Death By a Thousand Cuts

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Empires rise and fall. From a big enough vantage point, armed with the wisdom of hindsight, we can identify the junctures where empires collapse. However, as someone living through these shifts, the task becomes nearly impossible. It's hard to discern when exactly an empire begins to crumble under its own weight.

Historians argue that, during the timeline of an empire's collapse, no single event marks the precise moment when it ceases to exist. Instead, empires experience a slow death by a thousand cuts—a series of injuries that, each alone, might not be fatal, but collectively weaken the core until it can no longer hold. At these points of infliction, empires limp, trying to muster whatever strength they can to wrestle control of their peripheries.

The Slow Demise of Empires

There are common patterns that precede the collapse of empires:

- **Expansion and Overreach:** Empires often expand aggressively, extending influence and control over vast territories. This expansion is fueled by ambition, but it also strains resources, demanding continuous investment in administration and defense.

- **Inequality and Social Disparity:** As empires grow, sharp economic and social disparities begin to emerge. The divide between the powerful elite and the struggling masses widens, creating unrest.

- **Heavy Reliance on Military Might:** Empires rely heavily on their military to maintain control. Yet, over time, this reliance becomes a burden, with more resources diverted to maintain power rather than to foster growth or stability.

- **Internal Contradictions:** Eventually, contradictions within the system—such as the tension between continued expansion and the ability to manage diverse regions—create vulnerabilities.

Decline Over Generations

The decline of an empire is seldom a sudden collapse. It is more often a slow deterioration over generations—a decline marked by compounding minor failures, systemic mismanagement, and the inability to adapt to evolving challenges. Economically, politically, and socially, the empire begins to lose coherence.

Telltale Signs of Decline

1. **Economic Instability:** Economic crises become more frequent, and the empire struggles to manage them effectively.
2. **Military Overextension:** Resources are drained by excessive military commitments that yield diminishing returns.
3. **Social and Political Divisions:** Internal divisions deepen, and societal conflicts become more pronounced.
4. **Inadequate Crisis Management:** Major crises, such as pandemics or economic downturns, are mishandled, further accelerating decline.

Systemic and Cultural Issues

A sense of exceptionalism often pervades empires, giving rise to the belief that they are immune to the historical patterns of rise and fall. This belief, coupled with unsustainable military and economic policies, fosters complacency and detachment from reality.

Historical Parallels

Trump's recent victory, marking the beginning of his second term, signals a shift in U.S. policy towards economic isolationism. On the surface, these policies might seem like attempts to increase U.S. revenue, but a closer look reveals underlying issues. Trump's economic isolationist policies are symptomatic of a larger malaise—the slow unraveling of the U.S. empire.

Pundits have highlighted the seemingly "irrational" choice by the American public to elect a leader known for his destructive tendencies. Yet, this decision can be explained by the desperation of a public that has faced years of stagnation and unrest. When an empire is stretched too thin, internal unrest is inevitable, sharpening the divide between the "haves" and the "have-nots." The economically and socially marginalized will turn to radical policies and leaders for a fleeting sense of control over their lives.

Historical Echoes: The Roman and British Empires

The symptoms of decline that the U.S. faces today have their parallels in past empires:

- **Roman Empire**: The Roman Empire faced economic strain from maintaining a vast military presence, which drained its resources. To cope, Roman leaders debased the currency, which led to inflation and eroded trust in the economy. Barbarian invasions disrupted trade, isolating the empire economically and contributing to its eventual collapse.
- **British Empire**: The two World Wars drained the British Empire's resources and shifted focus to war efforts over global trade. Protectionist policies after the Great Depression, like the Ottawa Agreements, aimed to protect the domestic economy but stifled international trade. The Suez Crisis of 1956 exposed Britain’s weakened global position, leading to a rapid decolonization process and the empire's contraction.

In both cases, economic isolationism compounded the problems they faced. For Rome, economic instability combined with external threats hastened its collapse. For Britain, protectionist policies and the loss of international influence accelerated its transformation from a global empire to a nation-state in a globalized system.

The U.S. Today

The U.S. under Trump's administration has similarly embraced protectionist measures. Policies such as withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), renegotiating NAFTA, and imposing tariffs on imports are driven by nationalist economic theories. Yet, these measures may end up hurting the U.S. economy more than they benefit it.

The administration's attack on global trade institutions like the WTO, blocking the appointment of new members to its Appellate Body, and refusing to sign free trade statements, signals a departure from the cooperative global economic order that the U.S. once championed.

These moves reflect a desperate attempt to rein in the periphery, as major players like China and the BRICS nations edge towards greater autonomy from U.S. influence. Just as Rome and Britain struggled to maintain their influence over increasingly independent regions, the U.S. faces a similar challenge.

The Beginning of the End?

The gradual unraveling of the U.S. bears a striking resemblance to the late-stage Roman and British Empires. The current world order barely flinched at Trump’s threats of tariff increases, hinting that the U.S.'s influence is no longer what it once was.

The death of an empire is not marked by a single catastrophic event but by a thousand small wounds—wounds that weaken the core, leaving it vulnerable to collapse. The current trajectory of U.S. policy—marked by economic isolationism, internal division, and reliance on military might—could well be the beginning of such a decline. History reminds us that empires fall not from a single strike but from an accumulation of cuts, inflicted over time, until the center cannot hold.