

**The Twenty-First Century Decline of the United States of America**

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## **Abstract**

The United States democracy is in decline and facing a critical period in its history. To maintain its global empire, the United States must reinvent and reinvest in itself with a serious agenda that re-establishes an American exceptionalist attitude. American exceptionalism has been fading for decades since World War II. Domestically and internationally, unpopular wars and conflicts have undermined the perception of good intentions by the United States. Internally, racial and economic inequality, political corruption, and a lack of trust in leadership all contribute to the growing resentment towards the American government. If this continues, the United States will face the reality of no longer being the top superpower in the world. China is gaining significant ground, aggressively asserting its power, and challenging the United States. Based on current growth trajectories, economic forecasts have China becoming the world's largest economy by 2035. Recent efforts by the United States suggest it will do whatever is necessary to maintain its current state of power in the world and will not back down to the rising nation. This posture could result in global conflict and economic collapse. The United States' role in the world will be quite different at the end of this century if it cannot quickly improve in many key areas, including international relations, technology, trade agreements, climate diplomacy, and global development.

## **The Twenty-First Century Decline of the United States of America**

“I look forward to a great future for America, a future in which our country will match its military strength with our moral restraint, its wealth with our wisdom, its power with our purpose.” - John F. Kennedy, October 26, 1963

Every democracy has a lifecycle. The lifecycle of the United States democracy is no different. As the twenty-first century moves forward, the United States' ability to maintain world dominance is beginning to show signs of fatigue. Rarely does a single event cause the end of a great Empire. There is a gradual expansion followed by a gradual decline brought about by a combination of circumstances. (Glubb, 1976). Overextension, economic mismanagement, limited technological advancement, military costs, and high taxation are key factors of past failed democracies. Historians can compare the United States to these criteria to help determine where it sits in the lifecycle of a democracy. There are varying opinions on whether the United States is in a healthy phase of democracy or a state of decline. There are three main schools of thought concerning this subject. The Neo-Imperialistic school of thought believes the United States will further expand its influence and dominance across the globe. American Exceptionalism believes the United States is atypical and extraordinary compared to the development and structure of other countries, past and present. It is the belief that America remains the gold standard of the world. The declinist school of thought claims the United States, as a democracy, has already reached its peak and is in decline. As this happens, another empire will rise and take its place as the top global superpower. The rise of China within the last few decades is cause for great concern, as the United States is now forced to acknowledge it as a significant world power. Changes must be made to put the United States and democracy back on a powerful course of prosperity.

The Treaty of Paris of December 10, 1898, marked a significant milestone for the United States as a world power. The United States had to focus more on the world stage and its relationship with newly acquired territories such as Puerto Rico and the Philippines. (Thoughtco.2019). Within fifty years, the United States experienced a golden era after the end of World War II. Those years represented a period of peak American patriotism and economic success. During that time, the population of the United States grew significantly with the emergence of the baby-boomer generation, and so did its global power.

Almost immediately after World War II, a new “war” began, the Cold War, between the United States and the Soviet Union. The intense race for nuclear superiority and military dominance continued until late 1991, when the United States outlasted the Soviets and became the undisputed world financial and military leader. Since then, the United States has faced many challenges across many areas. Even with the strongest military and economy, failed wars, political divisions, and global competition have reduced its popularity; however, the American spirit still encompasses the world and provides hope for the suffering in other nations.

### **Neo-imperialism**

The United States has asserted financial, military, and cultural influences and dominance all over the globe since the late 1800s. The full power of the United States developed in the middle to late twentieth century after the end of World War II. The neo-imperialistic view sees the United States continuing on an upward trend, with its ability to influence and control nations through domains such as the American military-industrial complex, the financial-industrial complex, consumerism, and Big Tech.

Militarily, the United States has indirectly and covertly backed regime change in many countries. From 1899 to 2025, the United States has overthrown governments in 31 countries. This number includes only known efforts. (Worldpopulationreview.com, 2025). In 1953, the newly formed CIA helped overthrow Mohammed Mossadegh, the Prime Minister of Iran, to protect British oil interests after his government refused to concede to Western oil demands. In a 2023 PBS article, the CIA finally admitted having a role in the coup. “The CIA now officially describes the 1953 coup it backed in Iran that overthrew its prime minister and cemented the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as undemocratic. Other American officials have made similar remarks in the past, but the CIA’s acknowledgment in a podcast about the agency’s history comes as much of its official history of the coup remains classified 70 years after the putsch.” (Gambrell, 2023)

Iran has not forgotten the United States' involvement. “That complicates the public’s understanding of an event that still resonates, as tensions remain high between Tehran and Washington over the Islamic Republic’s rapidly advancing nuclear program, its aiding of militia groups across the Mideast and as it cracks down on dissent. Seven decades later, the 1953 coup remains as hotly debated as ever by Iran, its theocratic government, historians, and others.” (Gambrell, 2023)

The American neo-imperial philosophy has been revived with the second term of President Donald J. Trump. The President had first talked about purchasing Greenland in 2019. Denmark, which holds sovereignty over Greenland, deemed the president’s idea ridiculous. In the United States, critics lambasted his project as megalomaniacal or un-American. (Press, 2025). Upon taking office in January of 2025, President Trump again set his sights on Greenland as part of a “manifest destiny” push. (Treisman, 2025). This time, he upped the ante when he

brazenly expressed interest in making the country of Canada the fifty-first state of the United States.

It is difficult to deny the advantages the United States would gain by acquiring Greenland, as it provides significant natural resources that could help stabilize the American economy for over a century. The Institute for Energy Research published an article in January 2025 explaining the idea. “President Trump sees Greenland as having strategic national security value to the United States due to its location near potential trade routes and possession of rare and undiscovered mineral assets needed for laptops, cell phones, wind turbines, electric vehicles, weapons, and much more.” Greenland’s key mineral deposits include rare earth elements, graphite, copper, nickel, zinc, gold, diamonds, iron ore, and tungsten. A 2023 survey indicated that 25 of 34 minerals deemed “critical raw materials” by the European Commission can be found in Greenland. Trump stated, “We need Greenland for economic security.” Acquiring territory is not new to the United States, having acquired Alaska from Russia in 1867 and purchased Louisiana from France in 1803, as well as other acquisitions. (Press, 2025)

In the mineral cold war with China, the article suggests Greenland is critical for the United States to stay relevant. “...it (the U.S) has been less successful in developing its minerals, giving China a stronghold, particularly in processing. Three decades ago, for example, the United States produced a third of the world’s rare earth elements, and China produced about 40 percent. By 2011, China had 97 percent of the world’s production, which its government has limited whenever it has found it advantageous to do so. The United States has opened some new mineral mines, but the Biden-Harris administration has made it difficult, revoking licenses, delaying permits, and aiding environmentalists in their opposition to mines spread across the United States. Greenland could meet at least 25 percent of global rare earth demand well into the

future.” Tech giants have already begun to explore Greenland's vast resources, as several billionaires, including Jeff Bezos, Michael Bloomberg, and Bill Gates, are betting that Greenland has enough critical minerals to power hundreds of millions of electric vehicles. (Greenland..., 2025)

Unfortunately for President Trump and the neo-imperial faction of the United States, Denmark has no interest in selling Greenland. When asked on NBC's Meet the Press on May 4, 2025, the President did not rule out using military force to gain control of Greenland. “I don't rule it out. I don't say I'm going to do it, but I don't rule out anything. No, not there. We need Greenland very badly. Greenland is a very small amount of people, which we'll take care of, and we'll cherish them, and all of that. But we need that for international security,” Trump said. This could be a major cause of concern internationally, considering a poll published in the Danish Berlingske and Greenland's Sermitsiaq dailies, showed eighty-five percent of Greenlanders do not wish to be part of the United States. (Hubbard, 2025)

The United States has directly and indirectly cast its influence all over the globe for over a century. From CIA-backed coups to the full-scale military assaults on Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States military has been committed to securing democracy and natural resources for itself and its allies. With President Trump and the “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) movement, along with his America First agenda, American neo-imperialism has unapologetically stepped back onto the world's main stage.

### **American Exceptionalism**

American Exceptionalism can be defined as the idea that the United States differs from other countries in an exceptional way based on historical, ideological, or religious reasons.

American exceptionalism values the United States as a unique, unprecedented superpower with an obligation to take an active global role because of its status. The fundamentals of American exceptionalism are generally attributed to the country's founding. Proponents of the concept argue that the United States was uniquely founded on republican ideals rather than centering on a historical community or ruling elite. These principles for good governance are laid out in the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, both of which are occasionally described as divinely inspired. (Britannica.com)

There are problems with the American Exceptionalism way of thinking. The notion of "American exceptionalism" became widely applied in the context of efforts to account for the weakness of working-class radicalism in the United States. The United States is the only industrialized country that does not have a major Socialist movement or Labor Party. Socialist theorists have not been able to understand why. (Lipset, 1996). United States labor unions were at their strongest in the 1940s, coinciding with the peak of the "Great Compression", a period when economic inequality was the lowest. It's often called the "Golden Age of Democracy". (Harvard Law 2023)

Although the United States does not have a strong Labor Party, the Democratic Party has been called "the party of the people" and has had a close relationship with labor unions for many decades, due to its position on collective bargaining rights, pro-union legislation, and more. With the emergence of the Republican Party's MAGA movement, unions wavered in their support of the 2024 Democratic Party's presidential candidate. For example, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which has 1.3 million members, decided not to endorse a presidential candidate in 2024 for the first time since 1996. (Maguire & Navarro, 2024)

The unions perceived support for the Republican Party and Donald Trump did not last long, as a group of federal employee unions filed a lawsuit looking to stop the Trump administration's efforts to take away union representation from approximately one million federal workers. The lawsuit claims President Trump exceeded his constitutional authority and violated unions' rights. (Davis O'Brian, 2025). There is great interest in the outcome of the lawsuits, given that President Trump has appointed three conservative Supreme Court justices who may favor his actions.

Over the past fifty years, the American exceptionalist viewpoint has decreased among young people of the United States. "Since 1976, a large nationally representative survey has asked U.S. high-school seniors, 17 and 18 years old, whether they agree that "Despite its many faults, our system of doing things is still the best in the world": a fairly succinct summary of American exceptionalism. In the early 1980s, 67 percent of high-school seniors agreed that the United States system was the best. By 2022, only 27 percent did. Thus, only one out of four American teens now agrees that their country is exceptional." (Twenge 2023). This has led to an overall dissatisfaction by the American people with political leaders and the state of the union.

When President Trump won the 2024 election, many supporters felt American Exceptionalism was back, and the MAGA movement would show how the United States *was* still superior to the rest of the world. However, with the recent decline of the U.S. dollar and U.S. stocks, many of his supporters feel that the era of United States dominance may be ending. The Financial Times claims that "a bubble in American exceptionalism" began well before President Trump's second term. "After building in global markets for years, it showed classic signs of climaxing following his election, when many seemed convinced that the new president's policies would attract even more capital to the US. But such irrational exuberance was bound to pop on

the first sharp pin. If not the tumult of Trump's early days, then some other shock would have provoked investors to rethink their record high allocations to US assets. In short, the overdue rebalancing of global markets has just begun, and is likely to be playing out for a long time.” (Sharma, 2025)

This rebalancing is not entirely due to Trump's tariffs and the uncertainty of his policies. “The hype around American exceptionalism was built on superior US economic growth, which was artificially juiced by massive government spending and an unprecedented boom in capital expenditure in artificial intelligence. The US economy had never been this government-dependent before, and running budget deficits of 6 per cent was not sustainable.” (Sharma, 2025)

American Exceptionalism still has a heartbeat, but it is faint. The German fiscal reform of 2025 and China's unveiling of a low-cost AI model are examples that other nations can compete with the United States. Internal signs, such as the lack of patriotism from the youth of the United States and the rebalancing of the market and dollar, suggest that not only will American Exceptionalism die, but the democracy of the United States, as a whole, is coming to an end quickly.

### **The Decline of the United States**

Democracy in the United States is in decline. A shift to an autocratic style of government can be seen with the trend of democratically elected Presidents expanding their powers through executive orders, bypassing the system of checks and balances outlined by the Constitution. “The power concentrated in the White House has expanded in each administration since Franklin D. Roosevelt's. Meanwhile, the legislature is so crippled by gridlock and partisanship that even when the presidency and Congress are controlled by the same party, the system struggles to pass

laws. There have been six shutdowns of the federal government since 1981, an indication of political dysfunction.” (Moyo 2018)

In 2016, The Economist’s Intelligence Unit demoted the United States' status from “full democracy” to a “flawed democracy”. It has kept that status while continuing to drop in related metrics. The EIU’s annual democracy Index measures 5 main categories – electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and the political culture – and assigns scores to each. (Castronuovo, 2021)

Brookings' 2023 research publication supports the declinist theory as the United States is experiencing two forms of democratic erosion within government institutions.

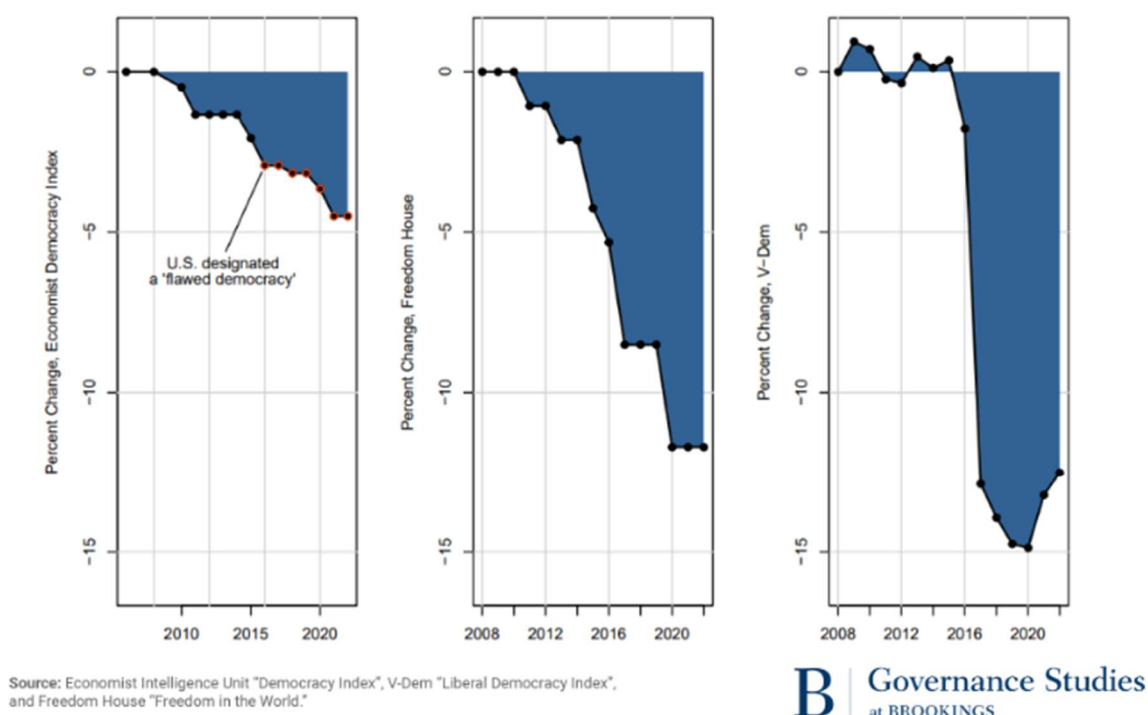
- *Strategic manipulation of elections.* Distinct from “voter fraud,” which is almost non-existent in the United States, election manipulation has become increasingly common and increasingly extreme. Examples include election procedures that make it harder to vote (like inadequate polling facilities) or that reduce the opposing party’s representation (like gerrymandering).
- *Executive aggrandizement.* Even a legitimately elected leader can undermine democracy if they eliminate governmental “checks and balances” or consolidate power in unaccountable institutions. The United States has seen substantial expansions of executive power and serious efforts to erode the independence of the civil service. In addition, there are serious questions about the impartiality of the judiciary.

The following figure summarizes the ratings the United States has received since 2008 in the *Economist’s* Democracy Index, Freedom House’s measure of Freedom in the World, and the “V-Dem” index from the Varieties of Democracy Institute at the University of Gothenburg.

These indices come to a consistent conclusion: Freedom and democracy in the United States are in decline. According to the Economist, the United States now ranks not among the world’s “full democracies” (such as Canada, Japan, and most of Western Europe) but among the “flawed democracies” (such as Greece, Israel, Poland, and Brazil). (Brooking 2023)

FIGURE 1

### Experts agree that U.S. democracy is in decline



A key similarity between past failed empires and the United States is the inability of a democratic empire to keep pace with its growing military demands. The United States continues on a path of increasing national debt, and its defense spending is contributing to tremendous strain on its economy. As of June 2023, the US has around 750 military bases in at least eighty countries. “In 2022, the U.S. spent \$877 billion on its military – the most of any country, and more than China, Russia, India, Saudi Arabia, the U.K., Germany, France, South Korea, Japan, and Ukraine combined. This figure includes \$19.9 billion in military aid to Ukraine.” (O’Dell 2023). Proportionally speaking, the American defense spending decreased from 41 percent of

GDP in World War II to 7.5 percent in 2025. This may be the reason we see a decline in democracies globally. Possibly with this in mind, as tensions mount with China, the Trump administration approved a defense budget that will be approaching \$1 trillion for 2026, nearly 50% higher than 2023 spending levels. There now seems to be an urgency within Washington to fortify its military and its place as the global leader. (Shane, 2024)

This decline of democracy is not unique to the United States. There is a backsliding globally as more countries have begun to move from democracy and toward autocracy. The quality of global democracies hit an all-time low in 2024. (Lotz, 2025). According to an article published by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan, “At the end of 2023, democratization was occurring in 18 countries, representing 5 percent of the world’s population; autocratization was occurring in 42 countries, representing 35% of the world’s population. We’ve seen surges away from democracy before– “reverse waves” occurred between World War I and World War II, and again between 1962 and 1973. But the reverse wave that the United States is now a part of is different from those we have seen before for three main reasons:

- Today’s democratic reversals are happening in mature, consolidated democracies that are expected to be secure, including the US, India, Brazil, and Greece, as well as newer democracies that were once considered stable like Hungary and Poland.
- Some 70 to 90% of these global shifts have been driven not by military coups but by executive aggrandizement – leaders actively undermining checks and balances on their power and the capacity of opponents– with tactics such as packing courts; impeaching and intimidating judges; sowing disinformation; attacking the media; labelling civil society organizations as a threat, and finding ways to prevent people from mobilizing peacefully.

- Democratically elected, autocratic leaders are using a shared playbook to expand their authority, and sharing tactics to serve common goals. Not by accident, the plans laid out in Project 2025 mirror those implemented by Viktor Orbán in Hungary.” (Jones/Platt 2025)

As democracy transitions into something resembling an autocracy, China is a larger threat to the stability of the United States. Trade wars continue to escalate between the two countries, and China has warned that it is prepared to fight “any type” of war against the United States. In a post on X, the Chinese embassy said, “If war is what the US wants, be it a tariff war, a trade war or any other type of war, we’re ready to fight till the end.” This escalation of words comes as China said it is increasing its defense spending budget by 7.2 percent this year.

Xi Jinping, the President of the People's Republic of China, has set a goal to complete a full military modernization by 2035, with the development of new missiles, ships, submarines, and other technologies such as surveillance methods. (Rahaman Sarkar, 2025). This coincides with the year the Chinese economy is predicted to surpass the economy of the United States.

The Chinese foreign ministry also had harsh words for the United States, saying, “Intimidation does not scare us. Bullying does not work on us. Pressuring, coercion or threats are not the right way of dealing with China. Anyone using maximum pressure on China is picking the wrong guy and miscalculating.” (HKFP, 2025)

The U.S. State Department held its ground and said that they are working “to deter China’s aggression, combat China’s unfair trade policies, counter China’s malicious cyber activity[and] end China’s global trafficking of fentanyl precursors.” (Rahaman Sarkar, 2025)

This new Cold War between the United States and China has great potential of becoming hot. China is approaching the capability to take Taiwan by force. United States intelligence is reporting that Xi wants his military ready by 2027, although many reports suggest 2035. President Biden repeatedly said that he would order troops to defend Taiwan against an invasion; however, President Trump refused to give a clear answer on his stance on protecting Taiwan from an invasion by China during his presidency. (Yeh, 2025) The United States is prepared to engage China if necessary, which could lead to a world war if Russia and North Korea were to get involved.

For the United States to win this Cold War against China, it must stay ahead of military and semiconductor technologies. The United States must invest in talent-based immigration. Since the two countries are economically interdependent on one another, there needs to be an effort to increase China's dependence on the United States' supply chains, while focusing on doing the opposite with theirs. This would put them in an advantageous position economically.

Engaging in conflicts with other countries, such as Russia and Iran, takes the focus off China and therefore should not be entertained. The United States must strengthen its relationships with its powerful allies to create a formidable alliance to deter any potential military conflict with China. (Alperovitch, 2024). Unfortunately, the current administration is concentrating on its America First policies, which is an abrasive approach to long-time allies and erodes international diplomacy.

The next fifty years will be critical for the United States and world history. Signs of a declining democracy and a lack of an exceptionalist attitude within the American public emphasize the erosion. China can smell the blood in the water. The United States could implement a competent plan to harden itself against China, but there is no guarantee it will be

successful. The Trump organization knows the United States is in dire condition and on the verge of taking a lesser role globally. China is unafraid of the United States, as it seems destined to become the world leader by the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are on course to dominate the world stage, and there may be nothing the United States can do to stop it, other than with military conflict.

The free world must recognize the advantages of cooperating with the United States to help it maintain its superiority. Securing an agreement related to the purchase of Greenland and its natural resources could give the United States the upper hand internationally. If the United States is overtaken militarily and economically, democracy will be threatened worldwide. China's communist government rules with fear and intimidation. The people are under constant surveillance, and prisons await those who are considered threats or voice opinions contrary to the beliefs of leadership. This style of government cannot be permitted to flourish and must not be tolerated. The United States must get serious in its endeavor to reinvent and harden its role as the protector of democracy and freedom. God Bless the United States of America.

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