Chapter 5
Absolute Decline: Is America Like Rome?

Could US lose its ability to influence world events because of decline of society and culture, its economy, or political institutions?

Society and Culture — OK
- Social problems seem not to be increasing
- Some even decreasing (crime, divorce rates, teenage pregnancy)
- Strong immigration (13% foreign-born):
  - creates healthy demographic curve
  - increases appeal and therefore soft power

Economy — OK
- Slower growth after 2008, but not stagnation
- Shale revolution boosts economy and jobs, lowers costs
- Leader in research and development
- Problems:
  - low rate of savings, large deficit, rise in debt
  - poor educational system below university level [top universities, but ratings are bogus and costs are out of control]
  - income inequality (poor jobs for less-educated; decline of middle class)
- Economy is not in absolute decline [yet]

Political Institutions — Not OK
- Gridlock may prevent translating power resources to outcomes
- Decline in public support for institutions
- [Internet allows exclusive access to news sources that support existing beliefs]
- Nasty politics nothing new, but we are more partisan now [rightmost Democrat is left of leftmost Republican; not true 20 years ago]
- Local politics and involvement in civic institutions have not declined as national has

Conclusions
Problems:
- Education system
- Income inequality
- Political institutions and partisanship
Chapter 6
Power Shifts and Global Complexity

Two great power shifts:
• Among states from West to East (covered in Chapters 1 - 4)
• Power diffusion from governments to non-state actors

Greater complexity
• Governments weak to respond to transnational issues like financial stability, climate change, terrorism, and pandemics
• Even a superpower will have to work with others
• 3-level chessboard: military [US first, but military is hard to use], multipolar economics, transnational problems outside governmental control (not susceptible to military solutions)
• Problem isn’t being passed by another country, but increasing entropy (“Who’s next? No one.”)
• [WADG will have to meet from 9–12]

The world in 2030
• National Intelligence Council predicts US first, but no hegemons. [2002 NIE on WMDs helped sell Iraq war; anything really useful probably classified]
• US population will grow, other nations’ will shrink; Africa will more than double (serious problem)
• US share of world output slipping a little, but other countries rising a lot—more complexity
• US leadership still key (e.g., 2008 financial crises)
• Internet no longer entirely American

The information revolution and power diffusion
• More things happening outside of control of any state
• Information creation and distribution decentralized (Wikileaks, terrorism, spontaneous movements)
• Dependence on computing increases importance of cyber attacks, mostly from strong states
• US can no longer achieve its goals acting alone

Chapter 7
Conclusions
• Earlier efforts to assess relative power have been wrong (Soviets in 1970s; Japan in 1980s)
• Estimates of China’s strengths may be wrong, too, but it will surely gain relatively
• Still the American Century, but some events are unforeseen
• US may not convert its hard- (military & money) and soft-power resources (it did not between the Wars); long-term swing from maximalist politics to retrenchment
• US now reluctant (Obama, at least) to use intervention unless its or allies’ security is threatened
• Given Afghanistan and Iraq, we will now probably stay out of Syria [For the next 18 months, anyway; John Stewart, 2-June-2015: “Learning curves are for pussies”]
• We’ll need alliances, but they’re hard to create if we turn inward
• Military support of allies is important, but “force is a blunt instrument”
• Military no help on transnational issues
• Leadership is not the same as domination
• More complex world will require US to make smart strategic choices
• [Partisanship and dumber politicians/voters make smart choices unlikely]