



## The Fall of Empires Begins With the Loss of Legitimacy

The American empire has long portrayed itself as a defender of democracy, human rights, peace, and prosperity. But the widening gap between this narrative and reality is rapidly undermining its legitimacy.

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The standoff between the United States and Iran centers on control of the Strait of Hormuz, a critical chokepoint for global energy supplies. If Washington fails to secure this essential corridor, its credibility as a pillar of the international order will be seriously undermined.

Such a situation is reminiscent of the Suez Canal crisis in 1956, when the United Kingdom, unable to impose its will on Nasser's Egypt and under pressure from the United States, laid bare the limits of its power. This is how [Ray Dalio](#) interprets this new war in the Middle East.

## Power and Legitimacy

Numerous indicators are regularly cited to assess the relative decline of American power: “overextension” of its military, industrial decline, rising inequality, falling life expectancy, massive debt, military setbacks, or the rise of China. But an empire is not sustained by force alone.

It rests on a combination of power and legitimacy—ideological, cultural, or even religious. In *Tout empire périra*, the French historian [Jean-Baptiste Duroselle](#) emphasizes that the loss of legitimacy is one of the most profound and decisive factors in imperial decline.

To sustain itself, an empire like the United States must appear, in the eyes of the dominated populations, peripheral elites, and a segment of its own society, as a respectable power—a guarantor of a certain order, relative prosperity, and universal values.

As long as this legitimacy holds, power can be exercised at a relatively low cost. But when it begins to crumble, the use of force becomes increasingly costly and ineffective. For resistance grows, hostile coalitions form, and internal dissent intensifies.

When an empire is perceived as arrogant, predatory, or [decadent](#), its authority disintegrates. One might say that the loss of legitimacy resembles bankruptcy: slow and gradual at first, then sudden and irreversible in the end. It seems that the United States has now entered this second phase.

## The Hidden Side of “Economic Sanctions”

One of the main instruments of American power lies in the use of economic sanctions, made possible by its control over the dollar and the SWIFT payment system. Long presented as “nonviolent” alternatives to war, their devastating human toll is now entering the public consciousness.

A study published last year in *The Lancet Global Health* analyzed age-specific mortality data from 152 countries over a fifty-year period (1971–2021). It highlights a significant causal link between unilateral economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union and a substantial increase in mortality. According to the authors' estimates, these policies are associated with approximately 38 million additional deaths over the study period.

These policies, often described as “diplomatic tools” or “targeted pressure,” actually function as genuine unilateral embargoes, imposed outside any legitimate multilateral framework such as the UN. Their effects are profoundly destructive: they undermine access to food, essential medicines, medical equipment, drinking water, and health infrastructure, thereby inflicting massive and indiscriminate suffering on civilian populations.

Despite their repeated political failures, these measures are never called into question. Cuba has been suffering the consequences for over 65 years, while Iran and Venezuela have been facing them for decades.

The first victims are systematically the most vulnerable: children under 5 and the elderly. The study shows that this age group accounts for a majority of excess deaths, with particularly pronounced effects among toddlers. Since the early 2010s, sanctions are estimated to have caused the deaths of more than one million of these young children worldwide, worsening malnutrition, fueling preventable infectious diseases, and limiting access to basic pediatric care.

Far from being a “soft” or humanitarian measure, unilateral economic sanctions constitute a form of indirect weapon of mass destruction, whose human cost is comparable to that of conventional warfare. This reality, supported by rigorous data, calls for an urgent debate on the moral and legal legitimacy of these measures.

## **Military Aggression and Regional Chaos**

The war the United States is currently waging against Iran is part of a long series of military aggressions in the region that have been ongoing for more than twenty-five years. Wesley Clark, a former general and NATO Supreme Commander, [revealed the extent of this as early as 2007](#). Barely ten days after September 11, 2001, he discovered a confidential memo at the Pentagon outlining a plan to overthrow seven countries within five years—Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and finally Iran.

All these conflicts were presented to the general public as battles for noble causes: promoting democracy, liberating an oppressed people, fighting terrorism, emancipating women, overthrowing a tyrant, or to neutralize the threat of weapons of mass destruction. Grand narratives, carefully constructed and complacently relayed. But behind these justifications, the reality is invariably the same: chaos, destruction, death, and millions of displaced people.

Today, few still believe that the bombing of Iran aims to liberate Iranian women, impose a regime change favorable to the West, or prevent Tehran from acquiring a nuclear bomb. Iran is supposedly on the verge of obtaining the bomb: a [threat that Netanyahu has been brandishing](#) for over thirty years.



On the first day of the conflict, a strike on a school carried out by the United States and Israel caused between 150 and 175 deaths, mainly girls aged 7 to 12.

The resignation of [Joe Kent](#) on March 17 from his post as director of the National Counterterrorism Center confirms the crisis of confidence and unease caused by this new war. In his letter, he stated that Iran posed no imminent threat to the United States. He adds that this conflict, like the invasion of Iraq in its day, was triggered under pressure from Israel and its powerful lobby in Washington. Tehran is one of the last regional actors capable of containing Israeli expansionism and its “Greater Israel” project.

While it is difficult to define U.S. interests, the White House's messaging is causing astonishment. Donald Trump has repeatedly claimed that the military was "having fun" sinking Iranian ships. For his part, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has been making increasingly bellicose statements—referring to "decimation," "unprecedented destruction," or Iranian officials "hiding like rats"—some of which contradict international humanitarian law.

The White House's official social media account is posting images of struck Iranian targets, interspersed with footage from video games. The intended audience for this type of content remains unclear; its diplomatic impact, however, is disastrous. Traditional U.S. allies are privately expressing their unease over this escalation and Washington's communication, which they deem irresponsible.

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## **An empire carries within it the seeds of its own destruction**

According to Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, every empire is doomed to disappear because of its very nature. Unlike a nation or a community founded on mutual consent, an empire is based on domination by force. It maintains itself through military occupation, repression, exploitation, and diplomatic pressure.

This logic creates constant tension. The empire attempts to legitimize itself through an ideology of superiority, even as its actions systematically contradict this narrative. This dissonance undermines its legitimacy and constitutes one of the fundamental causes of its downfall.

The disastrous foreign policy pursued by the United States in the Middle East for more than twenty-five years, along with the considerable damage caused by the "economic sanctions" imposed by Washington, are a modern illustration of this. They have become unbearable and unjustifiable, especially when one champions American exceptionalism.

The empire faces a fatal dilemma: tolerating dissent weakens its central authority and fragments its cohesion, while repression, though temporarily effective, destroys its remaining legitimacy. It radicalizes populations, alienates allies and partners, and causes human, economic, and moral costs to skyrocket.

Duroselle's central paradox is clear: the more an empire attempts to ward off its demise through force, the more it accelerates its decline. Legitimacy—the invisible cement of domination—once lost, cannot be restored through coercion. Any attempt at rescue risks aggravating the problem and bringing the empire to an end.

Trump's policy follows in the footsteps of his predecessors, but his style and excesses are undoubtedly hastening America's loss of credibility on the world stage.

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