

The Life Cycle of Empires and America's Destiny

By Eric V. Snow

The German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) knew men and women had a hard time making better decisions after getting knowledge about the past. He once cynically commented, "What experience and history teach us is this—that people and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it." Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, America seemingly stands over the world economically, culturally, and militarily as a great giant. True, the United States now endures major tests from Iraqi restiveness against its occupying forces and from the war against Islamic terrorism since the events of 9-11. Other challenges loom ahead, such as from the European Union's growing political and economic unity and China's rapid economic and industrial growth.

But America's lone superpower status remains basically uncontested at this time. But could this change? Despite its preeminence right now, could America still decline and fall? Didn't that happen to other great empires in the past, such as those of Britain, Spain, Islam, Rome, Persia, and Babylon? Is America any different?

Sir John Glubb Pasha (1897-1987), a British military officer and historian, wrote about the collapsed empires of the past. In his book "The Fate of Empires and the Search for Survival," he described a general pattern fitting the history of some fallen empires. They went through a general life cycle of stages as they started, expanded, matured, declined, and collapsed. Has America today entered this life cycle's ending stages? If so, Americans should critically examine the current state of their culture to see what could be done to prevent the same grim fate.

Now is America an "empire"? Some may deny this word describes the USA. After all, this nation usually didn't systematically conquer and directly rule for long time periods large numbers of alien people having different cultures and languages. But the clearest exception to this generalization happened when America made the Philippines (1898-1946) its colony after taking them from Spain. Right after the Spanish-American War ended, the American army crushed a major native independence movement on these islands in order to keep them.

A nation also can have influence without conquering and then controlling an area with its own officials. By using occasional military interventions, economic aid, business investment, and the half-hidden mechanisms of "informal empire," America's influence spreads much further than just over the areas it has now or in the past. In the Caribbean, Latin America, and elsewhere in the world today, American political power can persuade people to make decisions they otherwise wouldn't make. In this light, comparing the United States with past empires is still sound.

Glubb Pasha found out that different empires had similar cultural changes while experiencing a life cycle in a series of stages that could overlap. He generalized about

empires having seven stages of development: (1) the age of outburst (or pioneers), (2) the age of conquests, (3) the age of commerce, (4) the age of affluence, (5) the age of intellect, (6) the age of decadence, and (7) the age of decline and collapse. Each stage helps to lead to the next as the values of the empire's people change over time. Military, political, economic, and religious developments all influence an empire's people to act and believe differently over time.

In the first two ages, the warrior's adventuresome and manly values make an empire gain power as it conquers land from others. Later on, businessmen, who normally value material success and dislike taking unnecessary risks, take over at the highest levels of society during the two next stages, the ages of commerce and affluence. Their societies downplay the values of the soldier. According to Glubb Pasha, they do this normally not "from motives of conscience, but rather because of the weakening of a sense of duty in citizens, and the increase in selfishness, manifested in the desire for wealth and ease." During these middle stages, empires stop taking more land, and start building walls instead. They switch from the offensive to the defensive. Historical examples include the wall built near the Scottish border by the Roman Emperor Hadrian, the Great Wall of China that tried to keep barbarians out, and even twentieth-century France's Maginot line, placed along the German border.

Conquest and (later) business investment promoted by the empire's unity builds the wealth that leads to the age of intellect. Even the brutal Mongol Empire, by bringing most of Asia under its rule, encouraged the caravan trade across Eurasia's famed Silk Road. During this fifth stage, the empire's leaders spent lots of money to establish educational institutions that resemble modern universities and high schools. During the age of intellect, schools may produce skeptical intellectuals who oppose the values and religious beliefs of their empires' early leaders. For example, the medieval Muslim philosophers Avicenna and Averroes, by accepting much of ancient Greek philosophy, weren't orthodox in belief. Scholars also may manage schools that teach the ruling class and/or some of the average people subjects that are either mainly oriented towards financial success (such as the M.B.A. today) or simply impractical. In the Roman Empire, teachers taught rhetoric (speech making) when emotionally persuading assemblies was no longer of political value. But in the early Roman Republic, students received a basic education that stressed character development and virtue.

The corrosive effects of material success encourage the upper class and the common people to discard the self-confident, self-disciplined values that had helped to create the empire. Then the empire eventually collapses. Perhaps an outside power, such as the barbarians in Rome's case, wipes it out. Or maybe an energetic internal force, such as the pro-capitalist reformers in the Soviet Union, finishes the job instead.

The growth of wealth and comfort clearly can undermine the values of character that led to a given empire's creation through self-sacrifice and discipline when it began. Then the empire so affected by moral decline grows weaker and more subject to destruction by forces arising inside or outside of it. Unsurprisingly, God warned Israel

against departing from worshipping Him when they became materially satisfied after entering the Promised Land (Deut. 8:11-15, 17-18; 31:20).

Has the United States entered the latter phases of the empire life cycle? True, it's only been independent from Britain somewhat over two centuries. It's a young country compared to those of Europe or Asia. But, does America today have the same values or cultural developments that past empires such as Rome had before they fell? For example, who are the nation's heroes? What does their selection indicate about the values of its people? Today in America people generally admire above all and pursue avidly news (i.e., gossip) about celebrities such as sports stars, singers, actors, and musicians.

As Glubb Pasha explains, the heroes of an empire's leaders and people change over time as their values do. Soldiers, builders, pioneers, and explorers are admired in the initial stages of the empire life cycle. Then successful businessmen and entrepreneurs are esteemed during the ages of commerce and affluence. For example, late nineteenth-century middle class Americans wanted their children to learn the values of prudence, saving, and foresight as found in Horatio Alger's stories. Intellectuals are also increasingly respected during the age of intellect.

During the last stages of decadence and decline, an empire's people often think most highly of and imitate the athletes, musicians, and actors. They tend to do this regardless of how corrupt these celebrities' private lives are. Remarkably, according to Glubb Pasha, in tenth-century Baghdad, during Abbasid Empire's decline, its writers complained about the singers of love songs having a bad influence on the young people! How different is the America of recent decades? Consider the successive major targets of conservative critics: Elvis, the Beatles, Ozzy Osbourne, and Marilyn Manson. Because people grow emotionally attached to the (rock) music they love, they have a high regard for its singers. Inevitably, this music's often spiritually rotten lyrical content, such as through blunt sexual references, bad language, and Satanic allusions, influences fans. The immoral lifestyles of many rock groups, which often use drugs and frequently engage in casual sex, do also.

More generally, what are some common features of an empire's culture in its declining period? Glubb Pasha and Bernard Goetz in "When the Empire Strikes Out" (which usefully summarizes Glubb's book) describe developments like these: 1. The decline of sexual morality, an aversion to marriage in favor of "living together," and an increased divorce rate all combine to undermine family stability. This happened in the upper class of the late Roman Republic and early Empire. The first-century A.D. writer Seneca once complained about Roman upper class women: "They divorce in order to re-marry. They marry in order to divorce." The birth rate declines and abortion and infanticide both increase as family size is deliberately limited. The historian W.H. McNeill has referred to the "biological suicide of the Roman upper classes" as one reason for Rome's decline. Gay sex becomes publicly acceptable and spreads, such as it was among the ancient Greeks before Rome conquered them.

2. The increased economic and political power of women, such as by their entry into the professions and the general workforce, are another sign of decline. For as women take over various roles or responsibilities in society, many men feel liberated to be irresponsibly non-productive or even destructive. During their empire's decline, Arab historians objected to the increased influence of women in public life. The Roman satirist Juvenal was horrified by female gladiators, poets, athletes, and actresses.

3. Many foreign immigrants settle in the empire's capital and major cities. The mixture of ethnic groups in these cosmopolitan places in close proximity inevitably produces conflicts. Because of their location within the empire, their influence greatly exceeds their percentage of the population. Here diversity plainly leads to divisiveness. (This problem could arise elsewhere within an empire's borders. The late Roman Empire, for example, tried to co-opt barbarians by settling them within its frontier regions and then hiring them to fight other barbarians).

4. Both irresponsible pleasure seeking and pessimism increase among the people and their leaders. The spirit described in I Cor. 15:32 spreads through society: "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." As people cynically give up looking for solutions to the problems of life and society, they drop out of the system. They then turn to mindless entertainment, luxuries and sexual activity, and drugs or alcohol. The astonishingly corrupt and lavish parties of the Roman Empire's elite are a case in point. The Emperor Nero, for instance, would spend the modern equivalent of \$500,000 for just the flowers at some banquets.

5. The government provides welfare for the poor extensively. In the case of the city of Rome, government-provided bread and spectacles helped to keep the masses content. (Rome had perhaps 1.2 million people around 170 A.D.) About one-half of its non-slave population was on the dole at least part of the year. True, helping the poor shows Christian compassion (Mark 14:7). But such help also can encourage laziness and dependency (II Thess. 3:10-12). Such problems are especially likely to result when the poor believe state-provided charity is a right of permanent duration, not a privilege to tide them over temporary bad times.

Consider this list of indicators of an empire's cultural and moral decline. Does anybody really think the United States hasn't entered the stages of decadence and decline? True, the tidal wave of social and cultural decay unleashed by the 1960's in America has ebbed some in the past decade or so. The rates of abortion, divorce, illegitimate births, drug abuse, welfare dependency, and violent crime either have declined or have gone up much more slowly.

Furthermore, some indicators of decline have good, not just bad, results. For instance, some immigration is helpful. As college-educated immigrants arrive, they normally benefit America economically while being a "brain drain" from Third World countries. And, indeed, the United States historically is a melting pot nation of immigrants. Nevertheless, the present floodtide of immigrants, legal or illegal, equals in impact the wave that arrived at America's shores around 1900. Today, they are far more

apt to be a divisive force. Why? Unlike a hundred years ago, America's intellectual elite overall has adopted multiculturalism and has rejected assimilation as its ideal. Today, multiculturalism is the ideology underlying a potentially ultimate political Balkanization. (For further evidence, see the liberal historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s "The Disuniting of America.") Think about what may happen if and when a Spanish-speaking majority inhabits the American southwest. Then Afro-centrism in the inner-city schools inevitably breeds resentment against the white majority (or even other minority groups) by its slanted historical revisionism. Promoting black English ("Ebonics") in the public schools inevitably holds back the black minority economically by making it less prepared for white-collar professional jobs that require a command of standard English. A lack of cultural unity as an ideal inevitably leads to conflict in a free society such as in the United States.

The general entry of women in the workforce also has its positive effects. Young single women or older widows under (say) 65 should work outside the home rather than depend on handouts from their families or the government. Many women with young children work full-time because ex-husbands (or ex-boyfriends) dumped them in order to escape the burdens of fatherhood. Some older women work after their ex-husbands victimized them by trading their ex-wives in for a younger model. Now the traditional sexual division of labor, of men working outside the home and women working inside it, may appear to be rather arbitrary. But discarding it won't work for most of society in the long run because men and women have innately different personalities. In a process that he has called "sexual suicide," the sociologist George Gilder in "Men and Marriage" describes how the feminist values presently enshrined in our culture lead to demographic decline. For as women increasingly feel the need both to bring home the bacon and to fry it up in a pan, the men correspondingly shirk more their family and work responsibilities. It's no coincidence that divorce rates and women's labor force participation rates increase together.

How should Christians react to applying the historical insights of Sir John Glubb Pasha's "The Fate of Empires" to America (and other English-speaking nations, including Britain)? We have to redouble our efforts to warn the world's nations (Matt. 24:14), and especially those largely inhabited by the descendants of the tribe of Joseph (cf. Ezekiel 33:1-9), about their fate if they don't repent. We also have to avoid letting our own patriotism blind us to how much displeasure God has in our nations' sins and how they will be punished in years to come. By knowing history better, we can project our likely national futures better. As the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill observed, "The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see."

