

Digital Disruption and Sovereign Decay

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Abstract

The trajectory of America's future and its ultimate fate can be analyzed and predicted through the lens of the American exceptionalist school of thought and the American declinist school of thought. For centuries now, the United States has upheld its superior qualities and has portrayed itself as an almost immortal superpower that no country can compare with due to its successful growth and innovation. However, while the United States does in fact possess a multitude of unique qualities that have allowed for such developments in power, this distinctiveness certainly does not make the nation immune to ruin. The very aspects that the United States takes pride in, such as its population, cultures, and society, may contribute to and accelerate the fall of American power. And with the rise of technology and access to information, people are increasingly able to notice the cracks in America's reputation. In the near future, society can expect to witness the cracks in American systems worsen, as social fragmentation threatens to worsen the political, economic, and cultural divides within the U.S. and in its relationship with nations all over the globe.

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Since World War II and the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States of America has long been recognized as a global superpower due to its unmatched military power, lead in the global economy, significant technological dominance, and extensive geopolitical influence. With this level of influence, however, comes frequent debates regarding the expected endurance of America's supremacy, especially as domestic challenges and international conflicts rise. The goal of this work is to examine these variables in order to predict the eventual state of the United States of America in the near future. The central argument will rest on America's technological advancements and its relationship to the U.S., analyzed through the lens of two primary schools of thought. The American exceptionalist school of thought holds that the United States' invaluable influence on the global stage distinguishes its success from that of other nations and guarantees its power over them despite their growing potential. The American declinist school directly counters these sentiments, instead stating that the United States' financial, social, political, and technological power is gradually reducing over time. They also emphasize China's rapid political and technological development, especially compared to the United States, to argue that the United States is at high risk of being replaced by China as a global superpower if conditions remain as they are. Though technology and education in the U.S. are continuously evolving, they nevertheless indicate a significant risk of social, cultural, and economic decline. By dissecting the relationship between technological progress and the imminent weakening that America is encountering, it becomes more and more unmistakable that the increased access to digital resources available with just a tap of one's screen is leaving people feeling frustrated, discontented, and wary of the government and its decisions. There is no doubt that the United States bears qualities that have allowed it to be as influential and powerful as it is in the present.

However, the constant technological growth is at stake of deepening social fragmentation, increasing citizens' distrust in the government and administration, and driving economic instability, all of which increase the probabilities of America's eventual decline as a superpower.

The American Exceptionalist Perspective

From as early as elementary school, people who have been raised in the United States have continually been planted with the belief that no country can outmatch the authority and grandeur of the United States, instilling a deep sense of patriotism from youth in many. Students grow up learning that the country was founded on the principles of democracy, liberty, and the balance of federal power. These concepts relate to the exceptionalist perspective, which has existed for nearly as long as the United States' establishment, increasing in popularity following the Civil War, and is a mentality many nationalists firmly follow. Exceptionalism and the associated school of thought have had a deeply intertwined role in domestic policy and foreign relationships, resulting in the United States' influence and self-proclaimed leadership role being reinforced time and time again. A prominent belief amongst Exceptionalists is that the United States' contributions to global politics, economics, and culture are unparalleled and distinctive. Advocates of this school of thought also suggest that the United States' influence on international democracy and its role in the "defeat of fascism" in World War II and the defeat of the Soviet Union secure its distinctiveness (Zipp, 2021).

That is not to say that the United States does not possess certain distinguishing qualities that have allowed it to get to the position of authority it holds in the current day. There are multiple unique attributes held by the U.S., but it is crucial to recognize the threats that accompany this idealistic vision of superiority and how such sentiments have been incorporated into the American population. Upholding these beliefs, specifically the notions of superiority and

irreplaceability can conceal susceptibilities in both the government and society. This, in turn, can potentially lead to egotism amongst political leaders as well as indifference towards certain issues. Such attitudes toward modern problems can lead to frustration among citizens, especially considering the role of technology in American society, as people can identify these vulnerabilities far more readily and spread the word about them. Holding the United States on its high horse and using exceptionalism to justify insufficiencies in retributive action ultimately ends up worsening public dissatisfaction and increasing distrust in the government.

Exceptionalism, Double Standards, and Legal Isolationism

Though many exceptionalists conform to “claim of difference, mission, or superiority, [many other theorists] associate it with a particular behavior or set of behaviors” (Williams, 2023). A prime example of such a theorist is Michael Ignatieff, who strays from the typical approach to exceptionalism and instead frames it through three core concepts: exceptionalism, double standards, and legal isolationism. These standpoints all intertwine with one another to highlight the techniques by which the United States involves itself in domestic and international affairs.

In his book, *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, Ignatieff begins by describing exceptionalism as how the United States frequently “signs on to international human rights and humanitarian law conventions and treaties and then exempts itself from their provision” (Ignatieff, 2005, p. 3). This lack of accountability is often displayed through the United States’ inability to comply with other nations’ terms and harboring explicit reservations when creating treaties or agreements, eventually allowing the U.S. to be excused from the same responsibilities and regulations they impose on other countries. For example, the United States has withdrawn from the Paris Agreement twice under both Trump Administrations, with President Trump

stating in his 2019 press statement that the agreement posed an “unfair economic burden...on American workers, businesses, and taxpayers by U.S. pledges made under the Agreement” (Pompeo, 2019). By incorporating technology in the picture, the United States’ actions could be deemed as hypocritical, as they expect other nations to offer transparency while the U.S. conceals its own procedures from observation and responsibility. In the same press statement, President Trump mentions how “U.S. emissions of criteria air pollutants that impact human health and the environment declined by 74% between 1970 and 2018. U.S. net greenhouse gas emissions dropped 13% from 2005 to 2017, even as our economy grew over 19 percent” (Pomper, 2019). However, following the United States’ withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2025, the U.S. has seen a 2.4% increase in greenhouse emissions (Gaffney & King, 2026). This demonstrates that the United States’ decision to withdraw from the agreement was less about preventing unfair economic burdens on citizens or avoiding unnecessary restrictions. Instead, the primary purpose was to avoid environmental restrictions and accountability for increasing greenhouse gas levels, demonstrating the U.S.’s inflexibility to multinational contracts they do not agree with, despite the consequences.

Ignatieff continues his perspective through the idea of double standards, in which he argues that “the United States judges itself by standards different from those it uses to judge other countries” (Ignatieff, 2005, p. 7). The U.S. is quick to criticize other nations for ignoring UN rights and laws, and has done so countless times in the past, yet refuses to accept criticism from the same UN bodies. For example, the United States often condemns North Korea for its restricted freedom of the press and tightly controlled information from the public. However, the release of the Pentagon revealed that the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations systematically deceived Congress and the public about the scale of U.S.

involvement in Vietnam (Britannica, 2017). Many pointed out the hypocrisy of the U.S., and there was a significant decline in confidence in the president and the administration, as they, too, had concealed exceptionally crucial information not just from the public but from the government itself. Additionally, with technological evolution and wider access to resources, politicians have increasingly been spreading meaningless statements to more people in an attempt to justify political and military decisions. An example of this is when it was discovered that Iraq did not, in fact, possess weapons of mass destruction as the United States had believed. This assumption on the U.S.'s part was what started the Iraq War, and acting on such speculation led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians and soldiers. Despite the heavy consequences, the United States still defended and justified its response to the threat of nuclear weapons, going out of its way to make the war appear warranted to the public, even though it resulted in the deaths of countless innocent people. Such inconsistencies and a lack of transparency from the government have become more and more apparent to people, ultimately contributing to a decline in government confidence and tarnishing the United States' leadership reputation both amongst American citizens and internationally.

The third form of exceptionalism, legal isolationism, describes the United States' repeated behavior of dismissing international laws and ordinances that American politicians believe would threaten the country's independence or autonomy. The U.S. has evaded agreements ranging from environmental protection measures to artificial intelligence regulations, often justifying these decisions by expressing that only the United States should have the authority to make resolutions for its citizens instead of succumbing to global expectations. This continued insistence poses not only a disturbance to international policy construction but also a concern to Americans' privacy and safety, especially considering that the U.S.'s technological

firms are primarily private oligopolies that prioritize maximizing profits. In Ignatieff's book, Anne-Marie Slaughter argues that despite the United States pursuing legal isolation, "law is being globalized, like commerce and communications" (Ignatieff, 2005, p. 8). With the world more interconnected than ever due to technological advancements, American legislators and judicial figures are expected to step into their role on the global stage during international conferences. The extreme inflexibility of engaging in such discussions and legal reinforcements fortifies the growing perception of American hypocrisy and demonstrates to citizens that the U.S. is more dedicated to maintaining independence rather than being transparent.

The American Declinist Perspective

The American decline school of thought argues that the United States is undergoing a steady descent in power and international influence. This perspective emphasizes the nation's decline in economic and social supremacy, political polarization, and social disintegration. This viewpoint is steadily gaining more popularity amongst American citizens, primarily due to China's rising economic ascent, increasing political tensions, and an influx of media that have shone a light on America's hypocrisy and dishonesty. Many declinists connect America's decline in influence and strength with the concept of an "overstretch" of power. In Paul Kennedy's book, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*, he explains that "wealth is needed to underpin military power, and military power is usually needed to acquire and protect wealth" (Kennedy, 1987, p. xvi). This means that nations need to balance their "wealth and economic base with their military might and strategic commitments" (D'Eramo, 2022).

Many declinists over time have argued in support of various "solutions" that they believe would mitigate America's seemingly inevitable decline. Continuing from Kennedy's notion regarding economic and military balance, he asserts that America needs to invest less in military

equipment and instead focus on rebuilding its industrial sectors and promoting competition. Other declinists believe America's downfall is the consequences of imperialism, urging that the U.S. should minimize getting involved in foreign conflicts. In Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone*, he expands on the concept of social capital, which refers to the networks and relationships between individuals and communities that eventually drive collaborative action. He contends that social capital in America is steadily dwindling, as civic involvement and trust amongst people have diminished (Putnam, 2000). Despite its ability to connect people around the world in mere seconds, technology has played a paramount role in this decline. Social media especially grants users infinite space for luring people into echo chambers of misinformation, hatred, and violence. For example, platforms like Discord, Reddit, Instagram, etc., are filled with predominantly white males who target their "black pill" ideologies towards younger male audiences to indoctrinate them. One study explained how such digital communities, run by users dubbed as "incels", "focus on technology [to] reinforce essentialist views on gender...male domination, dehumanizing women, and...misogyny" (Preston et al., 2021). Groups as such have mastered their techniques to gain large audiences and spread hatred as much as possible, and as a user, it has become easier than ever to get absorbed into such doctrines.

Further advancements in technology have continued to add complexities and nuances to the declinist argument. This has been especially heightened due to the surge of information regarding business, politics, and world leaders that is available to anyone with a device. While this can allow citizens to be more well-educated, it also provides an instrument of widespread disinformation. During ABC's presidential debate between President Donald Trump and Kamala Harris in the 2024 election, Trump argued that "In Springfield, [the illegal Haitian immigrants] are eating the dogs. The people that came in, they are eating the cats. They're eating – they are

eating the pets of the people that live there” (Thomas & Wendling, 2024). There was no evidence to support this claim, and it quickly became a viral meme amongst Gen-Z communities, who often quoted the laughability of Trump’s claims. Inevitably, conversations in right-wing groups also stirred up in response to Trump’s comment, inciting xenophobia and anti-immigration ideologies based on a fabricated declaration (O’Rourke, 2024). Regardless of people’s varying responses, the debate highlighted just how quickly information is distributed online, especially when it comes from a notable figure like a presidential candidate. Despite the claim being false, it reached countless audiences, highlighting how technology allows for the instantaneous spread of misinformation.

Artificial Intelligence and Misinformation

Many multi-billion-dollar tech corporations, such as Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, and Google, have been announcing widespread layoffs in numerous departments and sectors. Throughout 2025 alone, “Google conducted several rounds of layoffs totaling over 2,000 employees as part of ongoing restructuring and AI-focused prioritization” (AILoss.Co, 2025). From a profit-maximizing standpoint, integrating AI as much as possible into the workplace is the most efficient means of cutting costs and avoiding unnecessary expenditures in promotions, bonuses, etc., while still maintaining high productivity. From a human perspective, however, AI possesses a number of risks to people’s futures, education, and financial stability, as AI is expected to replace jobs in various fields. A study done by the Pew Research Center compared public perception of AI to that of AI expert opinions to analyze the similarities and discrepancies between the two. When the topic of AI impacting certain industries rose, “43% of adults overall [said] AI will lead to fewer teacher jobs in the next 20 years, compared with 31% of experts.” Similarly, this pattern was demonstrated when asked specifically about the fields of medicine and

law, where “38% of AI experts in the study presume that AI will cause jobs in law to be reduced” (McClain et al., 2025). The difference in opinion is certainly not a shock, as it is reasonable to assume that the majority of people would not appreciate entrusting their medical and legal situations to nonhuman systems that are unable to empathize with them. The increase in AI dependency for data collection and program development, no matter what industry is involved, has heightened a broad sense of apprehension toward job stability and the credibility of information fed to them.

The spread of disinformation and misinformation is further facilitated through deep fakes, which are AI-generated videos and images. While at first it was a means of entertainment to create various imagery, it was quickly utilized for more political agendas. One of the earliest instances of deepfakes being used in politics was during the first month of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. An “amateurish deepfake emerged of President Volodymyr Zelensky calling on his soldiers to lay down their weapons and return to their families” (Milmo et al., 2024). Though the video was low quality and evidently fake, it still prompted President Zelensky to respond to the video and tell Russian soldiers to return home instead. However, the deep-fake Zelensky came back a year later, this time featuring a considerably better quality and a more realistic clip that urged Ukrainian soldiers to surrender again. McKenzie Sadeghi, the AI and foreign influence editor at NewsGuard, mentioned that the November 2023 clip “marked a significant leap in deepfake technology since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, representing how manipulated content has become more convincing as technology advances” (Milmo et al., 2024). While it was once easy to tell apart genuine media from AI-generated content, as technology improves, it has become increasingly more difficult to distinguish between the two.

This paves the way for further spread of misinformation, as anyone online can create fake media and present it as the truth to wide audiences, many of which may accept it as fact.

Surveillance and the Erosion of Trust

Another major concern often brought up with the progression of technology is user privacy and safety, especially since it has become a well-known fact that both the government and private corporations are surveilling our behavior and activity around the clock. Trust in these firms has only decreased as the knowledge surrounding personal data collection and usage becomes more available. In 2023, the Federal Trade Commission charged Ring, a home security camera company, with compromising customers' privacy by allowing employees or contractors to access consumers' private videos and by failing to implement basic security protections. The complaint included a multitude of violations, a notable example being one employee who, over several months, viewed thousands of video recordings belonging to female Ring users that surveilled intimate spaces in their homes, such as bathrooms or bedrooms. The employee was not confronted until another employee discovered malpractice. Even after Ring implemented restrictions on who could access customers' videos, "the company could not determine how many other employees inappropriately accessed private videos, as Ring failed to implement basic measures to monitor and detect employees' video access" (Federal Trade Commission, 2023). Cases like this drastically decrease people's trust in corporations and technology in general, as it is nearly impossible for the average citizen to determine how their data is being utilized and if it is upholding their right to privacy. Furthermore, it raises the question of whether the data gathered by these private companies is contained within their own databases or if it moves to external third parties, such as the government.

Nevertheless, the data retrieved by these corporations is rarely kept completely confidential, as more and more companies analyze user behavior to enhance their own systems and advance AI technology. In particular, the information gathered can be used to train machine models, improve facial recognition software, and develop AI tools (Brown, 2021). A surprising example to many is the usage of Completely Automated Public Turing tests to tell Computers and Humans Apart (CAPTCHA), which is a standard security checking procedure that users are required to complete before they can access certain resources. Virtually every tech user is familiar with selecting a certain object from a grid of square pictures or reading a distorted text of numbers and letters as a common step before opening specific software. Most people believe that CAPTCHA's purpose is to prevent bots from entering websites and applications intended for human use, and while that was the initial objective, it no longer remains the complete truth. For example, Google tracks the time taken for users to complete this step and the movement of their mouse to gather data on how people identify certain subjects to be used in AI algorithm training (Strategic Intelligence, 2025). No CAPTCHA test discloses this usage of information, and it is recorded without informed consent, essentially concealing the true intention of these tests from people. This has magnified users' wariness about privacy online, as merely moving one's mouse or staying on a page slightly longer can be used by companies for their own advancement without people ever knowing.

Conclusion

The question of America's expected trajectory can be examined through the exceptionalist and declinist schools of thought with an emphasis on the role of technology to consider the digital age in which the U.S. finds itself. The exceptionalist school of thought consistently highlights the United States' leadership and global influence, but fails to consider

that the U.S.'s role on the international stage may be diminishing. The increase in knowledge and information available to people has accelerated this change, as it has allowed users to learn about aspects of the government that mainstream news typically does not discuss. Ignatieff's tri-layer foundations for exceptionalism emphasize how the United States has been taking advantage of its global power and exceptional qualities and demonstrate that repeated hypocrisy inevitably harms the relationship between citizens and the government. The declinist school of thought, on the other hand, upholds that American power is steadily decreasing, but provides a sliver of hope to explore viable solutions to mitigate these consequences. The United States must re-strengthen trust and faith between its government and its people, as separation of the two will continue to tear the country apart. Technology can even be used as a tool to bridge this gap and improve transparency to people by providing them with accurate knowledge regarding the government and its decision-making. However, modern examples indicate that this lack of openness to the public is intentional on the government's part, and it will likely not loosen these restrictions. And with limited regulation online, misinformation and fake media will continue to flood people's feeds and further propel the downfall of domestic and international American influence. The United States is unlikely to sustain its power over the next fifty years, and it's not out of the picture that this decline sharpens in the near future. If political leaders want to change the direction of America's future, they must be willing to yield their focus on superiority and instead work on acknowledging the flaws in American society to eventually resolve them. Otherwise, with the current trajectory based on the present, the fall of the American empire will be inescapable.

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