

**America's Future: Decline or Renewal?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper looks at the direction America is headed by comparing American exceptionalism, neoimperialism, and declinism. Even though the United States has been the strongest power in the world since World War II, world history shows that even the strongest empires will eventually fall. American exceptionalists Dinesh D'Souza, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Joseph Nye say that America is strong because of its soft power. The claim is that its democracy, its constitutional foundation, and its ability to influence other countries without involving our military keep it that way. The alternative belief is that of the neoimperialists like James Petras, who believe that American strength is not going away and that it is just changing into more economic and institutional control. However, Paul Kennedy and Immanuel Wallerstein take on the declinist view in that the United States is starting to show decline. They point out that the United States has similarities to past fallen powerful nations. Things such as too much debt, political division, inequality, and less unity were all signs leading to the fall of great nations. The United States similarly shows these signs, like its \$34 trillion national debt, low trust in government, growing gaps between the rich and the poor, and the rise of competing nations. This paper takes on the declinist belief because it makes the most sense. Rather than staying unaware of its reality, the United States needs to come to terms with the fact that it likely will not be in power forever. This way, we can begin to face these problems head-on and do something about them in order to have a better future.

### **America's Future: Decline or Renewal?**

The United States is seen as the dominant nation of this modern era. No country has even come close to matching its overall power, military strength, economic influence, diplomatic relations, technological innovations, and cultural influence. The United States currently maintains hundreds of military bases around the world. It controls the most widely used currency in the international system, which has so far led many of the world's political and economic institutions. In addition, many American corporations, media, technology companies, and financial markets have a huge influence over global culture and commerce. The dominance of America is worldwide, and many, if not all, countries view the United States as the most powerful empire in modern history. This is why Americans and political thinkers believe that the United States will remain the most powerful, even if nations before them have collapsed from similar challenges. Some people argue that America's democratic nature, such as its constitutional system and innovative culture, makes it different from the previous empires. The concept that the United States is different and not held by the same patterns as past great nations has become more than just a political analysis; it has become a broader idea of American exceptionalism. From this view, the United States is a nation destined to lead the world indefinitely.

However, one of the central questions in comparative politics is why some nations rise to global dominance while others decline and fall. If one analyzes comparative politics they will see that no dominant power in history has ever remained at the top of the international system (Kennedy, 1987; Wallerstein, 1974). The great empires of their time, like Rome, Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and the Soviet Union, eventually all declined even after being in power for

such a long period. History can argue that even the strongest countries eventually became vulnerable to structural weaknesses that led to their decline.

This raises a question all Americans should ask themselves. Is America any different from these empires before it, or is it starting to follow the same path as them? There is no question that the United States is the dominant global power today, but many analysts will argue that weaknesses are emerging beneath the surface (Janaro, 2014). The rising national debt, domestic political polarization, declining institutional trust, growing inequality, and the rise of other national competitors have led many people to question whether American power will remain in the long term. To answer this question, scholars have developed several major schools of thought regarding America's future. American exceptionalists argue that the United States will continue to renew itself and remain the world's leading power because of its institutions, innovation, and adaptability (Nye, 1990). The neo-imperialists argue that America will transform its power into new, less direct forms of global dominance (Petras, 2018, March 20). Declinists, in contrast, argue that the United States is entering a period of long-term decline, similar to that of previous great powers that overextended themselves and ignored or failed to resolve their internal structural weaknesses (Kennedy, 1987; Wallerstein, 1974). Therefore, the United States remains extraordinarily powerful today; the declinist perspective gives the most convincing explanation for America's future. America is now seeing those same signs that were present before the failure of dominant nations. This paper will evaluate each of the three perspectives and explain why the declinist school of thought offers the strongest explanation for America's future.

## **Stephen Orvis and Carol Ann Drogus**

In the textbook *Introducing Comparative Politics: The Essentials*, Stephen Orvis and Carol Ann Drogus take a neutral and educational approach rather than taking a specific view of America's future. Drogus specializes in Latin American politics, while Orvis focuses on African studies. In the textbook, they include other authors' ideas from different political scholars without their own personal opinions. This makes the textbook educational and unbiased since it does not take a position on the issue.

One thing that stands out about the textbook is that it is clearly written for an American audience. Many of the book's examples and explanations are tailored to U.S. students, sometimes even directly translating concepts into American terms. For example, when explaining political behavior, the authors note that "any political actor, meaning any person or group engaged in political behavior, can be motivated by a variety of factors" (Orvis & Drogus, 2018, p. 15). This can explain why the authors avoid being critical of the United States even when it suggests its weaknesses.

Despite this neutrality, several sections suggest patterns that align with the declinist view. When talking about states, whether they have fallen, are weak, or strong, the authors refer to Francis Fukuyama's argument that "the U.S. state has weakened in the last several decades due mainly to what he calls 'gift exchange' between legislators, lobbyists, and campaign donors that weakens the state's ability to make independent decisions based on some sense of the public interest" (Orvis & Drogus, 2018, p. 49). This gives a direct example of the type of corruption and elitism that exists internally, strengthening the beliefs of declinists.

The textbook also raises concerns about how American political institutions actually work. The authors describe how "American political institutions allow corporations to have great

influence by funding expensive political campaigns and that members of Congress have little incentive to vote in support of their parties and so are more open to pressure from individual lobbyists” (Orvis & Drogus, 2018, p. 30). This matches closely with declinist arguments about how wealth and political power can lead to a declining empire and a weaker ability for the state to serve the interests of the public.

The authors bring up C. Wright Mills, who argues in *The Power Elite* that the United States is actually controlled by a small group of wealthy and powerful people across our government, corporations, and our military (Orvis & Drogus, 2018, p. 27). This supports the declinist belief that the public does not have as much power as the wealthy elites, which is one of the warning signs of a country in decline.

While Orvis and Drogus do not take a declinist, exceptionalist, or neoimperialist viewpoint, the way they present in the book does show weaknesses within the American political system. By stating the United States weakness, elite influence, and how institutions are not really functioning the way that they should, the textbook seems to side with the declinist beliefs, even while trying to stay neutral.

### **Declinism**

We start with the declinism theory, which holds that the United States of America is entering a long-term phase of decline and will likely not be able to maintain its position as the world's most powerful nation forever. Influential scholars such as Paul Kennedy and Immanuel Wallerstein argue that these dominant nations eventually decline due to economic problems and global changes (Kennedy, 1987; Wallerstein, 1974). Rather than seeing America’s strength as permanent or untouchable, the declinist theory holds that the United States is just as vulnerable to forces that have brought down major powers and even empires throughout world history.

From this perspective, America's current strength can give the impression of guaranteed security. However, historically, many empires have also given that appearance of invincible strength right before their eventual decline (Kennedy, 1987). The decline theory usually does not occur all of a sudden or from a major incident. It presents slowly, causing a lot of issues inside and outside the country, dividing its system (Kennedy, 1987; Wallerstein, 1974). The theory points out that the United States has slowly started its decline but has not yet fully fallen. Declinists believe that no dominant empire can stay on top forever. In comparative politics, these superpowers tend to follow a pattern of rising and eventually declining. It is through a strong economy, military expansion, the best technology, and unifying the people that these countries become superpowers. Therefore, when they do make it to the top, they are at great risk of factors like recession and division. The British Empire, Ottoman Empire, Spanish Empire, and Soviet Union have all experienced being the most dominant, just like the United States, but that was right before their decline (Kennedy, 1987). In all those cases, the people at the top never thought they would lose their power; they thought it was permanent.

Those who argue that the United States has a permanent position as the most powerful country fail to see that the division of our nation has brought weakness. The United States is probably more powerful than any other empire that has existed before it. Although the United States may be more powerful than previous empires in some ways, this does not make it immune to the historical cycle of decline.

A major warning sign that declinists tend to look out for is the looming debt and imbalance of funds that America will eventually have to deal with. The United States has accumulated an enormous national debt, which reached \$34 trillion in January 2024 and is only getting worse, reflecting a long pattern of spending and borrowing that will eventually raise

concerns about the stability of our economy and financial sustainability (Associated Press, 2024). Having this unsustainably high debt will continue to increase pressure on our economy and effectively eliminate any chance of long-term growth and sustainability.

This connects to Paul Kennedy's theory of imperial overstretch, which holds that great powers begin to decline when their military and financial burdens exceed what their economy can sustain (Kennedy, 1987). Kennedy confirmed this in a 2006 interview, saying that the United States was "overstretched in two dimensions: military overextension across the globe, especially in Iraq, and financial overstretch because of budget and trade deficits" (Kennedy, 2006). It also reflects Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, which argues that global power is not permanent and shifts over time as dominant states begin to weaken economically (Wallerstein, 1974). Therefore, as the United States continues to fund many domestic programs and maintain military bases around the world, it faces financial risks that may lead to its collapse in its pursuit of global dominance.

Declinists argue that if we continue on this trend, our explosive debt will threaten American flexibility, leading future governments to spend taxpayers' money on debt rather than productive investments. Throughout history, empires that have overspent on their military, government, and other internal needs have been connected to failing or declining empires, such as the British Empire after World War I (Kennedy, 1987). Therefore, as our debt continues to grow out of control, the United States will begin to face limits on funding our military, investing in our infrastructure, or even responding to crises. So this means our nation will not be able to afford things and will have to cut important programs.

Declinists also believe that the U.S. political system is starting to show signs of dysfunction. Too much division between the major political parties has caused significant

difficulties in passing certain government policies or major reforms to address major problems. This has created legislative gridlock, making it more difficult to address issues, whether local, social, economic, or even foreign policy challenges. Furthering dysfunction, the public has lost trust in our government, and some of the institutions affiliated with it, such as Congress, the courts, and the presidency, have declined in effectiveness. According to the Pew Research Center, only about 17% of Americans trust the federal government to do the right thing most of the time, the lowest level in decades (Pew Research Center, 2025). Once we lose the public's trust, it will begin to affect our political system and, in turn, our unity as a society. The Declinists believe that when there is division in both government and political systems, the country begins to lose its ability (Kennedy, 1987). So, it comes down to how the rest of the world can respect us if we are unable to correctly govern ourselves?

Declinists have said many times that when there is a huge difference in classes within a society, this creates a division in the nation. This is true of the United States, where only a small group controls most of the wealth and political power, while the working class, which is the rest of society, struggles with wages and affordability. According to the Pew Research Center, the median income of upper-income households is 7.3 times that of lower-income households which has gone up from 6.3 in 1970 (Pew Research Center, 2022). The public is aware of the inequality, and it has only led to anger and even more distrust in the system. The declinists explain that division shows up when only the most wealthy and powerful in society benefit. Empires have shown a pattern where the elites of a nation are clearly separate from the rest of society, and that division builds instability in the nation. The continued division will weaken the nation's future stability and harm its reputation throughout the world.

Besides the economic and political issues, declinists also argue that the United States is

heading towards a wider decline in social cohesion. Different ideologies, as well as differences in cultures among the different groups, add more to the division of the country. The belief in one America and one nation for all has never felt weaker than it does now. Our society's sense of togetherness in the United States has declined in recent decades, most likely due to the struggles faced by people in poverty as the gap between rich and poor continues to widen (Salud America, 2020). Historically, having strong national unity has always been important in keeping the country strong and powerful over time. With the elites continuing to separate themselves, the nation becomes more vulnerable and unstable, and it makes it harder to work with other powerful nations. This agrees with the declinist position because they say that when a country is divided on the inside, it cannot help itself or defend itself from outside countries. Therefore, if the United States keeps up with this rate of division, it will risk losing its spot as the top superpower.

However, not everyone agrees with the declinist views. Henry Nau, someone who disagrees with Kennedy, argues that Kennedy's predictions have not held up well because his theory ignores the role of national identity. Nau points out that domestic changes in the United States have actually created more American power, and that many of Kennedy's predictions, such as Japan overtaking the U.S. economically, never came true (Nau, 2001). Nau does make a good case, but we still need to look at the present issues like the trillions in debt, political chaos, and growing inequality that Kennedy raises as major issues.

When we really start to examine and study these economic, political, and social trends, it starts to look like the United States could be heading down the same road that eventually brought down every other major empire before it. The declinist view holds that pursuing United States dominance worldwide should not cause us to ignore internal problems at home, because it could make our country weaker over time.

In the past, we have seen over and over how powerful nations have collapsed, and it was not sudden but occurred slowly over time. It usually starts with the breakdown of the economy, the weakening of the government, and a fragmentation of society as a whole. Kennedy and Wallerstein have pointed out these trends, which support the idea that the United States is affected by these issues and will likely continue the path of other powerful nations that have fallen before it.

### **American Exceptionalism**

American exceptionalism takes the opposite view to the declinist view, arguing that the United States is on the right path and will likely remain the dominant global power because other fallen empires are not comparable to the United States' situation today. Two popular scholars in this school of thought are Dinesh D'Souza and Joseph Nye; both share the belief that America's systems are not at much risk and, unlike the declinist theory, America's power should endure much longer. D'Souza takes a more moral approach; he argues that because America has always prioritized freedom and individual choice, it will remain morally and structurally stronger than other societies (D'Souza, 2007). Nye, however, takes a more practical approach; he points to America's political system, economic strength, and the use of smart power as reasons it should remain strong (Nye, 1990). Instead of seeing today's problems as indications of long-term decline, both argue that they are only temporary issues because the United States is a unique superpower that will always find ways to recover.

Dinesh D'Souza is one of the main voices for American exceptionalism. He believes America is different from the rest of society because its foundation of freedom and free choice sets it apart. D'Souza believes that because Americans have the freedom to make their own choices and choose to be good, this is what makes them a better, more morally superior society

than others. He also points out that “the millions of Americans who live decent, praiseworthy lives deserve our highest admiration because they have opted for the good when the good is not the only available option”. Therefore, based on this belief system, we are not just a powerful nation but a uniquely evolved society. D’Souza finishes with the idea that “America is the greatest, freest, and most decent society in existence” and that history will view it as “a great gift to the world” (D’Souza, 2007). While D’Souza makes a really strong case, he has been criticized for making things sound too simple and also ignoring some of the darker facts of American history, such as colonialism and slavery.

Another scholar who supports the exceptionalist view is Seymour Martin Lipset. He believes that, unlike other nations with a shared history, America is unique because it derives from an original ideology. Lipset defines this ideology with five core values: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. He says a true American is not someone who is born there, but someone who adopts the ideology and values (Lipset, 1996). America’s history is defined by traditions and shared ancestry, which make it distinct from other nations. If we follow Lipset’s perspective and believe it to be true, then America’s values and ideologies do set it apart from other empires and give it a better chance of long-term staying power.

Unlike D’Souza and Lipset, Joseph Nye sees American exceptionalism more realistically and simply. In *Bound to Lead*, Nye argues that American power seems to be declining but actually is not. He thinks that the United States still holds a big advantage through what he calls smart power, which is a combination of hard power and soft power, military and cultural influences (Nye, 1990). Nye argues that America is better at using cultural attraction than using force, which helps it remain a leading nation for a longer period. However, Nye also warns that

America will risk its power if it were to lose its soft power and become more nationalistic. In an interview, Nye mentions that Trump does not use soft power and that this threatens America in the long term (Harvard Kennedy School, 2025).

Even though exceptionalism makes valid arguments, it still has its flaws. Stephen Walt, a professor at Harvard, says that American exceptionalism is a false belief that leads America to ignore its failures and overvalue itself (Walt, 2011). Those who argue against exceptionalism point out that declinists ignore the growing problems they raise, such as rising debt, political divisions, and rising inequality. Just because the United States was able to recover before from challenges does not guarantee it will happen a second time around. The belief that America is different from all of the previous nations before ignores what history has already taught us about the patterns of our current path.

While the American exceptionalist view makes some good arguments, it still lacks sufficient insight to explain all the problems America is currently facing. America does, in fact, have economic strengths and significant global influence, but these advantages cannot guarantee it will not decline. Therefore, the declinist viewpoints are more on track with the United States' current challenges and the patterns of past declining nations.

### **Neoimperialist**

Unlike the Declinist view, which interprets America as heading for an eventual fall, or the exceptionalist view that America will always be on top, the Neoimperialist gives a completely different interpretation of America's future. Neoimperialists interpret what is going on in America as a change or adaptation and therefore do not see an eventual decline or a permanent dominance. Scholars like James Petras (2018) argue that the United States should be able to stay on top if it uses its global influence through economic, political, and institutional

power in nonaggressive ways. This might show that the United States is weaker, but it holds most of the world's power and influence. Part of the neoimperialist argument is that the United States has a lot of economic control across the world. The U.S. dollar is the world's primary currency, and America's banks and financial institutions have a lot of power worldwide. Corporations that operate in the United States do business all over the world and impact how goods and services move. Neoimperialists point out that the economic influence the U.S. has lets it stay powerful without needing its military (Petras, 2018).

Neoimperialists also show that the United States holds influence over institutions outside of its own country. The U.S. shapes the world economy and policies through its leading role in organizations such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank (Petras, 2018). Because of their strong influence within these groups, the United States can make or veto decisions from far away. Military partnerships like NATO help the United States maintain and spread its control in many important regions. This shows that American strength does not come through force but through its influence globally.

Neoimperialists also say that power can be used more indirectly rather than directly, meaning through talking and not forcing. So this means the United States does not have to use any military action to dominate nations, but instead, it can use economic pressure, negotiations, or international institutions. Petras says the United States "redefined empire building as exploiting the domestic economy to militarize the empire" (Petras, 2018). So in order for America to keep its status as the dominant power on Earth, it had to change. Neoimperialists say that the United States' power has only shifted from force to other ways and is not a sign of decline.

Even though the neoimperialists do have convincing viewpoints, they still do not answer all the problems we see arising. The United States is a global influencer, but all signs point to a slow decline of its current position. As Regilme points out, “China has emerged as a significant state actor capable of challenging the dominance of the US and its Western allies in the post-Cold War global landscape” (Regilme, 2023). Powerful countries such as China are beginning to challenge the United States' dominance in the economy, and some are also moving away from American institutions. If America were truly in a transitional period and not headed to decline, then it would not be facing such major competition from other countries throughout the world. For example, the rise of China has a lot to do with the decline of America. As we continue to divide as a nation and threaten our democracy, our competitors will continue to rise. The rise of global competition amongst nations and the reshaping of alliances show that American influence is not as strong as neoimperialists claim. This weakens the argument that the United States' power is changing and not actually declining.

Neoimperialists argue that the United States exerts strong influence, while declinists point out underlying issues that the United States fails to address. The United States is powerful, but it is being challenged from within and outside its borders. Therefore, the declinist perspective remains more convincing because it better explains both the United States' global influence and the growing signs of its decline.

### **China’s Rise as a Global Challenge to American Power**

As the world keeps changing and power dynamics shift, more people are coming to agree with the declinist argument. One of the biggest challenges to U.S. power right now is how fast China is growing in the economy, military, and technology. As China gets stronger, it has become harder for the United States to stay dominant. As these changes become a reality, the

declinist belief that the United States global dominance is not invincible becomes more convincing.

China's military growth is a major threat to US power. According to Funaiole and Hart, China's defense spending was one-sixth that of the United States in 2012, but by 2024 that figure had risen to one-third. China's nuclear weapons have more than doubled in size, reaching 600 warheads in 2025, and now the United States has to deal with not one but two nuclear powers (Funaiole & Hart, 2025). China is competing not only by increasing its military strength but also by developing artificial intelligence. Romeiro Hermeto notes that China's DeepSeek AI model produced superior results and cost only around \$6 million to develop, compared to the hundreds of billions spent by the U.S. on tech (Romeiro Hermeto, 2025). As the Financial Times noted, "With DeepSeek, China innovates, and the US imitates" (Romeiro Hermeto, 2025, citing Financial Times). This proves that China is competing with us not only militarily but also in technology.

China's rise to power also challenges the other two schools of thought. Some American exceptionalists like Nye argue that America's combined power keeps it on top, because it helps to attract the other countries without forcing them. In retrospect, though in recent years America is now responding to China differently with tariffs and sanctions instead of its usual strategy of attraction, which shows that the soft power Nye warned that we would lose is already slowly slipping away (Harvard Kennedy School, 2025). China's growth is also opposing the neoimperialists' belief that American power is just transforming instead of declining. If America were just shifting its control to indirect, we would not be losing our influence to China, a country that is building its own competing institutions and outpacing the U.S. in innovation. Therefore, China is closing the gap with America in both fields, military strength and technology, which

shows that America is not just changing how it leads but instead losing its influence and ability to lead.

This challenge from China is exactly the kind of pressure historians and scholars cite when discussing the causes of an empire's decline. Diesen and Sachs warn that "empires rarely recognize decline while it is happening" and that declining powers often "intensify force precisely when strategic control is weakening" (Diesen & Sachs, 2026). We are seeing this in real time as the United States tries to respond to China with trade wars and sanctions, rather than addressing the real internal problems we have as a country. This pattern goes back to Kennedy's theory of imperial overstretch and Wallerstein's world-systems theory, both of which argue that superpowers decline when they overextend themselves as competition intensifies (Kennedy, 1987; Wallerstein, 1974). Therefore, the rise of China is real-world proof that the warnings from declinist beliefs are not just theories but are actually happening.

### **Conclusion**

After examining all three of these schools of thought, exceptionalism, neoimperialism, and declinism, the declinist view makes the most sense if we are trying to interpret America's future. Exceptionalists look at strengths like our innovation, and neoimperialists are right that U.S. power is changing into different forms, but neither fully addresses the real problems in our country that continue to weaken it over time. The growing national debt, political division, rising inequality, and weakening sense of unity all point towards a country that is slowly losing its strength. However, China continues to grow and expand all of its military, economic, and technological departments, which adds more outside pressure (Funaiole & Hart, 2025). This is why warnings from scholars like Kennedy and Wallerstein are becoming harder to ignore. History shows that no empire stays on top forever, and the United States is unlikely to be any

different. So, the issue is no longer whether decline will happen, but whether we will react to it in time to respond wisely and protect our country for future generations.

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