Chapter Twenty-Nine: The End of Imperialism

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Fading Empires: Anti-Colonialism and Decolonization
  The Sun Sets on the British Empire
  Reluctant Disengagement: the End of European Empires

New World Orders: Statebuilding in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia
  Statebuilding in Africa: from Village to Nation
  Statebuilding in the Middle East: Israel, Oil, and Islam
  Statebuilding in Asia: Democracy, Communism, and Capitalism

The Last Imperialist: The United States Abroad and at Home
  Good Neighbors: the United States in Latin America
  The Domino Game: the United States in Asia
  The Color Line: Conflict at Home

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The conflicts that led to World War I and World War II were not the only problems that the European nations were facing. Most of the imperial powers were also contending with uprisings and rebellions in their colonies. In Great Britain, some of the problems had been settled by extending commonwealth status to select colonies, including Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The British were not initially willing to extend that status to the Jewel of the Crown, India, because of its importance for the empire. After World War I ended, however, India began to move towards independence, in large part due to the leadership of men like Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi had trained as a barrister in London and had worked in the independence movement in South Africa before he returned home to India. He urged the use of nonviolence to bring the treatment of the Indians by the British to world attention. His tactics worked, and after World War II the British agreed to grant India its independence. The division of India, between a Muslim state (Pakistan) and a Hindi state (India), caused horrific riots and continued dissention, but the countries were free of British rule. The loss of India spelled the end of British domination in Asia.

In the Middle East and North Africa, struggles for independence were also occurring. In some states, such as Egypt, independence had been granted before World War II, although the British maintained a garrison at the Canal Zone. The areas that had been granted to Britain after World War I, including Iraq and Palestine, had to be dealt with as well. Iraq gained its independence in the years before World War II, although again the British retained a military presence there. In Palestine, the situation was far more complicated. Beginning in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Jewish Zionist settlers began to make their homes and compete with the indigenous Arab population in that region. In 1946, Britain granted independence to Jordan, and in 1947 created the state of Israel as a homeland for Jews. Britain withdrew in 1948, and Israel was immediately attacked by her Arab neighbors. The next 40 years saw constant hostility and even open warfare, and only with the Camp David Accord in 1979 did some level of peace come to the Middle East.

Britain was too drained financially to maintain its colonies after World War II, and its in Africa were released. The creation of the Commonwealth of Nations, in 1931, allowed former colonies to enjoy privileged economic relations with Britain. The only state which remained a problem for the British following World War I was Ireland, which had been advocating for home rule since the nineteenth century. A rebellion in 1916 had been brutally suppressed; battles in the streets between British soldiers and Irish Republican Army became common. In 1920 Britain divided Ireland into northern and southern states, with the Irish Free State in the south being declared a dominion and finally freed in 1937. However, independence did not end the problems in Ireland, which were frequently about religion, and wars continued late into the twentieth century.

Other imperial powers, notably the Dutch and the French, had no interest in relinquishing control of their empires. The Dutch ended up fighting an ultimately unsuccessful war to hold onto the East Indies, although they did grant Suriname full independence in 1975. The French fought to retain control of Vietnam but were eventually defeated by the Vietnamese forces; Vietnam was partitioned, and civil war broke out. In the Middle East, the French yielded their control of Syria and Lebanon. In North
Africa, the French were willing to give up Tunisia and Morocco, but they insisted on retaining control of Algeria, which many French viewed as an extension of France. The war to hold Algeria cost thousands of lives and led to bitter resentment against the French: it was not until Charles de Gaulle returned to office that Algeria received its independence, in 1962. Other colonies, including those held by Belgium and Portugal, also fought successfully for their independence in the years following World War II.

Once these former colonies had achieved their independence, there was the issue of how to create a government. Many of the colonies used the infrastructure that already existed, having been created by the imperial powers. Colonized Africa had a primarily cash crop economy, which had been a boon to the imperial powers but was often not enough to sustain an independent economy. Divided on issues of religion, education, and culture, the African people were vulnerable to dictators and often founded themselves under the control of a cruel and ruthless leader. In Kenya, in Rhodesia, and in Uganda, brutal dictators took control and slaughtered thousands of their own people before being ousted from power. The situation was different in South Africa, where a large minority of white settlers ran the country, separating themselves from the native Africans using a system called apartheid. Resistance to apartheid was met with jail sentences, torture, and even death, but the world’s attention began to focus on South Africa in the 1980s, and economic sanctions forced the leadership of South Africa to change its government. Elections based on universal suffrage were held in 1994, and South Africa was on its way to democracy.

In the Middle East, the discovery of oil changed everything. The successor states to the Ottoman Empire had many problems to contend with following World War I. The rise of Mustafa Kemal, known as Ataturk (father of the Turks), transformed Turkey from a backwards state to a more modern democratic country. In Egypt, the presidency of Abdel Nasser saw great strides, especially in terms of economics, for the Egyptian people. Nasser successfully galvanized the states of the Middle East, calling for a pan-Arab party to unify the peoples of the area. Other areas of the Middle East, particularly those around Israel, saw continual conflict during the years after World War II. Nasser’s successor in Egypt, Anwar Sadat, was assassinated for his role in bringing peace to Israeli-Egyptian relations.

As the rest of the world became increasingly dependent on petroleum, the Arab states created OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), designed to allow those countries that produced petroleum to have control over its sale and export. The wealth from the oil that was produced allowed for the introduction of many changes to the Middle East, but also to pad the pockets of the leaders of those countries. Some of the countries, notably Iran, came under the control of religious leaders who suppressed freedoms and ruled the countries as theocracies. The destabilization of some of these countries, including Libya and Iran, led the United States to attempt to intervene, often with disastrous results.

In Asia, the majority of the states followed the post-war Japanese model to become powerhouses of capitalism. With the exception of the countries under communist control (notably China), the countries of Asia became showcases for capitalism. The so-called Four Dragons of the Pacific Rim, including Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, all became significant economic powers. China, which became communist in 1949, remained a major power in Asia due to its nuclear capabilities, but the frequent repression of dissidents and human rights abuses have led to economic sanctions by the United States and the Europeans.

The last great imperial power was the United States. Indifferent at best before 1898, the United States victory in the Spanish-American war sparked a frenzy of imperial activity. American involvement in Latin America, notably Panama and Mexico, demonstrated the American desire for colonial holdings. The rise of strongmen, called caudillos, in many of the regions of Latin America only added to that impulse. The United States backed those strongmen who supported the United States, and intervened to overthrow those who did not. In response to the Communist threat of the 1950s, the United States became far more concerned about their neighbors to the south, and attempted to overthrow leaders such as Fidel Castro in Cuba. The CIA was successful in overthrowing Allende in Chile, but unsuccessful in its attempts against Castro. The United States also increased its involvement in Asia, again as a response to communism, and became embroiled in two major conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. Korea was a partially successful intervention in the American view; Vietnam was a disaster of epic proportions, with protests in the United States and all over the world regarding American involvement. By 1973, the United States was forced to withdraw its army without honor or victory, having lost thousands of men with nothing to show for it.

Protests against involvement in Vietnam were not the only demonstrations occurring in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement, and demands that the United States grant equality to the people of color living in America, became increasingly persistent, especially under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Voices of protest regarding the treatment of African-Americans came from almost every corner of the country. Even the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King could not slow the demands for change, and the Supreme Court decision of Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka, in which segregation in schools was
ruled illegal, marked the beginning of the end. The fight for equal rights continues, but tremendous gains were made in a very short period of time, although often at a great price. The United States was changing rapidly, and those changes would become increasingly apparent as the end of the twentieth century neared.

KEY POINTS

**Fading Empires:** Anti-colonial resistance begins even before 1914, then flares up after World War I, and leads after World War II to a thirty-year process of decolonization; at the end, the European empires are no more.

**New World Orders:** In Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, new states take form, shaped for better and for worse by their colonial experience, and representing a spectrum of political types—democratic, monarchical, socialist, and communist, but most often autocratic.

**The Last Imperialist:** A latecomer to imperialism, the United States acquires colonies in Asia and protectorates in Latin America, and intervenes as Cold War policeman in distant conflicts; at home the color line dividing the United States own people is at last acknowledged.

SUGGESTED FILMS

*Red Empire: Survivors: The Cold War.* Vestron, 54 minutes

*Gandhi.* Columbia, 187 minutes

*The Cold War.* McGraw-Hill, 20 minutes

*The Cold War.* Time-Life, 20 minutes

*The Story of Modern Egypt.* Time-Life, 20 minutes

*A History of U.S. Foreign Relations: The Road to Interdependence.* U.S. Department of State, 30 minutes

*Khrushchev and the Thaw.* Time-Life, 20 minutes

*The Problems of the Middle East.* Atlantis Productions, 22 minutes

*The Arab-Israeli Conflict.* Atlantis Productions, 20 minutes

*Israel.* Films, Inc., 13 minutes

*Crisis in Asia.* Time-Life, 20 minutes

*Gandhi s India.* Time-Life, 20 minutes

*Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam.* HBO, 84 minutes

*The Korean War.* A&E, 50 minutes