

## END-ESSAY:

# Can America Save Itself from Decline?

### I. The Question

SO, THE QUESTION is: Can America save itself from decline?

The history of great nations has been one of rise and rise, then decline and fall—Greece, Rome, Egypt, Persia, Spain, France, Great Britain. The usual pattern entails the over-extension of empire and the over-involvement in war, with an attendant hollowing-out of institutions at home and the beggaring of the home citizenry. In America's case, waging—and losing—too many wars (Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq), combined with extreme political dysfunction and extreme income inequality at home, has led the nation to the cusp of decline. Some observers say we are past the cusp and are well and truly on the skids.

Wherever we are on that downward trajectory, the question—the urgent question—becomes: Does America have the capacity, and the character, and the courage to thwart the historical model and reverse its decline, to rise again?

Decline of the American enterprise is a notion that, not that long ago, would have been unfathomable to pose. America emerged victorious from the Second World War, among the Allies the most powerful and the most intact. In our economic, political, and cultural influence, the 20th century became the American Century. We were the showcase of freedom and democracy and, historically novel, a flourishing middle class. In championing human rights and the individual, we were a moral

beacon to the world. Our principal rival for global influence, the Soviet Union, struggled to keep up, with its state-controlled economy, communist political system, and police state. When the U.S.S.R. imploded, in the early 1990s, America was acknowledged the victor, dubbed by international media as “the sole superpower.”

It was a short reign.

Not long after America was declared the world’s heavy-weight champion, signs of decline appeared, in the 1990s. Financial deregulation unleashed Wall Street’s “animal spirits,” leading to bubbles inflating and bursting. In Washington, give-and-take gave way to slash-and-burn warfare, inaugurated by an ex-history professor (House Speaker Newt Gingrich) who might have been expected to understand decline and fall. Culturally, artists came to pride themselves on “edgy” examinations of pathological behavior; so doing, these “humanists” defined humanity downward while elevating the anti-hero and declaring moral questioning off-limits. Critics, more hip than history-minded, applauded.

Now, two decades later, American decline has become a given, a trope, a reality, with, unfortunately, a dearth of forces—economic, political, or cultural—primed and available to mount a defense.

While some Americans take offense at any mention of national decline, accusing the speaker of lack of patriotism or faith, a *Wall Street Journal/NBC News* poll shows a majority believes it to be true. Not the usual “wrong track/right track” question, this poll asks specifically: “Do you feel America is in a state of decline, or do you think that this is not the case?” Between 2008 and 2014, fully 60% to 74% of respondents said Yes (with 74% in ’08, the year of the financial crash, and 60% in ’14). Equally worrying, those “not confident” their children will fare better than they fared are rapidly rising in number, from 56% in ’08 to 76% in ’14. Anecdotally, in asking around, I hear the remark that civilizations come and go and perhaps it’s America’s time to go.

Sadly—tragically—all this crumbling toward national decline has been *self-inflicted* and is not the result of external forces, such as a

military invasion mounted against us or a calamity of Nature such as occurred in the Midwest during the 1930s creating the Dust Bowl.

Certainly, there was the external force of al-Qaeda, the terrorist group that inflicted the attacks of September 11, 2001 against symbolic centers of American power—New York as financial center and Washington as political-military center. But America promptly took the battle to the enemy, abroad, and decimated its leadership substantially. And now, on the eve of the thirteenth anniversary of 9/11, after American troops have vacated Iraq, President Barack Obama announced America will return to battle, via air strikes, to pursue and destroy an even more ferocious terrorist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Yet, while we take objective action, away from us, against this new kind of enemy, it can be said that, subjectively, we were wounded, stricken—by fear. Especially in the tremulous aftermath of 9/11, fear lodged in our hearts—and accounts, I believe, for much subsequent bad decision-making and policy (the war in Iraq, torture).

But whatever the role of fear, what is disheartening is this: Being attacked in such horrific way—images of the twin towers of the New York Trade Center on fire and disintegrating to ground are still gut-wrenching—has *not* brought out the best in us. Much as America pulled together after the attack on Pearl Harbor, sacrificed, and waged a common defense against the Axis powers in the Second World War, one hoped there would be a similar pulling-together, and sacrifice, and common defense in the post-9/11 period. One hoped for our best efforts and best behavior. But, sadly, that has not been the case, in any arena—political, economic and financial, cultural and moral.

Which is why our decline, diagnosed these last few years, feels like suicide.

Our decline is due not to forces “over there,” but to forces (or lack thereof) inside. It is an internal thing, suicide. And this suicide is long, slow, and agonizing.

## **II. America's political suicide**

DYSFUNCTION, IF IT'S in effect long enough and if it continually resists amelioration—that is, if it is not “fixed”—eventually tips over into self-destruction, and suicide. Washington seems positively bent on it.

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