# The Decline and Fall of Empires

Why do great empires crumble away or crash? Are their deaths inevitable? Over the centuries, historians have postulated numerous reasons for the demise of empires. For example, Chinese scholars accepted a cyclical theory of history, namely, that growth and prosperity are inevitably followed by decline and fall. Chinese writers also accepted the proposition that periods of unity are followed by disunity and chaos, which in turn give way once more to unity. These views are shared by the great fourteenth-century Arab historian lbn Khaldun. Judeo Christian historians, on the other hand, believed that historic progression served God’s purpose and that history would end when God’s kingdom was established on earth. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, modern theories range from the Marxist view that all history is the result of class struggle based on economic causes to Arnold Toynbee’s hypothesis that empires rise when they meet the physical and spiritual challenges of the people and time and fall when they no longer do so.

The problem with broad theories such as these is that they may lead their exponents to bend, distort, or use facts selectively to prove their case, while ignoring or dismissing important factors that fail to serve their thesis. In fact, the rise and fall of great empires result from many complex reasons, some of which are shared, while in other instances they are specific and unique. Therefore it is difficult and unwise to force the explanation for the fall of all empire into a uniform framework. This essay identifies some of the important reasons for the decline and fall of empires. As we shall see, empires have characteristically declined and collapsed as a result of a combination of factors.

***1. Dynastic succession***. To paraphrase the great twentieth- century British statesman and historian Winston Churchill, although democratic governments are imperfect, they are nevertheless superior to all other forms of government. In particular, constitutional democracies built on the rule of law have clear rules concerning acquiring, holding, and relinquishing power. No major ancient empire was democratically governed. All were hereditary dynasties, ruled most of the time by men, but sometimes by women. Succession to power was often based on primogeniture or some other form of selection within the ruling family. Inevitably, after some generations, ruling families produced weak heirs due to wine, song, sexual excess, mental deficiency, or other causes, or they left minor heirs who were incapable of governing. Ineffectual leaders and disputed successions generally led to revolts, usurpations, and civil wars that toppled the ruling dynasty and contributed to the decline and fall of the empire. For example, the lack of an adult male heir spelled the breakup of Alexander’s empire. A disputed succession broke up the Mongol Empire two generations after its founding by Genghis Khan. Inferior rulers and minor rulers manipulated by relatives and eunuchs brought about the end of the Mauryan and Han Empires. Disputed succession led to coups that severely undermined the strength of the Roman and Inca Empires and ended the unity of the Muslim Empire a generation after Muhammad’s death.

***2. Bureaucratic corruption***. All effective empires relied on an honest bureaucracy and created checks and balances to ensure it. For example, the Romans emphasized the duty of the upper class to set moral examples and to devote their lives to public service. Han China created state universities and an examination system to educate and select men of integrity and ability for public service. In time, however, all bureaucracies succumbed to corruption, and corrupt government provoked rebellions: for example, a peasant revolt called the Yellow Turban rebellion contributed to the fall of the Han Empire.

***3. Inequitable economic burdens.*** Successful empires depended on sufficient revenues to support the military, bureaucracy, and other arms of government. Sufficient revenues depended on a prosperous population engaged in agriculture, trade, and industry. Those who could evade taxes, however, generally the powerful, often found ways to do so, thereby enhancing their incomes and becoming richer. The resulting shift of the tax burden to the poor and powerless inevitable led to decreased revenue for the government and aroused resentment among the taxpayers. A resentful population often revolted, and impoverished governments frequently lacked the resources to put down the revolts or to ameliorate the discontent that provoked them. Nor did the governments have the resources to mount defenses against external enemies. A vicious cycle of decline and fall resulted. For example, the rise of large plantations and the concomitant fall of a free farming citizenry greatly contributed to the fall of both Rome and the Han. The inability of the Gupta Empire in India to collect revenues, to pay all its officials contributed to its collapse.

***4. Regional, racial, and ethnic tensions.*** Great empires were usually composites of numerous racial, ethnic, and religious groups who resisted full integration. The Hellenistic empires never fully integrated the ruling class of Greeks and the subject Egyptians, Persians, and other ethnic groups. In India the reversion to regional states divided by language and ethnicity demonstrates how difficult the Mauryan task of attempting to unite the subcontinent had been. A major weakness of the Aztec Empire was its tenuous control over restless subject peoples, who were often ready to join outsiders against their current masters. Widely disparate regional interests led Emperor Diocletian to divide the Roman Empire into four administrations with four capitals and four leaders. In time the division solidified into two separate empires, each with its official language, traditions, and culture.

***5. Decline of martial spirit.*** The existence of a will to fight, or, put another way, the willingness of a populace to sacrifice property or life itself to defend the state, is an intangible but important factor in the rise and fall of many empires. The success of the Roman Empire was in part due to its male citizens’ pride in military service. When that spirit declined, Rome was forced to recruit unreliable mercenaries. The need to pay mercenaries drained the treasury. This was also true of the Han and Tang Empires in China. When the Tang government needed to recruit barbarian units for the army, the result was a rebellion that almost toppled the dynasty. According to some, the Indian emperor Ashoka’s emphasis on pacifism and moral persuasion as state policies sapped the martial spirit of the Indians and contributed to the fall of the Mauryan Empire after his passing.

***6. Moral decline.*** This is also an intangible factor. Nevertheless. From Augustus on, Roman leaders decried the decline of their citizen's moral fiber and their increasing self-indulgence and hedonism. Similarly, in Han China, the hedonism and extravagance of the upper classes are blamed for the decline of the dynasty. Emperor Ashoka of India appointed morality officers to uphold high moral standards, with dubious results.

***7. Escapist or otherworldly religions.*** The eighteenth-century historian Edward Gibbon blamed Christianity, which stressed heavenly rather than earthly rewards, for declining civic spirit and other ills of the Roman Empire. He also blamed religious strife among Christians for the increasing chaos of Rome. Like many upper class Han Chinese indulged in other worldly Buddhism or escapist philosophical Taoism. Emperor Ashoka’s encouragement of pacific pursuits and the nonviolent teachings of Buddhism and Jainism may also have contributed to weakening the Mauryan Empire.

***8. External enemies.*** All successful empires were forged through conquest and maintained through military strength. While defeated enemies schemed for revenge, the wealth generated by powerful empires inspired envy, especially among less affluent neighbors. Thus outsiders awaited opportunities to breach the defenses of the Han and Roman Empires and to loot, settle, and rule the lands they coveted.

***9. Costly technology.*** All successful empires created engineering wonders that helped to sustain them. From China to India, West Asia, the Mediterranean world, and South America, imperial governments built and maintained roads, harbors and waterways, irrigation projects, defensive walls, and other installations. They maintained granaries to provision troops defending their borders, to relieve famine, and to enhance their economics The Great Wall of China, the Roman roads and aqueducts, the enormous granary complex of the Inca, and the Ptolemaic irrigation works along the Nile River are major examples of the energies expended to maintain safety and enhance the economies of those empires. Whatever their intrinsic merit, however, the expense of initiating and maintaining projects of such magnitude often impoverished the governments that supported them, turning what was originally an advantage into a liability.