

## The Fall of Great Empires

Much ink has been spilled on the question of what causes great empires to be felled. Is it that they simply expire because they have been around for a while, or is there some other factor that all empires share that has been obscured by the dust of the ages? Well, of course, nothing lasts forever and part of the answer lies in the fact that all organisms grow over time, reach maturity, age and die. After all, death is part of life itself.

Nevertheless, there is some value, when traveling about the world, to take a look at what great empires have had in common and what has caused them to rise or fall. Having recently spent time in Italy and Israel, one can only look back at the millennia and wonder what happened to those great nations and whether there is any lesson for the United States today.

There are at least four factors worthy of note for anyone who is concerned about the future of the United States.

(1) Leadership. Every great empire that fell suffered from a failure of leadership. Some nations disappeared because there was simply no reasonable succession system in place. When kings and emperors depend upon their children or rivals, that will create built-in instability. Rome, for example, was almost constantly in a civil war, and even during Pax Romana succession of leadership and training of new leaders was haphazard and contentious at best. Rome, after year 350 of the Modern Era, had no viable way for training new leaders or making sure that competent leadership ran the empire. Ancient Israel likewise suffered from corrupt kings, civil disorder over succession and a failure of any system to train new leaders.

The United States is in much the same dilemma today. Having recently traveled abroad, almost everyone we met pointed out that while America has always been looked to as a stable and trusted leader, it appears that our political system is as untrustworthy and unsavory as their own. The Italians have had great difficulty in maintaining a stable government. Israelis constantly complain about the contentiousness in their own politics. "How can you Americans possibly nominate two people who are both so disreputable and lacking in integrity?" we have been asked constantly. Of course, they are right and there is nothing we can do except fall on the sword.

Even more worrisome than Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton is the fact that people do not respect politics and young people are even less likely to go into the field unless they are power mongers, have serious ego problems, or simply want to get rich off other people's money. Politics is no longer considered a noble profession in the United States. The Founders of our country hoped and assumed there would be no political parties, and certainly did not have any nomination process formalized, nor did they have a way of controlling the destructive effect of politicians being bought by special interests. Our nation needs a total revamp in its electoral system, from the primary process forward, if we are going to survive as a great empire. Otherwise, we simply will degenerate into a corrupt oligarchy where the best people are not interested in participating and the worst people have every incentive

(2) Patriotism. In most empires that fell, the populous simply stopped believing in the value of their nation. The Romans were not loyal to Rome, but rather were loyal to the army or to a particular class or family. This happened in every other culture that saw the demise of its empire. Americans are beginning to lose any feeling of patriotism as well. Bear in mind, patriotism does not mean a jingoistic “we are right all the time” philosophy. A patriot can oppose the nation’s policy strenuously, protest in the streets, and work for causes inapposite to the policies of the government. Patriotism is about adhering to a central goal and a common interest with respect to the value of nationhood. Americans today are so divided and so uneducated about their country, that there seems to be a lack of the kind of patriotism which permits supporters and dissenters alike to work together towards a common goal. We are angry at one another, make outrageous accusations, and bring out the worst in one another.

(3) Middle Class. Great empires have maintained a strong middle class. Wealthy aristocrats and poverty stricken people do not enable nations to survive for long periods of time. In order to maintain a middle class, there must be avenues of upward mobility. We are fast seeing the middle class in America disappear. We have permitted major corporations to send many of our jobs abroad, benefitting from low wages, bad environmental standards, and horrendous work conditions. It is not simply that Vietnamese, Malaysians or Chinese are willing to work for less money, but rather that their societies do not provide any of the protections that we take for granted. That is what is wrong with free trade. Free trade is not free, when it enables unfair competition against our own workers.

Free trade, of course, is not the only boogie man helping the middle class to evaporate. The fact that colleges have become an industry, turning out young people who cannot get jobs and then who cannot pay their bills, is also a destructive force in our society. A tax system which is so byzantine that it can only be understood by scores of tax practitioners is undermining the fabric of our society. Many corporations have more tax lawyers working for them than the Internal Revenue Service. There are plenty of wealthy Americans who pay no taxes thanks to loopholes and exemptions of every sort. All candidates who run for election in this country speak about the outrageousness of our tax system, but no one is willing to take on the problem. A simple 3-tiered progressive income tax with no deductions has received virtual universal agreement, but yet no politician truly will move on such an idea. Corporations should also pay a gross income tax, with no deductions, and with a simple 3-tiered system. Offshore tax schemes and other such artifices should be banned forever.

(4) Finances. This factor encompasses the corrosive effect of the \$19 trillion deficit. Republicans have been saying that we simply can grow our way out of this by cutting taxes. The theory is that the rich will hire the poor, the poor will pay more taxes and everything will be fine. The Democratic answer is to tax the rich and spend more money on the poor. Neither approach will do anything to benefit the overall financial stability of the country. Great empires have fallen because they could not finance their activities, overburdened the public with debt and waged wars that were too costly. We have made all of those same mistakes. We are spending more money than we have, we are not empowering the middle class to earn more money and pay more taxes, and we simply have attempted to grow our way out of debt. We are quickly headed for a third world economy. We are completely beholden to those who buy our bonds to finance our debt, who are mainly the Chinese. We pay billions and billions of dollars in

interest payments, even with very low interest rates. Heaven forbid when the interest rates increase. We are not going to grow our way out of this. We are going to have to make some hard decisions about what we want to pay for and who is going to pay for it. We are headed the way of every empire that has not been able to handle its financial affairs, has either spent too much money, has overburdened its people, or has simply become destitute. Alexander Hamilton saved this republic by convincing the new nation that it must assume the Revolutionary War debt of the states and pay off that debt in a timely fashion. Hamilton believed that taxes would eventually wither away.

By no means have we touched upon every feature of a failing empire, but we do know that the lack of a leadership ladder, a failure to subscribe to common national goals, the disappearance of the middle class and financial instability are powerful forces working against the American dream.

My father used to say, "Where there is life, there is hope." Certainly there is hope for the United States, but not without a revolution in our individual and national responsibilities. Perhaps this election, with the awful candidates we have selected, will shock us into a new way of thinking. Perhaps a third party will emerge. This may be the time to consider the Libertarian candidates, Gary Johnson and Bill Weld, who actually sound like reasonable and sane candidates for President. Unfortunately, they are still too isolationist and ideological to respond to America's problems, but supporting those candidates may be a wakeup call for the two major parties.

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