

THE DECISION FOR EMPIRE

Katie Kopania

Katie Kopania is a junior history major. This essay, written for a course in modern British history, was assigned to explore the motivation behind Britain's drive to build an empire. The sources used are from the texts for that class.

Take up the white man's burden—
Send forth the best ye breed—
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait on heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild—
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child!

When first considering the issue of Britain's late 19th-century empire, sentiments such as the one displayed in this Kipling passage would seem to make the argument against empire easy. The implication of the Anglo-Saxon race feeling that a native population was savage as a means to justify political gain is atrocious by modern-day standards. But exploitation and racial superiority were not the major drive of Britons in the late 1800s. Several factors made imperialism a reality for Britain. Empire was a necessity for Britain in this era because of the struggle for power that emerging countries in Europe faced. Arguments for empire will prove that any other alternative was unrealistic for the time period examined.

Britain's first taste of imperialism did not begin in the late 1890s. Empire was seen as far back as 1783 and on through most of the Victorian years, 1801–1870. Public opinion supported independence of the colonies in the past because interest was geared more toward trade rather than the acquisition of territory.¹ Interest was transferred in the latter 1800s with a new expansionist

1 Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden" in Walter Arnstein, ed., *The Past Speaks*. (Lexington, MA: DC Heath and Company, 1993), 280.

2 Walter Arnstein, *Britain Yesterday and Today, 1830 to the Present* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1996), 169.

government including Salisbury for the Conservatives and Roseberry for the Liberals. The transition was partially due to economic concerns such as markets, raw materials and potential investment outlets.³ Free trade was disintegrating as several countries began to impose their protective tariffs. The United States enacted the Morrill tariff of 1861, and Germany and France soon followed. "It came to be argued that Britain should occupy territories whose current commercial value was small or those territories might otherwise become part of the protective tariff of another sphere of power."⁴ The pressure of Britain to compete with countries for economic power was a major factor in the rise of empire.

Economic issues became a topic for heated debate for Britons, and William Greg shed some light on the discussion in relation to empire. Greg examined Sir W. Molesworth's statistics that alleged the colonies were economically unjustified. Sir Molesworth contended that the colonial empire cost England about 4,000,000 pounds a year, and that money could have been used to relieve England of its extreme taxes.⁵ When Greg looked into Molesworth's estimates, he revealed that his proposed 2.5 million pounds spent on military expenditures was actually only a little over one-and-a-quarter million pounds. Greg went on to show that the number might have been less because some military was used to protect the colonies, but other resources were used to protect Britain's overseas trade. In other words, the money would have been spent regardless of Britain's colonial settlements.

William Greg did venture even further into the economic question. He explained that there have been economic consequences without the advantage of the colonies. For starters, Britain would have had to face the protective tariffs, as previously explained. With England having been one of the chief manufacturers in the world, duties could have been as high as 30 to 50 percent to the United States alone.⁶ Britain would have inevitably lost profit in the long run as well as their influence in colonial rule.

In regard to the colonies, independence would not have necessarily guaranteed freedom from England. Granting independence would have left the

3 *Ibid.*, 171.

4 *Ibid.*

5 William Greg, "Shall We Retain Our Colonies?" in *The Past Speaks*, 280.

6 Arnstein, *Britain Yesterday and Today*, 171.

colonies vulnerable to attack and in need of assistance. From past experience, the colonies would have looked straight to England for their defense. Greg stated that "We should have to bear the expense of defending them from attack without having any control over their conduct in incurring it."⁷ In other words, Britain was tied to her dependents regardless, and if so, should have a say in their affairs as a compensation.

Outside of economic issues, there were other reasons for the years of empire. Power seemed to be a major factor in the rise of imperialism. Europe was rising, and several countries challenged England's dominance. For example, Germany became a leading military and political power after the Franco-Prussian War. That made it virtually impossible for Britain not to compete so as to hold strong in the balance of power. After exhausting all avenues within Britain herself, she had to expand to build up her weakening power.

An article titled "The Maintenance of Empire" by Benjamin Disraeli defended colonial rule. Disraeli was the leader of the Conservative party and examined the issue of imperialism. In his defense of empire, he made some effective points. He discussed how hard the Liberals fought to abandon the empire but explained that they did not propose adequate solutions to independence.⁸ He felt that self-rule was not out of the question if correctly implemented, but at the time was unrealistic. He also chastised the Liberals for only considering the financial ramifications, without giving due respect for England's political obligations. Disraeli ended his speech with an appeal to the nationalistic spirits of Britons. He left them to evaluate an England of comfortable and humble means as compared to one that would demand respect of the world.

Nationalistic prose was used to sway Englishers in support of the existing empire. The thought of a Britain so powerful that countries such as Germany and Russia posed no threat was appealing to many. Alfred Lord Tennyson followed such a call in his verse regarding the opening of the colonial exhibition. For

example:

... That old strength and constancy
which has made your fathers great
In our ancient island State,
And whenever her flag fly
Glorying between sea and sky,
Make the might of Britain known;
Britain, hold your own!⁹

Poems such as this raged with pride and rallied the masses to defend the honor of their grand nation.

With an English audience willing to support her nation, empire was inevitable. The time was conducive to colonial settlement and was supported. Critics of empire had one issue that remains to be discussed. The morality of rule over native populations was problematic. Many said that the treatment of Africans, and the violent force used to subdue them, was vile and extreme. Actually, there was certain evidence examined which raised doubts on the subject. Arnstein shows that it was actually the British who had a hand in the abolition of the slave trade. Beginning with west Africa in the 1850s and ending with the reluctant east Africa in 1895, the slave trade was finished. During the exhibition in the "Scramble for Africa," it appeared as though there were missionaries who were concerned with making religious converts. It would be foolish to assume that all Britons were peaceful and just, but it seemed as though their interests were not solely in exploitation, but rather in the advancement of the empire as a whole.

There has been evidence of force used upon Africans as well as the British perception that Africans were savage and primitive. The idea of a native population so diverse from the Anglo was something new. It seems plausible that ignorance and fear of Britain's own repression caused the English to act against the natives. During a time when the quest for power was at hand, England could show no vulnerability, for it, too, would have lost the power it held so dear.

7 Ibid., 270.

8 Benjamin Disraeli, "The Maintenance of Empire," in *The Past Speaks*, 276-278.

9 Alfred Tennyson, "Opening of the Indian and Cultural Exhibition by the Queen," in *The Past Speaks*, 279.

Joseph Chamberlain gave a speech on the "True Conception of Empire" in which he outlined three periods of colonial history. The first he described as a time when the colonies were established as a direct source of profit.¹⁰ He went on to the second stage to show the animosity against empire because free trade was successful following independence. The third stage pertained to the sense of obligation towards empire. He spoke of a national mission that could only have been justified if it enhanced the involved nations. He maintained that Britain did just that and introduced a peace and prosperity that the colonies had never seen before.¹¹ He did not say that British rule was perfect, but contended that it helped civilizations advance to heights never seen before. He spoke of the great British race which provided for the prosperity of all its inhabitants, as well as secured safety from potential danger.

William Greg added to Chamberlain's arguments favoring prosperity for the colonies. He argued that Britain's obligation was to protect the natives from slavery. He expanded on his point when he explained that if Britain abandoned the people of Jamaica that the United States would have converted them into slaves. His obligation was protection from potential harm and defense of the British empire.¹²

After analyzing the pros and cons of Britain's empire in the late 19th century, the position is clear. The British had no choice in the decision concerning colonialism, because if the colonies were not their acquisition, they would have been someone else's. The reality of the situation is apparent. Morally, cultures should not be subdued for political purposes, but for the time period, there was ignorance which lent the situation its fate. Britain was struggling for power during a time when it was up for grabs, and imperialism was a part of the package.

¹⁰ Joseph Chamberlain, "The True Conception of Empire," in *The Past Speaks*, 276.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹² William Greg, "Shall We Retain Our Colonies?" in *Ibid.*, 269.