

SundayReview | SUNDAY DIALOGUE

# Recapturing Our Ideals

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**To the Editor:**

Children born in America today may expect to live to the year 2100. What kind of life will our children and grandchildren experience?

Will it be the American dream of our ideals: “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”; “equal justice under law”; democracy; equal opportunity and respect; good education and training; a satisfying job and income; security; health and shelter in a sustainable environment with safe food, water and air?

Past civilizations and great powers have risen, declined and occasionally risen again. Examples include Egypt, China, Greece, Rome, Persia, Spain, Britain and the Soviet Union.

Basic causes of past declines include environmental degradation and resource depletion; climate change, floods, droughts, famines; disease; political polarization, social conflict and civil war; military overextension and resource-draining wars; excessive debt; and subjugation by external powers.

Americans need to counter the basic causes of decline that exist here now, as well as other indicators of decline, such as workers’ shrinking share of wealth, decaying infrastructure, inflating influence of money in politics, and plunging proficiency of our political institutions in benefiting the general welfare.

Abroad we need to reverse the declining effectiveness of our efforts to realize

and sustain American security, economic and political goals, while avoiding wars, especially a catastrophic nuclear war.

So what shall we do to regain and maintain the American dream for our children and grandchildren, to counter the decline of America and to avoid the disaster of war? Americans must address these questions now, *before* the next election. Candidates and citizens should *specify* and critically evaluate what they would do. After new policies are implemented, we need to continually re-evaluate them. The stakes are high — how our children and grandchildren will live, and the continuation of the American dream.

JEFFREY S. MILSTEIN

Burke, Va.

*The writer served as a policy and strategic planner in the State and Defense Departments and was an assistant professor of political science and international relations at Yale.*

## Readers React

Throughout our history there have been those who predicted an American decline. During the Cold War the alarm came from the conservative right, in despair over what it saw as political betrayal, moral corruption and military weakness. There is a new wave of despair over America's future, now coming from various points along the ideological spectrum.

I don't know if America is in decline or not, and I doubt that anyone else does either. The Greek historian Polybius wrote that "no sensible person could be justified in taking present circumstances as a basis for future expectations."

The book of the future is a closed one. We strive to do the best that we can for our country and our grandchildren, defending (and expanding) the values and principles that Mr. Milstein outlines. But there is a limit to what people, however engaged and forward thinking, can do to control or determine the future. A great national decline has many causes, not all of them obvious amid the political clamor

and rush of events.

The outcome is unknowable to us, but if history teaches anything, it is that nothing lasts forever.

STEVEN BERKOWITZ

New York

The dream will no longer be about thriving in America, but across borders in businesses, schools and organizations that shape their own place in the world. The idea of relying on the nation or its government to provide the pathway, the protection, the support for a self-realizing life is fading.

But this is not a turn to self-reliance. To realize your dreams now, and especially in the digital, interactive future, requires a network of personal and institutional connections that are crossing the conventional ones of family, neighborhood, state and nation. The possibilities of making these connections are growing exponentially. Our children and grandchildren will live in a much more dynamic world. New forms of interaction require new controls on violence, along with controlling the impact of too many people on the resources of the earth. Wishing them good luck.

DOUG CHALMERS

New York

*The writer is professor emeritus of political science at Columbia University.*

First and foremost, we need to invest in our children, particularly their education and health. Raise money (taxes, philanthropy, company sponsorship) to support public schools, health clinics that serve the young, Head Start, and activities that encourage children to develop outside of school hours. Offer vocational opportunities for higher education that can become a viable alternative to college degrees.

Create more opportunities for women, people of color and L.G.B.T. individuals in all walks of business life. No longer externalize the costs of pollution from

companies. Make them pay the bills for cleanup. Put people to work with conservation and repair work on our infrastructure and national parks. Implement single-payer health care nationwide. For everyone. Overhaul the for-profit drug and hospital industries. Overhaul and support the Veterans Affairs system for our vets.

Create action groups in each state to address issues from global warming. Create bigger financial incentives for energy-saving cars, fridges and other products. Support the architectural Not So Big House movement for both residential and commercial developments. Overturn Citizens United.

I realize much of the above is pie-in-the-sky. But you did ask.

TRACY KLINESTEKER

Kalamazoo, Mich.

Mr. Milstein asks what the future in this country will look like, laying out two possibilities. He cites some of the basic causes of decline, such as environmental degradation, climate change, political polarization, resource-draining wars and excessive debt. He states, "Americans must address these questions now, *before* the next election." Our current debates are largely off the mark. They include abortion, same-sex marriage, immigration and whether Senator John McCain is a war hero. It may well be that we must address the questions brought up by Mr. Milstein now, but we are not, and are not likely to do so. We are trapped in minutiae and are largely ignoring the broader issues. And future generations will pay dearly.

WILLIAM VAUGHAN Jr.

Chebeague Island, Me.

Ironically, for children the American dream is more realized in other advanced democracies, where they pay for elections with public funds instead of private big money donors. Lawmakers are freed up to respond to the needs of all economic classes, giving children a better chance for security and mobility.

Strict gun safety laws, not dictated by gun maker lobbyists, increase kids' chances of living out their life spans. Child care benefits enable both moms and dads to work

and raise stable families. Health care is guaranteed for all, without excessive profits to insurance and medical businesses. Higher education is subsidized, so graduates are free from huge college debt. Youths can get job apprenticeships in high schools, gaining skills to earn a living. Unions are accepted.

All these components of a healthy, secure life are fiercely contested in the United States, with the highest child poverty rate among advanced nations. America's conservative ideology of market solutions and small government cuts the rug out from under families. This continues to bode ill for future child health, education and well-being.

MEREDITH BALK

New York

Yes, "American decline" is the big question facing 2016 candidates (and all citizens). Is the "American dream" dead? Is our sense of "exceptionalism" unrealistic? Do we need to learn to live within limits? Americans have always believed we are special, that we have an "open frontier" of opportunities (Frederick Jackson Turner) and enjoy the "free security" of two oceans (C. Vann Woodward), creating a national spirit of optimism, security and hope for the future. Is this still alive? Or do we accept that all civilizations fall, that we need to limit our international commitments, focus on our domestic problems, make democracy work and learn to live together better?

International statistics document that the United States is no longer No. 1 in most areas (health, prosperity, happiness), and national polls reveal our lack of confidence about the future. The challenge for politicians is to face these realities, look beyond political games and provide concrete plans (not rhetoric) about a new and better path to the future.

WALT GLAZER

Sagamore Hills, Ohio

*The writer is a retired historian who taught at the University of Pittsburgh.*

## The Writer Responds

How do we achieve a better life for our children and grandchildren? We can learn from the experiences of past civilizations and powers that declined. We can also learn about the likely effects of specific policies such as those proposed by Ms. Klinesteker from the contemporary experiences of people in other advanced countries, as cited by Ms. Balk. These social policies that work are reflected in the international comparative statistics cited by Mr. Glazer.

Professor Chalmers accurately describes the growing importance of global interactions through the networks of communication, transportation and trade that shape our lives. We need to widen our circle of concern to include not just Americans, but people throughout the world. However, some transnational actors are undeniably hostile toward us and our values, including Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, hackers and some nation-states. Thus, our own national government must continue to provide protection and support for us.

So why, as Mr. Vaughan notes, are most of the current proposals by candidates largely not addressing the important issues that affect our future? American politicians have become overly solicitous to special interests, on whose financial support they depend to run their election campaigns. Meeting their demands regarding taxes, subsidies and regulations often comes at the expense of meeting the needs of a majority of voters, who give elected officials their Constitutional legitimacy.

So what should we do? If America declines, we *all* do, including special interests that will lose out to foreign competitors. The American people must understand that their future and their children's future is at stake in elections, and register and vote for the candidates who will support their interests.

JEFFREY S. MILSTEIN

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