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DECLINE, FALL, RINSE, REPEAT

Is America going down?

By Adam Gopnik

“Falling, yes, I am falling, and she keeps calling me back again,” Paul McCartney sang on June 14, 1965, a memorable high-water mark in musical history, when, on a single day, he recorded that first bluegrass-rock standard, “I’ve Just Seen a Face”; the throat-shredding early-metal model “I’m Down”; and then, in dulcet tones, the most covered song ever written, the ballad “Yesterday”—all within a few hours, with a little help from his friends. Some of us think there hasn’t been as good a musical day since.

How do such good days happen? What makes the bad days come? Why do we fall, and who calls us back, if anything can? Decline has the same fascination for historians that love has for lyric poets. Yet the coming catastrophe is always coming, and never quite getting here, so the first job the new declinist book has to do is explain why the previous declinist books were wrong. The population bomb that didn’t go *boom!* is an anchor tied to the ankle of the global warmers, while people who want to set up China as the new Yellow Peril are obliged to explain why the Rising Sun stopped rising. What’s more, since the intellectual predecessors of the declinist are all declinists, too, he has to grapple with the tricky point of insisting that the previous era was actually a peak rather than the valley that the previous declinists thought they were looking at.

With empires, as with rock bands, the most popular explanations of decline involve long-dormant disputes and frictions that came to life, or, more simply, a sinister force from Asia that brought the thing down and broke it up. At the same time, declinism can’t decline to the end. Although the forces of decline need to be ominously arrayed in tables and vectors, the author is expected to rally in the last chapter to explain the one way to reverse the otherwise irreversible: world government, national industrial policy, a third party, kindergarten education in Esperanto, or whatever. Everything has to be as inevitable as falling off a roof, and

yet there has to be a chance for someone falling to suddenly fly. Declinism is, in other words, a genre as much as it is any set of claims. Someone is always coming. “The Americans looming up—dim, vast, portentous—in their millions like gathering waves—the barbarians of the Roman empire,” Henry James, having absorbed the view of his English hosts, lamented in his notebook in 1895. (Note: the *barbarians*, not the Romans.)

The great summit of declinism—the peak from which all subsequent declinism has declined—was established in 1918, in the book that gave decline its good name in publishing: the German historian Oswald Spengler’s best-selling, thousand-page work “The Decline of the West.” Spengler has by now been reduced to an adjective; news-magazine writers back in the nineteen-seventies always used to refer to Henry Kissinger as “Spenglerian,” meaning farsighted in his pessimism and trying to manage the decline of liberalism in the face of the inexorable spread of totalitarian societies. Yet Spengler turns out to be a more idiosyncratic writer than his reputation suggests. A German pedant whom other German pedants found too humorless, but who lived long enough to flirt with the Nazis and resist them, he wasn’t so much “pessimistic” as biological in his approach. His thesis was that each culture-civilization has its own organic pattern of development, and none can escape its foreordained cycle of growth, blossoming, and wilting, any more than a single rose can. We don’t fall, as empires are supposed to, from sin; we wilt, as flowers do, from sun and time alone.

Spengler struggled to reconcile two truths: first, that all art tends to follow a path from initial strivings to perfect utterance and on to ornamental luxuriance, whether the move is from eighth-century-B.C. geometric art to Hellenistic twistings, or from Bach to Berlioz, or, I suppose, from “Love Me Do” to “The Long and Winding Road.” And yet things from the same cultural epoch, however much they alter in outward form, always resemble one another more than they resemble other, exterior things that they may be imitating. A 1907 Picasso looks more like a Rembrandt portrait than like an African mask—its concern is likeness and the individual, not the spirit and the ritual. The Beatles sound like the Beatles, no matter how many sitars they strum.

Spengler reconciles the two by saying that all civilizations share the same seasons but have different seeds. There have been three distinct seedbeds within Western civilization, each with a set of forms and themes unique to it: the Classical, the Magian (meaning, essentially, early Christian and Byzantine, under the influence of

the Near East), and our own, “Faustian” moment. The Classical was linear, with lines drawn around verse forms and atoms alike; Magian culture is mysterious and glittering, like its Magi; ours is, above all, spatial, with atmospheric perspective in our paintings and sea voyages of discovery in our dreams. Spengler has a long reach: there are comparative sections on Chinese and Islamic civilizations; “Pythagoras, Mohammed, Cromwell” is a typical chapter heading. But his main point is that the “West” whose decline we may fret over—the West that conquered the Aztecs and discovered science and built empires and made democracy—is already so far fallen as to be hardly worth mourning. We peaked sometime around 1300, with Chartres and then Giotto, and it’s been straight downhill to cosmopolitan cities and Old Masters and democracy ever since. Spengler has particular contempt for the idea that civilizations compete, a view that he sees as crudely “Darwinian” and “Materialist.” Cultures coexist, and go to hell in their own ways; “civilization” is just the name we give to the decline.

Like all big system-makers, Spengler is most interesting when he is least systematic, in the cracks in his system. He makes the sharp observation that in times of cultural fullness high stories and low dramas coincide; the plots of “King Lear” and “Macbeth,” like those of the Iliad, could be played in a village or a court. He also shrewdly notes that classical civilization, despite its mystery cults, assumed that the essentials of its world picture and logic were available to any educated citizen; in our Faustian culture, despite its “democratic” pretenses, these things are accessible only to a small body of experts. Democritus’ atomism was argued in the agora, whereas atomic theory is understood by a handful of physicists; everyone had an opinion on Praxiteles, but you master a code to crack Picasso. Spengler is also eerily prescient at times, predicting that a new style of “meaningless, empty, artificial, pretentious architecture,” heavy on ornament and historical reference, and filled with “imitation of archaic and exotic motives,” would appear in Europe and America around the year 2000. He was off by only a couple of decades.

But Spengler’s real superiority over this century’s declinists is that he isn’t writing public policy, just watching the wheels go round and looking for patterns in the roll. What Spengler contributed to history was not pessimism but a form of relativism—the insistence that each culture should be respected as a whole and not viewed as a debased version of another. Kissinger was truly “Spenglerian” not in the belief that all one could do was manage American decline but in the belief that each nation would have to find its own road to, and through, modernity—that Chinese

democracy would be more Confucian than Jeffersonian, and that freedom in Russia would look more Russian than free.

Today's declinists have absorbed Spengler, if mostly in unconscious ways. First, there's his insistence on seeing one's culture decline in terms of similar patterns elsewhere. This isn't a self-evident idea; Gibbon, as he charts the fall of the Roman Empire, barely glances at the contemporaneous Persian one. And then there's Spengler's rule-seeking abstraction. After Spengler, it isn't enough to say that the past two decades have been rough in Japan, or that the recession has been hard on Americans, or that the war in Iraq was a folly; the mistakes and the follies have to be shown to be part of some big, hitherto invisible pattern of decline—and made more vivid by contrast with the patterns of some other, as yet undeclined society. The simpler, saner idea that things were good and now they're bad, and that they could get either better or worse, depending on what happens next, gets dismissed as intellectually disreputable. His imprint is left in the idea that a big wheel must be turning in the night sky of history, and only the author of the book has managed to notice it.

The Stanford classics and history professor Ian Morris is one of these closeted Spenglerians. In "Why the West Rules—For Now" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; \$35), Morris is out to settle Spengler's questions using methods similar to the ones that Jared Diamond used in his mind-altering "Guns, Germs, and Steel": why, Morris wonders, is it we who invaded and colonized them, rather than they who invaded and colonized us? He puts the key question later than Diamond did, at the time not of conquistadores and Incas but of later imperial arrangements: why didn't the Chinese invade nineteenth-century England and take its rulers hostage? Telling something close to the entire story of human civilization, he uses a "social development index," a metric designed to show exactly how rich a society was. (Some periods in Asian culture score higher than any Western ones until modern times.) He freely confesses that this index looks fakely numeric, even a little "philistine," but quantifies things otherwise left to impressionistic guesses.

Diamond was a geographer who condescended to historians for imagining that all that eventfulness could overrule the facts of continent and climate and ocean; there are no cultural legacies, just environmental stresses turning out new tools. Morris, who was reared and educated in Britain, is a professional historian, with a professional historian's reflexes: he believes that great leaders play almost no role in history—if Alexander hadn't conquered the world, the next Macedonian probably

would have—and that new philosophical ideas are more or less fungible, invented to justify whatever was happening anyway. There are no great men; there are no big ideas. Morris is largely hostile to the idea that traditions, inward-turning in the East or outward-turning in the West, are responsible for the eventual imbalance that saw us boss them. Mostly, he thinks it was oceans and grains and illness—how long it took to get somewhere, the food you had to eat, the diseases you were immune to and the people you met on arrival were not. Yet he leaves some space for traditions to count. Spengler's outmoded idea that it was the essential passivity of the Chinese world view that kept the Chinese home may seem crude, but it is more convincing than the alternative, that all that kept them home was the vastness of the ocean. (Reading Morris, one begins to wonder whether the clichés of history—the inscrutable, watchful Chinese, who counts life in eons and contemplates his navel; the gruff entrepreneurial Western explorer—are entirely devoid of truth.)

Above all, Morris insists that the great hinge in human history is turning now. Until around 1770, the hard life of a peasant was the hard life of a peasant wherever it took place, and to be a mandarin in Cathay was not so different from being a courtier at Versailles; the development index scores them about the same. Then the steam engine was invented, in the North of England, and with it came industrialization, and by the end of the nineteenth century East and West might have been on different planets.

Morris asks the really big question: given that the door opened to a prosperity unequalled in all history, why did the nations that pioneered this prosperity plunge into suicidal warfare unequalled in all history? The question is not just why the steam engine was invented in England, near Stoke-on-Trent, but why Stoke-on-Trent produced the idiot generals at the Somme. Is ours a civilization truly Faustian in ways that Spengler couldn't have seen coming—a great deal of knowledge in exchange for damnation? Morris's answer is that modernity is, in every sense, an engine. Our great leap forward was a double movement of productivity machines and mass militarization, with each serving the other: the new engines allowed organized destruction on an unprecedented scale; the unprecedented scale of the warfare demands ever better engines. It is the necessary condition of modernity that it oscillates between banquets and barbarism.

The Faustian choice between the machine and the military is, Morris insists, starker than ever now: we are approaching either the Singularity—Ray Kurzweil's crossover, "Matrix" moment, when we will all be logged in sequentially to become parts in the

single artificial brain—or Nightfall, the global thermonuclear war that will end civilization on the planet. (Both are, Morris deduces, on target for 2045.) Morris implies that Spengler may have been right about the foreordained blossoming and decay of civilizations, on a far more cosmic scale than he could have imagined: once a society reaches to sun power, and makes nuclear weapons, it destroys itself. That's why we feel ourselves to be alone in the universe. What we see staring at the vast night sky is not a mystery but a morgue, full of suicided civilizations.

If Morris's version of declinism takes in the universe, Niall Ferguson's version, in his new, TV-series-accompanying book "Civilization: The West and the Rest" (forthcoming from Penguin Press; \$35), feels oddly idiosyncratic. Ferguson, a British historian who teaches at Harvard, pinpoints the moment he arrived at his intuition that the reign of the West was, after five hundred years, being supplanted by that of China: it was two years ago, during a concert of music by the Chinese composer Angel Lam, at Carnegie Hall. It seems weird that this kind of kitsch "classicism" should inspire such an epiphany, but that doubleness—very sure judgment, sometimes shaky taste—seems typical of Ferguson's book.

Always dashing and often quite brilliant on his many subjects—he has a terrific mini-essay on the triumph of Western clothing through Western cool and Western textiles—Ferguson has a habit of making ex-cathedra pronouncements from what turns out to be a seat of something less than stone. He so often gets things just a bit "off" that reading him is like looking at one of those old comic books printed slightly out of register. The French Enlightenment, he announces, was essentially indifferent to science and enterprise ("Especially in France, empiricism was at a discount," he writes)—and yet its greatest figure, Voltaire, spent two years of his life in retreat studying Newton with the mathematician Mme. du Châtelet, and spent still more in the watch-manufacture business. Ferguson's description of nineteenth-century capitalism as an "authentically Darwinian system" would have the backing of neither Darwin nor any modern Darwinian. (Since evolutionary biology is an account of the whole history of life, no epoch within it can be any more, or less, "authentic" than any other: absolute monarchy is just as "Darwinian" as competitive capitalism.) Nor is it remotely the case that Philip Larkin blamed the sixties for the decline of Christian faith; on the contrary, the sixties were what he fiercely regretted having *missed*, since they at least provided a pleasure principle to put in place of the religious faith that for his generation had vanished long before. More mystifyingly, Ferguson insists that the sixties were somehow a time of triumphant skepticism,

when the keynote of the period was credulity. (He would argue, I think, that sixties spirituality got expressed in mere “cults” rather than in true churches, but this surely is a distinction sturdier to the eye of faith than to that of history.) He suggests, half seriously, that John Lennon might have “killed Christianity,” though Lennon was insistently Jesus-centered (“Christ! You know it ain’t easy. . . . They’re gonna crucify me”) and, aside from a twelve-month period in the early seventies, intently spiritual, even employing a Sanskrit mantra in his refrains, as in “Across the Universe.” Bob Dylan, of course, the other great magus of the era, made a tour—ongoing and unending—of every church, from Judaism to evangelical Christianity. Small stuff, maybe, but when someone gets the sixties Beatles this wrong you have to wonder how well he really is doing with the sixth-century barbarians.

Ferguson is determined to revive Max Weber’s old idea that a “Protestant ethic” was behind the great Western leap forward, and links the decline of the West to the decline of Protestant faith. So he has difficulty with the truth that the decline in organized religion went hand in hand with the rise in prosperity: fewer people in Europe were of a religious faith at the end of industrial modernity than at its start. Perhaps people who eat more fear less and so worship less; perhaps people who worship less work harder for a reward in this world, and so end by eating more. Whatever the mechanism, the decline of religious faith tracks the rise in material prosperity. It may be that Europeans are, as Ferguson believes, somehow decadent now because they believe less—they are “the idlers of the world,” he declares—but they are certainly no *poorer* for it. Given that the Chinese regime he expects to eclipse us is starkly antireligious, Ferguson is reduced to insisting that Maoism was really a kind of Protestant heresy, and that the root cause of the current Chinese boom is a well-hidden Protestant revival, however minuscule the actual numbers. One wonders when, exactly, the Protestant revival happened in Japan.

But his recurrent thesis is that everything was going splendidly with the West until about five years ago, when bad financial policies and lax immigration rules brought unwelcome debt and dubious Muslims into the heart of Europe. Ferguson obsesses on what seems less the shifting of tectonic plates than the grinding of teeth in the daily chatter. (The terrorist threat to Europe, though ugly, is, by any standard of a century that saw sixty million dead in nationalist squabbles, less than epochal. The bombings in London were horrible; they also killed far fewer people than the Irish nationalist bombings.) A writer crafting history on the grand scale, we think, should keep the news cycle a little at bay; we would relish Spengler less if he wrote about

German strategy on the Western Front—though surely German strategy must have filled his everyday talk—and Kenneth Clark less if he had ended his survey of “Civilisation” with several pages on the devaluation of the pound and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, very much headline issues in 1969, when his book came out.

The anti-declinst book “The Next 100 Years,” by the professional “futurist” George Friedman, at least has the virtue of looking past the headlines to the vectors. He rather spoils the effect by extrapolating all kinds of detailed “scenarios,” including the rise of Polish power (really) and a clash in the twenty-forties between the Poles and the Turks (truly), that are not meant to be taken entirely seriously. Still, his core points seem sane: the one fixed pattern of modern capitalist life is that all booms become bubbles and all bubbles burst. The Chinese boom may somehow cheat this pattern, but if it does it will be the first. And the conflicts created by increasing prosperity tend to undermine it. A rising tide may lift all boats; but rising expectations can capsize them, too.

While British historians savor big-wheel explanations of why everybody is going to hell in a handbasket, American historians and journalists tend to work within a smaller historical compass. A case in point is “That Used to Be Us” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; \$28)—the title comes from a remark of Barack Obama’s about the disappearance of American innovation—which promises to be the small-scale Spenglerian volume of the season. A joint effort by the *Times* columnist Thomas Friedman and the Johns Hopkins professor Michael Mandelbaum, and written in a cozy, confidential style (there are frequent references to what “Michael” has written elsewhere and what “Tom” has seen in India and China), it accepts that the post-9/11 obsession with the Islamic threat and the War on Terror was a catastrophic national distraction. “Twenty-five years from now the war we undertook against al-Qaeda won’t seem nearly as important as the wars we waged against physics and math,” the authors declare, and then they catalogue all the ways in which America has, in the interim, slipped behind the rest of the rich world. There’s our creaking infrastructure (compare the Shanghai and New York airports, or the rail connections that get you there); our paralyzed education system, where that war against science was fought; and our generally inverted values, which leave us with too many bankers betting on each other’s bets and too many lawyers depositing other lawyers.

Who can argue with all this? Yet Friedman and Mandelbaum's book is marked by a kind of tactical disingenuousness. Not only do they propose, as a way to arrest the decline, a third party, with no clear policies, programs, popular constituency, or potential leaders; they also present every problem as one confronted by a uniform "we." The idea is that we all, left and right, wrinkle our brows and wring our hands and share the same goals, and are just so *frustrated* about our inability to achieve them. ("Senator Lindsey Graham leaned back in his chair in his Senate office, trying to imagine for us what would have happened if America's current media had been around to cover the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.") Now, there may be states and circumstances in which everyone wants something and the system prevents anyone from getting it. Perhaps all Italians want to save Venice from sinking, yet the dysfunction of Italian politics prevents them from doing so. But that's not the case here. Friedman and Mandelbaum want their countrymen to face the future without first facing the facts about their countrymen: this is the country that a lot of "us" want.

Despite their title, the authors seem, for instance, determined to avoid the obvious point that one American who shares their outlook and ambitions in almost every detail—who hates partisan wrangling, doubts the wisdom of big foreign wars, proposes a faith in a brisk mixture of private enterprise and public guarantees, accepts the priority of rebuilding our infrastructure—is the President of the United States. If he's been frustrated, it's not because of some vague "systemic" political paralysis. It's because, as he has been startled to discover—and as Friedman and Mandelbaum will also be startled to discover, if they ever get that third party up and running—there is another side, inexorably opposed to these apparently good things. The reason we don't have beautiful new airports and efficient bullet trains is not that we have inadvertently stumbled upon stumbling blocks; it's that there are considerable numbers of Americans for whom these things are simply symbols of a feared central government, and who would, when they travel, rather sweat in squalor than surrender the money to build a better terminal. They hate fast trains and efficient airports for the same reason that seventeenth-century Protestants hated the beautiful Baroque churches of Rome when they saw them: they were luxurious symbols of an earthly power they despised. Friedman and Mandelbaum wring their hands at "our" unwillingness to sacrifice our comforts on behalf of our principles, but Americans are perfectly willing to sacrifice their comforts for their ideological convictions. We don't have a better infrastructure or decent elementary education exactly because many people are willing to sacrifice faster movement between our

great cities, or better-informed children, in support of their belief that the government should always be given as little money as possible.

The reasons for these feelings are, of course, complex, with a noble reason descending from the Revolutionary War, and its insistence on liberty at all costs, and an ignoble one descending from the Civil War and its creation of a permanent class of white men convinced that they are besieged by an underclass they regard as the subsidized wards of the federal government. (Thus the curious belief that a worldwide real-estate crisis that hit the north of Spain and the east of Ireland as hard as the coast of Florida was the fault of money loaned by Washington to black people.) But the crucial point is that this is the result of active choice, not passive indifference: people who don't want high-speed rail are not just indifferent to fast trains. They are *offended* by fast trains, as the *New York Post* is offended by bike lanes and open-air plazas: these things give too much pleasure to those they hate. They would rather have exhaust and noise and traffic jams, if such things sufficiently annoy liberals. Annoying liberals is a pleasure well worth paying for. As a recent study in the social sciences shows, if energy use in a household is monitored so that you can watch yourself saving money every month by using less, self-identified conservatives will actually use and spend more, apparently as a way of showing their scorn for liberal pieties. (Presumably, you could construct a similar experiment running toward the left, with the goods at play carbon footprints or local produce or the like.) The kind of outlook that Friedman and Mandelbaum assume is somehow natural to mankind and has been thwarted here recently—a broad-minded view of maximizing future utility—has, from a historical perspective, a constituency so small as to be essentially nonexistent. In the long story of civilization, the moments when improving your lot beats out annoying your neighbor are vanishingly rare.

Central to Friedman and Mandelbaum's view is a long-exploded notion: that countries compete for prosperity, and that we must rise to the "Chinese challenge." Paul Krugman, back in the days when he was trying to teach economics to Democrats—this was before he had to start teaching arithmetic to Republicans—wrote an excellent book, "Pop Internationalism," explaining why this is so: firms compete, countries do not, and there can no more be competition between China and the United States, because firms from both compete for customers, than there can between the Upper East and Upper West Sides of New York, because Fairway and Eli Zabar struggle for dominance in groceries. (The fact that Fairway has now

implanted a store on Third Avenue does not mean that the Upper West Side is “winning.”)

Krugman made, in passing, another key point: though countries don't compete for prosperity, they do compete for status and power—and, one realizes, status and power are Friedman and Mandelbaum's real concern when they talk about American decline. They attack the humanistic film “Race to Nowhere,” which demonstrates the well-established truth that giving kids more homework to do only produces kids who have done more homework, while praising the “Tiger Mom,” who keeps her children away from the grade-school play in pursuit of better grades in math. You kids think you're stressed out from too much homework? “Stress is what you'll feel when you can't understand the thick Chinese accent of your first boss out of college,” Friedman and Mandelbaum taunt. (This horror of the Asian boss is a recurring one in the American imagination—in “Rabbit at Rest,” the final indignity for Harry Angstrom is the Japanese boss who comes in to shut down his Toyota franchise and can't pronounce his “l's.”) Never mind that the nationality of the boss would not make a bit of difference to your pocketbook; apparently, it would denote a loss of status if we worked for foreigners with their thick accents instead of having them work for us, with ours.

Yet the human concerns of prestige and power tend to hide behind the economic values of productivity and prosperity, with the persistent illusion that one will easily pass for the other. Britain and France are incomparably more productive and prosperous now than they were a hundred and fifty years ago, at the height of Empire—if it is our role in this century to repeat the economic “decline” of Britain in the last one, we'll have done fantastically well—but they have limited military power and thus reduced prestige. This loss of power, more than the gain in comfort, haunts their poets and, it seems, their people. Dominating so much British and French art since the war is an emotion of loss, and what has been lost is a sense of national prestige—a sense that what we're doing right here now matters to the world's destiny. The French novelist Michel Houellebecq, who has the great gift of fearlessness, once wrote about how much he preferred Russia to France: for all the poverty and corruption, the teen-agers were still filled with raw optimism and energy. (Part of his evidence, not entirely by the way, was that they love to listen to “Ticket to Ride” and “Love Me Do.”) Spengler was right, at least, that a civilization's sense of its own place in the cycle of life matters; if it feels like winter's on the way, it doesn't matter how large the autumn harvest is.

It takes more than full bellies to make fulfilled lives. Without enough to eat, life is nasty; with merely enough to eat, it feels empty. The escape from not-enough can highlight the emptiness of only-enough. Ferguson, sensing this vacuum at the center of our well-fed lives, asks how we can anchor our prosperity in permanent values: “What are the foundational texts of Western civilization that can bolster our belief in the almost boundless power of the free individual human being?” He answers, in a footnote, that his list would consist of Newton’s “Principia,” the King James Bible, Locke’s “Two Treatises on Civil Government,” Adam Smith’s “Theory of Moral Sentiments” and “Wealth of Nations,” Darwin’s “Origin of Species,” Burke’s “Reflections on the Revolution in France,” and the complete works of Shakespeare, along with a few speeches by Lincoln and Churchill.

You will search in vain for an ironic quiver of the cheek where his tongue must be buried. Ferguson actually thinks that all the key texts on modern freedom were written in English (or, in the case of the Bible, translated into it) by (Lincoln apart) subjects of the English crown. Put aside that Newton’s “Principia” is, as Morris writes, a technical book, unreadable by all but specialists, while Galileo’s “Two Chief World Systems,” to name just one book by a Foreigner, is a systematic defense of the scientific method that’s charmingly written, in the vernacular, for a popular audience. Put aside, too, the point that the Bible, with its resolute emphasis on obedience to authority, is hardly a document proclaiming the boundless power of the free individual, even in its sublime Jacobean rendering. What really is lost, if you don’t name Erasmus or Montaigne or Molière or, for that matter, Goethe to this list, is the horizon of the good life that is included in what we have called, since the Renaissance, humanism—the belief that, while our lives should be devoted to happiness, they’re impoverished without an idea of happiness deeper than mere property-bound prosperity. The special virtue of freedom is not that it makes you richer and more powerful but that it gives you more time to understand what it means to be alive.

What’s worth saving about “the West” is the moral achievements that have flowed from it. The emancipation of women and their integration on equal terms in education, the granting of civil rights to homosexuals, the removal, at least formally, of racial discrimination—these are not a common feature of prosperous or declining empires but unique moral achievements of this one. There’s no pattern in history to compare us to, because nothing like us ever happened before. The lessons of declinism are manifold, but the central one is that obsessively fretting about your

possible decline can be a good way to produce it. None of the things that let the West run the show in the past were the result of worrying about China: when Watt perfected his steam engine, he was not worrying that somebody was making one in Cathay. Only late in the nineteenth century did Britain begin to be infected by paranoia about the rise and consolidation of Germany, its schemes in Africa, Russian ambitions in Afghanistan and India—all of them pure prestige-and-status chimeras. Colonialism didn't even pay; Germany could have had all of Africa and British productivity would scarcely have been affected. But the paranoia led to the Great War, and to the catastrophes that followed. That's a lot of death—sixty million needless deaths—to get back to the starting point that was available in 1914, if you were willing to settle not just for a slightly smaller piece of a significantly bigger pie but for a slightly smaller place setting on a much expanded table. Faced with the same choice now, would we make the same error?

Whatever happens next, short term or long, is likely to be more affected by accident and by invention—and by new ideas—than by any trend now in sight. The philosopher Karl Popper once offered an important proof against “historicism”: what we know next will change what happens next, and we can't know what we'll know next, since if we could we'd know it now. Amid all Spengler's genius and silliness, his silliest moment is when he announces that physics is finished as a science, its task of description complete. This in 1918, when Einstein's predictions about the bending of light rays by gravity are about to be confirmed, and Bohr and Planck are already at work.

“Cultivate your garden,” Voltaire recommended. It remains enlightened advice both on practical grounds—people get rich by joining gardens together into big parks of prosperity—and on moral ones: the flowers will fade in any case, and meanwhile we will have had the utility of their fragrance. Declinism is a bad idea, because no one can have any notion of what will happen next. Yet the idea of our decline is emotionally magnetic, because life is a long slide down, and the plateau just passed is easier to love than the one coming up. One of the painful things that smart people learned in the last century is that the future cannot be an object of faith, and only the credulous can see clear auguries in the patterns of the past. We read history not to find predictive patterns but for the same reason that we listen to oldies stations on Sirius radio as we drive back roads on holiday: the old songs matter. Many of them were better than the new songs. That we might not learn anything from them, aside from the obvious truth that what worked then worked for then and what works now

works for now, doesn't alter our taste for old music. The long look back is part of the long ride home. We all believe in yesterday. ♦



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