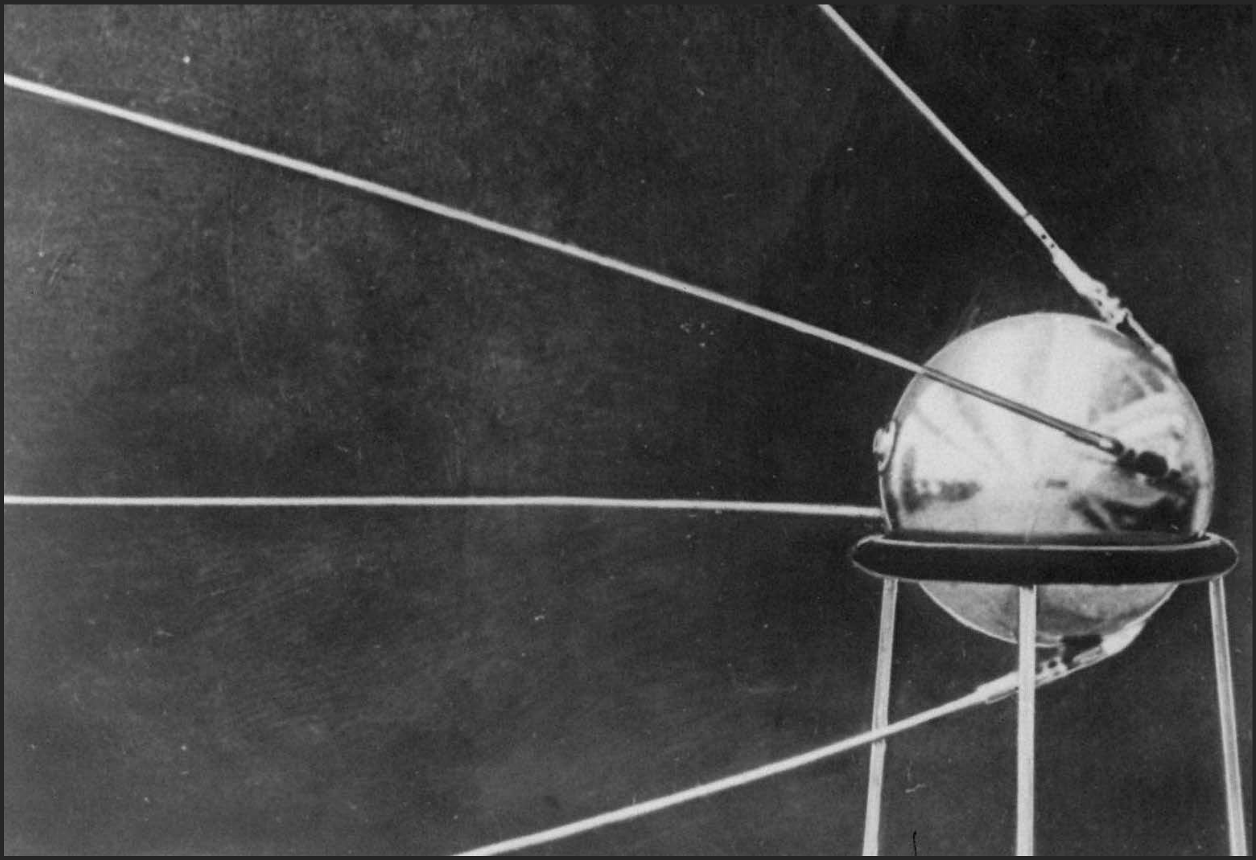

Sputnik, Russian News Agency, 1957

Histories of Decline

Tim Barker

Politics and economics in American "declinism"

"There is a great deal of ruin in a nation," Adam Smith once reassured his compatriots at a moment of British defeat.[1] But how much? American elites have wondered this periodically for most of the last sixty years. At irregular intervals, voices from the left and right of center raise the question of American decline. What can we learn from this march of failed predictions? Will the doomsayers always be wrong? Or just early?

In the Winter 1988–1989 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, political scientist Samuel Huntington attacked the question as the world stood on the precipice of the new unipolarity. Despite the impending Cold War victory, this was an anxious period for American capitalism. The malaise was summed up by Democratic presidential candidate Paul Tsongas: "The Cold War is over; Japan and Germany won."[2] Huntington rejected this defeatism. He deflated contemporary fears by reminding readers that similar decline panics had recurred since the 1950s in a series of waves symbolized by Sputnik, Vietnam, the energy crisis, and now, in the late 1980s, Japan.

In each instance, the foretold decline failed to materialize. In hindsight, we see their fantasies and projections for what they were. Who now remembers bestsellers like *The Coming War with Japan*?[3] But Huntington, while rejecting the decline thesis, refused to condescend to the declinists—even misguided fears were worth taking seriously, he maintained. True, the US had survived countless supposedly terminal diagnoses. But even a hypochondriac might benefit from regular visits to the doctor. Would the imperial republic have endured *without* the recurring panics? Could a hallucinatory discourse (Khrushchev will bury us) actually produce its own reality (continued American primacy)?

This is just what Huntington concluded. American structural power had endured not despite, but because of the doomsayers. In his words, "the declinists play an indispensable role in preventing what they are predicting."[4] This pattern held across the waves of post-Sputnik discourse. It also gave rise to a slyly confident prediction: "The United States is unlikely to decline so long as its public is periodically convinced that it is about to decline."[5]

This is what Plato might have referred to as a noble lie. In order to win their backing for policies to prompt renewal, American voters needed to be persuaded of the possibility of US decline. To whom would it fall to mislead the public for their own good? In the immediate sense, the declinists would do the persuading. But behind them there had to be someone capable of consciously inflating the crisis discourse. This sounds cynical, but it is appropriate when reading Huntington, who once wistfully reminded readers that Truman "had been able to govern the country with the cooperation of a relatively small number of Wall Street lawyers and bankers"[6]—a rare admission of the sources of political power in the American Century. A radical who wrote the same sentence would be crucified for crudeness.

Call it cynical or reductionist, Huntington's point of view has long been common in Cambridge, Manhattan, and Washington. Similar quotes, from men more powerful than Huntington, could be reproduced endlessly. One worldbuilding investment banker, the National Security Council and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) pioneer Ferdinand Eberstadt, said that "the country was always run by crises." He added: "if one was not evident, it had to be created to get things done."[7] Such strategies became the stuff of banter among insiders. In March 1950, one New England congressman told Secretary of State Dean Acheson that Cold War rearmament could not be sold "without some domestic crisis." In the event that "Stalin did not come through with his assistance in precipitating crises," Acheson should "not hesitate to create the crises himself."[8]

Swept to power with George W. Bush in 2000, Condoleezza Rice observed that the US "has found it exceedingly difficult to define its 'national interest' in the absence of Soviet power."[9] She hung a portrait of Acheson in her office and waited. Islamic radicalism held little interest for a trained Sovietologist like Rice—until it suddenly provided "one of those great earthquakes that clarify and sharpen."[10] The ruins in Manhattan became raw material for a new crisis and, she promised, another century in which the world's only superpower could "transform volatile status quos that no longer serve our interests."[11]

Impressive as these instances of on-record cynicism are, their significance is limited if all we take from them is that elites of business and statecraft have exploited, or even manufactured, narratives of crisis and decline. The vital question today is whether this time is different.

Reading Huntington's history of decline, 1958–1988

It is not easy to track the complex interactions between the discourse of declinism and the reality of decline. The sorts of relationships involved are best observed in concrete case studies. Huntington's genealogy begins in the late 1950s, when many Western elites feared that the relatively rapid growth of Soviet national income might soon leave the US the weaker power. In retrospect, this faith in Soviet growth was unfounded. But US performance in this period *was* inadequate. Between mid-1953 and mid-1958, industrial output and private employment actually declined. For the Eisenhower era as a whole, real GDP per capita grew just over 1 percent per year.[12]

On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union launched the first man-made satellite in world history. The image of *Sputnik*, launched by a modified intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), made it possible to represent the Soviet techno-economic challenge as a direct threat to the physical safety of US citizens. At that same moment, the US economy slid into the worst recession since the 1930s. Seizing the moment, Washington Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, a friend of Boeing and leading liberal Democrat, demanded a "National Week of Shame and Danger."[13]

The seemingly endless arenas of relative weakness indexed by the *Sputnik* launch—economic performance, research and development spending, education investment, engineering graduation rates, and so on—were all arguments for the nation to get serious about its position. The *Sputnik* scare provided the necessary trampoline for growth, military procurement, and quasi-military public investment. This policy synthesis had the added benefit of blocking more troublesome social democratic alternatives.

The launch of *Sputnik* was, of course, a real event, and US economic growth was indeed relatively slow. But key details were obscured, exaggerated, or warped to build the hysterical case. The element of outright deception achieved its clearest condensation in the so-called "missile gap," which helped the Democrats, led by JFK, ride to victory in 1960. Various Democrat-aligned experts claimed the Soviets had thousands of ICBMs—two orders of magnitude higher than the CIA's estimates. Today, we know that even the CIA's numbers were too high. The record shows that the number was even lower. Even at the time, Eisenhower knew the missile gap was a tall tale, which is why he responded to Republican defeat in 1960 with a speech targeting what he called the military-industrial complex. If Kennedy himself ever actually believed in the gap, he soon suspected (in his own words) that "what it looks like is we, some of us, distorted the facts and created a myth."[14]

The combination of the Sputnik public relations coup and recession in the US, was the key to post-1958 politics. What was really at stake in this wilderness of mirrors? According to historian Julian Zelizer, the "purpose" of the missile-gap myth was "the revitalization of liberal internationalism."[15] On the domestic front, victory was reckoned in output growth. The high-level stagnation which haunted the 1950s was replaced by the uninterrupted boom of the 1960s. From this case study, Huntington drew two important hypotheses. One was the value of exaggerated declinism in securing political support for the renewal of national power. The other was that military retrenchment was "self-limiting," since the economic effects of spending cuts might "give rise to political pressures and demands which can be met by an increase in military spending."[16]

The basic formulas of Cold War capitalism held until 1968, when the Viet Cong and international currency markets made clear the limits to this arrangement of domestic and foreign affairs. Within weeks of the Tet Offensive, "widespread reports appeared of European hotels, airlines, and exchange offices refusing to accept dollar currency."[17] Emergency measures—including a bombing pause and the abdication of Lyndon B. Johnson—staunched the bleeding. But the crisis of confidence in American power and solvency continued, leading to the end of the gold-dollar standard after 1971.

The long downturn in the middle of the 1970s, which threw tens of millions out of work across the capitalist world, led to concerns about a new depression. Meanwhile, resource nationalists spearheaded by Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) raised basic challenges to the international economic order. Expropriations reached record levels, and business consultants used computer punch cards to predict where the next revolution might occur (leading contenders: Rhodesia, Nigeria, Turkey, Lebanon, El Salvador, Libya, Portugal, Italy, Argentina, and Zaire). "The dollar is finished as international money," declared Charles Kindleberger.[18] As the 1980s began, best-selling nonfiction titles included *Crisis Investing* and *The Coming Currency Collapse*.

These were all headaches, and it was devilishly complicated to imagine how they could be overcome within American democratic politics, which was roiled by forces including right-wing "neo-isolationism" and liberal anti-militarism. Nixon and Kissinger attempted to deal with international complications by declaring that "the age of the superpowers is now drawing to an end."[19] Jimmy Carter bragged that the US was now free from "that inordinate fear of communism which once led us" into disasters like Vietnam.[20]

Faced with the flagging of globalist militarism, an influential coalition of elites mobilized to revive the idea of a clear and present Soviet threat. "It takes Pearl Harbor to wake us up," neo-Cold Warrior Gene Rostow wrote in 1977.[21] Two years later, Rostow and his comrades in the Committee on the Present Danger would flood newspapers and congressional committees with the fanciful claim the Iranian Revolution was the signal gun of a new Soviet offensive. In the absence of a real Yamamoto, one takes Pearl Harbors where one finds them.

The Second Cold War scare was cultivated by a bipartisan group, including Democrats like Huntington. But the political benefit fell to Reagan, who came to power with vague ideas about strategy and strong commitments to domestic military-industrial constituencies. According to Reagan economist William Niskanen, the defense budget became "little more than a stapled package of the budget requests from each service."[22] Even the official history published by the Office of the Secretary of Defense struggles to muster a case for the rearmament: "Was it a necessary and proper reaction to the Soviet threat? Or was it merely to satisfy the interests of the military-industrial complex? Or was it a little of both?"[23]

Even less plausible than the rewarmed Cold War was the idea that Japan posed a threat to US national security. One prompt for Huntington's essay was historian Paul Kennedy's surprise best-seller, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, which argued that the US had fallen into a familiar pattern of fiscally ruinous imperial overstretch. The real winner would be Japan, whose freedom from defense burdens allowed the country to conquer one civilian market after another.

It is worth recalling the extent and irrationality of the Japan panic. It was ludicrous to suggest that Japan—a disarmed dependent—presented a security risk to anyone in the United States. (This didn't stop Silicon Valley captains like Intel's Robert Noyce from warning that, "They are out to slit our throats."[24]) Strained attempts to redescribe Japan as a Soviet enclave only underlined their own incongruity. In the early 1980s, Toshiba sold eight numerical control tools to the USSR, knowingly evading US-led export controls. Apparently, the cutting-edge milling machines could be used to make screws for submarine propellers. Surely, the Pentagon charged, it was no accident that the Soviet navy just made an unexpected breakthrough in the "quietness" of their nuclear submarines.[25] Soon, of course, the Soviet Union no longer existed.

Still, at the end of the 1980s, Huntington concluded that the declinist panic was necessary to get Americans to address the real but remediable challenges they did face. The problem was butter, not guns: "Consumerism not militarism is the threat to American strength."[26] It was true that the consumption share of GDP skyrocketed in the 1980s (though Huntington failed to note that this overconsumption was highly concentrated in the affluent classes). Here, Japan did seem to have the advantage, with consumption representing just 67 percent of GDP, compared to 78 percent in the US. It was always hard to persuade people that they were living too well—which was why a little crisis might be just what the doctor ordered.

From "crisis" to crisis (1988–2016)

Huntington's anatomy of declinism was passed like an heirloom from one generation's best and brightest to the next. Until relatively recently, US elites turned to Huntington as a source of reassurance. In 2014, former Obama National Security Advisor Tom Donilon observed that recurring declinism was "in our DNA, and it helps drive our renewal." He quoted Huntington's *Foreign Affairs* article directly: "The United States is unlikely to decline so long as its public is periodically convinced that it is about to decline." Any real challenge—the weak recovery from 2008, the Tea Party, Piketty, China—could be handled by homeopathic doses of crisis rhetoric.[27]

But just over two years later, Hillary Clinton lost the 2016 Presidential election to Donald Trump, and the limited purchase of this view of American resilience became a generational problem for elite politics. The shock was extreme. Coupled with the surprise primary challenge of Bernie Sanders, the Trump victory was understood as a legitimacy crisis for liberal capitalism and, in particular, its globalized variant. Jake Sullivan, the hawkish Clinton protege assigned to dive into the wreckage, concluded that Trump's victory "reflected the exhaustion of a post-Cold War economic model," as if there were no warning signs.[28]

As we puzzle out the political meaning of declinist discourse, it is worth picking up from where Huntington left off, to remind ourselves of the dramatic transformations of the US economy that preceded this latest wave of declinism. What was happening in the 1980s, when Huntington could so easily dispatch with fears of economic feebleness? On the one side, Japanese dynamism evaporated, so there appeared to be no real threat to US economic dominance. Beyond the weakness of competitors, relatively strong growth in the US gave weight to claims of industrial revival. According to the historian Robert Brenner, after 1986 "the US manufacturing sector, and thereby the US private economy as a whole, achieved a striking recovery of profitability and ultimately, vitality." By the late 1990s, US fixed business investment exceeded the peaks of the pre-Reagan "golden age."[29] Alongside all the decade's froth and fraud, old-school indicators like business investment provided a real basis for the boom.

Meanwhile, the American industrial base had been radically and relatively successfully renovated. No one denied that the deindustrialization of the 1980s had been disruptive. According to Brookings, sudden job losses in this period "far outstripp[ed] any other job losses in recent US history." But they had been highly concentrated, with the vast majority of the employment effects located in two industries (steel and auto) and a few dozen counties (out of 3,000 total in the US).[30]

The smokestack industries never fully recovered, but impressionistic versions of the deindustrialization story can obscure the extent of restructuring which did occur after the Reagan-era nadir. Over the course of the 1990s, US auto employment increased by almost 300,000. These new jobs did not appear in the same places as before—nor did they offer the same security to workers, or become organized into powerful trade unions. But from the perspective of someone managing American capitalism, or someone who owned shares in the Big Three automakers, this was hardly a sign of failure. Similar stories of profit-driven rationalization and partial recovery can be told about steel and machinery sectors after 1982. The generational impacts of this dislocation—and its place in the history of declinist discourse—would not become legible in elite politics until 2016.

More decisive than the restructuring of heritage industries was the US dominance of high-tech manufacturing. In their indispensable book, *The Making of Global Capitalism,* Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin point out that in the late 1990s, “35 percent of global high-tech production took place within the US.”[31] Japan and Germany, the supposed beneficiaries of enlightened industrial policy, claimed 21 percent and 6 percent respectively (the European Union as a whole commanded 24 percent). A decade after Reagan’s terminal Cold War binge, “the US accounted for 77 percent of the world’s aerospace sales, 75 percent of all sales of computers and office equipment, 91 percent of computer software sales, and 62 percent of pharmaceuticals.”[32]

Between the flaws in the declinist case (as represented by Huntington), and the evident prosperity of the Clinton era, it was not difficult for anti-declinists to conquer the field. In 1998—unlike in 1988, 1978, 1968, 1958, or 1948—there was no apparent domestic politics of crisis. The winds of unipolarity were so strong that coherent arguments for primacy were barely needed at all. Stepping into the breach, some elite discourse shifted from complacent to hallucinatory, particularly among economists. “This expansion will run forever,” said MIT’s Rudi Dornbusch.[33] Paul Krugman declared that good economists could disagree on questions like whether “the demand side matters.”[34] Janet Yellen and Alan Blinder speculated about a future without public debt.[35]

While elite rhetoric had become startlingly free of crisis-mongering, signs of real economic stress were gathering. Even before 2008, productivity statistics made clear that the 1990s had been an anomaly, rather than a new and fabulous normal. The productivity slowdown had delivered, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, “a swift rebuke of the popular idea . . . that we had entered a new era.”[36] On the manufacturing front, stagnation was now evident not just in employment but in output as well. Between 1975 and 2000, the index of industrial production in manufacturing more than doubled. Between 2000 and 2025, it declined slightly.[37] In the high-tech sectors, investment overhang led to weak investment and cost-cutting.

The first two-and-a-half decades of the twenty-first century have not been kind to the optimistic dreams of the 1990s. Neoliberal Democrats’ claims to have revived US industry have been proven hollow. By 2018, Jake Sullivan found it fitting to say that defense production "amounts to the United States' only national industrial base."[38] Pathologies rooted in shareholder demands led to crises within the firms which had sustained US dominance. General Electric, a legal entity established in 1892, ceased to exist in 2024. By that year, Adam Tooze could refer uncontroversially to "the fact that Boeing can no longer make safe airplanes, or that Intel can no longer make high-end chips," and ask: "If you're in the business of high-end manufacturing, why would you be in the United States?"[39]

From the Huntingtonian perspective, increasing evidence of American decline raises an important question. The foundations of the revivalist logic of declinism have fundamentally shifted. Huntington's self-renewing dynamic was conditional on "the openness of [US] politics and the competitiveness of its economy." Both these pillars are now in doubt. If the rhetoric of "crisis" is now giving way to true political and economic crisis, the relationship Huntington drew between the discourse of decline and the reality of American renewal may no longer be stable. With the sum of decades of economic dislocation piled up in clear view, and cascading crises foreign and domestic emanating from Washington, can the declinist noble lie achieve its stabilizing effect?

A century of shame and danger?

The answer to this question depends on how one defines success. Even unchecked deterioration of the US might be compatible with the persistence of the US as the strongest pole in a multipolar world.

China's accomplishments in the realm of production will not produce hegemony unless the Chinese Communist Party develops a globally appealing ideology and addresses the dramatic contradictions within Chinese society itself. In the 1920s, the US produced 85 percent of the world's automobiles, but it took the Great Depression, the New Deal, and another world war before the economic powerhouse could integrate its own working class and create a new world order. The same principles apply to the military dimension: humiliations in the Persian Gulf demonstrate that the US is not omnipotent, but as long as other countries remain militarily weaker than the US-NATO-Israel-OAS complex, there is no reason that the US cannot enjoy dominance without omnipotence.

Whether or not the US remains dominant in some sense, its hegemonic claims are growing suspect. The hackneyed application of crisis politics, whatever its effectiveness at the polls or within the bureaucracy, is simply not capable of restoring the pre-2016 or pre-2000 state of affairs. That sun set along with Joe Biden. But even more, the political tools of declinism will accelerate the erosion of those political and economic pillars that Huntington identified as key to American renewal. This is inarguable when it comes to the question of political openness: the post-2020 national security turn will forever be synonymous with the bipartisan repression of US residents, from Hamilton Hall to the Twin Cities to CECOT in El Salvador. And it is just as true in the economic realm, where the new and ferociously bipartisan argot of national security-centered economic policy has produced a decade of adventurist protectionism—right through to Liberation Day.

The present kaleidoscope of declinist discourse reflects the cumulative wreckage of US domestic class war, imperial destruction, and competition with China into a staggering array of diagnosis and prescription. With America First intellectuals in the New York Times now advocating for managed decline,[40] bipartisan echoes of Scoop Jackson's "Week of Shame and Danger" abound. But today's declinists appear less likely than ever to be matched by a new dispensation of renewal. And in an age of tectonic global upheaval, triangulating the crisis won't work. The last few years in American politics are evidence that it only makes it worse.

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