

Technology's Role: Knowledge, Resources, and the United States' Social Decline

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze, dissect, and predict the state of American power over the next 50 years through the lenses of the American exceptionalist and American declinist schools of thought. Historically, the United States has perpetuated the perception of its near-unattainable growth, power, and progress. This examination argues that while the USA is unique in many ways, this distinctiveness does not shield it from ruin. Instead, this paper acknowledges the distinctive qualities of the American population, culture, and society, and how such components may exacerbate the American decline, especially as access to information increases. This paper argues that the very components that were often seen to be. As time passes, America's social fragmentation shows signs of increasing, emphasizing the political, economic, and cultural divides within the nation, let alone across the globe.

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The United States of America has been recognized as a global superpower since World War II, a title that was seemingly cemented after the fall of the Soviet Union. This influential position is a frequently debated topic, and the longevity of America's dominance is increasingly debated, especially as domestic and international challenges and competition rise. The goal of this work is to attempt to determine the state of the United States of America in 50 years (2075). Through the lens of two primary schools of thought, this paper seeks to examine the basis of technology's evolution and its relationship to the state of the USA over the next five decades, and how recent years have helped shape this prediction. The American exceptionalist school of thought has consistently framed the United States as distinctively invaluable and powerful and argues that this is an irrevocable quality that distinguishes America's success and growing potential from other countries. The American declinist school insists that the United States' political, financial, social, and technological power is reducing as time progresses. The idea of China's political and technological ascent is a key point that this school of thought often uses, declaring that the United States is at risk of being replaced as a superpower if things are not changed. The continual evolution of technology and education demonstrates a significant risk of social, cultural, and economic decline. This paper aims to dissect the relationship between technological advancements and the apparent deterioration facing America, with increasing access to readily available resources resulting in many citizens feeling dissatisfied, frustrated, and resistant to how the government behaves. With this said, while the United States retains unique qualities, technology's constant evolution serves to deepen social fragmentation, loss of trust in governance, and economic instability, exacerbating the increasingly likely decline of America.

American Exceptionalism: A Foundational Lens

No country has believed in its destiny and authority more than the United States of America. The country's foundation was cemented within the ideas of democracy, liberty, and the balance of powers. Within that, the concept of American exceptionalism argues that the United States of America exists as a superior country to other nations in its missions, global influence, and political systems. The exceptionalist belief system has existed alongside the country's establishment, especially post-Civil War, and is a mentality many nationalists subscribe to. Exceptionalism and the aligned school of thought have a deep-seated role in domestic policy and foreign engagements, consequently enforcing the influence and apparent leadership role that the United States affixes to itself. Exceptionalists maintain that the USA's contributions to politics, economics, and culture are explicitly unique and invaluable. Proponents of exceptionalism insist that the United States' influence in international democracy, the "defeat of fascism" in WWII, and the defeat of the Soviet Union solidify its uniqueness. (Zipp, 2021)

This paper accepts and acknowledges that the United States is distinct in many ways; in fact, it argues that this distinctness exists, but it aims to emphasize the risks that accompany the idea of superiority, and how this concept has been garnered within the American population, risk greater harm than benefit. The internalization of exceptionalism, particularly the concepts of superiority and irreplaceability, can mask vulnerabilities in government and in society. The purveyed mentality can result in complacency among political figures and inaction on many fronts. Consequently, this leads to risks of frustration in citizens in response to such behavior, and with technology's continued and constantly evolving role, the average citizen's means of identifying these susceptibilities is increased. Lack of corrective action, justified through

exceptionalism, deepens public and cultural dissatisfaction and unease, while trust in governance diminishes.

Exceptionalism In Action: Exceptionalism, Double Standards, and Isolationism

While many exceptionalists align with “claim of difference, mission, or superiority, [other theorists] associate it with a particular behavior or set of behaviors” (Williams, 2022, 1085). For example, political theorist Michael Ignatieff presents a unique framework for approaching exceptionalism, with three core concepts: exceptionalism, double standards, and legal isolationism. These viewpoints work in tandem to describe and emphasize how the United States engages in both domestic and international policy and conduct.

Ignatieff describes exceptionalism as how the United States repeatedly “signs on to international human rights and humanitarian law conventions and treaties and then exempts itself from their provision.” (Ignatieff, 2005, p. 3) This avoidance is frequently exercised through noncompliance, explicit reservation, or nonratification, exempting the United States from the responsibilities they impose on other countries. This behavior can be observed in the USA’s refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, maintaining that American judgment and decisions supersede that of oversight, deeming it unnecessary. With technology in the picture, the United States could be interpreted as hypocritical, with the nation expecting other countries to offer transparency, while the US takes great efforts to guard its own practices from observation and consequently accountability.

Ignatieff’s concept of exceptionalist double standards argues that “the United States judges itself by standards different from those it uses to judge other countries” (Ignatieff, 2005, p. 7). This feature is argued by some to be the greatest problem within American exceptionalism. While the United States aptly criticizes other states for inaction or ignoring UN rights bodies,

America refuses to accept criticism or comments from the same UN bodies. For example, the USA actively condemns Iran and North Korea, while actively excusing and reinforcing allies' similar behavior, like Israel. When September 11th occurred and the US sought a war on all forms of terrorism, many pointed out the hypocrisy, arguing that American policies toward attacks on civilians were akin to double standards. Additionally, with further advancements in technology and access to resources, politicians presented things in an attempt to justify various political or military actions. Even when it was uncovered that Iraq did not in fact possess weapons of mass destruction, the United States still aimed to defend and justify its response, and avoided consequences regarding the torture the CIA was found to have committed after the September 11th attacks (Tayler & Epstein, 2022). This inconsistency and lack of honesty is not invisible to American citizens and contribute to the decline in public trust, damaging American leadership's credibility and reputation, both domestically and internationally.

The third form of exceptionalism is described as legal isolationism. This characterizes the United States' behavior of refusing to abide by international law, which American politicians feel would damage or reduce the country's autonomy. The US has avoided agreements on conditions from treaties to artificial intelligence regulations, maintaining that the United States should make decisions for its citizens and system for itself, separate from global expectations and binds. Not only is this avoidance disruptive to international policy formation and ratifications, it also poses a concern to Americans' safety and privacy, especially when much of America's technological leaders are in the form of private, monopolistic companies. Anne-Marie Slaughter argues that, despite the seeking of legal isolation, "law is being globalized, like commerce and communications" (Ignatieff, 2005, p. 8). Consequently, American judicial figures are increasingly expected to engage in global discussion. The repeated, near absolute unwillingness to engage in

international legal standards reinforces the growing perception of hypocrisy and can signal to citizens that the United States prioritizes its autonomy over transparency, and in the digital age, this can prove worrisome.

The American Declinist Perspective

The declinist school of thought argues that the United States is experiencing a continual decline in power and global influence. The key points of this perspective are the diminishing economic and social dominance, political polarization, and social fragmentation. As time progresses, this ideology has gained greater traction, a shift credited to China's global ascent, political conflicts, and increasing access to information in the digital age has painted America in a less-than-exceptional light. Generally, discussions on the American decline would often arise during national concerns or significant change, and technology could be part of this change. Some declinists attest to the idea of "overstretch" of power as being a primary driver in the decline of American influence. Paul Kennedy argued in *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers (1987)* that the imperial overstretch will occur when big powers fail to balance their "wealth and economic base with their military might and strategic commitments" (D'Eramo, 2022).

A running consistency within declinists' descriptions of America is that many have their determined "solutions" or alternative actions that would reduce or mitigate the otherwise constant decline. Kennedy contends that America needs to stop spending on military equipment, restructure its industrial base, and prioritize competition, while Chomsky insists that imperialism must end. Others argue for expanding the accessibility of education, regulating corporate overreach, and promoting greater media and political transparency. Robert Putnam's concept of social capital can also be used in this discussion. Social capital refers to the networks, trust, and norms between individuals and their communities, and how such prompts collective action. In his

book, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam contends that American social capital is increasingly declining, exemplified through decreasing civic involvement and weakening interpersonal trust (Putnam, 2000). The evolution of technology only further complicates these networks and layers of social capital. While the internet poses as an opportunity for connection and community, social media is populated by performative, inaccurate portrayals of nearly any thinkable aspect of life. Online spaces create near-infinite room for echo chambers, misinformation, and surveillance, weakening the existing and potential bonds that constitute social capital and make it possible.

In contemporary developments, technology has introduced a new array of challenges to America and new layers to the declinist argument. With the exponential development within technology, labor markets, non-tech-based industries, and cultural perceptions have all been disrupted and influenced. This is arguably from increased access to information, not just about one another as people, but about businesses, figures, and politics. This improved access to information means that disinformation is more likely to gain traction. For example, during the presidential debate between Harris and Trump on the Presidential Debate of September 10th, 2024, Donald Trump claimed that Haitian immigrants were stealing domestic animals and eating them. Despite no evidence to support this claim, conversation and investigation were incited by his words, spurring xenophobia and anti-immigration ideologies, based on a made-up story (O'Rourke, 2024). This information was distributed instantaneously to millions of people watching the debate and speaks to the risks that disinformation and, eventually, misinformation pose, especially from a high-profile figure, let alone one vying for the position of President. Citizens want to feel that their leader(s) are honest, and the laughability of that statement speaks enough.

According to a Pew Research publication, public trust in government is nearing historic lows. This study's data, gathered from 1958 to 2024, depicts the primary parties and different races' feelings of confidence towards their government. As of 2023, only 16% of Americans said they trusted the government just about always or most of the time, which was among the lowest measures in nearly seven decades of polling." As institutional credibility and trust diminish further, the declinist warning that internal degradation can pose a greater threat than competition seems to ring true (Pew Research Center, 2024). This is a rising concern, especially with progress in Artificial Intelligence development, disinformation, and the growing presence of deep fakes (the digital manipulation of a person's physical features, often using AI) online.

The Role of Technology and America's Social Decline

The rise and evolution of technology has had an immeasurable impact on how Americans access information, interact with each other, and engage in social and political institutions. While technological advancements have allowed for greater connection and enablement of instant communication and discussion, they have also played a role in reinforcing divisions. Identity politics and the consequential moral juggling detract from many issues and have inadvertently caused greater fragmentation between communities. Social media's establishment and algorithmic systems have allowed for what is essentially recognized as echo chambers. Contextually, this refers to an environment in which ideas of similar rhetoric or theory continuously circle around the users who post or engage with them most, essentially reinforcing whatever their existing beliefs are. This means many users have inadvertently curated spaces in which the information they believe in and voice is regurgitated back to them by others of a similar mind. Not recognizing the algorithmic pod that they tend to stay in, many people do not necessarily recognize the differences in the internet atmosphere elsewhere. This debilitates

meaningful, cross-cultural communication and consequently, may limit the extent of critical media evaluation, making it difficult for potential misinformation or forms of propaganda to be effectively filtered out of commonly occupied spaces, be it online or in person.

Debates conducted online are becoming increasingly popular and visible. They cover topics such as public health, elections, and misinformation, highlighting the informational disparities that exist so frequently online. Artificial Intelligence (AI) plays a significant, exponentially involved role in the discussion of misinformation in the age of technology. AI has taken the forefront in the conversations surrounding technology and is a concerning aspect of contemporary life for many. At the core of its existence is the intrinsic lack of humanness within Artificial Intelligence, and through its construction, AI operates off the amalgamation of responses and prompts provided by users and developers. It is an explicitly nonhuman operation at its core, meaning that the growing global involvement in AI runs risks of eventual mass replacement of humans in various careers, a trend beginning to become overwhelmingly visible in tech environments and workplaces.

Artificial Intelligence: Degrading the Dependability of Information

Multi-billion-dollar companies, including Microsoft, Apple, Google, and Amazon, have contributed to the growing layoff rate, with Microsoft announcing its plan to lay off nearly 6,000 employees. Many critics conclude that Microsoft, like many other AI backing companies, plans to dedicate greater funds towards AI development and maintenance (Barrabi, 2025). From a top market contender's perspective, using a set and ever-evolving system would be the most efficient means of cutting costs while enhancing productivity. That said, from a human perspective, people are recognizing the risks to their futures, education, and stability, and with the potential being so broad, AI could absorb the role of varying levels of labor, be it manufacturing, teaching,

or even medicine. In a study published by the Pew Research Center, comparing AI experts and American public opinions on AI, when questioned about how AI would impact certain jobs, the public population demonstrated that “43% of adults overall say AI will lead to fewer teacher jobs in the next 20 years, compared with 31% of experts.” This pattern remains similar when both groups were asked about medical doctors, and 38% of AI experts in the study presume that AI will cause jobs in law to be reduced (McClain et al., 2025). Expectedly, it can be disconcerting to process that AI, a nonhuman system, is predicted by experts and the public to have a role in the degradation of careers that revolve around human engagement. As a result of the increasing disposal of human workers, the greater dependency on AI for data collection, program development, and other contributions, there is an unavoidable level of unease for citizens in the stability of their jobs and the reliability of the information they consume. AI’s continuance threatens the economic stability of thousands of Americans and people globally, poses a significant risk in the production of disinformation, and harms educational integrity and learning.

Disinformation is inarguably dangerous in nearly all cases, especially through the enablement of misinformation. The two have a cyclical relationship, with disinformation describing the intentional development and/or distribution of faulty facts, evidence, or information. Misinformation defines the often-inadvertent distribution of false information, and is frequently what was initially disinformation, regurgitated by people who do not know better, or may not be well-versed in critical media literacy, an increasingly necessary skillset (Chessen, 2017).

AI enables disinformation through deepfakes, AI-generated videos, images, audio, or text. This can be seen being utilized politically, in multiple different ways, one of which was an incident in 2024, in which Steve Kramer, a political consultant, utilized deepfake audio of

President Biden. The message relayed in these calls was essentially “Your vote makes a difference in November, not this Tuesday”, referring to the New Hampshire primary elections, claiming that if they voted in the primary, they would not be able to participate in the general election. This was eventually discovered, and the political consultant who did it was fined \$6 million and charged with 13 counts of voter suppression (felony) and 13 counts of impersonating a candidate (misdemeanor) (Bond, 2024). AI imagery and videos are also easily accessible to the common person, allowing people like Kramer, or even children, to have the capability to produce potentially problematic or socially disruptive creations. Elon Musk, the anointed leader of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), even reshared a deepfake of, at the time, Presidential candidate Kamala Harris. In sharing it, not only did Musk not proclaim anywhere that this content was disingenuous or parodical, but he also distributed it to his multi-million followers on app X, formerly known as Twitter. This took place 3 months before the Presidential election, and the content involved the deepfake audio (using Harris’ voice) to claim that Harris is a diversity hire, both because she is a woman and a person of color. It carries on having the voice exclaim that Harris does not know “the first thing about running the country.” Not only is the bare creation of this content concerning in the realm of disinformation and how it is utilized to influence voters, but the fact that highly influential figures face little to not repercussions for distributing the content, even if they were aware of its falsity, as Musk claimed he intended the video repost as satire (worth noting again, that this was not stated anywhere until hours later) (Swenson, 2024).

It is becoming increasingly relevant to discuss AI and its roles in public perceptions, politics, and engagement. It will continue to be a crucial talking point, especially with the fact that the primary American tech leaders are private, monopolistic companies that are essentially always

competing. With greater focus and investments into AI, its technology is improving, consequently improving the seamlessness with which generative AI is used to produce deepfakes, audio imitations, art, imagery, etc. Additionally, according to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center, the average American's perception of AI is negative, with many citizens feeling uneasy or pessimistic about the role of AI in the present and future, men being more optimistic than women (McClain et al., 2025). In fact, 43% of adults who were not considered AI experts argue that AI will harm them in some way, with 33% expressing uncertainty. This section aims to emphasize the importance of discrepancy in media and production, while actively acknowledging the growing risks and concerns accompanying technological innovations like contemporary AI.

In summary, AI has brought forth a new realm of uncertainty within technology, the workforce, and information. With mass job displacement becoming a genuine reality and the increasingly seamless development of AI content, including deepfakes, AI's existence and perpetuation have inevitably degraded the public's perceptions of economic stability, as well as truth and reality. With the evolving production of disinformation, attempts to disrupt political campaigns, and means of manipulation, people are justified in their unease. If the United States continues to allow AI to navigate unregulated, its ability to disrupt information and devalue human labor and contributions, the trust between the public and the government will continue to decline.

Surveillance, Privacy, and Trust in the Digital Age

Another concern with the evolution of technology is user safety and privacy, a worry that is amplified through the normalization of mass surveillance, be it by government or corporate entities. Civilians' sense of trust in institutions has been rattled through historical exposure of

how personal data is collected and exploited. One of the most significant examples of these revelations was through Edward Snowden, a former director of the National Security Agency (NSA). In 2013, Snowden leaked classified documents, through which he exposed the extent to which state surveillance took place under the publicly purveyed guise of national security. Through programs like PRISM, the US government collected data from both domestic and international citizens. This information included emails, phone calls, and browsing histories, and was collected without the individuals' knowledge or consent (Greenwald, 2014). Snowden's exposure of this information raised mass national concerns regarding personal privacy, security, and data. According to a 2019 Pew Research study, a majority of American citizens express a sense of powerlessness when approaching protecting their data and personal information (Pew Research, 2019). This constitutes long-lasting concerns, not only regarding the proven information exposed, but also the underlying concern of what else the government might be doing, and what it does not want its population to know.

State surveillance is not the only aspect of silent data collection that Americans face, with corporations utilizing advertisements as a means of shaping user behavior and attention. Through social media or random websites with paid collaborations or ads, companies are able to collect data based on browsing history, location data, links/ads interacted with, search history, personal information the consumer has provided, and data purchased from data brokers. (Singh, 2020) This information is used to better entice users, personalizing content and advertisements, passively encouraging the user to further interact with the displayed resources. Additionally, the information gathered can be used to train machine models, improve facial recognition software, and better develop AI tools and systems. This includes the use of Completely Automated Public Turing tests to tell Computers and Humans Apart (CAPTCHA), a common security checking

system that requires completion for users to access specific resources. These frequently involve selecting an object from a grid of squares, typing distorted text, or identifying how many of an object there are, with refreshing squares. While CAPTCHA's initial purpose was to prevent bots from accessing websites and other human-intended services, Google uses them to gather data on how people identify objects or text and use this information to train AI algorithms. This is essentially done without informed consent, and many people do not realize that the point of CAPTCHAs is beyond human vs. robot differentiation.

Both government and corporate surveillance and data collection tactics have influenced how Americans interpret their privacy online. Thanks to Snowden's exposure of the data collection from the United States, many Americans are more conscious about their presence online and more willing to doubt whether or not the government truly has the best interest of civilians in mind. Through just the exposure of surveillance, doubts in the government and corporations fester, and the accumulating evidence of powerful institutions being unwilling to cater to transparency continues to influence public concepts of trust and dependability.

Conclusion

This paper has worked to examine both exceptionalist and declinist schools of thought, with a focus on the role of technology in both of these perspectives. While the exceptionalist school has been a consistent framework that upholds the leadership that the USA has demonstrated, and provides a framework for nationalistic ideologies, such ideas have slowly but surely deteriorated. The evolution of technology has exacerbated this shift, primarily through increased access to knowledge. Using Michael Ignatieff's tri-layer framework for exceptionalism helped highlight the ways in which America has perhaps taken advantage of being seen as unequivocally exceptional. Dishonesty, hypocrisy, and avoidance on the part of

the government continually harm the relationship between citizens and political institutions. The declinist perspective maintains that America is on the decline, but the openness of alternative behavior to achieve a solution provides hope. A priority for the USA must be re-establishing trust and respect between itself and its citizens. Taking advantage of technological resources to *improve* transparency and increase openness to citizens will not only improve the relationship between the government and the people. Still, it can allow citizens to make better informed decisions and vote while informed. Granted, as touched on in this paper, this avoidance of transparency is effectively intentional. Regardless, the continual allowance of misinformation and dishonesty will further perpetuate the downfall of American influence on both an international and domestic level. The United States' ability to retain its power over the next 50 years is unlikely, and if political figures want otherwise, they must be willing to abandon the sensation of supremacy and acknowledge and address the flaws within their system. Otherwise, the American decline is not only likely, but self-inflicted.

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