

Poor America – Japan Times - 20.10.20

Poor America! This great and rich nation, the saviour of the free world in the 20th century, the author of Pax Americana, is having a miserable time in the 21st century.

The outward and immediate signs of this can be seen, and heard, in the violent polarisation of debate, the constant talk of a deeply divided nation, the explosive anger of the Black Community, the fury of persistent gender inequality, the angry war of words over the Supreme Court new member, and now, to cap to it all, a sick President, a grimly high Covid death toll and the airwaves full of whispers of conspiracy and shouts of pure hatred. The imminent Presidential election has been described as ‘a democratic disaster’. Truly a bad scene.

Yet beneath it all lies a much deeper and more historic process of which these ugly sores and social maladies are all the surface symptoms – including the Covid impact itself.

In a sense, what American society is suffering from now, in acute form and in almost all its limbs and organs, is what great world powers throughout history have at some stage endured – the almost puzzling moment when unquestioned superior power starts to slip away, the national role becomes blurred, the future less certain, the threats more serious and bewildering. The process is psychological and emotional, as much as social and political. Huge and difficult adjustment is required in the minds of all.

This leaves a feeling of intense frustration, mixed with disappointment and anger that things are not as they were and that somebody is to blame, that the leaders have failed to lead, that there must be other short-cuts out of the dilemmas. Endless empires in history, would-be and actual, have passed through the same experience, some much more painfully than others, since time immemorial, and continue to do so.

In the last hundred years the biggest collapse was perhaps of the biggest empire, the British one, of which the end was in fact quite skilfully managed with metamorphosis into a sort of club, the Commonwealth, more or less peaceably, and without prolonged bloodshed, except in India, Malaysia, and, to a lesser extent, Kenya.

Or, some might say, the more recent collapse of the Soviet empire was a bigger event still in its impact on the world order, giving, just for a brief window, the American nation its ultimate unipolar phase. Far more devastating still, in the first half of the 20th century, were the ambitions of Germany and Japan, which ended in total disaster, or further back still the disintegration of the old Austro-Hungarian empire or the crumbling of once-dominant Ottoman power.

In all such cases, when power shifts and status is challenged or destroyed, the peoples involved are left disorientated, searching aimlessly for leadership that would restore greatness, unable to accept that they are no longer the unquestioned ‘top nation’ leaders.

Old illusions cling and disunity prevails. Donald Trump's call, even from his sickbed, that 'America is the greatest country in the world' still gets its wide resonance. The belief of American supremacy in a hierarchy of states, lingers on, not just as the speeches of demagogues and rabble-rousers. It goes right across the political spectrum, takes in large sections of the governing classes, foreign policy circles, both liberal and conservative, and much of American academia and the media as well. It also goes back through several presidencies.

Thus we had Condoleezza Rice, George Bush Junior's articulate Secretary of State, firmly asserting only a decade ago that American values should prevail globally, with most of the Washington establishment nodding in agreement. The idea persists. Today we hear even Joe Nye, the brilliant Harvard prophet and expositor of soft power, insisting that America still remains 'the world's leading military power for decades to come'. Acknowledging that military force is no longer the answer to many of the key transnational issues of today, he and many other opinion-formers who think like him, nevertheless doggedly believe that sheer size is power and that America is still 'born to lead'.

Hence, with all this constant flow of pronouncements about America's world leadership, it is hardly surprising to see the dismay, the aggression, the furious identity assertion, and the polarized disunity that fizzles through American life when it turns out no longer to be quite like that.

But before we get too negative about America's apparent decline, or too convinced that great power clashes lie ahead, it is worth noting two aspects of the current situation which make it completely different from anything that has gone before.

First, unlike in past eras of national dominance and empire, in the American case there is no replacement, no new and conquering nation about to sweep in. This is so even though some may cite China, and see the Chinese 'threat' under every bed, as once they saw the Soviet Union, or even, absurd though it looks now, rising Japan.

Second, technology, the microchip and the nanochip have changed everything. Contrary to the learned views of Professor Nye, and many others, size no longer equates with power, indeed it has become the lumbering disadvantage in a network world of lightning speed connectivity. Power has not been transferred to another rival, it has been scattered across a multi-polar world and to a thousand different sources. Technology has created an age in which the Davids increasingly outwit the remaining Goliaths.

For today's America, and its friends, this should be good news. The end of super-power dominance need not mean defeat, civil war, anarchy or complete disruption of established forms of governance. All it requires is an adjustment of attitude and an acceptance – that America's huge talents, endless ingenuity and vitality can flourish just as well when America is not the 'top dog' nation, but just a big and generous partner in the network, as when it filled its previous unipolar role.