

# what one book

Expert Recommendations on a Selected Topic

## The Collapse of Empires

BY KEVIN HARTNETT

Our country's political gridlock and economic recession have prompted talk about the end of the American era. While such nay-saying is hardly new (the ever-pessimistic Puritans were ready to give up the experiment before they had even stepped off the boat), the parallels with other fallen empires seem more acute this time around: an army mired in foreign wars; excessive domestic consumption; mounting debt; and the rise of a new power in the East.

One of the first statements on the end of empire comes from Thucydides, who watched the Athenian army fall to the Syracusans at Sicily in 413 BC. Since then, the final days of great powers have fired the imaginations of historians, novelists, and readers alike. We voyeuristically relive the death throes of an empire and revel in diagnosing trends of a decline that could not be reversed or were not recognized by the people who lived through them.

Books on the causes of empire collapse generally fall into two categories. The first emphasizes the role of external pressure in felling great powers: the Huns knocking at Rome's eastern border; the systemic stress that World War II placed on the British Empire; the arms race that bankrupted the Soviet Union. The second priori-



The British Empire

tizes homegrown influences such as political dysfunction, social unrest, or moral decline.

If there is one firm conclusion we can draw from the experiences of prior empires, it is that whenever it is finally time to write a recap of the American Day, there will be no shortage of ink spilled on the topic. The following nonfiction and fiction books will help illuminate what may—or may not—be our final days.

### Roman Empire

#### The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire

By Edward Gibbon (1776–1788)



Gibbon's six-volume masterpiece was the first definitive history of the Roman Empire. Writing in a detached, ironic style and drawing ominous parallels between Rome and his own Britain, Gibbon attributed Rome's fall to the "pusillanimous indolence" of its soldiers and the consequent outsourcing of the army to the same barbarian mercenaries who eventually overran the empire. He criticized the ebbing manliness of Rome's population and controversially suggested that

the spread of Christianity—with its emphasis on the afterlife—had left Rome's citizens unwilling to fight for their empire. Gibbon's reliance on primary sources earned him the sobriquet, "the first modern historian."

#### Corruption and the Decline of Rome

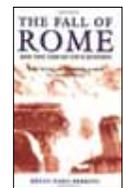
By Ramsay MacMullen (1990)



MacMullen observes that the Roman Empire did not fall all at once—but that when and where it did, the primary reason was corruption. He remarks on bribes paid by the rich to gain exemption from taxation and, starting in AD 250, the increasing venality of the courts, which undermined the civic fabric of the empire. MacMullen labels these trends the "privatization of power" that ultimately left Rome vulnerable before its invaders.

#### The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization

By Bryan Ward-Perkins (2005)



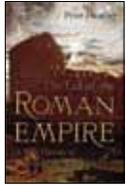
This slim, unique book uses archaeological evidence to assess the implications of the end of the Roman Empire for the average reader. Contrary to the idea that the end of Rome was a

benign, gradual process, Ward-Perkins cites the sudden scarcity of fine pottery, coinage, and roof tiles to argue that the sundering of Rome's extensive commercial network had immediate and severe consequences for the everyday lives of the empire's citizens.

### The Fall of the Roman Empire

**A New History of Rome and the Barbarians**

By Peter Heather (2005)



Heather argues that for all of the Roman Empire's faults, its demise was caused by factors beyond its control. In AD 376 the Huns erupted beyond Rome's eastern border, setting off a domino effect of migration that Heather argues eventually brought down the empire. To make this point, he observes that "all of the major successor states" that supplanted the Roman Empire in the West were "created around the military power of the new barbarian supergroups" that had coalesced in response to the Hunnic threat.

### Further Reading

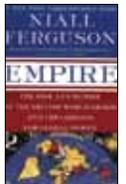
**HOW ROME FELL** *Death of a Superpower* | ADRIAN GOLDSWORTHY (2009)

## British Empire

### Empire

**The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power**

By Niall Ferguson (2004)

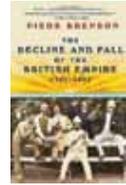


"The difficulty with the achievements of empire is that they are much more likely to be taken for granted than the sins of empire." Thus begins Ferguson's apology for British imperialism. He argues that the spread of free trade and the rule of law under the British were enough to make up for the empire's weaker moral moments. And at the very least, he rationalizes, the British were less severe rulers than the Belgians or the Japanese.

Ferguson, who locates the demise of the British Empire in the costs of fighting World War II, contends that the lessons of British history would benefit the United States, an "empire in denial."

### The Decline and Fall of the British Empire 1781–1997

By Piers Brendon (2008)

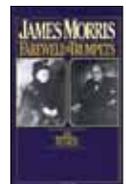


The velocity of a falling body, Tolstoy noted in *War and Peace*, is greatest just before it hits the ground. Brendon, who takes this position on the British Empire, argues that in the early 20th century, the empire was simultaneously expanding and tearing at the seams. The source of the empire's troubles, he writes, "was a betrayal of the civilized values which the British claimed to espouse." He cites the 1919 Amritsar Massacre and the use of concentration camps against civilians during the Boer War and against the Mau Mau in Kenya as examples of how the British lost power the more viciously they tried to hold onto it.

### Farewell the Trumpets

**An Imperial Retreat**

By Jan Morris (James Morris before 1972) (1978)



While most books on empire collapse focus on sweeping themes, James Morris (now Jan Morris) instead recreates, as one reviewer put it "the sights and sounds and smells and fears and joys" of the end of the British Empire. *Farewell the Trumpets* is the final volume in Morris's *Pax Britannica* trilogy. It begins in 1897 with Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and concludes 70 years later with Winston Churchill's funeral. Along the way, Morris focuses on major and minor historical characters at pivotal moments in the Empire's decline, rendering both the absurdity of the colonial project and the poignancy of its loss.

### Further Reading

**RAJ** *The Making and Unmaking of British India* | LAWRENCE JAMES (2000)

**EMPIRE** *The British Imperial Experience from 1765 to the Present* | DENIS JUDD (1988)

**THE RISE AND FALL OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE** | LAWRENCE JAMES (1997)

**BRITAIN AND DECOLONIZATION** *The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* | JOHN DARWIN (1988)

**A PASSAGE TO INDIA** | E. M. FORSTER (1924)

## French Empire

### All Souls' Rising

By Madison Smartt Bell (1996)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST



Many slave rebellions sprang up in the Caribbean in the 18th century, but only one succeeded. Bell sets this compelling work of historical fiction during the early years (1791–93) of the Haitian Revolution; it opens with wealthy white planters scheming to unleash a controlled slave revolt in order to tighten the alliance between upper- and lower-class colonists. However, the revolt soon spirals out of their control. Toussaint L'Ouverture emerges as the leader of the rebellion, which culminates in the 1793 burning of the city Cap-Haïtien and prompts many French settlers to flee the island.

### A Savage War of Peace

**Algeria 1954–1962**

By Alistair Horne (1977)



More than 150 years after the French Empire lost Haiti, it lost Algeria. Between 1952 and 1962 the National Liberation Front (FLN) battled the French army in a struggle marred by torture and civilian massacres. Horne's history was the first comprehensive telling of

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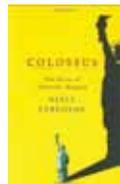
the Algerian War to appear in English, and it remains a highly influential text in the study of guerilla warfare and counterinsurgency. The book was even reissued during the Iraq War to meet spiking demand.

## American Empire

### Colossus

#### The Price of America's Empire

By Niall Ferguson (2004)



Ferguson has made a name for himself as a politically incorrect proponent of empire. In *Colossus*, he argues that America should impose its will more aggressively on the rest of the world in order secure the free flow of commerce around the globe. He writes that in an age of globalization “empire is more necessary ... than ever before” and maintains that the United States imperils its domestic security by acting too timidly abroad.

### Are We Rome?

#### The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America

By Cullen Murphy (2007)

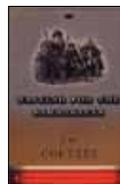


While *Vanity Fair* editor Murphy allows that substantial differences exist between America today and Rome at the time of its collapse (chief among them our democracy and innovative economy), he finds the parallels more troubling: an insular culture, a government dominated by special interests, and a rush to privatize public services.

## Other Empires

### Waiting for the Barbarians

By J. M. Coetzee (1982)



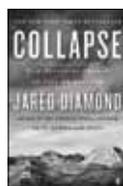
Coetzee's fable-like tale of an imagined empire (which, incidentally, resembles his own apartheid-era South Africa) centers on the moral

imperatives of imperialism. The story's protagonist, a wan bureaucrat known only as the Magistrate, lives in a border town that serves as a commercial hub for the outlying barbarian tribes. He figures himself “a responsible official ... serving out my days,” but he gets caught up in the empire's intrinsic brutality when the officials of the Third Bureau—the empire's secret service—descend on the town to root out mutinous elements.

### Collapse

#### How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed

By Jared Diamond (2004)



In this innovative take on the collapse of civilizations, Diamond argues that environmental degradation, rather than foreign pressure or cultural decline, poses the most lethal threat to empires big and small. He surveys a half-dozen fallen societies, ranging from the Greenland Norse to the Polynesians of Pitcairn Island, in order to identify common elements of their demise, including deforestation, water management problems, and, more recently, climate change.

### Further Reading

#### AUSTRIA-HUNGARY

**THE RADETZKY MARCH** | JOSEPH ROTH (1932)

#### BYZANTINE EMPIRE

**BYZANTIUM: The Decline and Fall** | JOHN JULIUS NORWICH (1995)

#### ETHIOPIAN EMPIRE

**THE EMPEROR** | RYSZARD KAPUSCINSKI (1989)

#### MEXICO

**NEWS FROM THE EMPIRE** | FERNANDO DEL PASO (2009) ■

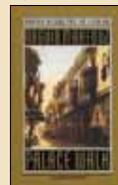
## have you read?

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fictionalized account is written by a Canadian journalist who witnessed the genocide of Tutsis by Hutus. A love story set amid this wider betrayal, the book is a defiant *cri de coeur*.

### Palace Walk

By Naguib Mahfouz | EGYPT



The first winner in the Arab-speaking world of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Mahfouz offers, in this first of a trilogy, a well that is tiny but deep, a refreshing and satisfying time capsule of life in early 20th-century Cairo. His evocation of the streets and households of the city is remarkably layered, and the Egyptian family who inhabit his Cairo speaks to us all.

### The Samurai's Garden

By Gail Tsukiyama | JAPAN



Sent from his home in China to a seaside village in Japan to recover from tuberculosis, Stephen spends a year in a breathtakingly rendered village; he records that time in this introspective novel. This is a story of love and devotion, alive with the cultural flavors of Japan: nuance, indirectness, and understatement.

### Katharine and E. B. White

#### An Affectionate Memoir

By Isabel Russell | UNITED STATES



Russell's memoir of the eight years she spent as personal secretary to E. B. White and his wife reveals just the person I suspected wrote *Charlotte's Web*: a gentle, sweet, funny, and charming man. A portrait of the Whites' later marriage and years in small-town Maine, this often tender account confirmed my lifelong partiality for E. B., the author of my favorite childhood book. ■