us: “Consider...the question of peacekeeping. It has become abundantly clear that the United States is not capable of effective peacekeeping—that is to say, constabulary duties.” He clarifies his position:

Unlike most European critics of the United States...I believe the world needs an effective liberal empire and that the United States is the best candidate for the job...The United States has good reasons to play the role of liberal empire, both from the point of view of its own security and out of straightforward altruism. In many ways too it is uniquely well equipped to play it. Yet for all its colossal economic, military and cultural power, the United States still looks unlikely to be an effective liberal empire without some profound changes in its economic structure, its social makeup and its political culture.

“All I mean,” continues Ferguson in his controversial book Colos-
and the United Kingdom, where his wife Susan, a media executive, and their three children live.

Moreover, in the United Kingdom, he is also quite the media celebrity. In 2002-3, for Britain's Channel 4, he wrote and starred in a six-part history of the British empire. In 2004, he followed with American Colossus—both programs based on his books. And in 2006, Britons watched his six-part The War of the World, dramatizing his latest, a huge volume subtitled Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West.

Visiting Ferguson in his office at the Center for European Studies, I asked him about the strain of separation from home and family, what he has called his transatlantic “trilemma.” “I can testify that it is extraordinarily hard,” he said. “It’s unfair to the family, and I’d so much rather they were here. But with every passing year, as children get older, they become harder to move. So I feel that I’ve lost this particular argument.” After a pause, though, he added, “Another way to look at it is that historically it’s not that abnormal for husbands and fathers to spend significant time away from their families—seamen, army officers, colonial administrators. Actually, funnily enough, these long separations perhaps do allow me bouts of extreme work, which suits my temperament.”

In the oration Ferguson delivered at Harvard’s Phi Beta Kappa literary exercises in June 2004, he noted: “Throughout much of my life, the United States has seemed to be tapping on my shoulder, urging me to quit the Old World for the New.”

Niall (pronounced “Neel”) Campbell Douglas Ferguson—born in Glasgow in 1964, his father a doctor, his mother a physics teacher—grew up in the west of Scotland, except for two years in Nairobi, Kenya, where his father had taken a job teaching. (His younger sister is now a professor of physics at the University of Pennsylvania.) He prepared at The Glasgow Academy, which he describes as “a school produced by the Scottish bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century to educate their sons for commerce. I was lucky because, though it was clear that I wasn’t going into business or law, the school was encouraging of those who were obviously effete intellectuals, and encouraged us to apply to Oxford or Cambridge. My parents never opposed this path. My father wasn’t the kind of man who wants to clone himself—he was delighted that I was academically motivated. The ethos of my family was work and education.”

So it was off to Oxford, where he promptly went straight to the devil. “In the true tradition of Calvinist lads who lapse,” he says, “I spent two years doing everything but work. I played the double bass in the jazz quintet, debated rather badly at the Oxford Union, edited a student magazine, and even appeared as the caterpillar in Alice in Wonderland, hookah and all.” At that moment, says he, he fortuitously discovered he was not cut out for the
stage and, according to his account, sprinted to the Bodleian Library in the nick of time. “Oxford, unlike Harvard, doesn't do continuous assessment. If you can get it together for your final examinations, which in those days meant 10 three-hour papers over seven days, it won't matter how bad you've been before.”

Dare we say the rest is history? Graduating with first-class honors in 1985, he was a demy (a foundation scholar) at Magdalen College until 1989. He then spent two years as a Hanseatic Scholar in Hamburg and Berlin, where he learned German, worked on his dissertation (subsequently his first book, Paper and Iron: Hamburg Business and German Politics in the Era of Inflation, 1897-1927), and worked as a journalist for British and German newspapers—using a variety of pseudonyms, to avoid academic reproach. At this point, he took up a research fellowship at Christ’s College, Cambridge, soon afterwards moving to a lectureship at Peterhouse. He returned to Oxford in 1992 to become fellow and tutor in modern history at Jesus College, and in 2000, he was appointed professor of political and financial history. Two years later he jumped the Atlantic to take the Herzog chair in financial history at the Stern Business School of New York University (where he was voted “Professor of the Year” in 2003). In 2004, the year he arrived at Harvard, Time magazine included him in its list of the 100 most influential people in the world.

Ferguson is a bonnie and beamish lad—genial, open, and charming. His admirers have suggested that in a movie he might be played by Colin Firth or Hugh Grant. In Alan Bennett’s recent play and film, The History Boys, he is the model for the contrarian teacher Irwin, played by Stephen Campbell Moore. But there is no reason he could not play himself. He certainly has the media savvy and experience. In his films he uses to great effect his mellifluous actor’s voice, Oxonian wrapped in unmistakable burr. As he does his good looks: In the film of Empire, he treks all over the former British colonies, looking very cool, from the Caribbean to Africa to India, speaking from dungeons and castles, from churches, gardens, and deserts, from parades, bazaars, and ritual ceremonies, from dugout canoes and rickshaws, and even while clambering up peaks, all the while overflowing with names, dates, customs, exotic anecdotes, and even the occasional familiar chestnut, such as “Dr. Livingstone, I presume!”

To those inclined to turn up their noses a bit at the concept of a media historian, Simon Schama, University Professor of art history and history at Columbia, and himself a media celebrity in much the same mold as Ferguson, snaps, “Well, let them try it themselves before they sniff. Trying to be a historian and a public intellectual is the most demanding, challenging task one can undertake. My professor, Jack [Sir J. H.] Plumb, and a mentor of Niall’s, taught that reaching a wide public is the most exacting challenge you can have as a scholar, without compromising the truth and the complexities of what you want to say. Niall does that extremely well, both on the printed page and on television. I am his number-one fan!”

On the other hand, it will come as no surprise that some of the concepts expounded by Ferguson rub many people the wrong way. Indeed, the very word “empire,” it seems, touches off severe reactions. To take but a couple of examples, the British journalist Johann Hari, under the headline “There can be no excuse for Empire,” writes in the Independent: “For over a decade now, Ferguson has built a role as a court historian for the imperial American hard right, arguing that the British Empire from the Victorian period on was a good thing with some unfortunate ‘blemishes’ that have been over-rated and over-stated.” In a review in the Guardian, entitled “The story peddled by imperial apologists is a poisonous fairy-tale,” Priyamvada Gopal, who teaches postcolonial studies at Cambridge, says that Ferguson, whom she refers to as a “neocon ideologue,” is rewriting history, “driven by the messianic fantasies of the American right....Colonialism—a tale of slavery, plunder, war, corruption, land-grabbing, famines, exploitation, indentured labour, impoverishment, massacres, genocide and forced resettlement—is rewritten into a benign developmental mission....” Ferguson is used to these imprecations. Although he did write a published letter chiding “Horrible Hari” (the epithet alludes to the Horrible Histories series by British author Terry Deary), Ferguson says this kind of criticism comes with the (imperial) territory.
We cannot deal here with all these charges. Anticolonialism, after all, is Gopal’s career. But take, for example, Gopal’s charge of slavery—an integral element, she says, of empire. In Ferguson’s film, one of the most significant points made is that Britain abolished slavery in its empire. Returning to Empire, the book, one reads in the section on the Clapham Sect about this evangelical group’s success in bringing about abolition:

It is not easy to explain so profound a change in the ethics of a people. It used to be argued that slavery was abolished simply because it had ceased to be profitable, but all the evidence points the other way: in fact, it was abolished despite the fact that it was still profitable. What we need to understand, then, is a collective change of heart.

He goes on to discuss the broad and diverse leadership of the campaign for abolition, and its unstoppable resolve, so that the slave trade was abolished in 1807 (and slavery itself in 1833). “From now on,” he continues, “convicted slavers faced, by a nice irony, transportation to Britain’s penal colony in Australia.” (In short, “indentured labour.”)

Furthermore, despite the anti-Western imperial scenarios constructed by his critics, Ferguson (without denying the undeniable) is emphatic about the benefits that accompanied British rule, including active efforts to eliminate female infanticide and sati (the self-immolation of a Hindu widow on her husband’s funeral pyre).

“Without the spread of British rule around the world,” he continues, “it is hard to believe that the structures of liberal capitalism would have been so successfully established in so many different economies around the world.”

Those empires that adopted alternative models—the Russian and the Chinese—imposed incalculable misery on their subject peoples. Without the influence of British imperial rule, it is hard to believe that the institutions of parliamentary democracy would have been adopted by the majority of states in the world, as they are today. India, the world’s largest democracy, owes more than it is fashionable to acknowledge to British rule. Its elite schools, its universities, its civil service, its army, its press and its parliamentary system all still have discernibly British models.

Ferguson is resolute in his defense of the relative stability and calm created by the British empire. In fact, one of the three principal causes of the “extreme violence of the twentieth century,” he writes in The War of the World, was the fracturing of empires—the British, yes, but also the others, the Axis powers, “the worst empires in all history.” (The two other determinants he cites—to simplify the vast tapestry of this book—were the violent coming apart of multiethnic societies and the boom and bust of economic volatility.) If the British empire was far from unblemished—and Ferguson describes the blemishes in great detail—it was also impressively noble in its “finest hour” against the Axis powers; and what made it so fine, so authentically noble, was that the Empire’s victory could only ever have been Pyrrhic.

In the end, the British sacrificed her Empire to stop the Germans, Japanese, and Italians from keeping theirs. Did not that sacrifice alone expunge all the Empire’s other sins? The War of the World takes the reader on a long and gruesome march through the century-long racial tensions and economic uncertainties that led to the Second World War and the “descent” of the West: that is, the descent into unimaginable horror,

“Thus,” in Ferguson’s view, “the only one of the options that was never seriously contemplated was pre-emption.”

But war is not always inevitable, as Ferguson stresses in his magisterial earlier book, The Pity of War. The book’s title is taken from Wilfred Owen’s “Strange Meeting”:

For by my glee might many men have laughed, And of my weeping something had been left, Which must die now, I mean the truth untold, The pity of war, the pity war distilled.

Ferguson plays on the subtle double meaning of the word: pity as the infinite sadness of war, and perhaps even more heart-breaking—pity as the avoidability of war.

In the very beginning of the book, he tells us about his grandfather, John Gilmour Ferguson, who
joined up at age 17 and was sent to the trenches as a private in the Seaforth Highlanders, the “devils in skirts.” He was wounded and gassed, reminding us of the more famous Owen poem, “Dulce et decorum est,” with its vivid “Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!....” But the lucky John Ferguson returned to Scotland to become in time a grandfather, unlike a huge number of his comrades.

The book is full of unexpected conclusions, not least that the outbreak of war itself took almost everyone by surprise. In spite of decades of predictions, treaties, broken treaties, and precautions; in spite of the fact that virtually every member of royalty throughout Europe was related and constantly in touch; in spite of all the spies and double agents and best-selling books; in spite of the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo, “thanks to the most famous wrong-turning in history”—the fact is that on August 4, 1914, it seems that the whole world was shocked that war had begun. But was it avoidable? In Ferguson’s words:

“...in 1914, a grandfather, unlike a huge number of his comrades. But the lucky John Ferguson returned to Scotland to become in time a grandfather, unlike a huge number of his comrades.”

The “thought-experiments” mentioned by Maier are the “counterfactuals” through which Ferguson arrives at his painful conclusion in The Pity of War. It is history in the subjunctive past perfect, a jeu d’esprit that he deploys with the utmost seriousness throughout his work and teaching.

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 development. It came about because my Ph.D. had ended up posing a counterfactual question: What if the Germans had stabilized their currency in 1920 and not embarked on their deranged hyperinflationary policy? Without actually knowing what I was doing, I tried to think that through, and argued that there really was an alternative, that it wasn’t inevitable, that there was a moment when, as a result of a series of very bad decisions, Germany ended up plunging into hyperinflation.

“I sent off an article making that point, and it came back with a referee’s report from one of the grand old men of German economic history, denouncing the very notion that an historian could ask a what-if question.

“I thought about this damning report, and I decided that he was wrong, and in a sense Virtual History was born at that moment. My feeling was, and I’m still very committed to the notion, that we need to ask this stuff. We can’t duck these questions. There’s a re-

luctance among mainstream historians to engage what seems to me a philosophically irrefutable point: that if we’re going to propose anything of a causal nature, we’ve got to make explicit the counterfactual that statement implies. I think it’s almost fraudulent not to make your counterfactual explicit. You’re cheating your readers and your students. If you really do think that, let’s say, the Fed was responsible for the Great Depression, then you have to show how a different monetary policy would have avoided it.

“The other thing I deeply believe,” he continues, “is that it helps you recapture the uncertainty of the past. We are about recapturing past thoughts, recapturing and reconstructing them, like the moment in August 1914, when absolutely nobody knew what was coming. Historians have been writing for years and years that the origins of the First World War date back to the 1890s. Well, that’s not how it felt at the time.”

Then there was Colossus, the book, he says “that managed to annoy just about everybody.” “Back in the dying days of the Clinton administration,” he says, “I concluded—somewhat heatedly—that ‘the greatest disappointment facing the world in the twenty-first century [is] that the leaders of the one state with the economic resources to make the world a better place lack the guts to do it.’ Little did I imagine that within a matter of nine months, a new president, confronted by the calamity of September 11, would embark on a policy so similar to the one I had advocated. Since the declaration of the war against terrorism, the question has ceased to be about guts. It is now about grit, the tenacity to finish what has been started.”

It is not hard to see why this book “managed to annoy just about everybody.” And it becomes easier to understand why his liberal critics call him a neocon stooge of the American hard right. (Especially when it gets around that he was, in his words, a “confirmed Thatcherite.” He had fallen in with the Thatcherites at Oxford—“clearly the most interesting people there,” but was too “junior and insignificant” to do more than write “a lot in what Churchill said: ‘At present we are paying eight millions a year for the privilege of sitting on an ungrateful volcano out of which we will in no circumstances get anything worth having’ It was a revelation to me that Americans were so parochial. I must say I came here no doubt with all kinds of illusions, but I was still surprised. I think that what happened is that people said, ‘Well, this guy is in favor of empire (which empire they don’t say), so therefore he must be in favor of the war.’ What I did say was that the United States should use its power more aggressively to get rid of rogue regimes and failed states, but the notion that that had any role to play in 2003 is absurd.

“I also said that the time for a ‘surge’ was 2004—I mean, if you’re going to do it, do it right. And the piece I wrote then for the New York Times, which got me into a lot of trouble, said the time for ruthlessness was at that moment. You had to stop the insurgency then and there; you had to whack Fallujah, you had to whack al-Sadr. But the army backed off, and that was a disastrous mistake. The credibility and legitimacy of U.S. forces on the ground have only gotten shakier.

“We need another idea at this point. I’ve suggested putting in UN troops.” (This column was roundly derided, too—particularly in that part of the media where the UN is synonymous with fecklessness and corruption, opinions he actually shares.) But, he persists, “I’m thinking of, say, Indians with blue helmets. Where in the world can the United States expect to find an ally prepared to put up sincere interest and support? Perhaps in India; India is a country with a large conventional force, and with a commitment to fight the war on terror.”

One way out of the appearance, so distasteful to his critics, of creating an empire in Iraq, is, to put it succinctly: hypocrisy. He wrote in the New Republic: “As in Bosnia, the United States should hand over some of the dirty work...But that will only be possible if the Europeans get what they want: the semblance of an imminent U.S. handover of power in Iraq. Note the word semblance. Reprinted from Harvard Magazine. For more information, contact Harvard Magazine, Inc. at 617-495-5746.
As the British showed in Egypt, you can keep up this kind of hypocrisy for quite a long time before you actually have to restore self-government for real.

“I don't think running away is an option,” he explains. “I think regardless of who is president, we are still going to have a military presence in Iraq by 2012. It’s not like Vietnam; you can’t just walk away, leaving it to go to hell, with everybody killing one another. As bad as that was, it had no geopolitical cost at all for Americans; the costs of failure were zero. Whereas the geopolitical cost of running away here is almost unimaginable. Not only would a full-scale regional civil war create all sorts of opportunities for the Iranian-backed Shi'ah and the wildest Sunni radicals who are behind al Qaeda. It makes your most important ally in the region, Israel, desperately vulnerable.”

The question has ceased to be about tenacity to finish what has been started.

These dark and freighted subjects—Vietnam, Israel, indeed most of the life-and-death questions of the last half-century—will be examined in Ferguson’s forthcoming undertaking: a biography of Henry Kissinger. It will be a “global” biography in the sense, he says, that “there isn’t a government that doesn’t have a view of this man. You’re dealing with an individual who had a significant role in almost every international crisis of the 1970s.”

Kissinger himself invited Ferguson to write the biography, and gave him access to his papers, upon which work has begun. But first, Ferguson must finish his book on Sigmund Warburg, who, though hardly known in the United States, was highly influential in European financial circles between the 1910s and 1930s. The Warburg book began back in Ferguson’s days in Hamburg, when he met a Warburg relative who invited the young Scot, a historian now morphing into an economic historian, to look at the family papers.

“So there I was,” Ferguson recalls, “sitting in the M.M. Warburg bank offices in Hamburg, and it was there that I really had my first encounter with serious historical research. Reading through the Warburg papers, I realized that here was an economic story I needed to understand. Why did the Germans lose control of their currency? What exactly had gone wrong?

“But there was another story which was not new to me. I’d always understood its importance. This was the story of the German Jews and their predicament. I was gripped by the most important and certainly the most perplexing tragedy of modern history, which was the tragedy of the Jews. The Jews—tremendously successful, not only in economic life, but also in cultural life, the standard-bearers of modernity in the arts and in political innovations of the modern period, and of course the ultimate victims of the backlash against it in the 1930s and ’40s.

“That really started my interest in German-Jewish history,” he continues. “And it wasn’t long after finishing my book, Paper and Iron, in which the Warburgs were central figures, that I was asked to look at the Rothschild archives, with a view to writing a substantial work on the history of the Rothschilds. It was an opportunity I seized with both hands, and I spent five years practically living in the Rothschild archives in London, with visits to important stuff in Russia and Frankfurt. By the time I was done, I think I was about as deeply immersed in German-Jewish history as it’s possible for a non-Jew to be; after all, it was ironic that somebody with my background was asked to write this book.”

The House of Rothschild has been called the finest book ever written about this dynasty, a work that “reaffirms one’s faith in the possibil-

But why is Ferguson destined to find himself so “deeply immersed in German-Jewish history”? Has he not enough to do defending and perhaps perpetuating his arguments on empire? There is no answer—yet—to the “irony” that a disputatious Scot should be chosen to write the story of not one, but three, German-Jewish world players who dominated history. Perhaps a hint can be found in Ferguson’s own suggestion that the Scots are in many significant ways similar to the Jews: “Scottish Calvinism gave rise to impulses comparable to those we associate with Jews in the modern period. A high regard for literacy. An emphasis on education as a route to social mobility. A aptitude for finance and for science.” Whatever the reason, he says with a laugh, “through it all, I have become a thorough philo-Semite.”

For more on this irony, we must await the coming cascade of books. Meanwhile, we might contemplate a possible counterfactual: What if we prove Ferguson wrong, don the purple, and contemplate a possible counterfactual: What if we prove Ferguson wrong, don the purple, and show up as the next empire?

Janet Tassel is a contributing editor of this magazine.