

DECLINING AMERICAN POWER

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A period of world history marked by rising American power has passed. We enter an era of diminishing American power.

We have gone over a continental divide, an historical watershed, and have, as yet, only dimly perceived the alteration of the landscape through which we move, noting but tardily that a descent has commenced, long after the turning point of our journey. Slowly, the unmistakable signs of lessening altitude will make themselves felt upon our consciousness in a thousand discernible ways.

It is a new experience for Americans. Hitherto, they have been travelling upward. Nothing in the American past conditions the people for the altered environment, a new direction, a decline of power.

It is futile to debate whether the change is good, bad, or indifferent. It is idle to try to go back on the path we have taken and locate the point of departure from the upward climb.

The beginnings of rising American power are far back in our history. It could be dated from the War of 1812 when the Independence of the country from Great Britian was really finally sealed in conflict. Decade after decade, power gathered about the North American state. Suddenly the nation assumed its continental proportions and took its place among the great powers of the world. World War I finally heralded its full arrival upon the international

stage. World War II found the country not only present on the world stage, but dominating it. The postwar years confirmed that predominance.

Then the country began to tire of a great power role. Whether the disillusionment was wholly the result by Indo China, or flowed, as well from a multiplicity of other causes, will be debated by historians of the future. In any case, citizens conditioned by generations of rising American power began to grow disenchanted with the responsibilities of power.

Quite swiftly, Americans began to be acutely aware of the anguish of great power. Quite deliberately, American legislators have begun to dismantle the nation's power and influence abroad. They have responded to a rising American distaste for the exercise of power. All the great train of consequences that flow from the possession and use of power began to dismay Americans. They were increasingly disenchanted with the hardships and inconveniences inevitable to the role; and increasingly impatient with the embarrassments often incidental to it.

Steps to diminish American power followed this disillusionment. They had their origin as well in the lingering historic contempt for imperial power going back to the nation's birth struggles against imperial power's Eighteenth Century embodiment in Great Britain. A substantial percentage of American citizens retained an inherited antipathy to great power even when their own country became a great power. The desperate years from 1775 to 1783 left a deep genetic imprint upon the American mind. A vestigial remnant of the ancient hatred of great national power survived the country's growth to continental dimensions, its industrial expansion to world leadership, its overwhelming military thrust. Millions, at the

peak of American power, retained an infatuation with remembered virtues, purity, and merit of a tiny country of three millions of people, guiltless of any designs upon the power or territory of others, innocent of any ambition in world affairs, and dedicated to the enjoyment of insular and isolated happiness behind the ocean moats that for so long shielded the land against attacks from abroad.

The reality of American power for years made itself felt in every quarter of the globe. Decisions everywhere in the world were for decades importantly influenced by estimates of what the United States could do and what it would do./ No one will ever know how many aggressive designs were abandoned because of an apprehension that they might arouse the application of American power. No one will ever know how many policies were undertaken in the expectation that American support would be forthcoming. American power became, and for decades remained, the single most important factor in the decisions of many nations, great and small.

American intervention in two world wars and an infinite number of lesser military affairs publicly demonstrated this influence; but the existence of power exerted its weight in thousands of instances unknown to the public, and in many not known even to those in charge of American affairs.

It was not just a possession of military might alone that was embraced in the great power influence of the United States, of course, but the combination of the hardware of military force coupled with willingness to use that physical force. The hardware that remains in this country still is formidable--as formidable as that of any other great power. The ability of the government to

use it has been visibly altered. The anxiety of Congress to curb executive discretion has resulted in specific legislative restraints upon executive prerogative. These restraints no doubt reflect a popular wish to restrict the executive. They may succeed in that, but they also may succeed in removing American military power as an instant and effective element in diplomacy around the world. And that, in the long run, may or may not serve the cause of peace.

There is no doubt that alarm bells have rung in every chancellery in the world, alerting diplomats to a new fact of life ---the unwillingness of the American people, and the inability of the American executive, to match the national power potential of the United States against the military potential of other countries.

President Ford recently dedicated the most powerful naval vessel in the world, a 750 million dollar nuclear carrier. But six resolute row recruits in a rusty rowboat, at the disposition of a purposeful executive, might weigh more heavily in the scales of world diplomacy than 6,000 sailors on the most powerful vessel on the high seas, commanded by an admiral who cannot command the pilot to take a hard rudder right without getting the course approved by 500 wrangling politicians in Congress.

The force in the world, so long slowly rising over decades, and then dramatically multiplying in the last two generations, now diminishes. What will be the result? What will be the result in the affairs of the world? What will be the result, internally, in the United States itself, where its millions of citizens often

have been astonishingly unaware of how the possession and use of national power influenced their lives and fortunes?

The immediate result, internally, may be one of relief. The people are well aware of the disadvantages of great power. They are as yet, not much aware of the disadvantages of great weakness. Probably they are pleased that the country, its power diminishing and declining, no longer can pursue some policies they found offensive and revolting, in pursuit of its foreign aims. They may take some satisfaction that men in charge of national affairs cannot do harm in remote places in the world. Perhaps it will only slowly dawn upon them that they also have divested their government of the power to do good.

As the power of the United States, both absolutely and relatively, continues to diminish, some of the disadvantage of diminishing power may become more apparent. There seems to be little popular fear of these disadvantages now.

Time may dull the irritations felt at the exercise of power; and sharpen a sense of the irritations aroused by the decline of power. Ultimately, Americans may come to weigh the years of American power in a fashion that will cause them to believe that, in spite of errors and aberrations, the influence of the United States on the course of world events was essentially beneficent and benign. The country, they may come to see, used its great power with moderation, and some success. This is not presently a widely articulated view of how the nation employed great power.

How successfully will it employ the lack of power? That is the present and future problem. And how will the lack of power change the character, the attitudes, and the standards of a people, now as unprepared for weakness as they were unprepared for power at the start of World War I? It would be easy to err in making an estimate of how this situation will change the United States; but the greatest error would be the assumption that there will be no change at all.