

# Voices From the Crowd: The End of Empire

By Miles Wickstrom

One axiom that is universally accepted among historians is that all empires eventually collapse. Throughout the history of mankind, there have been no exceptions to that rule. Some, like the Caliphate of the Middle East, last for many centuries. Others, like the Third Reich, didn't last even one generation. Some, like the Roman Empire, were particularly memorable. Others, like the Hittite Empire, you've never even heard of, have you? One constant still remains: empires always collapse. That's the rule.

All of us should naturally have an interest in empire collapse because we happen to live in an empire - the American Empire, founded in 1790 when we trounced the British Empire in the Revolutionary War. There are several predictors that signal what historian Dmitri Orlov calls "empire collapse syndrome", so let's compare the predictors of collapse with current events and see where our particular empire stands in its life cycle.

Empires typically - not always, but typically - collapse as the result of military overextension. The Roman Empire is a good example. At the time of the collapse of the Roman Empire in 476CE, its influence spanned four time zones and encompassed an area of the globe from Great Britain in the northwest to Saudi Arabia in the southeast.

Militarily, the Roman legion was one of the mightiest armies ever assembled. Like a juggernaut, it rolled across the map, conquering nation after

nation and bringing them under the thumb of Rome. As you might imagine, it is one thing to conquer, it's another thing to rule. When Italy was invaded by the Visigoths and Vandals and later the Huns in the fifth century, the Roman legion was spread so thinly that there simply weren't enough soldiers to defend the nation. The lesson here is valuable: the further a nation attempts to extend its influence through military means, the more vulnerable it becomes to collapse.

We - all of us - had a front row seat to exactly this phenomenon. The USSR spanned six time zones and existed from 1922 to 1991 - not a terribly impressive life span as far as empires go, but certainly an imposing force in its time. The Soviet Empire repeated all the mistakes of Rome. The ruinous costs of the space race, the arms race, and the Afghan war chewed up fully 27% of GDP. The result was an astronomical national debt. Without a functioning cash flow, funding for social services stopped. Maintenance and expansion of the country's infrastructure stopped. Paychecks for military personnel stopped. In 1985, it abandoned the prison system known as the gulag, not because it ran out of dissidents, but because it ran out of money. Six years later, the Russian Empire collapsed even though it still had nine thousand nuclear warheads and a massive military.

Note: history doesn't repeat

itself. We repeat ourselves.

So, applying the lessons of history, where does the American Empire stand? We might consider that nearly 50% of discretionary spending in the federal budget goes to the Pentagon. We might consider that we have more than 2000 military installations worldwide, at least one in every time zone on the planet. We might even consider the fact that we have borrowed two billion dollars a day for the last seven years to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We might also consider the fact that that borrowing accounts for \$10 trillion of our \$14 trillion national debt, and counting.

That level of borrowing comes at a terrible price. Each year, a larger slice of the budget pie goes to the military and prison industrial complexes while a smaller slice goes to education, and it shows. In 1995, America was ranked number 1 on scholastic achievement tests. Last year, we ranked 53<sup>rd</sup>. 53<sup>rd</sup> out of 57 countries. At least we can claim dominance over Somalia and Kazakhstan, for what it's worth.

We're losing our technological edge. The rest of the world is crisscrossed with bullet trains and magnetic levitation rail systems. America - the nation that once was the gold standard for technological innovation - has just one high speed rail line. The average speed? 62 MPH. The fastest computers in the world are manufactured in China using

Chinese technology. I was taught that communism was a political system that was doomed to fail and I believed it. The communist nation of China will pass America as the world's largest economy sometime in the next 16 years. India - ya know, that nation with all the starving children? - will pass us in 2050, Brazil ten years later.

Empires on a collapse trajectory typically see it coming well in advance even when they won't openly admit it. Once the writing on the wall becomes legible, it seems to become irresistibly tempting to rattle a few sabers one last time in a show of nationalistic chest-thumping. Thus, most empires have marked their collapse with burning cities, slaughtered civilians and martial law. In a highly weaponized empire such as ours, where there are more privately owned firearms than there are people, the worst case outcome is dire in the extreme.

Empires always collapse. That's the rule. As much as we'd like to think that rule doesn't apply to us, the American Empire will also collapse. That doesn't mean we will disappear from the face of the Earth, but it does mean we will need to learn how to accept second place as The New Normal. While we almost certainly passed the point of redemption in 1982 when we sold the White House to Wall Street, we can still plan the transition. Will it include burning cities and slaughtered civilians, or can we create a softer landing? I sincerely hope it is the latter.

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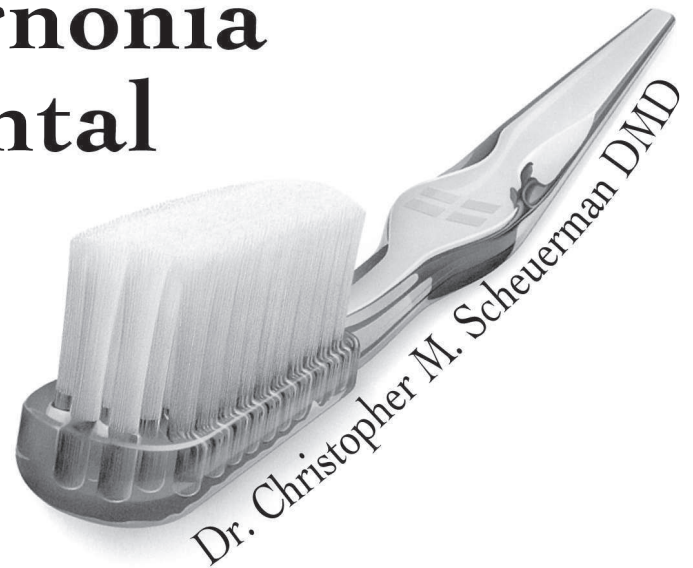
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