

Empire Falls

By NIALL FERGUSON

Historian Edward Gibbon blamed Rome's decline on military overreach, social decadence, and barbarian invasion. Sound familiar? From the quagmire in Iraq to ballooning U.S. waistlines (and debt), to Europe's immigration woes, the author shows why the sun is setting on the West

*The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest. —Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, “General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West.”*

I

It was 230 years ago that Edward Gibbon published the first volume of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, a work conceived, as he put it, “amidst the ruins of the Capitol” in Rome. It was among the shining and still-intact buildings of another capital that I began (presumptuously, no doubt) to imagine a sequel that might be written: the history of the decline of the West, meaning that distinctive complex of beliefs and institutions which originated with the Greeks, was planted across Europe by the Romans, embraced Christianity under the Emperor Constantine, and crossed to the New World with Columbus.

The idea of Western decline is hardly a new one. In the aftermath of the First World War, a prematurely retired German schoolteacher named Oswald Spengler published the first volume of one of the most influential books of the 20th century, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, usually translated as *The Decline of the West*. These days, however, few people bother with Spengler; his prose is too turgid, his debt to the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche too large, his influence on the Nazis (for whom he voted but against whom he later turned) too obvious. And no one takes seriously his idiosyncratic theory that civilizations, like the weather, pass through seasons. In any case, events since 1945 have tended to discredit Spengler's central idea of a Western downfall. It has seemed much more convincing—and perhaps also more gratifying—to portray the history of the 20th century as part of a protracted Occidental ascendancy. “Much of the last three centuries,” wrote the late British historian J. M. Roberts in his book *Triumph of the West*, published in 1985, “is the story of a triumph of the outright power of the West.” But not only a triumph of Western power, he argued—above all, the triumph of Western civilization.

Just four years later, the 20th century appeared to culminate in a comprehensive Western victory, with the breakup of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. Famously, on the very eve of those events, Francis Fukuyama, professor at Johns Hopkins University, was moved to proclaim “the end of history” and the victory of the Western model of liberal and democratic capitalism. Far from suffering its downfall in the 20th century, as Spengler had anticipated, the West appeared to attain its historic zenith. Neoconservatives in the United States, intoxicated by their country’s unrivaled status as a “hyperpower” and its achievement of “full-spectrum dominance” in warfare, wondered only how American primacy could be perpetuated for another “American century.”

Yet in many ways this inversion of Spengler is a fundamental misreading of the trajectory of the last hundred years. Far from being a time of Western ascendancy, the past century has in reality witnessed something more like a re-orientation of the world—albeit only a partial re-orientation—and the relative decline of the West.

In 1900 the West really did rule the world. From the Bosphorus to the Bering Strait, from Siberia to Ceylon, nearly all of what was then known as the Orient was under some form of Western imperial rule. The British had long ruled India, the Dutch the East Indies, and the French Indochina; the Americans had just seized the Philippines; the Russians aspired to control Manchuria. All the imperial powers had established parasitical outposts in China. The East, in short, had been subjugated, even if that process involved far more complex negotiations and compromises between rulers and ruled than used to be acknowledged.

Western hegemony was one of the great asymmetries of world history. Taken together, the metropolises of all the Western empires—the American, Belgian, British, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish—accounted for 7 percent of the world’s land surface and just 18 percent of its population. Their possessions, however, amounted to 37 percent of global territory and 28 percent of mankind. And if we regard the Russian empire as effectively another European empire extending into Asia, the total share of these Western empires rises to more than half the world’s area and population. This was a political globalization unseen before or since.

What enabled the minority in the West to rule the majority in the East in 1900 was not so much scientific knowledge in its own right as its systematic application to both production and destruction. By contrast, the empires of the East, from the Ottoman to the Qing, failed disastrously to modernize themselves. Their economies remained trapped in subsistence agriculture while the West forged ahead, colonizing and industrializing, devouring sugar and burning coal. Their tax systems were inefficient, forcing Oriental rulers to borrow from Western capital bankers. Eastern armies remained long on pageantry and short on firepower, while the West could deploy well-drilled troops equipped with machine guns and heavy artillery. Eastern navies stood no chance against the Western combination of steam and steel.

Nothing symbolized better the humiliation of the East than the Western military intervention to suppress the Boxer Rebellion, in China, in 1900. The rebels, who had menaced Western diplomats and missionaries, relied on martial arts and magic. Having wiped them out, the Western expeditionary force staged a “grand march” through Beijing’s Forbidden City and then undertook punitive raids deep into Shanxi Province, Inner Mongolia, and Manchuria.

Just a few years later, however, the East began to re-assert itself. Japan's defeat of Russia on land and at sea in 1904–5 marked a turning point in world history. From that point on, the balance of geopolitical power began to turn, slowly and painfully, back toward the more populous part of the world. It is only when the extent of Western dominance in 1900 is appreciated that the true narrative arc of the 20th century reveals itself. This was not “the triumph of the West,” but rather the crisis of the European empires, the ultimate result of which was the revival of the East—beginning in Japan—and the relative decline of the West.

This has not been a decline in the sense that Spengler envisaged: a kind of corrosive metropolitan ennui. Rather, it has been an unexpected but inexorable military decline. It has been a scarcely perceptible economic decline. It has been a subtle but unmistakable cultural decline. Above all, it has been a creeping demographic decline. In short, it has been a decline in precisely the sense that Gibbon understood the decline of Rome's empire.

According to Gibbon, Rome fell through a combination of external overreach, internal corruption, religious transformation, and barbarian invasion. That the United States—and, perhaps even more, the European Union—might have something to learn from his account is too seldom acknowledged, perhaps because Americans and Europeans like to pretend that their polities today are something more exalted than empires. But suppose for a moment (as the Georgetown University historian Charles Kupchan has suggested in *The End of the American Era*) that Washington really is the Rome of our time, while Brussels, the headquarters of the European Union, is Byzantium, the city transformed in the fourth century into the second imperial capital, Constantinople. Like the later Roman Empire, the West today has its Western and Eastern halves, though they are separated by the Atlantic rather than the Adriatic. And that is not the only thing we have in common with our Roman predecessors of a millennium and a half ago.

II

The Romans ... had acquired the virtues of war and government; by the vigorous exertion of those virtues ... they had obtained, in the course of the three succeeding centuries, an absolute empire over many countries.... The limits of the Roman empire still extended from the Western Ocean to the Tigris ... but the animating health and vigour were fled.... The barbarians ... soon discovered the decline of the Roman empire. —Gibbon, Chapter VII.

There is a well-established American tradition, perhaps best expressed by Gore Vidal in *The Decline and Fall of the American Empire*, of worrying that the United States might go the way of Rome. But the perennial liberal fear is of the *early* Roman predicament more than the late one. It is the fear that the republican institutions of the United States—above all, its hallowed Constitution, based on the careful separation of powers—could be corrupted by the ambitions of an imperial presidency. Every time a commander in chief attempts to increase the power of the executive branch, pleading wartime exigency, there is a predictable chorus of “The Republic is in danger.” We have heard that chorus most recently with respect to the status of prisoners detained without trial at Guantánamo Bay and the use of torture in the interrogation of suspected insurgents in Iraq.

Gibbon could scarcely ignore the question of the Roman republic's decay. Indeed, there is an important passage in *The Decline and Fall* that specifically deals with the revival of torture as a tool of tyranny. Few generations of Englishmen were more sensitive than

Gibbon's to the charge that their own ideals of liberty were being subverted by the temptations of empire. The year when his first volume appeared was also the year the American colonies used precisely that charge to justify their own bid for independence.

Yet Gibbon's real interest lay elsewhere, with the period of Roman decline long after republican virtue had yielded to imperial vice. *The Decline and Fall* is not concerned with the fall of the republic. It is a story that properly begins with the first signs of imperial overstretch. Until the time of the Emperor Julian (A.D. 331–63), Rome could still confidently send its legions as far as the river Tigris. Yet Julian's invasion of Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq, but then under Persian rule) proved to be his undoing. According to Gibbon, he had resolved, "by the final conquest of Persia, to chastise the haughty nation which had so long resisted and insulted the majesty of Rome." Although initially victorious at Ctesiphon (approximately 20 miles southeast of modern Baghdad), Julian was forced by his enemy's scorched-earth policy to retreat back to Roman territory. "As soon as the flames had subsided which interrupted [his] march," Gibbon relates, "he beheld the melancholy face of a smoking and naked desert." The Persians harried his famished legions as they withdrew. In one skirmish, Julian himself was fatally wounded.

What had gone wrong? The answer sheds revealing light on some of the problems the United States currently faces in the same troubled region. A recurrent theme of Gibbon's work is that the Romans gradually lost "the animating health and vigour" which had made them militarily invincible in the glory days of Julian's predecessor Trajan. They had lost their discipline. They started complaining about the weight of their armor. In a word, they had gone soft. At the same time, like most armies, their fighting effectiveness diminished the farther they were from home.

Most of us take it for granted that the United States Army is the best in the world. It might be more accurate to say that it is the best equipped and the best fed. More doubtful is how well it is configured to win a protracted low-intensity conflict in a country such as Iraq. One sign of the times that might have amused Gibbon has been the recent relaxation of conditions for recruits undergoing basic training. (A friend of mine who was in the army snorted with derision on hearing that trainees are now allowed eight and a half hours of sleep a night.) Another symptom of military malaise has been the heavy reliance of the Defense Department on National Guard and reserve troops, who have at times accounted for about half of the U.S. contingent deployed in Iraq.

The real problem, however, is a simple matter of numbers. To put it bluntly, the United States has a chronic manpower deficit, which means it cannot put enough boots on the ground to maintain law and order in conquered territory. This is not because it lacks young men; it has at least seven times as many as Iraq. It is that it chooses, for a variety of reasons, to employ only a tiny proportion of its population (half of 1 percent) in its armed forces, and to deploy only a fraction of these in overseas conflict zones.

In 1920, to illustrate the difficulty, when British forces quelled a major insurgency in Iraq, they numbered around 135,000. Coincidentally, that is very close to the number of American military personnel currently in that country. The trouble is that the population of Iraq was just over 3 million in 1920, whereas today it is around 26 million. Thus the ratio of Iraqis to foreign forces in 1920 was, at most, 23 to 1. Today it is around 210 to 1. To arrive at a ratio of 23 to 1, roughly one million American troops would be needed. Reinforcements on that scale are, needless to say, inconceivable.

This is the reality of what Michael Ignatieff, the Canadian Liberal politician and scholar, has called “empire lite” in his book of that name. In theory, the American military is a lean and mean fighting machine. In practice, however, downsizing has left it with too few combat soldiers to make a success of imperial policing—a labor-intensive task that renders redundant much of its high-tech hardware.

III

The tranquil and prosperous state of the empire was warmly felt, and honestly confessed, by the provincials as well as Romans.... It was scarcely possible that the eyes of contemporaries should discover in the public felicity the latent causes of decay and corruption. —Gibbon, Chapter II.

You are still not convinced. So, you say, the war in Iraq is not going well. But what about the bigger picture? How can the West possibly be regarded as being in decline when it is so economically dominant in the world? Today the combined output of the six biggest Western economies—Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States—exceeds half of total global output. Gross domestic product (G.D.P.) per capita in the United States is more than 30 times higher than it is in the economies of East Asia and the Pacific.

Yet the difference between the West and the Rest is much narrower than it once was. As recently as 1968, American G.D.P. per capita was 127 times higher than that of East Asia. By this measure alone, the gap between West and East has narrowed dramatically in our time. And it will continue to narrow. The International Monetary Fund estimates that the Chinese economy is growing at a rate roughly three times that of the United States. According to Goldman Sachs, China’s G.D.P. will overtake Britain’s this year. By 2041 it is likely to be the biggest economy in the world.

At the same time, the Western economies have vulnerabilities that have been largely obscured by the debt-financed boom of the past five years. America’s gross federal debt now exceeds \$8.5 trillion, and if the Congressional Budget Office’s outlook turns out to be correct, we are just a decade away from a \$12.8 trillion debt—more than double what President Bush inherited from his predecessor. Moreover, the officially stated borrowings of the federal government are only a small part of the U.S. debt problem. Ordinary American households, too, have gone on a borrowing spree of unprecedented magnitude. U.S. household credit-market debt has risen from just above 45 percent of G.D.P. in the early 1980s to more than 70 percent in recent years. The remarkable resilience of American consumer spending in the past 15 years has been based partly on a collapse in the personal savings rate from around 7.5 percent of income to below zero.

For demographic reasons, Americans need to be saving much more than this. According to the United Nations’ intermediate projections, male life expectancy in the United States will rise from 75 to 80 between now and 2050. The share of the American population that is aged 65 or over will rise from 12 percent to nearly 21 percent. By 2050 the elderly-dependency ratio (the ratio of the population aged 65 years or over to the population aged 15–64) could double. Only a minority of Americans have made adequate private provision for their retirement. That implies that most new retirees in the years ahead will depend to some extent on Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. Today, the average retiree receives benefits totaling \$21,000 a year from these programs. Multiply that by 37 million (the current number of elderly Americans) and you can see why these programs already consume 42 percent of federal outlays.

All this implies that the federal government has much larger unfunded liabilities than official data imply. If you compare the current value of all projected future government expenditures—including debt-service payments—with the current value of all projected future government receipts, the gap is about \$66 trillion, according to calculations by economists Jagadeesh Gokhale, of the Cato Institute, and Kent Smetters, professor at the Wharton School.

Americans, however, are not just borrowing from one another and, in effect, from the next generation. They are also, to a vast extent, borrowing from foreigners. In all but two years since 1992, the gap between the amount of goods and services the United States exports and the amount it imports has grown wider. This year, the current account deficit—which is largely a trade deficit—could rise as high as 7 percent of G.D.P., or nearly double its peak in the mid-1980s. The result is a remarkable accumulation of foreign debt. Estimates of the net international investment position of the United States—the difference between the overseas assets owned by Americans and the American assets owned by foreigners—have declined from a modest positive balance of 8 percent of G.D.P. in the mid-1980s to a huge net liability of minus 22 percent today. In other words, foreigners are accumulating large claims on the future output of the United States. Around 20 percent of corporate bonds are now in foreign hands, and nearly 10 percent of the U.S. stock market.

These are largely hidden weaknesses at present. Yet it cannot be a sign of Western strength that the annual bill for Social Security in the United States (\$554 billion) is now larger than the bill for national security (\$512 billion). And it cannot be a sign of imperial vigor that the United States needs to rely so heavily on foreign investors—including Asian central banks and Middle Eastern treasuries—to help finance a foreign policy that currently has minimal international support.

IV

The minds of men were gradually reduced to the same level, the fire of genius was extinguished.... The name of Poet was almost forgotten; that of Orator was usurped by the sophists. A cloud of critics, of compilers, of commentators, darkened the face of learning, and the decline of genius was soon followed by the corruption of taste.... This diminutive stature of mankind ... was daily sinking below the old standard. —Gibbon, Chapter II.

Perhaps our most perplexing vulnerability, however, is cultural. Gibbon was acute in identifying literary decline as one symptom of a more profound Roman malaise. And if his barbed allusion to the “darkened ... face of learning” does not immediately strike a chord, then some of the other symptoms may. While “the corrupt and opulent nobles of Rome gratified every vice that could be collected from the mighty conflux of nations and manners,” Gibbon wrote, “the most lively and splendid amusement of the idle multitude depended on the frequent exhibition of public games and spectacles.” Orgies and circuses are not precisely the favorite pastimes of Western society today. But if you substitute pornography and NASCAR, the parallel is not so far-fetched.

Outwardly, it is true, the institutions that exist to preserve and propagate our culture are in good shape. Never has the percentage of young people attending college been higher. Never have American universities dominated higher education and academic research as they do today. Our museums and concert halls offer more exhibitions and recitals than

the enthusiast can possibly hope to attend. And to enter any branch of Barnes & Noble is to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of books being published.

Yet beneath this upper crust of high culture there simmers a less appetizing stew. Few children read for pleasure. Most boys would rather fritter away their time on brutalizing video games such as *Grand Theft Auto*. Girls no longer play with dolls; they are themselves the dolls, dressed according to the dictates of the fashion industry. Endlessly gaming, chatting, and chilling with their iPods, the next generation already has a more tenuous connection to “Western civilization” than most parents appreciate.

Gibbon’s argument against Roman “luxury” was in part that it sapped the empire’s martial strength. Here, too, there is a striking analogy. For our culture’s sedentary character—our strong preference for watching over doing, for virtual over real action—seems closely correlated to our changing physical shape. Gibbon’s Romans became metaphorical pygmies. We, by contrast, are being transformed into actual giants. We are certainly taller on average than past generations, a consequence of improvements in nutrition. But we are also wider, since we now consume significantly more fats and carbohydrates than we actually need. According to the standard measure of obesity, the body-mass index, the percentage of Americans classified as obese nearly doubled, from 12 percent to 21 percent, between 1991 and 2001. Nearly two-thirds of all American men are officially considered overweight, and nearly three-quarters of those between 45 and 64. Only Western Samoans and Kuwaitis are fatter.

V

The natives of Europe ... no longer possessed that public courage which is nourished by the love of independence, the sense of national honor, the presence of danger, and the habit of command.... They ... trusted for their defence to a mercenary army. The posterity of their boldest leaders was contented with the rank of citizens. —Gibbon, Chapter II.

Often fat and sometimes fatheaded, the new Romans of the United States are nevertheless less decadent than their counterparts in that part of the new West across the Atlantic, governed from the new Constantinople, Brussels. The United States remains a vigorously Christian country, thanks in part to the invigorating competition there has always been among its multiple denominations and sects. Americans also remain capable of a robust patriotism (though this seems to require regular foreign attacks on U.S. soil to be sustained). And—unlike the Romans—they still have a resilient work ethic.

Things are different in Europe. The Europeans have all but renounced warfare as a tool of policy. Their armies are puny, their weapons inferior. In some areas, standards of physical fitness are even lower than in Middle America. Take Scotland, the land of my birth. Male life expectancy in some parts of Glasgow is now as low as 54. There has been a 350 percent rise in alcohol-related deaths in the last two decades. About 13,000 people die from smoking-related diseases every year. More than a third of Scotland’s 12-year-olds are overweight or clinically obese.

While Americans work, young Europeans are to a remarkable extent idle. In Britain as a whole, more than 5 million adults of working age—nearly 15 percent of the workforce—are now dependent on benefits. Nearly half of those have been living on welfare for more than five years. The reason these people do not show up in the official unemployment statistics is that many of them are counted as unfit for work rather than

jobless. Every day, 23 more teenagers in Britain sign up for “incapacity benefit.” This reflects a crisis of public education as much as of public health. As the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development recently pointed out, an exceptionally large share of British pupils leave school without any qualifications at all. One in six British adults lacks the literacy skills of an 11-year-old. It may be technically correct that the incapacitated are not unemployed. The reality is that they are unemployable.

Most striking of all, Europe has become the world’s first post-Christian society. There was a time when Europe could justly refer to itself as “Christendom”; indeed, this was the most enduring legacy of both Rome and Byzantium. Europeans built the continent’s great cathedrals to accommodate their acts of worship. As pilgrims, missionaries, and conquistadores, they sailed to the four corners of the earth, intent on converting the heathens to the true faith. Now, however, it is they who are the heathens. According to the Gallup International Millennium Survey of religious attitudes, barely 20 percent of Western Europeans attend church services at least once a week, while 47 percent of North Americans and 82 percent of West Africans do. And fully 15 percent of Western Europeans deny that there is any kind of “spirit, God, or life force”—more than 7 times the American figure and 15 times the West African.

The exceptionally low level of British religiousness was perhaps the most striking revelation of a recent ICM Research poll. One in five Britons claims to “attend an organized religious service regularly,” less than half the American figure. And only 19 percent would be willing to die for his or her beliefs, while 71 percent of Americans say they would.

The de-Christianization of Britain is a relatively recent phenomenon, as British religious and cultural historian Callum Brown has shown. For most of the first half of the 20th century, Anglican Easter Day communicants accounted for between 5 and 6 percent of the population of England; it was only after 1960 that the proportion slumped to 2 percent. Figures for the Church of Scotland show a similar trend: steady until 1960, then falling by roughly half. As those figures suggest, British Protestants were not especially observant (compared, for example, with Irish Catholics), but until the late 1950s established-church membership, if not attendance, was relatively high and steady.

Prior to 1960, most marriages in England and Wales were solemnized in a church; then the slide began, down to around 40 percent in the late 1990s. Especially striking is the decline in confirmations of baptized children. Fewer than a fifth of those baptized are now confirmed, roughly half the figure for the period from 1900 to 1960.

Contrary to popular belief, it was not the British Catholic writer G. K. Chesterton who said, “When men stop believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing. They believe in anything.” But he could have said it. Chesterton viewed atheism with the utmost suspicion. Those who disbelieve in God on supposedly rational grounds, he argued, merely become prey to pseudo-religions and superstitions. His neatest formulation was in *The Miracle of Moon Crescent*, where he wrote, “You all swore you were hard-shelled materialists; and as a matter of fact you were all balanced on the very edge of belief—of belief in almost anything.” Evidence to support his point is now abundantly available in post-Christian Europe, where all kinds of New Age cults and irrational beliefs flourish. Otherwise intelligent people choose apartments on the basis of feng shui. They delude themselves into thinking that attendance at a concert will reduce poverty in Africa. They are simultaneously against poverty and against global warming, when it is precisely the

reduction of poverty in Asia that is increasing emissions of carbon dioxide. Drawn to conspiracy theories as the ancients were to superstitions, some Europeans blame the U.S. government for rising sea levels (not to mention the 9/11 terrorist attacks).

With the decline of Christianity, Europe is also experiencing a rise in what politicians euphemistically call “antisocial behavior.” The restrained civility that was once a hallmark of English life has all but vanished, to be replaced by a startling rudeness. Profanity in the street and on television has become the norm. Once, a lifetime ago, an English writer warned of a future in which the state would keep the population under permanent surveillance. Today, George Orwell’s imaginary Big Brother is the name of a television series in which individuals *volunteer* for surveillance by the rest of the population. Far from being inhibited by their loss of privacy, they glory in mutual degradation. Shame has gone; so has civility. On Friday and Saturday nights, most English city centers become no-go zones where drunken, knife-wielding youths brawl with one another and the police. Another striking symptom of this new primitivism is the extraordinary surge in the popularity of tattoos, once associated with the unruly Picts of the Far North. In this modern decline and fall, it seems, at least some of the barbarians come from within the empire.

VI

A perpetual stream of strangers and provincials flowed into the capacious bosom of Rome. Whatever was strange or odious, whoever was guilty or suspected, might hope, in the obscurity of that immense capital, to elude the vigilance of the law.... It was the just complaint of the ingenuous natives that the capital had attracted the vices of the universe and the manners of the most opposite nations. —Gibbon, Chapters XV and XXXI.

Nothing changed Rome more than immigration. The same is true of the West today. But whereas a large proportion of immigrants to the United States come from countries that were colonized by Roman Catholics and quickly find jobs in America’s dynamic labor market, the situation in Europe is altogether different.

The demographic transformation of the West has its roots in feminism. Legislation against sex discrimination opened all kinds of careers to women that had previously been dominated by men. At the same time, the ready availability of contraception and abortion gave women an unprecedented control over their own fertility. Beginning in the late 1970s, the average Western European couple had fewer than two children. Today the figure is around 1.4, whereas it needs to be slightly higher than 2 for a population to remain constant. Europeans, quite simply, have ceased to reproduce themselves. The United Nations Population Division forecasts that, if Spanish fertility persists at such low levels, within 50 years the country’s population will decline by more than 4 million. The population of Italy will fall by a fifth. The overall reduction in native-born European numbers could be as much as 14 million. Not even two World Wars inflicted such an absolute decline in population.

Meanwhile, however, the combination of relative poverty and religious revival had a very different effect on Europe’s southern and eastern neighbors. Since the 1950s, according to U.N. figures, the crude birthrate in seven of the Muslim countries to the south and east of the Mediterranean—Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria—has been two or three times the European average. The gap between Pakistan and Britain has been even wider. The total number of children per woman in Britain today is around

1.7. The latest figure for Pakistan, one of the principal sources of immigrants to Britain, is 4.3.

The first wave of immigration to Europe after World War II was a post-imperial phenomenon; people from former colonies migrated in response to apparent labor shortages. Many family members later followed. Now, as European societies age, they are attracting immigrants from rather closer to home—from Eastern Europe especially—but the flow from the Muslim periphery continues, much of it illegal. The trouble is that many of the newcomers are moving to residential ghettos with miserable economic prospects. In France, the Western European country with the largest Muslim population, the unemployment rate among foreign-born residents is more than twice the national average, which, at 9 percent, is already high enough.

Today, around 20 million Muslims make their home in the European Union, and that number is certain to rise, even if Middle East expert Bernard Lewis's recent prophecy—that Muslims would be a majority in Europe by the end of the 21st century—surely goes too far. Fouad Ajami, director of the Middle East Studies Program at Johns Hopkins University, is more realistic when he anticipates that Muslim “colonization” will continue to be concentrated in certain regions of Europe, just as it was when the Moors ruled southern Spain (which they did from the 8th to the 15th century), or when the Ottomans ruled the Balkans (from the 14th to the 19th).

Those historic parallels are a reminder that Islam played a crucial role in Gibbon's explanation of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. For it was Islam that struck a heavy blow to what remained of the Roman Empire in the West when the Moors advanced into France as far as Poitiers, where they were finally halted, in 732. And it was again Islam which finally decapitated what remained of the empire in the East when the Turks sacked Constantinople in 1453.

Gibbon's account of monotheism is certainly the most controversial part of his great work. It was the spread of Christianity within the Roman world, he argues in the notorious 15th chapter of *The Decline and Fall*, that tended to dilute the martial values of the Romans. Venerating the Virgin Mary was very different from venerating Mars, the god of war. Yet the monotheism of Muhammad had a very different character from that of Christianity. Islam, in Gibbon's account, was always a belligerent religion. “The intrepid souls of the Arabs were fired with enthusiasm” by it, he notes. “The death which they had always despised became an object of hope and desire.”

That passage resonates in our own time, when suicide bombers stalk our transport systems, dreaming of heavenly trysts with multiple virgins. The problem, as Europeans have come to understand, is that it takes only a few would-be martyrs within a single Muslim community to produce a calamity.

VII Gibbon called the decline and fall of the Roman Empire “the greatest, perhaps, and most awful scene in the history of mankind.” Could a still more awful scene be unfolding in the form of the West's decline and fall? For Gibbon, Rome's decline was the result of military overstretch, inner decadence, religious conversion, and barbarian invasion. To my mind, all of these are operating today to undermine what remains of Western dominance in the world. If the United States suffers mainly from the first and second, the European Union seems even more afflicted by the third and fourth.

A hundred years ago, as we have seen, the West could justly claim to rule the world. After a century during which one Western empire after another has declined and fallen, that can no longer credibly be claimed. Empires, of course, take time to decline and fall. Gibbon begins his narrative in A.D. 96; he ends it in 1430, more than a millennium later. Yet there can be no question that the pace of imperial descent has quickened in modern times. The longest-lived empire after the Romans was the Ottoman Empire, which endured for 469 years. The East European empires of the Habsburgs and the Romanovs each existed for more than three centuries. The Moguls ruled a substantial part of what is now India for 235 years. Of an almost identical duration was the realm of the Safavids in Persia. The Spanish, Dutch, French, and British empires can all be said to have endured about 300 years. The lifespan of the Portuguese empire was closer to 500.

The empires created in the 20th century, on the other hand, were all of comparatively short duration. The Bolsheviks' Soviet Union (1922–91) lasted less than 70 years, a meager record indeed, though one not yet equaled by the People's Republic of China, established in 1949. Japan's colonial empire, which can be dated from the conquest of Taiwan in 1895, lasted barely 50. Most ephemeral of all modern empires was the so-called Third Reich of Adolf Hitler, which did not extend beyond its predecessor's borders before 1938 and had retreated within them by the end of 1944. The remaining empires of the West are young by Roman standards. But by the standards of modern times, the United States—at 230 years—is quite long in the tooth. The day when the Capitol in Washington, D.C., will be reduced to a picturesque ruin may seem to us infinitely remote. History—including the greatest historian of them all, Edward Gibbon—suggests that it may come sooner than we think.

Niall Ferguson is Laurence A. Tisch Professor of History at Harvard University and a Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution at Stanford. His latest book, The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West, comes out this month from Penguin Press.

Illustrations by TIM SHEAFFER