Introduction: decline or acquiescence?

by Roger Kimball

An introduction to our symposium “Is America in Decline?,” held jointly with England’s Social Affairs Unit.

We are only five days away from fundamentally transforming the United States of America.
—Barack Obama, October 2008

I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.
—Barack Obama, April 2009

Civilizations die from suicide, not murder.
—Arnold J. Toynbee, A Study of History

Decline is once again in vogue.1 When we began contemplating a symposium on the question “Is America in Decline?” last spring, little did we think that our finger would be so firmly on the pulse of the Zeitgeist. Look around: kindred symposia, essays, and special sections have sprouted up like mushrooms. Some have employed the same title we chose—“Is America in Decline?”—but I’ve noticed a gradual ratcheting up of the rhetorical volume. The current issue of Foreign Affairs, for example, screams in seventy-two-point type: “Is America Over?”

English is not as formal as Latin in distinguishing between questions that are genuine questions and those that expect a certain answer, Yes or No as the case may be. This gives writers and editors a little epistemological wiggle room. “Is America in Decline?” “Is America Over?” Are those genuine questions or covert declarations? You have to read on to find out. Let me say straightaway, then, that we intend our question mark to be a neutral interrogative. There are plenty of sobering observations and depressing statistics in the essays that follow. But the (generally gleeful) certitude that the answer to such questions must be Yes is hasty if not misplaced. The rejoinders “That depends” and “Compared to what?” never seem to receive the attention they deserve.

And by the way, why the glee? Writing about the British Empire, Santayana noted that “never since the heroic days of Greece has the world had such a sweet, just, boyish master. It will be a
black day for the human race when scientific blackguards, conspirators, churls, and fanatics manage to supplant him.” Something similar, I submit, can be said about American predominance. Just consider the alternatives.

A couple of preliminary observations. Gloom is a hardy perennial. It’s difficult to think of a time when intellectuals weren’t prognosticating disaster. And why not? Readers thrill to it. Bad news sells. “The Decline of the West,” to adopt the title of Oswald Spengler’s brilliant, dyspeptic fantasy, plays such seductive music. Spengler’s two-volume tome catapulted him to international celebrity in the scorched aftermath of World War I. Western Civilization: Wasn’t it like a tired old animal, dim-sighted, weak, ready for the grave? Many—that’s to say, many intellectuals—wanted to think so.

It is a theme with many variations. In the 1940s, Cyril Connolly plaintively announced that it was “closing time in the gardens of the West.” That was shortly before the West in general, and America in particular, emerged as the world’s economic, cultural, and political powerhouse—its gardens not only open but pullulating. In 1987, Paul Kennedy published The Rise and Fall of Great Powers, a long, scholarly book whose underlying theme was—you guessed it!—the “problem of number one in relative decline.” The United States, like Rome and Britain before it, was threatened with “imperial overstretch.” Japan, unburdened by international military commitments, was on the rise, poised to eat our lunch. The problem for U.S. leaders would be how to manage America’s (nearly) inevitable decline gracefully.

As Keith Windschuttle notes below in “Pax Americana & the U.S. Decline,” The Rise and Fall of Great Powers gave Professor Kennedy his fifteen minutes of celebrity. It might have lasted longer, but the Soviet Union imploded, the Japanese economy stalled, and by the early 1990s the relevant story was “The Rise and Yet Further Rise of One Great Power,” to wit, the United States.

Bad news sells. Pessimism has its pleasures. They tend, however, to be solitary pleasures. “I told you so.” Schadenfreude. The view is inward. Cheerfulness looks outward. It inspires. Ronald Reagan’s “It’s morning again in America” galvanized the country after the slough of despond that was the Carter years. (Is America in Decline? On Carter’s watch, the “misery index,” the sum of the unemployment rate and inflation, reached 21.98 percent. Want to fill your tank with gasoline? Get in line—if, that is, your license plate is the right number for today. Otherwise, come back tomorrow. Want a mortgage? That might cost you 22 percent in interest. Yikes.)

Cheerfulness, it is worth noting, is not the same as optimism. Voltaire’s Pangloss was an optimist. He was not a reliable guide to life (just ask Cunégonde). The critical supplement is honesty, a willingness to face up to realities, pleasant as well as unpleasant, and call things by their real names. That seems pretty elementary, and it is. But like that most uncommon virtue, common sense, it is rarer than you might expect.

It turns out that the question “Is America in Decline?” is more complex and equivocal than one might think. One prominent issue revolves around that awesome mysterious power, money. In “Things Have Been Worse . . . Haven’t They?,” Andrew McCarthy rehearses the dismal reality of money in contemporary America. Forget about the $15 trillion national debt. (On second thought:
do not forget about it, just put it to one side for a moment.) Pass over the $1.5 to $1.6 trillion that Barack Obama is adding to the deficit every year. Think instead about the promises we’ve made, what the green-eyeshade chaps call “unfunded liabilities”: Medicare, Medicaid, government pensions, etc. Add ‘em up, as McCarthy did, and you are looking at a number that is literally mind-boggling. No ordinary mortal can compass it in his imagination. It comes, McCarthy writes, to more than $80 trillion in debt. According to the Federal Reserve, the total net worth of the United States is $70 trillion. The portion of American debt that we’ve covered is far more than our wealth. Indeed, it is 25 percent more than the combined GDP of every country on earth (about $60 trillion). The tab for each household in America is nearly $700,000.

And that staggering number, remember, is only a snapshot of an ever moving, currently expanding, leviathan. “These figures,” McCarthy notes, “are not static. They grow constantly, and their rate of growth has rocketed in the last ten years—and exploded in the last three.” Take a few minutes to ponder the numbers involved and you can see why McCarthy concludes that while “our circumstances have been worse on occasion, our prospects have never been bleaker.”

Money plays a starring role in many of the essays that follow. That is to say, money’s dark cousin, debt, plays the lead. Debt, like money itself, is not a simple phenomenon. For one thing, it is a Janus-faced creature. If you look it up in a dictionary, you encounter the negative face: Debt is “something owed, such as money, goods, or services.” (It is perhaps not irrelevant that “debt” also has a theological meaning: an “offense requiring forgiveness or reparation.”) But debt has a positive side, too. It is a great enabler. Debt looks and acts just like cash. It exercises the same power over worldly goods and services that money does—but with this difference: It comes with a timer. Like Cinderella’s horses and carriage, there is a midnight that will strike and transform that magic power back into pumpkins and mice, lizards and rats and shabby old clothes. The trick is to enlist the temporary expedients in pursuit of something more permanent than a masked ball.

Has America managed to do this? Several indicators—a real unemployment rate that is north of 11 percent, anemic growth, and a recalcitrant culture of entitlement—incline one to doubt. Yet even now, today, the United States commands the most productive economy in the world. It is still, despite the best efforts of a socialistically inclined administration, a unique hot bed of innovation and entrepreneurial energy. Microsoft. Intel. Google. Apple. Ebay. Yahoo. Cisco. Facebook. Twitter. Wikipedia. Adobe. Amazon. Can any other country field a similar list of game-changing enterprises (most of which, incidentally, were started by immigrants)? As other commentators have noted, China may assemble the iPad. It was invented in Cupertino, California.

S. J. D. Green, in his essay on Tocqueville, offers a pertinent caution:

Most theories of decline err in their very precision. They seek to identify the moment of decline, as well as its more general causes. Many think we have reached that moment now. But history suggests that we have been here before. The United States has been the world’s largest economy only since the 1880s. It has been the preeminent geopolitical power for a period shorter than a normal person’s lifespan. Predictions of its passing either in military might or economic clout have accompanied that predominance almost from the start. Sputnik and the missile
gap—remember Khrushchev’s boastful threat—provided for much national soul-searching in the late 1950s.

I do not mean to minimize the realities that Andrew McCarthy outlined: I, too, am terrified by those bewildering numbers and the fact of the fiscal incontinence, political pusillanimity, and technocratic stupidity they suggested. I merely point out that there are countervailing forces at work.

Debt is not the only measure of decline. Another critical question revolves around the fate of what Charles Murray calls “the American Project,” a commitment to the Founders’ vision of limited government and individual liberty, on the one hand, and a habit of pragmatic virtue, on the other. Murray cites industriousness, honesty, marriage, and religion as forming the core of these “Founding virtues.” Neighborliness also comes into the mix, as does the genteel half-truth that we’re all “created equal.” It is essentially the same as the “Anglo-Protestant values” Samuel Huntington named in describing American exceptionalism in his book Who Are We? John O’Sullivan is right to call Murray’s essay “disturbing.” For what Murray demonstrates is a growing bifurcation of American society into two classes, one of which (“Fishtown”) is mired in the pathology of dependence, the other (“Belmont”) subsisting in more or less irresponsible indifference at the top of the societal pyramid. It’s easy to see what’s wrong in Fishtown: crime, inveterate joblessness, out-of-wedlock births, single parenthood. It is a recipe for social disaster. But what is happening at the other end of the spectrum is also firmly at odds with the American Project. As Murray notes, “The upper middle class in general, and the new upper class in particular, will continue to do well. But they will no longer be living any resemblance of what used to be called the American Way of Life. They will be the class on top in the same way that all complex societies have had a class on top, with nothing exceptional about it.”

Murray here touches on an issue Friedrich Hayek broached in The Road to Serfdom: One of the most important effects of “extensive government control” is psychological, “an alteration of the character of the people.” We are the creatures as well as the creators of the institutions we inhabit. “The important point,” Hayek concluded, “is that the political ideals of a people and its attitude toward authority are as much the effect as the cause of the political institutions under which it lives.” The question is: How far has that process of psychological change advanced? McCarthy may well be right that “Never before in our history has there been a time when the American idea was under assault and good men argued that virtue and the conservative disposition required capitulating.” He continues: “Our prospects are grim if that is not reversed.”
“If.” In that tiny conditional lies the possibility of reversal. John O’Sullivan, quoting McCarthy on
the tsunami of debt that seems poised to engulf us, observes that “If this rake’s progress were to
continue unamended, it would insure not simply further decline but something between Ireland’s
savage budgetary austerity and Greece’s collapse into social disorder.” Mark Steyn, in his somber
new book After America, generalizes this point in his address to the upcoming generation. “If you
don’t want to die, you need to force the statists either out of office or into dramatic course
correction.” Exactly.

There is a tendency when we endeavor to peer into the future to get caught up in what
McCarthy called the “solipsism of the now.” I greatly admire the political philosopher James
Burnham. Indeed, I think he is one of the most underrated social thinkers in the second half of the
twentieth century. But George Orwell was right when he said that Burnham’s essential intellectual
failing lay in “predicting a continuation of the thing that is happening.” Nazi power is on the rise,
ergo it will continue irresistibly; American capitalism is in crisis, ergo it will necessarily
disintegrate—except that the rude, unkempt force of reality intervenes, transforming those ergos
into “might have beens.”

The economist Herbert Stein famously observed that “if something cannot go on forever, it will
stop.” Exactly how it stops, of course, is another matter. I believe John O’Sullivan was right to
discern an “encouraging aspect” to the dismal financial statistics that are marshaled as evidence of
American decline. Namely: “they are the result of policy. They can, therefore, be changed by
policy: a mixture, for instance, of postponing retirement dates and eligibility for social security
and other entitlements, increasing the level of contributions for them,” cutting goverment spending,
and so on.

Just before the election of 2008, Barack Obama assured his acolytes that they were only “a few
days away from fundamentally transforming the United States of America.” Think about that. At
the moment Obama spoke, America was the richest, the mightiest, the most secure, and the freest
polity in history. If you set out to “fundamentally change” it, which of those characteristics would
survive? Granted, not all of the pathologies and symptoms of decline that are inventoried below
can be laid at Obama’s doorstep. Many got going long before he could even pronounce the phrase
“community organizer.” He has, in my view, greatly exacerbated many of the problems, above all
the economic problems, America faces. But his real significance is as a type, as a blame-America-
first left-wing intellectual. Were you to ask him, “Is America in decline?” his answer would be Yes.
He has repeatedly said as much while jetting around the world apologizing for America’s
mistakes. As John Fonte points out, the argument for American decline is often also an argument
on behalf of what he calls “transnational progressivism” and global governance.

But the fact remains: what can be wrought by man can be undone by man. The Victorians, as John
O’Sullivan observes, successfully tackled a host of seemingly insuperable social problems through
the expedient of enlightened social policy and hard work. Is America in decline? It would be a
rash man, I think, who could answer with certainty. Victor Davis Hanson and others have argued
that decline is a choice, not a fate. Challenges we face aplenty. But since I mentioned the Victorians, let me close with an admonitory line from William Ernest Henley’s “Invictus”: “I am the master of my fate/ I am the captain of my soul.” Perhaps the first order of business is to bring Henley’s poem back into vogue. The culture of entitlement, and the politicians who enable it, could not long survive that stringent call to self-determination.

Notes

1 “Is America in Decline?,” a symposium organized jointly by The New Criterion and London’s Social Affairs Unit, took place on September 23, 2011, in New York. Participants were James C. Bennett, Jeremy Black, John Fonte, Michael Gleba, S. J. D. Green, Daniel Johnson, Roger Kimball, Andrew C. McCarthy, Michael Mosbacher, Charles Murray, John O’Sullivan, James Piereson, William Shawcross, and Keith Windschuttle. Discussion revolved around earlier versions of the essays printed in this special section.

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