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Opinion

Is the sun slowly setting on U.S. power? That depends on us.



By [David Ignatius](#) Columnist April 26, 2024

The United States might be stumbling toward a decline from which few great powers have ever recovered. It has many of the tools of national recovery but doesn't yet have a shared recognition of the problem and how to fix it.

That's not a quote from a MAGA or progressive leaflet. It's a summary of a startling new study by Rand that was commissioned by the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment. It should serve as a loud wake-up call for America in this crucial election year.

The Rand study, which has the anodyne title "The Sources of Renewed National Dynamism," will be published Tuesday. It's part of a [series of reports](#) commissioned by the Pentagon office to assess the United States' competitive position as it faces a rising China. I was given an early copy because I've [written previously](#) about the project and its lead author at Rand, Michael J. Mazarr.

Though the report is mostly written in the dry language of sociology, this is explosive stuff. And its blunt evaluation is in the tradition of the Office of Net Assessment, which was created in 1973 during the bleak days of the Cold War to "think about the unthinkable." The office's founding director was Andrew Marshall, a famously eccentric contrarian thinker; it is now headed by James H. Baker, a widely respected retired Air Force officer who served as strategist for two chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

What has led to "the relative decline in U.S. standing," as the report asks? The opening chapter explains America's problem starkly: "Its competitive position is threatened both from within (in terms of slowing productivity growth, an aging population, a polarized political system, and an increasingly corrupted information environment) and outside

(in terms of a rising direct challenge from China and declining deference to U.S. power from dozens of developing nations)."

This decline is "accelerating," warns the study. "The essential problem is seen in starkly different terms by different segments of society and groups of political leaders." There's a right-wing narrative of decline and a left-wing one. Though they agree that something is broken in America, the two sides disagree, often in the extreme, on what to do about it.

Unless Americans can unite to identify and fix these problems, we risk falling into a downward spiral. "Recovery from significant long-term national decline is rare and difficult to detect in the historical record," the authors note. Think of Rome, or Habsburg Spain, or the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, or the Soviet Union. "When great powers have slid from a position of preeminence or leadership because of domestic factors, they seldom reversed this trend."

What causes national decline? The Rand authors cite triggers that are all too familiar in 2024. "Addiction to luxury and decadence," "failure to keep pace with ... technological demands," "ossified" bureaucracy, "loss of civic virtue," "military overstretch," "self-interested and warring elites," "unsustainable environmental practices." Does that sound like any country you know?

The challenge is "anticipatory national renewal," argue the authors — in other words, tackling the problems before they tackle us. Their survey of historical and sociological literature identifies essential tools for renewal, such as recognizing the problem; adopting a problem-solving attitude rather than an ideological one; having good governance structures; and, perhaps most elusive, maintaining "elite commitment to the common good."

Unfortunately, on this "fix it" checklist, the Rand authors rate U.S. performance in 2024 as "weak," "threatened" or, at best, "mixed." If we look honestly in the national mirror, we're all likely to share that assessment.

So what's the way out? Rand provides two case studies in which urgent reforms broke through the corruption and disarray that might otherwise have proved catastrophic.

The first example is Britain in the mid-1800s. It had built a fantastically successful global empire. But by the middle of the 19th century, it was rotting on the inside from "the human and environmental toll of industrialization, perceived corruption and ineffectiveness of political institutions, control of politics by a small group of landowning elites, rising economic inequality, and more." But Britain rallied with a wave of reform that swept British life and transformed politics. Intellectual leaders shared this passion for reform, from Thomas Carlyle to Charles Dickens.

A second case study can be found in the United States itself, after the binge of the Gilded Age of the late 19th century. That industrial boom transformed America, but it created poisonous inequalities, social and environmental damage, and gross corruption.

Republican Theodore Roosevelt led a “Progressive” movement that reformed politics, business, labor rights, the environment and the political swamp of corruption.

“Progressives had a ‘yearning for rebirth’ and sought to inject ‘some visceral vitality into a modern culture that had seemed brittle and about to collapse,’” note the Rand authors, quoting historian Jackson Lears.

The message of this study is screamingly obvious. America is on a downward slope that could be fatal. What will save us is a broad commitment, starting with elites, to work for the common good and national revival. We have the tools, but we aren’t using them. If we can’t find new leaders and agree on solutions that work for everyone, we’re sunk.