

# Publications

## No longer alone

IPA REVIEW ARTICLE

| [Alan Moran](#)

Alan Moran reviews Mark Steyn's *After America: Get Ready for Armageddon*

As a modern day Cassandra, in *After America*, Mark Steyn sees the Western world as a crumbling edifice in which the liberties and wealth that we have enjoyed face escalating attacks from both within and without.

In Steyn's view, the dominant threat from outside is militant Islam. Its impact is being internalised by new immigration, high fertility among Islamic immigrants and low birth rates among non-Muslims in the West. In his previous book, *America Alone*, Steyn showed how demographics are steadily increasing the size of the Muslim minority which, far from adopting the values of the society they have joined, has been even more militant than their parents in rejecting them. The flight from modernity is seen in the home grown terrorists in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Militant Islam despises homosexuality, is hostile to women not fully 'covered' and is generally intolerant to 'unbelievers', especially Jews. As such, because of its enhanced influence in the West, Steyn sees militant Islam as undermining the mutual accommodations that comprise the modern Western state. To illustrate the fundamental antagonism to democracy and liberty, he cites opinion polls showing that ten of the twelve people most admired people in Arab states were thugs or dictators (the other two, Mitterrand and Sarkozy, he dismisses as a pair of French roués).

Steyn lampoons attempts at outreach to militant Islam, which range from the bizarre to the blindly optimistic. Among the former are the 'Queers Against Israeli Apartheid', who seem oblivious to militant Islam's contempt towards homosexuality, a practice which in Talibanite Afghanistan invited the death penalty. Israel pursued peace by offering extensive concessions to its neighbours but these have led only to a perception of weakness and increased demands. Failing to learn from this, the Obama administration has assiduously courted—some say genuflected to—disparate Islamic interests with no evident gains. Under George W Bush's presidency, 83 per cent of people in Arab countries held negative perceptions of America, but far from dissipating after Obama's election, it has actually increased to 85 per cent since he became president.

But it is the fragility of the West itself that comprises the real danger. This stems less from establishing the conditions under which its enemies can flourish than in creating a cancer which is eating into its future capabilities.

Europe is where the rot has set in strongest. And as a bon vivant and cultural connoisseur, Steyn clearly enjoys Europe's legacy of past greatness in the opera houses, 'fabulous restaurants, stylish women' but the technological capability that created these is ebbing away. The economic sclerosis he observes in Europe is also to be seen in the US. Detroit is the perverse poster child of decline with the population falling 50 per cent since 1950. Thirty per cent of the employed work for the government and at least 29 per cent are unemployed. The city's education system has been dumbed down so much that it has a school board president who failed English in his degree and only graduated after suing his college, which then dropped English proficiency as a requirement.

The internal erosion of the West's vitality results from rising shares of unproductive government expenditures (and associated taxes) within the economy, burgeoning regulatory restraints on

enterprise and the substitution of 'rights' that shielded the citizen from government excesses to one that means 'rights to stuff, granted by the government, distributed by the government, rationed by the government but paid for by you.'

All countries have their own versions of the theatre of the absurd, illustrating the extent of this retreat from self reliance and careful spending of public monies. In the UK a disabled man was granted taxpayers money to fly to Amsterdam to have sex with a prostitute, which according to his social worker is a human right. In America, prior to becoming first lady, Michelle Obama was given a \$317,000 a year non-job to manage the University of Chicago's 'business diversity program'.

Steyn argues that bureaucracy is strangling innovation and argues that the advances over the past 60 years are far less momentous than those in the previous 60 years which saw cars, planes, television, computers, major drug breakthroughs and space travel. Calcification of innovation is exemplified by Eli Lilly which marketed insulin in 1923 after just two years of development. Regulatory processes for new drugs would now require a further five years and involve considerable additional expense. The upshot is stalled new drug developments.

Among other areas subject to creeping bureaucracy is job credentialism. In the 1950s only five per cent of the workforce needed to have their job qualifications approved by the government, but now covers one third of the workforce and even extends down to yoga teachers.

We have also seen government shifting to prevent wealth creation rather than as in the past seeking to promote it (though sometimes misguidedly). State schemes like the Hoover Dam are inconceivable today. The regulatory morass would prevent them even if the will of government were there to build them-and as Steyn points out, Obama's appointee in the Interior Department proudly assured an audience that 'You will never see another federal dam'. Restraints that prevent anything being done are epitomised by the Twin Towers area, which ten years after 9/11 remains unfinished.

Steyn sees such developments as not only adding to the cost of innovation but also as crushing the human spirit. Indeed, expanding on Victor Davis Hanson's rediscovery of the 1895 HG Wells novel, *The Time Machine*, he discusses the decline of an America spearheaded by a sybaritic ruling class, called the Eloi in Wells's future, enjoying leisured lives.

The modern Eloi like nice cars and fine housing and good food but despise oil, gas, nuclear power, farmland, electricity lines, and timber. They benefit from freedom but have lost the will and ability to defend it. Symbolic of this is a quote from a Dutch, gay humanist ('pretty much the trifecta of Eurocool') who says, 'I never learned to fight for my freedom. I was only good at enjoying it'.

The Eloi are recognisable in the wealthy class' children. Attending university until 30 and eligible for retirement 55, most have chosen environmentalism over production. Carbon emission restraints are the acme of this but environmentalism takes many ironic twists and brings unforeseen consequences. Steyn relates a case of a cougar killing a local dog in Nova Scotia and an activist prevailing over her fellow citizens not to hunt the animal, which eventually kills and eats her. Man's respect for animals, he points out, is leading carnivores to no longer fear us and to learn that we constitute easy pickings in the stalking game and a better source of fat and proteins than that hard to catch deer.

Post-2008 these stealthily enervating trends have intensified in the US, and are further aggravated by governments now seeking to cover their costs through borrowings. And the main lenders in town are the Chinese, having emerged from being economically comatose over the space of only two decades, the oil rich Islamic states and the Russians. None of these have any respect for the liberties that have defined the West and its ways of life.

The great hedonism of the West has been possible only because of US military power. Europe (and for that matter Australia and other affluent nations) has relied on the US to maintain open sea lanes

and defend them against aggression.

Now America too is hurtling towards European impotence, having adopted European welfare policies and debt accumulation. The Royal Navy, (following the example of the American Marines in Tripoli) readily undertook pirate policing in the Nineteenth Century but no longer dares make arrests having been advised that pirates taken into custody could claim refugee status and an entitlement to UK welfare. The US military would be susceptible to similar restraints. Not so the Russians: Somali pirates who seized a Russian tanker were captured and released some way from any port and, said the Russian spokesman, 'apparently have all died'.

Chinese control over US debt leaves the nation especially vulnerable militarily. In 1956, Eisenhower forced the UK to cease its Suez adventure simply by instructing the Treasury to start selling its sterling assets. If such a decisive intervention is easily achieved by a lender who is fundamentally in accord with the borrower, how much more vulnerable is the US to Chinese pressure?

But can things really be that bad? At a time when every news day brings fresh dangers, nobody should be complacent about the parlous situation of the Western system. Even so, some of the concerns that Steyn assembles may prove misplaced or exaggerated.

Firstly, Steyn laments the decline of manufacturing in the US and elsewhere in the West. And the current account deficits together with the pile-up of debt does reflect an inability to undertake adequate savings. This has caused an excessive migration of production to overseas locations but Steyn is surely wrong in considering that the jobs lost to China and India are gone forever, the corollary of which would seem to support protectionism.

Moreover, a relative decline of manufacturing is a natural consequence of higher income levels. As Steyn points out, at the time of the US Declaration of Independence 90 per cent of Americans were farmers. Today American agriculture employs less than three per cent of workers who operate so productively that they allow considerable net exports. And this is in spite of the crushing weight of regulations on water use, land use itself and the diversion of cropland to ethanol production.

Manufacturing automation does mean progressively fewer direct employees. Adam Smith marvelled at the division of labour that allowed pins to be made in a product line with eighteen different workstations. While a single pinmaker in the Eighteenth Century might make less than 20 pins per day, the process allowed 4,800 pins per day per employee. A modern pin factory would enjoy a labour productivity at least a hundred times greater.

Secondly, Steyn is right to point out that US debt stands at almost \$15 trillion, or 97 per cent of GDP. Though, as he points out, this is less relative to GDP than in 1945, the 1945 debt saved the world from tyranny and ushered an era of US dominance; by contrast, debt in 2011 has left a legacy with no benefit. Many economists consider that the debt is not a major issue and, indeed, no state has government debt as large as Great Britain's in 1815 when some estimates indicate that over 300 per cent of GDP was owed.

The US budget deficit is a horrendous 40 per cent, but when expressed as a share of GDP (10 per cent) it is less formidable. That said, while cutting back consumption by 10 per cent in the world's richest nation is hardly calamitous, it is no mean operational feat in the age of inflexible economies. Changing things is hard to do. Once a cycle of dependency and free hand outs is created it is difficult to reverse gear. Greece is finding this now with civil servants rioting to preserve their massive benefits.

In the US, even in 2004 a fifth of households were getting 75 per cent of their income from government and another fifth were getting 40 per cent. It is not easy to envisage them voting to have this reduced. Added to this constituency is a vastly over-remunerated public sector. Steyn points out

that at the start of the downturn the Department of Transportation had just one employee earning over \$170,000 per year. One and a half years later the number was 1,690.

Next, Steyn sees the direct government-originated Islamic threat largely coming from Iran. That country's imminent acquisition of nuclear weaponry is certainly menacing, but Iran remains a military pygmy. The nightmare is like that of the Visigoths, a tribe of less than 100,000 people. The Visigoths in 476 sacked Rome, an empire that had 450,000 soldiers under arms. Rome's overreach-bread and circuses, military expenditures, lavish living standards for the rulers and crippling costs of tax collection-resonate in today's America. But Iran could never pull off the Visigoths' trick.

Moreover, Iran is actually one nation where the Islamic hold is precarious. Though a theocracy presided over by a leader of doubtful sanity, it has a mooted mosque attendance of only two per cent and a youth whose main religious following is pop music. Above all, Iran is a rare example of a third world nation with a first world birthrate. Islam in Iran is undergoing the same population death spiral of 1.3-1.5 births per head that is threatening depopulation in Greece, Italy and elsewhere in Europe.

Indonesia is a further sign of hope that Islam might make the transition from the Fourteenth Century. This, the most populous Muslim state, has an economy that is growing fast with neither the benefit of petrodollars nor the Sino-Indian commercial overclass guiding Malaysia's successes.

The 'Audacity of Hope' is what Steyn titles his final chapter. But, having identified real problems, he offers little in the way of hope that they will be resolved.

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