



Why Do Nations Rise and Fall: A Survey

Why do civilizations fall? Not from invasion, but erosion—from lost virtues, squandered capital, and cultural amnesia. History remembers. Will we?

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Introduction

This essay represents the fifth iteration of a reflection I first attempted more than two decades ago, after reading David Landes’s “The Wealth and Poverty of Nations” in 1999. The book left a lasting impression on me—not only because of its scope and insight, but because it compelled me to consider deeply the under-lying forces that shape the fate of civilizations.



David Landes

Since then, I have continued to revisit the question of why nations rise and fall, drawing on the work of economists, historians, and cultural critics whose ideas have helped illuminate the terrain. This version, recently revised, weaves together

themes that have preoccupied me for many years. It is not meant to be definitive, but rather reflective—an attempt to distill what I have come to believe matters most in the endurance or unraveling of societies. For those who share an interest in the subject, I have included at the end of the paper a list of sources that may serve as a guide for further exploration. I hope that what follows will offer something worth the reader's time and thought.

Why Do Nations Rise and Fall: A Survey

At the root, the record of history is a record of the rise and fall of civilizations. The Assyrians and Babylonians once ruled vast swaths of the ancient world before vanishing into memory. The Greeks laid the intellectual foundations of the West, only to disintegrate and fall under Roman power. Rome itself, the greatest empire of antiquity, ultimately also fragmented under the weight of its own contradictions. Centuries later, Spain rose on the wealth of conquest and silver, only to fade into debt and decline. Britain, for a time the dominant global power, relinquished its empire within a generation. The Ottomans, the Habsburgs, the Soviets—each has had its moment in the sun, and each has eventually receded.

The reasons for their respective rises and falls may differ—military conquest, technological superiority, institutional decay, external invasion, moral exhaustion—but the pattern is unmistakable. History is strewn with the ruins of once-mighty powers. This recurring phenomenon has long intrigued not only historians, but also philosophers, theologians, economists, and statesmen. It is not merely a matter of curiosity, but of enduring significance. What causes a society to thrive? What leads it to fail?

From Ibn Khaldun^[1] in the 14th century, who wrote of dynastic cycles and the decay of group solidarity (*asabiyyah*), to Edward Gibbon's monumental *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which traced Rome's unraveling to moral and institutional weakness, the question has inspired generations of scholars. In more recent times, Arnold Toynbee^[2] proposed that civilizations rise in response to challenge and fall through internal failure. Paul Kennedy, in *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, highlighted the role of economic strength and strategic overreach. David Landes, Jared Diamond, and Daron Acemoglu—among others—have added to this tapestry of thought, offering cultural, geographical, and institutional lenses through which to understand civilizational fortune.

The persistence of the question suggests that it is not merely academic. Beneath it lies a deeper human impulse: the desire for permanence in a world of flux, and the hope that by studying the past, we might safeguard the future. To ask why nations

rise and fall is also to ask what sustains order, what undermines it, and whether decline is inevitable or preventable. This essay is born of that reflection.

The Temptation of Easy Answers

When confronted with the rise and fall of nations, it is tempting to seek simple, material explanations. Many point to natural resources, fertile soil, navigable rivers, or access to sea routes as decisive advantages. Others emphasize technological superiority or military might. These factors are not trivial—but they are also not sufficient. History, in its grand sweep, tells a more complex story.

Geographic determinism, for instance, has long held appeal. Jared Diamond, in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, attributes much of Eurasia's success to favorable geography, including east–west continental alignment, which facilitated the spread of crops, animals, and innovations. There is explanatory power in this. Yet geography can only go so far. As Diamond himself acknowledges,

"history followed different courses for different peoples because of differences among their environments, not because of biological differences among the peoples themselves" (Diamond, 25).

Still, geography alone cannot explain why two nations with similar conditions diverge so dramatically. North and South Korea, for example, share the same peninsula, language, and pre-1945 history—but diverged into two extremely different trajectories based on their ideological choices. Likewise, Ghana and Singapore both emerged from British colonial rule in the late 1950s with comparable income levels. Today, Singapore is a global financial hub; Ghana is still grappling with structural poverty and political fragility. The difference lies not in latitude but in leadership, governance, and culture.

Natural resources are often seen as a shortcut to wealth, but frequently act as a curse rather than a blessing. The silver mines of Potosí enriched the Spanish Empire in the 16th century, yet failed to generate lasting industrial strength. Instead, they fueled inflation, dependency, and imperial overstretch. The Assyrian Empire, rich in iron and agricultural lands, collapsed due to internal revolt and external invasion once its institutional control faltered. In modern times, Venezuela—blessed with immense oil reserves and other natural resources—suffers from economic ruin and social collapse, while resource-poor Japan, with disciplined institutions and a culture of innovation, has built a formidable economy.

Military conquest is another misleading indicator of success. The Roman Empire achieved an unprecedented territorial reach, yet as Gibbon argued, its internal decay in civic virtue, institutional coherence, and administrative competence paved the way for its disintegration. The Mongol Empire, perhaps history's largest contiguous land empire, vanished in a generation for similar reasons: it conquered, but did not cohere.

Technological superiority offers no guarantee of sustained dominance either. The Abbasid Caliphate, during its golden age, surpassed Europe in science, mathematics, and literature. Yet without institutional renewal and adaptability, its progress stalled. Innovation, if not supported by cultural values that reward inquiry and tolerate dissent, tends to fade.

The economist William Easterly put it succinctly: "Poor countries are poor not because of the tropics, but because of poor institutions. Geography is not destiny" (Easterly 254). David Landes echoes this sentiment: "The mere presence of riches does not make a society rich. It may even hinder the effort by creating the illusion of wealth without work" (Landes 516).

Even Fernand Braudel, no stranger to the long span of history, cautioned against geographical fatalism. "Geography is not an explanation," he wrote. "It is an invitation." The deeper reasons for national fortune or failure lie elsewhere—in how societies are organized, in how they transmit values, in the quality of their laws, and in the character of their citizens.

The materialist explanations may tempt with simplicity, but they leave us circling the surface. The true causes run deeper.

Landes and the Cultural Core

If material factors alone cannot account for the fate of nations, what can? In *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, historian David Landes^[3] offers a striking answer: the decisive elements lie not in what a society has, but in what it is. "In the pursuit of wealth," Landes writes, "failure or success are ultimately determined from within, not imposed from outside" (Landes, 523). That is, culture—broadly defined as the values, habits, beliefs, and institutional expectations of a society—shapes its capacity to prosper or to decay.

Landes identifies eight interwoven traits as crucial to civilizational success. None is sufficient on its own, and all require historical effort to develop and sustain. Let us consider each in turn, along with illustrative glimpses from history.

1. *A Sense of National Cohesion*

National cohesion is not mere sentimentality or flag-waving. It is the ability of diverse groups within a state to subordinate narrower loyalties to a common civic identity.

"National cohesion, a sense of belonging and of responsibility for one another, is indispensable to the building and sustaining of economic effort"

(LANDES, 524).

When it is absent, even the best laws are subverted by factionalism. Consider the early United States: a new nation, stitched together from disparate colonies, that forged cohesion through a shared constitutional framework and a culture of republican virtue. By contrast, the Habsburg Empire—multinational and multiethnic—fractured in the 19th and early 20th centuries, unable to foster unity among its component parts.

2. *The Capacity to Compete*

Competition involves not just ambition but adaptability. Successful societies cultivate an ethos of striving, experimentation, and resilience. Post-Meiji (after 1868) Japan offers a vivid example. Faced with Western industrial might, Japan rapidly reformed its institutions, adopted Western technologies, and built a world-class manufacturing base within a few decades. In contrast, Qing China, despite its size and resources, resisted reform and lagged behind—ultimately suffering under foreign domination.

3. *Respect for, and a Concern to Impart, Empirical and Technical Knowledge*

Prosperous societies value practical learning. They cultivate engineers, craftsmen, and problem-solvers—not just theorists or bureaucrats.

"Scientific curiosity and technological ingenuity are indispensable; they become productive only when joined to a culture that values practical knowledge and transmits it"

(LANDES 516)

This trait explains part of the European divergence during the Industrial Revolution. Britain's institutions, such as the Royal Society, fostered empirical research and its diffusion into industry. Meanwhile, in the Ottoman Empire, printing presses were resisted for centuries on religious grounds, delaying the spread of knowledge.

4. Preference for Advancement by Merit or Competence

Meritocracy, though imperfectly realized anywhere, is crucial to long-term national health. When status flows from talent and effort, rather than birth or patronage, a society unlocks the full potential of its people.

"Societies that valued performance more than privilege, and achievement more than ancestry, were more likely to innovate and grow"

(LANDES 515)

The Prussian civil service in the 19th century became a model of bureaucratic efficiency by recruiting based on examination and skill. Contrast this with modern Lebanon (among others), where sectarian quotas and patronage networks have hollowed out public administration, despite the country's considerable human capital.

5. A Citizenry Able Not Just to Acquire but Also to Use Wealth

Wealth, Landes argues, is not only to be acquired—it must be deployed productively. This requires financial literacy, ethical norms, and long-term vision.

"Wealth has to be created before it can be consumed, and societies that learn to invest and save will be the ones to endure"

(LANDES, PARAPHRASED FROM P.517).

In Switzerland, the culture of thrift, savings, and decentralized enterprise turned a mountainous, resource-poor country into a prosperous and stable society. Meanwhile, oil-rich Nigeria has seen vast wealth dissipated through corruption and consumption, with little invested in enduring capital.

6. Universal Respect for Honesty

Trust is the lubricant of economic and civic life. In low-trust societies, every transaction must be guarded, monitored, enforced—at great cost.

"Trust, honesty, and the rule of law lower transaction costs, encourage exchange, and promote investment"

(LANDES 516)

The Nordic countries consistently rank among the least corrupt, with public institutions that enjoy broad confidence. This trust enables smooth commerce, efficient governance, and innovation. In contrast, in many parts of the developing world, systemic corruption erodes both domestic and foreign investment, and reinforces cynicism.

7. Government Institutions That Secure Property and Reward Enterprise

Secure property rights and the rule of law are prerequisites for sustainable enterprise. Without them, investment withers, and the future becomes uncertain.

"Above all, economic growth requires secure property rights, honest government, and a climate of justice and order"

(LANDES 523)

This insight unites thinkers as different as Wilhelm Röpke and Hernando de Soto. Röpke wrote, "Only when property rights are protected is there room for personal independence and responsibility" (Röpke 85). De Soto has shown how billions remain excluded from prosperity because they lack formal title to land or capital. Countries like Chile and Estonia, through institutional reform, improved property rights and saw rapid development. Others, like Zimbabwe, experienced economic collapse after property seizures destroyed confidence and capital.

8. Discipline to Forgo Present Consumption for Future Gain

The final trait—arguably the most fragile—is the cultural capacity to delay gratification. Societies that save, invest, and plan can build; those that demand immediate reward often destroy their future.

"The discipline to save and invest rather than consume all, to put off gratification, is essential for long-term development"

(LANDES 518)

Germany's postwar recovery rested in part on a deep cultural embrace of thrift, education, and incremental progress—the so-called *Wirtschaftswunder*. Argentina, by contrast, once among the world's wealthiest nations, has endured a century of decline marked by populism, debt cycles, and short-termism.

Clearly, these traits, taken together, do not arise spontaneously. They are the products of long historical struggle, cultural effort, and institutional refinement. They are also fragile and easily eroded when neglected or mocked. As Landes insists, “If we learn anything from the history of economic development, it is that culture makes all the difference” (Landes 516).

Following, let us explore how these cultural foundations intersect with—and are reinforced or undermined by—the institutional structures as emphasized by other prominent thinkers.

Other Voices

David Landes is not alone in identifying the cultural roots of prosperity, but he is part of a broader chorus that includes economists, historians, political theorists, and sociologists—many of whom have underscored the vital role of institutions, law, and liberty in shaping the destiny of nations.

In *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson present a powerful institutional thesis: nations prosper when they develop inclusive institutions that protect property rights, enforce contracts, encourage investment, and offer equal opportunity. By contrast, extractive institutions—those that concentrate power and wealth in the hands of the few—sow stagnation.

"Countries like North Korea are poor because those who have power make choices that create poverty. They get it wrong not by mistake or ignorance but on purpose"

(ACEMOGLU AND ROBINSON 68)

This echoes, in modern terms, the insights of Douglass North, who emphasized that institutions shape economic performance by structuring incentives. North argued that long-run development depends on creating institutions that align private benefit with public good. Secure property rights, impartial enforcement of contracts, and constraints on arbitrary power are not luxuries—they are critical necessities.

It is worth noting that the rule of law has been a particularly durable engine of prosperity. Legal scholar Harold Berman observed in *Law and Revolution* that Western Europe's transformation into a dynamic civilization coincided with the emergence of autonomous legal systems, independent of both church and crown. These systems provided predictability, recourse, and accountability—conditions under which enterprise could flourish.

Private property, too, is more than a technical asset—it is a cultural institution. As Friedrich Hayek argued, “The system of private property is the most important guarantee of freedom, not only for those who own property but scarcely less for those who do not” (Hayek 107). Property rights create not only economic incentives but social stability: people with secure ownership are more likely to plan, conserve, and invest.

Röpke—one of the architects of postwar German economic reform—placed private property and decentralization at the heart of his “humane economy.” He warned that when the state becomes the sole provider and planner, the moral and civic fabric of society unravels. In his words, “Where everything is centralized, life becomes inhuman and dangerous” (Röpke 145). His colleague Alexander Rüstow coined the term *Vitalpolitik*—a politics of vitality—which aimed to embed economic liberty in cultural health and moral responsibility.

Liberty, more broadly, has long been understood as a precondition for creative flourishing. Alexis de Tocqueville warned that democracies might unwittingly drift into a “soft despotism”—a bureaucratic paternalism that stifles initiative under the guise of security. Tocqueville's fear was not of tyranny by force, but of a passive citizenry willing to trade self-responsibility for comfort. “The kind of oppression with which democratic peoples are threatened will resemble nothing that has preceded it in the world,” he wrote (*Democracy in America, Vol. II, Part IV, Ch. 6*).

The Austrian School of economics—Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, and later Hans-Hermann Hoppe—pushed this insight further. Mises argued that rational economic calculation requires free-market prices, which in turn require voluntary exchange and secure ownership. Hayek added that knowledge is decentralized and tacit, making central planning not just inefficient, but epistemologically impossible. Hoppe, drawing from a more radical libertarian tradition, insisted that without absolute respect for private property, civilization itself collapses into conflict.

Decentralization thus emerges as a critical theme. Whether political, legal, or economic, decentralized systems allow for local knowledge, resilience, and competition. The Swiss Confederation, with its cantonal autonomy and citizen assemblies, has long demonstrated the strength of subsidiarity. The Hanseatic

League, a decentralized network of trading cities in medieval Europe, prospered without a central authority because its institutions were adaptive, voluntary, and governed by commercial norms.

Even thinkers like Hernando de Soto, working from the developing world, have made the case that legal recognition of informal property is central to unlocking capital. In *The Mystery of Capital*, de Soto shows that billions of people possess assets—but without formal title, they cannot convert these assets into productive capital. What seems like a bureaucratic issue is, in fact, a civilizational one.

Across centuries and disciplines, then, the lesson recurs: freedom under law—anchored by property rights, supported by independent institutions, and guided by moral norms—is the soil in which prosperity grows.

These arguments reinforce, rather than contradict, Landes's thesis. Geography may set the initial terms of the game. Culture may shape the temperament of the players. But it is institutions—the rules, the referees, and the ethos of the contest—that ultimately determine whether a society advances or declines.

Are We Forgetting the Formula?

If Landes is right—and if prosperity stems from deep cultural and institutional traits—then we in the modern West must reckon with very uncomfortable questions. For what he described as the foundations of success—discipline, honesty, meritocracy, respect for property, civic cohesion—are not just being neglected. They are being actively dismantled.

The signs are difficult to miss. Meritocracy has been sacrificed at the altar of “equity,” “inclusion,” and “social justice,” ideological quotas. Science and education have been politicized resulting in the undermining of trust in expertise. Public and private debts have grown as permanent fixtures of policy—ballooning to levels once unthinkable, with no intention of repayment and no credible plan to reverse course. Dishonesty in public life is no longer shocking; it is assumed and expected. Long-term thinking is displaced by the culture of spectacle, distraction, and short-term reward. We have consumed the capital—moral, fiscal, and cultural—accumulated by previous generations, while congratulating ourselves on our progress.

This is not merely decline. It is what Landes would recognize as civilizational amnesia.

Cultural Cohesion and Its Unraveling

Landes emphasized national cohesion as a vital trait. Today, however, the Western world—particularly the United States—is defined more by fragmentation than unity. Identity politics pits groups against each other in a zero-sum game, while shared symbols, narratives, and civic rituals have eroded. Migration without integration has frayed social bonds. Tocqueville’s “mild despotism” is no longer a warning but a documentary, and the idea of a common purpose is treated with suspicion or derision.

Rothbard warned of this outcome. In his critique of state power, he noted that when the state becomes both the arbiter of identity and the provider of benefits, it encourages group warfare:

“The more the state takes, the more various groups must grab what they can before the loot runs out”

(ROTHBARD, *POWER AND MARKET*, 175).

In the view of many, cultural fragmentation is not accidental—it is systemic.

Monetary Destruction and the Loss of Future Orientation

Perhaps nothing illustrates the erosion of Landes’s eighth trait—the discipline to forgo present consumption for future gain—more than the West’s monetary trajectory. Once anchored by gold and fiscal prudence, modern monetary policy has become an exercise in denial. Debts rise, interest rates are distorted, and the very idea of sound money is ridiculed as an anachronism.

Rothbard, like Mises and Hayek before him, saw this not as a technical error but a moral one. He wrote:

“Inflation is a hidden tax and a form of legalized counterfeiting,”

(ROTHBARD, *WHAT HAS GOVERNMENT DONE TO OUR MONEY?* 39).

It punishes savers, rewards speculation, and undermines trust. Landes would agree: a society that cannot restrain itself financially has lost the cultural temperament necessary for prosperity.

Militarism and the Corrosion of Liberty

Another corrosive element is the return of militarism—not in the form of heroic defense, but as a permanent state of intervention. The post-9/11 era has seen Western powers, especially the United States, engage in continuous warfare with dubious strategic or moral outcomes. The consequences are manifold: bloated defense budgets, expanded surveillance, erosion of civil liberties, and a normalization of emergency powers.

Historian Paul Kennedy warned of “imperial overstretch”—the tendency of great powers to exhaust themselves through excessive military commitments. Landes, too, would view such patterns as signs of misallocated resources and declining internal discipline.

Rothbard condemned war as “the health of the state,” borrowing Randolph Bourne’s phrase. War, he argued, centralizes power, excuses tyranny, and redirects production from peaceful enterprise to destruction. A culture devoted to long-term prosperity cannot afford a permanent war economy.

The Myth of Exceptionalism

Underlying much of this institutional decay is a complacent belief in “exceptionalism”—the idea that certain nations, especially the United States, are immune to the laws of history. This delusion allows for the suspension of fiscal prudence, the dismissal of constitutional limits, and the assumption that decline is something that happens elsewhere, not here.

But Landes’s framework offers no such exemptions. Prosperity is not a birthright but it must be earned, nurtured, and protected. Its preconditions—honesty, thrift, competition, secure property, and a merit-based society—do not perpetuate themselves. They must be taught, defended, and sometimes recovered at great cost.

Rothbard offered a stark diagnosis: “There is no greater delusion than the idea that a political system or a culture is too big to fail. Leviathans fall just like republics when the moral foundations erode” (Rothbard, *For a New Liberty* 211).

Institutional Decay in Context

All these developments—monetary irresponsibility, cultural fragmentation, politicized education, permanent warfare, and unsustainable debt—can be understood as symptoms of institutional and cultural drift. They are the opposite

of Landes's eight virtues. Where once Western societies prized self-restraint, competence, and long-term planning, they now exalt emotion, grievance, and improvisation.

What Landes offered was a moral lens. He did not predict decline, but he warned that without vigilance, decline is inevitable. The loss of discipline, honesty, and cohesion is not simply a political problem—it is civilizational.

An Epilogue

Nations do not collapse overnight, nor by accident. Their downfall is rarely the result of a single war, a bad ruler, or an unfortunate event. It is, more often, the slow accumulation of choices made: the lost virtues, the eroded character and the ignored foundations.

Landes warned that success is earned, not inherited; built, not assumed. Civilizations rise on the strength of discipline, honesty, merit, knowledge, and foresight. They fall when those traits are mocked, discarded, or forgotten. The pattern is not mysterious. It is historical law.

On 10 January 1917, Theodore Roosevelt sent a letter to S. Stanwood Menken that includes the following prophetic paragraph:

"Americanism means the virtues of courage, honor, justice, truth, sincerity, and hardihood—the virtues that made America. The things that will destroy America are prosperity-at-any-price, peace-at-any-price, safety-first instead of duty-first, the love of soft living and the get-rich-quick theory of life. [4]"

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Unlike material destruction, which can often be rebuilt, moral and institutional decay follows a subtler course. It feeds on comfort, amplifies weakness, and resists correction. Once a society loses its capacity for self-restraint, once it chooses pleasure over principle, narrative over truth, and entitlement over effort, it enters a cycle from which history offers few painless exits.

In that sense, decline is not a policy error. It is not a glitch. It is the natural consequence of prior indulgences—the final stage of a long chain of moral concessions and cultural abdications. Just as financial bankruptcy begins gradually

and ends suddenly, so too does civilizational collapse.

Again, Rothbard captured the heart of the matter: “The great crisis of our age is not one of knowledge, but of courage. Not what to do—but whether we will do it.” Therein lies the narrow gate to renewal. It is not reforms or technocracy or clever governance that reverse decline. It is the rediscovery of virtues once thought obsolete: thrift, truth, duty, honor.

But renewal, if it does come, exacts a price. It demands sacrifice, clarity, and the rejection of comforting illusions. Most societies, having grown accustomed to their decadence, cannot and do not pay such price.

History does not mourn their passing. It simply moves on.

So, for those of us concerned not just with capital but with civilization—whether as investors, citizens, parents, or heirs—the most important indicators may not be GDP growth or interest rates. They may instead lie deeper: in the strength of institutions, the honesty of discourse, the cohesion of culture, and the moral stamina of the people.

Fortune follows character. And when character fades, ruin is not imposed. It is invited.

Ὁ νοῶν νοεῖτω.

("He who understands, let him understand")

[1] Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) was a North African Arab historian, philosopher, and statesman, best known for *The Muqaddimah*, a pioneering work of historical analysis written in 1377. In it, he introduced a cyclical theory of the rise and fall of civilizations based on the concept of *asabiyyah* (social cohesion), and emphasized the role of economic, cultural, and institutional factors in shaping history. Widely regarded as a precursor to modern sociology, Ibn Khaldun's insights into power, decay, and societal dynamics remain strikingly relevant.

[2] Arnold J. Toynbee (1889–1975) was a British historian and scholar of international affairs, best known for his 12-volume work *A Study of History* (1934–1961). In it, he examined the rise and fall of civilizations through a comparative framework, arguing that societies flourish when they respond creatively to challenges, and decline when they succumb to internal decay or fail to adapt. Toynbee's sweeping vision and emphasis on moral and spiritual vitality made him one of the most influential historical thinkers of the 20th century.

[3] David S. Landes (1924–2013) was an American economic historian and professor at Harvard University, renowned for his work on industrial development and the economic history of nations. His most influential book, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (1998), explores why some countries achieve sustained prosperity while others remain poor and it sparked wide debate across disciplines. This is the book that served as the inspiration for my unending interest in the subject.

[4] <https://history.stackexchange.com/questions/14706/did-theodore-roosevelt-ever-say-the-things-that-will-destroy-america-quote?>

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