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The worries and warnings come from across the political spectrum and across the oceans. New York Times critic Nicolai Ouroussoff calls America "an empire enthralled with its own power and unaware that it is fading." Former Clinton administration official Charles Kupchan concludes that "American primacy is already past its peak." According to Joseph Nye, who served under Presidents Carter and Clinton, America's "soft power -- its ability to attract others by the legitimacy of U.S. policies and the values that underlie them -- is in decline."

Peggy Noonan, speechwriter for the most optimistic of presidents, Ronald Reagan, asserts that "in some deep fundamental way things have broken down and can't be fixed." Ivan Eland of the Independent Institute warns that America's military "overextension could hasten the decline of the United States as a superpower."

Matthew Parris of the London Sunday Times reports that the United States is "overstretched," romantically recalling the Kennedy presidency, when "America had the best arguments" and could use moral suasion rather than force to have its way in the world. From his vantage point in Shanghai, the International Herald Tribune's Howard French worries about "the declining moral influence of the United States" over an emergent China.[1]

Are the declinists right about America's impending demise? Perhaps. But perhaps they're wrong: After all, declinism has a long history and a strange way of rearing its head when the U.S. is riding the waves of what Churchill called the "primacy of power." Indeed, it is during periods of U.S. ascendance -- or perhaps better said, periods that subsequently are recognized as having been ascendant -- that the declinists usually start sounding the (false) alarms. The "decline and fall of America" mantra has become an almost-decennial prophecy.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the University of Virginia's James Ceaser has written, it was widely accepted in Europe that "due chiefly to atmospheric conditions, in particular excessive humidity, all living things in the Americas were not only inferior to those found in Europe but also in a condition of decline."[2] Not surprisingly, the men who forged the American republic took issue with this early form of declinism. In fact, Ceaser notes, Alexander Hamilton rebutted Europe's pseudoscientific slander in *Federalist* No. 11. Pointing to "the arrogant pretensions" of Europe, Hamilton observed that "men admired as profound philosophers have in direct terms attributed to her inhabitants a physical superiority and have gravely asserted that all animals, and with them the human species, degenerate in America." He called on his countrymen to "vindicate the honor of the human race" by building "one great American system superior to the control of all transatlantic force or influence, able to dictate the terms of the connection between the old and the new world!"

Descending and Ascending

The 13 colonies hugging the Atlantic seaboard would rally behind Hamilton's vision and redefine the nature of their connection with the Old World, but the revolutionary moment was short-lived. After defeating the British Empire in a brutal war for independence, the young republic was soundly swatted back into its place less than 30 years later during the War of 1812. The war saw U.S. forces routed in Canada, U.S. sailors captured and impressed into duty on British warships, U.S. ports blockaded, and the U.S. Capitol and White House set ablaze by a British invasion force. When measured against Great Britain -- and against its own position just a generation earlier -- it appeared that the United States had declined drastically.

Two generations later, the Civil War would decapitate the national government and deform the nation. As Jay Winik's April 1865 (HarperCollins, 2001) reminds us, the war not only called into question almost a hundred years of independent self-government, but also embodied decline in its purest sense. Winik recounts savage episodes of murder, mayhem, guerilla warfare, terrorism, vigilantism, and state-sanctioned brutality on a par with anything we condemn today -- innocent civilians rounded up and summarily executed; cities burned to the ground; entire counties depopulated; mutilations and beheadings; all manner of torture. After Lincoln's murder, General Sherman openly feared America's slipping into anarchy. The Union general wondered "who was left on this continent to give order and shape to the now disjointed elements of the government." The war had rolled back American civilization, and recovery of what was lost was anything but certain. America had declined immeasurably -- or perhaps better said, descended.

Of course, Americans on both sides of the war would rebuild. By the early twentieth century, the United States would claim an empire of its own, with President Theodore Roosevelt using U.S. warships to flex American muscle in the Caribbean, Mediterranean, and Pacific and President Woodrow Wilson deploying American troops to Russia and Europe. Indeed, the rise of the United States in the global pecking order was aided by the economic and military devastation visited upon Europe by the Great War. Yet as historian Benjamin Rhodes has observed, America's "image abroad sank disastrously" during the Coolidge presidency, mainly due to European resentment over how the U.S. handled the role of global creditor.[3] Washington's mishandling of its newfound status as an economic-military power yielded a United States weaker than the nation that had tipped the balance in the Great War.

The U.S. failed to respond to the threats posed by the rise of power-projecting dictatorships in Europe and the Pacific -- threats punctuated by Japan's attack on the uss Panay in December 1937 and numerous German attacks in the Atlantic and the Red Sea. As if to underscore American weakness, President Franklin Roosevelt famously sent word to Hitler in 1938 that "the United States has no political involvements in Europe." The German dictator got the message. Washington's diplomatic deference and military meekness, says Gerhard Weinberg in *A World At Arms* (Cambridge, 1994), confirmed Hitler's "assessment that this was a weak country, incapable, because of its racial mixture and feeble democratic government, of organizing and maintaining strong military forces."

Losing the Postwar Peace, Losing the Cold War

In 1945, notes Derek Leebaert in *The Fifty Year Wound* (Little Brown, 2002), America had the "strut and swagger of a confident nation beating back tyrants. . . . The country was alive with strength and purpose." But by 1946, less than an eye-blink in the lifespan of a great power, everything had changed. The swagger was gone, replaced by uncertainty and worry.

Consider John Dos Passos's gloomy analysis of postwar Germany, which appeared in the January 7, 1946 Life. The U.S. had just flattened Imperial Japan and plowed into the heart of Hitler's Thousand Year Reich, yet Dos Passos could say "We've lost the peace. . . . Friend and foe alike look you accusingly in the face and tell you how bitterly they are disappointed in you as an American."

Pointing to the postwar division of Europe, which left half of the continent free and the other under Soviet domination, historian Michael Hunt has noted that "American policymakers opened this period of ostensible dominance by 'losing' Eastern Europe."[4] Leebaert adds texture to the portrait of postwar decline. "Ten months after the war's end," he writes, "not one U.S. Army division or Air Force group could be rated ready for combat." General Marshall himself called the postwar force "a hollow shell." In fact, as late as 1949, the U.S. had just 12 battle-ready tanks in Germany. Likewise, the evidence in occupied Japan pointed to America's virtual collapse as an enduring military power. Each division of the Eighth Army, Leebaert reports, was a thousand rifles short, the Fifth Air Force still had no jet fighters in 1949, and there were just 500 U.S. soldiers based in Korea. Thus, as world war gave way to Cold War, "The United States neither looked nor felt ready to contain anybody."

As the Cold War began in earnest, accusations over "Who lost China?" rang out across the U.S. Worries about America's decline soon spiked when communist forces rolled through Korea. General MacArthur's daring amphibious landing at Inchon would lead not to victory over the invaders but stalemate. Against a global backdrop of communist revolution, U.S. power seemed to be ebbing -- and Washington seemed to be expending the power it had at an unsustainable clip.

Between the Potsdam Conference and the Berlin airlift, President Harry Truman committed the American people to support any nation "resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures." He poured unheard-of sums into a standing peacetime army and oversaw the creation of the Department of Defense, National Security Agency, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and NATO to wage a new kind of war. He signed on to permanent defense treaties in Western Europe and the Pacific, opened the door to scores of other entangling alliances, repackaged war as police action, and justified it all because of the nature of the enemy and the omnipresent threat it posed. "If we falter in our leadership," he warned, "we may endanger the peace of the world -- and we shall surely endanger the welfare of our own nation."

Truman's doctrine wasn't a ready-made road map for waging the Cold War, according to Leebaert. Instead, the Cold War's first four years -- which coincided with Truman's first four years as president -- "were filled with starts and stops rather than any considered policy or long-range goals." The result: "a patched-together postwar order."

Nor did Americans immediately rally around Truman's battle plan. As historian Walter LaFeber recalls, Truman's critics "tore apart" his doctrine and policies. They warned that Truman would weaken the Constitution, overinflate the presidency, militarize U.S. foreign policy and destroy the UN.

Still others argued that, despite all its spending, deployments and pronouncements, America's Cold War battle plan was not working. "Even in the early 1950s," as Barry Goldwater recalled in *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Victor Publishing, 1960), "it was clear that we were losing the Cold War." Lamenting "the deterioration of America's fortunes," the arch-conservative worried about an enemy with the will and capacity to "dominate absolutely every square mile of the globe" and warned that "a craven fear of death is entering the American consciousness." Indeed, Washington's nonreaction to the Soviet invasion of Hungary just three years after the armistice in Korea seemed to trace the outer limits of America's will, if not its power. "As the bloody tragedy played itself out on the streets of Budapest, America watched, waited and did nothing," Patrick Buchanan bitterly recounts in his introduction. "The sense of frustration and failure was all the greater because Moscow had taken the risk of war, and Moscow had won."

U.S. political power and prestige suffered yet another blow when Sputnik rocketed into orbit in 1957 and Moscow took the high ground in the space race. Senator Henry Jackson called it "a national week of shame and danger." Senator Lyndon Johnson warned that "control of space means control of the world."

Of course, the U.S. faced terrestrial problems as well. "The Soviet Union increasingly appeared to be a triumphal industrial giant," Leebaert says. The New York Times, he notes, predicted that Soviet industrial output would exceed America's by the end of the twentieth century, and the CIA surmised that the Soviet economy would be three times larger than America's by 2000. "The overwhelming question," Leebaert writes of the 1950s, "was whether an apparently soft, even hedonistic American consumer society had the stamina for a long, inconclusive contest with communism."

Senator John Kennedy was worried about the answer to that question. Running for president in 1960, he pointed to a "missile gap" with the Soviet Union as evidence of America's weakening defenses. "We are . . . gambling with our survival," he warned. "This year's defense budget is our last chance to do something about it," he added for dramatic effect.[5]

Among those echoing Kennedy was his Democratic colleague Joseph Clark. Under the headline "U.S. Decline Seen in Eisenhower Era," The New York Times reported on a May 1960 speech in which Clark derided "timid leadership in both foreign and domestic affairs." Like Goldwater, he expressed worries that "America's world role had shrunk" and called for a "build-up in American military muscle."

Yet even after Kennedy had swooped in to save America from decline, it continued to look as if the U.S. had fallen fast and hard from its World War 11 perch. Ineptitude at the Bay of Pigs and irresolute responses to earlier communist challenges would conspire to invite the very thing Churchill had warned against in his Cold War preamble: "temptations to a trial of strength."[6]

In fact, by building missile bases and airstrips on Cuba, Moscow was exploiting a gaping hole in America's veneer of invincibility. The ensuing Cuban missile crisis merely exposed that gap to the rest of the world and prompted some governments to develop alternative sources of deterrence: Shaken by the notion that, in LaFeber's clever phrase, Washington had dragged them "uncomfortably close to annihilation without representation," the French and others grew ever more independent.

The trial of strength over Cuba would precede a trial by fire in Vietnam. In *Modern Times* (HarperCollins, 1983), Paul Johnson calls Vietnam and the consequent crisis of confidence "America's suicide attempt." During the Vietnam War, Washington entered into 16 bombing pauses and 72 peace initiatives. These self-imposed restraints, as Johnson observes, were "interpreted by friend and foe alike as evidence not of humanity, but of guilt and lack of righteous conviction" -- and decline. The war's final chapter, which saw North Vietnam violate the peace accords with impunity and Washington beat a hasty retreat out of Saigon, would be "the gravest and most humiliating defeat in American history."

In the midst of this macro-humiliation, there were countless smaller humiliations, each serving as a piece in the dark mosaic of American decline:

* French leader Charles de Gaulle withdrew from NATO's military structure in 1966 and afterwards pursued a separate peace with Moscow.

* Western Europe averted its gaze from the agony of its patron and protector. Not even Britain would lend a hand in Vietnam.

* When Israel called for help and the U.S. answered during the 1973 war, NATO turned its back. Only Portugal would grant overflight rights to U.S. supply planes.

* North Korea openly challenged and mocked U.S. power during the Vietnam debacle. Pyongyang seized the USS Pueblo in international waters and tortured its crew for 11 months, shot down a U.S. plane in international airspace, and, according to Leebaert, "hacked to death two U.S. officers in the 38th parallel's demilitarized zone."

* In the American sphere, Venezuela sided with OPEC and nationalized U.S. firms; left-wing forces ousted a U.S.-backed government in Nicaragua; and Argentina broke ranks and shipped grain to Moscow.

After Vietnam, the United States appeared to be in a geopolitical freefall. Amid recession, oil embargoes and assassinations, Johnson says, Soviet leaders referred to "the deepening general crisis" in the United States, and Beijing dismissed America as a power in decline. Even Washington seemed to believe America's best days were behind it. Leebaert records an exchange between Admiral Elmo Zumwalt and Henry Kissinger in which Kissinger concluded the United States had "passed its high point like so many other civilizations," adding that he was trying "to persuade the Russians to give us the best deal we can get."

It wasn't a very good deal. Coming on the heels of Vietnam, détente was an expression of American weakness. A 1976 report by Donald Rumsfeld conceded that in the event of war, America's ability to reinforce NATO or come to the aid of Japan or Israel was in doubt.[7] Indeed, according to Johnson, "America's decline in the Seventies seemed even more precipitous. in contrast with the apparent solidity and self-confidence of the Soviet regime." By 1971, he notes, Moscow had bypassed Washington in numbers of land-based and sub-based nuclear missiles. The USSR built some 1,300 warships between 1962 and 1977, the U.S. just 302; and while Washington retracted and retreated, Moscow's proxies established themselves across the Third World.

"We've become fearful to compete with the Soviet Union," one presidential candidate concluded in a campaign speech. "I want to see our nation return to a posture and an image and a standard to make us proud once again . . . we ought to be a beacon for nations who search for peace and who search for freedom."[8] The words could have been spoken by Ronald Reagan, but

in fact it was Jimmy Carter, who three years later would deliver a sermon to the American people essentially blaming them for American decline. Johnson takes note of Carter's conclusion that America's capacity to shape global events was "very limited." This was never more apparent than during Iran's unchallenged violation of the U.S. embassy in Tehran, which would mark the postwar nadir of American power and, it appeared, the fulfillment of declinist prophecies.

Bipolar Disorder

The country did not elect Reagan out of serious belief that he would change things," Derek Leebaert argues, "but because it felt cornered. If embassies could be seized with impunity, if OPEC could gear up to new heights of effrontery, if the United States was behaving as if its liberties depended on the People's Republic of China, then America was indeed looking like a 'pitiful giant' and perhaps well on the way to becoming one."

As a candidate, Reagan ticked off a seemingly endless list of U.S. vulnerabilities and outright defeats in the global conflict with Moscow: Soviet troops in Afghanistan, failure in the arms race, American hostages languishing in Iran, propaganda defeats at the un, faltering leadership in Europe. Reagan's solution was simple. Rather than accommodating Moscow through détente or containing it behind curtains and parallels, the United States would defeat the Soviet system once and for all: "We win," he said. "They lose."

Even as Reagan was reformulating America's grand strategy, those in the declinist school clung tenaciously to their arguments. In his treatise on decline, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (Random House, 1987) Paul Kennedy wondered whether the country's electoral and political system had the capacity to allow policymakers to reformulate the "grand strategy in light of the larger, uncontrollable changes taking place in world affairs." His implication was not just that the U.S. political system was outmoded, but that American power was outmatched.

The book laid out in grim detail how the United States was tumbling toward the same fate that had felled the dominant powers of earlier centuries; how "the American share of world power has been declining relatively faster than Russia's over the past few decades;" and how U.S. defense outlays and commitments were unsustainable and were pushing the United States toward the same "imperial overstretch" that had undone earlier powers.

From Kennedy's perspective, U.S. interests were too numerous, too widespread and too expensive to sustain. The bipolar system, he said, was giving way to a multipolar one. Thus, he reasoned, "there was a need to manage affairs so that the relative erosion of the United States takes place slowly and smoothly."

Kennedy's requiem was representative of a chorus of declinist predictions in the mid- to late 1980s.

* Writing just a few years ahead of Kennedy, Richard Barnet declared that the American Century had "lasted about 26 years." He mocked the Reagan administration for promising to reverse "the stunning decline of American power that marked the 1970s, "for "alarming millions in the United States and Europe," and, finally, for retreating from its hard line with Moscow.

* In 1988, Flora Lewis sighed that "Talk of U.S. decline is real in the sense that the U.S. can no longer pull all the levers of command or pay all the bills."

* Even in trying to deflect the declinists, James Schlesinger conceded in 1988 that the U.S. was "no longer economically the preponderant power . . . no longer militarily the dominant power . . . no longer can achieve more or less whatever it desires."

* "The signs of decline are evident to those who care to see them," declared Peter Passell in 1990, noting that the U.S. had lost its competitive edge and was losing its battle with the Japanese juggernaut.

* "Europeans and Asians," wrote Anthony Lewis in 1990, "are already finding confirmation of their suspicion that the United States is in decline."

* Citing America's dependence on foreign sources for energy and "crucial weaknesses" in the military, Tom Wicker concluded "that maintaining superpower status is becoming more difficult -- nearly impossible -- for the United States."[9]

Other declinists of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as Leebaert recalls, were predicting that the last decade of the twentieth century would be when "the American empire ran out of gas" and "took the British route to second-class economic status."

Moreover, says Samuel Huntington, American decline dominated academic discussions in 1988. By 1990, political scientists and pundits were borrowing Kennedy's premise and quipping that the U.S. and USSR had waged the Cold War, but Japan and Germany had won it. In 1993, historian William Pfaff looked back upon America's "soaring national ascent, and descent, between 1900 and the century's end" and concluded that "superpowerdom" had deformed the United States and delivered "better results for others than for itself."[10]

Of course, it was the Soviet Union that had declined and collapsed under the weight of empire. In an unfortunate stroke of timing for Kennedy, his analysis hit bookstores not long before the United States emerged as the unrivaled, unchallenged leader of something not known since the days of Rome -- a unipolar world. Leebaert calls it "a world unrecognizable from Professor Kennedy's one-dimensional perspective," noting that Kennedy "overlooked inconvenient facts, as information technologies forced decentralization and demanded the sort of adaptivity made for America."

Impotent or imperial?

Indeed, the U.S. surged into the 1990s, its global primacy punctuated by the military rout of Iraq in 1991, the collapse of Soviet communism, and a mastery of the Information-Age economy. Yet, as President George H.W. Bush expressed it in *A World Transformed* (Knopf, 1998), the U.S. was forced to defend its relevance in post-Cold War Europe in the same way an aging employee on the verge of being downsized might defend his job: "In our discussion about NATO," Bush wrote, "I explained why it was important for the United States to stay in Europe."

He succeeded in convincing the Europeans, but Americans remained unsure about the proper place of a superpower with no rival. This uncertainty was accentuated by Washington's increasingly allergic reaction to post-Cold War challenges:

* Two successive U.S. administrations seemed helpless to stop the vivisection of Bosnia. As Pfaff notes, the West's failure to stanch the bleeding in Yugoslavia "dealt a brutal blow to the idea that democracies possessed the capacity, or the will, to enlarge that zone of pacification and cooperation created inside the western political community. It even raised the question of whether that achievement would last." As the leader of the West, the U.S. was weakened and scarred by that failure.

* Disorganized clans were able to chase the mighty U.S. military out of Somalia, and the U.S. then averted its gaze from Rwanda's machete massacre.

* North Korea crashed into the nuclear club; India and Pakistan shook the subcontinent with a spasm of nuclear tests; and China conducted a reckless foreign policy of gunboat diplomacy in the Taiwan Straits.

* Even in America's backyard, Washington dithered over how to remove a scrawny junta in Haiti. "Rarely," recalled David Halberstam in *War in a Time of Peace* (Scribner, 2001), "had the United States looked so impotent."

In each instance, the U.S. played the role of spectator or prisoner of events. Friend and foe took notice. As the Balkans hemorrhaged, French President Jacques Chirac concluded that "the position of leader of the free world is vacant." Even after U.S. forces intervened, questions lingered about America's strength and stomach for global leadership. After the 78-day war from 30,000 feet over Kosovo, wrote Halberstam, Army Secretary Louis Caldera worried that Americans were more willing to take casualties when training for war than when waging it.

Osama bin Laden came to the same conclusion. From his perspective, America's retreat from Beirut in the 1980s, Mogadishu in the 1990s, and Yemen in 2000 was evidence of decline. "America exited dragging its tail in failure, defeat, and ruin, caring for nothing," bin Laden preached. "The extent of your impotence and weaknesses became very clear."[11]

Decline and conquer

To be sure, the U.S. faces challenges, competitors and threats that could erode its global position: China and India are ascending economically; the world abounds with asymmetrical threats that have the capacity to undermine the liberal order that Washington has sought to spread for generations; and Americans find themselves in the midst of yet another "great ideological conflict," in the words of the president's most recent security strategy document.

Today as in the past, U.S. primacy is neither inevitable nor a birthright. It is a burden that must be justified and shouldered anew by each generation in its own way. Even so, and notwithstanding Iraq, this is an unusual moment to diagnose the United States as a nation in decline. Just as the past is littered with unfulfilled predictions by the declinists, the present is teeming with evidence of unprecedented U.S. power.

From peace-keeping to war-fighting, deterrence to disaster relief, it is the U.S. military that the world turns to when in need. Johns Hopkins professor Fouad Ajami has noted, "The world rails against the United States, yet embraces its protection, its gossip and its hipness."[12] Especially its protection: More than half the globe enjoys overt defense and security treaties with the United States. The U.S. military is the last (and first) line of defense for most of the rest.

Of course, the U.S. military does more than protect and defend: In the span of about 23 months, it overthrew two enemy regimes located on the other side of the planet and replaced them with popularly supported governments. Even as American forces deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, they kept watch on the Korean peninsula and kept the sea-lanes open for the oil and goods that feed a truly global economy; did the dirty work of counterterrorism from Tora Bora to Timbuktu; and responded to disasters of biblical proportion in places as disparate as Louisiana and Sumatra.

This does not seem to be the handiwork of a faltering empire. Indeed, no other military could attempt such a feat of global multitasking. "The British empire," writes Niall Ferguson in *Colossus* (Allen Lane, 2004), "never enjoyed this kind of military lead over the competition . . . [and] never dominated the full spectrum of military capabilities the way the United States does today."

Yet the declinists say America's overseas commitments and consequent deployments are an indication of waning. Paul Kennedy warned in the 1980s that the U.S. was susceptible to "imperial overstretch" due to its overseas commitments. Later, Thomas Paterson maintained that military interventions in Central America during the latter stages of the Cold War "attested not to U.S. strength but to the loosening of its imperial net."[13] Today, Matthew Parris argues that "America's might is draining away" by listing some of the disparate places U.S. troops are deployed.

As to the charge that the U.S. is overstretched, Ferguson reminds us that the United States had 3.4 million men on active duty in the 1950s, which represented a sizable 2.1 percent of America's population (around 160 million at the time). By 1963, Leebaert adds, the U.S. had a million troops "stationed at more than 200 foreign bases." Today, by comparison, the U.S. has 1.4 million men and women on active duty (out of a population of 300 million). Even when activated reserve and National Guard components are factored in, only a fraction of a percent of the U.S. population is under arms today -- and just 350,000 U.S. troops are deployed overseas.

Moreover, while the declinists claim that the U.S. military is too expensive, they seldom note that the current defense budget accounts for just 3.5 percent of GDP. That's less than the U.S. spent on defense as a percentage of GDP at any time during the Cold War -- and far less than the 30 to 40 percent spent during World War 11. In fact, Ferguson notes, the cost of the U.S. military was 10 percent of GDP in the 1950s. One reason for this is the enormous size of the U.S. economy. Gerard Baker of the Times of London notes that the U.S. economy will be twice as big as Europe's by 2021, and that, compared to China, the U.S. is adding "twice as much in absolute terms to global output."[14] Ferguson also notes that the U.S. share of global productivity "exceeds the highest share of global output ever achieved by Britain by a factor of more than two."

In short, with a much larger economy, much larger population, and much smaller global footprint, the America of today is no more "overstretched" than the America of 1950 or 1970 or 1990.

Nor is it weaker on the diplomatic front.

Consider the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative, which was born just weeks after the fall of Baghdad. To date, some 60 nations have signed on to the PSI to strengthen their capacity to secure the seas and intercept weapons of mass destruction and their precursors while in transit.

Consider the U.S.-led Container Security Initiative, which deploys U.S. Customs agents to the world's largest, busiest ports to screen goods and containers coming into the United States. Today, 43 ports in dozens of nations participate in the program, creating a ring of security well beyond America's shores.

Consider Libya's preemptive surrender of its WMD arsenal in late 2003, which happened without the firing of a shot and, tellingly, came after Saddam's overthrow and capture.

Consider North Korea, which has been a challenge of the highest order for nearly six decades. It is a challenge that the current administration, like the previous ten, has not been able to fully solve -- an understatement underscored by Pyongyang's penchant for testing missiles and brandishing nukes. But if diplomacy is an end in itself, as so many critics of the current administration seem to believe, then North Korea represents an example of America's diplomatic power. Recall that U.S. diplomacy cajoled four other regional powers into talks, pressured North Korea into a multilateral setting (which it opposed) and then extracted Pyongyang's promise to give up its nuclear weapons. Whether the North Koreans end up keeping this promise is a subject for another essay. What is relevant here is that Washington pursued a major policy objective to persuade all of the regional powers of its importance to *them* and to secure a promise from North Korea. In the 1990s, that was hailed by many in the foreign-policy establishment as something to applaud. In the 2000s, it was dismissed as evidence of U.S. weakness.

With regard to "soft power," from McDonald's to Microsoft, American culture is in high demand. Whether or not we Americans like everything our culture produces, its attractiveness around the world is undeniable -- and yet another expression of U.S. power. We see this in the global popularity of Google, which was created by a pair of Stanford students without any government help at all but so dominates the web that the European Union is pouring $294 million into birthing an answer; in the pc primacy of Dell and HP; in the 330 million (and counting) PCs running Microsoft Windows ; in Apple iTunes, which has swept into 20 countries and displaced local powers such as Japan's own Sony.[15] We see this, too, in the life and times of Yao Ming, who was recognized in 2005 as China's "vanguard worker" -- an honor once awarded to citizens wholeheartedly embracing communism -- yet is a Texas multimillionaire who plays for the Houston Rockets.

Indeed, America has a magnetic pull on peoples of every race, religion and region. Thirty-two million of those who live in the U.S. were born somewhere else, notes Ferguson. When they arrive, these would-be Americans find a culture eager to graft in the new and the different -- a nation where a refugee from Czechoslovakia could be entrusted to oversee U.S. foreign policy as secretary of state, where an Austrian bodybuilder could become governor of the most populous state, where an Afghan immigrant could represent U.S. interests in Kabul and Baghdad, where a Polish immigrant would be asked to head the Joint Chiefs or restore what 9/11 maimed.

Land of wonders

Declinism performs a useful historical function," Huntington has observed. "It provides a warning and a goad to action in order to head off and reverse the decline that it says is taking place."[16] At its best, then, it is an expression of the American tendency toward self-criticism and continual improvement. This is a restless nation. Its capacity for change, its desire for change, its willingness to reevaluate and reassess itself make it easy to extrapolate periodic corrections or momentary uncertainties into downward trends -- declinism at its worst. Perhaps this is why its practitioners find themselves forced to revise and defer their predictions again and again.

Writing when America was still young, Tocqueville described this country as "a land of wonders, in which everything is in constant motion and every change seems an improvement."[17] Closer to our times, Yale historian C. Vann Woodward called optimism "a national philosophy in

America."[18] America's openness to change grows out of its optimism, which explains why most Americans do not subscribe to declinism's pessimism.

Given the breadth and depth of history, it would be foolish to think that U.S. power might not some day recede like a setting sun. Still, given our history so far, it would be just as foolish to overlook the less than stellar record of the declinists and conclude that "some day" is now.

Notes

1 Nicolai Ouroussoff, "Fear in a Soaring Tower," New York Times (June 30, 2005); Ivan Eland, "The Empire Strikes Out: The New Imperialism and Its Fatal Flaws," Cato Policy Analysis (November 26, 2002); Charles Kupchan, "The End of the American Era: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the 21st century," Presentation at the Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs (February 27, 2003); Joseph Nye, "The Decline of America's Soft Power," Foreign Affairs (May/June 2004); Peggy Noonan, "A Separate Peace," Opinion Journal (October 27, 2005); Howard W. French, "Behind the U.S. Decline of Influence in China," International Herald Tribune (March 22, 2006); Matthew Parris, "Ignore the Vanity of the Bushites, America's Might Is Draining Away," London Times (January 22, 2005).

2 James Ceaser, "A Genealogy of Anti-Americanism," >Public Interest (Summer 2003).

3 Benjamin Rhodes, "The Republican Retreat from International Responsibilities," in Thomas Paterson, ed., Major Problems in American Foreign Relations (Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 94>.

4 Michael Hunt, "American Decline and the Great Debate: A Historical Perspective," SAIS Review, (Summer/Fall 1990).

5 John Kennedy, "Senator Kennedy Presses for More Military Spending to Close the Missile Gap," in Paterson, Major Problems in American Foreign Relations, 300.

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