

Civilization: The West and the Rest¹

Reviewed by Captain Janet C. Eberle*

*[I]t makes no sense for China to have better rail systems than us, and Singapore having better airports than us. And we just learned that China now has the fastest supercomputer on Earth—that used to be us.*²

I. Introduction

With the United States struggling with over eight percent unemployment and recovering from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression,³ the factors that led to these circumstances and what needs to be done to return the United States as a dominant power in the world is a popular subject amongst scholars.⁴

In *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, Niall Ferguson provides his perspective on how western civilization adapted over the course of 500 years to become and remain the dominant power in the world. Essentially, Ferguson posits that “if we can come up with a good explanation for the West’s past ascendancy, can we then offer a prognosis for its future?”⁵ Ferguson credits six concepts or behaviors that he terms “the killer apps”—competition, science, property rights, medicine, the consumer society, and the work ethic—as providing the basis of western dominance.⁶ Despite proposing a relevant topic for the military reader, Ferguson fails to properly support his thesis.

II. Background

Niall Ferguson is the Laurence A. Tisch Professor of History at Harvard University and a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, as well as at Jesus College, Oxford. He has written numerous books,

* Judge Advocate, U.S. Air Force. Professor, Contract and Fiscal Law Department, The Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

¹ NIALL FERGUSON, *CIVILIZATION: THE WEST AND THE REST* (2011).

² President Barack Obama, President of the United States, Office of the Press Secretary, Press Conference at the White House (Nov. 3, 2010), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/03/press-conference-president>, and THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN & MICHAEL MANDELBAUM, *THAT USED TO BE US: HOW AMERICA FELL BEHIND IN THE WORLD IT INVENTED AND HOW WE CAN COME BACK* at Dedication Page (2011).

³ *U.S. Economy Adds 96k Jobs; Unemployment Rate Falls to 8.1 Pct. as More People End Job Searches*, WASH. POST (Sep. 2, 2012), http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/us-economy-adds-96k-jobs-unemployment-rate-falls-to-81-pct-as-more-people-end-job-searches/2012/09/07/488b6892-f93b-11e1-a93b-7185e3f88849_story.html.

⁴ See, e.g., FRIEDMAN & MANDELBAUM, *supra* note 2.

⁵ FERGUSON, *supra* note 1, at xv.

⁶ *Id.* at 12.

including *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (2003), *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (2004), and *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World* (2008).

Ferguson teamed with PBS to turn *The Ascent of Money* into a documentary series. It garnered Ferguson an International Emmy for Best Documentary in 2009.⁷ Following this successful model, Ferguson again teamed with PBS to turn *Civilization* into a documentary series. The two-part documentary series aired in May 2012.⁸

III. The West

Ferguson provides a clear roadmap for readers in the book’s introduction with what he intends to show “distinguished the West from the Rest.”⁹ He also describes each of the six concepts he uses to explain how the West became dominant.¹⁰ Where Ferguson first missteps is in failing to concretely define what or where he means by “the West.” He proposes it be defined as English-speaking countries, plus the French; possibly those, plus Germany, Italy, Portugal, Scandinavia, Spain, and Greece; perhaps, the Balkans and Russia could be added.¹¹ Eventually, Ferguson defines “the West” as “more than just a geographical expression. It is a set of norms, behaviours and institutions with borders that are blurred in the extreme.”¹² By failing to define who are “the West” and who are “the Rest,” Ferguson makes it difficult to assess his theory when a nation can be categorized as either one.

⁷ Niall Ferguson, *Biography*, NIALL FERGUSON, <http://www.niallferguson.com/site/FERG/Templates/General2.aspx?pageid=5&cc=GB> (last visited Aug. 15, 2013). See also *Home, The Ascent Of Money*, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ascentofmoney/> (last visited Aug. 15, 2013).

⁸ *About, Civilization: The West and the Rest*, PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/civilization-west-and-rest/about/> (last visited Aug. 12, 2013).

⁹ FERGUSON, *supra* note 1, at 12.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 13.

¹¹ *Id.* at 14–15.

¹² *Id.* at 15.

IV. The Killer Apps

In *Civilization*, Ferguson argues “the fortuitous weakness of the West’s rivals”¹³ in conjunction with “six identifiably novel complexes of institutions and associated ideas and behaviors”¹⁴ propelled the West ahead of other civilizations. Ferguson translates his theory into modern lexicon by deeming these six concepts “the killer apps.”¹⁵ He proceeds to argue his thesis by explaining how each of these “apps” contributed to the rise of western civilization. Unfortunately for the reader, Ferguson often fails to support his arguments for each of the “killer apps” or he discusses unrelated information, which runs contrary to Ferguson’s goal of explaining exactly what propelled the West forward. Nevertheless, his discussion of Competition, Science, Property Rights, Medicine, Consumption, and Work does give the reader a solid basis for understanding his theory.

A. Competition

In the 1400s, the East, in particular China, was the dominant superpower of the time. Asian agriculture far out produced European agriculture, resulting in a more populous East and more developed towns.¹⁶ Innovations developed during the 1500s to 1700s, such as the printing press, paper, and blast furnaces for smelting iron ore, are historically credited to European inventors when actually they originated in China hundreds of years prior.¹⁷ Ferguson argues that despite China’s power and position in the world, the competition of the Age of Exploration first propelled the West forward.¹⁸ Unlike Asian explorers who sought to bring back tributes for their leaders, Europeans viewed exploration as “about getting ahead of their rivals, both economically and politically.”¹⁹

While Asia was dominated by the Chinese Empire, Europe was fragmented into many nation-states. Near-constant fighting among the European nations was a byproduct of the geopolitical fragmentation, but it provided three benefits to western civilization²⁰—“it encouraged innovation in military technology;”²¹ states had to improve

methods of revenue collection to pay for their wars, which included government borrowing;²² and, unlike China, who suspended its overseas exploration in 1424, no one state was ever powerful enough to prevent exploration.²³ Ferguson successfully illustrates his point through a discussion of Portuguese explorers seeking an alternate route to the Indian Ocean to break into the spice trade previously controlled by the Turks and the Venetians.²⁴ Once the Portuguese established the new spice shipping route, European competition kicked into high gear and the Dutch and French began sailing and trading in spices as well. Eventually, the Dutch became the most prolific traders in spices over the Portuguese.²⁵

B. Science

In his next chapter, Ferguson explores the role scientific advances played in propelling European nations ahead of the Ottoman Empire. Ferguson credits the movable type printing press, which sparked the Reformation in Europe, as also promoting the Scientific Revolution by spreading ideas allowing scientists to build upon and form new theories.²⁶ In contrast, the Ottoman Empire had seen little scientific development after clerics argued in the eleventh century that science and philosophy were incompatible with the teachings of Islam.²⁷ Additionally, printing “was resisted in the Muslim world.”²⁸ Beginning in the late 1600s, European armies began defeating the Ottomans and driving them out of their territory. This shift in superiority resulted from the “application of science to warfare”²⁹ which provided “deadly accurate firepower.”³⁰

Ferguson’s scientific analysis is by far the best section of *Civilization*. He does an excellent job illustrating how science propelled the West ahead of the Ottoman Empire. He indicates the scientific gap is just now closing between the West and the Rest, giving Iran holding annual science festivals as an example.³¹ The problem with this example is it centers the scientific gap as being between the West and the Islamic world, not the Rest.

¹³ *Id.* at 13.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 12.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.* at 26.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 27–28.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 33.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* at 36–37.

²¹ *Id.* at 37.

²² *Id.* at 38.

²³ *Id.* at 32, 38.

²⁴ *Id.* at 33.

²⁵ *Id.* at 36.

²⁶ *Id.* at 60–67.

²⁷ *Id.* at 67.

²⁸ *Id.* at 68.

²⁹ *Id.* at 57.

³⁰ *Id.* at 83.

³¹ *Id.* at 94.

C. Property Rights

While Ferguson introduces the third “killer app,” property rights, in his Introduction as “the rule of law as a means of protecting private owners and peacefully resolving disputes between them, which formed the basis for the most stable form of representative government,”³² his chapter on the subject does not address these property rights in the West versus the Rest. Instead, he compares the colonization of the Americas by two Western cultures, the British and the Spanish, and deems it “one of history’s biggest natural experiments.”³³ He concludes that North America was more successful than South America due to the “British model of widely distributed private property rights and democracy”³⁴ as compared with “the Spanish model of concentrated wealth and authoritarianism.”³⁵ While an interesting historical discussion, none of the analysis in this chapter shows that widely distributed private property rights are unique or more common in the West, or how they might be superior to any system in the rest of the world.

D. Medicine

Ferguson deems medicine “the West’s most remarkable killer application”³⁶ due to its ability to significantly increase life expectancy. He shows through empirical data that life expectancies in Asia and Africa began a sustained improvement in life expectancy “before the end of European colonial rule.”³⁷ Rather than illustrate how medicine helped the West succeed, Ferguson spends a significant portion of his time examining unrelated subject matter.³⁸ Much of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of the role eugenics played in justifying brutal treatment of the local population during European colonization of Africa.³⁹ Ferguson’s argument would have been far more persuasive if he had focused more on the advances in medicine that helped European colonialists survive illnesses common to Africa.

³² *Id.* at 13.

³³ *Id.* at 97.

³⁴ *Id.* at 138.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.* at 146.

³⁷ *Id.* at 147.

³⁸ *Id.* at 149–57 (discussing the French Revolution), 157–61 (discussing Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War* and Napoleon Bonaparte’s military campaigns).

³⁹ *Id.* at 175–88.

E. Consumption

In examining the role of consumption in the rise of western society, Ferguson details the link between the Industrial Revolution, manufacturing of textiles, and the role of the worker as the consumer.⁴⁰ He describes the manufacture of clothing and the response to consumer demands of the different post-World War II economic models.⁴¹ Ferguson draws on the story of jeans in the West, and the demand for them behind the Iron Curtain, to support his argument that western society was better able to adapt to consumer demands.⁴²

Ferguson significantly detracts from an otherwise well-reasoned argument by including commentary on the perception of jeans as a sex symbol.⁴³ Additionally, he claims the campus revolts of 1968 were only “[s]uperficially . . . directed against the U.S. war to preserve the independence of South Vietnam.”⁴⁴ He argues their true goal was for “unlimited male access to the female dormitories.”⁴⁵ By including this sophomoric line of thought, it causes the reader to question the rest of Ferguson’s reasoning.

F. Work

The final “killer app” is the work ethic, which Ferguson argues finds its roots in the Protestant work ethic. The Protestant Reformation promoted not only hard work, but also high literacy rates, and saving capital by its members.⁴⁶ These characteristics helped the West succeed historically, but now are waning with Europeans working fewer hours and American saving rates falling.⁴⁷ In marked contrast, Christianity is on the rise in China. Ferguson illustrates the economic benefits with first-hand accounts of modern Chinese Christians; its ability to reduce corruption, promote philanthropy, and supply credit networks.⁴⁸ Ferguson’s logic and argument in this chapter are easily followed and well supported.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 198.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 236–52.

⁴² *Id.* at 240–52.

⁴³ *Id.* at 241 (detailing Mormon leader, Brigham Young, denouncing button fly trousers as “fornication pants”), 242 (commenting “how very difficult it is to have sex with someone wearing tight-fitting jeans”).

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 245.

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 259–64.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 264–76.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 285–87.

V. Conclusion

In his conclusion, Ferguson begins with the caveat that civilizations “are highly complex systems, made up of a very large number of interacting components that are asymmetrically organized.”⁴⁹ They can appear stable, but go into crisis from “[a] slight perturbation.”⁵⁰ Ferguson then leads into the current state of affairs in the United States, the impact of China acting as a U.S. creditor, and four obstacles to China continuing to ascend as a world power.⁵¹ He also argues that despite the West no longer monopolizing the “killer apps,” they are ahead because they have all the “apps” packaged together.⁵² Unfortunately, by starting with the explanation that civilizations are complex systems, Ferguson caveats his own predictions causing the reader to question the relevancy of the entire book.

If the reader desires an articulate, well-reasoned, thorough discussion of the historical rise of western civilization, the problems facing the West today, and how we might resolve them, look elsewhere. *Civilization: The West and the Rest* simply misses the mark.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 299.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.* 308–23. Ferguson argues that due to China’s non-competitive economic and political systems, a stock-market or real estate bubble burst could cause a depression; they might succumb to social unrest; the middle class could want a larger say in politics; finally, a coalition, led by the United States, could be formed to balance China.

⁵² *Id.* at 323.