

It's Not Just Trump Who Thinks America is in Decline

As you well know, at least part of Donald Trump's campaign success has been due to his slogan "Make America Great Again."

The implication behind the slogan is that America is in decline. After all, as professor Noah Smith pointed out [earlier this year](#), "you can't 'make America great again' unless America isn't-so-great right now."

And many Americans do feel a sense of decline. [Most](#) see the U.S. as less powerful than 10 years ago, as [economically fragile](#), and [73%](#) of Americans believe that moral values are getting worse.

It's the practice of many to outright dismiss claims about America's supposed decline. Many who fall into this camp tend to either still subconsciously believe in the myth of progress—that the world, as a whole, necessarily gets better with the passage of time—or they believe that people's general feelings about our current state don't really mean very much.

Yet, it's interesting to note that in the not-too-distant past the general feeling about America was decidedly less gloomy. As former Columbia University professor Robert Nisbet reminds us in his 1953 work *The Quest for Community*, in the 19th and early-20th centuries, the tone was much more optimistic about man and his ability to improve the world through reason and freedom:

"In every age there are certain key works which by their repetitive use and redefinition mark the distinctive channels of faith and thought... In the nineteenth century, the age of individualism and rationalism, such words as individual, change, progress, reason, and freedom were notably not merely for their wide use as linguistic tools in books, essays, and

lectures but for their symbolic value in convictions of immense numbers of men. These words were both the outcome of thought and the elicitors of thought. Men were fascinated by their referents and properties."

One might notice, by the way, that these are still the terms frequently used by politicians and think tanks representing the conservative/libertarian ethos ("individual," "reason," "freedom") and the liberal/progressive ethos ("change," "progress").

But these are not the terms of the *spiritus mundi* (the consciousness that marks an age) today, which may be part of why so many people feel that their political representatives are out of touch with them. Writes Nisbet:

"Today a different set of words and symbols dominates the intellectual and moral scene. It is impossible to overlook, in modern lexicons, the importance of such words as disorganization, disintegration, decline, insecurity, breakdown, instability, and the like. What the nineteenth-century rationalist took for granted about society and the nature of man's existence, as the result of an encompassing faith in the creative and organizational powers of history, the contemporary student of society makes the object of increasing apprehension and uncertainty.

A concern with cultural disorganization underlies almost every major philosophy of history in our time...

Are not the works of the major prophets of the age, Niebuhr, Bernanos, Berdyaev, Sorokin, Spengler, and others, based foremost upon the conviction that ours is a sick culture, marked by the pathologies of defeat and failure of regenerative processes? Is it not extraordinary how many of the major novelists and poets and playwrights of the present

age have given imaginative expression to themes of dissolution and decay—of class, family, community, and morality? Not only are these themes to be seen among the Titans—Proust, Mann, Joyce, Kafka, Eliot—but among a large and increasing number of secondary or popular writers. It is hard to miss the centrality of themes of dissolution in contemporary religious and literary expressions and the fascination that is exerted by the terminology of failure and defeat.”

I don't know that Trump has a clear notion of how to truly make America great again, or of what's truly the cause of the decline. But I do know that beginning the process of curing an illness requires that one first recognizes a problem.

There's no need for false optimism.