

Is America in Decline?

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Abstract

America is experiencing some decline but can be great once more if we embrace America's roots in strong unions and political action to affect change. Things are not looking great for the country as of late, but with a few small improvements, America could still be a superpower among others. America has declinist elements, neo-imperialist ones, and even ones that prove we are still great, but no one theory can truly encapsulate the entirety or complexity of the situation, while there are elements of all currently happening alongside some things (that seem unexplained or unrelated that are) that may be occurring outside of our knowledge.

Is America in Decline?

America has been going through some rough times lately. COVID-19, the cost-of-living crisis exacerbated by the Ukrainian War, and stagflation have given a beating to the middle class. The failure of government intervention has people asking themselves, is more government action the solution? The American middle class is dwindling and desperate for relief, which is why so many have turned to opiates or other drugs to numb themselves to the reality that life in America is not sunshine and puppy dog tails.

Many have speculated what has gotten us to our current state. Some point to specific events to portray a narrative, often to serve their own political purposes. To answer why America has fallen there are a few theories, but at this point, all agree that we are in decline and something needs to change. Nonetheless, all three theories have something worth adding to the conversation, but no one theory definitively explains everything, so all must be considered and analyzed.

Declinism, which is the idea that we've been in a bit of a downward spiral, mostly due to rising income inequality, has been rising in popularity as things have progressively gotten worse for the average American. In contrast, American Exceptionalism highlights what makes America unique, but often fails to address America's missteps and flaws. This usually involves a bit of histrionic thinking and coming to the wrong conclusions that do not address the root cause of issues. Lastly, Neo-Imperialism argues that we are following the same pattern as past empires in our ventures both at home and abroad, and eventually our power will be spread too thin to be as effective as it once was.

While there are staunch differences between the three main theories, at this point most all agree that America is in decline. They only differ to what degree, and if it is recoverable for

America. Even the declinists believe action is still politically viable and possible to restore our once great nation, it is just not looking likely. With a short stroll down history lane, we are reminded that Stalin coined “American Exceptionalism” (Friedman, 2012). Declinism is not new to America, and America has always come back stronger so far.

DW, a German news outlet, described three theories to try to explain Trump’s foreign policy. The first is realism, the second is the “reverse Kissinger”, or thirdly, spheres of influence (DW News, 2025). While analyzing each theory, it slowly becomes clear that no singular theory is entirely accurate in describing the political phenomenon of Trump. His personal opinion of someone plays a large role in how he operates. There does also seem to be some kind of X factor that no one can quite put their finger on, but only allude to and speculate about. Even at the end of their video, they admit that it might even be a mixture of all three or none. They do come close in explaining why he does what he does, he is a realist, he is a businessman, he sees things other people might not or just be brave enough to actually show that the US is still willing to do something, albeit misguided. He believes that America and himself have been chosen by God to rule over the Earth, including the Gaza Strip.

Comparatively, the three main schools of thought, declinism, neo-imperialism, and American exceptionalism, explain three different paths that America can follow in response. However, like the three theories of Trump, these are not exactly mutually exclusive if they are not taken to their extreme ultimately. Tentatively, it seems that America is isolating itself and other countries are aligning themselves or at least starting alliances with the US being notably absent in their plans. BRICS, Asian countries, and the EU are looking to strengthen their ties amongst each other to fight the projected effects of new US tariffs. Even Canada and Mexico are now looking to get closer to China in retaliation. The future of US exports looks a bit uncertain.

The American middle and working classes are under direct threat. Many look to the strength of the middle class as a symbol of how the country overall is doing. However, in recent years, it seems there has been a push to stop focusing on the minimum wage, and instead the maximum wage. This shift has not been lost, especially on economists, like Richard Wolff.

In “As the Empire Crumbles”, Richard Wolff chronicles the downfall of America starting with the bus system as an example of how America only serves the rich and those who are well connected (Wolff, 2024). Serving the middle class is passé. It is not about them anymore. It is all about following big money, elite money, people with connections and lots of friends with money too. He goes on to talk about the Ukrainian War and how it did not pan out quite the way the US wanted. Clearly, America did not crush Russia, and there is evidence now that the Biden administration knew from the get-go that they would not be able to win within the limits of just supplying arms and not directly putting boots on the ground. Wolff also mentions that America is not leading the world in exports or military power that can make a victory decisive anymore. Inflation is going back up, and America is not seen nearly as favorably as it once was. BRICS has effectively formed an economic global union without the US. Britain and America have switched places in global power. Now, America is facing a similar situation with becoming second or third to China and Russia’s spheres of influence.

Recently, he also made an appearance on Democracy Now! talking about Trump’s tariffs as further evidence of our decline. “No one knows if the jobs lost will be greater or smaller than any jobs gained. It’s a big risk being taken by Mr. Trump and if it doesn’t go well, it will produce the recession people are worried about” (Wolff, 2025). Dr. Wolff expertly explains how tariffs will mean higher prices for everyday goods which will mostly hurt the working and middle classes. When a union boss sings Trump’s praises, he reacts “It was disappointing, even

though he knows if you put a tax on things coming in, they will go up in price...we can expect a boost to inflation which will hurt the working class of this country in a very serious way.” He further explains how many US industries rely on other countries buying US exports, calling the tariffs a “Hail Mary” pass to somehow remedy the problems Trump sees with current US trade deals. Ultimately, by trying to strengthen ourselves, we are pushing our allies away and making the US unattractive to do business with. Instead of spreading our influence, the tables have turned on the US as Wolff remarks, “George Kenan taught us about containment, the irony, which Hagel would enjoy, we are becoming contained, we are isolating ourselves. We are the rogue nation of the world.” At this point, it is hard to argue against that, especially when as he points out, the US is often the sole vote with Israel at the UN. He also points out how China, South Korea, and Japan are putting aside their differences to come together to fight the upcoming US tariffs. The world is becoming more united, against America. Wolff also points out how nobody in the last fifty years has implemented tariffs because of the potential domino effect it could have. Economic nationalism, as he puts it, is not a good sign to other countries. This comes flying in the face of fifty years of free trade and a push towards globalism, to unite people and not plunge ourselves into a nuclear winter. The idea behind global trade, while problematic, was to spread more goods to more consumers. Without much thought about the long-term consequences, the populace was assured everything would even out because everyone everywhere would be able to afford cheap quality stuff. However, now we know the unfortunate externalities of labor shopping and the very real problems of modern slavery. While there are many problems with GATT and other such agreements, tariffs will most likely not alleviate the perceived problems or the real ones. They will only hurt the middle class and bleed them dry, like wars abroad. When discussing war and the military, it can be helpful to get the opinion of

someone who really knows what is going on to get a better idea of what is unfolding and where it is headed.

One such mind is Colonel Wilkerson, who was the Chief of Staff to Colin Powell during the beginning of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. In a discussion with Judge Napolitano, he asks the Colonel about NATO's saber rattling, "[w]hat is the point of having 100,000 troops on the border for what reason besides to be a tripwire?" The Colonel responds that would be an inconsequential number of soldiers and thus would have, "[a]s much impact as putting your finger in the ocean and taking it out thinking it's going to have a difference" (Napolitano, 2024). Some have speculated that Russia wants to bring back the USSR. The Colonel says no, "it's the opposite. It's about security, like missiles in Cuba" and it is the "[w]orst possible advice from Blinken" to stir up things with Russia. While his position is understandable, Putin should not be underestimated as to what he is capable of, and as others have found out, Russia historically does not keep their promises. Still, it is very telling to hear this from a Colonel. He is a realist who knows the logistics and reality of war. It might seem like one thing, but as we know things are not always as they seem.

Judge Napolitano notes that Putin will not go against NATO because he knows a hot war will surely be the end of his reign. He much prefers proxy wars and economic sanctions to full on war, but it seems that he is unwilling to relinquish territory that he has conquered. What his next move will be is basically anyone's guess, but it is not far-fetched to think things will escalate if Putin does not get what he wants. The Colonel hits the nail on the head when he says that Putin is a pragmatist. He is not quick to act and constantly thinking over his plans. Putin will act rationally and do what he thinks will be the best strategic move, which has allowed him to survive and be in his position for as long as he has. Wilkerson says without hesitation that "[w]e

are declining, and it is unavoidable, but we can build a glideslope to a softer landing where we are truly a nation among nations” (Napolitano, 2024). Times are changing, and America is no longer the world’s hegemon. People are looking elsewhere for their arms and safe investments.

Things are not looking too great in Gaza. The Hannibal Directive coming back is very telling as to how far we have come and where the thought process has gone. An idea that originated at one of the darkest points in history is brought up and not seen as a big deal because of a very warped perception of reality. America is in denial. It is one of the last stages, and even the Colonel acknowledges it towards the end of the video, “[t]hat’s the reality of it and it troubles me every day that we deny it”, when talking about the fact that America is aiding and abetting a genocide in the Middle East. Empires desperate to cling to power often try to with military force, but many are starting to question how thin we have spread ourselves, in lieu of eight potential wars across the world on the table now. America has not been making new friends lately and many are starting to see its actions as self-isolating.

The current state of the War in Ukraine indicates decline because we did not achieve the goal of defeating Russia or even crippling their economy through sanctions and other economic means. While now we know that the last administration probably knew the Ukrainian War was not winnable, it is probably still preferable to allowing a dictator to take over countries at a whim like it is the 1800s or something (Snider, 2025). That could set a dangerous precedent for the 21st century, as some say, land grabs are one of the symptoms of a failing and flailing empire in despair.

Chris Hedges details the decline of the American empire and how it will fall due to systemic issues caused by corruption of the democratic process. He masterfully crafts the narrative of how Americans became captive to entertainment and infotainment, even in politics.

He signifies the decline with a “moment of distress”, the betrayal of the Democratic party under Clinton to the business class. Jump ahead two cycles and a few bumps along the way, Democrats were flush with corporate cash, Obama was poised to beat McCain in gaining corporate campaign funding to secure his victory. Hedges describes how everything in capitalism is bought and paid for and often a mirage.

Trump is the perfect example of a manufactured image of success, a symptom of a diseased system that allows him to thrive in the waters of our current political climate. He takes the legitimate rage and dissatisfaction with the system and manipulates it for his own personal gain. The opiate epidemic, gambling, suicide, rise of extreme white hate groups, outsourcing of jobs are all signs of our decline. Another economic collapse is ahead as Hedges warns, “[w]hatever tepid reforms we had under Dodd Frank have been removed by Trump, this time around the financial elites don’t have a plan B” (Center for Governance Innovation, 2018). With stock buybacks, deregulation, and unsustainable growth, it is starting to look like the 1980s. Along with stagflation, rising housing costs, and less consumer protections, we are creating the perfect storm for our house of cards to collapse in. Unlike twenty years ago, there will not be a bailout for us to fall back on and we will fall into a depression like state.

Military expansion is usually a sign of empire decline. Hedges cites the British attempt to invade Egypt, Russian invasion of Afghanistan, and of course the Romans. “Once the dollar drops as the world currency, the empire contracts very swiftly and very violently. Foreign wars become unsustainable, and imports become very expensive.” He predicted the American predicament of 2025 seven years early with amazing accuracy. He also knows that there is resistance and a will to flip the system on its head.

Hedges outlines that everyone must work in concert, otherwise these attempts may prove futile and fruitless. “Unless the US builds mass movements with sustained acts of civil disobedience, any mechanism to hope this slide into corporate tyranny will be taken from us. Ripple effects will be felt; empires are fragile things that depend on the extraction of resources abroad and foreign labor.” While he offers a lot of credence to the idea that America is an empire in decline, he does not fall into complete nihilism and instead suggests that people take to the streets and demand their government back. Without direct action, the same things keep occurring and will continue to, unless real grassroots movements start to make waves in meaningful ways. Elites know this, and as Hedges puts it, they are ready with the iron boot. Those in power will tighten their grip and make the penalties harsh for enemies of the state. Now we have a situation where, “[t]hey are effective only in allowing the power elites to demonize the resistance and justify more draconian forms of control”. Hedges’ ability to foresee the future is uncanny and almost surreal. COVID saw many expansions of government powers to limit misinformation (which many saw as a government coverup). Many saw COVID restrictions as government overreach and a power grab that could not happen without the crisis, fully utilizing Naomi Klein’s “Shock Doctrine”. While most restrictions were put in place to keep us safe from ourselves, government intervention in China is exactly what led to the worldwide outbreak, which is undeniable. The spread of more authoritarian governments is also on the rise across the globe. Recent events have shown us they will never let a good crisis go to waste, especially if it justifies them claiming more power for themselves. They have to do it to keep us all safe and we just have to trust that the government knows best and hope it turns out better than last time.

Hedges makes a very compelling and somewhat depressing point but remains hopeful that America can still turn things around if we follow a simple formula that has seen real change

enacted in America before with positive results. It is up to every American to decide what they really want. Most just want a simple life with a white picket fence and a dog with two kids. Some just want to be able to live their lives without being tread upon.

Dr. Ron Paul is a libertarian idol who often is surprisingly accurate when it comes to his predictions, like how the dollar would drop and what effect that will and has now had (Petrova, 2024). As he states, Russia used India and China to work around sanctions on oil and other necessities. America and the West is no longer the biggest or baddest game around. BRICS has more economic power, and as we have seen in Ukraine and Afghanistan, US intervention does not always guarantee a win in this century as it did in the last. As Paul says, “[a]ll Empires end that way, they overextend themselves. They think it’s going to be permanent.” Nothing lasts forever, and just as the sun set on the British Empire, so must it also for the American one.

However, even the most ardent communist, the man of steel himself, Joseph Stalin described America as a nation with a very unique set of circumstances surrounding it making it exceptional, a nation that does not follow the rules like all the others, but one that sets an example (Friedman, 2012). American Exceptionalism says that America is an exceptional country that does not follow the conventional path that all those other nerd countries follow. America is cut from a different cloth. Maybe other empires have fallen, but not America. She is strong and getting stronger by the day by further isolating herself, somehow. There is no simple formula our puny peon brains can understand using standard logic to explain the rationale of the elite. They are the smartest and biggest-brained men in the country, so they surely will lead us to the path of prosperity by eliminating fraud and waste.

It does stand to reason that America should have some kind of plan for the future. Perhaps, it should involve implementing renewable technology or upgrading our infrastructure in

another way, but it will also undoubtedly be about who we will be aligning with and who will be kept at a distance. Robert Wilkie, former Secretary of Veterans Affairs outlines, “[t]here is no reason why America cannot expand Boris Johnson’s D-10 formula to add Asian powers to the G-7 and formally anchor western Europe in the Indo-Pacific. Deterring China is a global task” (Wilkie, 2021). Before sweeping tariffs, this made perfect sense. The US was poised as the lead superpower. Still, we do need to deter China, but so far efforts have not proved successful yet. Nonetheless, Wilkie makes several very good points in this article after setting the scene with a short history lesson that provides some needed context. America came to the aid of many post WWII and were seen as heroes the world over.

Many people believe that Americans are the chosen ones. That America is so unique, even our nationalism is on another echelon that others simply cannot recreate with the same fervor. The former Executive Vice President at the Heritage Foundation explains:

There is no other country in the world that embodied the blend of classical philosophy, Christianity, and even Enlightenment ideas in the unique way America did in the founding of the republic from 1776 to 1789. It was an exceptional (meaning uncommon) mix of liberty, limited government, natural rights, and religious liberty that made the American founding unique (Holmes, 2020).

Indeed, America’s successful revolution fueled by Enlightenment ideals and other influences led to many revolutions and similar constitutions to be adopted. Democracy had been tried before, but not quite like this. Americans are spoon fed from birth that their country is special, and indeed many had to die for those rights to be upheld for American society to be as it is today. Some generations grew up without their rights or were repressed by the American government because of their beliefs. Most never grew old enough to see the fruits of their resistance, but kept

fighting until the end regardless. America is exceptional in that you have the right to protest and redress the government for grievances. Another common theme among those who subscribe to American Exceptionalism is the belief that America was chosen by God to lead the world. America is one of the greatest, if not the best country on God's green earth and we are lucky to even be allowed to breathe the same air of freedom that once came out of the Founding Fathers' mouths before signing the Declaration of Independence. A veteran and retired police officer, Ski Ingram, shares that personal belief,

I believe that God inspired Thomas Jefferson and the framers of the Constitution while this country was being conceived. Some people reading this may be mocking me for what I believe and that is okay for I truly believe that everyone is free to believe what they want. That is part of what makes America exceptional (Ingram, 2020).

While it may seem a bit self-serving at first, there definitely is something incredible about the founding of America, which inspired many similar revolutions across the world. Now, we just seem preoccupied with simply taking it over.

America seems to be on a sort of shopping spree of countries. Americans do need stuff and energy, so it is not completely out of line for us to add some assets to the empire. Greenland, Canada, Panama, and the entirety of the North American continent seems to be on the table. Again, many argue that one of the symptoms of a declining empire is trying to expand and failing, or simply spreading the empire too thin. This new wave of imperialism for the US could be positive, and maybe with our exceptional nature America could lovingly incorporate new profitable territories across the globe. However, if we just simply look at the costs of foreign wars the US has recently engaged in, it is not looking likely. If we were to change our strategy perhaps things could turn out differently. So far, the playbook has been the same along with the

results, namely arming and training the foreign army and hoping after we leave things will be alright. If these places were actual US owned territories, that would change things dramatically. Annexing nearly the entire North America continent makes sense strategically. It's much harder to invade if you do not have any conveniently placed islands forty miles from Miami with nuclear missiles under enemy control. If the United States were to expand, it would make the military and other such expenses balloon to unseen levels. They could then spread over more people in turn, but if the need for security keeps rising, so will the spending.

There are a lot of things America could have done with all the money that it has spent on the War on Terror since 9/11. Obviously, it is quite an enormous amount of fire power and money, and with great power comes great responsibility. However, while it is important to keep Americans safe, we must ask how much is too much? We do need local police, firefighters, and other things that need funding understandably, but when we have other issues like decarbonizing and funding for education or infrastructure, we have to remember where we are falling behind.

For far less than it spent on militarization since 9/11, the U.S. could reinvest to meet critical challenges that have been neglected for the last 20 years:

- ▶ \$4.5 trillion could fully decarbonize the U.S. electric grid
- ▶ \$2.3 trillion could create 5 million \$15 per hour jobs with benefits and cost-of-living adjustments for 10 years
- ▶ \$1.7 trillion could erase student debt
- ▶ \$449 billion could continue the extended Child Tax Credit for another 10 years
- ▶ \$200 billion could guarantee free preschool for every 3-and-4-year old for 10 years, and raise teacher pay

- ▶ \$25 billion could provide COVID vaccines for the population of low-income countries (Koshgarian, Siddique, and Steichen, 2021).

The numbers speak for themselves. As astonishing as those are, America shows no sign in slowing down spending anytime soon. More military incursions and increased defense are good news for defense contractors and shareholders, but not for those on the receiving ends of such arms. To add insult to injury, wars do not often make new friends. The US is already losing its favor among what used to be thought of as natural allies. Canada and Mexico see the writing on the wall.

Conclusion

While we remain the most powerful military, we may be losing ground culturally and economically. Everyone mostly agrees, America is declining, and China is rising. It's hard to deny reality and accept things that go directly against one's ingrained beliefs. However, while America is still a very unique place with many distinct cultures, other countries are starting to make alliances and trade deals without the United States. Foreign workers and international students are beginning to look elsewhere to find more suitable conditions instead of building their lives where they can be suddenly uprooted at the mere accusation of a crime.

America can be great again if we unionize and educate our workforce effectively. We need more localized economic growth and affordable housing, to reinforce our own economy and build our future infrastructure instead of outsourcing it.

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