

America's Future: Three Schools of Thought

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Abstract

The Roman Empire of the 2nd century, the Mongol Empire of the 13th century, and the British Empire in the 16th century were three of the most powerful nations to ever exist, right up until the point they weren't. Is the current United States heading toward that same fate? The answer is 100% yes. The downward trend is being amplified by our current political friction and the refusal for recent administrations, Republicans and Democrats, to work together and pull up from the nosedive the country is headed. Until now. Until Trump's 2nd term. Trump as a businessman is taking bold steps to course correct like any business owner would do if they saw that their business was in a downward spiral. We will explore the framework from three schools of thought, Declinist, American Exceptionalist, and Neoimperialist to dissect the argument and come to a conclusion. At the end of the day, there are pieces of the Declinist and American Exceptionalist views that are spot on and offer great insight to where the country is currently positioned. However, the views expressed by the Neoimperialists, especially by Myra Adams which will be discussed later, offer an exact list of critical issues America faces today and a blueprint for the changes Trump 2.0 is attempting to enact. If you are rooting for the continued success of America, it's time to put aside your political differences and realize there needs to be changes to the status quo if this country wants to continue to lead the world. This administration has the chance to be one of the all-time great administrations and transform the US into an even greater power which will be poised to continue its dominance for another 250 years. Trump 2.0 is off to a fast, but rocky, start. However, when all is said and done, America will be repositioned for continued greatness.

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There is a popular saying, "Hard times create strong men, strong men create easy times, easy times create weak men, and weak men create hard times." These four stages are analogous to the four stages of business. Expansion, Peak, Contraction, and Trough. Put in simple terms, companies begin and have periods of growth. At some point in time, they reach their peak, and this can only truly be seen in hindsight. After they peak, they have a period where they contract and shrink. Finally, in the last stage, they reach the point of bottoming out. Exceptional companies can sustain periods of growth for years or decades like Apple. Great companies reinvent themselves or adapt and what would have been a peak, turns into a pause on a path of continued growth. An example of this would have been Apple in the 2000's. After growing with computers, they introduced handheld devices, namely the iPhone, and became even more dominant. Others can sustain a peak period and dominate their industry no matter what the competition is. Think of companies like Google, Amazon, or Nike. Then there are companies that are past their peak but able to hang around. They are no longer dominant, but they are not going anywhere. Think of companies like GE or AT&T. Lastly, there are companies on their way down or out. Some have long glide paths of relevance. No longer dominating but hanging in and playing a role. An example of this is something like a Bed, Bath and Beyond, Barnes and Noble, or a Best Buy (coincidentally, all three were next door to each other in the Hacienda Crossing shopping center in Dublin). Other examples are companies that fail spectacularly and go down in a blaze of glory like Blockbuster or Enron. Corruption, poor leadership, or pure arrogance turn into complete and immediate extinction.

Where is the US in relation to this analogy? Very clearly, the US was an Amazon, Apple, or Google. The rise of the US over the past almost 250 years will rank as one of the best, if not the very best, growth stories of an empire in the known history of the world. Our rise to power is historic and undeniable. We set the temperature for the world. We have the most power, the most potent military, the biggest economy, and historically strive to be the moral compass for the world. The moral compass part can be seen as heroic or selfish depending on who is looking at our actions.

However, at this point the US is at or certainly nearing its peak. Debt is spiraling out of control and political distrust is at an all-time high. According to the Pew Research Center, trust peaked at 77% in 1964 but plummeted in the 2000's starting after the events of 9/11. Just "22% of Americans say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right "just about always" (2%) or "most of the time" (21%)" (Pew Research Center, 2024). It's clear that the path we are on is not working and it's time for dramatic change. This view is what led to the significant win by Trump in the 2024 elections. American voters demanded dramatic change which is exactly what we are getting. It is understandable why every American is not 100% behind this president. His personality is rough, there is perceived cruelty in his decisions, and some of his policies appear random and change frequently. All of these are feelings that are valid and important. However, the vast majority of the criticisms of his plans are driven by personal financial incentives from opposing politicians and the media. This last issue is the most important area, and if not addressed, will take down America's ability to continue as the world's superpower. Now let's dissect the schools of thought of the Declinist, American Exceptionalist, and Neoimperialist.

Declinism

One key belief in the Declinist school of thought posits the idea that nations are in a state of decline in economic and political terms. In his book, Paul Gray states that “states playing in the world arena must constantly maintain a delicate internal equilibrium” (Gray, 1988). He is stating one issue superpowers face is an inability to stop themselves from spreading too thin. This concept is not difficult to understand and should not be a partisan issue. So, what was preventing prior leadership, under both Republican and Democrat controlled administrations, to enact change? Why is there hesitation for the government to work together and make smart, obvious changes? This leads us back to mistrust in government by voters in both parties. There is clearly a rise in political extremism from members of all levels of government including, congress, the house and current and past presidents. Why is there a rise? The obvious answer is there has been a financial reward for extremism. The louder they yell at each other, the more divisive they are, the crazier the antics, all leads to more fundraising. This fundraising is directly correlated with winning elections which leads to more power and financial gain. Simply put, if it was not working, it would change. Enter Trump 2.0 and the push for change.

Trump 2.0 is certainly the most unique President in recent history if not the entire history of the United States. Prior to Trump, Grover Cleveland was the only other President in our history who served two non-consecutive terms. In Trump’s case, his first term was at a time of increased divisiveness. The left and right were already ramping up their public dislike for each other and the sheer surprise of Trump actually winning really amplified the negative rhetoric. Being new to politics, Trump was not nearly as clear in the changes he wanted to implement nor was he as effective as he currently is in implementing change. Clearly, he was more prepared to

hit the ground running in 2025 after losing the 2020 elections to Biden. He came in with a clear gameplan to reposition the US on a global front and who he needed in his cabinet to help him enact new policies. He has gone after significant changes like securing the border, reimagining tariffs, reducing foreign spending, reinvigorating American manufacturing, and increasing military support. Foreign spending, in particular, has the potential to be viewed in a cruel way. However, it is important to realize we are in danger of spreading ourselves too thin thinking we can enforce changes everywhere on the planet all at the same time. In fact, one key point of Paul Kennedy's view on the Declinist state, is the notion that the US finds itself as "the inheritor of a vast array of strategic commitments which had been made decades earlier, when the nation's political, economic, and military capacity to influence world affairs seemed so much more assured" (Kennedy, 1988). Kennedy's words are extremely relevant because it is a mistake to not revisit past decisions to ensure they are still relevant or even feasible today.

Take for example the concept of social security. It has been reported that under the current structure of the social security system "trust fund reserves will be depleted in 2035" (CPBB, 2024). At that point, payouts to the system would be reduced. This is a perfect example of a social system which should have no controversy. Virtually every American would support the continuation of this program and yet there is clear, bipartisan data to suggest significant change is needed. This train is headed into a brick wall, but no one has been willing to divert the path until Trump. The left continues to claim that Trump wants to cut or privatize social security despite him and everyone around him repeatedly stating they have no intention of eliminating this program. Trump's D.O.G.E team, led by Elon Musk, is attempting to weed out the inefficiencies of this program among other things. If you consider the D.O.G.E. efforts from a

positive standpoint, they are simply trying to eliminate the fraud and abuse they see within the program. If you assume negative intentions as the media and Democrats do, they accuse D.O.G.E. of stealing taxpayer data, eliminating payments for valid Americans, and likely other negatives as well. It's disheartening to see that our elected politicians cannot sit down and figure out a plan to make necessary changes to ensure the continuation of the Social Security program. If they cannot have productive conversations around a topic that should have no dispute, then how can we imagine them to come together when there are actual topics they disagree on like immigration, taxes, and foreign policy.

It is clear politicians have a financial motivation to be loud and disruptive, but it's also clear this only continues to exacerbate the problems. Politicians, and the media, deceive the American public and it was easier to hide in the past because of the lack of transparency. Today, social media has helped remove the cloak of darkness exposing the blatant hypocrisy of politicians on both sides. As an example, these days after a politician makes a wild statement accusing the other party of something, it's easy to find video clips of that very same politician saying the exact opposite just a few years ago when the other party was in charge. Again, this goes both ways for Democrats and Republicans. More people are waking up to the hypocrisy and demanding truth from their elected leaders.

America is guilty of arrogance and an unwillingness for many leaders to give us the tough medicine we need. The US debt is spiraling out of control towards an economic collapse. This fact is not debatable. However, politician after politician has refused to be the adult in the room and make meaningful changes. Trump's first term saw historic spending which could be argued as necessary given a unique global pandemic. Biden's term saw massive spending which

could have been even higher had his own party not blocked an additional \$2 trillion in spending in 2021 for the Build Back Better spending bill. Among his spending plans was a plan called the ‘Inflation Reduction Act’ which did nothing to reduce inflation. It was a massive spending bill that Biden himself later described as “the most significant climate legislation in history.” It’s truly disheartening to see career politicians commit to spending amounts of money that are absolutely unfathomable in nonchalant ways. Describing one trillion dollars as 1,000 billion dollars puts the sheer amount into more perspective. It’s almost ridiculous to think about spending that much money. It should be a sign of pending doom if we think politicians in the span of weeks or even a few months could calculate what will be done with that much money. How can anyone claim something will precisely cost \$1.9 trillion dollars?

To sum up the view on the Declinist thought, look no further than Edward Luce. “This book will not predict America’s collapse. But it will prove skeptical about America’s ability to sharply reverse her fortunes” (Luce, 2012). Luce sums up perfectly in doubting the capabilities of our leaders to effectively question our path and change course. Ultimately this is very relevant to the US today but only analyzes part of the issues.

American Exceptionalist

The American Exceptionalist school of thought comes from a place where America feels it has a special destiny to lead the world. As if it is better than the world due to factors like morals or founding principles. Tom Stevenson in his article reveals how “the reach of the contemporary US is so great that it tends to blend into the background of daily events” (Stevenson, 2023). Here, Stevenson shares that our reach is so prevalent, and our influence is so great that things we are able to accomplish, if done in isolation, would be staggering

achievements. Yet we do these things so frequently, they simply blend into the rest of the daily news. Although this is an accurate statement, it does not tell the story as to where the US is today in global power. This implies we are still at our peak powers if not growing.

Another way to view the greatness of America is from the viewpoint of people from another country who would want to come to America. The reasons largely stem from the well documented thought that America is the land of opportunity. What is meant by that? One popular view is that in America, there is a sense that you control your own destiny. Put another way, here you “write the script of your own life. In America your destiny isn’t given to you, it’s constructed by you. That’s what makes America such a magnet for the world.” (D’Souza, 2019). There is no doubt this is what our country is built upon. This is the American dream. The view that you can move here, work hard, live your dreams and have financial success far beyond what you could have done in your home country. This is the entrepreneurial spirit which has driven the economic booms of many generations. Whether it was Ford in the early 1900’s, Apple in the 1970’s, or Amazon in the 1990’s. If you have an idea, in America you have the full opportunity to grow it through hard work.

On the opposite side of the argument, Joseph Nye reveals how “one problem in assessing decline is that the U.S. never had the complete control that some imagine” (Nye, 2024). Nye refers to past conflicts where the US was engaged but failed to get its desired outcome. The painful truth is that despite the US military might, we have failed spectacularly at forcing foreign countries to accept the US ways. This viewpoint is accurate and far more descriptive of where the US stands on the world’s stage. If the US enters a global political issue, we absolutely have the potential to come in with any or all of the following: more military power, more money, and

more global attention. However, none of this is a guarantee of lasting change and impact when our attention is eventually diverted. At the end of the day, American Exceptionalism is a slightly faded memory from the past but does not tell the whole story of why America is in our current position.

Neoimperialist

Classic imperialism was a brute force conquering where stronger countries would impose their will upon weaker opponents including taking over land, controlling political parties, and even things like imposing cultural norms. This is a generic, yet very accurate, overview on the history of world power. The modern approach is much more civil and is referred to as neoimperialism. There is a much more subtle influence, yet it still accomplishes many of the same objectives, which is power and influence. Gone are the days of annihilating your neighbor, stealing their resources and women, and taking their land. The end result is still power and control, but it is now done in a way that could be argued as more hands off. These same goals and objectives of the more powerful country can be accomplished through financial aid, back-door political influence, and debt or trade agreements. It could be argued the US uses money in the guise of humanitarian relief in a neoimperialistic way.

The difference in a growing nation versus one in decline is how the people of that nation benefit. James Petras describes how “a prosperous empire is cause and consequence of increases in families...In contrast, declining empires plunder the domestic economy; concentrated wealth at the expense of the labor force” (Petras, 2018). What Petras is saying is when a nation is on the rise, the benefits, in all areas, trickle down to all people. There are benefits to all aspects of life including financial, health, housing, and more. As that nation begins to decline, the excess

resources dry up and the upper class and ruling class begin to hoard the excesses for themselves, and the people suffer.

The neoimperialistic view is a perfect explanation for where America currently stands. This view can be summed up by Myra Adams when she states that “officials can only manage the decline and mitigate the impact” (Adams, 2024). In her article, Adams shares five areas of decline including: Uncontrollable debt, low student achievement, increasing income and wealth inequality, loss of American identity and patriotism, and widespread belief our political system is broken. This was a perfect synopsis of where the US was leading into the 2024 elections. It would be easy to say each of these five issues were an important part of Trump’s campaign promises. It’s as if Trump is trying to solve each of these topics in the first few months of his second term. Taking it a step further, it is also safe to say the left-wing media thinks nothing on this list is cause for concern. The dichotomy of the left and the right on these topics could not be any greater.

What is most impressive about Trump 2.0 is that no politician in recent history has had the strength and confidence to try and address these issues. Also, make no mistake about it, these are all existential issues facing the US. Take the skyrocketing debt as an example. We are on an unsustainable path. In 1975, the national debt was just over three trillion dollars. By the year 2000, this number grew to over \$10 trillion dollars. Today, that number is over \$36 trillion dollars. Another way of looking at the national debt is to look at it as a ratio of debt to the gross domestic product (GDP). In 1975, this ratio was 33%. By 2000, this ratio was 56%. As of 2024, this ratio has ballooned to 123% (Fiscal Data, 2025). In either analysis, the national debt is growing wildly out of control. With interest rates rising the past few years, the annual debt

service alone on that debt is around one trillion dollars and this is against an annual government budget of around \$6.8 trillion dollars (Fiscal Data, 2025). What does all this data mean? The consensus over the past several decades is a binary decision of either we want to keep all the mandatory, non-discretionary spending like social security, or we want to dismantle it. And there is no support for the thought of eliminating Social Security so administration after administration just keeps the status quo. So again, let us refer to this program and the creative way Trump is trying to tackle an important issue. Trump and team are attempting to make sure the program is up to date. To think the government is running perfectly without flaws or fraud would be a ridiculous statement. Therefore, it's entirely rational to have an outside audit of the program to make sure all recipients are valid. Trump has found a third option and has the interest to explore it whereas all predecessors simply continue down the path of thinking non-discretionary spending means we cannot even consider looking at the actual program. That is the easy path, and it is incredible to witness the media, and the opposing Democrat party mix the message and assume ill-intent at an obvious attempt to keep the program and make it stronger.

Where are we now?

Of these three schools of thought, the Declinist and American Exceptionalist points of view both give accurate assessments for flaws of the US system, however they come up short identifying the key issues and how to solve them. Both are good overviews but offer a generality of basic trends and natural flaws to a variety of empires. There are certainly very well documented arguments for these schools of thought, as discussed, which give great insight to the long-term downward path from a historical point of view. As discussed, Kennedy's warning to nations for blindly continuing down the path of decisions made at a different time. This is an

excellent piece of advice to challenge the status quo and rethink the processes which are otherwise embedded into our institutions. It's tough work, but necessary to avoid putting good resources towards programs in an ineffective way. In this spirit, Trump is attempting to do just this with D.O.G.E.. Depending on who you ask, its effectiveness and necessity varies but the effort to do such a thing is tough.

Similarly, the American Exceptionalist view is a generality as expressed by D'Souza where America is the desired destination of many people throughout the world. His view, echoed by many, centers around the ability of immigrants to work hard and achieve the financial success known around the world as the "American dream". It can also be the source of denialism as Nye interpreted refuting the US was ever truly in that spot of control in the first place. However, regardless of the argument, the influence the US has had on the world is indisputable, yet this school of thought doesn't offer the full explanation of where we go from here.

On the contrary, Neoimperialism portrays the best argument for where America is at this moment. It addresses, particularly through Adam's list, the key issues standing in front of the US. If viewed from an optimistic point of view, this is a list of things our country needs to solve. Neoimperialism, which incorporates traditional imperialist viewpoints, can be used to assess not just the struggles of today's America, but really can be used to define the struggles of any empire throughout history. History clearly repeats itself and the rise and fall of all great empires all follow a similar arc.

Furthermore, and the main point of discussion, different skills are needed to continue an empire than were needed to create it. Whether you call it leadership, power, or knowledge, it takes a unique individual to impart change in an organization as big as the United States of

America. Beyond just the individual, it also takes a set of circumstances within the US political system to enact this vision. In this case, it takes having a majority in the Senate and the House of Representatives, because of our current political environment of an unwillingness to work together. In essence, it takes the right person at the right time, and that time is now. Regardless of what you think of Trump the person, our country is on a path of decline. We need real change to avoid the decline all prior empires have ultimately gone through. We are in a unique moment right now where Trump and his administration can undo decades of negative momentum and effect necessary change.

Conclusion

Trump is a businessman first. He is doing what any good CEO does if they see their business going down a negative path. He is trying to reinvent his company and in doing such, he is trying to upend the current establishment which is set up to reward the status quo. You can argue about his abilities until you are blue in the face, but you cannot doubt the fact he ran on the agenda of fixing the country. As the clear leader of the US, I hope we will be able to trust his judgement and his team. Sadly, the media and the messaging from the Democratic party would suggest otherwise and in general there are plenty of examples of times just because they were a leader, it does not mean they were immediately trustworthy. One thing is for certain, if Trump is not successful, then the US will absolutely continue our state of decline. Then the next generation is going to take Professor Kropf's Political Science class about the great leadership of China's President Xi.

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