

PHILLIP ADAMS

End of empire

The Roman Empire fell in slo-mo and the deaths of the Spanish and Portuguese examples took time. But the modern era has witnessed imperial collapse at warp speed.

The Austro-Hungarian effort died in the trenches of World War I. The Bolsheviks shot Russia's Romanovs in a cellar. Japan's ambitions came to a bitter end with military humiliations and the horrors of Hiroshima. Germany's Third Reich? When cyanide capsules were passed around the *Führerbunker* like jelly beans. Britain, though nominally triumphant in that same war, saw its empire disintegrate in the aftermath. The Soviet Empire seemed simply to evaporate.

What happens to a proud, patriotic population when their once mighty nation is toppled from its pedestal? When defeat is followed by a punitive peace treaty it creates sullen resistance and, most famously with the document signed in a railway carriage in Versailles, guarantees the rise of Hitler. When victory is followed by failure, as in Churchill's Britain, it guarantees the rise of the Goon Show. (This is not entirely a joke. To their considerable

credit, the English softened the pangs and pains of decline with great good humour.)

Today a two-headed eagle, tomorrow a featherduster. Echoing the events of 1917, the overnight fall of the USSR caused an emotional crisis for the long-suffering serfs of the Kremlin. They might have detested the regime yet the Russian people lapsed into a depression at least as deep as their economy's. One of the symptoms: a sudden shortening of life expectancy, most dramatically among men.

It works the other way, of course. After centuries of being shamed, ridiculed and exploited by the West, China is returning to its ancient dominance. And the West, particularly the US, doesn't like it. The national sense of superiority, the belief in Manifest Destiny, is taking such a battering that Obama had to make his country's psychological collapse central to his final State of the Union. Evicted from Vietnam, unsuccessful in Afghanistan and incompetent in Iraq, US "foreign policy", a euphemism for undeclared

wars and futile military invasions, remains on the wrong side of history. Apart from the vast death tolls on all sides, the flow-on effects of these trillion-dollar fiascos have so undermined the American Dream that the US sometimes looks like a failed state, verging on the ungovernable. The National Rifle Association paranoia, the home-grown white supremacist survivalists, the Tea Party and Trump all feed on the inchoate anxieties of a people who fear the future of a diminished, defeated nation. Hence Obama's poignant pep talks.

Years ago, that master of the zeitgeist Philip K. "Blade Runner" Dick wrote *The Man in the High Castle*, a novel imagining a US that lost World War II. Now it's a TV series that confronts American viewers with a Nazi-occupied New York and a Japanese-occupied San Francisco. Recently, passengers riding the subway in Manhattan were so shocked by posters showing a revised Old Glory that the Mayor of New York banned them. The Stars had left the Stripes, replaced by the Swastika. Or the Rising Sun. The series depicts Americans having

to come to terms with subservience, having been told for generations of their innate, God-given superiority. And for many US viewers it will be a

metaphor for what they see and fear – the inevitable dominance of China.

Because Jefferson wanted a Roman-style Senate meeting in a Roman-style temple, much of Washington DC became a theme park of the Caesars, from Capitol Hill to the Supreme Court and the Lincoln Memorial. (It's a wonder the Senators and the Supremes don't wear togas.) Now the US follows Rome into its era of decline. We await a latter-day Gibbon.

“The belief in Manifest Destiny is taking a battering

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