

# When Empires Go Berserk Before the Fall: Myth vs. Reality

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## **Abstract**

This article is a short summary of key ideas to serve as a catalyst in further discussions. It engages critically with the thesis proposed by Chris Hedges in “The Rule of Idiots” that empires descend into madness before their collapse. Using systems science, social theory, and historical analysis, the piece evaluates this claim, examines alternative interpretations, and explores whether current events in the United States reflect terminal decline or transformative turbulence.

## **1 Historical Patterns of Decadence and Decline**

It has been said that “when civilizations start to die they go insane.” Chris Hedges used this phrase to describe how late-stage societies behave self-destructively, indulging in irrational policies and hedonism even as crises mount [1]. This echoes a long-standing historical narrative: great empires, in their final throes, succumb to decadence, chaos or collective madness before collapse. Arnold Toynbee famously remarked that “civilizations die from suicide, not by murder” [2]. Glubb [3] proposed a sequence of stages through which empires pass, ending with decadence and collapse.

Rome is the canonical case. As Glubb and others describe, the empire devolved into instability and grotesquerie – emperors assassinated, civic virtue replaced by indulgence. Chinese historiography supports a similar dynastic cycle [4]. French, Ottoman, and Soviet examples reinforce the perception: late-stage empires exhibit bizarre behaviors that in retrospect seem like signs of collapse.

## 2 The Temptation and Fallacy of Imperial Analogies

Observers now project this template onto the United States. In Hedges's view, American society exhibits precisely these symptoms: trivial politics, collapse of discourse, elite detachment [1]. However, this represents a logical fallacy – affirming the consequent. As Lowry notes, “we aren't Rome” [5]. Champlin [6] further cautions against reducing Roman collapse to moral decay. And unlike Rome, the U.S. remains governed by elections, not assassinations [5].

Historical analogy seduces through symmetry but distorts with overreach. Societies may exhibit signs of madness without collapse – and vice versa. Fatalism may be more ideological than evidentiary.

## 3 The Narrative Incentives of Political Journalism (Why So Many Political Books Feel Like Soap Operas)

Modern political journalism – especially long-form opinion writing and best-selling books – often adopts a narrative structure optimized for emotional resonance rather than analytical rigor. These works frequently resemble serialized drama: sharply defined antagonists, dramatic crescendos, and a predictable arc of downfall or redemption. This is not a flaw of the medium per se, but a result of *incentive structures* that reward visibility over veracity.

Many journalists, while not social scientists, nonetheless assume the mantle of cultural diagnosticians. Their portrayals of political dysfunction often rely on vivid metaphor, historical analogy, and rhetorical urgency. The result is typically *colorful but thin*: emotionally engaging, yet lacking in systems thinking, empirical modeling, or theoretical depth – what Postman famously warned was the transformation of public discourse into spectacle [7]. The goal, consciously or not, is to persuade – or provoke – not to explain.

This sensationalized style appeals to a public that increasingly approaches politics as *spectatorship*. Much like sports fandom, political allegiance becomes performative: people choose sides, repeat slogans, and treat ideological affiliation as a core identity. Within such an environment, the *epistemic content* of the argument matters less than its dramatic flair.

These trends contribute to a broader epistemological breakdown. When spectacle replaces structure, and narrative replaces nuance, societies lose the tools needed for sober self-assessment. While journalists may catalyze awareness, their work must be supplemented – critically and constructively – by deeper frameworks. Only then can we hope to understand whether current turbulence signals collapse, or transformation.

## 4 The Political Commentary Market: Narrative as Commodity

The persuasive power of political editorializing is not merely rhetorical – it is also commercial. The global publishing and media industries provide a substantial financial incentive for dramatic political storytelling. As such, some political journalists and authors may be drawn – consciously or not – toward sentimentalization, sensationalism, and reductionism to capture attention and secure revenue.

The global non-fiction book market is valued at over \$15 billion annually, with political and social commentary comprising a prominent sub-sector. In the United States, non-fiction publishing generates nearly \$30 billion per year, with political books experiencing dramatic sales spikes during moments of national tension. For instance, political book sales surged 32% in early 2018, coinciding with increased partisan polarization and media saturation [8].

Meanwhile, the broader news and editorial publishing industry exceeds \$200 billion globally [9]. Within this, digital news platforms and political commentary – ranging from long-form essays to cable news tie-in books – constitute a lucrative niche. Media companies such as Fox News generate hundreds of millions in digital revenue annually, some of which includes books authored by their on-air personalities [10].

These figures underscore an important point: public intellectual discourse is not only shaped by ideological motives, but also by economic ones. Editorial choices – what to emphasize, dramatize, or omit – may be influenced by the pursuit of market share. Political storytelling, in this light, becomes not just a cultural force but a commercial product.

## 5 Inflection Points and Structural Complexity

Before returning to our core critique, it is worth examining several underlying assumptions that contribute to the seductive – but often unscientific – appeal of such historical analogies. Today’s conditions differ from historical decline in two key ways: overlapping inflection points and qualitative transformation.

**Loss of Faith and Meaning:** Nietzsche’s warning about the “death of God” resonates today [11]. The collapse of shared moral and epistemic frameworks has led to a vacuum – populated not by gods, but by memes and conspiracies. The resulting chaos mimics decline but may be transitional.

**Technological Singularity:** Unlike past empires, we live amidst exponential technological change [12]. What appears as disorder may be the turbulence of rapid reconfiguration. Vinge and Kurzweil’s notion of singularity – now a metaphor for social upheaval – is instructive [13].

**The Polycrisis:** The “polycrisis” – interacting systemic shocks – creates a storm more complex than anything Rome faced [14]. The Guardian likens this to a state of “permacrisis” [15]. The madness is systemic overload, not terminal decay.

## 6 Revisiting the Four Propositions

As we approach our concluding thoughts, it is helpful to revisit the four key propositions that frame this critique:

**Both major parties fell into predictable traps.** The Republican and Democratic camps alike exhibited the behavioral patterns analyzed in this article – patterns shaped by media incentives, ideological self-reinforcement, and the hunger for moral clarity. Many of the core controversies associated with Trumpism – such as immigration control, deficit reduction, and curbing federal overreach – were recognized as pressing issues by prior administrations, yet rarely tackled with lasting effect. Their unresolved status helped set the stage for a political rupture.

**Trumpism transcends partisan identity.** While often labeled a Republican phenomenon, Trumpism is more accurately understood as a rebellion – however inchoate

– of independently minded individuals who feel alienated from established political institutions. It is less a coherent ideology than a negation of the system’s perceived failings. Crucially, the movement declared its grievances and prescriptions openly, then won – with a substantial share of the national vote. That democratic success, whatever one’s view of the movement’s content, lends credence to the idea that it was not imposed, but chosen.

Nor is this the first such rupture in recent memory. Earlier movements like Occupy Wall Street and the broader “99%” protests similarly expressed mass dissatisfaction with the perceived failures of institutional politics and elite consensus. Though ideologically distinct from Trumpism, they reveal a recurrent theme: public frustration with the business-as-usual approach of the two dominant parties. These episodes – despite their different ideological valences – may be interpreted as democratic feedback loops, signaling systemic discontent rather than disintegration [16], [17].

**This may be democracy working as intended.** Paradoxically, the very phenomena that provoke hand-wringing among intellectuals may signal that democracy is functioning – with friction, yes, but also with adaptability. Citizens polarize, protest, and criticize not necessarily because the system is broken, but because it permits – and perhaps encourages – such dissent. Levitsky and Ziblatt remind us that democratic erosion is often slow and contestable, not theatrical collapse [18]. Przeworski frames democratic crises as moments of stress-testing rather than endpoints [19]. Tufekci emphasizes that even disruptive forms of protest may be signs of democratic vitality rather than dysfunction [20].

This ambivalence is not new. Aristotle warned that democracy can devolve into demagoguery, where majority rule becomes mob rule [21]. Churchill, with characteristic wit, reminded us that “democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others that have been tried” [22]. In this light, turbulence may reflect not the breakdown of democracy, but its paradoxical strength: the ability to absorb and adapt to contention without collapsing.

**The decline of the United States is overstated.** Apocalyptic forecasts about the “end of America” are premature. Though the country faces serious challenges, many of the dynamics under discussion suggest turbulence rather than terminal decline. The republic may not be in freefall, but in flux.

Taken together, these propositions do not diminish the severity of the current tensions.

But they do suggest a need for interpretive caution: what appears chaotic or dysfunctional from one perspective may be a natural phase of democratic systems under stress – a phase with historical precedents and potentially regenerative effects.

## **7 Conclusion: Between Collapse and Metamorphosis**

The theory that “all empires go insane before they die” holds seductive power, but it oversimplifies history and ignores contemporary complexity. Today’s madness may yet prove to be a prelude to reconfiguration – not collapse. Nietzsche reminds us that from the death of the old, new values may arise. Orwell’s Dream [23] – where madness coexists with potential – may yet be our best metaphor.

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