Why Do Great Powers Decline?

by Bruce Thornton
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Bewailing America’s decline has been in vogue for quite a while now. Long gone is the confidence we enjoyed as the world’s only superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The terrorist attacks of 9/11, the long, difficult wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Great Recession of 2008, and its ongoing geopolitical and economic aftermath have left a dark cloud of pessimism hanging over our future. Books like Pat Buchanan’s *Suicide of a Superpower: Will America Survive to 2025?* and Mark Steyn’s *After America: Get Ready for Armageddon* warn of our accelerating decline caused by a collapse of ethnic identity or by an economic meltdown fueled by excessive debt and government spending.

The “antideclinists” have not been silent in response. Most recently, Robert Kagan has argued in *The World America Made* that our country’s still overwhelming military, economic, cultural, and demographic advantages mean that it will continue to dominate the global order for decades to come. As Kagan reminds us, we have faced numerous crises in the past, many of them much more serious than the problems we face today, and yet we have grown more powerful nonetheless.

How many people in the depths of the Carter-era’s “crisis of confidence,” Soviet geopolitical aggression, and “stagflation” imagined that within a decade, our most deadly and powerful ideological and military rival would disappear from history, and in the next three decades our economy would expand at a dizzying pace, with GDP increasing more than 60 percent?

All civilizations have, at one time or another, thought that they were declining, so it behooves us to keep some historical perspective on the current apocalyptic pronouncements. The fact remains, certainly, that civilizations do pass from history, leaving behind their ruins that we still study today—“All states and nations,” as British historian Norman Davies writes, “however great, bloom for a season and are replaced.” But national decline is not as inevitable as Davies’ metaphor suggests. As many have pointed out, decline is a choice, not a destiny. Thinking about why a people chooses their nation’s decline, then, is more useful than speculating about whether America definitively is or isn’t on a downward spiral today.

Running out of money is indeed an important reason for decline. Great powers have to be able to pay for the military infrastructure necessary for defending their far-flung interests. Once they can no longer afford the costs of those global interests, they begin to lose power and influence. England in 1919 ruled a quarter of the world and dominated the oceans, but the expense of World War I left them with a huge amount of debt, over $20 billion (in today’s money) owed to the U.S. alone. The Great Depression weakened the British economy even further. Cutbacks in the defense budget—it was reduced by 80 percent just between 1919 and 1921—and increased spending on social-welfare entitlements in the interwar years left England too weak to defend itself and its empire against Germany and Japan without help from the United States in World War II. Unable to afford its global possessions and defend its interests, the British Empire was, by 1960, at an end.

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Today, the United States is facing a fiscal crisis that, if left unresolved, will similarly weaken our ability to maintain our global power and influence. At
over $16 trillion, the national debt has now surpassed 100 percent of GDP and is still growing. According to the Senate Budget Committee, each child born today already owes $1.53 million in federal debt. Burgeoning spending on entitlements, projected to reach over 18 percent of GDP by 2050, and paying the interest on the debt—interest payments just over the next decade are projected to total $4.26 trillion—will consume all tax revenues, leaving nothing for national defense.

The deficit crisis has already led to a reduction of around $1 trillion in the defense budget over the next decade, even as the United States faces numerous global challenges from an expansionary Russia, multiple crises in the oil-rich Middle East, and an increasingly assertive China, whose military spending will double by 2015. An inability to defend the global marketplace could lead to further economic decline that would in turn erode America’s global power, interests, and influence.

As both Britain and the United States show, great powers risk decline when their citizens choose to spend money on themselves rather than on defense. Yet pointing out the economic cause of decline raises the question of why a nation chooses to spend its money the way it does. And the answer to this question lies in how citizens think about their country and its power.

The British once again provide a historical lesson. Even before the outbreak of World War I, significant parts of England’s elite had turned against the Empire and England itself. Books like J. A. Hobson’s influential *Imperialism: A Study* (1902) defined the Empire as a corrupt racket whose purpose was to enrich the ruling class. Victorian morality and mores came under withering attack from artists and intellectuals like the Bloomsbury Group, one of whose members, the novelist E. M. Forster, famously said, “If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.” At the outbreak of World War II, George Orwell noticed the dangers of the attitude “that there is something slightly disgraceful in being an Englishman, and that it is a duty to snigger at every English institution.”

But as always, the most perceptive insight into this dangerous attack on patriotism came from Winston Churchill in 1933. Noting the “mood of unwarrantable self-abasement” afflicting England, he drew the moral of such a collapse of confidence: “If we lose faith in ourselves, in our capacity to guide and govern, if we lose our will to live, then indeed our story is told.”

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Once a people lose their faith in their own way of life and its goodness, once they stop seeing their country as an object of love and a projection of their highest ideals and virtues, they will regard it instead as a source of material benefits, and a mere ure of conflicting interests among the citizens. They will start demanding that the government spend money on themselves and their entitlements, even if defense budgets have to be starved. Moreover, if they don’t believe that their country is worth fighting, killing, and dying for, then they won’t do those things themselves, or even want to provide the money for others to do so. Once that happens, a great power becomes vulnerable to its enemies, and its decline will follow—unless, as Churchill said in his brilliant speech after the disastrous Munich conference, they can effect “a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigor.”

Many of the elements in England’s decline are visible in the United States today. For many on the left, patriotism has long been discredited as an unsophisticated superstition, and a pernicious jingoism that ignores America’s numerous colonialist, imperialist, racist, sexist, and genocidal sins, the “imperfections” Obama alluded to in his 2008 *Foreign Affairs* article, “Renewing American Leadership.”

Because of these historical sins, many Americans “snigger” at their own country’s exceptional institutions and ideals, and look rather to Europe as the model of a more civilized, just, and equitable society. Rather than a nation whose dominant power and global reach make for a better and more peaceful world, America should be, many think, merely one “pole” of a “multipolar world” in which the interests and opinions of the “international community” take precedence over America’s. American global leadership in a multipolar world is then redefined as one “that recognizes our limits in terms of resources, capacity,” as President Obama told *Time* magazine.

Finally, it is no accident that many of those sharing these attitudes of American retreat and guilt also want to maintain and increase social welfare spending, even at the expense of the defense budget. They thus ensure that American decline indeed will take place, if only because we will no longer be financially able to sustain and defend our power and global influence.

All these attitudes contribute to the disintegration of national unity predicated on a common identity that is cherished and honored because it is believed to be better than any alternative.

Skepticism about America’s goodness and power, however, do not necessarily create our destiny. Decline will happen only if a critical mass of Americans chooses to believe those views and thus chooses “preemptive superpower suicide,” as Kagan calls it.

Fortunately, not every American has made that choice. Millions of Americans, many of them even now risking their lives in battles abroad, still believe that America is exceptional, and that her power has been and still is a force for good in the world, what Abraham Lincoln called, in the dark, bloody days of the Civil War when the decline of the nation was one battlefield loss away, “the last best hope of earth.” Avoiding the fate of the British Empire will in the end depend not on economics, but on how many of us choose not to let America decline.
for shaping our fate?

 Doesn't the question answer itself?

 ---Owen Hughes