The United States is the richest, militarily strongest, and most culturally diverse empire in world history. Unfortunately, many historians, most politicians, and a vast sector of the citizenry are in denial, create euphemisms such as "democratic republic," "house on the hill," and "nation-state," or take America's unprecedented civilization for granted. But America is a global empire, though of a peculiar kind – a nation founded by revolt against British imperialism. However, despite being the deciding factor in last century's two world wars, being the post-1945 superpower containing the spread of communism and, now, the Islamist jihad war of civilizations against the West, and currently having more than 750 military installations in two-thirds of the world's countries, former President George W. Bush stubbornly maintained, "America has never been an empire." The force behind Bush's imperial presidency, former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, claimed with a straight face: "We don't seek empires. We're not imperialistic." Balderdash!

An Oxford educated Scot, teaching at Harvard and Stanford, Niall Ferguson, in my opinion, is the most perceptive historian/political economist of our time. A libertarian, Ferguson believes the four pillars of Western European and North American civilization – representative government, the free market, the rule of law, and civil/private society – were responsible for the rise of the West, the British Empire and its American successor. Regrettably, those strengths are being undermined by the expanding role of government. An era of negligence and complacency brought about by institutional degeneration lies behind economic stagnation and the geopolitical decline that comes with it.

Ferguson wrote of the four pillars: "It was these institutions, rather than any geographical or climatic advantages, that set the West on the path to global dominance beginning around 1500. In our time, however, these institutions have deteriorated in disturbing ways. Our democracies have broken the contract between generations by heaping IOUs on our children and grandchildren. Our markets are hindered by overcomplex regulations that debilitate the political and economic processes they were created to support; the rule of law has become the rule of lawyers. And civil society has degenerated into uncivil society, where we lazily expect all of our problems to be solved by the state."

Indeed, our society is squandering the institutional inheritance of centuries. Arresting the breakdown of our civilization, Ferguson warns, will take heroic leadership and radical reform. The most worrisome evidence of decline is the "crisis of public debt," with government budgets out of control in the U.S. and Europe. Ferguson sees outsize debt as a symptom of the "betrayal of future generations: a breach of Edmund Burke's social contract between the present and the future." He estimated U.S. future obligations would exceed future revenues by \$200 trillion, and state and local governments face \$38 trillion in unfunded obligations.

George Melloan, in "The Great Money Binge: Spending Our Way to Socialism," doesn't contest Ferguson's numbers, but noted "future obligations stretch over many years, and the burden consists mainly of debt service, not the debt itself. But the numbers are so huge that just the carrying charges will likely make them unmanageable without painful adjustments. One adjustment that already seems inevitable is a reduction of Medicare and Social Security benefits to future generations. The Federal Reserve also has a solution – inflation, yet another form of pain. And then there is the Obama all-purpose remedy, higher taxes. One way or another, tomorrow's citizens will pay for today's excesses."

Ferguson is worried about the erosion of the rule of law, which Abraham Lincoln believed was

the most important institution in a democratic republic (America was no empire in Lincoln's day). Individuals, in their right to rise in society as far as talent and ambition allowed, must believe they received fair and just treatment from the dispute resolution system of law and courts. However, today, not only do politicians increasingly flout the Constitution, but also they are "creating a proliferation of unwise and unenforceable laws and regulations. Lawyers on congressional staffs write massive pieces of legislation for other lawyers to implement and still others to interpret for clients. Thus, lawyers rule."

For example, the 848-page Dodd-Frank Act, July 2010, which ran to 2,700 pages in its original draft, meddles with global finance in a "stupid, costly and dangerous" manner, requiring that regulators create 243 rules, conduct 67 studies and issue 22 periodic reports. The original 906-page Affordable Care Act has ballooned to over 1,000 pages with numerous amendments and is similar in misguided scope and complexity beyond the power of mere mortals to understand and control. Both pieces of legislation underscore that a "small input in a complex system can cause huge, unanticipated consequences."

Ferguson's argument that civil society is undergoing decay is no less depressing. He asserted: "As government has grown, civil society has withered. Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone" (2000) recorded a sharp decline in participation in civic organizations between the 1960s and the late 1990s – for example, a 61% drop in PTA membership. The French author Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at the scope of American civil society in the 19th century, the many associations that owed their 'birth and development' not to law but to individuals freely joining forces." Ferguson agrees with Tocqueville that "the state – with its seductive promise of 'security from the cradle to the grave' – was, and remains, the real enemy of civil society."

Ferguson reads like a modern day Juvenal or Vegetius lamenting the degradation of the Roman world. His thrust is that "it is the degeneration of civil, that is to say private, institutions, the failure of the Rule of Law, the distortion of economies by social engineering, and the breakdown of trust in civil society that are at the heart of why the West is in decline. The bright spot is that the decline is not terminal, or at least not yet, it can still be reversed."

Hopefully, this time the West gets it right and our children and grandchildren are not subject to another Dark Age as the West throws away the fruits of its culture. The American empire, with its unprecedented wealth and power, must lead the world through humility, not arrogance. Must lead knowing it is the policing power in an unruly world. Must lead knowing those around the world pinning their hopes of a better future by governing themselves without autocrats, must be able to depend on the American colossus to stay the course and not leave them in the lurch. Our time in this position of world leadership is fleeting, as it is for all empires. As Tony Blair put it succinctly in his address to Congress in July 2003, "All predominant power seems for a time invincible, but in fact, it is transient." As Ferguson concludes, "The question Americans must ask themselves is just how transient they wish their predominance to be. Though the barbarians have already knocked at the gates – once, spectacularly – imperial decline in this case seems more likely to come, as it came to Gibbon's Rome, from within."

No outside power will cause America's decline. Americans must prevent their empire of liberty from descending into oligarchy – where power rests in the hands of a few. An educated populace electing duty bound representatives to administer in their best interests and not those of the special interests can govern America's empire. Americans must avoid insularity, xenophobia, and intolerance. As Lincoln recognized, the better angels of the American character will determine America's future, not outsiders.

Indeed, the American public's opposition to military intervention in Syria has "struck, in some

cases shocked," members of Congress. A Reuters-Ipsos poll had support for a strike at 20%. As journalist Peggy Noonan commented, "Sometimes it shows strength to hold your fire.... At the end of the day America is America. We don't have to bow to the claim that if we don't attack Syria we are over as a great power."

What are Americans thinking? Noonan believes, "Probably some variation of: Wrong time, wrong place, wrong plan, wrong man. Twelve years of war. A sense that we're snakebit in the Mideast. Iraq and Afghanistan didn't go well, Libya is lawless. In Egypt we threw over a friend of 30 years to embrace the future. The future held the Muslim brotherhood, unrest and a military coup. Americans have grown more hard-eyed – more bottom-line and realistic, less romantic about foreign endeavors, and more concerned about an America whose culture and infrastructure seem to be crumbling around them."

She's correct. Americans must reclaim America from the special interests. The world will not descend into a new Dark Age because Americans decide to dry-dock their ship of state for overdue repairs.