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Fire and ice: How will America fail?

A decade ago I published a book wherein I reckoned the U.S. had 25 years to come to terms with the loss of the geopolitical primacy it had enjoyed for the previous seven decades. I called the book *Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century*. I took as my beginning date 2001, when, in my reasoning, the 11 September attacks in New York and Washington brought “the American century” to a stunningly abrupt close.

“Can America transform itself from a nation with a destiny into a nation with a purpose?” I drew this distinction from *The Promise of American Life*, a book Herbert Croly, the noted Progressive Era social critic, published in 1909. The question I posed was key to my case: Destiny, holding people in the space of timeless mythologies, confers upon them a semi-sacred “mission.” To have a purpose is to live in the stream of history, with earthly things to do.

A century after Croly wrote his classic commentary, the events of 2001 had lent the transformation he proposed a new urgency. America could accomplish it, and so accept its place as one nation among many, with grace, wisdom, dignity, imagination, and a measure of courage. Others had made such passages successfully, I argued, and come out vastly the better for it. Or America could resist the turning of history’s wheel—resist the 21st century altogether—and surrender its global hegemony only after a prolonged, incessantly destructive struggle to defend it.

My prediction was not so difficult to make. And, 23 years after the traumatic attacks of 11 September 2001, the choice America’s purported leaders have made is now evident—gruesomely, disastrously evident. I wondered, as I prepared to

write this commentary, whether the chaos, disorder, and human suffering that now overtakes our world is without precedent in modern history. This may be a matter of judgment, but there can be no question at all that the United States, in its refusal to accept the realities of our new century, has dragged us into a very dark time of war, violence, and inhumanity.

Much has been written about the proxy war the U.S. provoked in Ukraine when it sponsored the coup in Kiev a decade ago. By way of the sanctions regime Washington then imposed on the Russian Federation, it has critically disrupted Europe's natural interdependence with the Eurasian landmass to its east. As much or more has been written and said of the West's support for Israel's shockingly depraved siege of Gaza these past six months. And we are well aware of the escalating danger of a confrontation with China across the Taiwan Strait—a danger the U.S. cavalierly risks.

Taken together, these four crises have pushed a great deal of our planet—Europe and Russia, the borderlands between them, the Middle East, and East Asia—into turmoil. I am reminded of an observation Le Carré assigned to a character in one of his novels: “Wherever in the world you find a mess, you can be sure the Americans have been there.”

Various commentators have argued over the years that it is to Washington's advantage that the world is kept off balance in this way—just as Israel finds advantage in the destabilization of its neighbors. However true this may be—and I cannot dismiss the thesis—the reality of our time is that the U.S., having chosen wrongly in the years following the events of 2001, is now face to face with the comprehensive failure of its post-Cold War geopolitical strategy as fashioned by the ideological cliques known collectively as neoconservatives.

I have long favored the failure of American foreign policy as we now have it—not because I am somehow “un-American,” to invoke the old Cold War phrase, but because I am confident the U.S. can do better. This failure now presses upon us. But it is time to recognize that America will not change course so long as the imperium’s managers remain addicted to an idea of America and its place in the world that is rooted in the thought that the nation and its people have a destiny rather than a purpose.

The war in Ukraine is lost. Russia, having accepted a breach with the West, now turns successfully to the non-West for those relations that will sustain it. Europe, despite the supine acquiescence of its leadership, has returned to that muttered resentment toward America that one heard during the mid- and late Cold War years, when the Continent was force-marched in Washington’s anti-Soviet crusade against its, Europe’s, own interests.

Elsewhere, the U.S. can enable Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians of Gaza as long as it wishes, but America’s standing in the community of nations has already suffered critical, I would say irreparable damage. However much the Pentagon increases its presence at the western end of the Pacific, there is no chance whatsoever it would prevail in any open conflict with the People’s Republic.

A powerful nation can sustain miscalculations and failures of this kind for a very long time. But here we have to make an important distinction. America is a powerful nation, but it is no longer a strong one. The costs of its power, in other words, are to be measured according to the accumulating weaknesses—political, economic, social, even cultural and psychological—that its projection of power has required.

I do not see that this pattern is very different from the Soviet Union's in the decades before its demise. Or, going further back, we find the prolonged projection of power exacting the same price in the cases of various empires, from the Romans onward throughout the history of Western "civilization." It is enfeeblement from within, I mean to say, that will finally tip the U.S. into a circumstance of overstretch such that its power eventually fails—along with the notion of destiny that has justified it.

The working and middle classes in the U.S. find themselves in a state of increasing desperation some official statistics obscure. Forty million Americans now live below the official poverty line, which is drawn on the basis of utterly unrealistic figures of annual income (\$20,000 for a family of two, \$30,000 for a family of four). One child in five now lives in poverty, the rate having doubled in 2022, the latest year for which figures are available.

Political institutions, provisions for welfare, the health-care system, the courts, the universities—all must serve the late-stage imperium and are in consequence in one or another state of dysfunction. Related to this, a generalized state of depression is widely acknowledged.

These are symptoms of a shredded social fabric. And a durable social fabric is essential to what makes a nation strong. There is one other characteristic of strong nations we must not overlook: They and their citizens have a purpose, things to which they dedicate themselves because there is a shared understanding that they are worthy of doing.

In the matter of imperial overstretch, there is no more accurate measure of the failure to come than the metropole's debt position. Again with reference to history, an empire's decline is typically preceded by a radical increase in national

indebtedness: The projection of power, in other words, is no longer affordable. If The U.S. has not reached this state already, it is well on the way to doing so.

America's national debt now totals \$34.5 trillion, roughly 130 percent of gross domestic product. This already compares unfavorably with many other nations—some developed, some developing. Last week the Congressional Budget Office, which monitors the nation's fiscal position, issued a new long-term forecast indicating that the federal debt will break its post-World War II record in five years and reach 166 percent of GDP—an “unprecedented” rate of increase the CBO stated—in 2054.

For comparison's sake, America's debt-to-GDP ratio averaged half its current level from 1940 to 2022 and stood at a low of 32 percent as recently as 1981. To be noted: The debt-to-GDP figure was well below 50 percent at the time of the 11 September events—just prior to the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The conclusion to be drawn is obvious but not altogether so. The policy cliques may overreach in one or another circumstance abroad, suddenly tipping the imperium into a decline that, with the Ukraine and Gaza crises in view, is already accelerating. In a more protracted fashion, the desperation at home I have penciled here could eventually lead to an unprecedented level of political instability.

It is a question of fire or ice. And it is hard to say which of these will force the United States at last to surrender its pretense of God-given destiny and mission. The certainty at this point is that a failure the world will welcome is on its way.

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