

THE FATE OF EMPIRES

(JOHN BAGOT GLUBB)

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What Americans need now is a cheery book that assures us how our global power and hegemony are destined to last, if not forever, for a good deal longer. This is not that book. *The Fate of Empires* is an obscure work, by an obscure man. Yet it apparently still has a following today, because quite frequently, I am asked to read and discuss it, most of all the relevance of its analysis of empire to the present American moment. And to be sure, as America flails impotently in a doomed effort to maintain global preeminence, a discussion of how empires end seems particularly timely. So I figured, why not?

Sir John Bagot Glubb, born in 1897, was a man whose life spanned the height, and then the death, of British empire. His father was a career soldier; he himself fought in World War I, and was awarded the Military Cross. He thus seemed set on an honorable, though not exceptional, career. But like many Englishmen of his generation, most famously T. E. Lawrence but also others such as Wilfred Thesiger, he had a great interest in, and attraction to, the Middle East—in particular, to the Arabs. These men saw in the Arabs, if not a higher civilization, one with virtues lacking in the West, and they immersed themselves within Arab culture, often for decades.

Glubb himself did not go fully native, as by taking an Arab wife or converting to Islam. He was an Englishman to the core, something that comes through clearly, in good and bad ways, in this book. He even named his son, born in 1938, after the heroic Godfrey of Bouillon (the Godfrey part, not the Bouillon part), first ruler of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, an aggressive statement of Western Christian confidence. But naming does not dictate destiny, at least not here—Godfrey converted to Islam as a young man, changed his name to “Faris,” and spent his life working for Muslim causes, mostly with a Communist bent. Maybe Glubb would have been fine with part of that, though, given his admiration for the Arabs and Islam. I don’t know if he ever commented publicly on his son’s choices.

After the war, Glubb was sent by the British to Iraq, sometime Mesopotamia, then under administration by the British as a League of

Nations mandate. In 1926, he took service directly with the new government of Iraq. The British also administered the contiguous Emirate of Transjordan (which later, in 1946, became the country of Jordan), and in 1930 Glubb joined the Arab Legion, a small body of men formed by the British as the nucleus of an army for the Transjordan. In this capacity, he became intimately familiar with the land, its people, and its rulers, the Hashemite kings of the region, who still rule Jordan. In 1939, he took over command of the Arab Legion, which had grown greatly and became the actual army of the Transjordan, then of Jordan itself, and ultimately the largest armed force in the area. This made Glubb in effect the chief military officer (whom they called "Glubb Pasha") of Jordan, responsible directly to the King, and he had considerable influence in government. He led the Legion against Israel in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, and left command, to return to England, in 1956.

No doubt this history, if expanded, is fascinating, and controversial, perhaps, but that is not our focus today. Glubb spent the next thirty years writing, mostly detailed works about the Arab world. But this is his only still-read work—a quite short, more general, book, written in 1976 as two essays for a British magazine. What he offers is an empirical analysis of past historical empires, or more precisely "great powers," in which he sought for patterns explaining their rise and fall, in order to "reach conclusions which [will] assist to solve our problems today."

Such analysis is an ancient pastime, of course. Everyone from Xenophon to Ibn Khaldun to, closer in time to Glubb, Oswald Spengler, had offered such analyses. Glubb doesn't seem to realize this, however, or at least doesn't advert to it. He says of his plan, "No such conception ever appears to have entered into the minds of our historians," and he complains that all historical study is "limited to short periods." I suppose if that means "modern British historians," there may be some truth to his claim, but it's obviously untrue on any wider scale. This points up my main complaint with this book—although it has some interesting things to say, it betrays a blinkered focus far too often. The British as a whole (with plenty of notable exceptions) were often accused of superciliously ignoring other cultures, other than as they intersected with England and the West, and while that tendency was probably exaggerated, for in many ways the British were far more cosmopolitan than us, Glubb's analysis is, as they say, miles wide and inches deep. Maybe

being narrow is inevitable in what is not a magnum opus, rather just two magazine articles (the second largely responding to criticism of the first), and being narrow doesn't mean no interesting conclusions can be drawn, but it definitely undercuts the impact of the book.

The short version of *The Fate of Empires*, and probably the reason it has undergone a revival of late (along with that it's a lot quicker read than, say, Arnold Toynbee's somewhat similar twelve-volume *A Study of History*), is the internet meme: "Hard times create strong men, strong men create good times, good times create weak men, and weak men create hard times." Glubb's method of analysis is simple. He lists the empires from which he derives his conclusions, beginning with the Assyrian (859–612 B.C., in his reckoning) and ending with Britain (1700–1950). He lists eleven (with the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire being distinct great powers). Six powers are listed in the Christian era: three non-Western (all Muslim dominated), and three Western Christian (Spain until 1750; Romanov Russia; and Britain). "India, China, and Southern America were not included, because the writer knows nothing about them." I suppose honesty is the best policy, but if you're purporting to disseminate knowledge synthesizing the life and death of great powers, this seems like a very major gap indeed.

But let's see what Glubb has to say. His first, and arguably most important, conclusion is that all empires, with the exception of a few whose life span was cut short, last for approximately the same time period—250 years, or ten generations, more or less. This is true regardless of their form of governance, location, or the technologies of the time, transport, war, or other. Glubb's is a pessimistic vision. The usual human response to the inevitable failure of empire is to analyze one's own declining polity and offer revisions to the structures in an attempt to prolong the empire, but Glubb is very clear that what does not matter at all is the nature of the political institutions or the ideology of the state. Huge variations have existed in history—the Romans had almost nothing politically in common with the Mamluks, for example—yet regardless, every empire follows the same path. The precise nature of the ultimate fall varies, however, because it depends largely on external circumstances.

After this overview, Glubb generalizes the universal life stages of empire. First, "outburst," the "Age of Pioneers," an "extraordinary display

of energy and courage," where "backward races" rise up. The reason for this outburst is always obscure, but most likely, Glubb thinks, due to jealousy of the goods, material and immaterial, that empires have. He adduces the Viet Cong, who "showed more enterprise and initiative than the Americans"; today he might adduce the Taliban. The observant reader will note, however, that mere successful defense against a foreign power, not followed by expansion at the expense of that power, is hardly rising up. Nonetheless, it is no doubt true that all great powers to date began in an age of expansionist pioneers.

This first age merges into expansion, the "Age of Conquests." Conquest is accomplished by aggression, most often by subduing existing civilizations, but also by grabbing uncivilized lands, if any are available, simply by shouldering existing populations aside, such as the United States's "conquest of barbarian peoples." Psychologically, the nascent empire shows "unresting enterprise in every field," combined with "readiness to improvise and experiment." That is, conquest is not merely military; it is full spectrum aggressive achievement.

Expansion leads to the "Age of Commerce," which features a great increase in trade and material wealth, especially when formerly fragmented lands are brought under one umbrella. (Glubb is very concerned about small states forming "an insuperable obstacle to trade and cooperation," for which reason he is desirous of the creation of a European super-state. He expresses no hesitation at this goal, another strike against him, given what we see the European Union has devolved into. "Great power" is a term nobody would apply to it.) In the beginning of the Age of Commerce, virtues such as "courage, patriotism and devotion to duty" are still ubiquitous, but part of the Age of Commerce is that enterprise is turned toward seeking new forms of wealth, which leads to the "Age of Affluence." The turn to a focus on money erodes virtue; it "silences the voice of duty." Somewhere in here is the noontime of the empire. Yet the first signs of internal decay become visible, in particular a loss of initiative as organizations of the society calcify and virtue seeps away.

Outward changes then begin, most notably a change to defensiveness, to no longer expanding but rather protecting what has been gotten. Pacifism increases and the military loses prestige, but the civilization still sees itself, increasingly falsely, as exalted and strong. The "Age of Intellect" arrives, where the ruling classes turn to education as their main focus,

especially of the young, and more broadly, high culture reigns supreme, and science is privileged. This creates the false idea that “the human brain can solve the problems of the world.” Intellectualism “weakens unselfishness and human dedication to sacrifice.” Worse, it leads to the widespread belief that cleverness can substitute for sacrifice. Carl Schmitt’s “endless conversation” becomes the prime mode of political discourse (not that Glubb mentions Schmitt), and decline accelerates. Internal dissension increases, both in frequency and in the gulf between factions, and national leaders promise not to work for the nation, but to harm the opponents of their supporters. (Glubb also complains that we moderns do not learn from history, and that what little history is taught in schools is merely “contemporary politics masquerading as history.” He had seen nothing yet.)

Mass immigration is permitted, even encouraged, ending the ethnic homogeneity on which a high-trust society necessarily relies, furthering the decline. The original inhabitants admit immigrants to do the tasks they no longer want to do, whether menial or military, and seeing themselves as superior, and destined to rule forever, do not consider the long-term effect. Progress is inevitable, after all, so there is no need to work hard—rather, it is time to relax, and enjoy the fruits of empire, and to spread the wealth through creating a welfare state. Immigrants assimilate somewhat, but their loyalties to the nation are weaker, and diversity is the very opposite of our strength. It is not, Glubb is at pains to note, perhaps not wanting to be cancelled as Enoch Powell had been, that immigrants are inferior—merely that excessive immigration is fatal to an empire (though he is wrong that immigrants are “just different”; they can often be inferior, both in their nature and culture, and in that since almost always they migrate for gain, they slot directly into the ongoing decline based on excessive commercial focus).

Selfishness and idleness hack at the roots of the nation. The fruit is decadence. “Decadence is a moral and spiritual disease, resulting from too long a period of wealth and power, producing cynicism, decline of religion, pessimism and frivolity. The citizens of such a nation will no longer make an effort to save themselves, because they are not convinced that anything in life is worth saving.” Total lack of initiative appears; there are no new enterprises, no risk-taking, no heroic achievement.

All that remains is to squabble over the wealth remaining—which, no surprise, diminishes rapidly.

As decline begins to bite, “universal pessimism” takes hold, as everyone sees the contrast to earlier, more glorious, self-confident times. Frivolity, in the form of sportsball and other entertainment, grows greatly. “The heroes of declining nations are always the same—the athlete, the singer, or the actor.” Most of all, women, formerly entirely absent from public and political life, become openly influential in both spheres. Given that women are usually highly influential in private life, and thereby in most societies (mostly invisibly) influence politics at all stages of a civilization, and exercise even more influence through the raising of children, it is not clear whether Glubb sees this newly public role for women as cause or effect of decline, though he is very clear that feminism, supposed liberation of women, is the direct opposite of the health of the state; it appears often at the same stage as feminization of men and an increase in homosexuality, both dire signals of the approaching end. Regardless, Glubb could not even have conceived of today’s gynocracy that rules almost the entire West, in which the female virtues, and the female vices, are both exalted as the only possible basis for governance, public and private, while masculinity is demonized and prevented from fulfilling its crucial civilizational functions. Unsurprisingly, this is like throwing gasoline on the fire of collapse, something I have earlier noted as being on shining display in our response to the Wuhan Plague, but which will soon enough offer far more dramatic examples.

Glubb’s analysis all fits together neatly with basic facts every educated person knows about fallen empires. That said, few of his conclusions are buttressed with specific historical examples; this book is very short, as I say, and offers only brief synthesis and summary. The examples Glubb does offer are almost always from England or from what he calls the Arab Empire, which he dates from A.D. 634–880. Perhaps someone expert in Assyria or the Persia of Cyrus could offer confirmation or objections to the analysis. That’s not me, but I am frankly dubious, for example, if one can slot the empire of Spain, or Romanov Russia, very easily into the specifics of Glubb’s claimed pattern. Russia, for example, had many problems, but immigrants and sportsball were not in evidence, nor were women political decisionmakers. Thus, my snap

judgment on Glubb's book is that it's interesting, but not much more, without a lot more detail being provided and supportively slotted into his overall argument.

Glubb was perfectly well aware that more study would help. "If the present writer were a millionaire, he would try to establish in some university or other a department dedicated solely to the study of the rhythm of the rise and fall of powerful nations throughout the world." This is, in fact, what Peter Turchin, the originator of cliodynamics, which purports to scientifically study exactly this, has done. I don't know if he's come up with any suggested answers on what to do, but certainly his prediction in *Ages of Discord* that the 2020s would be a time of chaos in the West are looking pretty good right now.

I think we can conclude no more than that Glubb was generically somewhat correct. For example, it is no doubt true that the single greatest cause of ultimate failure of any great power is wealth. It seems evident that no society can maintain high levels of wealth for very long without rotting from the inside out, a problem for which I have not yet been able to see any solution. Glubb, for this reason, attacks modern industrial society, sometimes seeming like he is channeling the future manifesto of Theodore Kaczynski. But industrial society has a life of its own; it cannot be dialed back except, maybe, by a strictly virtuous society (both ruling class and the masses), and when industrial society offers wealth, its mere existence seems to make virtue impossible, thus capping the apogee of the civilization far below what it might otherwise have achieved. I am a techno-optimist, but I have not solved this problem, and doing so is essential for any future civilization.

Glubb, trying not to grasp the nettle of the obvious conclusion from his own reasoning, ends his first article with an open-ended question, whether any of this cycle can be avoided by an empire. He's quite explicit it's too late for England, whose empire was already long over in 1976. The only question for Glubb was whether Britain "will remain strong, united and free, or become a nation of underlings and mendicants." In his second article, no doubt stung by negative reaction, he calls for "a revival of our spirit" that will "transform our situation and guarantee our future." Good luck with that. We can answer his question now, and it's underlings and mendicants for the British, six days a week and twice on Sunday. England is now a place where deracinated Eloi, descendants

of Alfred and Edward the Confessor who mock their great ancestors, if they are even aware of them, prostrate themselves to Islam, vomit in the streets after binge eating and drinking, and hide quivering in their pods when a very modestly-dangerous respiratory virus sweeps the land. There is no way back for England, and Glubb would have been the first to admit that, were he granted a vision of 2022.

Whatever the precise accuracy of Glubb's analysis, every word of the end stages of empire as description certainly applies to our own empire, which suggests we are in big trouble (though that's hardly news). Not to mention, it's been almost exactly 250 years for us. What's next for America, then? Our empire is, of course, the "Global American Empire," GAE, which is, as we have seen in the global split over the reaction to the war in Ukraine, not global at all, but rather the prime manifestation of what is often called globohomo, the nasty combination of Left ideology, consumerism, and spiritual ennui. GAE (not just America, but also its satrapies such as Western Europe and Japan) exhibits all the terminal symptoms Glubb identifies. However, interestingly, it's more than that. GAE also exhibits many characteristics of decline that exceed any seen before in history, as Michael Anton outlined a few months back in a seminal article titled, simply, "Unprecedented."

For example, while immigrants have been allowed into many dying empires, never before has a ruling class refused any attempt to make them assimilate, or actively sought the "Great Replacement" of the native stock (and tried to depress its own native birthrate). No ruling class has ever hated its own country and people in the least, much less to the fanatic degree of our ruling class. No elite has, in Anton's words, ever been "determined to make [their country's] population fat, weak, ugly, lethargic, drug-addled, screen-addicted, and hyper-sexualized, the men effeminate and the women masculine." No elite has exalted ugliness over beauty, or criminal behavior over lawful behavior, or rejected education as a goal, instead substituting lies about history and science, when there is any education at all. By Glubb's metrics, GAE is a dying empire on steroids, mainlining amphetamines as it careens down the tracks.

So GAE is going to be over soon. No surprise there. What comes next? The common, trite answer is that the Chinese will replace us as the world's foremost empire. But that's silly—they're only a few decades

behind us on the endless treadmill that feeds empires into the furnace of history. Or, more accurately, they will never even become an empire, having kneecapped themselves by killing their children. The Party has woken up to this fact, and has begun desperate measures to wrench China off the treadmill; these will not be successful, although they may prevent China from becoming as disgusting a spectacle as GAE has become. The short answer is that no existing polity in the world today, great or small, has any apparent chance of becoming, or remaining, a relevant empire.

Is there any way out for us? After all, I am always pushing Foundationalism as the solution to what ails us. But, you should not forget, I am very explicit there is no path from here to there—from where we are now to the shining future—without first going backwards, or perhaps sideways, hard and fast. Glubb does note that religious revival is characteristic of late stage empires; it does not rescue them, but may help bridge and shorten the gap to the next iteration of whatever that people experiences. (This is similar to what Toynbee, whom Glubb does not mention, said—a “universal religion” often is a crucial step in the next turn of the wheel, usually as a newly ascendant group adopts it.) While certainly a form of religious revival is sweeping parts of GAE, what some call wokeism and I call end-stage leftism, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, this is in no way a real religion. It will most certainly not form the core of any new thing. Will we see some other religious revival? I am still holding out hope it will be Christianity—but that will not happen until people have good reason to turn to God, as the things we have made gods, money, sex, and the internet, fail us. If they do, perhaps after a round, or multiple rounds, of destruction, a Christian empire could rise. If they do not, it is unclear what will, or could, replace GAE, at least in North America. Most likely multiple nations, from which will emerge one or more that restart the cycle with the Age of Pioneers, likely after a long period of sliding backward.

Another possibility, outside of North America, is a resurgence of Islam and of the peoples to whom Islam’s simple message is attractive. After all, Glubb profiles three separate empires that had Islam at their core; why not a fourth? As Western Europe dies out, and is swamped by Africans (who could be Christians, too), from North Africa or points further south, maybe what will result will be an Age of Pioneers,

encroaching on mostly empty lands, with what elderly inhabitants remain easily swept away, the American Indians of the twenty-first century. True, it seems unlikely that these invaders, attracted by economic opportunities and the perceived chance to live parasitically on the wealth of Europe, could offer the new “extraordinary display of energy and courage” Glubb identifies as crucial to the Age of Pioneers and the start of a new great power. The wealth, of course, will disappear soon enough, along with the advanced medicine and other indicia of modernity. But that’s a failure to understand the cycle of empires, whatever the accuracy of Glubb’s analysis. That’s the way it goes—backward, and then maybe forward. But not necessarily forward. Europe, in this scenario, might just become like sub-Saharan Africa—a place from which nothing of any real worth has ever emerged, merely a place where people live their lives, perhaps more happily than us moderns.

To most, the world today seems too interconnected for any such collapse of today’s tottering empires. That we cannot imagine it does not mean it will not happen. There is no reason to believe that interconnectedness will continue, and in any case past performance is, in the matter of empires, very much a guarantee of future performance. We are going, it seems, back to the future.