

# The Pessimist Persuasion

*Throughout history, many intellectuals have been willing to write their society's obituary long before the game was up.*

BY ARTHUR HERMAN

*"America has become the symbol not of a strong, assured, confident giant, striding into the future—but of a society that now stands more than ever as a warning of where [defying] nature merely to become richer and richer without limit can lead to. . . . We wonder if the whole course of America has not been based on a false premise. Can she change that course—or is she inevitably heading for some ultimate disaster?"*

These sobering words were not written under the shadow of the recent Wall Street collapse or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. British journalist Christopher Booker penned them in 1980, in an essay titled "Dear America: Meditation on a Lost Dream."

Later that year, Ronald Reagan was elected president. If Booker had predicted instead that America was on the brink of a turnaround from the malaise of Vietnam and the Carter years and in less than a decade would win the Cold War, he probably would have been branded a hopeless crank—not least by himself.

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Yet many elites continue to make a fetish of pessimism, rejecting those who disagree as Pollyannas who are out of touch with reality. However, our taste seems insatiable for Pollyanna's opposite, the professional pessimist. Books predicting the decline and death of civilization have been a staple for publishers almost from the moment the printing press was invented. As a cultural attitude, declinism goes back even further than that.

*To whom can I speak today?*

*The iniquity that strikes the land*

*It has no end.*

*To whom can I speak today?*

*There are no righteous men*

*The earth is surrendered to criminals.*

This is the authentic voice of professional pessimism from wall hieroglyphics in a New Dynasty tomb in Egypt dating from 2000 BC.

Today the purveyors of doom, gloom, and decline are back in force. After the Dow plunged 40 percent last year, Elizabeth Wurtzel, the author of *Prozac Nation* (1994), bade farewell in *The Wall Street Journal* to America as a significant force. *The Washington Post* asked, "Is Capitalism

Dead?” In February, *Newsweek* supplied the answer: “We Are All Socialists Now.” George Soros says that the times we are living through can only be compared to the collapse of the Soviet Union, while his archrival, Rupert Murdoch, announces that “nations will be redefined” as a result. That the American Century is finally, definitively over is the one proposition on which pundits Kevin Phillips, Peggy Noonan,

ica’s emergence as a global power, seem absurd. Yet Adams remains a respected, even admired figure—not least for his scathing critique of the America of his day. In fact, one might argue that declinism’s appeal is strongest when it bears the least resemblance to reality.

However, as historian Jacob Burckhardt (himself a confirmed pessimist) pointed out more than a century and a half

ago, if there is one defining characteristic of Western civilization, it is its capacity for renaissance. No other civilization has shown quite the same ability to hit the refresh button on its own principles and ideals and to find a spark for renewal where others only see darkness and chaos.

Just as the Black Death set

**A CENTURY AGO, HENRY ADAMS predicted the planet itself would become extinct due to a steady loss of heat and energy—a kind of reverse global warming.**

Pat Buchanan, and Fareed Zakaria, as well as the editors of *The Nation*, can all agree. Late last year, Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times* summed up our future in the title of a new book, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*. Now he can add Broke to his dismal list.

Ten years ago, I wrote a book called *The Idea of Decline in Western History*. In researching it, I discovered how often experts and pundits made virtually the same predictions when America’s economic fortunes took a turn for the worse: in 1873, again in 1893, again in 1929, and again in the post-Vietnam, stagflationary 1970s. The same gloomy forecasts of overpopulation, ecological collapse, and global economic disaster that permeated Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968), Barry Commoner’s *The Closing Circle* (1971), and the Club of Rome’s *Limits of Growth* (1972) also pervaded the works of the pessimists of the Gilded Age. “Two more generations should saturate the world with population,” Henry Adams wrote not long after the great financial panic of 1893, “and should exhaust the mines.” At that point, he said, the demise of capitalism would be inevitable. By 2025, Adams predicted, the planet itself would become extinct as the result of the steady loss of heat and energy in accordance with the inexorable laws of thermodynamics—a kind of reverse global warming.

In retrospect, these words, written on the eve of Amer-

the stage for the Renaissance, and the Great Depression for the Greatest Generation, so it would be foolish to assume that America or capitalism has suddenly, and in an unprecedented fashion, lost its capacity for self-renewal and recovery this time.

Of course, all societies feel the pain of circumstances at some point, whether in a major financial panic such as the Wall Street crash of 1929 or following a military catastrophe, such as France’s defeat in 1940. A reaction of gloom and pessimism may be inevitable. However, once the declinist mindset has taken hold, actual economic and geopolitical trends and possibilities no longer matter. In ancient Rome, 17th-century Spain, France in the 1930s, and even the United States at critical junctures in its history, we can see how an obsession with decline distorts people’s perception of reality and actually undercuts the basis of self-renewal.

Above all, the spread of pessimism has repeatedly triggered a flight to a secular savior, namely, the all-powerful state—often with catastrophic consequences. The real danger in our current exposure to the pessimist persuasion is that this will happen again.

The first sign of this inclination toward declinism is a pervasive sense that our best days are behind us, and that none in the present live up to the heroic standards of the past. This cultural theme has appeared at all times and in all societies, but ancient Rome remains the classic example of how this assessment can result in a strange bifurcation. Quite early in the Roman Republic a disaffected intellectual

elite became convinced that their country's days were numbered, even, ironically, as Rome was steadily expanding its empire, influence, and wealth.

What sociologist Daniel Bell in a 1969 book deemed “the cultural contradictions of capitalism,” namely the tendency of societies to spawn an intellectual class that revolts against the very society that makes its existence possible, describes perfectly the revolt of Rome's best and brightest more than two millennia earlier. It was the original *trahison des clercs*. Indeed, for more than 450 years, from the age of Pompey and Caesar in the first century BC until the Western Empire's last days, educated Romans would express amazement at the rampant corruption around them (against which they themselves were, of course, immune), and would live out their days convinced that their compatriots had sold out the sterling values of Rome's founding fathers.

The record is breathtaking, yet strangely familiar. In Julius Caesar's day, the historian Sallust chose Rome's final defeat of Carthage, in 146 BC, as the moment when “fortune turned unkind” against Rome. Before that time, Sallust declared, Romans had been better and nobler: “To such men no toil came amiss; no ground was too steep or rugged, no armed foe too formidable; courage taught them to overcome all obstacles.” Their only goals in life were honor and glory; “at home they lived frugally and never betrayed a friend.”

However, as Rome's empire grew, “growing love of money, and the lust for power which followed it, engendered every kind of vice.” To Sallust, the history of Rome was the story of the republic's steady, inexorable slide from virtue to



Roman intellectuals began bemoaning the decline of their civilization several centuries before the Visigoths brought down the Western Empire with the sack of Rome in AD 410, shown here in a 1654 painting.

vice. Another celebrated writer, Livy, composed his entire history of Rome from its foundation by Romulus and Remus, in order to reveal to his fellow citizens “the decay of the national character . . . until it reaches these days in which we can bear neither our diseases nor their remedies.”

Livy's successors painted imperial Rome as a cesspool of depravity. The historian Tacitus made his reputation tracing a steady trickle-down effect of corruption from emperors such as Tiberius, Nero, and Caligula that he said had triggered a decay of private morals and a blank passivity among Rome's leading families in the face of encroaching tyranny.

The irony is that by the time Tacitus died (c. AD 117), this supposedly decadent and declining Roman Empire had grown to more than 2.2 million square miles and contained 120 million inhabitants, with a network of 50,000 miles of stone-laid roads connecting its far-flung frontiers to its capital. New citizens from parts of the empire such as Greece, Syria, Africa, and the Danube basin brought fresh energy to the Roman Senate and government. Under the Caesars, Roman citizens enjoyed an unparalleled prosperity, until a combination of barbarian invasions, demographic

national bankruptcy (the first of several) in 1597.

The material losses of the Armada were made up in less than two years. In economic terms, Spain's bankruptcy made its future recovery and prosperity a priority to its European creditors, including its enemies. However, the Armada's failure and economic downturn "struck a society that was conditioned to success," as historian J. H. Elliott notes. "Spaniards felt an urgent need to explain to themselves what was happening to them." The explanation they found was *declinación*.

**"LIFE IS NO LONGER a contest of great minds for great ends, but a pot house squabble," lamented Ralph Waldo Emerson.**

An entire intellectual industry was born. The so-called *arbitristas*, the first modern policy wonks, flooded bookshops with their various and sometimes bizarre proposals for reversing the nation's supposed decline. A standard formula, then as now, was to bemoan

decline, and overtaxation finally doomed the Western Empire in the fourth century AD.

Yet the empire's finest minds found it all meaningless and empty, compared to an idealized image of their ancestors. When Rome did run into problems beginning in the third century AD, its best and brightest reacted with resigned despair. Many, such as Saint Augustine, turned to Christianity for consolation. Having lost its elite's loyalty at the height of material success, the Roman Empire could not count on their help when disaster really came.

**T**he Roman example illustrates how a belief that the best days are behind us can take hold in the midst of success and prosperity. Seventeenth-century Spain shows how, in the face of genuine adversity, the world's greatest superpower can become fixated on the question of decline.

Hapsburg Spain in the 16th century ruled a series of dominions from Asia to the Western Hemisphere, enjoying an unprecedented flow of wealth from its American possessions that financed the largest and most professional army and navy in the world. Then Spain suffered a check on its global ambitions by the rising powers of England and Holland, epitomized by the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and a

failure to uphold society's founding ideals, in Spain's case those of the golden age of Ferdinand and Isabella, of Columbus and the conquistadors, when supposedly all Spaniards had led sober lives and practiced traditional religious and martial virtues without letup.

"Our Spain in all things reached its highest degree of perfection . . . in those times," wrote one celebrated writer, Martín González de Cellorigo. But then wealth flowing from the New World "corrupted the good customs of men" and made them lazy and complacent. "Idleness has destroyed the greatest empires in the world," wrote another *arbitrista*. Now it was destroying Spain.

"Never," wrote Luis Valle de la Cerda in 1600, "has Spain as a whole been as ruined and as poor as it is now." Yet foreign visitors could find no evidence of any decline. They found a nation as rich and as powerful as ever: able to wage war simultaneously on Holland and England, as well as threaten war with France, while still importing bullion from the Americas in the tens of millions of ducats. Still, the perception of decline became so widespread in the early 17th century that even the king, Philip III, began to speak of the days "when my monarchy, as everyone agrees, began to decline"—a decline that he, like other politicians, found himself powerless to stop.

It is not just imperial cultures that can be obsessed with this sense of decline from their ancestral stan-





Spain quickly recovered from the material impact of the Armada's defeat in 1588, but the psychological impact on Spain's leaders was profound.

dards. The same phenomenon surfaced in the United States in the 1840s and '50s, when there was a general sense that the young American republic, if not actually in decline, had already seen its best days. The Founding Fathers, it was believed, had snatched away all the glory; there were no great crises or achievements left for Americans as they entered an age of malaise and “the forcing-house of mediocrity,” as James Russell Lowell put it.

“We can win no laurels in a war of independence,” Daniel Webster proclaimed in 1843. “Earlier and worthier hands have gathered them all.” Ralph Waldo Emerson agreed. “We have no prizes offered to the ambition of virtuous young men,” he wrote. “Life is no longer a contest of great minds for great ends, but a pot house squabble” that would only attract the basest temperaments. To the author of an article published in *Putnam's Monthly* in 1855, it was clear that the heroic virtues of the Founders were dead. The American beau ideal, he wrote, “has passed away from the most of us, as nothing but a dream. We yield ourselves, instead, to calculation, money making, and moral indifference.”

Yet in five years, the moral and political landscape of America would be dramatically transformed by secession and civil war. A generation that had been made to feel

that heroic achievement was beyond them, that “nothing more is to be made of them,” in Lowell's dismissive expression, would launch the United States in a new epic direction and give birth to an age of unprecedented growth and prosperity.

The American example reveals that the idea that a society has lost its way and forgotten the standards of its forebears—the idea of “declension”—does not automatically spell doom or paralysis. On the contrary, it can serve as a spur to new creativity and a sense of resolve, as successive Great Awakenings in American history have demonstrated. However, when a society's genuine successes are redefined as moral decline, especially its economic successes, then recent setbacks can serve as the justification for a major restructuring of priorities, and the ideology of decline takes on a new relevance.

The Romans blamed their supposed moral rot on their wealth and luxury. In the Spanish case, many *arbitristas* blamed their country's defeats on its reliance on the very thing that was the main source of its power and wealth, the discovery of the New World. The *arbitristas* insisted that the easy money that resulted from a massive influx of gold, silver, and other commodities from the Americas, along with the emigration of Spaniards to the New World in search of

that easy money, had ruined Spain's economic future. "The poverty of Spain has resulted from the discovery of the Indies," wrote one author. "Our Spain has its eyes so fixed on trade with the Indies . . . that it has given up trading with its

nature," as Ronald Takaki, the dean of multicultural historians, wrote. It had taken Americans on "an irrational quest for power and destruction" throughout their history. Takaki's solution was what he termed a "revolution from within," substituting a new American history that undermined the

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"myths" that America was built on equality of opportunity (instead of white solidarity) or individual free enterprise (instead of corporate capitalism)—in short, the version of American history largely presented in our schools and universities today.

neighbors." Others blamed the riches of the Indies for everything from the decline of domestic manufactures to growing inequality of incomes.

A good pessimist not only can make past success look like failure, but can present catastrophe as condign punishment for past sins, and anticipate impending collapse with hopeful, almost gleeful expectation. In the 1970s America endured stagflation, unemployment, high gas prices, and a steady loss of status in the world. Like the Spanish *arbitristas*, American intellectuals decided that their country's slide was payback for the sins of Vietnam and Watergate—not to mention the American obsession with economic success. Just as an earlier generation blamed the Great Depression on the excesses of the Jazz Age and the "perils of prosperity" of the 1920s, a generation of New Left puritans made the same charge against the American dream of the 1960s. American middle-class affluence, Beat Generation poet Allen Ginsberg wrote, made "insane demands" on us. Virtually every argument about the evils of material prosperity rehearsed today by advocates of global warming and "green alternatives" was invented in the 1970s by authors such as Barry Commoner and Jonathan Schell, who anticipated the collapse of Western developed economies with a sense of grim satisfaction.

Multiculturalism sprang from the same impulse, as the necessary corrective to what was seen as Western civilization's record of exploiting "subaltern" cultures and peoples, which had doomed it to obsolescence in a more inclusive future dominated by the Third World. At the heart of the triumph of the West was a drive that was "demonic in force and

However, even this revolution from within, which specifically seeks to undermine traditional sources of American self-confidence and renewal, is still not enough to trigger a full-scale internalization of the idea of decline. That would require the last fateful element: a search for hidden forces and conspiracies that are accused of being the causes of disasters and decline.

**T**he "paranoid style" is not the exclusive property of Left or Right. However, it is a perennial adjunct of the pessimist persuasion. The belief that current disasters are the result of manipulation by unseen forces itself depends on a belief that society has reached a point of decline where it can no longer resist them. In the Roman case, it was easy to blame the woes of empire on Christians and other "outsiders." In the Spanish case, Jews, heretics, and foreigners of all kinds took the brunt of responsibility. However, the most graphic example of how the fear of decline and the paranoid style can combine to paralyze a democratic society has to be France in the 1920s and '30s.

The experience of World War I had left France victorious but exhausted, while the war's aftermath exposed the country's economic and political weaknesses. France during the Great Depression never suffered the kind of mass unemployment that America did; nor did it experience the kind of hyperinflation and economic chaos that beset the Weimar

Republic. Yet both Left and Right assumed that France's normal institutions had failed beyond the point of recovery.

Each blamed the other for that failure, or blamed outside conspiratorial forces, including Freemasons, Jews, and the Americans. The Right railed against the "decadence" of the Third Republic, while the Left decried the *embourgeoisement* of society and longed for "authenticity," which included glorifying violence and revolution. On both sides it was generally assumed that France was controlled by a secret syndicate, called variously the 100 Families or the "wall of money," *le mur d'argent*, against which France's normal political institutions were helpless. The politically committed yearned instead for what one observer, Arthur Koestler, called "a new human order," which would overthrow the old decadent system.

It was this fear of "the decadence of France," the title of a popular 1931 pamphlet, that drove young intellectuals to the political extremes. "The only way to love France today," wrote Pierre Drieu La Rochelle in the 1930s, "is to hate it in its present form." Those who did not choose fascism, as Drieu La Rochelle did, chose pacifism or, in Jean-Paul Sartre's case, communism. For the rest, there was only resignation to decay. "We are victims of what we are, and France, in particular, [is a victim] of her advantages." Thus Paul Valéry in June 1940, when defeat was staring the nation in the face.

When war came, both the Left and the Right in France were ready to lose in order to blame the other for the defeat. When Marshal Pétain learned of the French army's collapse, he remarked with grim satisfaction, "This is the result of 30 years of Marxism." André Gide tried to be more philosophical: "[France] was already falling to pieces to such a degree that perhaps the only thing that could save her was, is perhaps, this very disaster in which to retemper her energies."

The result was Vichy. France in defeat

turned desperately to a savior, Pétain, and watched as the entire French government and economy were restructured in order to purge the legacy of the past and settle old scores. Instead of rebirth, the French found themselves trapped in a self-destructive collaboration with their country's enemies. Instead of regeneration, Vichy brought humiliation and a legacy of dishonor with which France is still grappling, more than half a century later.

All too often this is where the pessimist persuasion winds up. Convinced that society has lost its bearings, that its greatest strengths are actually weaknesses, and that those weaknesses have exposed society to manipulation by unseen forces, people find themselves considering desperate measures, including turning to the state as the one institution able to contend with the magnitude of the crisis.



Remember Japan as No. 1? *Time's* 1981 cover reflects the then-popular belief that "the Japanese model" would render American-style capitalism obsolete.

This was how Romans ended up stripping power from their civilian government and handing it over to a military junta led by the Emperor Diocletian (AD 284–305). Diocletian and his successors did manage to shore up Rome's unstable frontiers and hold off the barbarian threat, but at the cost of a massive tax increase that crippled the empire's economy. People complained during Diocletian's reign that there were more tax collectors than taxpayers; the land tax consumed one-third of a typical farmer's gross output. The Diocletian state destroyed the natural roots of loyalty to the Roman mission. A new, otherworldly empire, that of Christianity, won that loyalty instead.

In Spain, it was a prime minister, the Duke of Olivares, who sought to overcome Spain's decline with massive tax increases and a centralization of imperial authority. By 1640, the result was regional revolts across the Spanish Empire. Instead of reversing Spain's decline, Olivares plunged the Spanish economy into a three-century abyss—all the while still blaming his failure on Spain's *declinación*. By 1700 Spain had been reduced to the sick man of Europe, a crippled empire over which the other European powers fought for spoils.

**I**s America in 2009 on the verge of this kind of vicious downward spiral? Are we on the verge of believing that only the power of the state can save us from ourselves?

Perhaps not. At the start of the current financial crisis, in October, a Rasmussen poll found that 59 percent of respondents agreed that government was not the solution to our current woes. This February, after a 3,000-point drop in the Dow and soaring unemployment numbers, Rasmussen found that the percentage still agreeing with that position was unchanged.

Of course, some of the warning signs of the self-fulfilling prophecy of decline are there. Still, the pessimists make it easy to underestimate the ability of the American people and markets, instead of government, to reverse direction and overcome failures. America is still the most innovative and creative economy in the world. (Great Britain, by contrast, has not developed a new industry since World War II.) And contrary to Thomas Friedman and others, the economic playing field is not flat—and

won't be for many decades in the future.

Even if this recession deepens, America is not about to be replaced by China or India as a financial and economic colossus. On the basis of gross domestic product per capita, China's economy ranks roughly 100th in the world, far behind those of Mexico and Brazil, much less the United States. Even if China maintains its present rate of growth (wildly improbable in this global recession), it will take at least 30 years before its standard of living matches that of the United States, and it will be a long time before it becomes as important an economic or financial market for the rest of the world. In fact, the current financial crisis, which has sent the world flocking to the relative safety of U.S. Treasury bonds, demonstrates just how vital the United States remains as the financial mecca of the global system.

There are other reasons to be optimistic. During the past year I have had the privilege of touring one of our most advanced naval vessels, USS *Mesa Verde*, and interviewing the officers and crew of another, USS *New York*. Anyone meeting these young people, or returning Iraq veterans, has to be impressed with their level of dedication, competence, and physical and mental fitness, and their positive expectations about the future—not just their personal futures in service to their country, but the nation's future. All are high-school educated, drug free, and trained in how to work with others to accomplish major tasks, whether fighting terrorists or delivering relief aid to people in the most remote places on earth.

No wonder American businesses seek out former junior officers for management positions, or that American voters are eager to elect them to Congress and statehouses. They want to bring that self-confident competence to bear to help solve the nation's problems. World War II gave us the Greatest Generation, which transformed America in the soaring decades that followed; there is every reason to believe that the generation now serving in Iraq and Afghanistan will do the same.

In 1980 Christopher Booker waved a sad farewell to the American dream. On the eve of Ronald Reagan's election and the longest stretch of American economic growth in history, that prediction of decline seemed a little premature. The same may be true of today's predictions that America's day is done; that is, *if* the pessimist persuasion doesn't take hold. ■