

total defense budgets of most countries. Controlling the Atlantic or the Pacific without a shoreline on both would be beyond the economic capability of just about any nation.

North America alone can house a transcontinental nation capable of projecting power simultaneously into the Atlantic and the Pacific. Therefore North America is the center of gravity of the international system. At the dawn of the American age, the United States is far and away the dominant power in North America. It is a country that simultaneously invaded Europe and Japan in 1944-45. It took military control of both bodies of water and retains it to this day. This is why it is in a position to preside over the new age.

But it is important to recall that Spain once dominated Europe and presided over the opening century of the European Age. While I expect that North America will be the center of gravity of the global system for the next few centuries, I also expect the United States to dominate North America for at least a century. But as with Spain, the assertion that North America is the center of gravity does not guarantee that the United States will always dominate North America. Many things can happen—from civil war to defeat in a foreign war to other states emerging on its borders over the centuries.

For the short term, however—and by that I mean the next hundred years—I will argue that the United States' power is so extraordinarily overwhelming, and so deeply rooted in economic, technological, and cultural realities, that the country will continue to surge through the twenty-first century, buffered though it will be by wars and crises.

This isn't incompatible with American self-doubt. Psychologically, the United States is a bizarre mixture of overconfidence and insecurity. Interestingly, this is the precise description of the adolescent mind, and that is exactly the American condition in the twenty-first century. The world's leading power is having an extended adolescent identity crisis, complete with incredible new strength and irrational mood swings. Historically, the United States is an extraordinarily young and therefore immature society. So at this time we should expect nothing less from America than bravado and despair. How else should an adolescent feel about itself and its place in the world?

But if we think of the United States as an adolescent, early in its overall history, then we also know that, regardless of its self-image, adulthood lies ahead. Adults tend to be more stable and more powerful than adolescents. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that America is in the earliest phase of its power. It is not fully civilized. America, like Europe in the sixteenth century, is still barbaric (a description, not a moral judgment). Its culture is unformed. Its will is powerful. Its emotions drive it in different and contradictory directions.

Cultures live in one of three states. The first state is barbarism. Barbarians believe that the customs of their village are the laws of nature and that anyone who doesn't live the way they live is beneath contempt and requiring redemption or destruction. The third state is decadence. Decadents cynically believe that nothing is better than anything else. If they hold anyone in contempt, it is those who believe in anything. Nothing is worth fighting for.

Civilization is the second and most rare state. Civilized people are able to balance two contradictory thoughts in their minds. They believe that there are truths and that their cultures approximate those truths. At the same time, they hold open in their mind the possibility that they are in error. The combination of belief and skepticism is inherently unstable. Cultures pass through barbarism to civilization and then to decadence, as skepticism undermines self-certainty. Civilized people fight selectively but effectively. Obviously all cultures contain people who are barbaric, civilized, or decadent, but each culture is dominated at different times by one principle.

Europe was barbaric in the sixteenth century, as the self-certainty of Christianity fueled the first conquests. Europe passed into civilization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and then collapsed into decadence in the course of the twentieth century. The United States is just beginning its cultural and historical journey. Until now it has not been sufficiently coherent to have a definitive culture. As it becomes the center of gravity of the world, it is developing that culture, which is inevitably barbaric. America is a place where the right wing despises Muslims for their faith and the left wing despises them for their treatment of women. Such seemingly different perspectives are tied together in the certainty that their own values are self-evidently best. And as with all barbaric cultures, Americans are ready to fight for their self-evident truths.