I.

Is the United States in decline, as so many seem to believe these days? Or are Americans in danger of committing pre-emptive superpower suicide out of a misplaced fear of their own declining power? A great deal depends on the answer to these questions. The present world order—characterized by an unprecedented number of democratic nations; a greater global prosperity, even with the current crisis, than the world has ever known; and a long peace among great powers—reflects American principles and preferences, and was built and preserved by American power in all its political, economic, and military dimensions. If American power declines, this world order will decline with it. It will be replaced by some other kind of order, reflecting the desires and the qualities of other world powers. Or perhaps it will simply collapse, as the European world order collapsed in the first half of the twentieth century. The belief, held by many, that even with diminished American power “the underlying foundations of the liberal international order will survive and thrive,” as the political scientist G. John Ikenberry has argued, is a pleasant illusion. American decline, if it is real, will mean a different world for everyone.

But how real is it? Much of the commentary on American decline these days rests on rather loose analysis, on impressions that the United States has lost its way, that it has abandoned the virtues that made it successful in the past, that it lacks the will to address the problems it faces. Americans look at other nations whose economies are now in better shape than their own, and seem to have the dynamism that America once had, and they lament, as in the title of Thomas Friedman’s latest book, that “that used to be us.”

The perception of decline today is certainly understandable, given the dismal economic situation since 2008 and the nation’s large fiscal deficits, which, combined with the continuing growth of the Chinese, Indian, Brazilian, Turkish, and other economies, seem to portend a significant and irreversible shift in global economic power. Some of the pessimism is also due to the belief that the United States has lost favor, and therefore influence, in much of the world, because of its various responses to the attacks of September 11. The detention facilities at Guantánamo, the use of torture against suspected terrorists,
and the widely condemned invasion of Iraq in 2003 have all tarnished the American “brand” and put a dent in America’s “soft power”—its ability to attract others to its point of view. There have been the difficult wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which many argue proved the limits of military power, stretched the United States beyond its capacities, and weakened the nation at its core. Some compare the United States to the British Empire at the end of the nineteenth century, with the Iraq and Afghanistan wars serving as the equivalent of Britain’s difficult and demoralizing Boer War.

With this broad perception of decline as the backdrop, every failure of the United States to get its way in the world tends to reinforce the impression. Arabs and Israelis refuse to make peace, despite American entreaties. Iran and North Korea defy American demands that they cease their nuclear weapons programs. China refuses to let its currency rise. Ferment in the Arab world spins out of America’s control. Every day, it seems, brings more evidence that the time has passed when the United States could lead the world and get others to do its bidding.

Powerful as this sense of decline may be, however, it deserves a more rigorous examination. Measuring changes in a nation’s relative power is a tricky business, but there are some basic indicators: the size and the influence of its economy relative to that of other powers; the magnitude of military power compared with that of potential adversaries; the degree of political influence it wields in the international system—all of which make up what the Chinese call “comprehensive national power.” And there is the matter of time. Judgments based on only a few years’ evidence are problematic. A great power’s decline is the product of fundamental changes in the international distribution of various forms of power that usually occur over longer stretches of time. Great powers rarely decline suddenly. A war may bring them down, but even that is usually a symptom, and a culmination, of a longer process.

The decline of the British Empire, for instance, occurred over several decades. In 1870, the British share of global manufacturing was over 30 percent. In 1900, it was 20 percent. By 1910, it was under 15 percent—well below the rising United States, which had climbed over the same period from more than 20 percent to more than 25 percent; and also less than Germany, which had lagged far behind Britain throughout the nineteenth century but had caught and surpassed it in the first decade of the twentieth century. Over the course of that period, the British navy went from unchallenged master of the seas to sharing control of the oceans with rising naval powers. In 1883, Britain possessed more battleships than all the other powers combined. By 1897, its dominance had been eclipsed. British officials considered their navy “completely outclassed” in the Western hemisphere by the United States, in East Asia by Japan, and even close to home by the combined navies of Russia and France—and that was before the threatening growth of the German navy. These were clear-cut, measurable, steady declines in two of the most important measures of power over the course of a half-century.
SOME OF THE ARGUMENTS for America’s relative decline these days would be more potent if they had not appeared only in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008. Just as one swallow does not make a spring, one recession, or even a severe economic crisis, need not mean the beginning of the end of a great power. The United States suffered deep and prolonged economic crises in the 1890s, the 1930s, and the 1970s. In each case, it rebounded in the following decade and actually ended up in a stronger position relative to other powers than before the crisis. The 1910s, the 1940s, and the 1980s were all high points of American global power and influence.

Less than a decade ago, most observers spoke not of America’s decline but of its enduring primacy. In 2002, the historian Paul Kennedy, who in the late 1980s had written a much-discussed book on “the rise and fall of the great powers,” America included, declared that never in history had there been such a great “disparity of power” as between the United States and the rest of the world. Ikenberry agreed that “no other great power” had held “such formidable advantages in military, economic, technological, cultural, or political capabilities.... The preeminence of American power” was “unprecedented.” In 2004, the pundit Fareed Zakaria described the United States as enjoying a “comprehensive uni-polarity” unlike anything seen since Rome. But a mere four years later Zakaria was writing about the “post-American world” and “the rise of the rest,” and Kennedy was discoursing again upon the inevitability of American decline. Did the fundamentals of America’s relative power shift so dramatically in just a few short years?

The answer is no. Let’s start with the basic indicators. In economic terms, and even despite the current years of recession and slow growth, America’s position in the world has not changed. Its share of the world’s GDP has held remarkably steady, not only over the past decade but over the past four decades. In 1969, the United States produced roughly a quarter of the world’s economic output. Today it still produces roughly a quarter, and it remains not only the largest but also the richest economy in the world. People are rightly mesmerized by the rise of China, India, and other Asian nations whose share of the global economy has been climbing steadily, but this has so far come almost entirely at the expense of Europe and Japan, which have had a declining share of the global economy.

Optimists about China’s development predict that it will overtake the United States as the largest economy in the world sometime in the next two decades. This could mean that the United States will face an increasing challenge to its economic position in the future. But the sheer size of an economy is not by itself a good measure of overall power within the international system. If it were, then early nineteenth-century China, with what was then the world’s largest economy, would have been the predominant power instead of the prostrate victim of smaller European nations. Even if China does reach this pinnacle again—and Chinese leaders face significant obstacles to sustaining the country’s growth indefinitely—it will still remain far behind both the United States and Europe in terms of per capita GDP.

Military capacity matters, too, as early nineteenth-century China learned and Chinese leaders know today. As Yan Xuetong recently noted, “military strength underpins hegemony.” Here the United States
remains unmatched. It is far and away the most powerful nation the world has ever known, and there has been no decline in America's relative military capacity—at least not yet. Americans currently spend less than $600 billion a year on defense, more than the rest of the other great powers combined. (This figure does not include the deployment in Iraq, which is ending, or the combat forces in Afghanistan, which are likely to diminish steadily over the next couple of years.) They do so, moreover, while consuming a little less than 4 percent of GDP annually—a higher percentage than the other great powers, but in historical terms lower than the 10 percent of GDP that the United States spent on defense in the mid-1950s and the 7 percent it spent in the late 1980s. The superior expenditures underestimate America's actual superiority in military capability. American land and air forces are equipped with the most advanced weaponry, and are the most experienced in actual combat. They would defeat any competitor in a head-to-head battle. American naval power remains predominant in every region of the world.

By these military and economic measures, at least, the United States today is not remotely like Britain circa 1900, when that empire's relative decline began to become apparent. It is more like Britain circa 1870, when the empire was at the height of its power. It is possible to imagine a time when this might no longer be the case, but that moment has not yet arrived.

BUT WHAT ABOUT the “rise of the rest”—the increasing economic clout of nations like China, India, Brazil, and Turkey? Doesn’t that cut into American power and influence? The answer is, it depends. The fact that other nations in the world are enjoying periods of high growth does not mean that America’s position as the predominant power is declining, or even that “the rest” are catching up in terms of overall power and influence. Brazil’s share of global GDP was a little over 2 percent in 1990 and remains a little over 2 percent today. Turkey’s share was under 1 percent in 1990 and is still under 1 percent today. People, and especially businesspeople, are naturally excited about these emerging markets, but just because a nation is an attractive investment opportunity does not mean it is a rising great power. Wealth matters in international politics, but there is no simple correlation between economic growth and international influence. It is not clear that a richer India today yields greater influence on the global stage than a poorer India did in the 1950s under Nehru, when it was the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, or that Turkey, for all the independence and flash of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, really yields more influence than it did a decade ago.

As for the effect of these growing economies on the position of the United States, it all depends on who is doing the growing. The problem for the British Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century was not its substantial decline relative to the United States, a generally friendly power whose interests did not fundamentally conflict with Britain’s. Even in the Western hemisphere, British trade increased as it ceded dominance to the United States. The problem was Britain’s decline relative to Germany, which aimed for supremacy on the European continent, and sought to compete with Britain on the high seas, and in both
respects posed a threat to Britain’s core security. In the case of the United States, the dramatic and rapid rise of the German and Japanese economies during the Cold War reduced American primacy in the world much more than the more recent “rise of the rest.” America’s share of the world’s GDP, nearly 50 percent after World War II, fell to roughly 25 percent by the early 1970s, where it has remained ever since. But that “rise of the rest” did not weaken the United States. If anything, it strengthened it. Germany and Japan were and are close democratic allies, key pillars of the American world order. The growth of their economies actually shifted the balance irretrievably against the Soviet bloc and helped bring about its demise.

When gauging the impact of the growing economies of other countries today, one has to make the same kinds of calculations. Does the growth of the Brazilian economy, or of the Indian economy, diminish American global power? Both nations are friendly, and India is increasingly a strategic partner of the United States. If America’s future competitor in the world is likely to be China, then a richer and more powerful India will be an asset, not a liability, to the United States. Overall, the fact that Brazil, India, Turkey, and South Africa are enjoying a period of economic growth—which may or may not last indefinitely—is either irrelevant to America’s strategic position or of benefit to it. At present, only the growth of China’s economy can be said to have implications for American power in the future, and only insofar as the Chinese translate enough of their growing economic strength into military strength.

II.

IF THE UNITED STATES is not suffering decline in these basic measures of power, isn’t it true that its influence has diminished, that it is having a harder time getting its way in the world? The almost universal assumption is that the United States has indeed lost influence. Whatever the explanation may be—American decline, the “rise of the rest,” the apparent failure of the American capitalist model, the dysfunctional nature of American politics, the increasing complexity of the international system—it is broadly accepted that the United States can no longer shape the world to suit its interests and ideals as it once did. Every day seems to bring more proof, as things happen in the world that seem both contrary to American interests and beyond American control.

And of course it is true that the United States is not able to get what it wants much of the time. But then it never could. Much of today’s impressions about declining American influence are based on a nostalgic fallacy: that there was once a time when the United States could shape the whole world to suit its desires, and could get other nations to do what it wanted them to do, and, as the political scientist Stephen M. Walt put it, “manage the politics, economics and security arrangements for nearly the entire globe.”

If we are to gauge America’s relative position today, it is important to recognize that this image of the past is an illusion. There never was such a time. We tend to think back on the early years of the Cold War as a
moment of complete American global dominance. They were nothing of the sort. The United States did accomplish extraordinary things in that era: the Marshall Plan, the NATO alliance, the United Nations, and the Bretton Woods economic system all shaped the world we know today. Yet for every great achievement in the early Cold War, there was at least one equally monumental setback.

During the Truman years, there was the triumph of the Communist Revolution in China in 1949, which American officials regarded as a disaster for American interests in the region and which did indeed prove costly; if nothing else, it was a major factor in spurring North Korea to attack the South in 1950. But as Dean Acheson concluded, “the ominous result of the civil war in China” had proved “beyond the control of the ... United States,” the product of “forces which this country tried to influence but could not.” A year later came the unanticipated and unprepared-for North Korean attack on South Korea, and America’s intervention, which, after more than 35,000 American dead and almost 100,000 wounded, left the situation almost exactly as it had been before the war. In 1949, there came perhaps the worst news of all: the Soviet acquisition of the atomic bomb and the end of the nuclear monopoly on which American military strategy and defense budgeting had been predicated.

A year later, NSC-68, the famous strategy document, warned of the growing gap between America’s military strength and its global strategic commitments. If current trends continued, it declared, the result would be “a serious decline in the strength of the free world relative to the Soviet Union and its satellites.” The “integrity and vitality of our system,” the document stated, was “in greater jeopardy than ever before in our history.” Douglas MacArthur, giving the keynote address at the Republican National Convention in 1952, lamented the “alarming change in the balance of world power,” “the rising burden of our fiscal commitments,” the ascendant power of the Soviet Union, “and our own relative decline.” In 1957, the Gaither Commission reported that the Russian economy was growing at a much faster pace than that of the United States and that by 1959 Russia would be able to hit American soil with one hundred intercontinental ballistic missiles, prompting Sam Rayburn, the speaker of the House, to ask, “What good are a sound economy and a balanced budget if we lose our national lives and Russian rubles become the coin of the land?”

Nor was the United States always able to persuade others, even its closest allies, to do what it wanted, or to refrain from doing what it did not want. In 1949, Acheson tried and failed to prevent European allies, including the British, from recognizing Communist China. In 1954, the Eisenhower administration failed to get its way at the Geneva Conference on Vietnam and refused to sign the final accords. Two years later it tried to prevent the British, the French, and the Israelis from invading Egypt over the closure of the Suez Canal, only to see them launch an invasion without so much as a heads-up to Washington. When the United States confronted China over the islands of Quemoy and Matsu, the Eisenhower administration tried and failed to get a show of support from European allies, prompting John Foster Dulles to fear that NATO was “beginning to fall apart.” By the late 1950s, Mao believed the United States was a superpower
in decline, “afraid of taking on new involvements in the Third World and increasingly incapable of maintaining its hegemony over the capitalist countries.”

BUT WHAT ABOUT “soft power”? Wasn’t it true, as the political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr. has argued, that the United States used to be able to “get what it wanted in the world” because of the “values expressed” by American culture as reflected through television, movies, and music, and because of the attractiveness of America’s domestic and foreign policies? These elements of soft power made other peoples around the world want to follow the United States, “admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness.”

Again, the historical truth is more complicated. During the first three decades after World War II, great portions of the world neither admired the United States nor sought to emulate it, and were not especially pleased at the way it conducted itself in international affairs. Yes, American media were spreading American culture, but they were spreading images that were not always flattering. In the 1950s the world could watch televised images of Joseph McCarthy and the hunt for Communists in the State Department and Hollywood. American movies depicted the suffocating capitalist conformism of the new American corporate culture. Best-selling novels such as The Ugly American painted a picture of American bullying and boorishness. There were the battles over segregation in the 1950s and 1960s, the globally transmitted images of whites spitting at black schoolchildren and police setting their dogs on black demonstrators. (That “used to be us,” too.) The racism of America was practically “ruining” the American global image, Dulles feared, especially in the so-called Third World. In the late 1960s and early 1970s came the Watts riots, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the shootings at Kent State, and then the government-shaking scandal of Watergate. These were not the kinds of images likely to endear the United States to the world, no matter how many Jerry Lewis and Woody Allen movies were playing in Parisian cinemas.

Nor did much of the world find American foreign policy especially attractive during these years. Eisenhower yearned “to get some of the people in these down-trodden countries to like us instead of hating us,” but the CIA-orchestrated overthrows of Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran and Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala did not help. In 1957, demonstrators attacked the vice president’s motorcade in Venezuela, shouting, “Go away, Nixon!” “Out, dog!” “We won’t forget Guatemala!” In 1960, Khrushchev humiliated Eisenhower by canceling a summit when an American spy plane was shot down over Russia. Later that year, on his way to a “goodwill” visit in Tokyo, Eisenhower had to turn back in mid-flight when the Japanese government warned it could not guarantee his security against students protesting American “imperialism.”
Eisenhower's Democratic successors fared little better. John F. Kennedy and his wife were beloved for a time, but America's glow faded after his assassination. Lyndon Johnson's invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965 was widely condemned not only in Latin America but also by European allies. De Gaulle warned American officials that the United States, like "all countries that had overwhelming power," had come "to believe that force would solve everything" and would soon learn this was "not the case." And then, of course, came Vietnam—the destruction, the scenes of napalm, the My Lai massacre, the secret incursion into Cambodia, the bombing of Hanoi, and the general perception of a Western colonialist superpower pounding a small but defiant Third World country into submission. When Johnson's vice president, Hubert Humphrey, visited West Berlin in 1967, the American cultural center was attacked, thousands of students protested American policies, and rumors swirled of assassination attempts. In 1968, when millions of Europe's youth took to the streets, they were not expressing their admiration for American culture.

Nor were the great majority of nations around the world trying to emulate the American system. In the first decades of the Cold War, many were attracted to the state-controlled economies of the Soviet Union and China, which seemed to promise growth without the messy problems of democracy. The economies of the Soviet bloc had growth rates as high as those in the West throughout much of this period, largely due to a state-directed surge in heavy industry. According to Allen Dulles, the CIA director, many leaders in the Third World believed that the Soviet system "might have more to offer in the way of quick results than the U.S. system." Dictators such as Egypt's Nasser and Indonesia's Sukarno found the state-dominated model especially attractive, but so did India's Nehru. Leaders of the emerging Non-Aligned Movement—Nehru, Nasser, Tito, Sukarno, Nkrumah—expressed little admiration for American ways.

After the death of Stalin, moreover, both the Soviet Union and China engaged in hot competition to win over the Third World, taking "goodwill tours" and providing aid programs of their own. Eisenhower reflected that "the new Communist line of sweetness and light was perhaps more dangerous than their propaganda in Stalin's time." The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson administrations worried constantly about the leftward tilt of all these nations, and lavished development aid on them in the hope of winning hearts and minds. They found that the aid, while eagerly accepted, guaranteed neither allegiance nor appreciation. One result of Third World animosity was that the United States steadily lost influence at the United Nations after 1960. Once the place where the American war in Korea was legitimized, from the 1960s until the end of the Cold War the U.N. General Assembly became a forum for constant expressions of anti-Americanism.

In the late 1960s, Henry Kissinger despaired of the future. The "increased fragmentation of power, the greater diffusion of political activity, and the more complicated patterns of international conflict and alignment," he wrote to Nixon, had sharply reduced the capacity of both superpowers to influence "the actions of other governments." And things only seemed to get more difficult as the 1970s unfolded. The United States withdrew from Vietnam in defeat, and the world watched the first-ever resignation of an
American president mired in scandal. And then, perhaps as significant as all the rest, world oil prices went through the roof.

THE LAST PROBLEM pointed to a significant new difficulty: the inability of the United States to wield influence effectively in the Middle East. Today people point to America’s failure to bring Israelis and Palestinians to a negotiated settlement, or to manage the tumultuous Arab Awakening, as a sign of weakness and decline. But in 1973 the United States could not even prevent the major powers in the Middle East from engaging in all-out war. When Egypt and Syria launched their surprise attack on Israel, it was a surprise to Washington as well. The United States eventually had to go on nuclear alert to deter Soviet intervention in the conflict. The war led to the oil embargo, the establishment of OPEC as a major force in world affairs, and the sudden revelation that, as historian Daniel Yergin put it, “the United States itself was now, finally, vulnerable.” The “world’s foremost superpower” had been “thrown on the defensive, humiliated, by a handful of small nations.” Many Americans “feared that the end of an era was at hand.”

In the 1970s, the dramatic rise in oil prices, coupled with American economic policies during the Vietnam War, led the American economy into a severe crisis. Gross national product fell by 6 percent between 1973 and 1975. Unemployment doubled from 4.5 percent to 9 percent. The American people suffered through gas lines and the new economic phenomenon of stagflation, combining a stagnant economy with high inflation. The American economy went through three recessions between 1973 and 1982. The “energy crisis” was to Americans then what the “fiscal crisis” is today. In his first televised address to the nation, Jimmy Carter called it “the greatest challenge our country will face during our lifetimes.” It was especially humiliating that the crisis was driven in part by two close American allies, the Saudi royal family and the Shah of Iran. As Carter recalled in his memoirs, the American people “deeply resented that the greatest nation on earth was being jerked around by a few desert states.”

The low point came in 1979, when the Shah was overthrown, the radical Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini came to power, and fifty-two Americans were taken hostage and held for more than a year. The hostage crisis, as Yergin has observed, “transmitted a powerful message: that the shift of power in the world oil market in the 1970s was only part of a larger drama that was taking place in global politics. The United States and the West, it seemed to say, were truly in decline, on the defensive, and, it appeared, unable to do anything to protect their interests, whether economic or political.”

IF ONE WANTED to make a case for American decline, the 1970s would have been the time to do it; and many did. The United States, Kissinger believed, had evidently “passed its historic high point like so many earlier civilizations.... Every civilization that has ever existed has ultimately collapsed. History is a tale of
efforts that failed." It was in the 1970s that the American economy lost its overwhelming primacy, when the American trade surplus began to turn into a trade deficit, when spending on entitlements and social welfare programs ballooned, when American gold and monetary reserves were depleted.

With economic difficulties came political and strategic insecurity. First came the belief that the tide of history was with the Soviet Union. Soviet leaders themselves believed the “correlation of forces” favored communism; the American defeat and withdrawal from Vietnam led Soviet officials, for the first time, to believe they might actually “win” in the long Cold War struggle. A decade later, in 1987, Paul Kennedy depicted both superpowers as suffering from “imperial overstretch,” but suggested that it was entirely possible that the United States would be the first to collapse, following a long historical tradition of exhausted and bankrupt empires. It had crippled itself by spending too much on defense and taking on too many far-flung global responsibilities. But within two years the Berlin Wall fell, and two years after that the Soviet Union collapsed. The decline turned out to be taking place elsewhere.

THEN THERE WAS the miracle economy of Japan. A “rise of the rest” began in the late 1970s and continued over the next decade and a half, as Japan, along with the other “Asian tigers,” South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan, seemed about to eclipse the United States economically. In 1989, the journalist James Fallows argued that the Japanese state-directed economy was plainly superior to the more laissez-faire capitalism of the United States and was destined to surpass it. Japan was to be the next superpower. While the United States had bankrupted itself fighting the Cold War, the Japanese had been busy taking all the marbles. As the analyst Chalmers Johnson put it in 1995, “The Cold War is over, and Japan won.” Even as Johnson typed those words, the Japanese economy was spiraling downward into a period of stagnation from which it has still not recovered.

With the Soviet Union gone and China yet to demonstrate the staying power of its economic boom, the United States suddenly appeared to be the world’s “sole superpower.” Yet even then it was remarkable how unsuccessful the United States was in dealing with many serious global problems. The Americans won the Gulf War, expanded NATO eastward, eventually brought peace to the Balkans, after much bloodshed, and, through most of the 1990s, led much of the world to embrace the “Washington consensus” on economics—but some of these successes began to unravel, and were matched by equally significant failures. The Washington consensus began to collapse with the Asian financial crisis of 1997, where American prescriptions were widely regarded as mistaken and damaging. The United States failed to stop or even significantly to retard the nuclear weapons programs of North Korea and Iran, despite repeatedly declaring its intention to do so. The sanctions regime imposed against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was both futile and, by the end of the decade, collapsing. The United States, and the world, did nothing to prevent the genocide in Rwanda, partly because a year earlier the United States had been driven out of Somalia after a failed military intervention. One of the most important endeavors of the United States in
the 1990s was the effort to support a transition in post-Soviet Russia to democracy and free-market capitalism. But despite providing billions of dollars and endless amounts of advice and expertise, the United States found events in Russia once again to be beyond its control.

Nor were American leaders, even in the supposed heyday of global predominance, any more successful in solving the Israeli-Palestinian problem than they are today. Even with a booming economy and a well-liked president earnestly working to achieve a settlement, the Clinton administration came up empty-handed. As the former Middle East peace negotiator Aaron David Miller recounts, Bill Clinton “cared more about and invested more time and energy in Arab-Israeli peace over a longer period of time than any of his predecessors,” and was admired and appreciated by both Israelis and Palestinians—and yet he held “three summits within six months and fail[ed] at every one.” Clinton’s term ended with the collapse of peace talks and the beginning of the second Palestinian intifada.

Even popularity was elusive in the 1990s. In 1999, Samuel P. Huntington labeled America the “lonely superpower,” widely hated across the globe for its “intrusive, interventionist, exploitative, unilateralist, hegemonic, hypocritical” behavior. The French foreign minister decried the “hyperpower” and openly yearned for a “multipolar” world in which the United States would no longer be dominant. A British diplomat told Huntington: “One reads about the world’s desire for American leadership only in the United States. Everywhere else one reads about American arrogance and unilateralism.”

THIS WAS NONSENSE, of course. Contrary to the British diplomat’s claim, many other countries did look to the United States for leadership, and for protection and support, in the 1990s and throughout the Cold War. The point is not that America always lacked global influence. From World War II onward, the United States was indeed the predominant power in the world. It wielded enormous influence, more than any great power since Rome, and it accomplished much. But it was not omnipotent—far from it. If we are to gauge accurately whether the United States is currently in decline, we need to have a reasonable baseline from which to measure. To compare American influence today with a mythical past of overwhelming dominance can only mislead us.

Today the United States lacks the ability to have its way on many issues, but this has not prevented it from enjoying just as much success, and suffering just as much failure, as in the past. For all the controversy, the United States has been more successful in Iraq than it was in Vietnam. It has been just as incapable of containing Iranian nuclear ambitions as it was in the 1990s, but it has, through the efforts of two administrations, established a more effective global counter-proliferation network. Its efforts to root out and destroy Al Qaeda have been remarkably successful, especially when compared with the failures to destroy terrorist networks and stop terrorist attacks in the 1990s—failures that culminated in the attacks of September 11. The ability to employ drones is an advance over the types of weaponry—cruise missiles
and air strikes—that were used to target terrorists and facilities in previous decades. Meanwhile America’s alliances in Europe remain healthy; it is certainly not America’s fault that Europe itself seems weaker than it once was. American alliances in Asia have arguably grown stronger over the past few years, and the United States has been able to strengthen relations with India that had previously been strained.

So the record is mixed, but it has always been mixed. There have been moments when the United States was more influential than today and moments when it was less influential. The exertion of influence has always been a struggle, which may explain why, in every single decade since the end of World War II, Americans have worried about their declining influence and looked nervously as other powers seemed to be rising at their expense. The difficulties in shaping the international environment in any era are immense. Few powers even attempt it, and even the strongest rarely achieve all or even most of their goals. Foreign policy is like hitting a baseball: if you fail 70 percent of the time, you go to the Hall of Fame.

III.

The challenges today are great, and the rise of China is the most obvious of them. But they are not greater than the challenges the United States faced during the Cold War. Only in retrospect can the Cold War seem easy. Americans at the end of World War II faced a major strategic crisis. The Soviet Union, if only by virtue of its size and location, seemed to threaten vital strategic centers in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. In all these regions, it confronted nations devastated and prostrate from the war. To meet this challenge, the United States had to project its own power, which was great but limited, into each of those regions. It had to form alliances with local powers, some of them former enemies, and provide them with economic, political, and military assistance to help them stand on their own feet and resist Soviet pressure. In the Cold War, the Soviets wielded influence and put pressure on American interests merely by standing still, while the United States had to scramble. It is worth recalling that this strategy of “containment,” now hallowed by its apparent success, struck some influential observers at the time as entirely unworkable. Walter Lippmann attacked it as “misconceived,” based on “hope,” conceding the “strategic initiative” to the Soviets while the United States exhausted its resources trying to establish “satellite states, puppet governments” that were weak, ineffective, and unreliable.

Today, in the case of China, the situation is reversed. Although China is and will be much richer, and will wield greater economic influence in the world than the Soviet Union ever did, its geostrategic position is more difficult. World War II left China in a comparatively weak position from which it has been working hard to recover ever since. Several of its neighbors are strong nations with close ties to the United States. It will have a hard time becoming a regional hegemon so long as Taiwan remains independent and strategically tied to the United States, and so long as strong regional powers such as Japan, Korea, and
Australia continue to host American troops and bases. China would need at least a few allies to have any chance of pushing the United States out of its strongholds in the western Pacific, but right now it is the United States that has the allies. It is the United States that has its troops deployed in forward bases. It is the United States that currently enjoys naval predominance in the key waters and waterways through which China must trade. Altogether, China’s task as a rising great power, which is to push the United States out of its present position, is much harder than America’s task, which is only to hold on to what it has.

Can the United States do that? In their pessimistic mood today, some Americans doubt that it can. Indeed, they doubt whether the United States can afford to continue playing in any part of the world the predominant role that it has played in the past. Some argue that while Paul Kennedy’s warning of imperial overstretch may not have been correct in 1987, it accurately describes America’s current predicament. The fiscal crisis, the deadlocked political system, the various maladies of American society (including wage stagnation and income inequality), the weaknesses of the educational system, the deteriorating infrastructure—all of these are cited these days as reasons why the United States needs to retrench internationally, to pull back from some overseas commitments, to focus on “nation building at home” rather than try to keep shaping the world as it has in the past.

AGAIN, THESE common assumptions require some examination. For one thing, how “overstretched” is the United States? The answer, in historical terms, is not nearly as much as people imagine. Consider the straightforward matter of the number of troops that the United States deploys overseas. To listen to the debate today, one might imagine there were more American troops committed abroad than ever before. But that is not remotely the case. In 1953, the United States had almost one million troops deployed overseas—325,000 in combat in Korea and more than 600,000 stationed in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. In 1968, it had over one million troops on foreign soil—537,000 in Vietnam and another half million stationed elsewhere. By contrast, in the summer of 2011, at the height of America’s deployments in its two wars, there were about 200,000 troops deployed in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan combined, and another roughly 160,000 troops stationed in Europe and East Asia. Altogether, and including other forces stationed around the world, there were about 500,000 troops deployed overseas. This was lower even than the peacetime deployments of the Cold War. In 1957, for instance, there were over 750,000 troops deployed overseas. Only in the decade between the breakup of the Soviet empire and the attacks of September 11 was the number of deployed forces overseas lower than it is today. The comparison is even more striking if one takes into account the growth of the American population. When the United States had one million troops deployed overseas in 1953, the total American population was only 160 million. Today, when there are half a million troops deployed overseas, the American population is 313 million. The country is twice as large, with half as many troops deployed as fifty years ago.
What about the financial expense? Many seem to believe that the cost of these deployments, and of the armed forces generally, is a major contributor to the soaring fiscal deficits that threaten the solvency of the national economy. But this is not the case, either. As the former budget czar Alice Rivlin has observed, the scary projections of future deficits are not “caused by rising defense spending,” much less by spending on foreign assistance. The runaway deficits projected for the coming years are mostly the result of ballooning entitlement spending. Even the most draconian cuts in the defense budget would produce annual savings of only $50 billion to $100 billion, a small fraction—between 4 and 8 percent—of the $1.5 trillion in annual deficits the United States is facing.

In 2002, when Paul Kennedy was marveling at America’s ability to remain “the world’s single superpower on the cheap,” the United States was spending about 3.4 percent of GDP on defense. Today it is spending a little under 4 percent, and in years to come, that is likely to head lower again—still “cheap” by historical standards. The cost of remaining the world’s predominant power is not prohibitive.

If we are serious about this exercise in accounting, moreover, the costs of maintaining this position cannot be measured without considering the costs of losing it. Some of the costs of reducing the American role in the world are, of course, unquantifiable. What is it worth to Americans to live in a world dominated by democracies rather than by autocracies? But some of the potential costs could be measured, if anyone cared to try. If the decline of American military power produced an unraveling of the international economic order that American power has helped sustain; if trade routes and waterways ceased to be as secure, because the U.S. Navy was no longer able to defend them; if regional wars broke out among great powers because they were no longer constrained by the American superpower; if American allies were attacked because the United States appeared unable to come to their defense; if the generally free and open nature of the international system became less so—if all this came to pass, there would be measurable costs. And it is not too far-fetched to imagine that these costs would be far greater than the savings gained by cutting the defense and foreign aid budgets by $100 billion a year. You can save money by buying a used car without a warranty and without certain safety features, but what happens when you get into an accident? American military strength reduces the risk of accidents by deterring conflict, and lowers the price of the accidents that occur by reducing the chance of losing. These savings need to be part of the calculation, too. As a simple matter of dollars and cents, it may be a lot cheaper to preserve the current level of American involvement in the world than to reduce it.

Perhaps the greatest concern underlying the declinist mood at large in the country today is not really whether the United States can afford to continue playing its role in the world. It is whether the Americans are capable of solving any of their most pressing economic and social problems. As many statesmen and commentators have asked, can Americans do what needs to be done to compete effectively in the twenty-first-century world?
The only honest answer is, who knows? If American history is any guide, however, there is at least some reason to be hopeful. Americans have experienced this unease before, and many previous generations have also felt this sense of lost vigor and lost virtue: as long ago as 1788, Patrick Henry lamented the nation’s fall from past glory, “when the American spirit was in its youth.” There have been many times over the past two centuries when the political system was dysfunctional, hopelessly gridlocked, and seemingly unable to find solutions to crushing national problems—from slavery and then Reconstruction, to the dislocations of industrialization at the end of the nineteenth century and the crisis of social welfare during the Great Depression, to the confusions and paranoia of the early Cold War years. Anyone who honestly recalls the 1970s, with Watergate, Vietnam, stagflation, and the energy crisis, cannot really believe that our present difficulties are unrivaled.

Success in the past does not guarantee success in the future. But one thing does seem clear from the historical evidence: the American system, for all its often stultifying qualities, has also shown a greater capacity to adapt and recover from difficulties than many other nations, including its geopolitical competitors. This undoubtedly has something to do with the relative freedom of American society, which rewards innovators, often outside the existing power structure, for producing new ways of doing things; and with the relatively open political system of America, which allows movements to gain steam and to influence the behavior of the political establishment. The American system is slow and clunky in part because the Founders designed it that way, with a federal structure, checks and balances, and a written Constitution and Bill of Rights—but the system also possesses a remarkable ability to undertake changes just when the steam kettle looks about to blow its lid. There are occasional “critical elections” that allow transformations to occur, providing new political solutions to old and apparently insoluble problems. Of course, there are no guarantees: the political system could not resolve the problem of slavery without war. But on many big issues throughout their history, Americans have found a way of achieving and implementing a national consensus.

When Paul Kennedy was marveling at the continuing success of the American superpower back in 2002, he noted that one of the main reasons had been the ability of Americans to overcome what had appeared to him in 1987 as an insoluble long-term economic crisis. American businessmen and politicians “reacted strongly to the debate about ‘decline’ by taking action: cutting costs, making companies leaner and meaner, investing in newer technologies, promoting a communications revolution, trimming government deficits, all of which helped to produce significant year-on-year advances in productivity.” It is possible to imagine that Americans may rise to this latest economic challenge as well.

It is also reasonable to expect that other nations will, as in the past, run into difficulties of their own. None of the nations currently enjoying economic miracles is without problems. Brazil, India, Turkey, and Russia all have bumpy histories that suggest the route ahead will not be one of simple and smooth ascent. There is a real question whether the autocratic model of China, which can be so effective in making some
strategic decisions about the economy in the short term, can over the long run be flexible enough to permit adaptation to a changing international economic, political, and strategic environment.

In sum: it may be more than good fortune that has allowed the United States in the past to come through crises and emerge stronger and healthier than other nations while its various competitors have faltered. And it may be more than just wishful thinking to believe that it may do so again.

BUT THERE IS a danger. It is that in the meantime, while the nation continues to struggle, Americans may convince themselves that decline is indeed inevitable, or that the United States can take a time-out from its global responsibilities while it gets its own house in order. To many Americans, accepting decline may provide a welcome escape from the moral and material burdens that have weighed on them since World War II. Many may unconsciously yearn to return to the way things were in 1900, when the United States was rich, powerful, and not responsible for world order.

The underlying assumption of such a course is that the present world order will more or less persist without American power, or at least with much less of it; or that others can pick up the slack; or simply that the benefits of the world order are permanent and require no special exertion by anyone. Unfortunately, the present world order—with its widespread freedoms, its general prosperity, and its absence of great power conflict—is as fragile as it is unique. Preserving it has been a struggle in every decade, and will remain a struggle in the decades to come. Preserving the present world order requires constant American leadership and constant American commitment.

In the end, the decision is in the hands of Americans. Decline, as Charles Krauthammer has observed, is a choice. It is not an inevitable fate—at least not yet. Empires and great powers rise and fall, and the only question is when. But the when does matter. Whether the United States begins to decline over the next two decades or not for another two centuries will matter a great deal, both to Americans and to the nature of the world they live in.

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