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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Like Rome Before the Fall? Not Yet

By PIERS BRENDON

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VICE PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN complains that he is being driven crazy [because so many people are betting on America's demise](#). Reports of it are not just exaggerated; they are, he insists, ridiculous. Like President Obama, he will not accept “second place” for the United States. Despite the present crippling budget deficit and the crushing burden of projected debt, he denies that the country is destined to fulfill a “prophecy that we are going to be a great nation that has failed because we lost control of our economy and overextended.”

Mr. Biden was referring in particular to the influential book “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers” by Paul Kennedy, a British historian who teaches at Yale. Published in 1988, the book argues that the ascendancy of states or empires results from the superiority of their material resources, and that the wealth on which that dominance rests is eroded by the huge military expenditures needed to sustain national or imperial power, leading inexorably to its decline and fall. The thesis seems a tad schematic, but Professor Kennedy maintains it with dazzling cogency. In any debate about the development of the United States, one would certainly tend to side with the detached historian rather than the partisan politician.

All too often, however, students of the past succumb to the temptation to foretell the future. For reasons best known to himself, for example, the eminent British historian A. J. P. Taylor predicted that the Second World War would reach its climax in the Spanish port of Vigo. Equally preposterous in its way was Francis Fukuyama's claim that the conclusion of the cold war marked the end of ideological evolution, “the end of history.”

When indulging his own penchant for prophecy, Paul Kennedy too proved sadly fallible. In his book, he wrote that Japan would not stagnate and that Russia, clinging to Communism, would not boom economically by the early 21st century. Of course, Professor Kennedy did not base his forecasts on runes or entrails or stars. He weighed the available evidence and extrapolated from existing trends. He studied form, entered suitable caveats and hedged his bets. In short, he relied on sophisticated guesswork. However, the past is a map, not a compass. It charts human experience, stops at the present and gives no clear sense of direction. History does not repeat itself nor, as Arnold Toynbee would have it, does it proceed in rhythms or cycles. Events buck trends. Everything, as Gibbon said, is subject to “the vicissitudes of fortune.”

Still, history is our only guide. It is natural to seek instruction from it about the trajectory of earlier great powers, especially at a time when the weary American Titan seems to be staggering under “the too vast orb of its fate.” This phrase (loosely taken from Matthew Arnold) was used by the British politician Joseph Chamberlain to depict the plight of his nation in 1902. The country had indeed suffered a severe setback during its South African war and its global supremacy was under threat from mighty rivals in the United States and Germany. Yet the British Empire was at its apogee.

Paradoxically, the larger great powers grow, the more they worry about their vulnerability. Rudyard Kipling wrote this elegy to the empire, of which he was unofficial poet laureate, to mark its most spectacular pageant, Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee in 1897.

Far-called, our navies melt away;

On dunes and headlands sinks the fire;

Lo, all our pomp of yesterday

Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!

Aptly quoting these lines exactly a century later, when Britain gave up its last major colony, Hong Kong, this newspaper’s editorial page noted that the queen’s empire had been relegated to the history books; the United States had become the heir to Rome.

Now doom-mongers conjure with Roman and British analogies in order to trace the decay of American hegemony. In so doing they ignore Gibbon’s warning about the danger of comparing epochs remote from one another. It is obviously possible to find striking similarities between the predicament of Rome and that of Washington (itself modeled on classical lines, incidentally, because it aspired to be the capital of a mighty empire). Overstretch is common to both, for example: Rome defended frontiers on the Tigris, the Danube and the Rhine; America’s informal empire, controlled diplomatically, commercially and militarily, girdles the globe.

But the differences are palpable. The Roman economy depended on agriculture whereas the United States has an enormous industrial base, producing nearly a quarter of the world’s manufactured goods, and dominates the relatively new invention of the service economy.

Rome was prone to internecine strife whereas America is constitutionally stable. Rome was overwhelmed by barbarians whereas America’s armed forces are so powerful as to prompt dreams of what is known in military doctrine as “full spectrum dominance.” Even in an age of terrorism and nuclear proliferation, it is hard to visualize an attack on America as devastating as that inflicted by Vandals, Goths and Huns on Rome.

Similarly, the British Empire was a weak empire. It was acquired thanks to certain temporary advantages, and run on a shoestring. It governed the multitudes of India with 1,250 civil servants, and garrisoned its African colonies with a thousand policemen and soldiers, not one above the rank of colonel. The thin white line often broke under pressure.

Then Britain lost a whole generation of empire-builders during the First World War, and was virtually bankrupted by the Second. It was bailed out by the United States, which briefly sustained the British Empire as an auxiliary in the cold war. But its status as no more than a client was amply demonstrated in 1956, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower cracked the whip and stopped the Anglo-French invasion of Suez. The empire was quickly dismembered, its ghost surviving as the Commonwealth.

Stemming from a tiny island, the British Empire was once described as an oak tree in a plant pot. American dominion, by contrast, is rooted in a bountiful continent. But does not the organic metaphor imply that states, like other living things, will inevitably deteriorate and die? This suggestion was convincingly denied by Lord Palmerston, the champion of the Victorian “gunboat diplomacy” that brought China to its knees. To compare that country to a sick man or an old tree was an “utterly unphilosophical mistake,” he said, since a nation could adopt mechanical means of self-renovation. This, needless to say, China has done.

Despite its grave problems, there are some relatively simple steps America could take to recover its position. It could bring its military commitments into line with its resources, rely more on the “soft power” of diplomacy and economic engagement and, as George Washington said, take advantage of its geographically detached situation to “defy material injury from external annoyance.” Such a policy would permit more investment in productive enterprise and pay for butter as well as guns, thus vindicating Joe Biden’s faith in the recuperative capacities of the Great Republic.

On the other hand, Paul Kennedy may well be right to predict that the United States will shrink relatively in wealth, and therefore power, as its Asian and European rivals grow. Such contractions can be traumatic, as suggested by the experience of Britain, which, as Dean Acheson said, lost an empire without finding a role.

However, the British now tend to echo the historian Lord Macaulay, who said that the end of their physical empire would be the proudest day in their history if they left behind “the imperishable empire” of their arts and their morals, their literature and their laws. In other words, national self-esteem should not stem from global might but from cultural values and achievements. Faced by the prospect of decline, Americans could hardly do better than to cling to the noblest traditions of their own civilization.

*Piers Brendon, a fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge, is the author of “The Decline and Fall of the British Empire.”*

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 26, 2010

An Op-Ed essay on Thursday, about the decline of nations, misidentified the source of the observation that Britain had lost an empire without finding a role. It was Dean Acheson, not Adlai Stevenson.

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