DECOLONIZATION IN BRITAIN AND FRANCE
by Miles Kahler
(Princeton University Press; 426 pp.; $40.00/£95)

Ralph Baultjens

Modern global colonialism was largely a European invention. For over four centuries, beginning in 1500, a few small European nations appropriated the bulk of our planet and ruled it as a kind of international free-for-all. Aided by superior naval and ordnance technology, inspired by economic greed mixed with cultural and Christian expansionism, they seized, bought, and lost vast territories. The imperial enterprise became the single most important venture in world affairs.

By 1914, people of white European stock had occupied or ruled four-fifths of the earth. In this process, they changed global economics and political life, and changed themselves, too. Territorial acquisition brought prosperity and fueled the Industrial Revolution. Then, two world wars began a massive rollback. Empires dissolved and new nations were born. A whole Third World was created in the two decades after 1945.

As old-style colonialism retreated, academicians advanced. An outpouring of studies explained the impress of empire on non-Western nations, recording and analyzing the cultural, psychological, economic, political, and other dimensions of the colonial heritage. Strangely, however, relatively little effort was invested in examining the other side of the balance sheet—the cost of decolonization to the imperialists.

Miles Kahler, professor of political science at Yale University, addresses this neglected fact of the colonial experience in Decolonization in Britain and France. It is an enterprise full of promise, reversing the conventional question about international affairs by seeking to define how world politics affects domestic politics. Unfortunately, Kahler falls short of his fascinating objective in three ways, each suggestive of the perils of an overspecialized approach.

First, Kahler focuses only on the political impact of colonial devolution in Britain and France. He appears to forget or evade other, deeper significances, among them, values. So many of modern British and French attitudes, expectations, standards, and self-images have been shaped by the ideas and even some of the misplaced ideals of the "White Man's Burden" or "La Mission Civilisatrice." The persistence of these values and their infusion into the political arena is one of the central features of public life in these two nations. After World War II both Britain and France suffered terribly because they insisted on looking at a noncolonial world through obsolete colonial lenses. The Suez War in 1956 was one of many resulting lapses.

The second problem with this book is its selection of specific situations to illustrate the impact of decolonization. Kahler discusses the British withdrawal from Africa and, to a lesser extent, from Guyana; and he examines the departure of the French from North Africa. Both are important milestones in imperial retrace, but any informed reader will be provoked to ask whether Indian and Indochinese decolonization did not leave a deeper scar on the British and French political psyche. Emotional crutches they surely were. These, rather than Africa, were probably the watersheds separating modern history from traditional policy. By the time the African turn came, the general public (as opposed to certain power centers) was largely reconciled to an inevitable contraction of empire.

Finally, a didactic presentation detracts from the merit of Decolonization. Kahler makes his arguments in a convoluted, scholastic way. Though this is a complex topic, no special effort is made to clarify its intricacies. The reader gets ensnared in colonial detail and data. Superior research, to be sure, but painful to read.

Yet despite these difficulties, the author makes worthy points. He demonstrates how disturbing decolonization was to the political universe of Britain and France. Every political party, from far left to neolithic Right, was deeply affected. Business lobbies, long involved with colonial policy, made things tough. In Britain, decolonization was comparatively benign because successive governments were able to isolate British colonial settlers from home politics. France, unable to do this, almost lapsed into civil war—and De Gaulle was the phoenix rising from imperial ashes! All this is meticulously documented by Kahler.

One of his important observations concerns the management of decolonization. Although initially begun by socialist regimes, it was managed for the most part by Conservative governments—the MacMillan and the De Gaulle administrations. Supervising decolonization had a kind of centralizing effect. It moved socialist governments to the right and conservative gov-

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Japan's economy paused briefly and then veered to the left, much to the consternation of their true-believing fringes. Perhaps the lesson is that in European democracies, responsibilities of office often induce a sobriety in policy. Decolonization represents the end of the age of European predominance. In reflecting on Kahlérs treatment of this, two further thoughts come to mind. Apparently. possession of an empire was a powerful help in building an industrial economy. For Western Europe it was a trap door. Neither Britain, France, nor any other European colonizer recovered when the door caved in. Yet for Japan, empire was a launching pad. When its imperial adventure crashed, Japan's economy paused briefly and then took off for celestial industrial heights. Does this tell us something about European and Oriental cultures and resilience?

Another thought. As Kahlérs suggests, divestiture of European empire was more difficult to handle than its acquisition. And its loss devastated imperial economists, perhaps irrecoverably. In the perspective of history, then, was the enormous colonial effort, costing millions of lives, unjustified? Did it create a period of artificial prosperity but leave most of its beneficiaries unprepared for the modern world—doomed to second-class status as the price of imperialism? The answer to both questions is strongly affirmative. It is a measure of the delusion of nations that these colonial activities are still extolled as their hours of glory.

For provoking these and other reflections, Kahlérs deserves some measure of gratitude. After all, remembrance is the only inoculation against repetition. All the more regret, then, that his style and sense of organization rank much below his research. However, Decolonization is Miles Kahlérs first book, and he will, one hopes, produce other works that better display his considerable talents.

This separation between private life and public action was not intended, of course. Ours was to be a government not only for and of the people but by the people. To this day, in fact, the New England town meeting remains a powerful symbol for Americans—the image of locals turning out in full force in order to be heard on matters of common interest. What we actually have is a people so distanced from their government that to almost half of them, according to 1980 figures, even the quadrennial pulling of the lever doesn't seem worth the puny effort.

This decline in political participation, this privatism and alienation, is the subject of Benjamin Barber's provocative new book—or, more accurately, two new books under a single banner. For Professor Barber has actually set himself two separate and distinct tasks: first, to explore why our citizenship is so lathy; and second, to propose how this "thin democracy" might be reversed. The first discussion is grounded in political theory; the second is, perchance, more practically oriented. Here the author has set himself the formidable task of generating concrete suggestions for "participatory politics for a new age."

Barber's most fundamental proposition is that liberalism—in particular those institutions of liberalism that provide for representation—rather than securing democracy, actually destroys it. Representation by political professionals, Barber argues, reduces the rest of us to little more than observers of our own public dramas. Inevitably, we begin to lose interest in a government that at least survives without us; finally, incurably, we avoid political performance altogether.

Barber explores the "preconceptual frame" on which our liberal democracy is based. He argues that a Cartesian assumption underlies democratic theory: namely, that "there exists a knowledgeable independent ground...from which the concepts, values, standards, and ends of political life can be derived by simple deduction." He argues further that liberal theory gives prominence to the premise that man is alone and that therefore the paramount feature of human existence is separateness rather than togetherness. Barber's intellectual history is stitched together by the three dominant "dispositions" of liberalism that recur throughout his analysis. These are (1) the anarchist disposition that inlines women and men to regard themselves as "generically autonomous beings with needs and wants that can...be satisfied outside of coercive civil communities"; (2) the realist dis-

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