

Sleepwalking into the Imperial Dark:

What It Feels Like When a Superpower Runs Off the Tracks

By Tom Engelhardt

This can't end well.

But then, how often do empires end well, really? They live vampirically by feeding off others until, sooner or later, they begin to feed on themselves, to suck their own blood, to hollow themselves out. Sooner or later, they find themselves, as in our case, economically stressed and militarily extended in wars they can't afford to win or lose.

Historians have certainly **written** about the dangers of overextended empires and of **endless war** as a way of life, but there's something distant and abstract about the patterns of history. It's quite another thing to take it in when you're part of it; when, as they used to say in the overheated 1960s, you're in the belly of the beast.

I don't know what it felt like to be inside the Roman Empire in the long decades, even centuries, before it collapsed, or to experience the waning years of the Spanish empire, or the twilight of the Qing dynasty, or of Imperial Britain as the sun first began to set, or even of the Soviet Empire **before the troops** came slinking home from Afghanistan, but at some point it must have seemed at least a little like this -- truly strange, like watching a machine losing its parts. It must have seemed as odd and unnerving as it does now to see a formerly mighty power enter a state of semi-paralysis at home even as it staggers on blindly with its war-making abroad.

The United States is, of course, an imperial power, however much we might prefer not to utter the word. We still have our globe-spanning array of semi-client states; our military continues to **garrison** much of the planet; and we are waging war abroad more continuously than at any time in memory. Yet who doesn't sense that the sun is now setting on us?

Not so many years ago, we were proud enough of our global strength to regularly refer to ourselves as the Earth's "sole superpower." In those years, our president and his top officials dreamed of establishing a worldwide *Pax Americana*, while making **speeches** and issuing **official documents** proclaiming that the United States would be militarily "beyond challenge" by any

and all powers for eons to come. So little time has passed and yet who speaks like that today? Who could?

This can't end well.

But then, how often do empires end well, really? They live vampirically by feeding off others until, sooner or later, they begin to feed on themselves, to suck their own blood, to hollow themselves out. Sooner or later, they find themselves, as in our case, economically stressed and militarily extended in wars they can't afford to win or lose.

Historians have certainly **written** about the dangers of overextended empires and of **endless war** as a way of life, but there's something distant and abstract about the patterns of history. It's quite another thing to take it in when you're part of it; when, as they used to say in the overheated 1960s, you're in the belly of the beast.

I don't know what it felt like to be inside the Roman Empire in the long decades, even centuries, before it collapsed, or to experience the waning years of the Spanish empire, or the twilight of the Qing dynasty, or of Imperial Britain as the sun first began to set, or even of the Soviet Empire **before the troops** came slinking home from Afghanistan, but at some point it must have seemed at least a little like this -- truly strange, like watching a machine losing its parts. It must have seemed as odd and unnerving as it does now to see a formerly mighty power enter a state of semi-paralysis at home even as it staggers on blindly with its war-making abroad.

The United States is, of course, an imperial power, however much we might prefer not to utter the word. We still have our globe-spanning array of semi-client states; our military continues to **garrison** much of the planet; and we are waging war abroad more continuously than at any time in memory. Yet who doesn't sense that the sun is now setting on us?

Not so many years ago, we were proud enough of our global strength to regularly refer to ourselves as the Earth's "sole superpower." In those years, our president and his top officials dreamed of establishing a worldwide *Pax Americana*, while making **speeches** and issuing **official documents** proclaiming that the United States would be militarily "beyond challenge" by any and all powers for eons to come. So little time has passed and yet who speaks like that today? Who could?

A Country in Need of Prozac

Have you noticed, by the way, how repetitiously our **president**, various presidential **candidates**, and others now insist that we are “the greatest nation on Earth” (as they **speak of** the U.S. military being “the finest fighting force in the history of the world”)? And yet, doesn’t that phrase leave ash in your mouth? Look at this country and its frustrations today and tell me: Does anyone honestly believe that anymore?

It wasn’t a mistake that the fantasy avenger figure of **Rambo** became immensely popular in the wake of defeat in Vietnam or that, unlike American heroes of earlier decades, he had such a visibly, almost **risibly overblown** musculature. As eye-candy, it was pure overcompensation for the obvious. Similarly, when the United States was actually “the greatest” on this planet, no one needed to say it over and over again.

Can there be any question that something big is happening here, even if we don’t quite know what it is because, unlike the peoples of past empires, we never took pride in or even were able to think of ourselves as imperial? And if you were indeed in denial that you lived in the belly of a great imperial power, if like most Americans you managed to ignore the fact that we were **pouring our treasure** into the military or **setting up bases** in countries that few could have found on a map, then you would naturally experience the empire going down as if through a glass darkly.

Nonetheless, the feelings that should accompany the experience of an imperial power running off the rails aren’t likely to disappear just because analysis is lacking. Disillusionment, depression, and dismay flow ever more strongly through the American bloodstream. Just look at **any polling data** on whether this country, once the quintessential land of optimists, is heading in “the right direction” or on “the wrong track,” and you’ll find that the “wrong track” numbers are staggering, and growing by the month. On the **rare occasions** when Americans have been asked by pollsters whether they think the country is “in decline,” the figures have been similarly over the top.

It’s not hard to see why. A loss of faith in the American political system is palpable. For many Americans, it’s no longer “our government” but “the bureaucracy.” Washington is visibly in gridlock and incapable of doing much of significance, while state governments, **facing** the “steepest decline in state tax receipts on record,” are, along with local governments, staggering under massive deficits and **cutting back** in areas -- education, policing, firefighting -- that **matter** to daily life.

Years ago, in the George W. Bush era, I wanted to put a **new word** in our domestic political vocabulary: “Republican’ts.” It was my way of expressing the feeling that something basic to this country -- a “can do” spirit -- was seeping away. I failed, of course, and since then that “can’t do” spirit has visibly spread far beyond the Republican Party. Simply put, we’re a country in need of Prozac.

Facing the challenges of a world at the edge -- from Japan to the Greater Middle East, from a shaky global economic system to weather that has become **anything but entertainment** -- the United States looks increasingly incapable of coping. It no longer invests in its young, or plans effectively for the future, or sets off on new paths. It literally *can’t do*. And this is not just a domestic crisis, but part of imperial decline.

We just don’t treat it as such, tending instead to deal with the foreign and domestic as essentially separate spheres, when the connections between them are so obvious. If you doubt this, just pull into your nearest **gas station** and fill up the tank. Of course, who doesn’t know that this country, once such a generator of wealth, is now living with **unemployment figures** not seen since the Great Depression, as well as unheard of levels of debt, that it’s hooked on foreign energy (and like most addicts has next to no capacity for planning how to get off that drug), or that it’s living through the **worst period** of income inequality in modern history? And who doesn’t know that a crew of financial fabulists, corporate honchos, lobbyists, and politicians have been fattening themselves off the faltering body politic?

And if you don’t think any of this has anything to do with imperial power in decline, ask yourself why the options for our country so often seem to have shrunk to what our military is capable of, or that the only significant part of the government whose **budget** is still on the rise is the Pentagon. Or why, when something is needed, this administration, like its predecessor, regularly turns to that same military.

Once upon a time, helping other nations in terrible times, for example, would have been an obvious duty of the civil part of the U.S. government. Today, from **Haiti** to Japan, in such moments it’s the U.S. military that acts. In response to the Japanese triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown, for instance, the Pentagon has **mounted** a large-scale recovery effort, involving 18,000 people, 20 U.S. Navy ships, and even fuel barges **bringing fresh water** for reactor-cooling efforts at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear complex. The effort has been given a military code name, Operation Tomodachi (Japanese for “friend”), and is, among

other things, an obvious propaganda campaign meant to promote the usefulness of America's archipelago of bases in that country.

Similarly, when the administration needs something done in the Middle East, these days it's as likely to send Secretary of Defense Robert Gates -- he recently paid official visits to **Bahrain**, **Saudi Arabia**, **Iraq**, and **Egypt** -- as Secretary of State Hilary Clinton. And of course, as is typical, when a grim situation in Libya worsened and something "humanitarian" was called for, the Obama administration (along with NATO) threw air power at it.



Predictably, as in Afghanistan and the Pakistani borderlands, air power failed to bring about speedy success. What's most striking is not that Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi didn't instantly fall, or that the Libyan military didn't collapse when significant parts of its tank and artillery forces were taken out, or that the swift strikes meant to turn the tide have already stretched into more than a month of no-fly zone **NATO squabbling** and military **stalemate** (as the no-fly zone version of war **against Saddam Hussein's Iraq** stretched to 12 years without ultimate success).

Buy the book.

Imperially speaking, two things are memorable about the American military effort in Libya. First, Washington doesn't seem to have the conviction of what's left of its power, as its strange military dance in (and **half-out of**) the air over that country indicates. Second, even in the military realm, Washington is increasingly incapable of drawing lessons from its past actions. As a result, its arsenal of potential tactics is made up largely of those that have failed in the recent past. Innovation is no longer part of empire.

The Uses of Fear

From time to time, the U.S. government's "**Intelligence Community**" or IC musters its collective savvy and plants its flag in the future in periodic reports that go under the generic rubric of "Global Trends." The last of these, **Global Trends 2025**, was prepared for a new administration taking office in January 2009, and it was typical.

In a field **once left to** utopian or dystopian thinkers, pulp-fiction writers, oddballs, visionaries, and even outright cranks, these compromise bureaucratic documents break little ground and rock no boats, nor do they predict global tsunamis. Better to forecast what the people you

brief already believe, and skip the oddballs with their strange hunches, the sorts who might actually have a knack for recognizing the shock of the future lurking in the present.

As group efforts, then, these reports tend to project the trends of the present moment relatively seamlessly and reasonably reassuringly into the future. For example, the last time around they **daringly predicted** a gradual, 15-year soft landing for a modestly declining America. ("Although the United States is likely to remain the single most powerful actor, [the country's] relative strength -- even in the military realm -- will decline and U.S. leverage will become more constrained.")

Even though it was assumedly being finished amid the global meltdown of 2008, nothing in it would have kept you up at night, sleepless and fretting. More than 15 years into the future, our IC could imagine no wheels falling off the American juggernaut, nothing that would make you wonder if this country could someday topple off the nearest cliff. Twists, unpleasant surprises, unhappy endings? Not for this empire, according to its corps of intelligence analysts.

And the future being what it is, if you read that document now, you'd find none of the more stunning events that have disrupted and radically altered our world since late 2008: no Arab lands boiling with revolt, no Hosni Mubarak under arrest with his sons in jail, no mass demonstrations in Syria, no economies of peripheral European countries imploding down one by one, nor a cluster of nuclear plants in Japan melting down.

You won't find once subservient semi-client states thumbing their noses at Washington, not even in 2025. You won't, for example, find the Saudis in, say 2011, **openly exploring** deeper relations with Russia and China as a screw-you response to Washington's belated decision that Egyptian autocrat Hosni Mubarak should leave office, or Pakistani **demands** that the CIA and American special operations forces start scaling back activities on their turf, or American officials practically pleading with an Iraqi government it once helped put in power (and now moving **ever closer** to Iran) to **please, please, please** let U.S. troops stay past an agreed-upon withdrawal deadline of December 31, 2011, or Afghan President Hamid Karzai publicly **blaming** the Americans for the near collapse of his country's major bank in a cesspool of corruption (in which his own administration was, of course, **deeply implicated**).

Only two-plus years after *Global Trends 2025* appeared, it doesn't take the combined powers of the IC to know that American decline looks an awful lot more precipitous and bumpier than imagined. But let's not just blame our intelligence functionaries for not divining the future

we're already in. After all, they, too, were in the goldfish bowl, and when you're there, it's always hard to describe the nearest cats.

Nor should we be surprised that, like so many other Americans, they too were in denial.

After all, our leaders spent years organizing their version of the world around a "Global War on Terror," when (despite the 9/11 attacks) terror was hardly America's most obvious challenge. It proved largely a "war" against phantoms and fantasies, or against modest-sized **ragtag bands** of enemies -- even though it resulted in perfectly real conflicts, absolutely genuine **new bases abroad**, significant numbers of civilian dead, and the **expansion** of a secret army of operatives inside the U.S. military into a force of 13,000 or more operating in 75 countries.

The **spasms of fear** that coursed through our society in the near-decade after September 11, 2001, and the enemy, "**Islamic terrorism**," to which those spasms were attached are likely to look far different to us in retrospect. Yes, many factors -- including the terrifyingly **apocalyptic look** of 9/11 in New York City -- contributed to what happened. There was fear's usefulness in prosecuting wars in the Greater Middle East that President Bush and his top officials found appealing. There was the way it ensured **soaring budgets** for the Pentagon and the national security state. There was the way it helped the politicians, lobbyists, and corporations hooked into a developing homeland-security complex. There was the handy-dandy way it glued eyeballs to a one-event-fits-all-sizes version of the world that made the media happy, and there was the way it **justified** ever increasing powers for our national security managers and ever lessening liberties for Americans.

But think of all that as only the icing on the cake. Looking back, those terror fears coursing through the body politic will undoubtedly seem like Rambo's muscles: a deflection from the country's deepest fears. They were, in that sense, consoling. They allowed us to go on with our lives, to visit Disney World, as George W. Bush **urged** in the wake of 9/11 in order to prove our all-American steadfastness.

Above all, even as our imperial wars in the oil heartlands of the planet went desperately wrong, they allowed us not to think about empire or, until the economy melted down in 2008, decline. They allowed us to focus our fears on "them," not us. They ensured that, like the other great imperial power of the Cold War era, when things began to spiral out of control we would indeed sleepwalk right into the imperial darkness.

Now that we're so obviously there, the confusion is greater than ever. Theoretically, none of this should necessarily be considered bad news, not if you don't love empires and what they do. A post-imperial U.S. could, of course, be open to all sorts of possibilities for change that might be exciting indeed.

Right now, though, it doesn't feel that way, does it? It makes me wonder: Could this be how it's always felt inside a great imperial power on the downhill slide? Could this be what it's like to watch, paralyzed, as a country on autopilot begins to come apart at the seams while still proclaiming itself "the greatest nation on Earth"?

I don't know. But I do know one thing: this can't end well.

Tom Engelhardt, co-founder of the [American Empire Project](#), runs the Nation Institute's [TomDispatch.com](#). His latest book is [The American Way of War: How Bush's Wars Became Obama's](#) (Haymarket Books).

Copyright 2011 Tom Engelhardt