## Pre-Emptive Decline

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### Abstract

*Why do hegemonic powers appear to have so few viable policy levers with which to cope with their fears of decline, and often adopt policies that are least well-suited, if not antithetical to the task? In this work I suggest that status threat generates a set of typical and quite maladaptive responses at both the individual/organizational level, and in the context of popular political culture, that exacerbate decline. This phenomenon, "pre-emptive decline," is evident in both elite-driven policy and mass political responses and is reviewed here in maladaptive courses of action adopted in 19th century Britain, and in the contemporary United States.*

**Keywords:** Decline, Fear, Great Powers, Hegemony, Rivalry

The decline of U.S. hegemony signals a change in the nature of relations in the modern world-system. States at the apex of productive, commercial, and financial efficiency may turn the resulting resources into politico-military power such that they can unilaterally dictate the rules of the global system. The rules are generally designed to facilitate transmission of resources toward

the core. Great power mobilization and war declines, and violence in the system is often described as "low intensity" or "anti-systemic." Barriers to trade and finance are reduced through the imposition of rules that allow central actors to benefit, albeit unequally. Decline emerges as a result of some mix of waning internal advantages, coalescing external opposition, and alterations in conducive global environments. But the ferocity of the decline raises questions. What helps us understand the inability of the greatest powers to recognize, analyze, and learn to cope with such deterioration? Why do we not see the safeguarding of key resources or the adoption of policies to soften the impact?

This work suggests that social units whose leaders and populations fear decline tend to adopt policies that exacerbate their situations and hasten their deterioration. Decline becomes self-fulfilling and emerges earlier than it might have otherwise. Hence the label "pre-emptive."

The argument of this paper, drawn from literatures in psychology, sociology, history, and politics, is that perceptions of decline generate fear and a drive to recapture dominance, particularly in those with high self-esteem. Such fear generates in-group solidarity and an overemphasis on positive group traits and abilities. These lead to over-commitment to initial (and often poorly functioning) strategies, even when alternatives are available. Increased defensiveness, poor preparation, and ill-conceived bargaining strategies follow. So too does a reduction of norms against the use of violence. This increases chances for all manner of conflict. Finally, self-censoring, constriction of control, and a tendency to revert to over-learned (traditional) behaviors lead a drive toward the search for foundation myths. This "reversion to tradition" features stories about the allegedly exceptional characteristics that facilitated the rise of a nation in the first place. Policy directions derived from such myths are unlikely to be helpful in the face of contemporary challenges and are rendered even less useful by the fact that their reinterpretation in periods when there is fear of decline is likely to overemphasize the utility of force. Evidence suggests that this process was at work in (formerly hegemonic) Britain as early as the 1850s, as illustrated by educational policies, and is currently operant in the United States.

Pre-Emptive Decline is not meant to compete with or replace existing theories of hegemonic deterioration. It is a precursor phenomenon, generating a fear-based response that renders decline more likely, regardless of other generative processes. If not universal, this phenomenon is certainly widespread among the greatest powers throughout history, though it is easier to fully trace among modern polities. In the first short section of this work, I will identify some of the historical evidence of such a process, then turn briefly to theories of hegemonic decline, ending with the recent effort of Richard Lachmann who identifies a different reason for the types of policy failures identified here. Like the more structural theories we will review, Lachmann's excellent work still begs an explanation of the perceptual changes that drive policy paralysis and exacerbate the processes of hegemonic decline.

## Historical Examples and Theoretical Efforts

The lack of ability to act effectively when fear of decline emerges is an oft noted but little considered chapter in various great power histories. Edward Gibbon ([1781] 1994: 731) comments on efforts in the late Roman Empire under Justinian to enlarge the empire when its ancient boundaries were already impossible to maintain. He concludes "the wars, the conquests, and the triumphs…are the feeble and pernicious efforts of old age, which exhaust the remains of strength, and accelerate the decay of the powers of life." The literature on Byzantine decline features an argument about the failure of economic structural adaptation, and an argument about weak leadership. One element of that weak leadership was a tendency to hold to traditions and maintain policy continuity even as the empire grew weaker (Kazhdan and Cutler 1982; Anderson 1974). Thomson (1998: 88) concludes "the impact of imperial power became negative, the state reverting or slowing down the adjustments which were necessary to enable Byzantine society to cope."

Similar arguments are found regarding Venice. After a long discussion, Braudel (1984: 132) concludes that "leadership of a world-economy is an experience of power that may one day blind the victor to the march of history." Though fidelity to a set of increasingly maladaptive internal policies is noted, the real issue is a terribly uncharacteristic over-extension of Venetian military activity (Toynbee 1934-1961, v.4: 278).

Analogous process emerged in Holland. By 1655, after about 65 years of European economic dominance, the Dutch were sponsoring extensive patriotic parades, commissioning special medallions, and undertaking monumental public architecture, largely in response to insecurities about their global position (Cottrell 1972). Taylor (1996: 168-170, emphasis added) concludes that "it is only when the exalted position is *perceived* as being under threat that it has to be so brazenly broadcast to the world." In 1672 the Dutch won a war with France, and the subsequent celebrations were incommensurate with the victory, (as in the case of U.S. festivities following the invasion of Grenada or the first war against Iraq that lasted longer than the hostilities themselves) (Taylor 1996: 171-173). Taylor labels such conflicts "bad wars" not because they were lost, but because they signal decline given the uncharacteristic effort it took to win, or their overblown victory celebrations.

There are numerous arguments in the general literature about the dynamics of the decline of hegemonic powers, especially from within the world-systems perspective and related understandings. Braudel ([1949] 1976) offers an early model of great power decline when he compares the impact of resource depletion, the transition to a rentier state, and the rise of contenders, in Italy and Iberia.

For Wallerstein (1983), hegemony emerges from systemic advantages in production, commerce, and finance, and is solidified by systemic war and new rules. New rules are usually liberal and there is a tendency for the free flow of factors of production to undercut economic and political advantages. In Wallerstein's 2003 discussion of the decline of American power he identifies a toxic cocktail of coalescing internal and external challenges: the limits of military power are reached, growing anti-Americanism is noted, relative economic decline sets in, as does a reduction in civil liberties, and the negative impact of maladaptive nationalism emerge.

Hegemons decline as none of the traditional mechanisms for restoring order are capable of dealing with such a conjunction.

Giovanni Arrighi's formulation of hegemonic decline begins with the contradictory interaction of the two key elements of hegemony: power resources and ideational leadership. Hegemonic systems expand, but as divisions of labor, specialization, and emulation of the hegemon increase, the extent and form of interaction eclipse the capacity of regulatory institutions to assure stability. Competition increases among states and enterprises, social conflicts increase, and novel power configurations emerge (Arrighi and Silver 1999: 28-31). This is true not just in the west but between western and non-western civilizations as well (Arrighi 1994; 2007). The outcome of this complex structural process is impossible to predict, though the deep and widespread crisis in the current era suggests a systemic or epochal level crisis as opposed to an adjustment (Arrighi and Silver 1999: 21).

In earlier and related work, Modelski and Thompson (1996) offer a complex model of the rise and decline of leading powers based on the development of lead economic sectors that bring great wealth and global leadership in their wake. But there is eventual diffusion and exhaustion, systemic challenge, and global instability re-emerges.

In a more recent work, Peter Turchin (2016) adopts his Structural-Demographic Theory to the history of the United States. He divides society into laboring classes, who undercut their own position when times are good by increasing their numbers and therefore reducing their wages, and elite classes, who enrich themselves on both the upswing and downswing; but in the latter are prone to overproduction and therefore increasingly bloodthirsty competition. The results are a complex set of dynamic elements, including worker immiseration, elite polarization, and often state bankruptcy. U.S. society destabilizes and is plunged into an "age of discord" that signals hegemonic decline.

These structural and empirical explanations offer an array of fascinating and legitimate analyses of decline, but hegemonic power itself remains difficult to track given its perceptual foundations. Hegemonic states act the way they do given both their resources and the recognition their leaders have regarding what such resources can accomplish if appropriately managed. As such, advantages are rapidly recognized and put to work. But periods of hegemony are best recognized in retrospect. Even at its height policy makers feel themselves beset with numerous challenges and often fear that resources will be insufficient. Opponents may suffer from somewhat similar uncertainties as they rise to challenge a hegemonic power on local or global grounds.

This work asks about what happens when leaders and populations of hegemonic states generally fear that the internal and external challenges are too great, and their status is in real peril. Such fear can be debilitating, leading to selective retrenchment, or to a variety of maladaptive responses that can confound matters further. The latter is more likely and more dangerous. Actions that might ameliorate shortcomings are often overlooked in favor of policy decisions that exacerbate the situation. The structural analyses of world-systems are less able to apprehend such processes. One recent attempt by Richard Lachmann makes an attempt to do so.

Lachmann (2020) takes up historian Robert Brenner's argument that if similar structural conditions generate different local outcomes, the local structure must be the deciding variable. Variations in the length and form of modern hegemonic states should signal a move to study local structures. He also adopts Arrighi's arguments on the global context in which domestic class interactions are located and must be understood. Lachmann argues that the same phenomena that lead to the rise of hegemony must lead to its demise when they disappear, which is likely to be the result of the unique stresses that hegemony itself creates. Modern European hegemons all grew from empires (formal or informal) and emerge as a result of four additional conditions. The first is the existence of an elite class that is competitive and therefore not unitary; the second is the existence of agreements and compromises among elite class factions that minimize domestic conflict; the third is the lack of autonomy of colonial elites such that the metropole could set extractive policies without undue difficulty; and the last is that colonial elites fail to attain the ability to increase inter-elite conflict in the metropole. All four of these attributes had to be present for an empire to become a hegemon. Any deviation would stop an empire from doing so.

Lachmann sees hegemonic decline as the loss of any of these 4 attributes and seeks to trace the manner in which hegemony created wealth or tensions that fostered such changes in the Netherlands, the UK and the United States. The volume is particularly rich in its analysis of how internal class factions and related colonial pressures undercut various element of hegemonic power. To his credit, he notes where key elements of his analysis of decline are missing, as in the UK example (Lachmann 2020). Acknowledged, but less well noted are the separate global-level changes in technology, organization, or competition that might generate decline as well, as they are not the focus of the volume (Lachmann 2020). And the move from agriculture and industry to finance seems to be both based upon and blamed for the lack of resources devoted to the former as a result of financialization, setting up a problematic chronology.

From the perspective of preemptive decline, this work is especially interesting as it asserts that class factionalization built on sophisticated global and domestic changes may explain the inability to pursue policies necessary to salvage power resources or pursue necessary reforms. When Lachmann (2020: 287) suggests, however, that "political actors are motivated by ideas and interests, but political accomplishments arrive at particular moments because opponents have been weakened, alliances strengthened, and structural impediments cleared away" we should wonder what role perceptions of change and instability play in the process. Political and economic actors are unlikely to wait for concrete indicators of decline and rely instead on their perception that these alterations are in process. Key general attributes, like the move of business leadership away from liberal policies, or the decline of the government's ability to maintain popularity while acting progressively, seem as vulnerable to perception (and misperception) as concrete alterations in elite interests. This is especially true if early movements of these sorts emerge long before more objective measures of decline, as I trace in the UK. Likewise missing is an explanation for the similar elite and mass psychologies late in the hegemonic cycles of the Netherlands, the UK, and the United States when fear of decline appears to trigger inward-looking questions of national

identity, backward-looking policy preferences, and the veneration of (expensive and often unhelpful) violent solutions to contemporary problems.

## The Psychology of Pre-Emptive Decline

This work interrogates two categories of responses to "fear of decline." The first concerns individuals and their roles in organizations. Counter-productive responses to fear are well understood in individual and organizational psychology, and in parts of the foreign policy literature. The second set of challenges concern the process known as "reversion to tradition" in the face of crisis. This predisposition can emerge in leadership circles, but it may also be noted in popular culture. Relevant tradition is constituted in the midst of contention over which social myths are thought to have once led to dominance. The content of these beliefs is more cultural or mytho-historic in nature.

The result of these two responses is a form of overcompensation that leads to maladaptive policies that squander time and resources. Instead of dealing in a purposeful manner with either the anxiety regarding decline, or oncoming elements of decline itself, fear leads to responses that foster ever more self-defeating policy choices. Fear of decline becomes self-fulfilling.

## High Self-Esteem, Status Threats, and Poor Decisions

Fear of decline generates a desire to regain dominance, especially among individuals with high levels of self-esteem. Great power leaders and their upper echelon staffs have risen to the top of highly competitive national political processes that afford them extraordinary power. But individuals with high self-esteem are susceptible to behavioral miscalculations in situations when their status, or that of their organizations, comes under threat. They tend to become inappropriately optimistic, increase levels of persistence without altering their strategy, and when their behaviors do change, they tend toward self-defeating patterns of over-compensatory action.

Overly optimistic predictions regarding future performance are likely given three related individual-level tendencies. First, individuals who are members of a high-status group tend to view themselves as part of a coherent unit, and threats to the group are perceived as personal (Simon, Aufderheide, and Kampmeier 2001). Second, individuals possess a tendency to over-emphasize their positive traits. This remains a useful element of mental health providing the overestimation does not stray too far from genuine abilities (Taylor et al. 1989). For those with organizational power there is special danger. Constant flattery and special levels of support tend to move self-perception out of the realm of acceptable exaggeration. Baumeister (1989: 186) identifies a set of historical examples when exaggeration led to policy disaster and warns that "Initially…the expansion of the margin of illusion may generate excitement and attract additional supporters. But as the margin of illusion continues to expand, it renders the individual or group increasingly prone to make nonoptimal decisions…and these may contain the danger of self-destructive consequences." Psychological studies establish that among those with high self-esteem, this illusion persists even in the context of repeated failures (McFarlin and Blascovich 1981).

Not only do high self-esteem individuals predict success in the face challenges, but their predictions tend to be exaggerated relative to their best prior levels of performance. This may be caused in part by the tendency of high-status group members to enhance their levels of discrimination against opponents, whose abilities they often belittle (Turner and Reynolds 2001). Goleman (1989: 196) concludes "relying on those illusions creates a self-fulfilling prophecy…we do nothing that might make a difference for the better."

Increasingly poor decision-making by those with high self-esteem who face status threats emerges in three parts. First, there is a tendency to over-commit. Attempts to overcome an obstacle with repetitive and unsuccessful tactics persist, even in the context of trustworthy alternative advice (McFarlin, Baumesiter, and Blascovich 1984). Self-defeating behaviors include reduced preparation and the adoption of ill-designed bargaining strategies that increase the chance of failure (Baumesiter and Scher 1988; Tice 1991). In general, judgment declines as "people with high self-esteem tend to respond with extreme, irrational patterns to an ego threat" (Baumesiter, Heatherton, and Tice 1993: 156).


**Toward Violence**

Perceived threats to group status generate a desire for the re-imposition of dominance (Baumesiter et al. 1988). From the perspective of research on identity, negative feedback that is inconsistent with a given "standard of identity" may generate "more extreme versions of behavior associated with that identity" (Willer et al. 2013: 985). This is exacerbated by our natural evolutionary responses to threats, including a release of hormones that increase aggression, regardless of the utility of aggression in a particular situation (Archer 2006).

High status groups are protected by a multi-step tendency to enforce the highest possible level of unity even in instances where there exist serious concerns about the continued capacity of the group. In-group pressure leads to conformity, but since there is a desire to be viewed as more than a simple conformist, actors overcompensate to enhance their status as "true believers." This includes enforcing the norms of the group, trumpeting its power, value and dominance, and demanding that others do the same (Willer, Kuwabara, and Macy 2009).

There are additional mechanisms that help generate resentment, increase misunderstanding, and justify violence in the face of fear of decline. Status challenges engender defensiveness, even if actions taken by others are aimed at unrelated actors. Another source of tension emerges because high status and low status groups adopt very different preferences regarding how they should be treated, reducing the efficacy of diplomatic efforts (Dovidio et al. 2012). Since dominant groups deploy hierarchy-enhancing myths, the source of the threat may be blamed for acting in (what the myths identify as) an illegitimate manner (Cohrs 2012). Perceptions of these "illegitimate" actions serve as the initial release of ethical restraints on the use of violence. Once the process of delegitimation is in operation, every form of violence is facilitated—from attacks against individuals to genocide (Bar-Tal and Hammack 2012).

The findings of prospect theory are consistent with enhanced risk-taking when expected levels of success by high-status groups are not met (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). Applications of

prospect theory to international relations stress the greater tendency of risky behavior in the context of potential losses, rather than in search of gains. Taliaferro (2004) applies the insights of prospect theory to global politics and finds increasing levels of coercive diplomacy and a greater tendency toward the use of expensive military intervention in the affected contexts.

The maladaptive tendencies related to status threats are not unique to individuals with high self-esteem. A number of literatures identify similar processes in mass political culture. Responding to status threat with maladaptive political choices and violence is well known in ethnic conflict studies. Horowitz (1985) ties the drive to protect group status to an increase in prejudice that legitimizes violence, all as a prelude to outbreaks of ethnic conflict. The use of traditional symbols to generate hatred is illustrated by Kapferer (1988), and its broader application, especially in generating new "traditional hatreds," is traced in a pair of important volumes by Kaufman (2001; 2015).

Threats to the status of a group are internalized by group members, often as a result of the actions of leaders bent of fostering ethnic violence. These leaders seek to restrict the focus of group identity to ethnicity, concentrate social and economic competition around that ethnic identity, and manipulate myths and symbols to generate hatred and legitimize violence (Gagnon 1994-1995). Ethnic myths and symbols are particularly vulnerable to this form of manipulation given the psychological dynamics of identity and threat perception (Kaufman 2015). A similar conclusion may be reached in the case of national, as opposed to ethnic formulations, though the relationship between national status and individual responses is not as straightforward (Spinner-Halev and Theiss-Morse 2003).

Taken together, group status threats are personalized, increase in-group cohesion, facilitate discrimination, drive delegitimation, maladaptive decision-making, poorly calculated risk-taking, and a propensity to violence.

**Increasingly Traditional Responses**

In an early work titled *Victims of Groupthink*, Irving Janis (1972) outlines the organizational pathologies that emerge in times of crisis. Particularly problematic responses include self-censorship of unwelcome facts and enhanced centralization of decision-making. Staw, Sandelands, and Dutton (1981) argue that the result of these processes will be policy rigidity. Several studies from the 1950s and 1960s (reviewed in Staw et al. 1981) link stress with restricted attention, anxiety, and arousal, which together act to narrow perception, reduce flexibility, and generate well-learned and very traditional responses. Staw et al. (1981: 502) argue that threat rigidity generates increased cohesiveness, constriction of control, and increased expectations of uniformity: "thus, maladaptive cycles are predicted to follow from threats which encompass major environmental changes since prior, well-learned responses are inappropriate under new conditions."

There is also support for both the "information restriction" and "control monopolization" elements of the threat-rigidity argument. Gladstein and Reilly (1985) find major restrictions in information processing in the context of increasing threats to a group. Less information is accepted, shared, processed, or used. Groups of talented individuals with long histories of successful

problem-solving may be just as vulnerable as new and untested units (Gladstein and Reilly 1985). Boulding (1975) argues that threats of decline can cause us to turn away from cooperative interactions just as they become most potentially useful.

The restriction of control is a key symptom. Centralization emerges as a robust outcome in empirical studies on the impact of institutional decline (Cameron, Whetten, and Kim 1987). Ocasio (1993), in studying economic downturns, notes that if power is highly institutionalized, economic adversity will lead to greater entrenchment and a decrease in the rate of executive succession. Authority becomes more concentrated and entrenched. Hierarchy becomes more pronounced.

Loss of flexibility is considered by Plotnick, Turoff, and Van Den Eede (2009) and Muurlink et al. (2012: S74-S76). When stress generates responses in terms of "over-learned behaviours" the "rigidity is a non-adaptive response to threat, and can lead to a recursive increase in threat or stress." Threat leads to rigidity, rigidity leads to the use of traditional responses that are unsuccessful, the lack of success leads to more perceptions of threat, in a recursive dynamic of self-reinforcing failure.

Whatever the hypothesized genesis of the reversion to tradition under stress, several studies have confirmed the relationship. The work of Shaham, Singer, and Schaeffer (1992), as well as Klein (1996), establish the tendency of individuals to adopt well-worn responses when subjected to stress. Schwabe and Wolf (2009) review the history of research on stress and reversion to tradition that has evolved in the fields of brain chemistry and neuroscience. The condition is well-enough understood to be treated with medications. Prescriptions are available for musicians who suffer from the fear that they cannot avoid repeating the same errors (stage fright). The neuro-chemical foundations of the tendency to revert to tradition when under stress are made clear by Hermans et al. (2011), in a physiological study that mapped the relevant human neural networks.

George et al. (2006) suggest that group threats generate the need to reestablish control over conditions, and such control may be perceived if the threatened group behaves as expected in given circumstances. This is true whether those behaviors are productive or not. In corporations, such behaviors "kept their key constituencies at bay through conforming to normative expectations" or even simply by "mimicking the organizing templates…that are viewed as legitimate" (George et al. 2006: 355)  In one of the most interesting studies, Ocasio (1993: 33) suggests with regard to economic crisis that "adversity increases reliance on core cultural assumptions, values, and beliefs, as interpreted by participants in organizational decision-making, increases the rate of adoption of solutions that are consistent with the core cultural assumptions and decreases the rate of assumptions of other forms of organizational change," and concludes that "the narrowing of attention and reliance on cultural assumptions and beliefs is likely to continue as long as economic adversity prevails" (Ocasio 1993: 43). Form and not function is what matters.

## Maladaptive Tradition

A second problematic element building upon reversion to tradition is more generally cultural, manifests as mass political behavior, and functions through the manipulation of social myths and identity. Social myths are "emotionally charged beliefs that reflect the way in which people

experience formative periods in their history" (Girling 1993: 2). They are the "deep stories" with which people organize their understanding of the "specific emphases and moral highlights" of their own past (Doty 2004: 13). They serve as "rallying signs," especially in periods of stress (Girling 1993: 11). These ideas require no further legitimation. Social myths are especially relevant in the political realm as they form the safest and most popular anchors to which political personalities and platforms can tie themselves.

The creation and interpretation of myths varies over time for three reasons. First, myths are symbolic representations that may contain inaccuracies, but the stories told and the emotions they elicit are not products of rational modes of thinking. Their meanings are immune to logical argument and may be molded to conform to whatever vision the purveyors of newly strengthened emotions point to. Second, their meanings are contested, and they can be played off against one another. For example, the veneration of individualism may be deployed to justify leaving others alone, or excuse intervening in their affairs. The result is a constant rebalancing of their meanings. Finally, myths adapt to social change. The humility and frugality of members of the Protestant sects that fled Britain for the American colonies were wholly consistent with the democratic freedoms that allowed dissenters to flourish. Over time, the economic growth sometimes credited to the Protestant Ethic allowed those with vast wealth to undercut democracy until it is today "a shadow of its former self" (Girling 1993: 5). Myths also overlap and condition one another. If the social unit is large enough, differences may appear regionally (Langman and Lundskow 2016). Inconsistency is not a problem as myths elicit emotions, and emotion is a human response that emerges prior to, and may cancel, rationality (Kaufman 2015).

The traditions and interpretations that are most likely to be favored in times of crisis are those that promise the quickest and most assured reassertion of control. Traditions or norms that enhance longer-term competitive abilities or leverage cooperative interactions are less likely to be embraced. This is true even if the longer-term policies are clearly superior strategies and the more immediate proposals are illogical or obviously fallacious. The tendency for social frustration to be translated into cultural tendencies is discussed in both peripheral and core societies (Fanon 1979; Bergesen 2006). In the former, frustration may lead to hyper-violence within the community. In the latter, Don Quixote, James Bond, and John Rambo emerge as important fictional characters that carry vast audiences into violence-filled parodies of pre-decline capabilities.

Fear of decline thus leads to a desire to regain dominance that includes overly optimistic estimates of capacity built around exaggerated perceptions of positive group abilities and in-group coherence. There is an over-commitment to initial strategies and reduced or cursory preparatory measures. Weakening of normative restraints against violence, enhanced defensiveness, and poor bargaining strategies increase the tendency toward conflict. We also see reversion to traditional responses via constriction of control, use of over-learned behaviors, and self-censoring.

The following sections offer two examples of political processes that illustrate pre-emptive decline. The first concerns the surprising decision to downplay scientific and technical education reforms in Britain in the 1860s even though such reforms were understood to be vital for continued global economic and political leadership, and had significant logical, popular, and official support.

The second concerns the welcome accorded to an electoral platform promising a return to greatness for the United States.

### Pre-Emptive Decline, Education, and Competitiveness in 19th Century Britain

The impact of pre-emptive decline is reflected in decisions on education in Britain beginning in the 1850s. The characteristic backward-looking orientation, short term perspective, and tendency toward more aggressive behaviors are all manifest; and help explain why a curriculum that was oriented toward continued economic productivity via scientific and technical advantage was proposed, popular, officially supported, and even legally mandated but was in the end ignored in favor of a regressive and conflict prone alternative. Traditional indicators and dates for the decline of British hegemony did not follow until shortly thereafter.

### A Recipe for Concern

Starting in the 1850s, the British began to perceive challenges to their way of life and global status. Though no appreciable decline had taken place, heretofore secure bastions of social and economic stability began to emanate subtle signs of change. The official position of the Anglican Church had long afforded it a significant role in the life of town and country. By 1851, however, the population identifying with official doctrine fell below 50%. The growing urban working class was especially indifferent, and the census of 1851 "revealed an alarming number of people who practiced no religion" (Bedarida 1990: 90-92). Personal Christian doctrines did not disappear among the majority, but the official church with its role in education and social control appeared to be weakening (Kumar 2003).

Liberalism and industrialization were also losing their luster. Inequality spiraled (Bedarida 1990). The repealing of the protectionist Corn Laws in 1846 signaled a move away from the political dominance of landowners, but also undercut the conditions of about one million agricultural laborers. Many fled to ill-prepared urban areas (Hobsbawm 1968). Liberal orthodoxy came under political pressure as widespread poverty and social instability were blamed "above all [on] the malfunctioning of an industrial system" (Bedarida 1990: 107).

Britain's place in the world also showed subtle signs of strain. In 1850 Britain had no serious great power competition, but officials feared the rise of major competitors in the coming decades (Rubinstein 1990). Most of the focus was on Germany's rapid and well-organized rise (Saffin 1973). Prominent educators, such as Matthew Arnold (quoted in Wiener 1981: 35), were among those who warned the populace "that the preservation of their position in the world demanded the cultivation of intelligence."

British science and technology had been showcased proudly at the Exhibition of 1851. Public attention was drawn to the link between science and industry (Saffin 1973). Only eleven years later the relative position of British technology at the Exhibition of 1862 suggested impending encroachment. This image was reinforced with high-profile coverage of the Exhibitions of 1867 and 1870 (Pollard 1989; Sanderson 1995; Sanderson 1999).

Several scholars argue that concerns over decline emerge as early as the 1850s, well before the economic downturn of the 1870s, or the threats of contending great powers in the 1880s and 1890s (Briggs 1987; Newsome 1961; Pollard 1989; Rubinstein 1990; Sanderson 1995; 1999; Silver 1983). The *idea* of decline proved to be very powerful and was reinforced every time some weakness was perceived. Such perceptions were quick to be adopted in popular literature and as a topic for academic debate. More critically, perceptions of decline were adopted as political issues. The shrill tones of the political parties magnified concerns (Tomlinson 2009).

There then emerges a search for "What went wrong?" and "Who is to blame?" that engages all manner of interest groups. Solutions are offered to badly mis-specified problems or long-extinguished challenges. As Taylor (1996: 158) concludes, in seeking to restore "the glories of the past, chances of a better future are eroded." Much of this is illustrated in policymaking on education.

## Criticisms of Education

Scholars of various perspectives have seen fit to lay Britain's economic woes at the schoolhouse door. Education has often been viewed as crucial to long-term development (Sanderson 1995). No less than Adam Smith argued that a publicly provided education would be necessary to help deal with the dislocations of marketization and urbanization (Dobbs 1919). Smith was not heeded. Education remained a private matter. Literacy declined in the early industrial cities (Sanderson 1995). Misery increased.

Several specific criticisms of the British educational system emerged with regard to its support of economic and social goals in mid-century. The first concerned the lack of science and technology in the curriculum. This criticism is often joined by the related argument that useful subjects like English, French, mathematics, and history, were similarly ignored (Saffin 1973). Science and technology remained outside the curriculum even though 1.) industrialization had captured the attention of the whole of society; 2.) trade advantages rested upon advances in science; 3.) defense of the empire was more and more driven by technology; and 4.) the growing middle class wanted to educate their sons in subjects that were more relevant than the classics. Inertia played a role. Education was often private or religious, and designed to nurture aristocrats and good Christians. No expensive laboratories, new books, or scarce science teachers had to be acquired.

On the other side of the equation, social groups of all ideological stripes lamented the lack of educational opportunities in modern subjects. The industrial products and processes of the pervious century required little in the way of formal learning, and this instilled the unfortunate idea that such training was therefore unnecessary (Pollard 1989). But the leading sectors of the period after 1830 (electro-magnetism and organic chemistry) required more systematic education and research (Hobsbawm 1968).

In various debates over economic decline, neo-classical liberals like McCloskey (1970) argued that it made no sense to devote public resources to increasing education in science and technology. Wages for those with science and technology backgrounds were neither high nor

rising. There was no change in the social status of those with such skills. Science was slow to gain acceptance at the university level for lack of demand by students or donations from possible future employers. Only certain industries were among the forces lobbying for more science and technology in the schools. McCloskey (1970) concludes that British entrepreneurs did not adopt the latest technology given their accurate assessment of demand conditions relative to costs.

Contemporary analysis is not generous to McCloskey's position. Use of the term "entrepreneur" in her work is a misnomer. "Management" is the term that should be used to define those who seek an optimal match between existing resources, markets, and output, while an entrepreneur re-makes that environment, "bursting out of organizational constraints" (Payne 1990: 43, see also 29). Rubinstein (1990) is concerned that while management was sound, the quality of entrepreneurship had declined. Innovation and increased productivity were rare (Payne 1990; Pollard 1989; Robbins 1990). Payne (1990: 29) sees little if any innovation of an entrepreneurial nature in this period and concludes that management "was unaware of their own inadequacies and unconscious of the poverty of information upon which they based their decisions." Their concerns started and stopped with controlling major costs like wages, while supplying existing markets. Pollard (1989) argues that business failed to recognize their need for science and suffered as a result.

A closely related criticism of the educational system was its alleged bias against industry and innovation. Upper middle-class industrialists and professionals sent their sons to school for both educational and social purposes, and Wiener (1981) argues that the result was gentrification. Taylor (1996: 163) echoes Toynbee in suggesting that "It is not so much the resulting lack of a science-trained labour force that is important, but the way elite education imbued the whole social fabric with anti-industrial values." Daunton (1989: 120-121) concludes: "A conception of 'Englishness' emerged which virtually excluded industrialism, and bourgeois culture was 'gentrified', leading to a dampening of economic endeavor as businessmen shunned industrial entrepreneurship for the more socially acceptable role of a gentleman." Making money was acceptable, if not flaunted or acquired by getting one's hands dirty, and especially if it was accomplished at arm's length. A career in finance might be thought of as the model of "gentlemanly" capitalism (Daunton 1989). Wiener makes much of the tendency of industrial elites to both send their sons to the great universities and turn themselves into country gentlemen by purchasing rural estates. The result, he argues, was that "Industry after industry exhibited the pattern of gentrification accompanied by changes in strategy and structure that hampered future growth" (Wiener 1981: 145-146). Gentlemanly pursuits, rural estates, or the financial sector siphoned talent and attention from industry.

Such criticisms are not uncontested. Where Wiener lamented the premature retirement of founders, and the flight of the second generation, Rubinstein (1990) shows that children did not flee their father's businesses, nor did profits decline. Sanderson (1999) notes an increase in nepotism. The belief in science and technology, part of a broader faith in progress, remained at the center of late Victorian middle-class values (Kumar 2003). State funding for science increased by 18 times between 1839 and 1859 (Pollard 1989). This suggests the slow erosion of tradition and

growing support for change at the highest social and political levels. Tendencies toward inertia appeared weakened.

## The Educational Environment

Calls for educational reform did not appear in a vacuum. Broad social experimentation emerged, including Adam Smith's call for education as a palliative to the ills of urbanization, the growing middle-class demand for education, the rise of itinerate lecturers on the sciences and mathematics, the hope that schools might deter crime, the proliferation of private academies, various experiments with night schools, trade schools, factory schools, and Sunday schools, and the decline of religious leadership on education.

In the more established and traditional public school sector, the reforms of the 1840s and 1850s pioneered by Thomas Arnold were most important. Arnold became headmaster of Rugby and was the most prominent of the Benson Circle of reformers (Newsome 1961). The residential academies of Arnold's time taught classics and generally allowed students autonomy in their non-class hours, leading to a virtual law of the jungle (Newsome 1961). The results, made famous in novels of the period, included vicious competition among students for everything from spare funds to sexual favors. Tensions between students and staff did not fall much short of physical violence. The overall environment was dominated by a sense of mob rule. Arnold introduced more structured activities during non-class hours, formal leadership positions for the oldest class, and modern subjects like history, mathematics, and contemporary languages. This educational paradigm went by the name of "Godliness and Good Learning" and was expected to turn students away from the feral behavior of past eras and into more capable citizens and leaders. This was in line with the highest principles of the Victorian era in its attempt to cultivate gentlemen (Daunton 1998).

Nonetheless, these reforms fell short of middle-class expectations. Arnold opposed the introduction of science into the curriculum, ostensibly on the grounds that there was insufficient time. He argued that since science could not be taught properly, it should not be offered at all (Strachey 1918). Arnold was also famously opposed to the materialism of his age, and his well-known concerns with the degrading aspects of modernity might have extended to science as well (Mack 1941). This adherence to the classics left him less popular than his achievements might have warranted.

The anarchy of the British educational establishment, rising calls for reform, and ongoing social change, provided both incentive and latitude for government intervention (Saffin 1973). The drive to put science into the curriculum lay at the heart of many reform efforts that emerged around mid-century, and was a central pillar of the findings of a series of Parliamentary Commissions formed in response to popular calls for action (Pollard 1989). In 1846 a science teacher training scheme was initiated (Saffin 1973). Through the 1860s a great number of pro-science lobbies emerged in support of curricular reform, the creation of textbooks, and additional teacher training (Saffin 1973).

While industrialists were not universally favorable to such efforts given concerns over taxation, those in research-heavy and high skill sectors supported change (Pollard 1989). By about

1850 natural sciences were introduced at Oxford and Cambridge, laboratories were built, and curricula were established to delineate disciplines (Saffin 1973; Sanderson 1995). Science was also integrated into the curriculum of the Royal Military Academy.

All three of the major Parliamentary Commissions on secondary education that met between 1858 and 1864 (The Newcastle Commission on general education; the Clarendon Commission on elite institutions; and the Taunton Commission on "other" schools) highlighted the issue of science and technology. The Newcastle Commission urged the creation and adoption of science across all secondary schools. The Clarendon Commission, the most important as many schools copied the curricula of the elite institutions, labeled the neglect of science in the curriculum "a great practical evil" (Pollard 1989: 118) and went so far as to urge that science be adopted as an alternative to the classics for purposes of the general training of the intellect. The Taunton Commission called for a major increase in science offerings, emphasizing that it was simply wrong to ignore science in the curriculum (Saffin 1973). These commissions concluded that "the neglect of the natural sciences is the most lamentable feature of the public school syllabus" (Newsome 1961: 68). This all led to the legal requirement that science enter the curriculum in the Public School Act of 1868 (Sanderson 1995). Later commissions reiterated calls for science in the curriculum and lamented the slow pace of change (Pollard 1989).

## The Surprising Defeat of a Science Oriented Curriculum

The central role that education played in the debate over economic growth, the extent of popular support, high status lobbying efforts in favor of science, and Parliamentary success, would suggest a major reform in the British educational system was forthcoming (Mack 1941). The reform took place, but science was not included. Part of the demand for change was based on fear of global status threats, which prompted a more general call to rethink society and education (Wiener 1981).

It is the argument of this work that the fear of decline elicited a backward looking, short term, and aggressive response, as opposed to the more fundamental but less viscerally appealing policies proposed by various social groups and educational commissions. Education is a long-term solution to social problems, and these tend to be less popular than tough-sounding policies that follow traditional guidelines, even when the latter are highly questionable (Sanderson 1995). Newsome (1961: 3) concludes: "the cry had gone up for educational reform. Those who were in a position to carry out reform responded by looking to the past for their ideal. They strove to return to first principles…either by devising new methods or by breathing new life into the old."

## The Traditions of Decline

Nearly all of so-called the "ancient traditions" that were thrust into the debate on educational philosophy were contested, and both the push for science and technology, and its failure, can be traced to the arguments over identity that emerged in the context of fear of decline. Britain faced a particularly daunting task. As an empire (both on its home island and abroad), Britain's self-appointed imperial mission was to bring harmony and civilization to its domain, hence particular

national identities were a threat. Especially after union with Scotland in 1707, the leadership realized that the key issue was to hold the empire together. Kumar (2003: 37) notes "when you are securely in charge it is best not to remind others of this fact too often or too insistently. It is insecure nations…who most stridently assert their nationalism." It is at this point that we find the growth of English (not British) nationalism, setting intellectuals in search of unique character traits and a special collective destiny.

The genesis of English nationalism is highly contested (Colley 1992; Kumar 2003). So much of English identity was tied to cosmopolitan visions of empire and progress that it was only after those notions began to be questioned that there began a search for any truly unique national attributes. A key feature in this process "was the invention of 'old traditions' in the late 19th century" (Dodd 1986). Horne (1969) outlines an important argument about two contending metaphors for English nationalism. The "Northern Metaphor" was pragmatic and calculating. It was the cultural image of the urban industrial heartland, the site of England's creation of industrial Europe. The "Southern Metaphor" was the aristocratic and traditional rural image of the Crown Heartland, sans London (Horne 1969). Its historic origins offered a set of social norms that promised stability and security (Dobbs 1919). Traditional rural relations were less infected by the endless debates of churchman or urban cynicism (Bedarida 1990). Popular authors, like Kipling "worrying that England's days of predominance were numbered, turned for reassurance from the overseas setting of his imperial stories to the contemplation of England's own rural past" (Wiener 1981: 56). He was joined by the works of several popular authors like Thomas Hardy. Art, poetry, and music also generated a picture of English rural bliss (Kumar 2003). Taylor (1991: 151-153) concludes "the pioneer of industrialization and the most urbanized country in the world is idealized in rural terms....the Anglo-British became a non-rural people with an ideal rural image...[and Northern England]...was relegated not just to peripheral status but to an alien existence in the national scene."

Traditional rural ideals that emerged in art, literature, and the popular press are enumerated by a variety of scholars including Girling (1993), Newsome (1961), and Mandler (2006). Most are captured in the work of Bedarida (1990) and Saffin (1973). Bedarida identified these traditional rural traits as 1) A Culture of Self-Help; 2) Monarchy; 3) Patriotism; 4) Christianity; and 5) Social Hierarchy. For Saffin the traits and skills to be translated through the educational system were 1) Defense of the Empire; 2) Good Policy Making; 3) War Fighting Ability; and 4) Building Character. Traits of the Northern Metaphor like rationality, progress, and pragmatism, were peripheralized.

The Southern Metaphor has its dark side. Industrial cities, their factory owners, and their working classes, were marginalized (Thompson 1965). National status came to be further cemented with decisions to standardize English pronunciation that adopted the southern dialect used by only 3% of the population (Taylor 1991). The study of history in the lower schools was focused on transmitting this Southern Metaphor to younger students (Kumar 2003). From this new nationalist and southern perspective, British superiority was not the result of either innovation or exploitation, but of an exceptional English character that extolled faith, service, and the "right of

success" (Girling 1993: 138). Being thusly blessed, it was not just an expedient policy, but the sacred duty of England to bring civilization to others. Defense of the empire became a moral necessity, and Rome was the model. This exercise in exceptionalism quickly finds "satisfaction turned to self-satisfaction, pride to national pride, confidence to chauvinism tinged with xenophobia" (Bedarida 1990: 93). Over half of Bedarida's and Saffin's lists of popularly accepted national character traits have martial connotations.

Scholars debate the level of actual economic and political decline, but ignore the way that early fears emerge and play a role in both official and popular circles. Reverting to foundation myths, and rising to meet enemies foreign and domestic, provides a handy means of taking action; but the action is likely to be myopic, aggressive, and counter-productive.


**Pre-emptive Decline and Education**

The impact that fear of decline had on educational reform would not have been predicted from the debates at the time, popular demands, or the conclusions of the various Parliamentary Commissions. With its renewed emphases on nation and empire, the emerging educational paradigm was known as "Muscular Christianity" and was constructed around a simplified Southern Metaphor that sought to avoid complex debates over social change or curricular needs. Education was to serve the allegedly traditional purpose of service to society, and now also of global mission (Saffin 1973; Newsome 1961). The key was a shift away from either Arnold's "Godliness and Good Learning" or the training of Victorian Gentlemen, and toward martial preparedness and individual character development (Sanderson 1995). Daunton (1989: 132) argues "the value system was remade between [the Reform Act of] 1832 and [the Reform Act of] 1867…The emphasis was on character rather than virtue, and character was tested by striving, self-reliance and mastering of circumstances."

One of the most obvious changes sparked by Arnold's insistence that free time at school be managed was the introduction of competitive games, often newly designed, first at the elite private institutions—like Rugby—and then more generally. Games became a serious part of the curriculum in the 1860s. Players were not differentiated by age or size, leading to a painful toleration of organized violence by younger students. A "cult of manliness" emerged that rewarded stoic disregard for harm and a lack of exhibited emotions (Newsome 1961: 81-83).

Sanderson (1995: 35-36) concludes that education "aimed to produce the physically fit, patriotic and basically honorable young men with leadership qualities necessary for the Army, the Empire, and the City, on which the strength of Britain depended." One Wellington headmaster bragged that the new system would transform students into "handy rifle skirmishers" and lauded the school as "a splendid institution for turning out Army officer material" (Newsome 1961: 198) while another noted that the rise of organized games meant the end of some of the few existing scientific activities like the study of botany or entomology during free time (Newsome 1961).

The new emphasis was a welcome move away from classics, and it promised at least some contemporary applications (Mack 1941; Newsome 1961). It was also consistent with the desires

of aristocrats for a suitable education, and to clerics who sought the continued propagation of their creed. It emerged in the context of fear of decline and a concomitant debate about national character, long before actual decline set in (Sanderson 1999; Bedarida 1990). That timing gave rise to calls for resurgence and a focus on resurrected and reconstructed myths regarding the national character (Sanderson 1995). Increased aggressiveness punctuated these myths and became a way to show that while there were challenges, there was no decline. As a result, the British held off incorporating more science and technology into their curricula, and it is no coincidence that chemical and other highly technical key industries in Germany and the United States took the lead. Britain declined. The irony is that while decline may be inevitable, policies derived in an atmosphere of fear have a tendency to hasten its onset and sharpen its bite.

## Pre-Emptive Decline in the 21st Century United States

Anxiety among members of high status groups is an important element in generating the processes of pre-emptive decline, since individuals in that category are both more predisposed to suffer the negative effects of status decline and most capable of pursuing a policy agenda in response. In the wake of Donald Trump, and in the continuing shadow of Boris Johnson's Brexit, it is easy to believe that populist mobilization is the result of cynical exacerbation and manipulation of economic changes generated by globalization on lower status citizenry. It can easily be suggested that high status leaders pounded their duplicitous message to create and energize their base; taking advantage of existing status fears, while not themselves affected (Diamond 2018). There are both theoretical and empirical reasons for believing, instead, that the high status population strata most susceptible to the dynamics of pre-emptive decline are themselves motivated by status threats. Though globalization (in the form of both increased trade and more open finance) is well understood to generate significant inequalities favoring holders of capital, they may do so regionally and not just along existing economic cleavages, or they may generate demands for compensatory tax systems that would impose real costs on high earners and their corporations (Rodrik 2018). Chase-Dunn et al. (2019), following Goldfrank (1978), note that while fascism is understood as a movement created and led by non-elites, contemporary neo-fascism, also called "populist nationalism," is an offshoot of authoritarianism, created by members of the existing political and economic elite and dependent upon them for funding, political latitude, message, organization, and leadership. This is a top-down movement fostered by existing political classes as they see their positions, or the positions of their organizations, deteriorating (Goldfrank 1978; Chase-Dunn et al. 2019). Rodrik notes that immigration or drives for equality provide a foundation for right-wing movements. Economic threats in the absence of cultural "others" provide a foundation for left-wing movements. Both are led by existing members of elite groups who craft the messages and lead the mobilizations (Rodrik 2018).

Careful empirical analysis by Diana Mutz (2018: E4330, emphasis added) confirms that "candidate preferences in 2016 *reflected increased anxiety among high-status groups* rather than complaints about past treatment among low status groups. Both growing domestic racial diversity

and globalization contributed to a sense that white Americans are under siege." Perceived threats to dominant groups generates a need to regain a sense of security that drives "nostalgia for the stable hierarchies of the past," along with "defense of the dominant in-group, a greater emphasis on the importance of conformity to group norms, and out-group negativity" (Mutz 2018: E4331). More critically, concern over decline led to a renewed questioning of the fundamental identity and national character of the United States, which was then reconstituted in the context of fear and constant partisan hammering. The result was the resurrection of traditional sets of myths—myth complexes—with more aggressive messages.

It is beyond the scope of this work to review the vast literature on such myth complexes in the United States, but we will focus briefly on three consistent elements of discussions of the U.S. national character: individualism, pragmatism, and exceptionalism. These are widely accepted central elements of U.S. tradition. It is no coincidence that we can see an efflorescence of statements and policies consistent with the fear-driven elements of these myth complexes.

## Individualism

Individualism, a trait identified with the United States since de Tocqueville, is supported by the related values of self-help, egalitarianism, and self-reliance (Hofstadter 1963: Langman and Lundskow 2016). In a system that privileges individual liberty, the state must leave economic interactions private. Those who are deemed worthy, whether by God or the market, will rise. Success in this realm is not contestable, and it is further legitimized by the popular "prosperity theology," which teaches that the blessings of health and wealth are bestowed by God upon those who have proven themselves worthy (Bowler 2013; Luce 2019). As a result, this myth ties individualism, *laissez faire* economics, self-help, and religious belief, into a tight knot.

When reconstituted under stress, the ugly side of this myth complex presents as disdain for failure, distrust of the state, belief that Others have advanced only as a result of illegitimate actions, and an acceptance of policies suggested by those whose interests are tied to market fundamentalism: campaign contributions become free speech; tax cuts are expected to provide employment; those lacking adequate health care should oppose its provision by the state; and "Our" economic challenges are caused by "Others" whose indolence or criminality has been facilitated by traitorous globalist elites (Girling 1993; Langman and Lundskow 2016).

## Pragmatism

Pragmatism plays an important role at the head of a second myth complex. Individuals who interact in a just, self-help-based system are expected to take actions that move them ahead. de Tocqueville highlighted what he saw as a unique American industriousness. It is the purposeful activity of individuals that should determine levels of relative success. Individuals should be allowed to do what works (or whatever works) to get ahead.

The focus of pragmatism is on action, not thought. As early as 1750, and in subsequent great religious awakenings, conflict surrounded the value of action vs. knowledge. Even having an

educated clergy was challenged by an evangelical movement that featured charismatic but uneducated lay preachers (Murphy 2009). Feelings and emotions were regularly pitted against knowledge and thought. Hofstadter speaks of the "cult of the practical" that viewed success as a matter of character and authenticity, not education or preparation. The life of the mind was suspect (Hofstadter 1963). Anti-intellectualism emerges as a key element of the myth of pragmatism.

Under stress, this myth complex presents as active disrespect for knowledge, facts, and the individuals who create or marshal them. Edelman (1971) notes that only facts that support a broader myth are likely to be accepted, and Girling (1993) highlights the non-rational (and therefore essentially irrefutable) nature of myths. Hofstadter notes the low levels of respect accorded teachers, high clergy, and progressive intellectuals. American education was generally considered little more than a necessary evil, not a process for fostering the intellect (Hofstadter 1963). The tension this creates with the need to foster science and technology for national security purposes has not escaped scholarly notice (Gauchat 2012; Jelen and Lockett 2014).

**Exceptionalism**

Exceptionalism underpins a third typically American myth complex that is closely associated with a discomforting admixture of strong religion and violence. American exceptionalism predates the founding of the republic. A new land offering new freedoms beckoned to religious dissenters who established a prosperous society and interpreted their experience through the lens of their faith. Their Nation, notes Murphy (2009: 50, 101) was "chosen" and came to be viewed as an intimate part of "God's unfolding plan for human history." As early as the Civil War we find editorials, sermons, and campaign platforms suggesting that the wars the United States fights, and others that the United States should fight (as against slavery, German imperialism, and later communism and Islam), are a "climactic test of the redeemer nation and its millennial role" (cited in Murphy 2009: 63-64). American hesitation, failure, decadence, or decline, would be bad not only for its citizens, but would signal the defeat of God on earth.

It is a short step from here to the justification of all necessary means to defeat evil. This legitimizes the use of violence, torture, and underpins the culture of firearms. God's mission transcends moral norms, overrules domestic interests, and rejects the idea that we should be tolerant of others. Scholars speak to the existence of the "monomyth" or "hero's journey" that is found among a number of cultures, and signals exceptionality (Green 1997). This begins with a call to adventure, recognition of supernatural assistance (chosen-ness), challenges and temptations, revelation at the point of greatest danger, transformation, atonement, and return. These challenges require the use of righteous violence in pursuit of moral redemption, purification, justice, and the bringing of others to their ultimate salvation (Schlesinger [1981] 2004).

Exceptionalism requires little in the way of stress to be dangerous. Violence against enemies foreign or domestic is justified by the exceptional position of the United States, covering everything from the pacification of the frontier ("the only good Indian is a dead Indian"), opposition to "godless communism" ("Kill a Commie for Christ"), the spreading of "The Good

News," (an evangelical message opposed to social mobilization and liberation theology in Latin America), to upholding the unlimited rights of personal gun ownership and "self" defense (Deiros 1991). Questioning exceptionality, or admitting to reduced national capacity, is not an option. Nor is planning for an unexceptional, if viable and sustainable future. Langman and Lundskow (2016) conclude:

> If American exceptionalism, anchored by its peculiar social character once facilitated the rise of American economic and political power, the same characterological traits now limit self-awareness, obscure objective considerations, discourage self-examination and indeed foreclose the possibilities of changing directions to halt the downward spiral of the great Colossus that is now tipping toward its collapse (Langman and Lundskow 2016: 210).

**The Ceding of Authority**

The result of these psychological propensities in the face of fear of decline, and the myth complexes that are turned to as we revert to tradition, is a populace with a propensity to cede authority to strong leaders. Driskell et al. (1988) find that lower echelon individuals in a social unit are more likely to voluntarily yield control of a situation to their superiors when under stress, just as leaders are likely to demand greater control. As a result, hierarchy becomes more pronounced. In times of stress, authority is most likely to devolve to leaders perceived as being free of the usual constraints, and ready to take any and all necessary action (Gills, Morgan, and Patomäki 2018). Langman and Lundskow review this literature and conclude, if immoderately:

> The openly racist, sexist, ethnocentric and rude reality TV star and billionaire Donald Trump talks like a Brooklyn tough guy, with his in-your-face persona, [and] represents a fusion of the classical American social character…Trump, the social dominator is individualistic, phallic aggressive tough with a streak of sadism, narcissism, authoritarianism, xenophobia, and anti-intellectualism. What's not to like? (Langman and Lundskow 2016: 237).

From this perspective, Donald Trump is essentially the poster child for pre-emptive decline.

## Conclusion

Perhaps the most disheartening element of pre-emptive decline is its self-reinforcing character. A population's attempt to deal with perceived decline finds them putting their trust in both maladaptive historic myths and allegedly strong leaders. Such leaders are called forth at the exact time that they are least suited to making good choices and are, if anything, more likely to fall prey to this pathology. Poor decisions and poor policies then reinforce perceptions of decline and offer little but another round of failure and frustration. The dynamics of pre-emptive decline may help us understand the processes by which poor decisions have been made historically, and the underlying nature of some current concerns in the world-system.

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