

“Merely in Decline? Or Doomed?”

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By John Stossel

NEW YORK, N.Y.—While campaigning, President Donald Trump said, “We’re a nation in decline.”

Now that he’s president, the left agrees.

“We are witnessing the collapse and implosion of the American empire,” says Cornell West.

Are the predictors of doom correct? Will America collapse like so many civilizations before us?

If we don’t learn from history, says historian Johan Norberg, that might happen.

“It’s a clash within every civilization on whether they should keep going, be open to innovation and progress, or whether they should retreat and decline,” he says in my new video.

His book, *Peak Human: What We Can Learn from History’s Greatest Civilizations*, looks at the “golden ages” of ancient Athens, ancient Rome, the Song dynasty in China, the Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad, Renaissance Italy, the Dutch Republic and the Anglosphere.

Norberg argues that, once people acquire a certain amount of comfort, they say, “‘We want stability, protection, we want someone to take care of us’ . . . that’s what leads to stagnation.”

People in power are generally comfortable with that: “They’ve built their power on a particular system of production, certain ideas, a particular mentality . . . Whereas trade, innovation, growth, it’s all about change . . . What sets these golden ages apart is that, for a period of time, they managed to lift themselves above that and give more people more freedoms. That also allowed them to experiment more and come up with better technologies and raise living standards.”

Greece once led the world. Rome too. Not anymore. Why?

Because people want “safety, stability, protection,” says Norberg. “They slow things down, get that stability, but they also get stagnation and poverty.”

China experienced a golden age during the Song dynasty.

"They had more freedom than other Chinese dynasties . . . More openness to new ideas from strange places . . . [Farmers] were allowed to experiment with new grain, new forms of rice from Vietnam, and to trade with others. They came up with constant innovations. It became a very urbanized society that ushered in incredible experiments with iron, steel, textile, machines."

The government scrapped laws that had limited what could and couldn't be sold. They allowed markets to stay open all night (something not allowed before).

"In traditional Chinese society, people had fixed areas where they were allowed to live and where they had to return after having done a day's work. People did not mingle and meet people from other classes, other professions . . . Under the Song dynasty, the walls were torn down . . . They began to mingle with one another . . . they could do more business, listen to concerts, go to religious ceremonies. Eventually, Chinese society realized that this is how you make progress. This is how we become wealthier. When more people meet, when more people exchange goods and services and ideas, they prosper."

But, after the Mongols invaded, the Chinese banned ocean voyages and foreign trade. They stifled the experimentation that had made them rich.

"They wanted stability after all this uncertainty and chaos. 'How do we do that?' . . . By regulating everything, telling people to stay in their places . . . They got stability. They also got 500 years of stagnation, 500 years that turned the richest and greatest civilization on the planet to a desperately poor country."

If any country is in a golden age today, I would think it's America, and Norberg agrees.

"I wouldn't want to live anywhere else in human history. We have made such remarkable progress when it comes to expanding freedoms, reducing poverty, increasing life expectancy."

But the American experiment is now 250 years old. Few golden ages last that long. Once affluent, people want stability and a government that resists change.

"That then undermines the innovation that we need to keep golden ages going," warns Norberg. "If we want a golden age to keep going, we have to fight for it."

How?

"Double down on the institutions of liberal democracy, free markets, and unleash new waves of innovation and of progress. There is still time. We can still save this golden age."