

America in Decline: Paths to 21st Century Security & Prosperity

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Unitarian Universalist Church
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Initial Readings:

The Culture of Terror:

Blatant colonialism mutilates you without pretense; it forbids you to talk, it forbids you to act, it forbids you to exist. Invisible colonialism, however, convinces you that serfdom is your destiny and impotence is your nature; it convinces you that it's *not possible* to speak, *not possible* to act, *not possible* to exist.

Eduardo Galeano, *The Book of Embraces* 1989

[T]here's one thing I must tell you: there's no question of heroism in all this. It's a matter of common decency. That's an idea which may make some people smile but the only means of fighting a plague is – common decency.

Albert Camus, *The Plague* 1948

This is the great problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great 'world house' in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace."

Martin Luther King, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos of Community?* 1967

SERMON

I want to thank Rev. Harris for the invitation to join you this morning. It is a pleasure to be with you.

Unitarian pulpits hold a special place in my imagination. Forty-four years ago, when my then to be wife Lani and I were young, engaged, living at opposite ends of the continent and wanting to bridge our different religious backgrounds, unbeknownst to one another we each went to Unitarian churches on the same Sunday morning. That was in the early stages of the Vietnam War, and in Washington, D.C. I was profoundly moved

by the sermon given by a visiting preacher from the German Free Church. Drawing on his painful memories of German soldiers marching off to two World Wars under the slogan “God and Country”, he drew disturbing but undeniable parallels to our country’s invasion of Vietnam. It is out of this tradition that I speak this morning.

Let me begin with questions: Since the beginning of our Great Recession, how many of you have lost your jobs or have a close friend or relative who has? How many, like Intel’s chairman, feel you are doing okay but worry if your grandchild will have a job?

As the award of this year’s Nobel Peace Prize to Liu Xiaobo, demonstrates, China also has its problems. But, the questions I just asked are not being asked in Shanghai. While our economy has lost more than 8 million jobs and our gross domestic product has stagnated China’s has been surging. Not only has China surpassed Japan as the world’s second largest economy, but Silicon Valley is retooling in a race to catch up with China’s solar technology industry. Think about it. We’re struggling to keep up with China.

This brings me to the central point of this sermon, that as the Book of Proverbs tells us “A people without a vision will perish.”

Denial is not a river in Egypt; it is a powerful current within our society. Afflicted with privilege and cognitive dissonance, our elites and political leaders are self-destructively holding the nation to magical thinking: illusions of our inherent superiority. Meanwhile, systems and our aging infrastructure collapse around us.

It remains politically dangerous for our leaders to confront the reality that the values and policies that led to “The American Century” carried within them the seeds of our 21st century decline. Blinded by affluenza; “rugged individualism”, so-called “free

enterprise” capitalism, military “full spectrum dominance,” and our version of Crusader Christianity, the nation has lost its way. Among the results are the hollowing out of our economy, the consequent loss of jobs and homes, and renewed racism targeted especially against Latinos, Muslims and President Obama.

Before I further depress you, let me point to the way out of our crisis: domestic and foreign policies deeply rooted in commitments to Common Security. Common Security was the concept, based on religious and realpolitik truths, that served as the paradigm for ending the Cold War: one cannot be secure if the other feels threatened and insecure. It means rationally addressing the sources of peoples and nations fears, and doing the hard nosed negotiating of win-win arrangements that provide for the common or mutual security. Nuclear arms control agreements provide more security than arsenals on hair trigger alert. We’d do better, in fact, to get rid the all, as required by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Similarly, millionaires’ property values will inevitably plummet if we don’t have tax dollars to protect our communities from climate change’s rising oceans.

Allow me a historical reference. George Kennan was best known as the author of the Cold War’s containment doctrine. Less well known is what he advised President Truman in 1948:

"We have about 50% of the world’s wealth, but only 6.3% of its population...we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our task...is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity...we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts."

This was three years after we inflicted nuclear holocausts on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to gain geostrategic advantages over the Soviet Union. Maintaining that “position of disparity” meant creating the military-industrial complex, six decades of wars and military intervention, and it is a major source of our current economic crisis.

I was tempted to title this sermon “The Price of a Hamburger”, but Lani nixed it. My reference was to a recent article by Thomas Friedman. On the eve of an economic conference in Tianjin, he wrote “China’s CCTV aired a skit showing four children – one wearing the Chinese flag, another the American, another the Indian, and another the Brazilian – getting ready to run a race. Before they take off the American child ‘Anthony’ boasts that he will win ‘because I always win.’ And he jumps out to a big lead. But soon Anthony doubles over with cramps. ‘Now is our chance to overtake him for the first time!’ shouts the Chinese child. ‘What’s wrong with Anthony?’ asks another. ‘He is overweight and flabby,’ says another child. “He ate too many hamburgers.””

Anthony’s cramps and our national crisis have multiple and interrelated causes. I want to summarize them before presenting an alternative to New Gingrich’s Plan for America.

Economic

It doesn’t take a Nobel laureate to know that we are in serious economic trouble. Like the Dutch tulip bubble of the 1630s and the more recent dot.com bubble, the housing speculation that fueled Clinton and Bush era prosperity has burst with devastating consequences for millions. We still face the dangers of a double dip recession, deflation, and a possible depression, especially if the Herbert Hoovers of the Republican and Tea Parties continue to resist the hard won lessons of Keynesian

economics. Even with a renewed and expanded stimulus program, we will likely to follow Japan's footsteps (something you can read about in this morning's New York Times,) a decade or more of economic stagnation and a declining slice of the global economy.

In his recent book *The Betrayal of American Prosperity*, Reagan-era trade official Clyde Prestowitz names the two greatest causes of our relative economic decline: decades of near-religious belief in so-called "free market" capitalism and the trading away of economic resources and advantages for short-term geostrategic advantage.

There is a historic pattern whereby nations, including the United States, laid the foundations for their economic rise by protecting their industries with tariff walls and otherwise gaming the international system, just like China today. Once primacy was achieved, imperial Britain and then the U.S. insisted on "free trade" to destroy trade barriers raised by other nations. But, that also means making our economies more fully open to competition: Japanese cars, Chinese flat screens, and so on. With the insularity that has long characterized our nation, our political leaders refused to adapt as Japan, China and the Asian tigers developed a dynamic new model of state-led, and in critical aspects owned, capitalism – not unlike the one we used to build 19th century canals and railways and to win World War II.

Of course, we don't really have "free enterprise". Large corporations enjoy economies of scale, hire the lobbyists, buy advertising and politicians, and enjoy tax advantages that small manufacturers, service providers and retailers can only dream of.

Hewing to the U.S. version of free market orthodoxy and worshipping short term profit maximization, rather than attending to the long term economic health, many CEO's

shipped production abroad to reduce hourly wages. Services were similarly “outsourced.” Meanwhile, the needs of workers and communities, whose contributions were essential to building these mega-corporations, were ignored. The jobs and technologies that fuel innovation, as well as tax dollars, went to Shenzhen and Changzhou, not Detroit and Chicago.

Prestowitz also points to the imperial temptations that sapped our economic strengths in trade offs for geopolitical advantages: “To obtain rights for military bases overseas [and we have more than 1,000 such bases from Japan to Jordan and Kenya to Colombia] or votes in the UN or troop contributions to American led- military expeditions, Washington...grant[s] special tariff exemptions to trading partners or acquiesce[s] in the virtual exclusion of U.S. goods from foreign markets.” Thus we buy goods manufactured in China, but carrying “made in Jordan” labels, to help keep a client Middle Eastern monarchy in power. Lowering tariffs on Pakistani textiles helped to buy that military dictatorship as a dubious ally in the war against the Afghan Taliban. Joint production of aerospace and other high-tech produces goes with maintaining military alliances with Japan and other countries. Such arrangements also mean the bleeding of technological advantages that are essential to innovation and job security and job creation.

And of course, there’s our dependency on foreign oil. Like a heroin addict in a death spiral, who steals from friends and family rather than opting for the drs of rehab, we send hundreds of billions of dollars a year into Saudi and other Persian Gulf vaults. Along with similar sums lining Beijing’s and Tokyo’s treasuries as a consequence of our massive trade imbalances, we are increasing our dependence and undermining our

children's future economic prosperity. There are limits to how many petro- and other dollars these nations will stash in our banks. Over time they will move their money to other currencies and invest in other countries. This will mean still less money for the home, business and college loans that are essential to our prosperity.

Military

Militarily we face more than a deadly quagmire in Afghanistan, a war that will cost something like \$3 trillion dollars by the time we pay decades of veterans' benefits and interest on the Chinese and Japanese loans that pay for the killing. That's on top of the continuing and equally great costs of the Iraq war. Then we have the drone and Special Forces attacks of our low-intensity warfare in Pakistan, Yemen, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Somalia, and Colombia.

These wars have drained our national treasury, resulted in more G.I. suicides than battlefield deaths, created a new generation of terrorists, and deepened the alienation of much of the oil and resource-rich Islamic world.

While we spend more than \$800 billion annually on the Pentagon's core budget – 800 BILLION - our infrastructure decaying around us, and President Obama can't get \$200 million to fund innovation hubs to address our greatest energy challenges.

Remember a year ago, when we had to boil water for three days? We have fallen behind China in providing efficient mass transit, and teachers are being laid off across the country – causing additional painful unemployment and further sacrificing our children's futures. They, too, are victims of our wars and militarism.

The historian Paul Kennedy calls this "imperial overreach". Like the empires that preceded us, imperial overreach spells decline. Debtor nations cannot indefinitely fund

what the Pentagon calls “full spectrum dominance” – the ability to dominate any nation, anywhere, any time, at any level of power. As we see in Afghanistan, with asymmetric warfare, the world’s richest nation in the world cannot impose its will on a largely illiterate, desperately poor but highly motivated, irregular peasant forces. And, in East Asia, China will soon be able to deter our most powerful and incredibly expensive tool of foreign military intervention: nuclear powered aircraft carriers.

Culture

What do I dare say about culture? It’s a long time since *Father Knows Best* was our national paradigm or that our colonial history and the DAR defined U.S. culture.

In fact, we are known for our culture wars. Who rules? Bob Dylan or 50 Cent; Quentin Tarantino or Jennifer Lopez; Danielle Steele, Tony Morrison or Jonathan Franzen?

Even if John Bohner, likely the next Speaker of the House, laments that “the America he grew up in has been ‘snuffed out’”, we have become a multi-cultural society. Black and Latino, Jewish and Muslim, conservative Christians, radical Lesbians, Italian-American, Chinese-American, and the list goes on. Hope lies in cross-fertilizing, harmonizing and nurturing the dynamism of our multiple cultures.

Let me skip past the materialism that Martin Luther King observed brings us “neither peace of mind nor serenity of spirit”, and the nearly unconscious cultural assumption that “Americans” – which is to say U.S. people and not Mexicans or Argentineans – should by right dominate the world.

Instead, let me emphasize that there are costs, as well as benefits, to our individualistic culture. Years ago, we were warned about the consequences of our

“culture of narcissism”. News that we were “bowling alone” preceded post-modernism and the parallel worlds we inhabit with the rise of the Internet and Web and the decline of our major media.

A leading Japanese intellectual once told me: “In Japan we may err too much on the side of communalism. But, in the United States you are consumed by your individualism. You spend 100% of your energy looking after your individual needs and interests. If you could learn to trust others just 30% of the time, you would be a much happier people.”

If we can leave individualistic social Darwinism behind, if we can make common cause with one another, we will have the cultural foundation needed to opt for environmentally and economically sustainable high speed trains and reduce our dependence on gas guzzling, global warming cars. It will allow us to overcome the growing income inequality that inflicts suffering and subverts democracy.

Spiritual

Here in a church, I should say a few words about religion. As some of you probably read, a recent Pew survey confirmed what many of you know: atheists and Jews tend to know more about the world’s religions than our Christian neighbors and compatriots. Yet, the fundamentalists – our Christian Taliban - who know the least about religion are leading the charge to tear down the walls between church and state. We even have mainstream politicians like Senator McCain insisting that the U.S. is a “Christian nation”. And, you know, he doesn’t have the Pentagon turning its cheek in mind.

Intellectual

President Obama recently reminded us that the U.S. is no longer number one in education. We rank 14th in the percentage of those with college educations. This doesn't spell prosperity in the information age. It doesn't work to teach Creationism instead of evolution, to have 37% of our young people unable to find Iraq on a map after twenty years of war, to have an equal number believe who that most Indians are Muslim, and to have so few speaking foreign languages. Those of you who have traveled to Europe must have been impressed by the facility in languages that gives many Europeans the ability to engage and work with a wide range of people.

And, on a deeper level, there's the question of how we instill democratic values and thinking when history is little taught little and when rote memorization and teaching to the test replace creative and critical thinking.

Political

It sometimes feels that we are living Gandhi's nightmare. With our politicians exacting an eye for an eye, for an eye, for an eye, our political leaders are blinding themselves. I hate to rely so heavily on Thomas Friedman, but he was right when he wrote that much "of our poll-driven, toxically partisan, cable-TV-addicted, money-corrupted political class are more interested in what keeps them in power" than on what we need to revitalize our nation.

Just as we can't export democracy at the end of a bayonet or drone, we have yet to overcome the divisions – including the embrace of racism – that ignited our Civil War. When you find yourself wondering at right-wing Republicans' disdain for the Northeast

cosmopolitanism and comparing Obama to Hitler, think about the legacies of Nixon's southern strategy and the demographic, and thus political, rise of the Sunbelt.

And, there is the reality of our military government, or the military government within our government. President Eisenhower warned that the military-industrial-Congressional complex was subverting our constitutional democracy. Five decades later, more than half of our government's discretionary spending goes to the military. Our Pentagon spending is roughly equal to what is spent by the rest of the world – combined! But, somehow, the problem always seems to be Social Security, entitlements and foreign aid

As Eisenhower understood, the military-industrial complex is a deep and subversive set of systems. We see this as weapons manufacturers place sub-contracts in a majority of Congressional districts to ensure the votes that guarantee their mega-profits and privilege. Liberal members of Congress scream bloody murder when the Pentagon threatens to close redundant military bases in their districts. And, many universities are increasingly dependent on military contracts.

Years ago, a Chilean Methodist minister who had been imprisoned and tortured in Pinochet's prisons, was asked "When do you know if you have a military government?" He answered: Look at your national budget."

Toward Common Security

Some say "Maybe the decline will do us some good." In some ways they are right. Approaching the world with greater humility, reducing consumption, and not sacrificing children to the maws of war can only be for the good. But, as we see with job losses, foreclosures, and homelessness, the decline can also cause real suffering. Meanwhile

Wall Street, corporate interests, the military-industrial complex and Know-Nothings are stashing away fortunes and consolidating their privileges. If we fail to develop a credible alternative vision that addresses our people's need for real security, as well as the political will to create it, the future will belong to the Robber Barons and the religious right.

There's a lesson to be taken from Native American cultures that were built on the foundation of learning from seven past generations and fulfilling their descendants needs seven decades into the future. In this spirit, let me respond to the Republicans "Plan for America" with one of my own.

1. Along with the sun gods Ra and Helios, free market capitalism should be understood as mythology. It was a state-led national industrial policy that built the canals, railroads and dams essential to 19th & 20th century U.S. prosperity and victory in World War II. As we did then, we should look to private sector-government partnerships to build 21st century infrastructures and to produce competitive high-tech and climate friendly technologies.

2. We can go a long way toward outlawing the casino capitalism that precipitated our economic crisis by resurrecting the Glass-Steagall Act, enacted in response to the 1930s Depression, that prevented banks from becoming Wall Street gamblers.

3. With the growing and gross economic inequities, it's time to return to truly progressive and graduated income taxes, and end tax give aways to the wealthiest two percent. If my parents' was "the greatest" generation, let's go back to the personal income tax rates that prevailed during the prosperous 1950s.

4. Here in Massachusetts we should vote “NO!” on question #3. I don’t like the regressive sales tax, but if the backers of the question 3 prevail, we’ll see an additional \$2 ½ billion state budget deficit, further savaging of our social services, increased joblessness, and accelerated infrastructure decay as we race Mississippi to the bottom. And while you are at it, on Monday, please call Senator Brown’s office and urge him to vote for the New START Treaty. The last thing we can afford is a renewed arms race with Russia.

5. If the Pentagon wants more money, let them organize a bake sale. No, like Britain and Germany, it’s time to slash our military spending, with the savings used to invest in our human capital, building 21st century infrastructures, and to pay down the Bush-Cheney national debt. Barney Frank opened the way with his call for a 25% reduction, but that just covers bringing warriors home from Iraq and Afghanistan. We have 1,000 foreign military bases scattered across the planet, and despite his call for a nuclear weapons free world, President Obama’s budget calls for increasing nuclear weapons spending by \$180 billion over the next decade - \$180 billion! We can do better than that.

6. With the Pentagon spending roughly fifty times that of the State Department, we need to demilitarize our foreign policy. When the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like the proverbial nail. Just as Common Security provided the conceptual basis for ending the Cold War, it’s time to base our approach to the world on common security, not full spectrum dominance. A more humble and respectful approach to other nations can only increase our security.

7.As in Germany, which is enjoying near full employment, education should be recognized as a right that also provides the foundation for individual and national economic security. Instead of modernizing our nuclear arsenal, we can use our tax dollars to ensure that every qualified student can study as far as his or her smarts will take them. We need the next generation of engineers, scientists and linguists if we are to prosper. We need historians, philosophers and political theorists to regenerate our democracy.

8.Politically, if there is to be a litmus test for future Supreme Court nominees, it should be a commitment to overturn the Citizens United decision that permits foreign as well as corporate money to dictate the outcome of our elections. Like the Dred Scott decision, if Citizens United isn't overturned, we can kiss popular democracy good-bye.

9.Friends, with the exceptions that prove the rule, our religious leaders and communities have long been “on the scene missing” when it comes to struggles for justice and peace. If, as Quakers believe, respect for the dignity of each person is an essential spiritual value, it's time to get your ya yas out there.

10. My final point harkens back to Albert Camus. We are not called upon to be heroic, but simply to live with common decency. Essential to such decency is human solidarity and the willingness to make even small sacrifices to help ensure common security in this and the next seven generations.

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