

Twilight of the American Empire

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Abstract

This paper will argue that due to the election of Donald Trump in 2024, the United States has entered an accelerated state of decline. Following the principles of the declinist school of thought, along with cases from current events, this analysis outlines how executive overreach, the dismantling of institutional safeguards, economic isolationism, and foreign policy mismanagement are contributing to a rapid erosion of American global influence. A key part of this decline falls into the hands of the Department of Government Efficiency, which has gutted crucial parts of the federal government, and instead of finding and weeding out corruption and waste, it has contributed to the same issues the department was supposedly created to eliminate. Furthermore, this administration's disregard for constitutional norms, evident in its defiance of Supreme Court rulings and weaponization of outdated legal frameworks like the Alien Enemies Act, has further destabilized democratic structures. The neglect and shunning of Ukraine and several breaches of national security, such as the Pentagon's Signal group chat leaks, have further eroded U.S. credibility on the global stage. These developments signal not just a temporary political crisis, but a deep, and intentional, structural unraveling. Through engagement with both theory and recent political events, this paper presents the decline of the United States not as hypothetical, but as active, observable, and increasingly irreversible.

Twilight of the American Empire

One of the most stable pillars on the world stage, American supremacy, has not just collapsed but has crumbled from within. What once passed as unquestioned supremacy in military strength, economic reach, and cultural sway now feels like a carefully preserved fantasy. Following Donald Trump's reelection in 2024, every aspect of governance has begun changing rapidly. These changes, part of a much larger effort to dismantle the premise that American institutions are resilient enough to withstand turmoil or even a constitutional crisis, are ripping through many foundations of American democracy. What we are witnessing is not simply a standard transfer of political power, but an internal effort to reshape the country into something new, something almost identical to the framework laid out by the Heritage Foundation in their Project 2025.

At the center of this transformation is the consolidation of power in the executive branch. Institutions designed for the public good have been dismantled, crippled, or repurposed for political advantage. The newly formed Department of Government Efficiency, led by Elon Musk, has become the clearest example of this shift, having gutted oversight and regulation while branding it as reform. The elimination of the Department of Education, defiance of Supreme Court rulings, and weaponization of outdated legal statutes like the Alien Enemies Act are not ad hoc decisions. They are coordinated moves in a broader strategy to hollow out the state, replacing infrastructure designed for democracy with loyalty and spectacle.

This decay does not stop at domestic policy, however. Internationally, the administration has mishandled the war in Ukraine, compromised alliances across Europe, and eroded U.S. national credibility through reckless leaks of military intelligence, including sensitive discussions shared via Signal group chats. Trump has further destabilized the economy through erratic tariffs, alienated trade partners, and neither helped growth nor curtailed inflation. His revived rhetoric about annexing Greenland and threatening Canadian sovereignty represents yet another pivot from diplomacy to political spectacle aimed more at stirring emotions rather than maintaining stability.

The followers of the Declinist school have long warned that internal instability, institutional decay, and executive overreach would inevitably catch up to the United States. What was once dismissed as alarmism now reads like a play-by-play. Paul Kennedy, in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, laid out how military expansion paired with economic stagnation weakens an empire's ability to sustain itself. As an empire expands, demands for its resources stretch thin, and power becomes less durable. There is not always a grand collapse; often, it is a gradual erosion of authority, reach, and credibility.

Kennedy's analysis is particularly relevant today, as the United States has pursued expensive military ventures abroad while neglecting collapsing infrastructure at home. In fiscal year 2023, the United States allocated 1.1 trillion dollars, which amounts to 62 percent of its discretionary budget, to militarized programs such as war, weapons, law enforcement, and mass incarceration. This leaves limited resources for domestic infrastructure improvements (Siddique, 2023). Government debt is climbing, inequality is growing, and coherent

policymaking has been replaced with executive overreach. The crisis facing the country is not merely economic or geopolitical; it is systemic. Kennedy's theory emphasized that great powers fall when they prioritize short term dominance over long term sustainability. This shortsightedness has become a defining feature of the Trump administration, which has been characterized by aggressive executive orders, mass deportations, and defiance of court rulings, all actions that critics argue undermine democratic norms and concentrate executive power (Time, 2025).

This administration has consolidated power through control, not through consensus or negotiation. President Trump has governed almost entirely by executive order from the beginning of his second term, largely bypassing the legislative process. Governance, once rooted in institutional checks and representative deliberation, has shifted to unilateral orders from the Oval Office. Executive orders, previously a tool for resolving emergencies or minor administrative issues, have now become the primary mechanism for major policymaking. As the Trump administration approaches its one-hundredth executive order, the executive branch is increasingly the sole source of federal authority. The consequences of this shift are immediate and far-reaching. Congress has been diminished into little more than a theater for political grandstanding, no longer functioning as a true legislative body. With sweeping policy changes in areas such as immigration, education, and defense made without real legislative input, the balance of powers outlined in the Constitution has been fundamentally undermined.

Perhaps most alarming is the administration's open defiance of the Supreme Court. In the case of *Abrego Garcia*, where the Court ordered the individual's return to the United States,

the executive branch simply refused to comply. The precedent of this is catastrophic. If the president can ignore the highest court in the land without consequence, judicial authority ceases to be binding. This is not a political disagreement. It is a constitutional crisis. The rule of law cannot function if enforcement is optional. Even if the courts stop Trump's executive orders now, who is to say he will not disregard federal courts as he has with the Supreme Court's ruling to return Abrego Garcia.

The dismantling of American institutions offers another stark warning. While past administrations have criticized bureaucracy and called for reform, the current administration has replaced the idea of public service with demands for political loyalty. The attempts to eliminate the Department of Education and the creation of the Department of Government Efficiency without the approval of Congress stand as clear evidence that weakening federal capacity is not a byproduct of political shifts but an explicit goal.

The Department of Education, which once worked to guarantee fair access to education and protect civil rights in schools, has been entirely dissolved. Although this move was justified as returning control to the states, the real effects have been disastrous. Federal support for low-income districts has disappeared. Protection for vulnerable students has gone unenforced. Whatever national vision for education once existed has been abandoned. Instead of creating liberty or flexibility, the elimination of the department has produced fragmentation and collapse, particularly in communities that once relied on federal aid.

The Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, was introduced with Elon Musk at the helm. Marketed as a solution to bloated government spending, DOGE has prioritized budget

cuts above all else. Agencies have seen their budgets slashed without warning or coherent strategy. Musk has publicly claimed that DOGE will save over one hundred billion dollars by 2026 (Galvin, 2025), but there is no evidence of improved services, transparency, or public access. Instead, career public servants have been terminated, replaced by private contractors, and monitored by expansive AI systems designed to track political loyalty and productivity.

Perhaps the most disturbing is how DOGE has bypassed traditional oversight. Hiring procedures have been rewritten. Watchdog offices have been neutered. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was dismantled entirely, leaving humanitarian aid efforts without coordination or continuity. No alternative system was put in place, and the agency was simply eliminated.

The rhetoric of reform conceals the real agenda: shrinking the administrative capacity of the federal government until it is incapable of meaningful action. As Kennedy warned, decline can come through exhaustion and mismanagement. What is happening now is worse. Institutions are not simply failing; they are being deliberately dismantled.

Economically, the Trump administration has weaponized trade policy and the average citizen's wallet. Over the past several months, new tariffs have been introduced with little explanation or coherent planning. Billed as efforts to protect American workers and bring home manufacturing, the reality has been the opposite. Prices have risen, defying Trump's repeated campaign promise to lower grocery costs "starting on Day One" (ABC Action News, 2025). Supply chains have been disrupted, and confidence in the U.S. economy has faltered, as reflected in the stock market's sharp decline. The S&P 500 has dropped by more than 17

percent since Inauguration Day, with many fearing Trump's policies will raise costs and slow growth (Richter, 2025). These decisions are not only flawed, but they are also incredibly reckless.

On paper, tariffs were promised to bring manufacturing back and reduce dependence on foreign goods. In practice, they have made basic goods more expensive for American consumers. Farmers have faced falling sales, and small business owners who depend on imported materials and goods have been pushed toward bankruptcy. Industries dependent on global trade have also been destabilized, and in some cases, companies have begun relocating production abroad just to escape the chaos.

Major institutions have pushed back against this economic chaos, with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce issuing a statement warning, "The bottom line is this: tariffs are a tax paid by Americans, and their broad and indiscriminate use would stifle growth at the worst possible time." (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2025). The people hurt most by these tariffs are not foreign competitors. They are the same American workers Trump claimed to champion. The GOP, a party that was historically closely associated with lower taxes, has split from this aspect and has moved to increase taxes and prices for the average American.

Tariffs, especially at the levels Trump has imposed, do more harm than good. Raising tariffs by one hundred percent might sound like an effective way to stimulate domestic manufacturing, but the reality is quite different. Even if companies manage to shift supply chains and restart production before tariffs fully hit, the costs are simply passed on to consumers, often at higher rates than the tariffs themselves in order for the company to turn a

profit. Goods remain expensive and often climb in price to compensate. Meanwhile, American manufacturers lose international customers who will not absorb inflated prices. Instead of strengthening the economy, Trump's tariff policies isolate American businesses and fuel domestic inflation without driving meaningful growth.

None of this is accidental and is symbolic of a larger pattern of economic incompetence. Economic policies are made reactively, chasing headlines instead of following strategic planning. By flooding the system with a constant barrage of policies, even ineffective ones, the administration creates the illusion of high productivity. This "flood the zone" tactic overwhelms the average person, making it less likely that they will pause to scrutinize individual policies or consider their long-term effects. There is no coherent strategy behind Trump's tariffs, rather, it is political theater pretending to be economic policy. Simultaneously, American credibility in global markets continues to decline, and competitors abroad are already moving to fill the gaps left behind. The United States cannot serve as a global leader while isolating itself economically. Kennedy made this clear: "A rising power may become a great power; but if its economic base is eroded, its power cannot long be maintained" (Kennedy, 1987, p. 71). What we are seeing now is not a hypothetical warning. It is happening in real time.

The recent Signal chat leaks demonstrate a deeper problem within the United States government: the erosion of institutional expertise at the hands of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). In March 2025, it was reported that sensitive military discussions, including deployment timelines, intelligence-sharing procedures, and troop locations, were carelessly shared through a private Signal group chat used by senior officials

and staffers, bypassing secure communication protocols (Gault, 2025). What was once considered improbable, national security breaches of this magnitude originating from within the government, has now become a dangerous reality. This breach was not an isolated failure but the inevitable result of dismantling career institutions, purging experienced officials, and replacing them with politically loyal but unqualified appointees under DOGE's leadership.

The leaks convey an essential truth: that institutions cannot exist devoid of human expertise. Systems, using and involving people, rely on competent people with an understanding of governance, not just logistics, but the ethics and strategic relevance of the process. When entities like DOGE assault federal agencies to make increasingly shallow budget cuts, they are really cutting the muscle and bone that hold the critical activities together. These leaks illustrate that shaking the experience from the government doesn't create more efficient government; it hinders and halts government proceedings.

Poor foresight on the part of the current administration has caused disruptions in essential lines of communication and operational security. The wrongful termination of officials who valued consistent, procedural, confidential, and ethical practice in the government left cracks in the organization. Partisans, opportunists, and those with less inclination to protect national security, such as the newly appointed Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth (a former FOX news host) filled that vacuum. This is a critical mistake, as noted by national security expert Daniel Byman, "Creating more risk for internal sabotage, mismanagement, and leaks of sensitive information by purging expertise from the federal workforce in favor of loyalty" (Byman, 2025, p. 2).

The administration might spout positive propaganda regarding DOGE's cost-saving measures, but these actions put the United States at greater risk. While political loyalty might hold political value for a president looking for control, it does not serve a nation and its allies that expect steady governance. Intelligence operations, the conduct of foreign diplomacy, and even military command arrangements are complicated ecosystems that rely on trust, professionalism, and institutional memory, which are all being deconstructed.

The Signal leaks are only the visible tip of the iceberg, and the first major scandal of the second Trump Administration, happening less than 100 days since the inauguration. If sensitive information can be leaked from the inside without immediate consequences, it sends a message to foreign adversaries that America's continued intelligence gathering process is compromised. It undermines trust in its allies and further emboldens its enemies. Additionally, it supports what scholars like Paul Kennedy have warned about: a nation's decline is not just caused by poor economic management or military overreach, but also by the loss of the skills and abilities needed to maintain its power. In short, by ousting hundreds of career officials for short-term savings, the administration not only has not created a more productive government, but it has also created a government that is brittle and hollow. Expertise, professionalism, and institutional memory are not luxuries that a great power can do away with; they are necessities. To gut them for the sake of efficiency does not make America stronger. It makes it weaker, mortally.

The Trump administration's recent actions have also raised alarms about the erosion of judicial independence in the United States. On April 25, 2025, FBI agents arrested Milwaukee

County Circuit Court Judge Hannah Dugan for allegedly assisting an undocumented immigrant in evading arrest inside her courtroom (Richer, Shastri, & Bauer, 2025). Many legal experts warned that “This case sends a chilling message that judges who stand up for due process and individual rights could end up being prosecuted federally” (Garrity, 2025). Even though Judge Dugan was eventually released, the fact that a sitting judge was arrested for decisions made from the bench signals an alarming shift toward executive intimidation of the judiciary.

The arrest sets a dangerous precedent. It threatens to reduce the judiciary from an independent check on executive power to a mere extension of political will. The parallels to historical examples of authoritarianism are troubling, such as in the early years of Nazi Germany, where judges who refused to enforce racial policies were removed, imprisoned, or replaced with regime loyalists, leading to the collapse of judicial independence and the creation of a rubber-stamp court system.

This development is not isolated. It fits into a broader pattern of disregard for constitutional norms. Using federal law enforcement to intimidate judges corrodes one of the last meaningful barriers against unchecked executive power. As history shows, when judicial independence collapses, democracy itself stands on crumbling ground. In the end, the survival of democracy rests with the people willing to defend it.

On the contrary, the American Exceptionalism school argues that the United States is fundamentally different from other empires in history. According to this view, the country’s founding principles, innovative economy, and global influence will allow it to adapt to any crisis and emerge stronger. Supporters point to periods of turmoil, such as the Civil War, the Great

Depression, and the civil rights movement, as proof that the United States always rebounds, yet this view dangerously underestimates the magnitude of what is happening today.

Exceptionalism assumes resilience without recognizing that resilience must be continually earned. A proud history or a strong economy alone cannot safeguard a nation. Without functioning democratic institutions, the hallmarks of Exceptionalism, such as innovation, leadership, and unity cannot survive.

Today's decline is fueled internally. It is driven by efforts to erode checks and balances, weaken free elections, and replace expertise with loyalty. Historian Richard Hofstadter warned that "The road to authoritarianism is paved by complacency toward the small erosions of democratic practice" (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 27). It is precisely this complacency, born from myths of invincibility, that allows constitutional norms to be dismantled without widespread resistance. One major example of such complacency was the January 6th insurrection, and the reaction to it. Considering that Trump, who invoked the riot yet faced minimal repercussions and was allowed to run for office again was a massive failure on behalf of the judiciary. Exceptionalism is not a shield against decline, it is a comforting illusion that, if left unchallenged, hastens the very collapse it so adamantly denies.

The Neoimperialist school offers another false sense of security, as its advocates argue that America's financial, technological, and cultural dominance will sustain its global influence even in the face of domestic political decay. This view suggests that the sheer scale and reach of multinational corporations, Wall Street firms, and Silicon Valley tech giants can offset internal instability by anchoring American power in global markets. These institutions, often wealthier

and more influential than entire countries, operate through vast international networks that concentrate economic power and decision-making in the hands of a transnational elite. According to the Hampton Institute, such entities help preserve American dominance not through democratic strength but through neoliberal mechanisms that privilege corporate capital over public institutions (Hampton Institute, 2025).

This view ignores the broader dynamics of influence. Economic power alone does not sustain leadership. Trust, stability, and legitimacy are equally crucial. Investors place capital where they see predictable governance and the rule of law. Allies form lasting partnerships with countries they believe in. If the United States descends into authoritarianism or some form of oligarchy, further instability and isolation, its economic and cultural dominance will quickly erode.

Cracks are already visible, and allied nations are quickly building independent defense systems. International businesses are forging closer ties with Europe and Asia, and influence is no longer simply about having wealth. It is about being seen as a reliable, stable leader. As Fareed Zakaria observed, "Decline is not just about loss of power, but about loss of purpose and vision" (Zakaria, 2008, p. 37). Without vision, the systems that Neoimperialists depend on will collapse faster than they realize. The decline of the United States is no longer a distant possibility; but rather it is unfolding before us. The collapse of institutional norms, the reckless use of executive authority, the abandonment of global leadership, and the flirtations with authoritarian tactics reveal a nation actively unraveling itself. Myths of Exceptionalism and Neoimperialist resilience offer easy comfort and a false sense of security in difficult times, but

they do not stand up to scrutiny and the rapidly changing political atmosphere. Strength must be preserved, and influence must be earned. No empire, however powerful, is immune to collapse when it chooses short-term dominance over long-term sustainability. History does not favor the complacent. It favors those who recognize decline and act to reverse it. Without a serious course correction, the fall of the United States will not be gradual or hidden. It will be a sudden collapse, visible to all, yet denied by those who refused to believe it could happen here. The question is no longer whether decline is occurring, but if anything can, or will, be done to stop it.

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