

The Decline of the United States

1. Decline?

It might seem strange to talk about the decline of the United States¹ at a point when its President seems able to act with impunity, in ways that to other people often seem arbitrary and often damaging to others, on both a national and an international level. Yet the issue seems to me real. To address it, I need to take a step back from our immediate circumstances. Given the limited space at my disposal, what I can say must of necessity be sketchy and impressionistic. It must also, by its very nature, be speculative.

There is, it seems to me, a lot to admire about the United States. I was a permanent resident in the US for ten years, and have thereafter been a frequent visitor for academic purposes. The American Constitution is a remarkable document. It drew lessons from British politics at the time when America became independent, together with what became distinctively American concerns for religious toleration and free speech. A lot of thought was put into the problems facing a democratic republic spread across a vast tract of land. And the system developed into a remarkable arrangement within which political power was subject to a system of checks and balances, both within the different branches of the Federal government, and also between the Federal government and the individual states.

There was a lot to be said for the resulting arrangements. They still allow for a remarkable degree of diversity – so that Muslims,² highly conservative Jews,³ and also secular liberals can flourish within a single country.⁴ There has also been a fascinating tension between the initial religious-based foundation of higher education in the United States, and

secular liberalism which is currently dominant there.⁵ There are also unresolved tensions between religious-based social conservatism, and the operations of a highly commercial society. The United States has indeed been the location of incredible and productive commercial developments – including in information technology - up to the present day. In addition, it played a key role in the Second World War, and, through the Marshall Plan, was remarkably generous in assisting impoverished countries in Europe to recover from its aftermath.

That being said, the history of the impact of European settlers on the Native Americans was grim. Slavery – and its aftermath – still causes deep problems.⁶ In addition, it has also to be said that the history of America's relationship with many other countries has not been happy. The quotation supposedly from the Mexican ruler Porfirio Diaz sums things up nicely: 'Poor Mexico: So far from God, so close to the United States.' While its history, from predation by American companies operating in other countries, to problematic political interventions elsewhere, has not been a happy one.

Nonetheless, the American system in many ways functioned well for its own citizens. And in many respects, there was considerable generosity exhibited towards people elsewhere.⁷

2. What has happened?

Despite its faults, one might ask: just what has happened to what was a system of government with considerable attractions? The answer to this, in my view, is complex, and has many more features than it is possible for me to explore in this short paper. But let me highlight some of them. It would be possible simply to point to Donald Trump. He is a man with certain talents and surprising appeal. But at the same time, he seems to me a terrible President. I will not spend my limited time in spelling out why, beyond that he seems to behave as if

he is right about everything, to be vain and also vindictive. He is not interested in matters of truth and falsity, is apt to dismiss from their government employment people who bring him information that he does not like, and he does not hesitate to use the powers of the American government to retaliate against people with whom he disagrees. On the international stage, he uses his power to bully anyone that he can, exhibits no loyalty to allies, and seems to admire the strong and the ruthless.

My concern, however, is not with Trump, who is constitutionally barred from any further term of office, and – as someone a couple of years older than I am – will one hopes not play an active role in politics for all that much longer. It is, rather, with the question: how, given the constitution and the character of the United States, has it been possible for them to get Donald Trump as President and for him to act as he has done?

First of all, as I indicated in my reference to George Marsden's book about the changing character of higher education in the United States, an important contrast opened up during the course of the Twentieth Century between older traditions in America, and the character of higher education. There was a contrast between broadly conservative opinion about religious and social matters, and ideas that became more popular in colleges, universities, and also the courts.

Conservative citizens found themselves increasingly in settings in which intellectuals disagreed with the ideas and practises to which they were accustomed. The economic problems of the inter-war period meant that many citizens responded positively to aspects of the New Deal, despite its break with American traditions of limited government. After the Second World War, hostility to communism meant that there was support for conservative-minded politicians. But such support also seemed

to depend on their appealing to anti-black sentiment. While the conservative intellectual William Buckley was nonplussed to discover that, as Kevin Phillips argued, the working-class⁸ members of the 'emerging Republican majority' had no objection to governmental assistance when it was directed towards themselves.⁹ This already suggested that there was a potential for certain tensions between working-class potential Republican voters, and the kinds of free-market themes which were stressed by Buckley and by Republican Presidential candidates, from Barry Goldwater and then Ronald Reagan onwards.

A further twist to this took place, relating to issues to do with religion. Conservative evangelical Christians in the United States had become increasingly uneasy about liberal social tendencies,¹⁰ including restrictions on prayer in public schools, moves in the direction of the acceptance of marriage between homosexuals, and also the liberalization of laws concerning abortion. Republican candidates had tended to indicate their sympathy with conservative religious sentiments, but had not delivered on this when support from people with such views played an important role in getting them into power. This was in part because to address these matters – e.g. by way of Supreme Court appointees – could be difficult (not least, because American opinion was divided); in part because the politicians themselves were on these matters likely to be more liberal than their supporters.

That there were issues here, was indicated by the support that the highly conservative Pat Buchanan received as a potential Republican Presidential candidate, and then as an independent.

3. Social and Economic Changes

The United States remains a highly prosperous country, albeit one in which there is a good deal of inequality. However, some

significant social and economic changes have started to take place.

Older forms of extractive industry have been in decline. While a lot of jobs in manufacturing were lost – in some cases, to overseas suppliers, in some cases to the introduction of automation and information technology. There was also a significant shift of manufacturing from older unionised centres in the north and mid-west, to non-unionised production in southern states.

All this was significant, because it meant that there has been a significant decline in opportunities for well-paid work for unskilled and semi-skilled people. By contrast, opportunities have grown for the more highly educated, especially those with the ability to work in, or to do creative work using, information technology and, now, artificial intelligence.

Two issues about this are noteworthy. The first is that, as has been noted by writers across the political spectrum in the United States, there has been a tendency for working class people and the new highly educated, to separate, physically. The new more wealthy are tending to live in different places, socialise together, and to marry one another. While older patterns in which the wealthy and poorer people lived in the same small towns, have declined.¹¹ There has also been a strong tendency for people teaching in colleges and universities to be socially liberal in their views, and for this to make an impact on their students. This, in turn, has led more educated people to favour socially liberal policies. But these have tended to concentrate on programmes which at least notionally aim to assist disadvantaged minorities, rather than to be concerned with poorer citizens, generally. This has led to certain tensions between the Democrats, who in the Northern parts of the U.S., were often close to working class trades unions, and working-

class people who are not as sympathetic to their current concerns for minority groups and 'woke' issues. In addition, there has been a tendency for those who are more conservative and those who are more liberal, to separate, geographically.¹²

All this meant that there was a growing opportunity for more populist Republicans to appeal to working class people who felt politically abandoned.

4. Some Problems About Knowledge

I need, at this point, to turn to a rather different issue, which I will also have to treat briefly.¹³ To cut a very long story short, if we are lucky, human knowledge may grow and develop. But even our most impressive achievements are fallible, and may be overturned and corrected in ways that we can't anticipate. As humans, we tend to be attached to the ideas with which we have grown up, or to innovations which happen to appeal to us, and we are reluctant to accept that our favoured views may be incorrect. But in fact, there is every reason to be open to criticism, and to suggestions about how ideas might stand in need of improvement. While some of the most important opportunities for learning may come from respectful exchanges with people whose views are very different from our own. Such exchanges may not be pleasant, and there may be tensions between what is good for us and what we like.

Another kind of problem is posed by issues relating to fallible expert knowledge. As I have just suggested, even our best ideas are fallible, and in need of improvement. It is also the case that pertinent criticism of our current ideas could come from anyone.¹⁴ I don't mean, by this, to say that any of us is, say, equally able to come up with corrections to the latest scientific theory. But as Friedrich Hayek has emphasised, information pertinent to the evaluation of economic and social

theories and ideas about social policy, is scattered right across society, and in ways that may not be accessible to those taking decisions for us on a centralized basis.¹⁵

At the same time, while expert knowledge is fallible, it is typically the best that we have at any time, and we are all in need of it. For – if things are going well – it typically consists of ideas which offer pertinent solutions to problems, and which has undergone testing and expert critical scrutiny. It remains fallible, and it may be possible for us to develop criticisms of it.¹⁶ But these criticisms are, themselves, fallible and need to undergo scrutiny. At any one time, we will have to take for granted all kinds of knowledge which we can't ourselves appraise – not least, even as background knowledge which we use in developing our criticisms of other ideas.

This means that, in order to operate with the best fallible human knowledge that is available, we need access to what other people have produced and, particularly, to ideas which are pertinent to current problems, and which have undergone serious critical scrutiny.

5. The Fragmentation of the Public Sphere

In his *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas offered a suggestive discussion of the way in which a 'public sphere' for the discussion of public policy had developed among British merchants in coffee houses in the Eighteenth Century. He discussed ways in which this was both productive but also limited – most obviously in terms of limitations of access by class and gender. He also discussed the way in which the (welcome) widening of the electoral franchise led to problematic consequences. For one moved into an era of machine politics, and propaganda, rather than deliberation about ideas on their merits.

One can see certain problems which parallel this as having arisen in our own time. In particular, there has been a shift first to a proliferation of news sources and then, through the impact of the internet and social media, to a fragmentation of discourse. While it has been argued that Habermas was over-optimistic in discussing things in terms of a single, shared public sphere,¹⁷ there has been a striking impact on what we did enjoy by way of a shared public sphere. However, just because of financial competition from the internet and social media, there has, in Western countries, been a striking decline in the operation of serious newspapers, which used to serve as forums for discussion in principle open to all opinions, and which had the resources to conduct important critical investigations, and also fact-checking of what was being reported.

In place of this, there has certainly been a dramatic growth in active participation. But this has taken place particularly on social media. These, however, have been geared to people's preferences – and to attracting their attention in ways that can be sold to advertisers. A striking polarization has taken place, with a diminution in people's readiness to take seriously viewpoints which differ from their own, and a decrease in their attention span.¹⁸ A consequence of this would appear to be that we have started to lose out on the kind of access to the fallible expert knowledge of which we are all so much in need. While, as Cass Sunstein has argued in his *#Republic*,¹⁹ all kinds of political institutions which depended on serious discussion between people with different perspectives on things, now no longer function as well as they used to.

In broad terms, a consequence of all this is that individuals tend to find themselves thrown much more upon their own ideas and prejudices. While, in fact, the internet has made

available to us an incredible richness of resources – so that, in fact, it is not difficult for people to work critically with many sources, from across many different countries representing many different shades of opinion – there is a risk that we simply seek support for our own prejudices. It is striking that social media – with, it should be stressed, its inbuilt tendency to provide to people what they find attractive to read (whether or not it is good for us) – are becoming an increasingly significant news source for members of the American population.²⁰ The Fox News channel – which is notorious for its one-sidedly pro-Trump coverage – is increasingly successful.²¹

In broad terms, in the United States, and more generally across Western democracies, there has been a tendency for ordinary members of the public to have their prejudices unchallenged, and to become self-insulated from fallible expert knowledge. They are left with little idea of just what the constraints are upon the choices that face those taking political decisions. And they may simply not have to encounter criticisms that could readily be made of the views which they hold.

All this, it seems to me, has created a particular opportunity in the United States for Donald Trump. Trump, in my personal judgement is simply wrong in respect of many of the things that he thinks to be correct. But he is a brilliant communicator, and in televised rallies, he told imaginative stories which appealed to the sentiments of his audience, made witty put-downs of those with whom he disagreed, and combined political appeals and entertainment in ways which were not constrained by truth.

6. Donald Trump

It would be wrong to put America's current problems simply down to Donald Trump. On the face of it, there has been a significant shift over time towards the Presidency gaining power.²² Donald Trump, in his first (chaotic) term of office, seemed to be frustrated that he was not able to achieve all that he wished to. His choice of policies seemed, indeed, to be constrained by more traditional experts and people associated with the older traditions of the Republican party. Trump tended to depict himself as representing the will of the people, and to picture himself as being illegitimately constrained by hostile elites. In part this was a matter of advisors arguing that things that he was trying to do were ill-considered. In part, it simply reflected his experience of the American system of checks and balances. This anti-elitism in some ways echoed significantly the experience of working people who felt that they were losing out to the educated, and to what was seen by them as the favouring of the interests of minority groups.

When Trump was elected to a second term of office, he seemed determined not to be constrained in the same way. A former adviser of his, Steve Bannon, had argued that he should adopt a strategy summed up by the slogan 'flood the zone'.²³ The idea here – which he put into practice – was that he could circumvent institutional controls on the Presidency by putting up multiple 'Executive Orders'. These are directives, issued by the President as head of the Executive, and traditionally are restricted to actions which the President is already legally empowered to take. Trump has issued a large number of these things, including on matters in respect of which it is not clear that he in fact has the relevant Constitutional powers. There have been moves to check what he has been doing, by

way of the legal system. But this moves relatively slowly, and Trump issues executive orders at a dramatic pace.

What in the past might have served as effective constraints on arbitrary action by the President, have been swept aside.²⁴ Trump has, in broad terms, appointed as advisers people who will endeavour to do whatever he wishes. While senior public servants who bring to him factual information that he does not like, may well find that they are fired.²⁵ Trump has been able to nominate people to the judiciary who are conservative in their views.²⁶ While he has been able to influence members of the House of Representatives and the Senate, by threatening to support candidates opposed to them for Republican nominations in primary elections.

In broad terms, Trump – in ways which resemble the actions of other populist politicians, such as Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom – has been simply impatient with any kind of traditional or indeed constitutional constraint which stops him from trying to achieve his goals. He stresses the fact that he was elected to office with a particular programme. And buoyed with a sense of his own importance, is perfectly happy to disregard the views of the kinds of experts who in the past would have been able to urge caution on him.

This, in turn, has allowed Trump to turn his back on allies, to bully those who seem weak, to behave in ways which seem outrageous in relation to Ukraine, Gaza and Iran, and to take measures which seek to disadvantage almost every other country in trading relations. It should not surprise us that other countries may try to take advantage of American weaknesses, as they start to be exhibited.

7. Conclusion

The account that I have offered is wide-ranging and, by its very nature, impressionistic. But I hope that the thread of my argument will be clear – and thus open to criticism. While the problems with which I have been concerned have been manifested particularly under its current President, America's current weaknesses have deep roots.

To sum up, my argument has been that the United States has real strengths. But social and economic changes together with problems about the public sphere, have served to undermine American institutions and to cut off ordinary citizens from ready access to the kind of fallible expert knowledge that we all need. While the problem which faces Americans, and which poses difficulties for the rest of the world, is that these changes have allowed its current President to find ways round the checks and balances that should properly constrain his power.

¹ My concern, here, will be with specific economic, social and political issues, rather than with wider themes – the significance of which my friend Ali Paya has stressed to me – concerning broader tendencies of the fortunes of different countries to fluctuate.

² See, for example, Edward E. Curtis IV, *Muslims in America*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

³ For a fascinating account of the interplay between a strict Hasidic Jewish group and secular law in the U.S., see Louis Grumet and John M. Caher, *The Curious Case of Kiryas Joel*, Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2016. More generally Jewish people have thrived in the U.S., despite initial prejudice and hostility. The same can be said for, for example, Catholic immigrants from Ireland and Italy.

⁴ At the same time, there is also ill-informed hostility towards Islam on the part of 'Christian nationalists' in the U.S. See on this Andrew

L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁵ See George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

⁶ See, on post-Civil-War developments C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, commemorative edition, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, and Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1993.

⁷ If one doubts this, it is worth contemplating the problems that have been caused recently with the withdrawal of various kinds of aid to Africa, under President Trump.

⁸ In the United States, these people are typically referred to as ‘middle class’.

⁹ See, on this, Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority*, 1968, and – for a most interesting detailed story - Sam Tanenhaus, *Buckley: The Life and the Revolution that Changed America*, New York: Random House, 2024.

¹⁰ Notably as a consequence of decisions by the Supreme Court.

¹¹ See, on this, Charles Murray *Coming Apart*, New York: Crown, 2012 and Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015.

¹² See on this Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008. In recent years, the effects of this have been enhanced by a tendency, in the U.S., for more conservative rural areas to have relatively greater political representation.

¹³ See also my *Mīyān-e Hāyek va Popper* [Between Popper and Hayek], Tehran: Tarḥ-no Publications

¹⁴ Karl Popper stressed, in this context, what he called the ‘rational unity of mankind’, in terms of the ability of any of us, in principle, to offer critical input.

¹⁵ This was the basis of an argument, in Hayek, for the importance of our using market-based forms of decision-taking (and also common-law legal systems), which allow for the impact of such knowledge in ways that operate to the advantage of society, generally.

¹⁶ That is, assuming that we can understand what is involved and have the capacity to engage with it. I am well aware that there are all kinds of fields in which I would simply not be able to do this.

¹⁷ I have discussed these issues in more detail in my 'Popper, Objectification, and the Problem of the Public Sphere', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 46 (4), 2016, pp. 392-411.

¹⁸ Compare, for a recent report, 'Is the decline of reading making politics dumber?', *The Economist*, 4th September 2005, <https://www.economist.com/culture/2025/09/04/is-the-decline-of-reading-making-politics-dumber>

¹⁹ Cass Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018.

²⁰ 'Overall, just over half of U.S. adults (54%) say they at least sometimes get news from social media': Pew Research Centre September 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/social-media-and-news-fact-sheet/>

²¹ 'Fox News Channel finishes summer 2025 trouncing ABC, NBC, CBS in primetime', <https://www.foxnews.com/media/fox-news-channel-finishes-summer-2025-trouncing-abc-nbc-cbs-primetime>

²² See, for example, Erin Petersen, 'Presidential Power Surges', <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/presidential-power-surges/>

²³ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/28/us/politics/trump-policy-blitz.html>

²⁴ See, for a useful brief analysis, 'Donald Trump is unpopular. Why is it so hard to stand up to him?', *The Economist*, 4th September 2025, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2025/09/04/donald-trump-is-unpopular-why-is-it-so-hard-to-stand-up-to-him>

²⁵ See, for example, 'Trump fires lead official on economic data as tariffs cause market drop', *BBC News* 1st August 2025: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cvg3xrrzdr0o>

²⁶ It can fairly be said that there has been a long period in which judges were appointed to the Supreme Court who were distinctively liberal in their views.