

The End of the American Empire Gabriel Moran

There is a wide agreement that the United States cannot return to the way it was before the pandemic, compounded by the widespread racial protests. The question, then, is whether what follows will be better or worse than the way things were. One can hope that this terrible crisis would lead to the country facing up to obvious problems that existed before 2020. But the divisiveness in the country that is manifested and exacerbated by the government in Washington dampens hopes that a restored country will be an improved country.

The answer to the question of better or worse needs a distinction. The nation of the United States may be worse off when the pandemic subsides, but there is hope that many long-range changes will be for the better. But what seems certain is that the empire of America is finished.

“America,” is a term that was coined in 1507. It was the name of a continent but a new kind of continent, even a new world which was empty (which it was not) where a man was free to recreate himself. This meaning of America as a mythical place of liberty, novelty and openness has never disappeared.

The United States of America, a federation that began in the 1780s, identified itself with the American continent and the dream of America. United States history is enveloped in the myth of America, making it almost impossible to examine the actual country and to initiate needed reforms. The failure to eradicate slavery at the beginning of the country is clear evidence that the United States was not then America, and today most black people would agree with Langston Hughes that “America never was America to me.”

When empires fall, the end is usually foreshadowed by the nation being blind to its internal crumbling. Historians in the future will look back in wonder that this country could be so blind to its own failings. The split

between rich and poor has reached a ridiculous stage in recent decades. In this wealthy country, millions of poor people live precariously with poor housing, scandalously low wages for essential jobs, and no health care provisions.

The beginning of the American empire can be dated to 1898 when the United States was finishing its continental conquest. The wars against Cuba and the Philippines established ownership of land separate from this continent. The country refused to admit that it had colonies. Instead of sending governors and taking some responsibility for its colonies, it ruled by pushing the idea of America as embodied in political and economic policies. If the freedom that America supposedly brought was not compelling, the military helped to ensure that America would succeed.

The full might of empire did not emerge until the end of World War II. The United States and its American empire had triumphed. However, much of the country did not wish to rule the world and in 1945 a radical demilitarization began. In 1950 the United States jumped unprepared into a war on the Korean peninsula. Secretary of State Dean Acheson said that the United States war in Korea “came along and saved us; it enabled passage through Congress of a quadrupling of American defense spending.”

Since 1950 the United States has never stopped increasing its military budget. Dwight Eisenhower famously warned at the end of his presidency about a “military-industrial complex,” but he presided over the growth of that complex during the 1950s.

U.S. politicians brag about having the most powerful military in the history of the world. United States spending on weapons can only be described as absurd. The United States spends billions of dollars on a single aircraft carrier that will probably be useless in a big war; it has 3000 nuclear weapons that are certainly useless except for ending civilization.

If one uses megatons of destructive power as the measure, the claim to be the greatest military power in history is true. But if the point of having a military is to win wars, the U.S. military's last success was World War II. The repeated failures have not been the fault of the men and women in the military but the politicians who in defense of the idea of America have sent the soldiers into unwinnable wars in places that the United States did not understand.

While the United States poured money into making instruments of war it claimed that there was not enough money to provide health care for its citizens, good schools for its children, and repair of the roads, bridges and public transit that were in obvious decay. There was still a possibility at the time of the multiple social movements of the 1960s that serious reform might be undertaken, but since 1980 the split between rich and poor has become exceedingly worse.

The crumbling of empire has been brought into plain sight with a president whose mission seems to be to destroy the last vestiges of decency and the things that the United States could rightly be proud of, especially to have taken in millions of immigrants and to have provided an openness for scientific and technological innovation. Not surprisingly, the president is at war with these finest qualities of the United States in his endless bombast of what he is doing for America. The aim is to enrich himself, aided by enablers who also want more money despite their destroying the system that provided them with their obscene wealth,

Will the United States be a better place after the fall of America? Other nations now look upon the United States not with fear or admiration but with pity. There may be a feeling of humiliation when citizens can no longer claim to be number one. But life might be less harried and violent for the majority of people when the country accepts its membership in a community of nations. It can start solving its obvious internal needs and begin cooperating with other nations to address urgent global problems.