



Can Countries Make Themselves Great Again?

by [Victor Davis Hanson](#)

Wednesday, January 17, 2018

Is Donald Trump's slogan "Make America great again" mere campaign rhetoric in the tradition of Barack Obama's "hope and change," George H. W. Bush's "a kinder, gentler nation," and Ronald Reagan's "It's morning in America again"? Or do such renaissances really occur in history?

The Roman Republic and Empire together lasted for more than 1,000 years. Yet at various times throughout this period, Rome was declared finished—like during the Punic Wars (264-146 BC), the Civil Wars of the late Republic (49-31 BC), and the coups and cruelty of the 12 Caesars (49 BC-AD 96), especially during the reigns of Caligula, Nero, and Domitian.

Inflation, revolts, barbarian invasions, corruption, and decadence were seen as insurmountable problems. Witnesses such as Livy, Tacitus, Petronius, and Suetonius all recorded that the Rome of their generation was simply too corrupt to continue. As Livy famously put it in the introduction to his massive history of Rome, written almost 500 years before its eventual implosion, "We can bear neither our diseases nor their remedies."

In fact, throughout the centuries of these serial crises, Rome usually found ways to bear the necessary remedies. Often, it was saved through the intervention of exceptional generals like Scipio Africanus. Sometimes, stabilizing figures such as Augustus sought a moral revival. Effective rulers such as those whom Nicolò Machiavelli's called the "Five Good Emperors"—Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antonius Pius, and Marcus Aurelius—gave the world 100 years of calm prosperity between AD 96-192. The magisterial Edward Gibbon described their century as an era when "the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous."

Amid radically changing times, with novel internal and external enemies, Roman institutions and culture persisted. The rule of law, transparent administration, and habeas corpus flourished alongside clean water, good roads, sewage removal, and the professionalism of the Roman legions. Rome endured for a millennium as it went through cycles of decline, recovery, and efflorescence.

A millennium-old Great Britain was also considered finished on a number of occasions. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the statism of Napoleonic France seemed the way of the future, destined to unite all of Europe against the British Navy, and to create an everlasting proto-European Union under French soft despotism. Yet the defiant Admiral of the British Fleet, John Jervis, 1st Earl of St Vincent, assured the British sea lords in 1801—who were anxious about a seaborne French invasion—"I do not say, my Lords, that the French will not come. I say only they will not come by sea." The Duke of Wellington dispelled the remnants of the French army at Battle of Waterloo, and helped usher in a century of relative European peace.

By late 1916, Britain seemed again on the brink. The French and British armies were being bled white at the nightmares of the Somme and Verdun. The German army was considered the most fearsome in history. Russia and France, Britain's allies, seemed on the brink of surrender or mutiny and rebellion. And the United States had no desire to enter the European meat-grinder of World War I. Yet Britain persisted at great cost. A nearly ruined France rallied. America came into the war. And Germany and Austria collapsed.

A quarter-century later, Britain once more seemed on the verge of being crushed by Germany. After June 1940, Britain was the only major free European country left as Hitler occupied most of the continent from the English Channel to the Russian border. Still, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the British people remained unmoved. The strange little island had turned out replicas of John Jervis and the Duke of Wellington in the form of figures like Churchill and field marshalls Bernard Montgomery, Alan Brooke, and William Slim.

After the war, during the 1950s and 1960s, Britain gave up its empire, nationalized most of its industries, and suffered from dismal economic growth. It was largely written off as a neo-socialist, post-imperial, hopeless relic. Yet after the reforms of Margaret Thatcher, the London of the 1990s once again became the financial capital of Europe, as British cultural influence reverberated throughout the world in film, television, literature, and music.

Throughout all these challenges, British parliamentary government persevered. There were no coups or revolutions. An attenuated Royal Navy kept its traditions of protecting the island nation, even in the age of richer and far more powerful superpowers. British civility, ancestral manners, patriotism, and independent thinking endured. Traditional education and values kept producing men and women of genius when the hour was darkest. Oxford and Cambridge remained at the forefront of scholarship and scientific research. On each occasion of crisis, Britain returned to its roots and reasserted itself, even as its obituaries were being written.

The same holds true of the United States—another flexible republican idea wedded to the rule of law and antithetical to history's norms of tribalism, theocracy, and sectarianism.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, an exhausted and dissolute America was said to have reached “peak oil” and soon would become near bankrupt, importing all its energy needs. Ronald Reagan, however, claimed it was actually “morning in America” after growing the economy at 7 percent between November 1983 and 1984, and facing down the “evil” Soviet Empire.

During the last decade, experts have declared that the U.S. economy will likely never again achieve 3 percent per annum economic growth, given an aging population, globalization, and the rise of entitlements. Americans were, instead, to adjust to an “era of limits” and to forget ideas that they were an “exceptional people.”

That pessimism was not new, well aside from the past existential crises of the Civil War, two World Wars, the Great Depression, and other financial meltdowns. Postwar Americans had been warned in the 1950s that Soviet-style communism would sweep the Third World and “bury” the West. In the 1980s, Americans were to defer to the superior economic model of Japan, Inc. that soon would take over the world. Then the next colossus was said to be the European Union's transnational democratic socialism of the 1990s. Now, it is the supposed fated dominance of twenty-first-century communist-capitalist China.

In all of these cases, the flawed assumption was that the U.S. Constitution; a free-market tradition of entrepreneurial capitalism; a multiracial people united through the assimilative melting pot; and federalism under the banner of *e pluribus unum* were either passé or ossified ideas. People thought the days of an America with a booming stock market, an energized manufacturing and industrial sector, plentiful and affordable gas and oil, and a world-dominant tech industry were over.

Yet as 2018 begins, the United States has become the largest producer of gas, oil, and coal in history. Its stock market is at record levels. The economy is growing at a 3 percent rate—and unemployment may dip below 4 percent, even though some commentators have claimed over the last decade that it likely would never fall below 5 percent again. The auto, steel, manufacturing, financial, agricultural, and high-tech industries are ascendant. The world's aspiring professionals prefer graduate schools in Cambridge (Mass.), Palo Alto, and New York to those in Beijing, Moscow, or Tehran. The health of a society is still judged by age-old criteria such as the quality of its educational institutions, the stability of its constitution, the moral caliber of its citizenry, and the ability to feed, fuel and protect itself—and on these measures, the United States is doing far better than its peers the world over.

National and collective decline among constitutional societies such as ours is almost always a choice, not a fate. The culprit of inescapable national regression is rarely external causes like war, disease, or environmental catastrophe. Instead, states insidiously wither away from complacency and ennui brought on by affluence and leisure, which often lead to amnesia about the sacrifices and protocols required for prosperity.

Declining states reverse course not so much by reinventing themselves as by returning to the values that once made them singular. Renewal focuses on investing more than consuming, limiting the size of state bureaucracies and entitlements, and avoiding costly optional wars. It also requires preserving the rule of law, enshrining meritocracy, and reinducting national pride in ancestral customs and traditions while ensuring citizens equity under the law.

In an age of instability—with China ascendant, rampant global terrorism abroad, and increasing racial tension at home—can America return to its economic, cultural, and military preeminence while offering security, prosperity, and a continuation of American values to its citizens?

“Make America great again” hinges on remembering what made America “great” in the first place, but also what has threatened to not make America great at various times in our history. The options are not opaque.

Each generation must choose whether to unite around an ideal that transcends class, race, and regional divides, or to give in to the more natural state of tribal solidarities and prejudices. There is always a choice whether to abide by the Constitution or to warp it. We are always pondering whether to liberate the American economy or to nationalize it, and whether to honor or be ashamed of our icons of the past. Can an often second-guessing, apologetic, and overly litigious America still feel confident that it can be good enough without having to be perfect?

Every nation's next generation must decide whether to leave behind a country better than the one it inherited. And sometimes, the resulting choices can reenergize or finally put to rest their collective inheritance.