoided the kind of entanglements that would have made enemies and wasted resources. Its occasional engagements with the rest of the world were never popular, and always

resulted in a return to restraint. That changed with Pearl Harbor, after which the world would not be so easy to ignore. By the end of that war the United States had created the greatest military machine the world had ever seen.

The collapse of the Soviet Union left the world with one truly global superpower, for better or worse, which is a fact that remains true today. While there is much talk today of U.S. decline and renewed great power rivalry, there should be little doubt as to which country is the world's most powerful, in nearly every measurable category. That relative power is not what it once was, perhaps; indeed the majority opinion in the security community holds that the United States is in decline, and that other powers are catching up (or have already done so). A bit of perspective helps here, however: perceptions of decline have accompanied Washington's superpower status from its very beginning, and have thus far been proven wrong every time.[7] As early as 1962 Henry Kissinger was warning that "fifteen years more of a deterioration on our position in the world such as we have experienced since World War II would find us reduced to Fortress America in a world in which we had become largely irrelevant."[8] Declinism has deep roots.

Fears of decline are a persistent feature in all great powers, and always come to prominence following foreign policy disasters. The negative emotions that accompany catastrophe—anger, guilt, shame, doubt, insecurity—contribute to widespread national pessimism. It is no coincidence that waves of declinism hit U.S. shores after withdrawals from Vietnam and Iraq, and that another has followed the failure to Americanize Afghanistan.[9] Failure portends failure; status relies on perception as much as reality, and when pessimism reigns, decline seems imminent. The inability to prevail in the various post-9/11 conflicts has fed speculation that U.S. power and/or influence are shrinking. Many believe that the ability of the United States to bring about its preferred outcomes is simply not what it used to be. The official mind—the "blob"—is today repeating sentiments it has held many times before.

This does not mean that modern declinists are necessarily wrong, or that the era of U.S. dominance is not in its final death throes. About the only observation that can be made with confidence is that, irrespective of the ultimate fate of the system, the United States will be the predominant (i.e., most important and most influential) actor in international politics for some time to come, and its decisions will determine the character of the system. The strongest countries make the rules and create the norms; their actions set precedent and trickle down throughout the world. One need only imagine the different world we would be in had the Germans had won the Second World War, or the Soviets the cold one that followed. The current international order is largely (though obviously not totally) a creation of the United States and its choices. Getting U.S. grand strategy right, then, matters for the international interest as much as the national.

The United States has not followed a consistent path since its era of predominance began. Finding the right approach begins with an examination of the three basic strategic questions: What kind of world does the United States inhabit? What should its goals be? How can they be best accomplished?

## The Modern Security Environment

Just as no person is ever completely safe, no country is ever entirely free from threats. Security is relative, however: Declaring an age "safe" or "dangerous" only matters in comparison to those that came before, and a knowledge of history allows us to understand how relatively safe the United States is. Though the risk is low, it is not zero. Two threats in particular keep U.S. strategists up at night, or so we are told: China and complexity itself. Neither of these are particularly worrisome. Let us begin with the latter.

Neither the Tang nor the Mongols had to worry about weapons of mass destruction, or cyber warfare, or complex economic interdependence, so perhaps theirs were simpler times. These and other modern concerns (terrorism, climate change, artificial intelligence, etc.) often make the world seem more complicated than ever before. To many observers, this complexity is the defining feature of the twenty-first-century security environment, one that makes the current era more dangerous and unpredictable than its predecessors.[10] This message has been consistent, in both official and unofficial outlets, for more than two decades.

References to complexity and uncertainty are now so routine that they are no longer noticeable, often coming at the beginning of a document or speech in order to set the stage for the analysis, preferences, and prescriptions that follow. Would-be Secretary of State John Kerry began his confirmation hearing by stating that "today's world is more complicated than anything we have experienced."[11] The Director of National Intelligence opened a 2016 address with this claim: "We're facing the most complex and diverse array of global threats that I've seen in my fifty-three years or so in the intelligence business."[12] No one asked them to explain their comments or outline the evidence they were based on, much less questioned what the implications of such a belief were. Remarks like these—and hundreds more like them—regularly pass without comment or question. Constant repetition created a conventional wisdom. Complexity and uncertainty quickly became the defining features of the post-Cold War security environment, the organizing principals around which U.S. strategists had to plan. "Uncertainty hawks," to borrow a phrase coined by Carl Conetta and Charles Knight, came to dominate the marketplace of ideas.[13]

The origins of this belief are not hard to find. Analysts at the RAND Corporation were among the first to suggest that a certain uncertainty

descended upon the world after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and promoted it as the guiding principle of the post-Cold War era. In the early 1990s James Winnefeld and his colleagues argued that the emerging security system was not in fact any safer, appearances notwithstanding. "Out with the old, in with the?????" and "Certitude vs. Uncertainty" were among Winnefeld's self-explanatory subheadings.[14] "Uncertainty is the dominating characteristic of the landscape," wrote Paul Davis, editor of a 1994 RAND volume on defense planning.[15] These RAND analysts and a great many other people in and outside the academy warned that we would "soon miss the Cold War."[16] It did not take long for U.S. national security strategy documents to pick up the theme. "The real threat we now face," according to the 1992 *National Military Strategy*, "is the threat of the unknown, the uncertain."[17] The message has been consistent, in both official and unofficial outlets, for nearly three decades. The 2005 *National Defense Strategy* labeled uncertainty the "defining characteristic of today's strategic environment."[18] Since 2014 the U.S. Army Operating Concept has been "Win in a Complex World."

The implications of complexity are uniformly grim. Known threats can be measured, understood, and combated; those left to the imagination rapidly expand to take on ominous proportions. "At present, Americans confront the most confusing and uncertain strategic environment in their history," wrote prominent historian and strategist Williamson Murray on behalf of many. "It may also be the most dangerous to the well-being of their republic."[19] The dangers posed by unknown unknowns, perhaps because of their obscurity, tend to appear unlimited and particularly terrible. As the Romans used to say, *omne ignotum pro magnifico*, or everything unknown appears great.

One would think that such an important, near-universally accepted belief would have a deep literature and mountains of evidence to sustain it. One would be wrong. In fact, complexity and uncertainty are usually accepted as givens, as basic assumptions about which, since everybody apparently agrees, no one considers too much. Evaluating the beliefs that form the cannon of national security ought to be high on the list of priorities for scholars as well as national security professionals. Few are more widespread, and simultaneously underexamined, than the belief that the world is an uncertain and therefore dangerous place.

This assertion would have amused our superpower predecessors, whose times were hardly simple and straightforward. Their security environments were dangerous and unknowable, and they had even less information about what was going on outside their borders. Violent overthrow was a real possibility, at least from within, which provided pressures that must have felt rather complex. Every one of them would have happily traded their challenges for those facing the twenty-first-century United States, since they all lived in more dangerous times.

Our era seems so complex because of one of the most common cognitive errors, called "chronological bias." We simply know much more about today's threats and challenges than we do about those of the past. As a result, ours seem new, and worse than what came before. Only the study of history can liberate us from that bias, and mitigate its pernicious analytical effects.

Chronological bias led three prominent scholars of international politics to argue that the depth of modern complexity renders the formulation of grand strategy impossible. "The world today is one of interaction and complexity," they wrote, rendering attempts to forge grand strategy pointless. A "disordered, cluttered, and fluid realm is precisely one that does not recognize grand strategy's supposed virtue: a practical, durable, and consistent plan for the long term."[20] Apparently earlier "realms" were ordered, tidy, and stable, making their challenges conducive to long-term, consistent planning. Grand strategy is dead, they argued, killed by systemic chaos.

Historical perspective should allow us to dismiss such notions. Somehow our predecessors managed to overcome the complexity of their equally disordered times and forge paths forward. One of the primary functions of strategic thinking is to prepare for the unexpected and the novel. If grand strategy can only exist amid utopian predictability, then it never can exist.

Complexity is indeed the enemy of strategy, however, although not for the reasons supposed by our political scientist trio. A belief in the inherent uncertainty of modern times destroys the ability to think, not the ability to plan, moving danger from the world of reality to that of the imagination where all things are possible and many things are terrifying. Those in the fog of complexity lose their bearings as well as their ability to assess threat and prioritize interests. A security environment of drastic unknowables cannot guide the construction of rational policies or military forces. How much is enough to protect against intangible dangers? How many supercarriers, F-22s, cyberwarriors, spy satellites, or combat brigades does the United States need to keep its people safe from unknown unknowns? When danger is limited only by imagination, states will invariably purchase far more than they need, wasting money on weapons systems that will never be used in the hopes of addressing threats they do not actually perceive.

Imaginary danger is limitless but real danger is not. Flexibility is a central component to any sagacious grand strategy, but planning decisions must take probabilities into account while establishing priorities. While anything is possible, if we are to believe the cliché, surely not everything is plausible. "To make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary," Edmund Burke noted centuries ago. "When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes."[21] Vague dangers can appear great, and quite frightening, as long as they are not

considered in any real depth. Once they are, once the current era is put in historical perspective, much of our worries melt away, and we should be able to formulate a more prudent, productive path forward.

In the past few years, uncertainty hawks have had to share the spotlight with a new, but equally overblown threat. Although concerns regarding rising peer competitors began to form immediately upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was not until the Trump era that they took top billing for U.S. defense planners. The 2017 National Security Strategy de-emphasized complexity, though it was still present, and shifted focus to renewed "great power competition." Many analysts jumped aboard with alacrity, especially those at the Pentagon and the various war colleges.[22] Russia is back and China is growing, we are told, and together they pose a conventional challenge to U.S. dominance. Of the two, the latter excites the most alarm in the official mind, since Russia spends less than one-tenth as much money on its military as does the United States. For all his bluster, bombast, and foolish invasions, Vladimir Putin runs a corrupt petrostate, albeit one with nuclear weapons.

China, however, is a different story. For much of the last twenty-five years, its growth has been portrayed as a dire, existential, alarming, growing, yet simultaneously underrated threat by many in the U.S. security community. Every few years a new wave of desperate warnings emerges, each acting as if the danger is new or newly urgent. The implications of China's rise have been the most hotly debated issue in international security for thirty years, and probably will be for the rest of our lives.[23]

If indeed the People's Republic is intent on replacing the United States, it has a rather odd way of showing it. China's military spending is growing, but not fast, and it remains less than one-third of U.S. levels. Its defense budget is somewhere around 1.5 percent of its GDP, which is less than half that of the United States and about the same level as Germany. As Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution has pointed out, were China in NATO, the United States would be badgering it to spend more.[24] This is not the pace of a country urgently determined to challenge the champion. Like its army, China's navy is large, but quantity does not imply quality at sea in the information age. In terms of capability, the United States has no peer in the Pacific or anywhere else. And even after the post-Cold War cuts, Washington maintains somewhere around twenty times more nuclear warheads.

China's post-Cold War actions do not demonstrate obvious aggressive intent. Headlines regarding the South China Sea, for example, focus on the construction of islands and airstrips and miss the general pattern of increased cooperation and compliance on Beijing's part since at least 2016.[25] The PRC has not sent troops into another country since 1979, which is much more than the United States can say. And, bluster and threat aside, it has shown little interest in absorbing Taiwan

by force. Although U.S. analysts worry obsessively about this possibility, surely it is significant that the Taiwanese do not. Taipei is another U.S. ally that does not spend enough on its defense, at least according to its friends in Washington.[26] Its leaders seem stubbornly unconcerned.

China is investing heavily in new trade infrastructure around the world, and it has landed a craft on the moon that brought back nearly five pounds of rocks. How either of these actions poses a problem for the United States is not clear, even though the implications always seem ominous when reported with the proper amount of breathlessness. Chinese leaders face an extraordinary array of challenges at home, many the result of their own paranoia and cruelty, which they prioritize ahead of international matters. Most of their problems would be exacerbated, not alleviated, by aggression abroad. They have powerful incentives to avoid rocking the various regional boats.

Furthermore, not even the most pessimistic analyses imagine that Beijing has designs on territory across the ocean. Worst-case scenarios suggest that China poses a growing threat to its periphery, but not beyond. Should U.S. deterrence fail and Chinese leaders make the stupendously ill-advised decision to initiate conflict, violence would stay local, and the United States would remain fundamentally safe.

"A national security strategy needs a named enemy," argued Colin Gray. "In order to select a dominant strategy, a country requires of its policymakers that they pick a dominant foe."[27] Grand strategists are more at home with a concrete power against which to plan. China seems to be the logical candidate, if only it would cooperate. History should teach us that by that by all important measures the modern era is significantly better—more peaceful, more predictable and far richer—than any that have come before. The security environment the United States faces is safer, more forgiving, and certainly not any more complex than that of any of earlier superpowers. These facts should be the primary drivers of twenty-first-century U.S. grand strategy.

Thus the two major threats to U.S. security are not particularly major at all. Relatively benign security environments pose problems of their own, however: As the Roman republicans could warn us, danger often plays a centripetal role in society. It binds people together in a common cause, and makes them forget their internal divisions and hatreds, if just for a while. Without enemies, without the presence of frightening barbarians on the border, people soon remember all the devious and treacherous acts their fellow citizens have committed in the past. They refocus the mistrust and suspicion previously reserved for external foes onto internal ones. Strong states may be safe from attack from abroad but, as the Tang, Mongols, and Ottomans discovered, they remain vulnerable to danger within. Perhaps people need enemies to function, as a number of psychologists suspect, in order to give life meaning and provide a reason to

get out of bed in the morning.[28] Perhaps our species is not hard-wired to live in harmony for long.

This should sound familiar to those paying attention to the United States over the past couple of decades. Although American politics have never been a bipartisan utopia, it is no coincidence that a deterioration of relations between the parties occurred in the 1990s once the Cold War ended. The Gingrich-Clinton battles that set the stage for the deeply partisan politics to follow would not have happened were the Soviet Union still around to keep Americans scared and united.[29] The Trump era was just the latest step in a long, steady process of deteriorating trust and civility. The post-Cold War parties are divided more by culture than ideology, and their competitions are increasingly zero-sum. Political polarization of the 2020s is much more dangerous than that of 1980s, because its partisans see their struggle not in terms of Republican vs. Democrat but good vs. evil. Like the religious wars of the past, culture wars do not lend themselves to compromise endings. In American politics today, the only satisfying outcome is victory, and bargaining is traitorous.

Secure frontiers can lead to dissention at home. Violence is hardly inevitable—the Spanish, British, and many other great powers managed to avoid civil conflict—and sagacious leaders can promote domestic tranquility. It will just prove harder to do so without foreign enemies, whose absence clears the way for divisive politics, demagogues, and reality TV buffoons.

Governing is no less challenging in times of safety; the challenges are just different. Less existential, to be sure, but perhaps more intractable, and more in need of steady guidance.

## Modern U.S. Interests (The *Why*)

Of the two dimensions of strategic thinking—the *why* to act and the *how*—the latter is more era-dependent. Ways and means evolve faster than ends. Few modern goals are going to require legions or tercios or dreadnaughts to achieve. Prior experiences are more helpful in helping us identify what interests and goals should be, or the *why* of grand strategy, the dimension that makes grand strategy grand. Interests evolve too, of course, and more than is often recognized. Even Lord Palmerston's famous "eternal and perpetual" interests that were Great Britain's "duty to follow" are essentially irrelevant to its security today. It is not the specific ends but the process by which earlier powers set their priorities that can impart some wisdom to the modern strategist. In particular, we might learn a bit about the value of dominance, the importance of limiting our interests, and the specific challenges that accompany great power.

The international system is always in flux and rates of growth differ, so in the long run other states will catch up to those on top. Six case studies should be sufficient, however, to demonstrate that there is no life cycle to dominance, no patterns or timelines, nor inevitable outcomes.[30] Great states sometimes recover from the direst of crises, like half-century civil wars; others implode rather suddenly, like the Mongol Empire, leaving few clues as to why. Most find ways to plod along, however, clinging to greatness and romanticizing the past. All regard decline as a disaster and most resist it, sometimes in ways that seem designed to fail. Few greet the end with equanimity.

Grand strategy can postpone decline, but even the wisest cannot prevent it forever. Perhaps it is worth considering just how worried we should be about that fact. How important is status? What price should the United States be willing to pay to maintain its dominance? Should we fear decline?

Such questions are not addressed in foreign-policy circles. The top priority of American grand strategy, according to almost all who write about it, ought to be to preserve the "unipolar moment."[31] From the most ardent interventionist to the least, American observers generally believe that the status quo maximizes the security and prosperity of the United States. They reflexively seek to preserve it everywhere, from Taiwan to Ukraine to Iran, just as all superpowers have done throughout time. The value of its relative position is accepted as a given, as an underlying assumption rather than a proposition in need of defense. Debates about grand strategy center around how best to defend the status quo, not why; which means will secure that end most effectively, not whether it is worth securing in the first place. The most efficient ways to ward off balancing and dissuade the rise of military competitors become the issues, not why to do so. Rare is the strategist who recommends that Washington willingly cede its position in the international hierarchy.[32]

Those observers of international politics whose models do not allow for fundamental evolution in the system (i.e., realists) are also those most concerned with status. "Realism dictates that the United States should seek to remain the most powerful state on the planet," argued John Mearsheimer, who goes on to suggest that one of Washington's goals ought to be to "make sure that no other power dominates in its region."[33] "If the country is not Number One, it will be Number Two or lower," according to Gray.[34] It is hard to argue with that math.

It is not hard to argue, however, with the reasoning. First of all, it is not clear that primacy is very useful for the country that possesses it.[35] 2021 is not 1221. In a world where state survival is essentially assured, there is no practical difference between being number one and number ten according to the various (often arbitrary) rankings. Whereas overwhelming strength was once a means to the end of safety, today that end can be attained without it. And as recent experience shows, dominance does not confer the kind of influence it once did, since few

states fear an American attack. Military capability is simply not as useful as it used to be.

Superpowers are happy, but it is an insecure happiness. The second reason not to fear decline is psychological, since high status has counterintuitive effects. People atop social hierarchies tend to grow pessimistic and fearful over time, and they inevitably take steps to preserve their position that are at once hopeless, unnecessary, and counterproductive. They sense challenge everywhere, whether or not it exists, and grow somewhat paranoid about their future. Their past always seems better in comparison. The examples are clear throughout the cases. Even at its most powerful moments, Rome always had prominent voices prophesizing imperial decay and decline.[36] The long reign of Constantine the Great, for instance, was sold to the Roman people as "the restoration of good times."[37] At the height of their empire, what stood out among British strategists, wrote Robinson and Gallagher, was their longing for the past and "resignation to a bleaker present."[38] Pessimism and nostalgia are peculiar but common conditions of great power. Happiness and satisfaction are relatively rare.

Fear of decline leads to efforts to stave it off, which often do more harm than good. Leaders tend to romanticize all aspects of the past as they try to return to an elusive, glorious era, and they emphasize the irrelevant and/or injurious. Almost inevitably moral failures take the blame for society's ills, and regeneration adopts a distinctly reactionary tone. Roman emperor Diocletian sought to bring back the old-time religion and fed heretics to lions; Kublai Khan's Yuan successors revived ancient ceremonies designed to root out evil, which ended up alienating villagers; the Ottomans attempted to turn back the clock by losing tolerance for religious diversity, forfeiting one of their major strategic advantages; the Spanish *valido* Olivares cracked down on pubs, banned dancing, and instituted dress codes in order to return his country to greatness.[39] Rather than embrace change and move forward, campaigns for national revival commonly look backward.[40] Glorification of the past merely inhibits progress and exacerbates the problems it seeks to solve.

History should help nervous Americans feel better about decline. Our more recent cases not only avoided disaster on the way down but emerged better off. The collapse of Spanish power dealt a serious blow to the national glory but not its interests. As discussed in Chapter 5, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, life for the Spanish people had improved in nearly every measurable way compared to their lot at the empire's height. The British experience offers much the same lesson: national pride suffered following the loss of the dominions, but material, tangible interests were essentially unaffected. The English people were able to adjust rather quickly to the notion of being a normal state rather than an empire. As it turns out, in the modern era, decline does not imply catastrophe.[41]

Whenever U.S. dominance finally reaches its conclusion, the country will be no less secure, prosperous, or free. And as I have written elsewhere, since

unipolarity contributes to pathological misperceptions, its end may well *improve* Washington's ability to think strategically.[42] The ultimate goal of U.S. grand strategy may be to maintain the status quo, but that status quo has costs. Overall, decline is not to be welcomed, perhaps, but neither is it to be feared.

Now and for the foreseeable future, however, U.S. predominance will continue. Its strategists will have to contend with the many surprising challenges such status brings, even if preserving it might not be of the utmost practical importance. Past experience cannot offer specific advice, but it can suggest guidelines worthy of consideration for those seeking to preserve the unipolar moment.

The main challenge facing U.S. leaders will not be too few choices, but too many. The United States will always have a set of options, including the option to do nothing, in nearly every imaginable foreign policy situation. With great power comes great flexibility. Superpowers operate under different guidelines than most countries, since no mistake they make will be fatal. They can afford to take chances and bluff. No amount of intervention abroad will make their homeland much safer or more prosperous; no amount of neglect will increase their negligible existential dangers. The United States can choose to be as active or as restrained as it wants. Sometimes intervention abroad may be advisable to address milieu goals, but it will rarely—if ever—be necessary to protect the country's vital interests. Those are assured a priori, before the first troops land in foreign countries or the first ship sails through disputed waters. For the power on top of the hierarchy, the world is not zero-sum.

Flexibility ought to make grand strategy easier. The opposite is often true, however; as psychologists have long been aware, choice creates a paradox.[43] As much as people value their freedom and claim to welcome options, in reality they often are happier when options are limited. In everyday life as well as national security, great freedom of choice generates anxiety and stress. It is much easier to follow the guidance of those who suggest confidently that only one real alternative exists.

The perception of necessity, of having "no choice" in any given situation, is the ultimate salve for the conscience of the policymaker. The terrible burden of decision-making is lifted when only one option exists. In reality, as our cases should amply demonstrate, necessity is an illusion for superpowers. Advisors who claim that there is "no choice" in any given situation are either attempting to force an outcome of their liking or betraying a fundamental misunderstanding of risk (or, what is most likely, both).[44] Claims of necessity are deeply pathological, since they prevent the coherent analysis of options and make optimal, rational choices less likely.

To govern is to choose. The formulation of grand strategy is complicated by flexibility, but choices must be made nonetheless. Decision-makers can be

comforted by the realization that few things they do will be catastrophic or irreversible; the strategic flexibility that accompanies great power offers wide latitude for midcourse adjustments. Modification of standing policies is nonetheless surprisingly rare in statehouses, since it is often associated with weakness. Perhaps the only thing leaders fear more than defeat is appearing wobbly in the eyes of the public, since domestic enemies pose a greater threat to their rule than foreign ones. But single-mindedness and dogged pursuit of purpose, so admirable to the historian, can be liabilities for the strategist. As Lord Salisbury once observed, the commonest political error was that of "sticking to the carcass of dead policies."[45]

In the United States, the Pentagon is the home to the most inveterate carcass-stickers, especially where wars are concerned. Once hostilities have commenced—hostilities they may well have opposed, since those in uniform are the most dovish elements in the U.S. foreign policy process—generals will urge presidents to stay the course until victory is achieved, regardless of costs and benefits. Aversion to loss is understandably a central part of military training, since winning wars is the mission. It thus falls to the political leader to assess whether those victories are worthwhile. To paraphrase a cliché, grand strategy is too important to be left to the generals. Civilian leaders do not easily change course either, which is why sometimes a change in administration is a prerequisite for overdue strategic adjustments. But it is the willingness to change, to alter policy as the cost/benefit analysis evolves, that separates the good strategies from the bad, and the successes from the disasters.

Such alterations can prove difficult, since pursuit of the status quo does not inspire innovation. Inflexibility at the top doomed reform efforts of the Tang, the Ottomans, and the Spanish. On the other hand, Great Britain embraced change, if unevenly, and by doing so preserved its power and influence. To the state on top, systemic alterations, including those that accompany progress, seem risky. They rock the fragile geopolitical boat. It takes enlightened rulers to welcome and lead life's inevitable evolutions, and since sustained, sagacious leadership is nowhere the norm, ossification is a long-term danger of dominance. The champion is always less hungry than the challenger.

Flexibility also brings the very real danger of doing too much. "Overambition," wrote historian Richard Hart Sinnreich, "is the mortal enemy of effective grand strategy."[46] It is quite difficult, as it turns out, to avoid the various temptations that come with tremendous power. Careful readers will note that at one point or another, all prior superpowers took on burdens they could have avoided and wasted resources pursuing unimportant goals. They failed to recognize limits.

When external forces cannot contain a state's imperial ambitions, limits must come from within. Examples of wise strategic choices do exist: under Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, Roman armies stopped and drew lines around their empire. They

could have pushed those frontiers through the Indus Valley and beyond, as did Alexander, but their overextended empire would have exploded just as quickly as did his. They chose to stop. Likewise, the Ottomans did not expand past their "action radius" from Constantinople, though they certainly were capable of doing so. If other leaders had recognized the frontier of their ambitions, if they had avoided unnecessary adventures on the imperial periphery, they too could have postponed decline.

Policymakers in twenty-first-century Washington face the same challenge. They must recognize frontiers, both physical and psychological, literal and figurative, if their grand strategy is to produce durable predominance. Twenty-first-century borders are set but frontiers are not; no one wonders where the United States begins and ends, but its interests extend well beyond those boundaries. To grasp modern frontiers, one must look beyond maps. The limits of U.S. interests exist as much, or even more, in the mind.

Frontiers mark not only the important areas but the important issues. They define our interests and shape our action, informing leaders what is important and what is better left ignored. Not only our interests but our values are reflected in the frontiers we recognize. Genocide, for instance, occurs outside of our physical border but inside our psychological frontier, and it demands action. States have military frontiers and economic frontiers, as well as political and cultural frontiers, all of which require different tools for their defense, but the utility is the same in all cases. Such limits define the reach of our national goals, separating the vital from the trivial. When clearly marked, they protect not only against enemies but against our own overextension; they send messages inward as well as out. Without them, prioritizing interests is a very difficult task indeed.

The United States today acts as if it recognizes no frontiers. Its interests extend to every part of the globe, to every neighborhood from Kiev to the South China Sea, from the Arctic to Palau. Its Unified Command Plan divides the entire world into "areas of responsibility" where it seeks to achieve "full spectrum dominance." Once limited to this planet, the United States now reaches beyond the final frontier with its new service branch, whose mission is to "deter aggression in, from, and to space."[47] Falling behind any country anywhere in any aspect of national competition is unforgivable. Such a limitless conception interests invites disaster, an invitation that Washington has already accepted on several occasions.

Warning about overextension is easier than avoiding it. Like overconfidence, the limits of expansion are often clear only in retrospect. We can say now that Tang were foolish to send so many expeditions into Korea, for example, but each time they expected cakewalks. The Spanish seem wise to have resisted the temptation to attack China in the late sixteenth century, but at the time it seemed like a reasonable proposition to Philip II's advisors. Then again, most strategists would probably have cautioned the Mongols not to attack Persia, Russia, and

China simultaneously, but they did—and it worked. So one never knows exactly how far expansion can go until one tries and fails at the next step.

As a general rule, then, it is usually best to err on the side of strategic caution and draw frontiers as tightly as possible. Universalist, limitless grand strategies cannot last long. Shrinking the radius of American interests may prevent overextension, which remains the biggest long-term threat to predominance. Should the United States decide that maintaining its status in the international hierarchy is an important end—and, again, it is hardly clear that it should—one of its primary means should be minimizing cost. Demarking clear frontiers in order to send messages to our strategists as well as theirs would be a good way to start.

Clear frontiers promote the status quo, with its attendant peace and growth. Surely it is worth noting that the happiest, most profitable, safest periods in our cases were the restrained eras, those that historians—who by nature prefer action and derring-do to passivity and sensible management—traditionally disdain. We know almost nothing about the long, peaceful, prosperous tenure of Antoninus Pius (138–161), for example, because stability fails to impress the chroniclers. The reigns of those leaders who operated within limits were often boring, but boredom serves the interest of superpowers. Drama-free governance is often capable governance, where masses on both sides of borders can thrive. Yet Trajan is praised more than Hadrian, Suleiman more than Bayezid II, and Philip II more than his son. If glory is the metric, then these assessments are accurate. If serving the tangible interests of their people is more important, however, then history remembers each pairing backward.

Frontiers should structure U.S. strategic debates. Once the blob accepts the notion that limits on ambition are not only necessary but wise, we can then argue over where exactly they should be drawn, and why. The first step is to recognize that our goals will be easier to achieve, and folly easier to avoid, if we restrain ourselves. And restraint must come from within, since those without cannot do it.

## Modern Policies and Tools (The *How*)

> *We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.*
>
> —*Thomas Jefferson*

Our ancestors were barbarians. As much as we might admire them for their occasional wisdom and castle-building expertise, it is hard to overlook their acceptance of torture, slavery, colonization, conquest, foot binding, and many other unsavory activities. They threw people into lakes to determine guilt and innocence, and up until a century ago regularly tried and executed suspected witches

as well as wicked animals.[48] No doubt we shall seem equally barbarous to our descendants, who will struggle to understand our fondness for things like factory farming, sunbathing, dog shows, mixed martial arts, enemas, hot yoga, and who knows what else. Moral progress occurs in a straight line; each generation improves upon the last, and rarely do outdated practices return.

Progress should thus be expected in the tools available to the grand strategist. Washington's set of ways and means is much different from those of its predecessors—and, in almost all cases, it reflects evolution in liberal, humanitarian directions that is worth pausing to contemplate.

Consider slavery. Each state we have examined employed, at one time or another, unfree labor in pursuit its goals. Slavery was at least as old as, and often central to, civilization itself. The prosperity of the Romans and Tang were dependent upon the foreigners they seized and sold; capturing humans was a central goal of the Mongol and Ottoman conquests and was at the heart of the economies of the new-world European empires. Two centuries after the British began a worldwide movement away from the practice it still exists in the criminal periphery but is nowhere a component of national policy. This peculiar institution, thought just and natural for most of history, has been decisively and permanently abolished.

Another practice common in our cases was the even more peculiar institution of eunuchism. A remarkable number of history's emperors, kings, khans, and sultans were advised by people with mutilated genitalia. The practice originated in China but spread across Eurasia to dozens of civilizations and hundreds of courts, appearing in Egypt, Persia, India, Rome, Byzantium, Istanbul, and Charlemagne's capital Aachen. It is mentioned approvingly in both the Bible and the Hadith. The twenty-first is the only century of the last fifty when no leaders have been guarded by mutilated men. Eunuchs were thought to be fundamentally different from other people: They looked different, for one thing—their arms and legs tended to grow unusually long, and their faces took on a nearly triangular shape for some reason—but it was the lack of desire that put eunuchs in their own category.[49] They were considered both brilliant and ruthless, operating on a higher, eerie spiritual plane. As a result, they were significant strategic assets. This asset, however, is unlikely to avail itself to policymakers in Washington.

There has also been significant progress in attitudes toward imperialism. The death of conquest has brought about the end of empires, those superstate entities that were a staple of political organization throughout history. As long as it remains unacceptable for countries to absorb their neighbors, empires will be a topic for the historian, not the political scientist. Informal versions persist, perhaps, but the formal is frowned upon.[50] Unlike previous dominant powers, the United States must pursue its interests without the option of creating the

next great empire. Pax Americana, if such a thing exists, relies upon a completely different arrangement.[51]

Sometimes progress goes unrecognized for quite some time. While most of history's superpowers placed tremendous value on their prestige and reputation, for instance, it is not at all clear that such intangible assets matter much in a world without conquest. The dominant view among scholars today is that the importance of honor and credibility have been (and, for the most part, remain) greatly exaggerated by American policymakers.[52] Study after study has shown that it is an illusion to believe that actors can control their reputations; others will form images that are essentially unaffected by attempts to shape them. Furthermore, the images others hold of us is not as important in determining their actions as we think it is. *Our* credibility, or lack thereof, does not factor too much into *their* calculations. This is one of the major gaps dividing the policy and academic communities: Leaders obsess over their reputation while scholars maintain that it does not help states achieve their goals and is certainly not worth fighting for.[53]

During the Cold War, leaders in Washington worried that diminished U.S. credibility would embolden their counterparts in Moscow who were awaiting signals of U.S. irresolution before unleashing their nefarious plans. We know now that this was untrue, that Soviet behavior was not shaped by their perceptions of U.S. credibility, but for decades this pathological belief skewed Washington's strategic priorities, leading to persistence in otherwise irrelevant backwaters like Vietnam, Korea and Central America.[54] Millions of lives were sacrificed to protect the reputation of the United States, every one of them in vain.

The importance of credibility is further diminished in a world where war is rare and conquest essentially absent. Vladimir Putin was not awaiting signs of American irresolution to intervene in his near abroad; local events, not our reputation, were decisive. China's expansion in its neighboring seas is not dependent upon perceptions of American resolve. In fact, our continuing presence there probably makes their activity more likely. Our credibility (or lack thereof) affects neither their actions nor our safety.

This lesson has not been learned by U.S. leaders, who continue to believe that their reputations for resolve are important tools in the twenty-first century. But, like slaves, eunuchs and empires, credibility will not help the modern United States achieve its goals.

Some policies of the past do retain their relevance. Keeping potential enemies divided, for example, remains a good idea, even if it is somewhat less urgent. Even if those enemies are unlikely to attack, a united, hostile Eurasia could still cause problems for Uncle Sam. Whether such a bloc would ever endeavor to cut off the United States from the world economy is hardly certain, since ours is a nation of rich consumers, but U.S. status would surely wither in the face of prolonged,

united opposition. Dividing rivals has never been an easy task: small powers are compelled to balance against the large, and the most obvious way to do so is to align with the other small powers. Keeping them divided requires overcoming a powerful, natural force of political gravity. Diplomacy is today, as it has always been, the primary means to pursue a policy of *divide et impera*. Washington is unlikely to harbor pretenders to others thrones, as did Rome, nor is it going to intervene in Eurasian conflicts on the side of the smaller power, as London did for generations. It can, however, maintain healthy bilateral relations with Europe, China, and Russia, which is the surest way to reduce their imperative to balance. It can also avoid actions that would make a Russia-China-Iran or similar axis more likely. Reminding rivals of how much they distrust one another is perhaps not quite as critical in the twenty-first century as it was in the first, but it is still wise. Productive, profitable relations with other countries prevent them from perceiving the United States as a threat and balancing against it. Keeping friends close but enemies closer is good advice for mobsters and superpowers alike.

The second relevant policy involves economizing force. It does not take a deep read of the preceding chapters to realize that the main factor separating good grand strategies from bad is the extent to which leaders conserved resources. The most basic job of the strategist is to achieve the greatest benefit for the lowest cost, never employing expensive tools when cheaper ones will accomplish the goal—and, far more important, avoiding the pursuit of those ends that would cost more than they benefit. The Romans controlled their empire with 250 thousand men under arms; the Mongols economized even better, conquering and then ruling hundreds of millions of subjects with less than a million of their own. In every age, the most successful states maximize the return on strategic investment.

This wisdom is essentially lost on the current generation of U.S. policymakers. America often acts without regard to either cost or resource limitations, ignoring the central challenge of grand strategy. Instead of seeking ways to minimize expenses, Washington operates as if spending and security are directly related. Its unspoken mantra (if such a thing is possible) is that the more the United States devotes toward its military, the safer it is. This proposition would be dubious in any age, but in a world free of conquest it is simply absurd. Basic U.S. safety is assured irrespective of its defense budget, as is the safety of Belgium, Bolivia, and Bhutan. The Department of Defense is profoundly misnamed; it does no actual defending. Instead it pursues other goals, what to most states would be considered secondary considerations, since the primary U.S. interests are not imperiled. Under a rational grand strategy, lesser ends would be pursued with lesser means, and more cheaply. High levels of spending in low-threat eras mortgage the ability to address larger problems that may arise the future.

In 2022 the U.S. defense budget is around $768 billion, which is more than the next ten countries (five of whom are its treaty allies) combined.[55] This money purchases a level of capability that suggest its leaders simply do not prioritize an economy of force. The United States makes no effort to spend less and achieve more; quite the opposite, it acts as if its aim is to spend more to achieve less. It is badly overextended, as limitless, and therefore fiscally endangered, as any superpower of the past.

The absurdities are clear at sea. As the last chapter explained, the British determined the size of the Royal Navy and addressed the classic force-planning question ("how much is enough?") with the "two-navy standard." A maritime force as strong as the next two biggest navies combined, they reasoned, should be sufficient to prevent invasion. Today's United States is also an island nation in some senses, separated by water from the landmass with the bulk of humanity just as Britain was off the coast of Europe. America faces a much smaller threat of invasion but retains greater maritime dominance: one calculation suggested that Washington effectively operates a *seventeen* navy standard.[56] That is a very rough estimate, however, one that tries to compare the essentially incomparable. In terms of capability, reach and firepower, one could easily argue that the U.S. Navy is more powerful than all others combined. It is sized to fight a nightmarish all-against-the-United-States war, rather than to address realistic threats of the waking world.

The champions of the U.S. Navy and the rest of the Department of Defense argue that the military needs to be even bigger, more capable, and omnipresent. Finding the lowest level of expenditure capable of achieving national goals is not among their concerns, and as a result the United States spends itself into penury defending interests that are simultaneously unimportant and unthreatened. Force is not economized and the great lesson from the past is unheeded, because those in charge believe that more spending translates into more security rather than surer decline.

No frontiers limit U.S. grand strategy, and until they are created, the United States will fall victim to overambition and overextension. Future historians will wonder why its leaders were unable to see this in real time, to learn from the past and improve the present.

* * *

"Strategy is not merely a reflection of the interests which it purports to defend," wrote the British historians Robinson and Gallagher. "It is even more the register of the hopes, the memories and the neuroses which inform the strategists' picture of the world."[57] The identification of interests and threats is largely a matter of perception, and perception varies widely. Since the individuals running countries change over time, so too does grand strategy. Consistency across

administrations, much less generations, is rare, leading more than a few observers to doubt whether grand strategy can ever really exist.

While states do not generally operate according to highly classified, top-secret plans, they do use frameworks to help determine which national interests are vital and which are secondary, separating the serious threats from the merely annoying. They also have methods to figure out how to pursue their national goals at acceptable costs. They have grand strategies, in other words, whether skeptics recognize them or not. And the most successful states have executed the best of them.

If one thing is constant in foreign policy, it is that the outside world does not stand still. Other countries will wax and wane, causing all sorts of expected and unexpected headaches for future presidents. The choices U.S. leaders make in coming decades will determine how they manage that waxing and waning, and how long American superpower and predominance will persist. Grand strategy will shape not only U.S. status, such that it is, but also the character of the world it bequeaths to future powers. Rarely has a country had so important a task.

Fortunately there is precedent from which to learn. The United States is not the first country to face the challenges of making strategy in the absence of serious threat, even if it is likely to be the last for quite some time. The wisdom with which it chooses frontiers, and the extent to which it looks forward rather than back, will determine how long its power remains super. Grand strategy will decide its fate.

# NOTES

## *Preface*

1. Those interested in prolonged discussion of the relative power of the United States (which, I assume, is everyone) can consult Christopher J. Fettweis, *Psychology of a Superpower: Security and Dominance in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

## *Chapter 1*

1. Multiple ancient sources relate Cato's obsession. For one, see Plutarch, *The Life of Cato the Elder*, 27. The second quotation comes from Cicero, *Cato the Elder on Old Age*, 6:18.
2. No senator believed that Carthage represented an actual threat to Roman security. Pierre-Luc Brisson, "Rome and the Third Punic War: Aspects of Mediterranean Unipolarity in the Second Century BC," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome* 131, no. 1 (2019): pp. 177–199.
3. The earth-salting may be fiction, but it makes for a good story. R.T. Ridley, "To Be Taken with a Pinch of Salt: The Destruction of Carthage," *Classical Philology* 81, no. 2 (April 1986): pp. 140–146.
4. All quotations from Sallust, *The War with Jurgurtha*, 41:2–5. Polybius also notes widespread controversy over the Third Punic War, which many Romans felt had violated the principles of the Republic. *The Histories*, 36:9.
5. The first political murders occurred in 133 BC. See Edward J. Watts, *Mortal Republic: How Rome Fell into Tyranny* (Basic Books, 2018), p. 11.
6. Fortunately, fine reviews of this literature exist elsewhere. See Lucas Milevski, *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2016); Nina Silove, "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of 'Grand Strategy'," *Security Studies* 27, no. 1 (January–March 2018): pp. 27–57; and Rebecca Friedman Lissner, "What Is Grand Strategy? Sweeping a Conceptual Minefield," *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (November 2018): pp. 52–73. Other important works include Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996/97): pp. 5–53; Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Cornell University Press, 2014); Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski, and Simon Reich, *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework and Cases* (Oxford University Press, 2019); and John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (Penguin Press, 2018). Historians tend to approach the subject differently, concentrating mainly on warfare. See the essays in Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, and James Lacey, eds., *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); and John Andrea Olsen and Colin S. Gray, *The Practice of Strategy: From Alexander the Great to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

7. As the eminent historian A.J.P. Taylor wrote, "No one asked what the war was about. The Germans had started the war in order to win; the Allies fought so as not to lose . . . Winning the war was the end in itself." *The First World War* (Penguin Books, 1963), p. 62.
8. As an anonymous(ish) reviewer has pointed out, it is also possible that God compelled Pharaoh to resist. The Bible suggests this, explaining that the Lord kept "hardening Pharaoh's heart" for some reason. If He was indeed acting against His stated goal (perhaps in order to facilitate an entertaining spectacle at the Red Sea), then as a strategist He moves from "inefficient" to "insane."
9. Moltke: Daniel J. Hughes, ed., *Moltke on the Art of War* (Ballantine Books, 1996), p. 92. Tyson: Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. ix.
10. Christopher J. Fettweis, *Psychology of a Superpower: Security and Dominance in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 92–95.
11. See Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Cornell University Press, 1991); and Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," *World Politics* 61, no. 1 (January 2009): esp. p. 200.
12. Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), p. 74.
13. There is no uniformity regarding the definition of "policy" in the grand-strategy (or any other) literature. It is sometimes considered the driver of strategy, or its supporter, or even its customer. For simplicity's sake, we will consider policies *the methods employed by states to pursue national interests*.
14. Recounted by Thomas E. Ricks, "Rumsfeld Gets an Earful from Troops," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2004, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2004/12/09/rumsfeld-gets-earful-from-troops/ec74b055-5090-496b-a66c-145d37a79473/.
15. This classic force-planning question was coined by President Kennedy's former "whiz kids" Alain C. Enthoven and K. Wayne Smith in *How Much Is Enough? Shaping the Defense Program 1961–1969* ( Harper & Row, 1971).
16. Churchill made this bizarre remark at a White House luncheon on June 26, 1954, as reported by W.H. Lawrence, "Churchill urges Patience in Coping with Red Dangers," *New York Times*, June 27, 1954, p. 1.
17. David Vine, *Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (Metropolitan Books, 2015), p. 5.
18. Two-thirds of the world's hard currency reserves remain in dollars. For an explanation of what that means for U.S. power, see Jonathan Kirshner, "Dollar Primacy and American Power: What's at Stake?" *Review of International Political Economy* 15, no. 3 (August 2008): pp. 418–438.
19. For a review of the international impact, with images and links, see Jen Kirby, "'Black Lives Matter' Has Become a Global Rallying Cry against Racism and Police Brutality," *Vox*, June 12, 2020, available at https://www.vox.com/2020/6/12/21285244/black-lives-matter-global-protests-george-floyd-uk-belgium.
20. Tami Davis Biddle, *Strategy and Grand Strategy: What Students and Practitioners Need to Know* (US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, December 2015), p. 54.

## *Chapter 2*

1. "From the time of Caesar Augustus down to our own age," wrote the contemporary historian Florus, "owing to the inactivity of the emperors, [Rome] grew old and impotent . . . under the rule of Trajan it again stirred its arms and, contrary to general expectation, again renewed its vigor with youth as if it were restored." *Epitome of Roman History*, 1:8.
2. Anthony R. Birley, *Hadrian: The Restless Emperor* (Routledge, 1997), p. 78.
3. The phrase "hated by all" is how the *Historia Augusta* describes him (Vol. I, 11.7 and 25.7; see also 27.1).
4. The emperor had accused these men of plotting against him, a claim about which ancient sources are skeptical. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, Vol. VIII, 2:5. Some historians have suggested that the four men were leading figures in a faction dedicated to Trajan's expansionist policies, making their extermination essentially an act of grand strategy (Michel Christol and

Daniel Nony, *Rome et son Empire* [Hachette, 2003], p. 158). While certainly possible, I find no support for this theory in ancient sources.

5. The only source we have for this oft-quoted (in Hadrian circles, at least) boast is a booklet about the manners of the Caesars by Aurelius Victor called *Epitome De Caesaribus* (14:10), written at the end of the fourth century. For more on Hadrian's grand strategy, see Christopher J. Fettweis, "Restraining Rome: Lessons in Grand Strategy from Emperor Hadrian," *Survival* 60, no, 4 (August–September 2018): pp. 123–150.
6. Susan P. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate* (University of California Press, 1999), pp. 41–42. For other skeptics of Roman grand strategy, see J.C. Mann, "Power, Force and the Frontiers of the Empire," *Journal of Roman Studies* 69 (1979): pp. 175–183; Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Clarendon Press, 1990), ch. 9; Fergus Millar, "Emperors, Frontiers and Foreign Relations, 31 B.C. to A.D. 378," *Britannia* 13 (1982): pp. 1–23; and C.R. Whittaker, *Rome and Its Frontiers: The Dynamics of Empire* (Routledge, 2004), esp. pp. 28–49.
7. For defenses of the existence of Roman grand strategy, Kimberly Kagan, "Redefining Roman Grand Strategy," *Journal of Military History* 70, no. 2 (April 2006): esp. pp. 334–335; Everett L. Wheeler, "Methodological Limits and the Mirage of Roman Strategy," *Journal of Military History* 57, no. 1 (January 1993): pp. 7–41 (part 1) 57, no. 2 (April 1993): pp. 215–240 (part 2); and Arther Ferrill, *Roman Imperial Grand Strategy* (University Press of America, 1991). The classic that started this conversation is Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
8. Adrian Goldsworthy, *Pax Romana: War, Peace and Conquest in the Roman World* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016), pp. 358–359.
9. Edward Gibbon, "General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West," reprinted at the end of his sixth volume (chapter 38 of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 6 [W. Strahan, 1783], pp. 408–409).
10. This must have been a widely known, oft-discussed story, since it is repeated multiple times in ancient sources. See Livy, *History of Rome*, 45:12; Polybius, *The Histories*, 29:27; Justin, *Epitome of Pompeius Trogus*, 34:3; and Appian, *The Syrian Wars*, 14:66.
11. Quoted by Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (University of California Press, 2006), p. 44. He adds this: "No one in antiquity—no one—disputed this statement." Adrian Goldsworthy wrote that "There is simply no evidence for any truly pacific state or people—and it is hard to see how any could have survived." *Pax Romana*, p. 56.
12. The notion that Roman imperialism was fundamentally defensive was first suggested by the German historian Theodor Mommsen in *The History of Rome*, Vol. 2 (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889), pp. 369–370. The term "defensive imperialism" was coined for a century later, by a critic: William V. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome: 317–70 B.C.* (Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 163. See alsoRobert M Errington, *The Dawn of Empire: Rome's Rise to World Power* (Cornell University Press, 1972), esp. pp. 3–5; and Stephen L. Dyson, *The Creation of the Roman Frontier* (Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 270–278.
13. P.A. Brunt, *Roman Imperial Themes* ( Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 102.
14. For a description of how the legions evolved from militia into professional army, see Lawrence Keppie, *The Making of the Roman Army: From Republic to Empire* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1984).
15. Thomas S. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians, 100 B.C.–A.D. 400* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 156. For comparison, in 2019 United States had one person in uniform for every 175 civilians.
16. A typical legion consisted of around five thousand infantrymen supported by a roughly equal number of specialists, such as archers, slingers, and cavalrymen. These specialists, known as *auxilia*, were drawn from around the empire, wherever local traditions developed relevant deadly skills.
17. Flavius Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 3:5:1
18. Simon James, "The Fabricae: State Arms Factories of the Later Roman Empire," in J.C. Coulston, ed., *Military Equipment and the Identity of Roman Soldiers* (British Archaeological Reports, 1988), pp. 257–331.

19. See Edward J. Watts, *Mortal Republic: How Rome Fell Into Tyranny* ( Basic Books, 2018), esp. pp. 5–11.
20. This is the assessment made by Casear. See Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, p. 137.
21. Brunt, *Roman Imperial Themes*, p. 477.
22. Goldsworthy, *Pax Romana*, pp. 368–369.
23. Luttwak argued that Rome's boundaries (or *limes*) were essentially "scientific frontiers," *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, esp. pp. 51–126. This is a quite contested notion—some historians maintain that Rome's frontiers always gradually blended into neighboring lands. For discussions of boundary areas instead as "zones of interaction," see C.R. Whitaker, *The Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* ( Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 60–97; and Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire*, pp. 372–418.
24. Tacitus, *Annals*, 1.11.1.
25. Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (Houghton Mifflin, 2007), p. 201.
26. Charles S. Maier comments upon this, off-handedly, in *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 114.
27. For different takes on hegemonic stability theory, see Charles Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (University of California Press, 1974); Samuel P. Huntington, "Why International Primacy Matters," *International Security* 17, no. 4 (Spring 1993): pp. 68–83; and G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton University Press, 2011).
28. On "revisionist" and "status quo" powers in International Relations, see Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics* ( Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), pp. 125–126.
29. Chester G. Starr, *The Roman Empire, 27 B.C.–A.D. 476: A Study in Survival* (Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 165.
30. Starr, *The Roman Empire, 27 B.C.–A.D. 476*, p. 115.
31. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, p. 116.
32. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, p. 145.
33. Quoted by Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War*, 5:12.
34. Tacitus, *Annals*, 6.32.
35. Tacitus, *Germania*, 33.
36. Baron de Montesquieu, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline* (Hackett Publishing Co., 1965), p. 71.
37. Described by Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, p. 338.
38. Adrian Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower* (Yale University Press, 2009), p. 107; and Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, pp. 170–177.
39. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1, ch. 3, pt, 1.
40. J.B. Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army: 31 BC–AD 235* (Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 388.
41. Aurelius Victor says that Antoninus "was of such great goodness in the principate that he doubtless lived without a model . . . since by his authority alone, with no war, he ruled the orb of the earth for twenty-three years, with all legions, nations, and peoples together fearing and loving him so much that they regarded him as a parent or patron more than a *dominus* or *imperator*." *Epitome De Caesaribus*, 15.2–3.
42. Michael Kulikowski noted that "narrative sources tend to go silent in times of peace, in every age and every culture." *Imperial Triumph: The Roman World from Hadrian to Constantine, AD 138–363* (Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 39. To Gibbon, this was a sign of the greatness of Antoninus Pius, whose reign was "marked by the rare advantage of furnishing very few materials for history; which is, indeed, little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind." *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 1, ch. 3, pt. 1.
43. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire*, pp. 414–415.
44. Brent L. Sterling, *Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors? What History Teaches Us about Strategic Barriers and International Security* (Georgetown University Press, 2009), pp. 76–77.

45. David J. Breeze and Brian Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall* (Allen Lane, 1976); and Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 414.
46. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, pp. 88–89.
47. Anthony R. Birley, *Hadrian: The Restless Emperor* (Routledge, 1997), p. 116. See also Sterling, *Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?*, p. 77.
48. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians,* pp. 230–231 and 328.
49. Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, p. 210.
50. Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War*, 4.6.2.
51. Quoted by Mattern in *Rome and the Enemy*, p. 115.
52. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, p. 22.
53. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, pp. 118–119.
54. Tacitus, *Annals*, 2.26.1.
55. Goldsworthy, *Pax Romana*, pp. 44–45.
56. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 58.3.5. See also Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, pp. 216–217.
57. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians,* p. 191.
58. Goldsworthy makes this observation in *Pax Romana*, p. 58. Constantine the Great lamented that he was obliged to wage war on the Goths in 331, for example, since they had attacked the Sarmatians, his *amici*. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, p. 341. This is what modern political scientists would refer to as "entrapment"; see David Edelstein and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "It's a Trap! Security Commitments and the Risks of Entrapment," in A. Trevor Thrall and Benjamin Friedman, eds., *US Grand Strategy in the 21st Century: The Case for Restraint* (Routledge, 2018), pp. 19–41.
59. Starr, *The Roman Empire*, p. 77.
60. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, pp. 121 and 159.
61. Tacitus, *Agricola*, p. 21.
62. One exception to this rule appears to have been the Druids, whose practices of human sacrifice and overall creepiness proved too much for the otherwise-tolerant Augustus. Goldsworthy, *Pax Romana*, p. 67.
63. Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War*, 5.406. For a description of some of the techniques of Romanization, see Tacitus, *Agricola*, pp. 20–21.
64. "The enthusiasm of local elites for imperial rule," argued historian Kulikowski, "is the primary explanation of the Roman empire's success." *Imperial Triumph*, p. 2.
65. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 59.
66. "If a man was good enough to fight for Rome," explained historian Ronald Syme, "he was good enough to be a citizen." *Colonial Elites: Rome, Spain and the Americas* (Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 3.
67. This edict created a host of new legal issues that needed to be ironed out. Efforts to do so began the "great age of classical Roman law," which formed the foundation of western legal tradition. See Kulikowski, *Imperial Triumph*, p. 100.
68. Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, p. 139.
69. Goldsworthy, *Pax Romana*, p. 278.
70. Tacitus, *Annals* 12.31–39. For more on Romans and disarmament, see Starr, *The Roman Empire,* p. 120.
71. Ramsay MacMullen, *Romanization in the Time of Augustus* (Yale University Press, 2000), p. 129.
72. Many Roman institutions and traditions carried on for centuries. See Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
73. Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, p. 16.
74. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, p. 280.
75. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, p. 292.
76. Goldsworthy, *Pax Romana*, p. 403. Rome was at war with itself from 88–87, 82–81, 49–45, 44–36, and 32–30 BC; not again until 69 and then 193 AD, but with increasing frequency thereafter. After the five-decade period of civil strife in the middle of the third century, civil war returned from 306–324, 350–353, 365–366, 383–384, 387–388, 392–394 and throughout the 420s. And those are just the major ones.

77. The *Historia Augusta* (3.8) relates with some skepticism a legend of the Emperor Carus being killed by lightning while campaigning against the Parthians in 283. Many historians are even more skeptical.
78. Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History* (Pan Macmillan, 2005), *passim*, but esp. p. 87; and A.D. Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium, AD 363–565: The Transformation of Ancient Rome* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 2.
79. Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 14.
80. Ammianus Marcellinus has a lengthy description of Hun customs in *Roman History*, 31.2. "The people of the Huns," he wrote, "exceed every degree of savagery . . . you would not hesitate to call them the most terrible of all warriors . . . Like unreasoning beasts, they are utterly ignorant of the difference between right and wrong; they are deceitful and ambiguous in speech, never bound by any reverence for religion or for superstition."
81. Burns (*Rome and the Barbarians*) is somewhat skeptical of the importance of the Huns in explaining German migration; Heather (*The Fall of the Roman Empire*) is not.
82. For a review of this argument, see Ramsay MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 176–178.
83. On this, see Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, esp. pp. 159–182.
84. Kulikowski, *Imperial Triumph*, p. 261.
85. Fergus Millar, "Government and Diplomacy in the Roman Empire during the First Three Centuries," *International History Review* 10, no. 3 (August 1988): pp. 345–377, 369.
86. Goldsworthy, *How Rome Fell*, p. 327.
87. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, p. 300.
88. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*, p. 50.
89. Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium, AD 363–565*, pp. 2–3.
90. Burns, *Rome and the Barbarians*, p. 378.
91. Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium, AD 363–565*, p. 31.
92. Counted by Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, p. 165.
93. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*, p. 54.
94. This continued long after the fall of the west. See Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2009), *passim*.
95. Rua tried this again in 434, when the empire was busy dealing with threats to Carthage. Apparently the gods frowned upon his lack of imagination, because this time he was struck by lightning. Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium*, p. 118.
96. Appian discussed by Starr, *The Roman Empire*, p. 125.
97. For Reagan, Schlafly, Jones and others, see Edward J. Watts, *The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 233–237. On climate change: Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 12.
98. Alexander Demandt, *Der Fall Rom: Die Auflösung des römischen Reiches im Urteil der Nachtwelt* (C.H. Beck, 1984).
99. Watts, *The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome*, p. 118 and *passim*.
100. Starr, *The Roman Empire*, p. 168.
101. Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 4:11:3–7. It is perhaps worth noting that our other major source for this era, Cassius Dio, does not mention this event.
102. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 79:1:1.
103. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 78:20:2.
104. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, p. 60.
105. Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, 31.4.10.
106. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, p. 459.
107. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 78:7:1–4.
108. Lee, *From Rome to Byzantium*, p. 19. Rowland Smith suggests that the common perception of this idolization is incorrect in *Julian's Gods: Religion and Philosophy in the Thought and Action of Julian the Apostate* (Routledge, 1995), pp. 12–13. It is, however, the common perception, and for good reason.

109. Andrew G. Scott also describes Macrinus's polices as "defensive" and "anti-war." *Change and Continuity within the Severan Dynasty: The Case of Macrinus*, PhD Dissertation (Rutgers University, May 2008), p. 118.
110. John Curran, "From Jovian to Theodosius," in Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. XIII: The Late Empire, A.D. 337–425* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 78.
111. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*.

## *Chapter 3*

1. Typical is Kyle Harper, who wrote, "These used to be called the Dark Ages. That label is best set aside. It is hopelessly redolent of Renaissance and Enlightenment prejudices. It altogether underestimates the impressive cultural vitality and enduring spiritual legacy of the entire period that has come to be known as 'late antiquity.'" *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 12. See also Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages, 400–1000* (Penguin, 2009); and Peter Heather, *The Restoration of Rome: Barbarian Popes and Imperial Pretenders* (Macmillan, 2013).
2. Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Public Affairs, 2004).
3. Perhaps the best discussion of strategic culture is Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture," *International Security* 19, no. 4 (Spring 1995): pp. 32–64.
4. John K. Fairbank, "Varieties of the Chinese Military Experience," in Frank A. Kierman Jr. and John K. Fairbank, eds., *Chinese Ways in Warfare* (Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 4–6.
5. Quoted by Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 16. See also Yi-Ming Yu, "Military Ethics of Xunzi: Confucianism Confronts War," *Comparative Strategy* 35, no. 4 (November 2016): pp. 260–273.
6. Paraphrasing John Keay, *China: A History* (Basic Books, 2009), p. 259.
7. Herlee Glessner Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China* ( University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 249.
8. Fairbank, "Varieties of the Chinese Military Experience," p. 7.
9. Fairbank, "Varieties of the Chinese Military Experience," p. 11.
10. David A. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300–900* (Routledge, 2002), p. 7.
11. See especially Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton University Press, 1995); Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (Columbia University Press, 2011).
12. Arthur F. Wright described the leader of the Ch'en as a "feckless nincompoop." "The Sui Dynasty," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 55.
13. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, p. 27.
14. The Khitans, alone among these nomadic peoples, had a written language, but it remains nearly indecipherable today.
15. The issue is explored by David Curtis Wright in "The Hsiung-nu/Hun Equation Revisited," *Eurasian Studies Yearbook* 69 (1997): pp. 77–122.
16. Goat comparisons were surprisingly common. Tang Emperor Xuanzong (847–859) complained to his court that the barbarian "devils" invade when China showed weakness, "bringing their goatish odor to places near the metropolitan region." Wang Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia: A History of Diplomacy and War* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), p. 289.
17. Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* ( Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 240–241.
18. Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), esp. pp. 171–172. A somewhat less harsh assessment can be found in Brent

L. Sterling, *Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors? What History Teaches Us about Strategic Barriers and International Security* (Georgetown University Press, 2009), pp. 106–156.

19. Jonathan Karam Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800* (Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 43.
20. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, p. 131.
21. On the *fubing*, see Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, pp. 109–111 and 189–193; and Wright, "The Sui Dynasty," pp. 101–102.
22. Wright, "The Sui Dynasty," pp. 81, 87–88, 107.
23. This number is a subject of some controversy among historians, some of whom find it credible (Victor Cunrui Xiong, *Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty: His Life, Times, and Legacy* (State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 55–56) and some of whom do not (Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare,* p. 148). All agree that the invasion force was enormous.
24. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, p. 145.
25. Xiong, *Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty*, p. 179.
26. Liu-ch'iu was not Japan, since no invasion is mentioned in its sources, but beyond that its identity is anyone's guess. John Fairbank was convinced it was the Ryukyus, a suggestion not accepted universally. "A Preliminary Framework," in John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 1. The outcome of the invasion is in dispute as well: some sources report a roaring success, with the mysterious island added to the empire; others describe a massive failure, with 80–90 percent casualties. See Wright, "The Sui Dynasty," pp. 138–139.
27. These statistics come from Xiong, *Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty*, pp. 51, 65, and 66.
28. Xiong, *Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty*, p. 65; and Wright, "The Sui Dynasty," p. 148.
29. Wright, "The Sui Dynasty," p. 149.
30. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, p. 160.
31. Howard J. Wechsler, "The Founding of the T'ang Dynasty: Kao-Tsu (Reign 618–26)," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 161–162.
32. Mark Edward Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* (Harvard University Press, 2009), pp. 146–149.
33. Taizong means "Supreme Ancestor"; each successive Tang ruler would be known as some form of "zong," or ancestor. For some recent hagiography, see Chinghua Tang, *The Ruler's Guide: China's Greatest Emperor and His Timeless Secrets of Success* (Scribner, 2017), which claims that the bow the emperor used "was twice the normal size and strong enough to shoot through an iron door" (p. 152), and that he killed more than a thousand men on the battlefield (p. 2).
34. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, pp. 143–144.
35. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, p. 188.
36. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, pp. 250–251.
37. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 251.
38. Yihong Pan, *Son of Heaven and Heavenly Qaghan* (Western Washington University Press, 1997).
39. Tang, *The Ruler's Guide*, p. 138.
40. Quoted by Keay in *China*, p. 250.
41. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 252.
42. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 249.
43. Quoted by Howard J. Wechsler, "T'ai-Tsung (Reign 626–649) the Consolidator," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 197.
44. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 267.
45. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 269.
46. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare,* p. 196.
47. Tang, *The Ruler's Guide*, p. 105.
48. Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, p. 181.

49. Jennifer Holmgren, "A Question of Strength: Military Capability and Princess-Bestowal in Imperial China's Foreign Relations (Han to Ch'ing)," *Monumenta Serica* 39 (1990–1991): pp. 31–85.
50. David McMullen, *State and Scholars in T'ang China* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), esp. p. 31.
51. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 31.
52. Lien-sheng Yang, "Historical Notes on the Chinese World Order," in John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 33.
53. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, pp. 14 and 24.
54. See the essays in Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order*.
55. Denis Twitchett, "Introduction," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 32–38; and Skaff, *Sui-Tang China and Its Turko-Mongol Neighbors*, pp. 6–7.
56. Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, p. 154.
57. Tang, *The Ruler's Guide*, p. 150.
58. Quoted by Yang, "Historical Notes on the Chinese World Order," p. 27.
59. Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire*, p. 156.
60. Michael Hoffman, "Cultures Combined in the Mists of Time: Origins of the China-Japan Relationship," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 4, no. 2 (February 2006): p. 7 (1–9).
61. For a discussion of *wenming* and its strategic implications, see James Waterson, *Defending Heaven: China's Mongol Wars, 1209–1370* (Frontline Books, 2013), p. 198. See also Prasenjit Duara, "The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism," *Journal of World History* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2001): pp. 99–130.
62. Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework," pp. 1–19.
63. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 264.
64. Yang, "Historical Notes on the Chinese World Order," p. 28.
65. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 260.
66. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 247.
67. For more on this notion, see Felix Kuhn, "Much More than Tribute: The Foreign Policy Instruments of the Ming Empire," *Journal of Chinese History* V5, no. 1 (January 2021): esp. pp. 71–72.
68. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 282.
69. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 249.
70. For hostages as a tool of strategy, see Lien-sheng Yang, "Hostages in Chinese History," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 15, no. 3–4 (December 1952): pp. 507–521. Their exceptional use by the Tang emperors is reviewed on p. 510.
71. As Yuan-kang Wang has pointed out to me, many Chinese emperors made similar statements, often after conquests. The quotation appears in Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 255.
72. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 260.
73. As modern historian Wang Zhenping noted, the implementation of *de* "seemed to have been feasible only when China was in a position of power, dealing with weaker and friendly countries." *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 256.
74. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 8.
75. This is mostly my interpretation. Some mild agreement in Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 245.
76. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 294.
77. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, p. 146.
78. This is one of the central arguments of Barfield in *The Perilous Frontier*, p. 150 and *passim*.
79. Richard W.L. Guisso, "The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-Tsung and Jui-Tsung (684–712)," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), esp. p. 297. For interesting takes on her reign, see N. Harry Rothschild, *Wu Zhao: China's Only Woman Emperor* (Pearson Longman, 2008); and Dora Shu-fang Dien, *Empress Wu Zetian in Fiction and in History: Female Defiance in Confucian China* (Nova Science Publishers, 2003).

80. Speculation on this matter can be found in Guisso, "The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-Tsung and Jui-Tsung (684–712)," p. 331.
81. Guisso, "The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-Tsung and Jui-Tsung (684–712)," pp. 314–316.
82. Denis Twitchett, "Hsüan-Tsung (Reign 712–56)," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 349.
83. Keay, *China*, p. 253.
84. Twitchett, "Hsüan-Tsung (Reign 712–56)," p. 376.
85. Twitchett, "Hsüan-Tsung (Reign 712–56)," p. 375. Another historian pointed out that over the course of the dynasty when "Tang frontier armies suffered serious defeats, it was usually in the context of rash, ill-considered offensive operations." Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, p. 214.
86. Tang, *The Ruler's Guide*, p. 101.
87. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 285.
88. Twitchett, "Hsüan-Tsung (Reign 712–56)," pp. 415–418.
89. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, p. 14.
90. Twitchett, "Hsüan-Tsung (Reign 712–56)," p. 417.
91. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, pp. 221 and 224.
92. Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), *passim*, with helpful diagrams on pp. 22–23.
93. Keay, *China*, p. 236.
94. At the center was the capital, the "royal domain" (*dianfu*); next came the "domain of the nobles" (*houfu*) under direct imperial control; beyond that was the "pacified domain" (*suifu*) containing the semiautonomous lands and clients; the "domain of restraint" (*yaofu*) was next, or those areas that the Chinese influenced but did not control, the true buffers; and finally came the "wild domain" (*huangfu*), or the lands of the barbarians. Fairbank, "A Preliminary Framework," pp. 4–11; and Xiong, *Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty*, p. 218.
95. Xiong, *Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty*, p. 218.
96. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 253.
97. Zhenping, *Tang China in Multipolar Asia*, p. 288.
98. "Why were the lessons of [Taizong] . . . forgotten," lamented Barfield, "and an effective frontier policy abandoned in favor of static defenses and a defeatist attitude toward the nomads?" *The Perilous Frontier*, p. 146.
99. C.A. Peterson, "Court and Province in Mid- and Late T'ang," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 467.
100. There is little reason to believe, as some recent observes have suggested, that the rebellion was one of the worst tragedies in human history (see Steven Pinker's otherwise brilliant *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (Penguin, 2011), p. 195). Such interpretations cite one major piece of evidence, the stark declines reported by Chinese census data. This was probably due to variations in bureaucracy rather than population; drastic swings in census efficiency were common in the era, especially during wartime. Howard J. Wechsler, "T'ai-Tsung (Reign 626–649) the Consolidator," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 209; and Denis Twitchett and Howard J. Wechsler, "Kao-Tsung (Reign 649–83) and the Empress Wu: The Inheritor and the Usurper," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 277.
101. Graff, *Medieval Chinese Warfare*, p. 227.
102. Colin Mackerras, "The Uighurs," in Denis Sinor, ed., *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 317–342.
103. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*, p. 151.
104. "To the end of the Uighur period," Barfield wrote, "their policy remained one of extortion." *The Perilous Frontier*, pp. 154 and 153.

105. Michael T. Dalby, "Court Politics in Late T'ang Times," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 567.
106. Charles Backus, *The Nan-Chao Kingdom and T'ang China's Southwestern Frontier* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).
107. For a description of Tang efforts to recover after the rebellion, see Josephine Chiu Duke, *To Rebuild the Empire: Lu Chih's Confucian Pragmatist Approach to the Mid T'ang Predicament* (State University of New York Press, 2000).
108. C.A. Peterson, "Court and Province in Mid- and Late T'ang," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 494–495.
109. Jennifer Holmgren, "A Question of Strength: Military Capability and Princess-Bestowal in Imperial China's Foreign Relations (Han to Ch'ing)," *Monumenta Serica* 39 (1990–1991): pp. 31–85. The story of the Uighurs appears on p. 47.
110. Peterson, "Court and Province in Mid- and Late T'ang," p. 537.
111. Denis Twitchett, "Tibet in Tang's Grand Strategy," in Hans van de Ven, ed., *Warfare in Chinese History* (Boston: Brill, 2000), pp. 106–179.
112. Peterson, "Court and Province in Mid- and Late T'ang," p. 543.
113. Court records from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) speak of ten times that number. Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The Eunuchs in the Ming Dynasty* (State University of New York Press, 1996).
114. Michael Hoeckelmann, "Power Emasculated: Eunuchs, Great Clans and Political Reproduction under the Tang," *Tang Studies* 38, no. 1 (2020): pp. 1–27.
115. Jia Yinghua, *The Last Eunuch of China: The Life of Sun Yaoting* (China Intercontinental Press, 2009).
116. Keay, *China*, p. 289.
117. Robert M. Somers, "The End of T'ang," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 3: Sui and T'ang China, 589–906, Part I* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 755.
118. Those interested in the details can consult Somers, "The End of T'ang," pp. 682–789.

## *Chapter 4*

1. On the various intra-European quarrels, see Peter Jackson, *The Mongols and the West, 1221–1410* (Pearson-Longman, 2005), p. 23.
2. C. Raymond Beazley, ed., *The Texts and Versions of John Plano Carpini and William du Rubruquis* (Hakluyt Society, 1903), p. 142.
3. For a review, see Greg S. Rogers, "An Examination of Historians' Explanations for the Mongol Withdrawal from East Central Europe," *East European Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (Spring 1996): pp. 3–26.
4. James Waterson, *Defending Heaven: China's Mongol Wars, 1209–1370* (Frontline Books, 2013), p. 52.
5. On that endemic violence, see Paul Buell and Judith Kolbas, "The Ethos of State and Society in the Early Mongol Empire: Chinggis Khan to Güyük," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26, no. 1–2 (January 2016): pp. 43–64, esp. p. 48.
6. There is little agreement on how to transliterate Mongol names, even among experts. No one can seem to agree on whether to refer to Genghis, Chingis, Chinggis, Chengiz, Zingis, Jenghis, or Jenghiz. This work will stick the former, which is most common in popular circles, understanding that this is the Persian spelling; if the reader could mentally pronounce it with a soft G, perhaps everyone might be happy. Similar arbitrary but consistent decisions will be made regarding other names and places. Also, all diacritical marks have been removed, since they strike this author as pointless.
7. Some good places to start include John Man, *Genghis Khan: Life, Death and Resurrection* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2004); and Frank McLynn, *Genghis Khan: His Conquests, His Empire, His Legacy* (Da Capo Press, 2015).

8. Ruth W. Dunnell, "Xi Xia: The First Mongol Conquest," in William W. Fitzhugh, Morris Rossabi, and William Honeychurch, eds., *Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire* (Smithsonian Institution, 2013), p. 156.
9. Our sources suggest that the Jin killed thirty thousand of their own during one such rebellion. Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* (Broadway Books, 2004), p. 93.
10. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 97.
11. Non-Mongols were also organized into units called *tanmas* deployed in rear areas, especially on the border between the steppe and productive agricultural lands. For more on Mongol military organization, see Timothy May, "The Mongols at War," in William W. Fitzhugh, Morris Rossabi, and William Honeychurch, eds., *Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire* (Smithsonian Institution, 2013), *passim* but esp. p. 198. On the haircuts, see Timothy May, *The Mongol Empire* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 79.
12. Owen Lattimore, "Chingis Khan and the Mongol Conquests," *Scientific American* 209, no. 2 (August 1963): p. 55.
13. Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror*, translated by J.A. Boyle (University of Washington Press, 1997), p. 80.
14. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 218.
15. Michal Biran, "Diplomacy and Chancellery Practices in the Chagataid Khanate: Some Preliminary Remarks," *Oriente Moderno* 88, no. 2 (2008): esp. pp. 377–379.
16. At times Genghis insisted on taking 2 percent of subservient populations as hostage-slaves, all of whom had to be replaced when they grew too old or otherwise unproductive. Lien-sheng Yang, "Hostages in Chinese History," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 15, no. 3/4 (December 1952): pp. 513–517.
17. J.J. Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquests* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), pp. 55–56.
18. Ata-Malik Juvaini, *Genghis Khan: The History of the World Conqueror*, translated by J.A. Boyle (University of Washington Press, 1997), p. 43; Tatiana Zerjal, Yali Xue, Giorgio Bertorelle, Bumbein Dashnyam, S. Qasim Mehdi, and Chris Tyler-Smith, "The Genetic Legacy of the Mongols," *American Journal of Human Genetics* 72, no. 3 (March 2003): pp. 717–721.
19. Quoted everywhere, including by Robert Marshall, *Storm from the East: From Genghis Khan to Khubilai Khan* (University of California Press, 1993), p. 88.
20. Quotation from Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 125.
21. Juvaini wrote that the *Yasa* included "all that pertains to the method of subjugating countries and relates to the crushing of the power of enemies and the raising of the station of followers." *Genghis Khan*, p. 24. Some modern historians doubt whether it contained much of actual interest; see Marshall, *Storm from the East*, pp. 36–37. Either way, its loss is one of history's minor tragedies.
22. They also put words into their conquerors' mouths that only utter psychopaths would have uttered. Thus we have the oft-quoted, apocryphal statement of Genghis that "the greatest pleasure in life is to defeat your enemies, to chase them before you, to rob them of their wealth, to see those dear to them bathed in tears, to ride their horses, and to clasp to your breast their wives and daughters," which emerged a century after the Great Khan's death. It was reported by a Persian victim: Rashid al-Din, *Compendium of Chronicles*, Vol. 1, Part 2.
23. Timothy May, "Grand Strategy in the Mongol Empire," *Acta Historia Mongolici* 18, no. 7 (January 2017): p. 104.
24. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 91.
25. Different versions of this story pop up with some frequency in medieval sources. David Morgan, *The Mongols*, 2nd ed. (Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 57.
26. Juvaini, *Genghis Khan*, p. 193.
27. Quotation from *The Secret History of the Mongols*, discussed by Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 34.
28. This point is made by Thomas T. Allsen in *Mongol Imperialism: The Policies of the Grand Qan Möngke in China, Russia, and the Islamic Lands, 1251–1259* (University of California Press, 1987), p. 224.
29. Morgan, *The Mongols*, p. 37.

30. Juvaini, *Genghis Khan*, p. 143.
31. C. Raymond Beazley, ed., *The Texts and Versions of John Plano Carpini and William du Rubruquis* (Hakluyt Society, 1903), pp. 110, 126.
32. The *nerge* made impressions on observers, many of whom left detailed descriptions. Juvaini is one; see *Genghis Khan*, p. 28. See too Timothy May, "The Mongols at War," in William W. Fitzhugh, Morris Rossabi, and William Honeychurch, eds., *Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire* (Smithsonian Institution, 2013), p. 191; and Hugh Kennedy, *Mongols, Huns & Vikings* (Cassell & Co., 2002), pp. 118–122.
33. May, *The Mongol Empire*, p. 103.
34. Owen Lattimore, "The Geography of Chingis Khan," *Geographical Journal* 129, no. 1 (March 1963): p. 7.
35. May, *The Mongol Empire*, p. 39.
36. Richard A. Gabriel, *Subotai the Valiant: Genghis Khan's Greatest General* (Praeger, 2004).
37. May, "Grand Strategy in the Mongol Empire," p. 103.
38. These three are described in more detail by May, "The Mongols at War," pp. 196–197.
39. Timothy May, "The Mongol Art of War and the Tsunami Strategy," *Golden Horde Civilization*, no. 8 (2015): pp. 31–37.
40. Matthew Paris, *Matthew Paris's English History from the Year 1235 to 1273*, translated by J.A. Giles (George Bell and Sons, 1889), pp. 312–313.
41. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 114.
42. Juvaini, *Genghis Khan*, p. 171.
43. The Chinese advisor Yeh-lu Ch'u-ts'ai, who served both Genghis and Ogedei, is sometimes credited with helping to moderate their excesses. Marshall, *Storm from the East*, pp. 77–80. For more on the strategic aspects of slaughter, see pp. 65–72.
44. Peter Jackson, "The Dissolution of the Mongol Empire," *Central Asiatic Journal* 22, no. 3–4 (1978): p. 197.
45. Juvaini, *Genghis Khan*, pp. 235–236.
46. May, *The Mongol Empire*, p. 99.
47. European ignorance of Asia was rather astonishing. Even an experienced traveler like de Carpini wrote of a race of invincible dog-people who bit many Mongol warriors and made them retreat. They had feet of oxen, and every third word was a bark. C. Raymond Beazley, ed., *The Texts and Versions of John Plano Carpini and William du Rubruquis* (Hakluyt Society, 1903), pp. 117–118 and 122–123.
48. Jackson, *The Mongols and the West, 1221–1410*, p. 49.
49. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 147. On the Mongol use of explosives, see Stephan Haw, "The Mongol Empire—The First 'Gunpowder Empire'?" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 23, no. 3 (July 2013): pp. 441–469.
50. Marshall, *Storm from the East*, p. 114.
51. Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquests*, p. 66.
52. Poor Mongols tended to live longer, since their poverty forced them to eat less desirable food—like the occasional plant. John Masson Smith Jr., "Dietary Decadence and Dynastic Decline in the Mongol Empire," *Journal of Asian History* 34, no. 1 (2000): p. 38. On the longevity of Mongol rulers, see pp. 35–36 and 42.
53. Smith, Jr., "Dietary Decadence and Dynastic Decline in the Mongol Empire," p. 46. On alcoholism among the elite, see George Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire* (Greenwood Press, 2006), pp. 149–166.
54. Thomas Allsen, "The Rise of the Mongolian Empire and Mongolian Rule in North China," in Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China. Vol. 6, Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 400.
55. Juvaini, *Genghis Khan*, p. 637. See also Kennedy, *Mongols, Huns & Vikings*, p. 167.
56. Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism*, pp. 88–89.
57. Morris Rossabi, "The Reign of Kublai Khan," in Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China. Vol. 6, Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 430.
58. Norman F. Dixon argued that a specific personality type thrives in military organizations during times of peace, one that often underperforms when war begins, in his wonderful *On*

*the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (Macdonald & Co., Ltd., 1976). To that one can add structural explanations: The skills one needs to ascend to the top of peacetime military organizations are not necessarily those that lead to success on battlefields.

59. Waterson, *Defending Heaven*, p. 22. The erosion of the Song navy is discussed on p. 80.
60. Along with allied Chinese specialists, who may have outnumbered the Mongols five to one. Waterson, *Defending Heaven*, p. 92.
61. May, *The Mongol Empire*, p. 270.
62. Morris Rossabi in *Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times* ( University of California Press, 1988), p. 99.
63. Rossabi, "The Reign of Kublai Khan," p. 437.
64. The offended King Narathihapate of Pagan in Burma replied that he could not submit as "supreme commander of 36 million soldiers, swallower of 300 dishes of curry daily" and sexual mate of 3,000 concubines. Rossabi, "The Reign of Kublai Khan," p. 485.
65. Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, pp. 100–101.
66. May makes this observation in "Grand Strategy in the Mongol Empire," p. 88.
67. May, *The Mongol Empire*, p. 101.
68. Morgan relates this story in *The Mongols*, pp. 64–65.
69. May, *The Mongol Empire*, p. 86.
70. Juvaini, *Genghis Khan*, p. 26.
71. May, *The Mongol Empire*, p. 87.
72. Rossabi, "The Reign of Kublai Khan," p. 447.
73. May, *The Mongol Empire*, p. 194.
74. Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan*, p. 119–120.
75. Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan*, p. 71.
76. Elizabeth Endicott-West, "The Yüan Government and Society," in Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China. Vol. 6, Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 614.
77. Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquests*, p. 127.
78. John Dardess, "Shun-ti and the End of Yüan Rule in China," in Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China. Vol. 6, Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 570.
79. Quoted by Rossabi, *Khubilai Khan*, p. 74.
80. Weatherford wrote that Kublai "consistently and systematically pursued a nearly two-decades-long policy of winning the allegiance of a continental civilization." *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, p. 208.
81. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 3, chapter 64, available at https://www.ccel.org/g/gibbon/decline/volume2/chap64.htm.
82. Timothy Brook, *The Troubled Empire: China in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties* (Harvard University Press, 2010), esp. pp. 50–78.
83. Dardess, "Shun-ti and the End of Yüan Rule in China," p. 585.
84. Morgan, *The Mongols*, p. 173. Alcohol may have played a decisive role; see Lane, *Daily Life in the Mongol Empire*, p. 163.
85. Discussed by Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, pp. 73–76.
86. Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquests*, p. 191.

## *Chapter 5*

1. Reasonable estimates of Ottoman strength vary wildly, from fifty to one hundred thousand. Unreasonable estimates triple those numbers. Steven Runciman, *The Fall of Constantinople, 1453* (Cambridge University Press, 1965).
2. Caroline Finkel, *Osman's Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1923* (Basic Books, 2005), p. 49.
3. Quoted by Finkel in *Osman's Dream*, p. 48.
4. Quoted by Palmira Brummett in "Ottoman Expansion in Europe, ca. 1453–1606," in Suraiya N. Faroqhi and Kate Fleet, eds., *The Cambridge History of Turkey, Vol. 2: The Ottoman Empire as a World Power, 1453–1603* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 69.

5. Gladstone, quoted by Finkel in *Osman's Dream*, p. 488.
6. Peter F. Sugar, "A Near-Perfect Military Society: The Ottoman Empire," in L.L. Farrar Jr., ed., *War: A Historical, Political, and Social Study* (ABC-Clio Press, Inc., 1978), pp. 95–108.
7. Daniel Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 1. See too Virginia H. Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870: An Empire Besieged* (Pearson Longman, 2007), p. 45; and Paul Coles, *The Ottoman Impact on Europe* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), pp. 69–77. Gábor Ágoston and others object to this characterization, noting that every other state of the time was equally militarized. "The Ottomans: From Frontier Principality to Empire," in John Andrea Olsen and Colin S. Gray, *The Practice of Strategy: From Alexander the Great to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 109.

   "All in all, waging wars constituted the *raison d'etre* of the empire," argued Géza Dávid, before noting that other rulers of the time "were rather bellicose," which is what one might call an "understatement." "Ottoman Armies and Warfare, 1453–1603," in Suraiya N. Faroqhi and Kate Fleet, eds., *The Cambridge History of Turkey, Vol. 2: The Ottoman Empire as a World Power, 1453–1603* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 280.
8. Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (University of California Press, 1996), p. 129.
9. Halil İnalcık, "Ottoman Methods of Conquest," *Studia Islamica*, no. 2 (1954): p. 104. For a review of the critiques of this influential article, see Géza Perjés, *The Fall of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary: Mohács 1526–Buda 1541* (Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 85.
10. Burak Kadercan, "Territorial Design and Grand Strategy in the Ottoman Empire," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 5, no. 2 (April 2017): p. 169.
11. The role of religion in Ottoman conquests is somewhat controversial. To Paul Wittek, it was the most important factor; see *The Rise of the Ottoman Empire* (Royal Asiatic Society, 1938). Heath W. Lowry suggests that this "Gazi thesis" overstates the case in *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (State University of New York Press, 2003). See too Colin Imber, "Ideals and Legitimation in Early Ottoman History," in Metin Kunt and Christine Woodhead, eds., *Süleyman the Magnificent and His Age: The Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern World* (Longman, 1995), esp. p. 139.
12. One such crusade paused on the way to the southern Balkans to convert two hundred thousand Bulgarians by force. Lord Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries: The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Empire* (Morrow Quill, 1977), p. 52.
13. For other examples, see Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire: 1300–1650: The Structure of Power* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002), p. 256; and Ágoston, "The Ottomans," pp. 105–131. On the practice in general, see Leslie P. Pierce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. pp. 28–32.
14. Taxation and vassalage: Norman Stone, "Turkey in the Russian Mirror," in Ljubica Erickson and Mark Erickson, eds., *Russia: War, Peace and Diplomacy* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004), pp. 94–95. Land-use system: M. Fuad Köprülü, *The Origins of the Ottoman Empire* (State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 116. Administrative and bureaucratic practices: Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 129. Succession: Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (University of California Press, 1996), p. 120.
15. See Karen Barkey, "Rebellious Alliances: The State and Peasant Unrest in Early Seventeenth-Century France and the Ottoman Empire," *American Sociological Review* 56, no. 6 (December 1991): esp. p. 704.
16. Quoted in Sugar, "A Near-Perfect Military Society," pp. 97–98.
17. Turkey, Greece, Albania, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovakia, Cyprus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Bahrain, and Qatar. The population estimate: Douglas A. Howard, *A History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 281.
18. It is also (perhaps more) possible that Bayezid was treated rather well in captivity. Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, p. 30.
19. İnalcık, "Ottoman Methods of Conquest," p. 116.

20. Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* ( Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 51 and 110.
21. Barkey, *Empire of Difference*, p. 70. See too Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunčević, *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Brill, 2013), p. 20.
22. Laws: İnalcık, "Ottoman Methods of Conquest," p. 108. Taxes: Köprülü, *The Origins of the Ottoman Empire*, p. 82. Fiscal regimes: Rhoads Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare 1500–1700* (Rutgers University Press, 1999), p. 189.
23. Kadercan, "Territorial Design and Grand Strategy in the Ottoman Empire," p. 169.
24. Quoted by Stephen Turnbull, *The Ottoman Empire, 1326–1699* (Routledge, 2003), p. 75.
25. Gábor Ágoston, "Empires and Warfare in East-Central Europe, 1550–1750: The Ottoman-Habsburg Rivalry and Military Transformation," in Frank Tallett, ed., *European Warfare, 1350–1750* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 114.
26. Suraiya Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Around It* (I.B. Tauris, 2004), p. 102. See too Rhoads Murphey, "Süleyman I and the Conquest of Hungary: Ottoman Manifest Destiny or a Delayed Reaction to Charles V's Universalist Vision," *Journal of Early Modern History* 5, no. 3 ( January 2001): p. 199.
27. Andrew C. Hess, "The Moriscos: An Ottoman Fifth Column in Sixteenth-Century Spain," *American Historical Review* 74, no. 1 (October 1968): p. 21FN.
28. Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, pp. 46, 153, 156 and 222–223.
29. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (Vintage Books, 1987), p. 11.
30. Goffman wrote that Ottoman rulers "had no basis in ethnicity, race, or religion," and included "individuals of Arab, Greek, Italian, Jewish, Slavic, sub-Saharan African, Turkish, and myriad other extractions." *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, p. 51.
31. Virginia H. Aksan and Daniel Goffman, "Introduction: Situating the Early Modern Ottoman World," in Virginia H. Aksan and Daniel Goffman, eds., *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 6.
32. Gulay Yilmaz, "Becoming a Devşirme: The Training of Conscripted Children in the Ottoman Empire," in Gwyn Campbell, Suzanne Miers, and Joseph C. Miller eds., *Children in Slavery Through the Ages* (Ohio University Press, 2009), pp. 121–122.
33. İnalcık, "Ottoman Methods of Conquest," p. 123. See also p. 128.
34. Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Around It*, p. 69.
35. To historian Colin Imber, it was the "mundane functions of government that ensured the Empire's survival." *The Ottoman Empire: 1300–1650*, p. 324. See too Perjés, *The Fall of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, esp. p. 22.
36. Carter V. Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire: The Sublime Porte, 1789–1922* (Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 67 and 338.
37. Linda T. Darling, "The Finance Scribes and Ottoman Politics," in Caesar E. Farah, ed., *Decision Making and Change in the Ottoman Empire* (Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1993), p. 89.
38. For both wives and concubines, according to historian Goffman, the mother's "cultural background and religious beliefs mattered not at all, and it seems to have been inconsequential (in terms of legitimacy of offspring at least) whether she was a wife or a slave, light- or dark-skinned." *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, p. 40.
39. Sultan Ahmed III (1703–1730) had thirty daughters, all of whom were married off to various luminaries. Some married multiple times, when widowed; six had a total of seventeen husbands between them. Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, pp. 338–339.
40. This practice, known as *polygeniture*, caused problems for the Mongols. Keeping the empire whole is *unigenture*. Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, pp. 37–38.
41. Mehmed II, quoted by Finkel in *Osman's Dream*, p. 71. For legal justification, see Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, p. 134. For more on this system, see V.J. Parry, "The Period of Murad IV, 1617–48," in M.A. Cook, ed., *A History of the Ottoman Empire to 1730* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 133–134; Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 47; and Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds*, p. 120.
42. Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, p. 165.

43. Imber, *The Ottoman Empire*, p. 257.
44. Turnbull, *The Ottoman Empire, 1326–1699*, p. 21.
45. Ágoston, "Empires and Warfare in East-Central Europe, 1550–1750," p. 116.
46. On Ottoman logistics, see Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare 1500–1700*, pp. 70, 85–86, 91, and 130; Ágoston, "Empires and Warfare in East-Central Europe, 1550–1750," p. 116; and Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870*, pp. 69–71.
47. On the various levels of Ottoman intelligence collection, see Gábor Ágoston, "The Ottomans," pp. 124–125.
48. Ottoman tactics are described in more depth by Imber, *The Ottoman Empire*, pp. 256–283.
49. Perjés, *The Fall of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, p. 119.
50. Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, p. 56.
51. Barkey, *Empire of Difference*, p. 65.
52. Ágoston, "The Ottomans," p. 125.
53. "A threat from Persia could produce in Constantinople a sudden willingness to make peace in Europe," noted Dorothy Vaughan, "and also the converse." *Europe and the Turk: A Pattern of Alliances 1350–1700* (Liverpool University Press, 1954), p. 207.
54. Perjés, *The Fall of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, p. 17.
55. V.J. Parry, "The Successors of Sulaiman, 1566–1617," in M.A. Cook, ed., *A History of the Ottoman Empire to 1730* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 111; and Ágoston, "The Ottomans," p. 119.
56. For an overview, see Palmira Brummett, *Ottoman Seapower and Levantine Diplomacy in the Age of Discovery* (State University of New York Press, 1994).
57. Greek officers: Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, p. 85. European gunners: A.N. Kurat and J.S. Bromley, "The Retreat of the Turks, 1683–1730," in M.A. Cook, ed., *A History of the Ottoman Empire to 1730* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 185. Sailors from all over: Gábor Ágoston, *Guns for the Sultan: Military Power and the Weapons Industry in the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 55. Andalusians: Hess, "The Moriscos," p. 7.
58. For more, see John Francis Guilmartin Jr., *Gunpowder and Galleys: Changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1974).
59. Quoted by Imber in *The Ottoman Empire*, p. 314.
60. For various perspectives on these assertions, see Perjés, *The Fall of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, pp. 51–54; William H. McNeill, *Europe's Steppe Frontier, 1500–1800* (University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 41 and 50; Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare 1500–1700*, p. 37; Molly Greene, "The Ottomans in the Mediterranean," in Virginia H. Aksan and Daniel Goffman, eds., *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 111; and Ágoston, "Empires and Warfare in East-Central Europe, 1550–1750," p. 113.
61. Greene, "The Ottomans in the Mediterranean," p. 109; and Imber, *The Ottoman Empire: 1300–1650*, p. 311. Usually when the advice to campaign only in good weather was disregarded things ended poorly, but not always: A fleet left port in December 1559 to mount an attack against Tripoli. Epidemics and bad weather slowed its progress, but it was still able to rout an equally troubled Christian fleet outside of Djerba. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, Vol. II* (Harper & Row, 1973), p. 977.
62. Justin McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks: An Introductory History to 1923* (Longman, 1997), p. 150.
63. Karen Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization* (Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 18; and Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, p. 137.
64. Murphey, "Süleyman I and the Conquest of Hungary," p. 219; and Gábor Ágoston, "Information, Ideology, and the Limits of Imperial Policy: Ottoman Grand Strategy in the Context of Ottoman-Habsburg Rivalry," in Virginia H. Aksan and Daniel Goffman, eds., *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 101. Halil İnalcık wrote that Mehmed "was not in the least interested in occupying Hungary," despite European fears to the contrary. *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age, 1300–1600* (Praeger, 1973), pp. 27 and 29.
65. On their grandiose claims, see Dávid, "Ottoman Armies and Warfare, 1453–1603," p. 279.
66. Burbank and Cooper, *Empires in World History*, p. 133.

67. Imber, *The Ottoman Empire*, p. 37.
68. Ebru Boyar, "Ottoman Expansion in the East," in Suraiya N. Faroqhi and Kate Fleet, eds., *The Cambridge History of Turkey, Vol. 2: The Ottoman Empire as a World Power, 1453–1603* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 131; and Carl Max Kortepeter, *Ottoman Imperialism during the Reformation: Europe and the Caucasus* (New York University Press, 1972), p. 237.
69. V.J. Parry, "The Reign of Sulaiman the Magnificent, 1520–66," in M.A. Cook, ed., *A History of the Ottoman Empire to 1730* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 94.
70. V.J. Parry, "The Successors of Sulaiman, 1566–1617," in M.A. Cook, ed., *A History of the Ottoman Empire to 1730* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 112; and Virginia H. Aksan, "Military Reform and Its Limits in a Shrinking Ottoman World," in Virginia H. Aksan and Daniel Goffman, eds., *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 123.
71. Kortepeter, *Ottoman Imperialism during the Reformation*, p. X.
72. Andrew C. Hess, "The Ottoman Conquest of Egypt (1517) and the Beginning of the Sixteenth-Century World War," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 1973): p. 69.
73. V.J. Parry, "The Reigns of Bayezid II and Selim I, 1481–1520," in M.A. Cook, ed., *A History of the Ottoman Empire to 1730* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 71.
74. Soner Cagaptay, "Those Crazy Christians," *The American Interest* 10, no. 5, (Summer 2015): pp. 16–23.
75. Hess, "The Ottoman Conquest of Egypt (1517) and the Beginning of the Sixteenth-Century World War," pp. 69 and 71.
76. Ágoston, "Information, Ideology, and the Limits of Imperial Policy," p. 99.
77. Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, p. 126.
78. Perjés, *The Fall of the Medieval Kingdom of Hungary*, p. 18; and Murphey, "Süleyman I and the Conquest of Hungary," p. 211.
79. Ágoston, "Empires and Warfare in East-Central Europe, 1550–1750," p. 118.
80. Andrew C. Hess, "The Evolution of the Ottoman Seaborne Empire in the Age of the Oceanic Discoveries, 1453–1525," *American Historical Review* 75, no. 7 (December 1970): p. 1917.
81. Hess, "The Evolution of the Ottoman Seaborne Empire in the Age of the Oceanic Discoveries, 1453–1525," p. 1916. See too Salih Özbaran, "Ottoman Naval Policy in the South," in Metin Kunt and Christine Woodhead, eds., *Süleyman the Magnificent and His Age: The Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern World* (Longman, 1995), pp. 55–70.
82. George Junne, *The Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire: Networks of Power in the Court of the Ottoman Sultanate* (I.B. Tauris, 2016).
83. Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, p. 239.
84. Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, p. 106.
85. W.E.D. Allen, *Problems of Turkish Power in the Sixteenth Century* (Central Asian Research Centre, 1963), chapter 5, "The Ottomans and Turkestan: The Don-Volga Canal Project," pp. 22–28.
86. Andrew C. Hess, "The Battle of Lepanto and Its Place in Mediterranean History," *Past & Present*, no. 57 (November 1972): p. 62.
87. Quoted by Turnbull, *The Ottoman Empire, 1326–1699*, p. 61.
88. Kate Fleet, "Ottoman Expansion in the Mediterranean," in Suraiya N. Faroqhi and Kate Fleet, eds., *The Cambridge History of Turkey, Vol. 2: The Ottoman Empire as a World Power, 1453–1603* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 157.
89. Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, Vol. II*, p. 864. He describes the fortifications surrounding the Ottomans on all sides, and the lack thereof inside the empire, on pp. 845–859.
90. Caucasus: Parry, "The Successors of Sulaiman, 1566–1617," p. 117. Europe and Black Sea: A.N. Kurat and J.S. Bromley, "The Retreat of the Turks, 1683–1730," in M.A. Cook, ed., *A History of the Ottoman Empire to 1730* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 180. Seventeenth century: Mark L. Stein, *Guarding the Frontier: Ottoman Border Forts and Garrisons in Europe* (I.B. Tauris, 2007).
91. Omer Lufti Barkan, "The Price Revolution of the Sixteenth Century: A Turning Point in the Economic History of the Near East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6, no.

1 (January 1975): p. 8. More recent scholarship suggests that the impact of American gold and silver has been exaggerated; see Sevket Pamuk, "The Price Revolution in the Ottoman Empire Reconsidered," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33, no. 1 (February 2001): pp. 69–99.

92. Sevket Pamuk, "Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500–1800," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 2 (Autumn 2004): p. 235.
93. Pamuk, "Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500–1800," pp. 231–232.
94. Bernard Lewis, "Ottoman Observers of Ottoman Decline," *Islamic Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 1962): pp. 71–87.
95. Howard, *A History of the Ottoman Empire*, p. 216.
96. Christopher Tuck, "'All Innovation Leads to Hellfire': Military Reform and the Ottoman Empire in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 3 (2008): p. 471.
97. Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, p. 380.
98. For a review of the various schools of thought on this, see Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (Phoenix 2003), pp. 47–49.
99. Betül Basaran, *Selim III, Social Control and Policing in Istanbul at the End of the Eighteenth Century: Between Crisis and Order* (Brill, 2014), p. 10; and Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870*, p. 35. On the rise of Islamic nationalism in the empire, see Veysel Şimşek, *The Grand Strategy of the Ottoman Empire, 1826–1841* (McMaster University, November 2015), available at https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/handle/11375/18232, p. 100.
100. Finkel, *Osman's Dream*, p. 213.
101. Tuck, "'All Innovation Leads to Hellfire,'" p. 485.
102. Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, p. 281.
103. Bayonet: Tuck, "'All Innovation Leads to Hellfire,'" p. 487. Others: Jonathan Grant, "Rethinking the Ottoman 'Decline': Military Technology Diffusion in the Ottoman Empire, Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of World History* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1999): p. 200.
104. The "bertone" class of ship caused the most trouble for the Ottoman Navy. Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe*, p. 194.
105. This was not for lack of effort: Tuncay Zorlu, *Innovation and Empire in Turkey: Sultan Selim III and the Modernisation of the Ottoman Navy* (I.B. Taurus, 2008).
106. Kinross, *The Ottoman Centuries*, p. 383.
107. Aksan, *Ottoman Wars, 1700–1870*, p. 28.
108. Feroz Ahmad, "Ottoman Perceptions of the Capitulations 1800–1914," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 11, no. 1 (January 2000): pp. 1–20.
109. On the impact of the war, especially on the home front, see Yiğit Akın, *When the War Came Home: The Ottomans' Great War and the Devastation of an Empire* (Stanford University Press, 2018).

## *Chapter 6*

1. Robert Goodwin, *Spain: The Centre of the World 1519–1682* (Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 178.
2. Peter Brightwell, "The Spanish System and the Twelve Years' Truce," *English Historical Review* 89, no. 35 (April 1974): p. 278.
3. Paul C. Allen, *Philip III and the Pax Hispanica, 1598–1621: The Failure of Grand Strategy* (Yale University Press, 2000), p. 236.
4. Quoted by J. H. Elliott, "Managing Decline: Olivares and the Grand Strategy of Imperial Spain," in Paul Kennedy, ed., *Grand Strategies in War and Peace* (Yale University Press, 1991), p. 93.
5. Brightwell, "The Spanish System and the Twelve Years' Truce," p. 289.
6. Brightwell, "The Spanish System and the Twelve Years' Truce," p. 276; and Patrick Williams, *The Great Favourite: The Duke of Lerma and the Court and Government of Philip III of Spain, 1598–1621* (Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 246.
7. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (Vintage Books, 1987), p. 43.
8. For some additional hagiography, see Hugh Thomas, *World Without End: Spain, Philip II, and the First Global Empire* (Random House, 2014), p. 297.

9. Brightwell, "The Spanish System and the Twelve Years' Truce," p. 273.
10. 1610, 1669–71 and 1680–82. George Norman Clark, *The Seventeenth Century*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 98. Sixteenth century: Geoffrey Parker, *Spain and the Netherlands, 1559–1659: Ten Studies* (Enslow Publishers, 1979), p. 65.
11. Those seeking more information on this position, or on how royal Spanish stools were handled, can consult Goodwin, *Spain*, p. 113.
12. In the words of one prominent historian, the empire "was rather the result of a series of accidental and artificial agglomerations than of a normal and natural growth." Roger Bigelow Merriman, *The Rise of the Spanish Empire in the Old World and in the New*, Vol. IV (Macmillan Company, 1934), p. 671.
13. Goodwin, *Spain*, p. 73.
14. For pessimism, see William S. Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009), p. 42.
15. On the religious dimensions of sixteenth-century warfare, see Daniel H. Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires and International Change* (Princeton University Press, 2009).
16. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, p. 33.
17. Quoted by Geoffrey Parker in *The Grand Strategy of Philip II* (Yale University Press, 1998), p. 6.
18. Quoted by Michael J. Levin in *Agents of Empire: Spanish Ambassadors in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 201.
19. We see this still today. Former U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton testified to the enduring truth of this perception when he said on CNN on June 24, 2020 that "Other world leaders are hardcore realists." For more on this and its implications, see Christopher J. Fettweis, *Psychology of a Superpower: Security and Dominance in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 108–110.
20. For a recent telling, see the trilogy by Hugh Thomas (all published by Random House): *Rivers of Gold: The Rise of the Spanish Empire, from Columbus to Magellan* (2004); *The Golden Age: The Spanish Empire of Charles V* (2011); and *World Without End: Spain, Philip II, and the First Global Empire* (2014).
21. Smallpox and measles in particular proved physically and psychologically devasting to Native American populations. Mumps may have rendered a third of male Native Americans sterile. Goodwin, *Spain*, p. 258.
22. On local hatred of the Aztecs, see Ross Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*, 2nd ed. (University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), *passim*. Aztec grand strategy is discussed in Frances F. Berdan, Richard E. Blanton, Elixathen Hill Boone, Mary G. Hodge, Michael E. Smith, and Emily Umberger, *Aztec Imperial Strategies* (Dumbarton Oaks, 1996).
23. The legend probably has its origins in Italy and was then promoted with gusto by the English and Dutch. Levin, *Agents of Empire*, p. 201; and William Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558–1660* (Duke University Press, 1971).
24. Quoted by Robert Bireley in *The Jesuits and the Thirty Years War: Kings, Courts, and Confessors* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 238. Also quoted (inaccurately, but why quibble) by Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 720.
25. Goodwin, *Spain*, pp. 161–166.
26. Charles E. Chapman, *A History of Spain* ( Macmillan, 1918), p. 234.
27. Geoffrey Parker, "The 'Military Revolution,' 1562–1660—A Myth?" *Journal of Modern History* 48, no. 2 ( June 1976): pp. 199–200.
28. James F. Powers, *A Society Organized for War: The Iberian Municipal Militias in the Central Middle Ages, 1000–1284* (University of California Press, 1988).
29. Over time the Spanish kings became reluctant to risk their Castilians on the battlefield. The various wars that occurred between 1559 and 1630 included more maneuver and sieges than set-piece battles, which decreased the danger to the most valuable infantrymen. Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire*, p. 86.
30. Parker, "The 'Military Revolution,' 1562–1660—A Myth?," p. 211. Whether this was a revolution or evolution is somewhat controversial. Also see Michael Roberts, "The Military

Revolution, 1560–1660," in Clifford J. Rogers, ed., *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe* (Routledge, 1995), pp. 36–50; Jeremy Black, *A Military Revolution? Military Change and European Society, 1550–1800* (Humanities Press International, 1991); and David Eltis, *The Military Revolution in Sixteenth Century Europe* (I.B. Taurus, 1995).

31. Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire*, p. 85.
32. For reasons beyond this author's ability to understand, Catalonia, Valencia, and Aragon paid virtually nothing in taxes, since their assemblies were somehow allowed to vote down requests from Madrid. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, p. 120.
33. The remnants of mercantilism are still with us, but under names untainted by slavery, like "protectionism" and "economic nationalism." For a good description of the Spanish version, see Clarence Henry Haring, *Trade and Navigation between Spain and the Indies in the Time of the Hapsburgs* (Peter Smith, 1964). In that era, though, everyone was a mercantilist. See Jacob Viner, "Power versus Plenty as Objectives of Foreign Policy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *World Politics* 1, no. 1 (October 1948): pp. 1–29.
34. The classic, exhaustive description of this system is by economist Earl J. Hamilton, *American Treasure and the Price Revolution in Spain, 1501–1650* (Harvard University Press, 1934). See too J.H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain, 1469–1716* (St. Martin's Press, 1963), pp. 173–177.
35. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, p. 46.
36. Geoffrey Parker, *The Dutch Revolt*, revised ed. (Penguin 1985), p. 39.
37. Goodwin, *Spain*, p. 185.
38. Mauricio Drelichman and Hans-Joachim Voth, *Lending to the Borrower from Hell: Debt, Taxes, and Default in the Age of Philip II* (Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 173–210.
39. Parker, *The Dutch Revolt*, p. 222.
40. Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1955).
41. Goodwin, *Spain*, p. 10.
42. Geoffrey Parker disagrees with the nickname: *Imprudent King: A New Life of Philip II* (Yale University Press, 2014).
43. "Gout" served as a catch-all diagnosis that in those days for many kinds of aches and pains, but its crippling effects on Charles were confirmed by pathologists in 2006. Before entombing the dead king, royal attendants removed one of his pinkies to serve as a (creepy) relic for the faithful in a monastery in San Lorsezo, where it provided sufficient tissue to determine his gout's severity. Jaume Ordi, Pedro L. Alonso, Julian de Zulueta, Jordi Esteban, Martin Velasco, Ernest Mas, Elias Campo, and Pedro L. Fernández, "The Severe Gout of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V," *New England Journal of Medicine* 355, no. 5 (August 3, 2006): pp. 516–520.
44. Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II* (Yale University Press, 1998), p. 77. He discusses the testament (an English version of which does not appear to exist) on pp. 77–82. See also Wim Blockmans, *Emperor Charles V 1500–1558* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 176.
45. Ernest F. Henderson, "Two Lives of the Emperor Charles V," *American Historical Review* 9, no. 1 (October 1903): p. 32.
46. That peaceful half-year occurred in 1577. Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, p. 2.
47. Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, p. 8.
48. Thomas spends two chapters examining the correspondence regarding this crackpot idea in *World Without End*, pp. 259–284. The details included here are from pp. 276, 279, and 281.
49. Descriptions of the meeting can be found in Henry Kamen, *The Duke of Alba* (Yale University Press, 2004), p. 71; and James M. Boyden, *The Courtier and the King: Ruy Gómez De Silva, Philip II, and the Court of Spain* (University of California Press, 1995), pp. 130–131.
50. Both quotations can be found in Parker, *The Dutch Revolt*, p. 88.
51. Kamen, *The Duke of Alba*, p. 71.
52. Henry Kamen, *Philip of Spain* (Yale University Press, 1997), p. 124.
53. Quoted by Kamen in *Philip of Spain*, p. 123.
54. This is the view espoused by Leopold Ranke long ago. *The Ottoman and the Spanish Empires in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Whittaker and Co., 1848), esp. p. 50.

55. This is the view of both Fernand Braudel (*The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, Vol. II* [Harper & Row, 1973], pp. 1054–1055) and Goodwin (*Spain*, p. 189).
56. Quoted by Parker in *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, p. xix.
57. Christopher Duffy, *Siege Warfare: The Fortress in the Early Modern World, 1494–1660* (Routledge, 1979), esp. pp. 58–105. See also Parker, "The 'Military Revolution,' 1560–1660—A Myth?," pp. 195–214.
58. Quoted by Parker in *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, p. 166.
59. The Duke would no doubt object, were he still with us, claiming this judgment to be unfair. Indeed there is some evidence that he tried to control his rampaging troops and failed (Goodwin, *Spain*, pp. 202–206). At best, he was ineffective at restraining them.
60. Thomas, *World Without End*, p. 199.
61. Quoted in Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, p. 111. See also his "David or Goliath? Philip II and His World in the 1580s," in Geoffrey Parker, *Success Is Never Final: Empire, War, and Faith in Early Modern Europe* (Basic Books, 2002), p. 36.
62. Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, pp. 164–165.
63. Geoffrey Parker, "If the Armada Had Landed," *History* 61, no. 203 (1976), pp. 358–368.
64. Geoffrey Parker titles his chapter on the Armada "The Worst-kept Secret in Europe?" in *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, pp. 209–228.
65. Elliott, *Imperial Spain*, p. 283.
66. According to Parker, it is also possible that these words were spoken by a close advisor to Philip. *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, p. 106.
67. Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, pp. 105–107. The quotation appears on p. 106.
68. Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, p. 286. Spanish writers of the period traced royal lineage back to the flood, making Philip a direct descendant of Noah. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, p. 125.
69. There ought to be no doubt that his faith was sincere. In addition to daily mass attendance, Philip collected holy relics, amassing some 7422 in all, including 12 corpses, 144 heads, and 306 limbs. During his last days, it was said that the only way to rouse him was to say loudly "Don't touch the relics," which would cause him to open his eyes immediately. Geoffrey Parker, *Philip II*, 3rd ed. (Open Court, 1995), p. xv.
70. Quoted by Parker in *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, p. 106.
71. On the implications of overconfidence and foreign policy, see Dominic D.P. Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Harvard University Press, 2004).
72. Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, p. 107.
73. Quoted by Allen in *Philip III and the Pax Hispanica*, p. 94.
74. These effects are explained more in Christopher J. Fettweis, *The Pathologies of Power: Fear, Honor, Glory, and Hubris in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 94–140.
75. These quotations can be found in Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, pp. 89–90.
76. The advisor was Juan de Zúñiga, quoted by Henry Kamen, *Spain, 1469–1714: A Society of Conflict*, 4th ed. (Routledge, 2014), p. 192.
77. Geoffrey Parker called this the "argument from the escalation of potential disasters," and it is hardly limited to Spain. *Spain and the Netherlands, 1559–1659: Ten Studies* (Enslow Publishers, 1979), pp. 110–111.
78. Parker, *Philip II*, p. 209.
79. Geoffrey Parker, "David or Goliath? Philip II and His World in the 1580s," in Geoffrey Parker, ed., *Success Is Never Final: Empire, War, and Faith in Early Modern Europe* (Basic Books, 2002), p. 18.
80. One: C.V. Wedgwood, *The Thirty Years War* (Anchor Books, 1961), p. 58. Another: Elliott, *Imperial Spain*, p. 295.
81. Quoted by Elliott in *Imperial Spain*, p. 295.
82. Williams, *The Great Favourite*, pp. 1–2.
83. R.A. Stradling, *Philip IV and the Government of Spain, 1621–1665* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 8.

84. Williams, *The Great Favourite*, p. 70.
85. For analysis of the events described in these paragraphs, see Allen, *Philip III and the Pax Hispanica*, pp. 61–76.
86. Allen, *Philip III and the Pax Hispanica*, pp. 10–11.
87. Levin, *Agents of Empire*, p. 6.
88. Allen, *Philip III and the Pax Hispanica*, p. 172.
89. Allen, *Philip III and the Pax Hispanica*, pp. 10–11; and Levin, *Agents of Empire*, pp. 15–182.
90. Elliott, "Managing Decline," p. 89. See also Antonio Feros, *Kingship and Favoritism in the Spain of Philip III, 1598–1621* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 139.
91. Feros, *Kingship and Favoritism in the Spain of Philip III*, p. 146.
92. Allen, *Philip III and the Pax Hispanica*, p. 238; and Feros, *Kingship and Favoritism in the Spain of Philip III*, p. 194.
93. Williams defended Philip by arguing (against the evidence, it seems to me) that his government "was much more belligerent than has often been supposed," and that it "took its lead from the King." *The Great Favourite*, p. 10.
94. Chapman, *A History of Spain*, p. 248.
95. Andrew C. Hess, "The Moriscos: An Ottoman Fifth Column in Sixteenth-Century Spain," *American Historical Review* 74, no. 1 (October 1968), pp. 1–25.
96. Elliott, *Imperial Spain*, p. 301.
97. Quoted by Feros in *Kingship and Favoritism in the Spain of Philip III*, p. 253.
98. Goodwin, *Spain*, p. 392.
99. One: Goodwin, *Spain*, p. 425. Another: Chapman, *A History of Spain*, p. 261.
100. Elliott, "Managing Decline," p. 94.
101. Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic and the Hispanic World, 1606–1661* (Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 217–223.
102. Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire*, p. 90.
103. See Janice E. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates and Sovereigns: State Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton University Press, 1994). The statistics are from Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, p. 367.
104. Quoted in Parker, *The Dutch Revolt*, pp. 264–265.
105. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, p. 656.
106. Henry Kamen, "The Decline of Castile: The Last Crisis," *Economic History Review* 17, no. 1 (1964): p. 68.
107. Kamen, *Spain*, p. 202.
108. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, p. 121.
109. Kamen, *Spain*, p. 188.
110. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, pp. 297, 406, and 530.
111. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, p. 655.
112. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*, p. 775.
113. Geoffrey Parker, "Why Did the Dutch Revolt Last Eighty Years?" *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 26 (December 1976): p. 59.
114. Quoted by Kamen in *Spain*, p. 261.
115. Drelichman and Voth, *Lending to the Borrower from Hell*, p. 243.
116. Chapman, *A History of Spain*, p. 459.
117. Kamen, "The Decline of Castile," p. 66.
118. Kamen, "The Decline of Castile," pp. 72 and 268.
119. Quoted by Kamen in "The Decline of Castile," p. 63.
120. Elliott, *Imperial Spain,* p. 354.
121. Chapman, *A History of Spain*, p. 459.
122. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, pp. 31–72.
123. Chapman, *A History of Spain*, p. 236.
124. This is my calculation. Some of the omitted conflicts were quite substantial and bloody, such as the fifty-year-long guerrilla war in Chile in the second half of the sixteenth century.
125. Drelichman and Voth, *Lending to the Borrower from Hell*, esp. pp. 263–269.
126. The literature on the resource curse is vast. My favorites include Michael L. Ross, "The Political Economy of the Resource Curse," *World Politics* 51, no. 2 (January 1999): pp.

297–322; and Jeffrey D. Sachs and Andrew M. Warner, "The Curse of Natural Resources," *European Economic Review* 45, no. 4–6 (May 2001): pp. 827–838.

127. Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, p. 102.
128. On honor cultures, see Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen, *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the South* (Westview Press, 1996).
129. Elliott, *Imperial Spain,* p. 315. Emphasis added. Reference to Philip III's "humiliating pacifism" recurs on p. 320.
130. Feros, *Kingship and Favoritism in the Spain of Philip III*, p. 139.
131. Henry Kamen, "The Decline of Spain: A Historical Myth?" *Past and Present* 81 (November 1978): pp. 29–30; and Maltby, *The Rise and Fall of the Spanish Empire*, pp. 192–193.
132. Elliott, *Imperial Spain*, p. 376.

## *Chapter 7*

1. This rather odd imperial sideshow is described by Howard V. Evans in "The Nootka Sound Controversy in Anglo-French Diplomacy—1790," *Journal of Modern History* 46, no. 4 (December 1974): pp. 609–640.
2. J.R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1883), p. 8. For modern views, see John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830–1970* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 3, 91; Jeremy Black, "Britain and the 'Long' Eighteenth Century, 1688–1815," in John Andreas Olsen and Colin S. Gray, eds., *The Practice of Strategy: From Alexander the Great to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 155–174; and David Morgan-Owen, *The Fear of Invasion: Strategy, Politics, and British War Planning, 1880–1914* (Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 12.
3. William S. Maltby, "The Origins of a Global Strategy: England from 1558 to 1713," in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 158. Those interested in more depth can consult William Reginald Ward, *The English Land Tax in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1953).
4. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, p. 101.
5. Paul M. Kennedy in *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (MacMillan Press, 1983), esp. p. 66.
6. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 87.
7. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 70.
8. Black, "Britain and the 'Long' Eighteenth Century, 1688–1815," pp. 165–166.
9. Quoted by Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (Allen & Unwin, 1980), p. 416.
10. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 124.
11. Quoted in Ronald Hyam, *Understanding the British Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 75.
12. John Mearsheimer called this "the stopping power of water." *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W.W. Norton, 2001), ch. 4.
13. Quoted by John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (Bloomsbury Press, 2012), p. 318.
14. It is hard to find anyone who questioned this imperative. As summarized by Michael Howard, "the dominance of the European land-mass by an alien and hostile power would make almost impossible the maintenance of our national independence." *The Continental Commitment: The Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (Maurice Temple Smith Ltd., 1972), pp. 9–10.
15. This is the second reference to this famous quotation from Lord Palmerston: "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow."
16. Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 17.
17. Other choke points were brought under control by absorbing the Falkland Islands, Heligoland, Malta, Ionian islands, Mauritius, Seychelles, Ceylon, Malacca, and several others. See Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, pp. 154–155.

18. An incomplete list of places with coaling stations would include Ajaccio, Alexandria, Barbados, Bermuda, Bombay, Cape Town, Cyprus, Diego Garcia, Fiji, Halifax, Lagos, Lisbon, Madras, Malta, Martinique, Mombasa, Trincomalee, Wei-hai-wei, and Zanzibar.
19. Its story is told in many places; for one of the more interesting, see Philip Lawson, *The East India Company: A History* (Routledge, 2013).
20. Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (St. Martin's Griffin, 1994), p. 132. "Catastrophically foolish" is my judgment.
21. Quoted by Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 116.
22. This argument is made by, among other people, Niall Ferguson in *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (Basic Books, 2002), pp. 89–90.
23. Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1–3. For a sympathetic portrayal of the king, see Andrew Roberts, *The Last King of America: The Misunderstood Reign of George III* (Viking, 2021).
24. Edmund Burke, "On Conciliation with America," in Peter J. Stanlis, ed., *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches* (Routledge, 2017), pp. 26–27.
25. Jeremy Black, *The British Empire: A History and a Debate* (Ashgate, 2015), pp. 98 and 147. On the process by which lost wars feed perceptions of decline, see Christopher J. Fettweis, *Losing Hurts Twice as Bad: The Four Stages to Moving Beyond Iraq* (W.W. Norton, 2008).
26. Black, *The British Empire*, p. 100.
27. Luigi Barzini, *The Europeans* (Penguin, 1983), p. 53.
28. Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher in *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (MacMillan & Co., 1961). Blob: David Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign Policy Guru," *New York Times Magazine*, May 8, 2016.
29. Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 466.
30. John S. Galbraith, "The 'Turbulent Frontier' as a Factor in British Expansion," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, no. 2 (January 1960): p. 151.
31. Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 208.
32. The Act is available in full text online. Those wishing to see it in a book can consult E.H. Nolan, *The Illustrated History of the British in India and the East* (Virtue and Co., 1859), with the quotation appearing on p. 294.
33. James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, p. 134.
34. Galbraith, "The 'Turbulent Frontier' as a Factor in British Expansion," p. 151.
35. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, p. 87; and W. Ross Johnston, *Great Britain Great Empire: An Evaluation of the British Imperial Experience* (University of Queensland Press, 1981), p. 100.
36. M.E Yapp, *Strategies of British India: Britain, Iran and Afghanistan, 1798–1850* (Clarendon Press, 1980), esp. pp. 12–18. The "powder-magazine" bit appears on p. 12.
37. Galbraith, "The 'Turbulent Frontier' as a Factor in British Expansion," p. 153; and Hyam, *Understanding the British Empire*, p. 129.
38. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, p. 53. On defensive imperialism in Britain, see Eric Adler, "Late Victorian and Edwardian Views of Rome and the Nature of 'Defensive Imperialism,'" *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 15, no. 2 (June 2008): pp. 187–216.
39. Aldon D. Bell, "War and the Military in Nineteenth-Century Britain," in L.L. Farrar, Jr., ed., *War: A Historical, Political, and Social Study* (ABC-Clio Press, Inc., 1978), pp. 123–128.
40. James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, p. 192.
41. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 209.
42. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, pp. 231–232.
43. Bell, "War and the Military in Nineteenth-Century Britain," p. 124.
44. Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 147; and Richard Hart Sinnreich, "About Turn: British Strategic Transformation from Salisbury to Grey," in Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, and James Lacey, eds., *The Shaping of Grand Strategy: Policy, Diplomacy, and War* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 142.
45. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 150.
46. Quoted by Black in *The British Empire*, pp. 152–153.
47. Quoted by James in *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, p. 174.
48. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, p. 95.

49. Ian St. John, *The Making of the Raj: India under the East India Company* (Praeger, 2012), pp. 69–70.
50. Quoted by Samuel S. Mander, *Our Opium Trade with China* ( Simpkin, Marshall, & Co., 1877), p. 12.
51. Quoted by J.Y. Wong in *Deadly Dreams: Opium, Imperialism and the* Arrow *War (1856–1860) in China* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 33. The word "opium" arises only once in the Treaty of Nanking, in Article IV as part of an arrangement to repay a pre-war ransom.
52. Quoted by Darwin in *The Empire Project*, p. 36.
53. One such person is Ferguson, in *Empire*, p. 176.
54. Quotes by Robinson and Gallagher in *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 269.
55. "There is a certain absurdity about the struggle for Fashoda," wrote Robinson and Gallagher. "There was a strange disproportion between ends and means . . . A still deeper absurdity seems to lie in the French speculation about damming the river . . . the scheme was hare-brained, for it turned out that there was no stone within miles of Fashoda . . . the great rivalry for the Upper Nile was based on a myth. The greatest absurdity of all might seem to be that for two months two great Powers stood at the brink of war." *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 376.
56. Byron Farwell, *Queen Victoria's Little Wars* (Harper & Row, 1972), p. 200. On this general point, see Muriel Chamberlain, *Pax Britannica? British Foreign Policy, 1789–1914* (Longman, 1988); and Rebecca Berens Matzke, *Deterrence through Strength: British Naval Power and Foreign Policy under Pax Britannica* (University of Nebraska Press, 2011).
57. Those "principal" wars were in Persia (1856–57), India (1857–59), China (1858–60), New Zealand (1860–66), Ethiopia (1867–68), the Gold Coast (1873–74), Afghanistan (1878–80), South Africa (1879 and 1880–81), Burma (1885–86), northwest India (1895 and 1897–98), Rhodesia (1896), and Sudan (1896–98). Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 117.
58. The valley was called Tirah, and fourty-four thousand troops took part. Farwell, *Queen Victoria's Little Wars*, pp. 318–329.
59. Sir Neville Chamberlain (no relation), quoted by Farwell in *Queen Victoria's Little Wars*, p. 325.
60. Quoted by Kennedy in *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 153.
61. Development of the concept of informal control is usually credited to Sir Frederick D. Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (William Blackwood and Sons, 1922). Formal definition and a good discussion can be found in Bernard Porter, *Empire Ways: Aspects of British Imperialism* (I.B. Taurus, 2016), pp. 20–21. List of informal empire locations: John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," *Economic History Review* 6, no. 1 (1953): p. 11.
62. Quoted by Barry Gough in *Pax Britannica: Ruling the Waves and Keeping the Peace before Armageddon* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 110. For more on gunboat diplomacy, see pp. 151–164.
63. Actual quotation available in Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 167.
64. It is popular among Marxist theorists and various critics of what is sometimes called "neo-imperialism" today. See Michael Hardt and Anthony Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2000).
65. Jürgen Osterhammel, "Britain and China, 1842–1914," in Andrew Porter, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III, The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 146–169.
66. Not imperialism: David McLean, *War, Diplomacy and Informal Empire: Britain and the Republics of La Plata, 1816–1853* (Bloomsbury, 1995), esp. p. 190. Quarter of overseas wealth: Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 87. Review and analysis of inconsistent intervention: Alan Knight, "Britain and Latin America," in Andrew Porter, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire: Volume III, The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 139–140.
67. Porter, *Empire Ways*, p. 21; and Gallagher and Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," pp. 1–15.
68. Black, "Britain and the 'Long' Eighteenth Century, 1688–1815," p. 173.

69. Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 247. See too C.C. Eldridge, *England's Mission: The Imperial Idea in the Age of Gladstone and Disraeli* (University of North Carolina Press, 1973).
70. Quoted by Raymond F. Betts in "The Allusion to Rome in British Imperialist Thought of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Victorian Studies* 15, no. 2 (December 1971): pp. 149–159; and Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c. 1500—c. 1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 8.
71. Charles Trevelyan, to be precise, of Irish famine fame. Quoted in Ferguson, *Empire*, p. 145.
72. W. Ross Johnston, *Great Britain Great Empire: An Evaluation of the British Imperial Experience* (University of Queensland Press, 1981), p. 153.
73. Porter, *Empire Ways*, p. 163. The literature on this debate is immense. For a sample, see A.P. Thornton, *The Imperial Idea and Its Enemies: A Study in British Power* (MacMillan, 1984); Mira Matikkala, *Empire and Imperial Ambition: Liberty, Englishness and Anti-Imperialism in Late-Victorian Britain* (I.B. Taurus, 2011); and Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Skeptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850–1920* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).
74. Johnston, *Great Britain Great Empire*, p. 86.
75. Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 396.
76. Ferguson, *Empire*, p. 152.
77. For slave trade numbers, see Markus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (Viking, 2007), p. 5; and Jeremy Black, *The British Seaborne Empire* (Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 67–73. According to an influential analysis by Seymour Drescher, the practice was "aborted in its prime." *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), p. 167 and *passim*. Half of the world's sugar: Chaim D. Kaufmann and Robert A. Pape, "Explaining Costly International Moral Action: Britain's Sixty-Year Campaign against the Atlantic Slave Trade," *International Organization* 53, no. 4 (Autumn 1999): p. 631.
78. Raymond C. Howell, *The Royal Navy and the Slave Trade* (Croom Helm, 1987); and Roger T. Anstey, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810* (Humanities Press, 1975).
79. "Except for the bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807," according to one account, "the battle of Algiers was most likely the largest cannonade dealt upon a littoral target by a naval force during the Age of Sail." Oded Löwenheim, "'Do Ourselves Credit and Render a Lasting Service to Mankind': British Moral Prestige, Humanitarian Intervention, and the Barbary Pirates," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (March 2003): p. 24.
80. Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 168.
81. Kaufmann and Pape, "Explaining Costly International Moral Action," p. 636.
82. Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, pp. 41–52. South Africa: Norman Rich, *Great Power Diplomacy, 1814–1914* (McGraw-Hill, 1992), p. 279.
83. Treaties: Gallagher and Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade," p. 11. Dahomey: Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, pp. 39–41. 5000 soldiers: Christopher Lloyd, *The Navy and the Slave Trade: The Suppression of the African Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (Routledge, 2012), p. xi.
84. Three different Navigation Acts (1650, 1651, and 1660) solidified the mercantilist system, as did the Staple Act that followed in 1663 and Plantation Act in 1673.
85. Stephen Krasner argued that Cobden-Chevalier began a "golden age of free trade" in Europe. "State Power and the Structure of International Trade," *World Politics* 28, no. 3 (April 1976): p. 325.
86. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 161.
87. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, p. 19.
88. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 150.
89. Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 268.
90. See Johnston, *Great Britain Great Empire*, p. 56; and Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, p. 396.
91. Quoted by Kennedy in *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 152.
92. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, p. 114.
93. Quoted by Robinson and Gallagher in *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 2.
94. Quoted by Porter in *Empire Ways*, p. 10.
95. According to Doyle, liberal political ideas and free trade were "catalysts of chaos." *Empires*, p. 303.

96. Quoted by Hyam in *Understanding the British Empire*, p. 98.
97. Johnston, *Great Britain Great Empire*, p. 153.
98. Ferguson, *Empire*, p. 223. For an entertaining description of the era, see Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912* (Avon Books, 1991).
99. Quoted by Robinson and Gallagher in *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 292.
100. Quoted by Robinson and Gallagher in *Africa and the Victorians*, p. 189.
101. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 181.
102. Sinnreich, "About Turn," p. 118.
103. Paul Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870–1945: Eight Studies* (George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 92.
104. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, p. 273.
105. The most comprehensive work on this issue is Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2004).
106. James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, pp. 327–329.
107. Johnston, *Great Britain Great Empire*, pp. 128–129; Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*, p. 80; and Porter, *Empire Ways*, p. 164.
108. John Gooch, *The Prospect of War: The British Defence Policy 1847–1942* (Frank Cass, 1981), p. 1.
109. Quoted by Gooch in *The Prospect of War*, p. 12.
110. Quoted by I. F. Clarke in *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars 1763–3749* (Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 34.
111. Quotations in this paragraph are from Morgan-Owen, *The Fear of Invasion*, pp. 2, 14, 21, and 50. On invasion scares, see too Howard, *The Continental Commitment*, pp. 20–21 and 36–39.
112. Quoted by Rich in *Great Power Diplomacy*, p. 218.
113. Sinnreich, "About Turn," p. 112.
114. Quoted by Rich in *Great Power Diplomacy*, p. 386, emphasis in original.
115. Robinson and Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians*, pp. 59–60.
116. Rich described what he described as the Kaiser's "colossal blunder" which was "was not designed to serve any serious political purpose whatever but was simply an act of stupidity" in *Great Power Diplomacy*, pp. 288–290.
117. 7 to 1: Bell, "War and the Military in Nineteenth-Century Britain," p. 128. 448 thousand troops: Morgan-Owen, *The Fear of Invasion*, p. 71. Only one battalion at home: John Gooch, "The Weary Titan: Strategy and Policy in Great Britain, 1890–1918," in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox and Alvin Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 287.
118. Darwin, *The Empire Project*, p. 247.
119. International-relations scholars call this the "power transition theory," or the "Thucydides Trap," after the ancient Greek historian who observed the process twenty-five hundred years ago. Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).
120. A.J.P. Taylor, *The First World War* (Penguin Books, 1963), p. 72.
121. "It was a measure of how far they had been driven from the old assumptions of imperial defence," wrote Darwin, "that British leaders could agree by mid-1918 that without Middle Eastern supremacy their world-system would collapse." *The Empire Project*, p. 377.
122. It was not stronger in Ireland. Black, *The British Empire*, p. 155.
123. John Mueller describes those lessons in *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (Basic Books, 1989), pp. 53–77.
124. James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, p. 468.
125. Paul Kennedy, "The Tradition of Appeasement in British Foreign Policy, 1865–1939," in his *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870–1945: Eight Studies* (George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 16.
126. Rich, *Great Power Diplomacy, 1814–1914*, pp. 352, 381–382.
127. For more on this, see Christopher J. Fettweis, *Psychology of a Superpower: Security and Dominance in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 74–98.
128. Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870–1945*, p. 216.

129. The relative balance of power is debated by Williamson Murray, "Munich, 1938: The Military Confrontation," *Journal of Strategic* Studies 2, no. 3 (December 1979): pp. 282–302; and P.E. Caquet, "The Balance of Forces on the Eve of Munich," *International History Review* 40, no. 1 (2018): pp. 20–40.
130. Stephen G. Fritz, *The First Soldier: Hitler as Military Leader* (Yale University Press, 2018), pp. 65–68.
131. For examinations of a lesson mislearned, see J.L. Richardson, "New Perspectives on Appeasement: Some Implications for International Relations," *World Politics* 40, no. 3 (April 1988): pp. 289–316; Jeffrey Record, *The Specter of Munich: Reconsidering the Lessons of Appeasing Hitler* (Potomac Books, 2007); and Paul Kennedy, "A Time to Appease," *The National Interest*, no. 108 (July/August 2010): pp. 7–17.
132. Quoted by Darwin in *The Empire Project*, pp. 422–423.
133. Skepticism regarding intent can be found in Derek Leebaert, *Grand Improvisation: America Confronts the British Superpower, 1945–1957* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).
134. Doyle, *Empires*, p. 257.
135. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Columbia University Press, 2012).
136. Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited," *American Sociological Review* 59, no. 1 (February 1994): p. 5.
137. Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share: A Short History of British Imperialism 1850–1995* (Longman, 1996), pp. 290–292 and 346–347. See also George L. Bernstein, *The Myth of Decline: The Rise of Britain Since 1945* (Pimlico, 2004), esp. pp. 9–10.
138. Porter, *Empire Ways*, p. 22.

## *Chapter 8*

1. Ernest May, *'Lessons' of the Past: The Uses and Misuses of History in American Foreign Policy*. (Oxford University Press, 1973); Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Policymakers* (Free Press, 1986); and Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton University Press, 1992).
2. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason* (Prometheus Books, 1998), p. 82.
3. Quoted by Geoffrey Parker, *The Geopolitics of Domination* (Routledge, 1988), p. 3.
4. The closest calls were South Vietnam, which was not a UN member, and Kuwait. Saddam Hussein's attempts to absorb the latter was decisively reversed at the behest of the Security Council. On border alterations, see Mark W. Zacher, "The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and the Use of Force," *International Organization* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2001): pp. 215–250; on conquest, Tanisha M. Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation* (Princeton University Press, 2007).
5. Steven Pinker has called this the "New Peace." *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (Viking, 2011).
6. John Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Cornell University Press, 2004); Christopher J. Fettweis, *Dangerous Times? The International Politics of Great Power Peace* (Georgetown University Press, 2010); Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Joshua Goldstein, *Winning the War on War* (Dutton, 2011). For skepticism, see Bear F. Braumoeller, *Only the Dead: The Persistence of War in the Modern Age* (Oxford University Press, 2019).
7. For a wonderful review, see Josef Joffe, *The Myth of America's Decline: Politics, Economics, and a Half-Century of False Prophecies* (W.W. Norton, 2014).
8. Henry A. Kissinger, *The Necessity for Choice: Prospects of American Foreign Policy* (Anchor Books, 1962), p. 1.
9. Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (Free Press, 1997). It is no coincidence that Oswald Spengler wrote his famous *The Decline of the West* (Knopf, 1926–1928) in Germany after World War I. The most prominent work of post-Vietnam declinism was Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (Random House, 1987), but this is also good: Robert W. Tucker, "America in

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22. The 2017 National Security Strategy is available at https://www.acq.osd.mil/ncbdp/docs/NSS-Final-12–18-2017–0905.pdf. See also Matthew Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the U.S. and China* (Oxford University Press, 2020); and Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World* (Knopf, 2018). Pentagon analysis: *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2020* (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020), available at https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF. Unbridled enthusiasm from the war colleges: the essays in Thomas F. Lynch, ed., *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition* (Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, October 27, 2020) and Mahir J. Ibrahimov, ed., *Great Power Competition: The Changing Landscape of Global Geopolitics* (US Army Command and General Staff College Press, Fort Leavenworth, KS, November 23, 2020).
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S. Ross, "The Geography of the Peace: East Asia in the Twenty-First Century," *International Security* 23, no. 4 (Spring 1999): pp. 81–118; and everything by M. Taylor Fravel, including his *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton University Press, 2008).

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39. Of these, the Yuan policies did the most long-term damage. John Dardess, "Shun-ti and the End of Yüan Rule in China," in Herbert Franke and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China. Vol. 6, Alien Regimes and Border States, 907–1368* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 581.
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42. Fettweis, *Psychology of a Superpower*, esp. pp. 74–98.
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