

PROLOGUE: UNDERSTANDING EMPIRE

THE DECLINE AND IMMINENT FALL of America's global empire is the most important geopolitical fact in today's world. It is also the least discussed. Politicians, generals, diplomats, and intelligence analysts around the world are already wrestling with the immense challenges posed by America's accelerating downfall, and trying to position themselves and their countries to prosper—or at least to survive—in the impending chaos of a post-American world. Outside the corridors of power, by contrast, few people anywhere seem to be aware of the tsunami of change that is about to break over their heads.

That needs to change. This book is an attempt to start a conversation that needs to happen, especially, but not only, in America—a conversation about the end of American empire and what will come after it.

In order to make sense of the impact that the fall of America's empire is going to have on all our lives in the decades ahead, it is crucial to understand what empires are, what makes them tick, and what makes them collapse. To do that, however, it will be necessary to bundle up an assortment of unhelpful assumptions and misunderstandings of history and chuck them into the compost.

We can start with the verbal habit of using empire—or more exactly, the capitalized abstraction Empire—as what S. I. Hayakawa used to call a “snarl word”:¹ a content-free verbal noise that’s used to express feelings of hatred. The language of politics these days consists largely of snarl words. When people on the leftward end of the political spectrum say “fascist,” or “Empire,” for example, more often than not these words mean exactly what “socialist” or “liberal” mean to people on the right—that is, they express the emotional state of the speaker rather than anything relevant about the object under discussion. Behind this common habit is one of the more disturbing trends in contemporary political life: setting aside ordinary disagreement in favor of seething rage against a demonized Other on whom all the world’s problems can conveniently be blamed.

The need to sidestep this habit makes it urgent to get past the currently popular custom of using terms like “Empire” as snarl words, and recover their actual meaning as descriptions of specific forms of human political, economic, and social interaction. Getting rid of that initial capital letter, arbitrary as it seems, is one step in the right direction. The younger President Bush’s administration was able to disguise a stack of dubious motives and justify a misguided rush to war by converting the tangled reality of Muslim resentment and radical militancy into the capitalized abstraction of Terror. In a similar fashion, many people on the other side of the political spectrum have covered equally dubious motives and justified equally unproductive actions by converting the tangled realities of influence, authority, and privilege in modern industrial states into the capitalized abstraction of Empire. The so-called Global War on Terror, of course, turned out to be an expensive flop, and much of what passes for “fighting Empire,” though a good deal less costly in blood and money, has been no more productive.

In this book, then, I will be discussing empires, not Empire, and as soon as some initial questions of definition are taken care of, I will be discussing specific empires—the one the United States

currently maintains, primarily, but also the British Empire that preceded it, and several others that cast useful light on the American empire's past, present, and future. One striking detail, of course, sets today's American empire apart from most of its predecessors: the curious fact that the only people these days willing to admit in public that the United States has an empire are almost always those who denounce it.

That's a very rare thing in the history of empires. As recently as the late nineteenth century, the world's empires proudly claimed that title, and those who argued that the United States should hurry up and get an empire of its own saw no need to cover that ambition with euphemisms. The popular rhetoric of that era celebrated the huge European empires of the day—especially that of Britain, which covered a quarter of the planet's land surface and had effective control over all its oceans—and insisted that since imperial rule brought peace and the benefits of European civilization to the rest of the world, it was a good thing for all concerned.

This same case has been made in recent years by a handful of conservative intellectuals, notably the historian Niall Ferguson,² and a certain number of facts can be cited in its support. Periods when one imperial power dominates any given system of nations tend to be periods of relative peace and stability, while periods that lack such a centralized power tend to be racked by wars and turmoil. Imperial Britain's century of world dominion from 1815 to 1914, for example, featured fewer wars—in Europe, at least—than any comparable period up to that time, and American dominion since 1945 has imposed an even more rigid peace on that fractious continent.

Outside Europe, to be sure, the imperial rule of Britain was a good deal less peaceful, and that of the United States has not been much better. Furthermore, peace, stability, and a Victorian ideal of good government for the natives are not necessarily the only benefits by which to measure. By this I don't mean to bring up such intangibles as freedom and self-determination, though of course

they also have a place in any meaningful moral calculus. The issue I have in mind is one of cold hard economics.

A broader view of history may be useful here. The first explorers to venture outwards from Europe into the wider world encountered civilizations that were far wealthier than anything back home. After returning to Italy from the Far East in 1295, Marco Polo was mocked as “Marco Millions” for stories of China’s vast riches, which later travelers found to be largely accurate. When the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama made the first European voyage around the southern tip of Africa and on to India in 1497, he and his crew were stunned by the extraordinary prosperity of the Indian society they encountered. When Hernán Cortes reached the Aztec capitol of Tenochtitlán in 1519, similarly, it was easily among the most populous cities on the planet—current estimates range from 200,000 to 300,000 within the city alone, and another million in the urban region surrounding it—as well as one of the richest.

A few centuries later, at the zenith of Europe’s age of empire, China, India, and Mexico ranked among the world’s poorest nations, while England, which had been a soggy backwater on the fringes of Europe known mostly for codfish and wool, was one of its richest. In 1600, for example, India accounted for an estimated 24 percent of the world’s gross domestic product, while all of Britain managed around 3 percent.³ Three centuries later India was among the most poverty-stricken nations on Earth, while England had become the center of the global economy.

Plenty of reasons have been advanced for this astonishing reversal, but there are times when the obvious explanation is also the correct one, and this is one of those. To make the point more clearly, consider that the 5 percent of humanity that lives in the United States of America uses around a quarter of the world’s energy and roughly a third of its raw materials and industrial product. This disproportionate share of the world’s wealth doesn’t come to us because the rest of the world doesn’t want such things,

or because the United States manufactures some good or provides some service so desirable to the rest of the world that other nations vie with each other to buy it from us. Quite the contrary; the United States produced very little during much of its empire's most prosperous period, and the rest of the world's population is by and large just as interested in energy, raw materials, and industrial product as Americans are.

It's considered distinctly impolite to suggest that the real reason behind the disparity is related to the fact that the United States has more than five hundred military bases on other nations' territory, and spends on its armed forces every year roughly the same amount as the military budgets of every other nation on Earth put together. Here again, though, the obvious explanation is the correct one. Between 1945 and 2008, the United States was the world's dominant imperial power, filling the same role in the global political system that Britain filled during its own age of empire, and while that imperial arrangement had plenty of benefits, by and large they flowed in one direction only.

With this in mind, we can move to a meaningful definition of empire. An empire is an arrangement among nations, backed and usually imposed by military force, which extracts wealth from a periphery of subject nations and concentrates it in the imperial core. Put more simply, an empire is a wealth pump, a device to enrich one nation at the expense of others. The mechanism of the pump varies from empire to empire and from age to age; the straightforward exaction of tribute that did the job for ancient Egypt, and had another vogue in the time of imperial Spain, has been replaced in most of the more recent empires by somewhat less blatant though equally effective systems of unbalanced exchange. While the mechanism varies, though, the underlying principle does not.

None of this would have raised any eyebrows at all in a discussion of the mechanics of empire, in America or elsewhere, during the late nineteenth century. Such discussions took place, in the

mass media of the time as well as in the corridors of power, and it was widely understood that the point to having an empire was precisely that it made your nation rich. That's why the United States, after a series of bitter public debates that will be discussed in a later chapter, committed itself to the path of empire in the 1890s, and it's why every nation in western Europe either had or desperately wanted an overseas empire—even Belgium had its own little vest pocket empire in Africa, and exploited it ruthlessly.⁴

The near-total domination of the world by European empires in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in conjunction with the popular racism of the time—Kipling's pompous blather about "the white man's burden"⁵ was embarrassingly typical for its era—has given rise in some circles to the notion that there's something uniquely European or, more precisely, uniquely white about empire. In reality, of course, the peoples of Europe and the European diaspora were by and large Johnny-come-latelies to the business of empire.

Ancient Egypt, as already mentioned, was as creative in this as in so many other of the arts of civilization, and had a thriving empire that extended far south along the Nile and north along the Mediterranean coast. The great arc of city-states that extended from modern Turkey through the Tigris and Euphrates valleys and the mountains and plateaus further east to the Indus Valley gave rise to dozens of empires at a time when Europe was a patchwork of illiterate tribal societies whose inhabitants still thought bronze was high tech. China had its own ancient and highly successful empire, and half a dozen other east Asian nations copied the Chinese model and pursued their own dreams of imperial expansion and enrichment. Sub-Saharan Africa had at least a dozen great empires, while the Aztecs were only the latest in a long history of Native American empires as splendid and predatory as anything the Old World had to offer. Empire is one of the most common patterns by which nations relate to one another, and emerges spontaneously whenever one nation has a sufficient preponderance of power to exploit another.

Empires have thus been around for a long time. The evidence of history suggests that they show up promptly once agriculture becomes stable and sophisticated enough to support urban centers, and go away only when urban life also breaks down. Anyone interested in tracking the rise and fall of empires thus has anything up to five thousand years of fairly detailed information from the Old World, and well over three thousand years from the New—plenty of data, one might think, for a coherent picture to emerge.

Unfortunately one major difficulty stands in the way of such a picture: empires attract doubletalk the way a dead rat attracts flies. Some of the doubletalk comes from rival power centers, outside the empire du jour or within it, that hope to excuse their own ambitions by painting that empire in the least complimentary colors that can be found, but an even larger amount gets produced by empires themselves—or, more exactly, by the tame intellectuals that empires produce and employ in numbers as large as the imperial economy can support. Between the doubletalk meant to make any given empire seem much worse than its rivals, and the doubletalk meant to make the same empire seem much better than its rivals, accurate understanding is an early casualty.

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned a few examples of the first class of doubletalk. Examples of the second are just as easy to come by, but one that's particularly relevant here is that shibboleth of contemporary economics, free trade. That term has become so thickly encrusted with handwaving and deliberate disinformation that it probably needs to be defined here. As I'm using it, it means a system of international exchange that prohibits governments from taxing or prohibiting the movement of goods, services, or money across borders.

Pick up an introductory textbook of economics, though, and your chances of finding an objective assessment of free trade are very low indeed. Instead, what you'll find between the covers is a ringing endorsement of free trade, usually phrased in the most crudely propagandistic of terms. Most likely it will rehash the arguments originally made by British economist David Ricardo in the

early 19th century to prove that free trade inevitably encourages every nation to develop whatever industries are best suited to its circumstances, and so produces more prosperity for everybody.⁶ Those arguments will usually be spiced up with whatever more recent additions appeal to the theoretical tastes of the textbook's author or authors, and will plop the whole discussion into a historical narrative that insists that once upon a time, there were silly people who didn't like free trade, but now we all know better.

What inevitably gets omitted from the textbook is any discussion, based on actual historical examples, of the way that free trade works out in practice. That would be awkward, because in the real world, throughout history, free trade consistently hasn't done what Ricardo's rhetoric and today's economics textbooks claim it will do. Instead, it amplifies the advantages of wealthy nations and the disadvantages of poorer ones, concentrating capital and income in the hands of those who already have plenty of both while squeezing out potential rivals and forcing wages down across the board. This is why every nation in history that's ever developed a significant industrial sector to its economy has done so by rejecting the ideology of free trade, and building its industries behind a protective wall of tariffs, trade barriers, and capital controls, while those nations that have listened to the advice of the tame economists of the British and American empires have one and all remained mired in poverty and dependence as long as they did so.

There's a rich irony here, because not much more than a century ago, a healthy skepticism toward the claims of free trade ideology used to be standard in the United States. At that time, Britain filled the role in the world system that the United States fills today, complete with the global empire, the gargantuan military with annual budget to match, and the endless drumbeat of brushfire wars across what would one day be called the Third World. British economists were accordingly the world's loudest proponents of free trade, while the United States filled the role of rising industrial power that China fills today, complete with sky-high trade barriers

that protected its growing industries and a distinctly cavalier attitude toward intellectual property laws.

When it comes to free trade and its alternatives, that level of understanding is nowhere near so common these days, at least in the United States. I've long suspected that businessmen and officials in Beijing have a very precise understanding of what free trade actually means, though it would hardly be to their advantage just now to talk about that with any degree of candor. On this side of the Pacific, by contrast, even those who speak most enthusiastically about relocalization and the end of corporate globalism apparently haven't noticed how effectively tariffs, trade barriers, and capital controls foster domestic industries and rebuild national economies—or perhaps it's that too many of them aren't willing to consider paying the kind of prices for their iPods and Xboxes that would follow the enactment of a reasonable tariff: the prices, in other words, that would be required if we had the trade barriers that built the American economy and could build it again, and if American workers were paid American wages to provide American consumers with their goods and services.

Free trade is simply one of the mechanisms of empire in the age of industrialism, one part of the wealth pump that concentrated the wealth of the globe in Britain during the years of its imperial dominion and does the same thing for the benefit of the United States today. Choose any other mechanism of empire, from the web of military treaties that lock allies and subject nations into a condition of dependence on the imperial center, through the immense benefits that accrue to whatever nation issues the currency in which international trade is carried out, to the way that the charitable organizations of the imperial center—missionary churches in Queen Victoria's time, for example, or humanitarian non-governmental organizations in ours—further the agenda of empire with such weary predictability. In every case, you'll find a haze of doubletalk surrounding a straightforward exercise of imperial domination. It requires a keen eye to

look past the rhetoric and pay attention to the direction the benefits flow.

Follow the flow of wealth and you understand empire. That's true in a general and a more specific sense, and both of these have their uses. In the general sense, paying attention to shifts in wealth between the imperial core and the nations subject to it is an essential antidote to the sort of nonsense, popular among the tame intellectuals previously mentioned and their audiences in the imperial core, that imagines empire as a sort of social welfare program for conquered nations. Whether it's some old pukka sahib talking about how the British Empire brought railroads and good government to India, or his American neoconservative equivalent talking about how the United States ought to export the blessings of democracy and the free market to the Middle East, it's codswallop, and the easiest way to see that it's codswallop is to notice that the price paid for those exports normally amounts to the systematic impoverishment of the subject nation.

In the specific sense, flows of wealth can be used to trace out the structure of empire, which is a more complex matter than the basic outline discussed so far might make it seem. It's entirely possible that long ago, when empires were new, there might have been one or two that consisted, on the level of nations, of a single imperial nation and a circle of subject nations; and on the level of populations, of a single ruling class and an undifferentiated mass of oppressed subjects. Nowadays, by contrast, an imperial system normally involves at least four distinct categories of nations, and an even more complex set of population divisions.

On the level of nations, the imperial nation is in a category of its own. Around it is the second layer, an inner circle of allied nations, who support the empire in exchange for a share of the spoils. The third category consists of subject nations, the cash cows that the empire milks, and in due time will milk dry. Finally, around the periphery, are enemy nations that oppose the empire in peace and war. In theory, at least, this last category shouldn't be necessary, but

it may not be accidental that when an empire loses one enemy, the usual response is to go shopping for another.

On the level of populations, the sort of crudely manipulative rhetoric that divides an elite 1 percent from an oppressed 99 percent is a formidable barrier to understanding. An empire that tried to manage its affairs along those lines would fall in weeks. From ancient Rome to modern Washington, DC, “divide and conquer” has always been the basic strategy of empire, and the classic way to do that in modern times is to hand out shares of wealth and privilege unequally to different sectors of the population. The British Empire turned this into an art form, using arbitrary privileges and exclusions of various kinds to keep ethnic groups in each subject nation so irritated at one another that they never got around to uniting against the British. From the simmering rivalry between India and Pakistan, through the troubles of Northern Ireland, to the bitter mutual hatreds of Israelis and Arabs in what used to be British Palestine, the ethnic hatreds whipped up deliberately for the sake of Britain’s imperial advantage remain a live issue today.

These same divisions can be traced out within the imperial nation as well, and readily make hash out of any attempt to sort things out along the simplistic “us and them” lines favored by so many political activists these days. In contemporary America, for example, different sectors of the population are subject to the same sort of privileges and exclusions that defined so much of life in British India. If you’re an American citizen, the average annual income of your parents is a more exact predictor of your own income than any other factor, but your gender, your skin color, the location on the urban-rural spectrum of the neighborhood where you grew up, and a great many other arbitrary factors have far more to say about your prospects in life than America’s egalitarian ideology would suggest.

Still, there’s more going on here than simple manipulation from the top down. Within an imperial system, different nations and population groups are always competing against one another

for a larger share of the wealth and privilege that empires make available. That happens on the scale of nations, for example, when a subject nation in a strategic location becomes an ally, or when an ally—as America did in 1945—supplants the former imperial center and takes the empire for its own. It also happens on the scale of populations, and on smaller scales still.

The ruling class of any nation, for example, consists of a loose alliance of power centers, held together by the pressures of mutual advantage, but constantly pursuing their own divergent interests and eagerly trying to claim a larger share of power and wealth at the expense of the other power centers. There are always families, factions, and social groups clawing their way up into the ruling class from the levels immediately below it, and others losing their grip on power and slipping down the pyramid. Outside the ruling class is an even more complex constellation of groups who support the power centers within the ruling class, who expect to receive wealth and privileges in return for their support, and who rise and fall in their own intricate rhythm. Proceed step by step down the pyramid, and you'll find the same complexities in place all the way down to the bottom, where a flurry of ethnic, cultural, and social groups compete with one another over whose oppression ought to get the most attention from middle-class liberals.

On the level of nations or that of populations, in other words, it's neither possible nor useful to divide the structure of empire into the simplistic categories of oppressor and oppressed, ruler and ruled. Many nations in any imperial system fall between the summit and the base of the pyramid, and are thereby permitted to pump wealth out of nations lower down on the condition that they forward part of the take further up. The vast majority of people in the imperial nation and its allies, and even some of those in the most heavily exploited subject nations, receive a share of wealth and privilege in exchange for their cooperation in maintaining the imperial system, compete constantly for a bigger share, and generally limit their criticisms of the imperial system to those aspects

of it that profit somebody else. That's why empires have proven to be so enduring a human social form; the basic toolkit of empire includes an ample assortment of ways to buy the loyalty, or at least the passive acquiescence, of all those potential power centers that might otherwise try to destabilize the imperial system and bring the empire crashing down.

Yet empires do come crashing down, of course. The fact that the form has proven to be enduring has not given a comparable endurance to any individual empire. Britons during Victoria's reign liked to boast that the sun never set on the British Empire. (That may have been, as the Irish liked to suggest, because God Himself wouldn't trust an Englishman in the dark.) Still, the sun did set on that empire in due time, and once the sunset started, it proceeded with remarkable speed. Children who were just old enough to remember the celebration of Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897, when the empire was not far from its zenith, had not yet reached retirement age when the last tattered scraps of that empire went whistling down the wind.

It sometimes happens that the fall of the last major empire in any given civilization is also the fall of that civilization, and a certain amount of confusion has come about because of this. The fall of Rome, for example, was the end of an empire, but it was also the end of a civilization that was flourishing long before the city of Rome was founded—a civilization that had seen plenty of empires come and go by the time Rome rose past regional-power status to dominate the Mediterranean world. The example of Rome's decline and fall, though, became so central to later attempts to understand the cycles of history that most such attempts in the modern Western world equated empire and civilization, and the fall of the one with that of the other.

That's the principal blind spot in the writings of Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, the two great theorists of historical cycles the modern Western world has produced.⁷ Spengler and Toynbee each argued that the natural endpoint of what Spengler

called a culture and Toynbee a civilization was a single sprawling empire—a Universal State, in Toynbee’s phrase—in which every previous movement of the culture or civilization that preceded it reached its completion, fossilization, and death. A barely concealed political subtext guided both authors; Spengler, formulating his theory before and during the First World War, believed that the German Empire would become the nucleus around which Faustian (that is, Western) culture would coalesce into the rigor mortis of civilization; Toynbee, who began his *A Study of History* in the 1920s and saw its last volumes in print in 1954, believed that an Anglo-American alliance would become that nucleus. In each case, national aspirations clearly undergirded scholarly predictions.

Yet it bears remembering that a Universal State along Roman lines is only one of the options. Plenty of successful civilizations—the ancient Mayans are one example of many—never came under the rule of a single imperial power at all. Others, such as the civilization of ancient Mesopotamia, had empires succeeding one another every century or two all through the latter part of their histories, so that no one empire put its stamp on the civilization the way that Rome did on the ancient Mediterranean world. Other civilizations had their own ways of dealing with the phenomenon of empire, and so a distinction needs to be made between the fall of empires and that of civilizations.

I’ve argued at length elsewhere that what drives the decline and fall of societies is a process that I’ve termed catabolic collapse.⁸ This unfolds from an inevitable mismatch between the maintenance costs of capital—that is, how much economic activity has to be put into maintaining all the things that societies create and collect—and the resource base needed to meet the maintenance costs of capital. Since capital tends to increase steadily over time, but resources are always subject to natural limits, every society sooner or later finds itself with more capital than it can maintain, and that tips it into a maintenance crisis: basically, a loss of capital,

usually made worse by conflict over who gets to keep how much of their existing shares.

Empires suffer from the ordinary form of catabolic collapse, just like any other form of human social organization complex enough to accumulate capital. Yet they have their own specific version of the phenomenon, and it's generally this specific form that brings them down. To understand how empires collapse, two things have to be kept in mind. The first is the core concept of catabolic collapse just mentioned—the mismatch between maintenance costs and available resources. The second is the definition of empire introduced above—that an empire is a wealth pump, a system of economic arrangements backed by military force that extracts wealth from subject nations and concentrates it in the imperial core.

Imperial rhetoric down through the centuries normally includes the claim that the imperial power takes only a modest fraction of the annual production of wealth from its subject nations, and provides services such as peace, good government, and trade relations that more than make up for the cost. As already noted, this is hogwash; it's popular hogwash among those who profit from empire, but it's hogwash nonetheless. Historically speaking, the longer an empire lasts, the poorer its subject nations normally get, and the harder the empire's tame intellectuals have to work to invent explanations for that impoverishment that don't include the reasons that matter. Consider the vast amount of rhetorical energy expended by English intellectuals in the 19th century, for example, to find reasons for Ireland's grinding poverty other than England's systematic expropriation of every scrap of Irish wealth that wasn't firmly nailed down.

This sort of arrangement has predictable effects on capital and maintenance costs. The buildup of capital in the imperial center goes into overdrive, churning out the monumental architecture, the collections of art and antiquities, the extravagant lifestyles, and the soaring costs of living that have been constant features of life in

an imperial capital since imperial capitals were invented. The costs of building and maintaining all this accumulation, not to mention the considerable maintenance costs of empire itself—the infrastructure of empire counts as capital, and generally very expensive capital at that—are exported to the subject nations by whatever set of mechanisms the empire uses to pump wealth inward to the center. Over the short to middle term, this is an extremely profitable system, since it allows the imperial center to wallow in wealth while all the costs of that wealth are borne elsewhere.

It's over the middle to long term that the problems with this neat arrangement show up. The most important of these difficulties is that the production of wealth in any society depends on a feedback loop in which a portion of each year's production becomes part of the capital needed to produce wealth in future years, and another portion of each year's production—a substantial one—goes to meet the maintenance costs of existing productive capital.

In theory, an empire could keep its exactions at a level which would leave this feedback loop unimpaired. In practice, no empire ever does so, which is one of the two primary reasons why the subject nations of an empire become more impoverished over time. (Plain old-fashioned looting of subject nations by their imperial rulers is the other.) As the subject nation's ability to produce and maintain productive capital decreases, so does its capacity to produce wealth, and that cuts into the ability of the empire to make its subject nations cover its own maintenance costs. A wealth pump is great, in other words, until it pumps the reservoir dry.

The wealth of subject nations, in other words, is a nonrenewable resource for empires, and empires thus face the same sort of declining returns on investment as any other industry dependent on nonrenewable resources. It's thus predictable that the most frequent response to declining returns is an exact analogue of the "drill, baby, drill" mentality so common in today's petroleum-dependent nations. The drive to expand at all costs that dominates the foreign policy of so many empires is thus neither accidental

nor a symptom of the limitless moral evil with which empires are so often credited by their foes. For an empire that's already drained its subject nations to the point that the wealth pump is sputtering, a policy of "invade, baby, invade" is a matter of economic necessity, and often of national survival.

The difficulty faced by such a policy, of course, is the same one that always ends up clobbering extractive economies dependent on nonrenewable resources: the simple and immovable fact that the world is finite. That's what did in the Roman Empire, for example.⁹ Since it rose and fell in an age less addicted to euphemisms than ours, Rome's approach to extracting wealth from subject nations was straightforward. Once a nation was conquered by Rome, it was systematically looted of movable wealth by the conquerors, while local elites were allowed to buy their survival by serving as collection agents for tribute. Next, the land was confiscated a chunk at a time so it could be handed out as retirement bonuses to legionaries who had served their twenty year terms of service. Then some pretext was found for exterminating the local elites and installing a Roman governor. Thereafter, the heirs of the legionaries were forced out or bought out, and the land sold to investors in Rome, who turned it into vast corporate farms worked by slaves.

Each of those transformations brought a pulse of wealth back home to Rome, but the income from conquered provinces tended to decline over time, and once it reached the final stage, the end was in sight. Hand over farmland to absentee investors who treat it purely as a source of short term profit, and whether you live in ancient Rome or modern America, the results you're going to get include inadequate long-term investment, declining soil fertility, and eventual abandonment. To keep the wealth pump running, the empire had to grow, and grow it did, until finally it included every nation that belonged to the ancient Mediterranean economic and cultural sphere, from the tin mines of Britain to the rich farms of the upper Nile.

That's when things began to go wrong, because the drive to expand was still there but the opportunities for expansion were not. Attempts to expand northward into Scotland, Germany, and the Balkans ran headlong into two awkward facts: first, the locals didn't have enough wealth to make an invasion pay for itself, and second, the locals had the kind of tribal societies that fostered Darwinian selection among their young men via incessant warfare, and quickly found that a nice brisk game of "Raid the Romans" made a pleasant addition to the ordinary round of cattle raids and blood feuds.

Expansion to the south was closed off by the Sahara Desert, while to the east, the Parthian Empire had the awkward habit of annihilating Roman armies sent to conquer it. Thus Roman imperial expansion broke down; attempts to keep the wealth pump running anyway stripped the provinces of their productive capital and pushed the Roman economic system into a death spiral. The imperial government stumbled from one fiscal and military crisis to another, until finally the Dark Ages closed in.

The same process can be traced throughout the history of empires. England's rule over India, once the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, is an example already considered. In the last years of British India, it was a common complaint in the English media that India no longer paid her own way. Until a few decades earlier, India had paid a great deal more than her own way; income to the British government from Queen Victoria's Indian possessions had covered a sizable fraction of the costs of the entire British Empire, and colossal private fortunes were made in India so frequently that they gave rise to an entire class of *nouveaux-riches* Englishmen, the so-called Nabobs.

It took the British Empire, all in all, less than two centuries to run India's economy into the ground and turn what had been one of the world's richest and most productive countries into one of its poorest. Attempts to expand the British Empire into new territory were ongoing all through the 19th and very early 20th centuries,

but ran up against difficulties like those that stymied Rome's parallel efforts most of two millennia before. Those areas that could be conquered, such as eastern Africa, didn't yield enough plunder to make the process sufficiently lucrative; where conquest would have been hugely profitable, such as China, British imperial ambitions ran up against stiff competition from other empires, and had to settle for a fraction of the take. Neither option provided enough income to keep the British Empire from unraveling.

The short-lived Soviet empire in Eastern Europe provides another example. In the wake of the Second World War, Russian soldiers installed Marxist puppet governments in every nation they overran, and the Soviet government proceeded to impose wildly unbalanced "trade agreements" that amounted to the wholesale looting of eastern Europe for Russian benefit. Much of the Soviet Union's rapid recovery from wartime devastation and its rise to near-parity with the United States can be assigned to that very lucrative policy of pillage. Once the supply of plunder ran short, so did the Soviet economy's capacity to function. Efforts to expand into new territory ran into the usual difficulties, and when the price of oil crashed in the mid-1980s, depriving the Soviet system of much of the hard currency that kept it afloat, collapse followed promptly.

The United States, as I hope to show, is being driven by the same forces along the same trajectory toward imperial bankruptcy and collapse. Like the empires just described, and many others as well, it has become economically and politically dependent on a set of unbalanced relationships that extract wealth from much of the world and concentrate it here at home. The specific form taken by those relationships, however, unfolds from the unusually complex history of America's empire, and the equally complex history of the language we use to talk about empires and other political arrangements in today's world.