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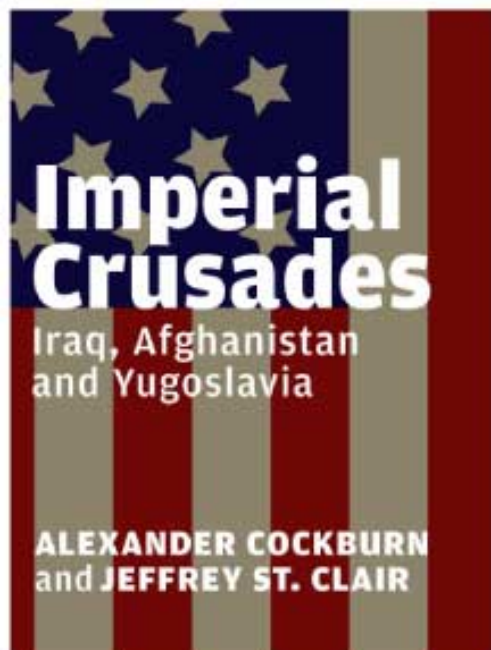
Imperial Entropy

Collapse of the American Empire

By KIRKPATRICK SALE

It is quite ironic: only a decade or so after the idea of the United States as an imperial power came to be accepted by both right and left, and people were actually able to talk openly about an American empire, it is showing multiple signs of its inability to continue. And indeed it is now possible to contemplate, and openly speculate about, its collapse.

The neocons in power in Washington these days, those who were delighted to talk about America as the sole empire in the world following the Soviet disintegration, will of course refuse to believe in any such collapse, just as they ignore the realities of the imperial war in Iraq. But I think it behooves us to examine seriously the ways in which the U.S. system is so drastically imperiling itself that it will cause not only the collapse of its



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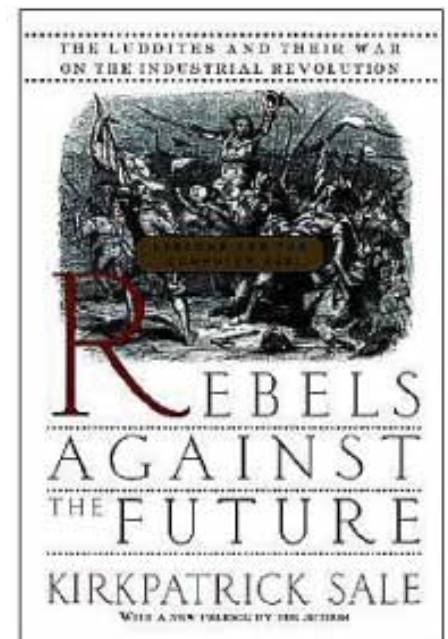
worldwide empire but drastically alter the nation itself on the domestic front.

All empires collapse eventually: Akkad, Sumeria, Babylonia, Ninevah, Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, Greece, Carthage, Rome, Mali, Songhai, Mongol, Tokugawaw, Gupta, Khmer, Hapsburg, Inca, Aztec, Spanish, Dutch, Ottoman, Austrian, French, British, Soviet, you name them, they *all* fell, and most within a few hundred years. The reasons are not really complex. An empire is a kind of state system that inevitably makes the same mistakes simply by the nature of its imperial structure and inevitably fails because of its size, complexity, territorial reach, stratification, heterogeneity, domination, hierarchy, and inequalities.

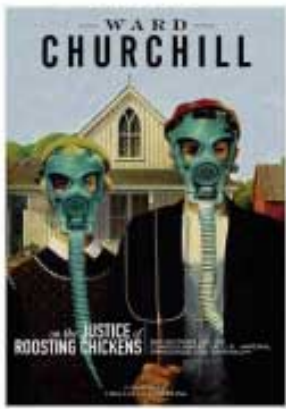
In my reading of the history of empires, I have come up with four reasons that almost always explain their collapse. (Jared Diamond's new book [Collapse](#) also has a list of reasons for societal collapse, slightly overlapping, but he is talking about systems other than empires.) Let me set them out, largely in reference to the present American empire.

First, environmental degradation. Empires always end by destroying the lands and waters they depend upon for survival, largely because they build and farm and grow without limits, and ours is no exception, even if we have yet to experience the worst of our assault on nature. Science is in agreement that *all*

important ecological indicators are in decline and have been for decades: erosion of topsoils and beaches, overfishing, deforestation, freshwater and aquifer depletion, pollution of water, soil, air, and food, soil salinization, overpopulation, overconsumption, depletion of oil and minerals, introduction of new diseases and invigoration of old ones, extreme weather, melting icecaps and rising sealevels, species extinctions, and excessive human overuse of the earth's photosynthetic capacity. As the Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson has said, after lengthy examination of human impact on the earth, our "ecological footprint is already too large for the planet to sustain, and it is getting larger." A Defense Department study last year predicted "abrupt climate change," likely to occur within a decade, will lead to "catastrophic" shortages of water and energy, endemic "disruption and conflict," warfare that "would define human life," and a "significant drop" in the planet's ability to sustain its present population. End of empire for sure, maybe end of civilization.



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Second, economic meltdown. Empires always depend on excessive resource exploitation, usually derived from colonies farther and farther away from the center, and eventually fall when the resources are exhausted or become too expensive for all but the elite. This is exactly the path we are on-peak oil extraction, for example, is widely predicted to come in the next year or two-and our economy is built entirely on a fragile system in which the world produces and we, by and large, consume (U.S. manufacturing is just 13 per cent of our GDP). At the moment we sustain a nearly \$630 billion trade deficit with the rest of the world-it has leapt by an incredible \$500 billion since 1993, and \$180 billion since Bush took office in 2001-and in order to pay for that we have to have an inflow of cash from the rest of the world of about \$1 billion every *day* to pay for it, which was down by half late last year. That kind of excess is simply unsustainable, especially when you think that it is the other world empire, China, that is crucial for supporting it, at the tune of some \$83 billion on loan to the U.S. treasury.

Add to that an economy resting on a nearly \$500 billion Federal budget deficit, making up part of a total national debt of \$7.4 *trillion* as of last fall, and the continual drain on the economy by the military of at least \$530 billion a year (not counting military intelligence, whose figure we never know). Nobody thinks that is sustainable either, which is why the dollar has lost value everywhere-down by 30 per cent against the euro since 2000-and the world begins to lose faith in investment here. I foresee that in just a few years the dollar will be so battered that the oil states will no longer want to operate in that currency and will turn to the euro instead, and China will let the yuan float against the dollar, effectively making this nation bankrupt and powerless, unable to control economic life within its borders much less abroad.

Third, military overstretch. Empires, because they are by definition colonizers, are always forced to extend their military reach farther and farther, and enlarge it against unwilling colonies more and more, until coffers are exhausted, communication lines are overextended, troops are unreliable, and the periphery resists and ultimately revolts. The American empire, which began its worldwide reach well before Bush II, now has some 446,000 active troops at more than 725 acknowledged (and any number secret) bases in at least 38 countries around the world, plus a formal "military presence" in no less than 153 countries, on every continent but Antarctica-and nearly a dozen fully armed courier fleets on all the oceans. Talk about overstretch: the U.S. is less than 5 per cent of the world's population. And now that Bush has declared a "war on terror," instead of the more doable war on Al Quada we should have waged, our armies and agents will be on a battlefield universal and permanent that cannot possibly be controlled or contained.

So far that military network has not collapsed, but as Iraq indicates it is mightily tested and quite incapable of establishing client states to do our bidding and protect resources we need. And

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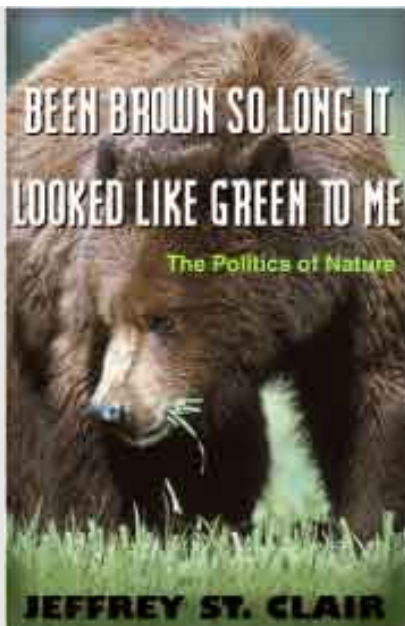
as anti-American sentiment continues to spread and darken-in all the Muslim countries, in much of Europe, in much of Asia-and as more countries refuse the "structural adjustments" that our IMF-led globalization requires, it is quite likely that the periphery of our empire will begin resisting our dominance, militarily if necessary. And far from having a capacity to fight two wars simultaneously, as the Pentagon once hoped, we are proving that we can't even fight one.

Finally, domestic dissent and upheaval. Traditional empires end up collapsing from within as well as often being attacked from without, and so far the level of dissent within the U.S. has not reached the point of rebellion or secession-thanks both to the increasing repression of dissent and escalation of fear in the name of "homeland security" and to the success of our modern version of bread and circuses, a unique combination of entertainment, sports, television, internet sex and games, consumption, drugs, liquor, and religion that effectively deadens the general public into stupor. But the tactics of the Bush II administration show that it is so fearful of an expression of popular dissent that it is willing to defy and ignore environmental, civil-rights, and progressive groups, to bribe commentators to put out its propaganda, to expand surveillance and data-base invasions of privacy, to use party superiority and backroom tactics to ride roughshod over Congressional opposition, to use lies and deceptions as a normal part of government operations, to break international laws and treaties for short-term ends, and to use religion to cloak its every policy.

It's hard to believe that the great mass of the American public would ever bestir itself to challenge the empire at home until things get much, much worse. It is a public, after all, of which, as a Gallup poll in 2004 found, 61 per cent believe that "religion can answer all or most of today's problems," and according to a Time/CNN poll in 2002 59 per cent believe in the imminent apocalypse foretold in the Book of Revelation and take every threat and disaster as evidence of God's will. And yet, it's also hard to believe that a nation so thoroughly corrupt as this-in all its fundamental institutions, its boughten parties, academies, corporations, brokerages, accountants, governments-and resting on a social and economic base of intolerably unequal incomes and property, getting increasingly unequal, will be able to sustain itself for long. The upsurge in talk about secession after the last election, some of which was deadly serious and led on to organizations throughout most of the blue states, indicates that at least a minority is willing to think about drastic steps to "alter or abolish" a regime it finds itself fundamentally at odds with.

Those four processes by which empires always eventually fall seem to me to be inescapably operative, in varying degrees, in this latest empire. And I think a combination of several or all of them will bring about its collapse within the next 15 years or so.

Jared Diamond's recent book detailing the ways societies collapse



**Been Brown So Long,
It Looked Like Green to Me:
The Politics of Nature
by Jeffrey St. Clair**

suggests that American society, or industrial civilization as a whole, once it is aware of the dangers of its current course, can learn from the failures of the past and avoid their fates. But it will never happen, and for a reason Diamond himself understands.

As he says, in his analysis of the doomed Norse society on Greenland that collapsed in the early 15th century: "The values to which people cling most stubbornly under inappropriate conditions are those values that were previously the source of their greatest triumphs over adversity." If this is so, and his examples would seem to prove it, then we can isolate the values of American society that have been responsible for its greatest triumphs and know that we will cling to them no matter what. They are, in one rough mixture, capitalism, individualism, nationalism, technophilia, and humanism (as the dominance of humans over nature). There is no chance whatever, no matter how grave and obvious the threat, that as a society that we will abandon those.

Hence no chance to escape the collapse of empire.

Kirkpatrick Sale is the author of twelve books, including [Human Scale](#), [The Conquest of Paradise](#), [Rebels Against the Future](#), and [The Fire of His Genius: Robert Fulton and the American Dream](#).

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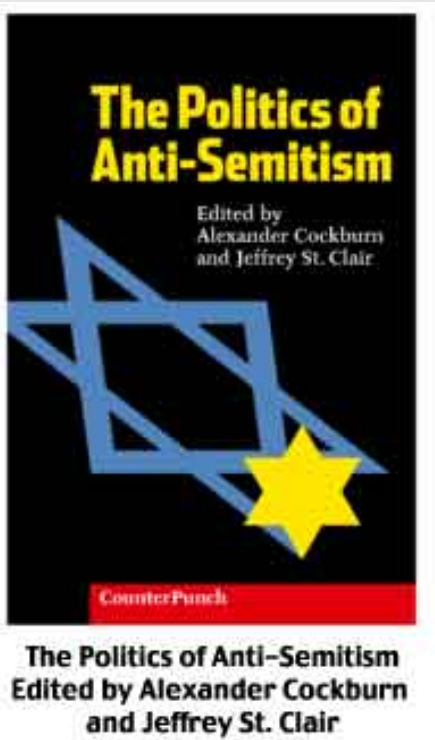
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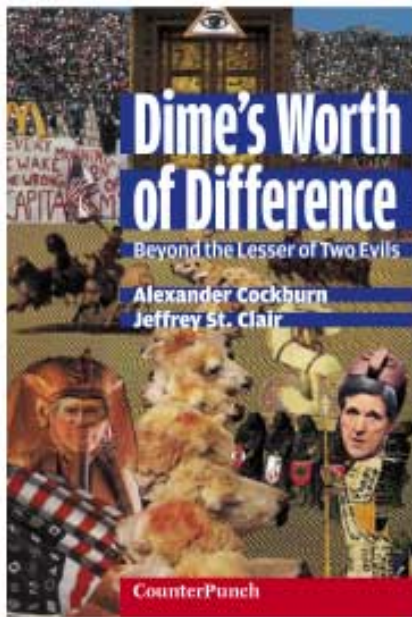
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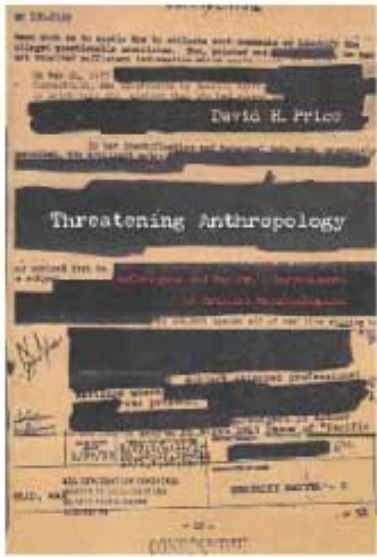
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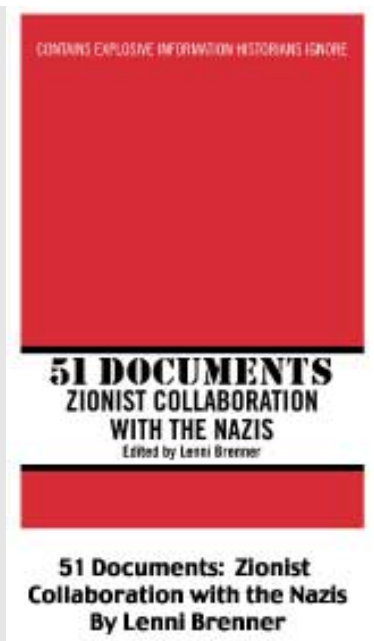
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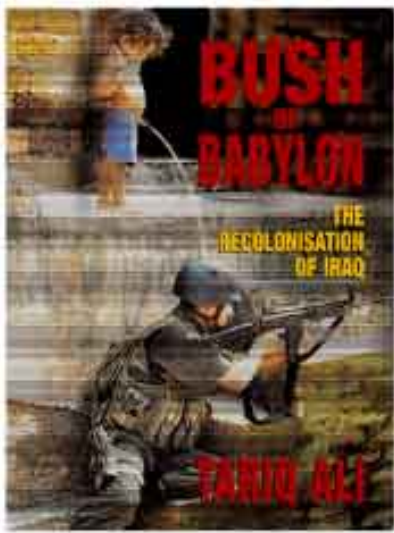
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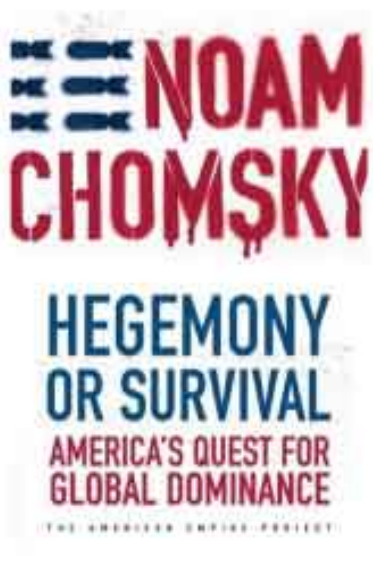
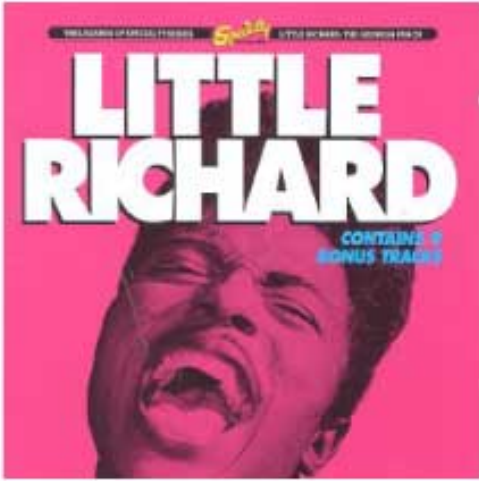


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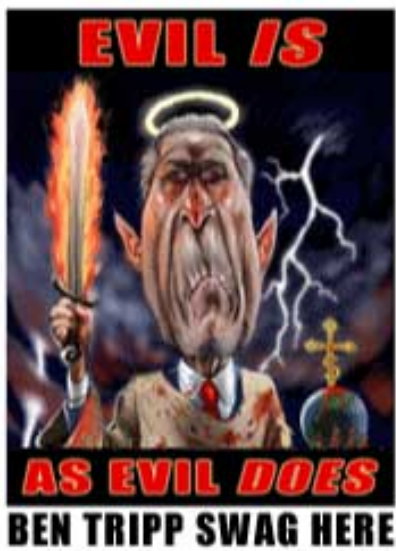
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