

# Why America Must Fall

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First, let me address the title of this commentary. When I write that America “must” fall, I do not mean that America *should* fall, or *deserves* to fall. I’m not suggesting that America *needs* to fall to please some political bias or cultural lean. No. When I use the word “must,” I’m invoking the idea of fate or destiny. What I’m saying is that America inevitably will fall because that’s the natural order of the evolutionary path our species is treading.

America was conceived and founded with an underpinning of beliefs, myths, and ideals that emerged out of what is called in western civilization “the Age of Reason” or “the Enlightenment.” That period of European history was progressive but not fully radical. The new ideas of individual liberty and personal dignity were grafted onto a much older base of selfishness, ownership, and greed, which had arisen and taken hold at the beginnings of what we call civilization. The economic system we know as capitalism traces its roots back to Medieval Europe, where it began to dethrone feudalism after a 700-year reign. During and after the Age of Reason, capitalism flourished, since it was well-suited to the synthesized set of assumptions that added individual freedom and personal liberty to the pursuit of wealth. England was its nursery, but capitalism found its real home in America, which became the national avatar for that new chapter in human social, political, and economic evolution.

Europeans “discovered” the western hemisphere (i.e., the “New World”) at the end of the 15th century and then aggressively colonized the two continents throughout the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. What was not foreseen was just how stunningly successful that evolutionary leap would be. Our species had been loping along (uh, more like stumbling along) for 200,000 years, doing moderately well in nomadic kinship bands as hunter-gatherer-foragers and horticulturalists. Then, a mere 12,000 years ago, “civilization” began a revolutionary leap forward, spurred by a variety of concurrent developments, including organized agriculture and the rise of nation-states. America stood on the shoulders of that earlier revolution and reached for the sky.

Two starkly contrasting elements in how this took shape provide a telling framework. The first was the total conquest of the northern continent and partial conquest of the southern hemisphere by genocide (a term that wasn’t even coined until the late 19th-century). European colonists to the New World who came to be known as Americans decimated the indigenous population. Through disease and war, we killed tens of millions of human beings whose ancestors had for many millennia lived in the western hemisphere as tribal cultures. This bloody

clearing of the way started out as unconscious, but it quickly became fully intentional, with a religious ideology (Christianity) and a philosophical-moral justification ("Manifest Destiny") that were enshrined as practical policy ("*The only good Indian is a dead Indian*"). Those "savages" had to die so we could claim and possess all the land, along with its abundant resources, for ourselves.

Before that terrible project was finished, England and America created the two Industrial Revolutions of the 19th and 20th centuries, sparked by a culminating series of inventions made possible by the one-time bonanza of energy-rich fossil fuels. These developments would reshape the world and allow the population of our species to dramatically increase.

As all that was taking shape, however, yet another shift was brewing in the zeitgeist. The onset of civilization had made possible extreme physical wealth for a small percentage of human beings (kings, royalty, and the ruling classes). By adding the elements of personal freedom and wider ownership, the American Experiment expanded this bounty to include those who pursued commerce through business in the marketplace. The largesse of new riches through capitalism did, to at least some extent, trickle down from the top into the mercantile classes.

But the headlong pursuit of wealth that was unleashed, along with the rapidly increasing human population and massive extraction of natural resources, were accompanied by new dilemmas. One was that the recent ideas of freedom and personal dignity applied only to some, but not to all, of humanity. The lower classes were left to fend for themselves and had to elevate their status "by the bootstraps." And, of course, slaves were entirely shut out, not only from wealth, but from freedom and dignity as well.

The "peculiar institution" of slavery became a facet of America's original sins. Slaves in the antebellum South comprised one-third of the population — four million by 1860. From the nation's founding, America struggled without success to resolve the contradiction of slavery. A brutal Civil War finally abolished chattel slavery, but it didn't end racism, which continues to this day.

The other dilemma was increasing and serious damage to the biosphere. Before civilization, humanity's footprint on the earth had been relatively light. Yes, even then we fouled the environment, but the earth sucked it up and recovered fairly easily. After civilization began, however, and then more strikingly after the ramping up of industrialization, the earth could no longer effectively neutralize humanity's disruptive and destructive impact on the natural world. The astonishing web of interdependence that had enabled and sustained organic life began to unravel.

Mass extinction events had periodically occurred before in earth's history, times where a majority of the planet's organic life-forms (species) died off suddenly and vanished for one reason or another. According to our best understanding of the geologic record, those cataclysmic changes had occurred five times since life began on earth. The most recent of the five, called the K-T Mass Extinction,

occurred about 65 million years ago at the end of the Cretaceous Period of the Mesozoic Era. That's the one where a meteor impact wiped out the dinosaurs, along with 75% of all other living species, but also opened the door to the rise of primates and mammals. The world we inhabit today was made possible by that cataclysm.

For roughly the past three centuries, a sixth mass extinction has been underway, or at least gearing up. Scientists have named this recent and current die-off the Anthropocene Epoch, since its cause is due mainly to human activity.

The first dilemmas (wealth inequality, class privilege, and racism) were initially more obvious among people inclined toward concern. By the mid-19th century, even as capitalism was only beginning to flex its powerful muscles, new ideas were already emerging about what would need to happen in civilization to sustain and better distribute the bonanza of wealth, freedom, and dignity. It became obvious to some that the rampant selfishness and greed unleashed with the onset of civilization could not continue indefinitely if humanity was to have any chance at all of maintaining its successful evolution. What grew out of those concerns were the philosophies of socialism and communism, with their economic, political, and social critiques of existing systems.

A full century later, some Americans (though by no means all) realized that the damage to the biosphere caused by human activity was also a catastrophe in the making. Solving the dilemmas of inequality and injustice wouldn't matter much if we trashed the environment. Humanity would need to find less harmful ways to live on the planet if we were to survive.

Taken together, these two developments (to which we could add a more recent third — the threat of nuclear war) highlighted a profoundly difficult challenge. Could humans collectively transform our tendencies toward personal selfishness, greed, and murderous conflict into a more sympathetic and empathic motivation to share? Also, could we repair or at least minimize the damage we did to the biosphere by finding new ways to live (or by restoring old ways) that would be more in harmony with Nature?

Cooperation and sharing had been hallmarks of 90% of our time on earth, but civilization had pushed the Us-versus-Them dynamic so basic to human neural programming into an extreme ratio: we loved and cared for only a small, select number (Us) and didn't give a crap about all the rest (Them). If we could not rebalance this ratio (so that there would be more of Us and fewer of Them), we would be doomed from within through social breakdown and doomed from without through ecological disaster.

Here in the 21st century, humanity is living out and suffering through an extraordinary pitched battle between these opposite motivations. Both sharing and self-centeredness are natural parts of the fabric of organic life. Neither is going away. But we have arrived at a point of serious imbalance where self-centeredness is dominant in the expression of our new-found power, so much so that our future as a species is in doubt. Humanity no longer appreciates,

supports, and participates in the harmonious interdependence of earthly life. We have become the equivalent of a toxic virus in the biosphere.

Capitalism was an amazing development that served humanity well for awhile. But that time is past, even as what is termed "late-stage capitalism" culminates in its mega-corporate form. A more honest and less euphemistic title would be "predatory capitalism," since that economic approach and social philosophy is now cannibalizing everything for short-term gain. The urgent and immense pressures to keep that game of profit going — whatever the cost — now imperil us. We seem unwilling or unable to even cut back, much less stop activities that have become monstrous and deadly to ourselves and to life on earth.

Many people in business today — even those who support capitalism — are well aware that something is very wrong. The economic imperative of commerce is now akin to a runaway train headed for disaster, and business people know that better than anyone. And yet, even most of those who are concerned continue to participate because they feel that no other choice is available. It's a Catch-22: Run faster after profits or risk not staying afloat in the marketplace, even though doing so may lead to collective disaster not too far down the road.

As I've written earlier, none of the "isms" works worth a damn in real life. Capitalism, socialism, and communism all suffer from feet of clay, despite their many benefits. But for all the serious downsides of socialism and communism, they now represent the only viable roads ahead over the coming century or two. Capitalism has become far too toxic. While pushing personal freedom to its limit, it has failed to promote or enable even a moderately fair distribution of wealth. And it has wreaked havoc with life's necessary interdependence.

Hypocrisy abounds. Capitalism spouts endless homilies about the wonders of competition while doing everything it can to further monopolies. Economists obsess about innovation, but corporate group-think enforces corrupt conformity. Socialism is excoriated as "anti-American," even though socialism for the wealthy and powerful was built into the system long ago. We talk about living more simply, but relatively few people want to give up all the goodies to which they have become accustomed (or addicted, to put it more plainly).

Both major political parties have sold their souls to the devil. Reform of the oligarchy is a joke. Government, which must be an essential agent if we are to save ourselves, cannot be trusted to enact any laws that promote sanity. Most institutions — education and health care come to mind as prime examples — have succumbed to senility and serve only themselves instead of the public.

The slow waltz of breakdown and collapse is already underway, gathering steam, and becoming more obvious with each passing year. At this point, things have to get worse — probably much worse — before they can even begin to get better.

Will we rise, like the mythical phoenix, from our own ashes? Or will we consume ourselves, like the dragon eating its own tail? I don't know. Time will tell.