Submitted by GRADY SMITHEY, SRC, Dallas Regional Mobility Coalition — Please provide copies to all Committee Members and staff.

NATIONAL JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2010

Is America going to hell? After a year of economic calamity that many fear has sent us into irreversible decline, the author finds reassurance in the peculiarly American cycle of crisis and renewal, and in the continuing strength of the forces that have made the country great: our university system, our receptiveness to immigration, our culture of innovation. In most significant ways, the U.S. remains the envy of the world. But here's the alarming problem: our governing system is old and broken and dysfunctional. Fixing it—without resorting to a constitutional convention or a coup—is the key to securing the nation's future.

BY JAMES FALLOWS

How America Can Rise Again

IMAGE CREDIT: SEAMUS MURPHY

ALSO IN OUR SPECIAL REPORT:

VIDEO: "ONE NATION, ON EDGE"
James Fallows talks to Atlantic editor James Bennet about a uniquely American tradition—cycles of despair followed by triumphant rebirths.

EDUCATION: "WHAT MAKES A GREAT TEACHER?"
How one organization, drawing on two decades of observation and research, may have found the answer. By Amanda Ripley

INTERACTIVE GRAPHIC: "THE STATE OF THE UNION IS ..."
... thrifty, overextended, admired, twitchy, filthy, and clean: the nation in numbers. By Rachael Brown

CHART: "THE HAPPINESS INDEX"
Times were tough in 2009. But according to a cool Facebook app, people were happier. By Justin Miller

SINCE COMING BACK to the United States after three years away in China, I have been asking experts around the country whether America is finally going to hell. The question is partly a joke. One look at the comforts and abundance of American life—even during a recession, even with all the people who are suffering or left out—can make it seem silly to ask about anything except the secrets of the country's success. Here is the sort of thing you notice anew after being in India or China, the two rising powers of the day: there is still so much nature, and so much space, available for each person on American soil. Room on the streets and sidewalks, big lawns around the houses, trees to walk under, wildflowers at the edge of town—yes, despite the sprawl and overbuilding. A few days after moving from our apartment in Beijing, I awoke to find a mother deer and two fawns in the front yard of our house in Washington, barely three miles from the White House. I know that deer are a modern pest, but the contrast with blighted urban China, in which even pigeons are scarce, was difficult to ignore.

And the people! The typical American I see in an office building or shopping mall, stout or slim, gives off countless unconscious signs—hair, skin, teeth, height—of having grown up in a society of taken-for-granted sanitation, vaccination, ample protein, and overall public health. I have learned not to bore people with my expressions of amazement at the array of food in ordinary grocery stores, the size and newness of cars on the street, the splendor of the physical plant for universities, museums, sports stadiums. And honestly, by now I've almost stopped noticing. But if this is "decline," it is from a level that most of the world

America. There are reasons for the difference: China, in which I never lost a signal when on subways, in elevators, or even in a coal mine, has limited competition among phone companies that coordinate to blanket the country with transmitters. Still, this is one of several modern-tech areas in which the U.S. is now notably, even embarrassingly, behind. I went several times to a private medical clinic in Beijing and once to a public hospital in Shanghai (the Skin Disease and Sexually Transmitted Disease Hospital—it's a long story). In each, the nurses entered my information at a computer, rather than having me fill out the paper forms, on a clipboard, on which I have entered the same redundant information a thousand times in American medical offices. Again, there's a reason for the difference; but we're not keeping up.

When I was a schoolboy in California in the 1950s and '60s, the freeways were new and big and smooth—like the new roads being built all across China. Today's California freeways are cracked and crowded and old. A Chinese student I knew in Shanghai who has recently entered graduate school at UC Berkeley sent me a note saying that the famous San Francisco Bay Area seemed "beautiful, but run down." I remember a similar reaction on arriving at graduate school in England in the 1970s and seeing the sad physical remnants—dimly lit museums, once-stately homes, public buildings overdue for repair—from a time when the society had bigger dreams and more resources than it could muster in the here and now. A Chinese friend who flew for the first time from Beijing to New York phoned soon after landing to complain about the potholed, traffic-jammed taxi ride from JFK to Manhattan. "When I was growing up, these bridges and roads and dams were a source of real national pride and achievement," Stephen Flynn, the president of the Center for National Policy in Washington, who was born in 1960, told me. "My daughter was 6 when the World Trade Center towers went down, 8 when lights went off on the East Coast, 10 when a major U.S. city drowned—I saw things built, and she's seen them fall apart." America is supposed to be the permanent country of the New, but a lot of it just looks old.

Since everyone knows that America's passenger-rail system is a world laggard, there is no surprise value in saying so. But it's still true. Stephen Flynn points out that the physical infrastructure of big East Coast cities was mainly built by the 1880s; of the industrial Midwest by World War I; and of the West Coast by 1960. "It was advertised to last 50 years, and overengineered so it might last 100," he said. "Now it's running down. When a pothole swallows an SUV, it's treated as freak news, but it shows a water system that's literally collapsing beneath us." (Surface cave-ins often reflect a sewer or water line that has leaked or collapsed below.)

At a dinner in Washington this fall, I heard a comment that summed up the combination of satisfaction and concern that ran through many of the interviews I held. The day before the dinner, three U.S. citizens had been named the winners of the Nobel Prize for physiology or medicine. The day after, three more would be named winners of the Nobel Prize for physics. All the more impressive for America's attractive power, four of the six winners had been born outside the country—in China, Canada, Australia, England—and had taken U.S. citizenship, in some cases jointly with their original country, while they trained and did work at U.S. or other foreign institutions. The dinner discussion topic was the future of America's scientific-research base—and the prize announcement, rather than a cause for celebration, was taken almost as a knell. "This was for work done 10 or 20 years ago, based on research funding that started 30 or 40 years ago," the main speaker, the CEO of a famous Silicon Valley firm, said. "I don't know what we're funding that will pay off 30 years from now."

"After almost a century, the United States no longer has the money," the economists J. Bradford DeLong and Stephen Cohen, both of Berkeley, write in their new book, *The End of Influence.*

> It is gone, and it is not likely to return in the foreseeable future ... The American standard of living will decline relative to the rest of the industrialized and industrializing world ... The United States will lose power and influence.

This judgment differed from many others I heard mainly in being more crisply put.

So the question is: Are the fears of this moment our era's version of the "missile gap"? Are they anything more than a combination of the two staple ingredients of doom-and-darkness statements through the whole course of our history? One of those ingredients is exaggerated complaint by whichever group is out of political power—those who thought America should be spelled with a "k" under Nixon or Reagan, those who attend "tea bag" rallies against the Obama administration now. The other is what historians call the bracing "jeremiad" tradition of harsh warnings that reveal a faith that America can be better than it is. Football coaches roar and storm in their locker-room speeches at halftime to fire up the team, and American politicians, editorialists, and activists of various sorts have roared and stormed precisely because they have known this is the way the nation is roused to action.

Today's fears combine relative decline—what will happen when China has all the jobs? and all the money?—with domestic concerns about a polarized society of haves and have-nots that has lost its connective core. They include concerns about the institutions that have made America strong: widespread education, a financially viable press, religion that can coexist with secularism, government that expresses the nation's divisions while also addressing its long-term interests and needs. They are topped by the most broadly held alarm about the future of the natural environment since the era of *Silent Spring* and the original Earth Day movement.

How should we feel? I spoke with historians and politicians, soldiers and ministers, civil engineers and broadcast executives and high-tech researchers. Overall, the news they gave was heartening—and alarming, too. Most of the things that worry Americans aren't really that serious, especially those that involve "falling behind" anyone else. But there is a deeper problem almost too alarming to worry about, since it is so hard to see a solution. Let's start with the good news.

One Reason Not to Worry: We Have Been Here Before

Three years ago, Cullen Murphy published *Are We Rome?*, a book that asked a version of the question that has run through American political discussion for at least 200 years. Murphy, a former editor of this magazine, gave the only sensible answer, which amounted to "Maybe." When I spoke with him recently, he emphasized how much the current wave of "declinist" worry matches a tradition that has been an inseparable part of American strength.

"If you go back and pick any decade in American history, you are guaranteed to find the exact same worries we have now," he said. "About our commercial capacities, about the education system, about whether immigrants are ruining our stock and not learning English, about what is happening to the 'real' values that built the country. Poke a stick into it, and you will get a gushing fount of commentary on the same subjects as now, in the same angry and despairing tone. It's an amazingly consistent trait.

"Fifty years from now, Americans will be as worried as they are today," Murphy said. "And meanwhile the basic social dynamism of the country will continue to wash us forward in the messy, roiling way it always has."

Ralph Nader, for whom I worked as a researcher in my teens and early 20s, and from whom I became estranged after his 2000 run for the presidency, made a similar upbeat point in a recent reconciliation conversation in Washington. First he elaborated the ways that Congress, the media, the regulators, and both political parties were more in thrall to corporate power than ever before in his memory. But, he said, "you've got to be very careful about thinking things can't rebound. My favorite phrase is 'America is a country that has more problems than it deserves, and more solutions than it applies.' We don't want to be Pollyannas, but we really should believe that we can turn things around."

In *The American Jeremiad*, his classic 1978 account of that phenomenon, Sacvan Bercovitch, of Harvard, points out that from the very start of European settlement in New England, colonists were warned that God was disappointed in them, so they should improve not just their individual ethics but their collective social behavior. Indeed, only six years after the *Arbella* brought John Winthrop to Massachusetts, a Congregationalist minister was lamenting the lost golden age of the colony, asking parishioners, "Are all [God's] kindnesses forgotten? all your promises forgotten?"

Bercovitch traces how this theme persisted through the centuries that followed, reaching its literary high point in the portrayal of 19th-century America in *The Education of Henry Adams*, to which I would add the 20th-century summit, George Kennan's *Memoirs*. Bercovitch also explains the theme's important political effect. "The jeremiad played a central role in the war of independence, and the war in turn confirmed the jeremiad as a national ritual." It was a national as opposed to a purely religious ritual, because the warnings were intended—and expected—to provoke a cleansing public response. Through the 1800s, "American Jeremiahs considered it their chief duty to make continuing revolution an appeal for national consensus," Bercovitch wrote. Americans had to be told that they were *this far* from doom before they would address problems.

In his recent book about Jimmy Carter's now-ridiculed "malaise" speech in 1979, *What the Heck Are You Up To, Mr. President?*, Kevin Mattson, of Ohio University, says that initially the speech was well received, as most jeremiads are. (I worked earlier as Carter's White House speechwriter but had left by that time.) The speech, which did not include the word "malaise," was officially called "A Crisis of Confidence" and warned that Americans had lost their way. Carter began by reciting a list of immediate crises and then said: "It's clear that the true problems of our nation are much deeper ... The symptoms of this crisis of the American spirit are all around us." He enumerated these "true problems" in painful detail. For instance, "We remember when the phrase 'sound as a dollar' was an expression of absolute dependability." The speech is shocking to read 30 years later, for how closely its diagnosis of American problems matches today's bleak national self-assessment, from the dispiriting partisan gridlock of politics to the crippling dependence on foreign oil. (One obvious difference is that Carter does not mention China at all, let alone as a more successful rival.) In retrospect, his grim tone might seem the reason Carter was turned out of office the next year. But in its time, this was what voters wanted to hear. "It prompted an overwhelmingly favorable response," Mattson wrote after his book came out. "Carter received a whopping 11 percent rise in his poll numbers." It is remembered as a failure not because Americans of the time rejected a tough-love appeal but because two days later Carter asked his Cabinet members to resign, creating an air of political chaos. In *The Audacity to Win*, his recent memoir of Barack Obama's drive to the presidency, David Plouffe, his campaign manager, describes how Obama struck a similarly resonant chord (minus the Cabinet turmoil) at an important moment in the campaign. At 11 p.m., as the last candidate speaking at the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner in Des Moines two months before the Iowa caucuses, Obama held a crowd rapt with a jeremiad calling for national rebirth and reform. "The dream that so many generations fought for feels as if it's slowly slipping away," he said. "And most of all, we've lost faith that our leaders can or will do anything about it." The crowd went wild.

The expectation of jeremiad is so deeply ingrained in Americans' political consciousness that it might seem to be universal. In fact, most historical accounts suggest this is a peculiar trait of our invented political culture. I recall, from living in both Japan and England, mordant remarks about the fecklessness of public officials, but many fewer "we have lost our country" broadsides of the sort that Americans have long taken for granted.

T. Jackson Lears, of Rutgers, has written two influential books that discuss American cycles of despair and renewal in the 19th and 20th centuries: *No Place of Grace* and *Rebirth of a Nation*. "Historically, the prospect of imminent decline has been used as a rallying cry, to get Americans committed to whatever is the agenda of the person doing the rallying, often the

elites," he told me. He added that while much of today's "free-floating populist anger" reminded him strongly of the mood of the 1890s, in light of the long history of such concerns, "we can rightly raise a skeptical eyebrow at the shrillest predictions of imminent catastrophe."

Nearly 400 years of overstated warnings do not mean that today's Jeremiahs will be proved wrong. And of course any discussion of American problems in any era must include the disclaimer: the Civil War was worse. But these alarmed calls to action are something we do to ourselves—usually with good effect. Especially because of the world financial crisis, "we have seen palpable declines in the middle class's standing and its sense of security for the future," Jackson Lears said. "I think that was a good deal of what was behind Obama's election—that same longing for rebirth that we have seen in other eras. It is rooted in the familiar Protestant longing for salvation, but is adaptable to secular arenas. Obama was basically riding to victory as part of a politics of regeneration." Barack Obama's very high popularity ratings just after the election suggest that even those who now oppose him and his policies recognized the potential for a new start.

It was recognized overseas as well. Shortly before the election, I interviewed a senior Chinese government official in Beijing. He would not speak on the record about U.S. politics, and he noted that since the time of Nixon, Democratic presidents had been more troublesome for China to deal with than Republicans. But he said, "We view this"—meaning the possibility of Obama's election—"as a test of whether America can change course. It is a remarkable strength of your country." This fall in Sydney, the head of an investment bank laid out for me the ways that profligate spending in the United States had brought the world close to financial disaster, and the future problems that would be created by America's looming federal deficits. Then he said, "And we will look on in awe as you avoid catastrophe at the last moment—again."

"Why has the United States been so resilient?" Michael Kazin, a historian at Georgetown University, asked rhetorically, after enumerating previous waves of concern about American "decline." He listed many factors, including the good luck of geography and resources, the First Amendment's success in reducing religious and sectarian friction, and the decentralization of power and culture. "There's no Paris, no Rome—a city where a general strike could bring the whole country to a halt." But like Lears and the writer Garry Wills, Kazin was at pains to challenge today's declinism on its own terms, pointing out the successes of recent American history. "Racial relations, the major problem in our history, are better than they have ever been before," he said. "Religious tolerance is better. Anti-immigrant feelings do not come close to the levels of the 1840s, 1890s, or 1920s. Political decline? The level of participation is higher than it used to be, especially in the last election."

Garry Wills listed his concerns about the militarization of American public life (the subject of his recent book, *Bomb Power*) and the vitriol of today's political/cultural divisions. But he added: "When people say how bad things are, I always emphasize that we have never in our history been so good on human rights. The rights of women, gays, the disabled, Native Americans, Hispanics—all of those have soared in the last 40 years." Even the "birther" and "tea bag" movements are indirect evidence of progress, Wills said. "They are reactions to a really great achievement. We did elect a black president. Not many people thought that was possible, even two or three years ago." Of course Wills's list of achievements is, for some, evidence of what has been "taken" from them in recent history. The point for now is that their concern is part of a strong national tradition, as is the fluidity that gave rise to it. If we weren't worried about our future, then we should really start to worry.

Another Reason Not to Worry: The Irrelevance of "Falling Behind"

In one important way, the jeremiads I have heard since childhood are not part of the great American tradition. Starting with *Sputnik*, when I was in grade school, they have involved comparisons with an external rival or enemy. "Whether you like it or not, history is on our side," Nikita Khrushchev said to Western diplomats in 1956. "We will bury you." After the Soviet Union

came the Japanese and the Germans; and now China, or occasionally India, as the standard whose achievements dramatize what America has not done.

This is new. Only with America's emergence as a global power after World War II did the idea of American "decline" routinely involve falling behind someone else. Before that, it meant falling short of expectations—God's, the Founders', posterity's—or of the previous virtues of America in its lost, great days. "The new element in the '50s was the constant comparison with the Soviets," Michael Kazin told me. Since then, external falling-behind comparisons have become not just a staple of American self-assessment but often a crutch. If we are concerned about our schools, it is because children are learning more in Singapore or India; about the development of clean-tech jobs, because it's happening faster in China.

Having often lived outside the United States since the 1970s, I have offered my share of falling-behind analyses, including a book-length comparison of Japanese and American strengths (More Like Us) 20 years ago. But at this point in America's national life cycle, I think the exercise is largely a distraction, and that Americans should concentrate on what are, finally, our own internal issues to resolve or ignore.

Naturally there are lessons to draw from other countries' practices and innovations; the more we know about the outside world the better, as long as we're collecting information calmly rather than glancing nervously at our reflected foreign image. For instance, if you have spent any time in places where tipping is frowned on or rare, like Japan or Australia, you view the American model of day-long small bribes, rather than one built-in full price, as something similar to baksheesh, undignified for all concerned.

Naturally, too, it's easier to draw attention to a domestic problem and build support for a solution if you cast the issue in us-versus-them terms, as a response to an outside threat. In *If We Can Put a Man on the Moon ...*, their new book about making government programs more effective, William Eggers and John O'Leary emphasize the military and Cold War imperatives behind America's space program. "The race to the moon was a contest between two systems of government," they wrote, "and the question would be settled not by debate but by who could best execute on this endeavor." Falling-behind arguments have proved convenient and powerful in other countries, too.

But whatever their popularity or utility in other places at other times, falling-behind concerns seem too common in America now. As I have thought about why overreliance on this device increasingly bothers me, I have realized that it's because my latest stretch out of the country has left me less and less interested in whether China or some other country is "overtaking" America. The question that matters is not whether America is "falling behind" but instead something like John Winthrop's original question of whether it is falling short—or even falling apart. This is not the mainstream American position now, so let me explain.

First is the simple reality that one kind of "decline" is inevitable and therefore not worth worrying about. China has about four times as many people as America does. Someday its economy will be larger than ours. Fine! A generation ago, its people produced, on average, about one-sixteenth as much as Americans did; now they produce about one-sixth. That change is a huge achievement for China—and a plus rather than a minus for everyone else, because a business-minded China is more benign than a miserable or rebellious one. When the Chinese produce one-quarter as much as Americans per capita, as will happen barring catastrophe, their economy will become the world's largest. This will be good for them but will not mean "falling behind" for us. We know that for more than a century, the consciousness of decline has been a blight on British politics, though it has inspired some memorable, melancholy literature. There is no reason for America to feel depressed about the natural emergence of China, India, and others as world powers. But second, and more important, America may have reasons to feel actively optimistic about its prospects in purely relative terms.

The Crucial American Advantage

Let's start with the more modest claim, that China has ample reason to worry about its own future. Will the long-dreaded day of reckoning for Chinese development finally arrive because of environmental disaster? Or via the demographic legacy of the one-child policy, which will leave so many parents and grandparents dependent on so relatively few young workers? Minxin Pei, who grew up in Shanghai and now works at Claremont McKenna College, in California, has predicted in *China's Trapped Transition* that within the next few years, tension between an open economy and a closed political system will become unendurable, and an unreformed Communist bureaucracy will finally drag down economic performance.

America will be better off if China does well than if it flounders. A prospering China will mean a bigger world economy with more opportunities and probably less turmoil—and a China likely to be more cooperative on environmental matters. But whatever happens to China, prospects could soon brighten for America. The American culture's particular strengths could conceivably be about to assume new importance and give our economy new pep. International networks will matter more with each passing year. As the one truly universal nation, the United States continually refreshes its connections with the rest of the world—through languages, family, education, business—in a way no other nation does, or will. The countries that are comparably open—Canada, Australia—aren't nearly as large; those whose economies are comparably large—Japan, unified Europe, eventually China or India—aren't nearly as open. The simplest measure of whether a culture is dominant is whether outsiders want to be part of it. At the height of the British Empire, colonial subjects from the Raj to Malaya to the Caribbean modeled themselves in part on Englishmen: Nehru and Lee Kuan Yew went to Cambridge, Gandhi, to University College, London. Ho Chi Minh wrote in French for magazines in Paris. These days the world is full of businesspeople, bureaucrats, and scientists who have trained in the United States.

Today's China attracts outsiders too, but in a particular way. Many go for business opportunities; or because of cultural fascination; or, as my wife and I did, to be on the scene where something truly exciting was under way. The Haidian area of Beijing, seat of its universities, is dotted with the faces of foreigners who have come to master the language and learn the system. But true immigrants? People who want their children and grandchildren to grow up within this system? Although I met many foreigners who hope to stay in China indefinitely, in three years I encountered only two people who aspired to citizenship in the People's Republic. From the physical rigors of a badly polluted and still-developing country, to the constraints on free expression and dissent, to the likely ongoing mediocrity of a university system that emphasizes volume of output over independence or excellence of research, the realities of China heavily limit the appeal of becoming Chinese. Because of its scale and internal diversity, China (like India) is a more racially open society than, say, Japan or Korea. But China has come nowhere near the feats of absorption and opportunity that make up much of America's story, and it is very difficult to imagine that it could do so—well, ever.

Everything we know about future industries and technologies suggests that they will offer ever-greater rewards to flexibility, openness, reinvention, "crowdsourcing," and all other manifestations of individuals and groups keenly attuned to their surroundings. Everything about American society should be hospitable toward those traits—and should foster them better and more richly than other societies can. The American advantage here is broad and atmospheric, but it also depends on two specific policies that, in my view, are the absolute pillars of American strength: continued openness to immigration, and a continued concentration of universities that people around the world want to attend.

Maybe I was biased in how I listened, but in my interviews, I thought I could tell which Americans had spent significant time outside the country or working on international "competitiveness" issues. If they had, they predictably emphasized those same two elements of long-term American advantage. "My favorite statistic is that one-quarter of the members of the

National Academy of Sciences were born abroad," I was told by Harold Varmus, the president of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and himself an academy member (and Nobel Prize winner). "We may not be so good on the pipeline of producing new scientists, but the country is still a very effective magnet."

"We scream about our problems, but as long as we have the immigrants, and the universities, we'll be fine," James McGregor, an American businessman and author who has lived in China for years, told me. "I just wish we could put LoJacks on the foreign students to be sure they stay." While, indeed, the United States benefits most when the best foreign students pursue their careers here, we come out ahead even if they depart, since they take American contacts and styles of thought with them. Shirley Tilghman, a research biologist who is now the president of Princeton, made a similar point more circumspectly. "U.S. higher education has essentially been our innovation engine," she told me. "I still do not see the overall model for higher education anywhere else that is better than the model we have in the United States, even with all its challenges at the moment." Laura Tyson, an economist who has been dean of the business schools at UC Berkeley and the University of London, said, "It can't be a coincidence that so many innovative companies are located where they are"—in California, Boston, and other university centers. "There is not another country's system that does as well—although others are trying aggressively to catch up."

Americans often fret about the troops of engineers and computer scientists marching out of Chinese universities. They should calm down. Each fall, Shanghai's Jiao Tong University produces a ranking of the world's universities based mainly on scientific-research papers. All such rankings are imprecise, but the pattern is clear. Of the top 20 on the latest list, 17 are American, the exceptions being Cambridge (No. 4), Oxford (No. 10), and the University of Tokyo (No. 20). Of the top 100 in the world, zero are Chinese.

"On paper, China has the world's largest higher education system, with a total enrollment of 20 million full-time tertiary students," Peter Yuan Cai, of the Australian National University in Canberra, wrote last fall. "Yet China still lags behind the West in scientific discovery and technological innovation." The obstacles for Chinese scholars and universities range from grand national strategy—open economy, closed political and media environment—to the operational traditions of Chinese academia. Students spend years cramming details for memorized tests; the ones who succeed then spend years in thrall to entrenched professors. Shirley Tilghman said the modern American model of advanced research still shows the influence of Vannevar Bush, who directed governmental science projects during and after World War II. "It was his very conscious decision to get money into young scientists' hands as quickly as possible," she said. This was in contrast to the European "Herr Professor" model, also prevalent in Asia, in which, she said, for young scientists, the "main opportunity for promotion was waiting for their mentor to die." Young Chinese, Indians, Brazilians, Dutch know they will have opportunities in American labs and start-ups they could not have at home. This will remain America's advantage, unless we throw it away.

The Main Concerns

If we're worried, perhaps that's a good sign, since through American history worry has always preceded reform. What I've seen as I've looked at the rest of the world has generally made me more confident of America's future, rather than the reverse. What is obvious from outside the country is how exceptional it is in its powers of renewal: America is always in decline, and is always about to bounce back.

Late last year, on the first anniversary of Barack Obama's election, I was at a lunch where an immigrant billionaire discussed his concerns about the new administration's economic policy. By the meeting's ground rules, I am not supposed to identify the speaker—and the wonderful thing about America is that "immigrant billionaire" does not narrow the field down too much. The man thought that deficit spending was out of control, that other world leaders judged the new president as weak

and therefore might test him, and that a run on the dollar might begin any day. "But long term, America will be fine," he said, as if the truth was so self-evident, it didn't need to be explained.

So what could be the contrary case? It starts with the aspects of relative decline that could actually prove threatening. The main concerns boil down to jobs, debt, military strength, and overall independence. Jobs: Will the rise of other economies mean the decline of opportunities within America, especially for the middle-class jobs that have been the country's social glue? Debt: Will reliance on borrowed money from abroad further limit the country's future prosperity, and its freedom of action too? The military: As wealth flows, so inevitably will armed strength. Would an ultimately weaker United States therefore risk a military showdown or intimidation from a rearmed China? And independence in the broadest sense: Would the world respect a threadbare America? Will repressive values rise with an ascendant China—and liberal values sink with a foundering United States? How much will American leaders have to kowtow?

The full details are beyond us here, but the crucial point is that in principle, the United States itself has the power to correct what is wrong in each case. Take jobs, as a very important for-instance: the loss of middle-class jobs is America's worst economic problem. But that would be so even if China were still as closed as under Mao. According to prevailing economic theory, a country's job structure and income distribution are determined more by its own domestic policies—education, investment, taxes—plus shifts in technology than by anything its competitors do. That's especially true of a large economy like America's. Those policies are ours to change. With differences in detail, something similar is true of America's public and private debt, its maintenance and careful use of military power, and its management of the "soft power" that enlarges its freedom of action.

The Biggest Problem

We could correct all these problems—and that is the heart of the problem. America still has the means to address nearly any of its structural weaknesses. Yes, the problems are intellectually and politically complicated: energy use, medical costs, the right educational and occupational mix to rebuild a robust middle class. But they are no worse than others the nation has faced in more than 200 years, and today no other country comes close to the United States in having the surplus money, technology, and attention to apply to the tasks. (China? Remember, most people there still live on subsistence farms.) First with Iraq and now with Afghanistan, the U.S. has in the past decade committed $1 trillion to the cause of entirely remaking a society. We know that such an investment could happen here—but we also know that it won't.

That is the American tragedy of the early 21st century: a vital and self-renewing culture that attracts the world's talent, and a governing system that increasingly looks like a joke. One thing I've never heard in my time overseas is "I wish we had a Senate like yours." When Jimmy Carter was running for president in 1976, he said again and again that America needed "a government as good as its people." Knowing Carter's sometimes acid views on human nature, I thought that was actually a sly barb—and that the imperfect American public had generally ended up with the government we deserve. But now I take his plea at face value. American culture is better than our government. And if we can't fix what's broken, we face a replay of what made the months after the 9/11 attacks so painful: realizing that it was possible to change course and address problems long neglected, and then watching that chance slip away.

The most charitable statement of the problem is that the American government is a victim of its own success. It has survived in more or less recognizable form over more than two centuries—long enough to become mismatched to the real circumstances of the nation. If Henry Adams were whooshed from his Washington of a century ago to our Washington of today, he would find it shockingly changed, except for the institutions of government. Same two political parties, same number of members of the House (since 1913, despite more than a threefold increase in population), essentially same rules

of debate in the Senate. Thomas Jefferson's famed wish for "a little rebellion now and then" as a "medicine necessary for the sound health of government" is a nice slogan for organizing rallies, but is not how his country has actually operated.

Every system strives toward durability, but as with human aging, longevity has a cost. The late economist Mancur Olson laid out the consequences of institutional aging in his 1982 book, *The Rise and Decline of Nations*. Year by year, he said, special-interest groups inevitably take bite after tiny bite out of the total national wealth. They do so through tax breaks, special appropriations, what we now call legislative "earmarks," and other favors that are all easier to initiate than to cut off. No single nibble is that dramatic or burdensome, but over the decades they threaten to convert any stable democracy into a big, inefficient, favor-ridden state. In 1994, Jonathan Rauch updated Olson's analysis and called this enfeebling pattern "demosclerosis," in a book of that name. He defined the problem as "government's progressive loss of the ability to adapt," a process "like hardening of the arteries, which builds up stealthily over many years."

We are now 200-plus years past Jefferson's wish for permanent revolution and nearly 30 past Olson's warning, with that much more buildup of systemic plaque—and of structural distortions, too. When the U.S. Senate was created, the most populous state, Virginia, had 10 times as many people as the least populous, Delaware. Giving them the same two votes in the Senate was part of the intricate compromise over regional, economic, and slave-state/free-state interests that went into the Constitution. Now the most populous state, California, has 69 times as many people as the least populous, Wyoming, yet they have the same two votes in the Senate. A similarly inflexible business organization would still have a major Whale Oil Division; a military unit would be mainly fusiliers and cavalry. No one would propose such a system in a constitution written today, but without a revolution, it's unchangeable. Similarly, since it takes 60 votes in the Senate to break a filibuster on controversial legislation, 41 votes is in effect a blocking minority. States that together hold about 12 percent of the U.S. population can provide that many Senate votes. This converts the Senate from the "saucer" George Washington called it, in which scalding ideas from the more temperamental House might "cool," into a deep freeze and a dead weight.

The Senate's then-famous "Gang of Six," which controlled crucial aspects of last year's proposed health-care legislation, came from states that together held about 3 percent of the total U.S. population; 97 percent of the public lives in states not included in that group. (Just to round this out, more than half of all Americans live in the 10 most populous states—which together account for 20 of the Senate's 100 votes.) "The Senate is full of 'rotten boroughs,'" said James Galbraith, of the University of Texas, referring to the underpopulated constituencies in Parliament before the British reforms of 1832. "We'd be better off with a House of Lords."

The decades-long bipartisan conspiracy to gerrymander both state and federal electoral districts doesn't help. More and more legislative seats are "safe" for one party or the other; fewer and fewer politicians have any reason to appeal to the center or to the other side. In a National Affairs article, "Who Killed California?," Troy Senik pointed out that 153 state or federal positions in California were at stake in the 2004 election. Not a single one changed party. This was an early and extreme illustration of a national trend.

On rereading Mancur Olson's book now, I was struck by its relative innocence. Thinking as an economist, Olson regarded the worst outcome as an America that was poorer than it could otherwise be. But since the time of his book, the gospel of "adapt or die" has spread from West Point to the corporate world (by chance, Olson's *Rise and Decline* was published within weeks of the hugely influential business book *In Search of Excellence*), with the idea that rigid institutions inevitably fail. "I don't think that America's political system is equal to the tasks before us," Dick Lamm, a former three-term governor of Colorado, told me in Denver. "It is interesting that in 1900 there were very few democracies and now there are a lot, but they're nearly all parliamentary democracies. I'm not sure we picked the right form. Ours is great for distributing benefits but has become

weak at facing problems. I know the power of American rejuvenation, but if I had to bet, it would be 60–40 that we're in a cycle of decline."

What I have been calling "going to hell" really means a failure to adapt: increasing difficulty in focusing on issues beyond the immediate news cycle, and an increasing gap between the real challenges and opportunities of the time and our attention, resources, and best efforts. Here are symptoms people have mentioned to me:

• In their book on effective government, William Eggers and John O'Leary quote a former deputy mayor of Los Angeles, Michael Keeley, on why the city is out of control. "Think of city government as a big bus," he told them. "The bus is divided into different sections with different constituencies: labor, the city council, the mayor, interest groups, and contractors. Every seat is equipped with a brake, so lots of people can stop the bus anytime. The problem is that this makes the bus undrivable."

For that same book, Eggers and O'Leary surveyed members of the National Academy of Public Administration, a counterpart of the National Academy of Sciences for public managers. Sixty-eight percent of those who responded said that the government was "less likely to successfully execute projects than at any time in the past."

• Kevin Starr, author of an acclaimed multivolume history of California politics and culture, told me that through the 1960s, the state's public culture was dedicated to the idea that big things could be done. "The water plan, the freeways, the universities—it was all supposed to be the greatest in the history of the human race," he said. "It was envisioned as a higher-ed utopia. Whether you wanted to be a nuclear physicist or a beautician, the state would help get you there." Now, as he and countless others point out, California's system has been engineered to ensure that nothing can be done. Through ballot measures, California's electorate votes itself increasing benefits; through other ballot measures, the public limits taxes to pay for them. Harold Varmus won his Nobel Prize for work done at UC San Francisco and still owns a house in the Bay Area. He says that thanks to California's famous Proposition 13, which has limited property taxes over the past 30 years, his annual taxes in California are about $600—one-twentieth of what they are for a similar property in New York.

The American Society of Civil Engineers prepares a "report card" on the state of America's infrastructure—roads, bridges, dams, etc. In the latest version, the overall "GPA" for the United States was D, and the cost of bringing all systems up to adequacy was estimated at $2.2 trillion over the next five years, or twice as much as is now budgeted by all levels of government. In 1988, the comparable study gave an overall grade of C, with many items getting B's. Now, the very highest grade was for solid-waste systems, at C+, or "mediocre." Roads, dams, hazardous-waste systems, school buildings, and public drinking water all received a D or D–. The average dam in the United States is 50 years old. "More than 26%, or one in four, of the nation's bridges are either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete," according to the latest report. Improving existing bridges would cost about $17 billion per year, or about twice as much as currently budgeted. Worn-out water systems leak away 20 gallons of fresh water per day for every American; replacing systems that are nearing the end of their useful life would cost $11 billion more annually than all levels of government now plan to spend. "Engineers don't usually put things dramatically, but the alarm about infrastructure is real," Stephen Flynn, of the Center for National Policy, told me. "Our forebears invested billions in these systems when they were relatively much poorer than we are. We won't even pay to maintain them for our own use, let alone have anything to pass to our grandchildren."

• Robert Atkinson, the director of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, in Washington, has written that several times per century, a "transformational wave" of new technologies ripples through the economy and creates new opportunities and wealth. In the past, these have included mass-production systems, modern chemicals, aviation, and so on. Today the economically important technologies include genomic knowledge, information technologies like the Internet, and

the geospatial information, from the GPS network, that is built into everything from dashboard navigators to the climate-change-monitoring systems that measure the size of glaciers or extent of forests. Private companies now create the jobs and wealth in each field, but public funds paid for the original scientific breakthroughs and provided early markets.

It couldn't have been otherwise, Atkinson says. The scale of investment was too vast. The uncertainty of payoff was too great. The risk that profits and benefits would go to competitors who hadn't made the initial investment was too high. The difference between promising and dead-end technologies was too hard to predict—especially decades ago, when work in all these fields began. So each started as a public program: the Internet by the Pentagon, the Human Genome Project by the National Institutes of Health, and the GPS network by the Air Force, which still operates it. The government could not have created Google, but Google could not have existed without government efforts to establish the Internet long before the company's founders were born. This pattern—public investment and standard-setting, followed by private industrial growth—has been consistent through the years, Atkinson said, which is what worries him now. "Our companies and entrepreneurs are matchless in their power to adapt," he said. "We lead in many categories the private economy can handle by itself. But where you need any public-private coordination, we've become handicapped. I worry that our companies can adapt, but our *system* can't."

• Scientists I spoke with said that as more and more research money is assigned by favoritism and earmark, it becomes harder for scientists to pursue the most-promising research opportunities. "The amount of earmarking that has percolated into the scientific establishment is disturbing," Shirley Tilghman, of Princeton, told me, referring to congressional appropriations that single out particular scientists or projects for support rather than letting research organizations distribute the money. "Science is not a democracy. It is a meritocracy. The old cliché that 90 percent of the progress comes from 10 percent of the people is true. You want a system that acknowledges that the first priority is to get resources into the hands of the very best scientists, who are going to do the vast majority of the work that will move us ahead." That was still easier in America than in most other places, she said, but harder than it used to be.

• In 1972, Congress created an Office of Technology Assessment as a source of nonpartisan expertise on scientific and technical questions, ranging from the utility of early anti- AIDS treatments to the practicality of alternative fuels for cars. The model was hailed and imitated internationally; here, it helped inspire the creation of the Congressional Budget Office two years later. The CBO remains, but in 1995 Newt Gingrich, in one of his early acts as speaker of the House, led a movement to abolish the OTA, as a symbolic strike against government waste. Its annual budget at the time was $22 million—less than a dime per U.S. citizen, or 20 minutes' worth of financial-bailout spending early last year. "We are willfully making ourselves stupid," Ralph Nader said about the absent OTA. He has urged the current Democratic congressional majority to reinstate it. But, he says, "they are so afraid of attacks for supporting 'big government,' they won't dare."

Nader, who at age 75 is as intense and animated as ever, concludes his modern jeremiads with a "yes we can!" appeal for the power of reform. ("I never like the word 'hope,' though," he says. "It's usually 'I hope *you* can,' not 'I hope *we* can.'") But he sounded pretty discouraged when ticking off the problems our system couldn't face. "When was the last time we faced up to a major national problem?" he asked. "Immigration. Corporate crime. The war on drugs, which is a madness beyond boundaries." The list went on, and of course included the rigidity of the two-party system and "the collapse of Congress" in terms of upholding its authority rather than abdicating its power to the White House. "We would do well to focus on the issue of public paralysis."

• From a different political starting point than Nader's, Andrew Bacevich reached a similar conclusion. Bacevich, a West

Point graduate and career Army officer who now teaches at Boston University, began by criticizing today's popular military doctrine of counterinsurgency, or COIN. With its emphasis on better ways of fighting in Afghanistan or Iraq, he said, it represented a "triumph of tactics over strategy"—that is, better ways of doing a job that perhaps should not be done. "This is a phenomenon that goes beyond the military sphere to the political and economic sphere," he said. "I think it would be easy for common-sense Americans to draw up a list of big things that would seem to demand concerted effort. Deficits are too big. Health costs are unacceptable. Oil. And yet we have a political system that seems to be constantly consumed with trivial things. We cannot seriously grapple with the big issues. Tactics consume strategy." Rick Perlstein, whose *Nixonland* and *Before the Storm* are critical histories of the modern conservative movement, said the most worrisome symptom was the relative shortage of a jeremiad theme under Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, and now Obama. This he attributed to Ronald Reagan, "who managed to equate criticism with anti-Americanism, and render unintelligible bad news about America." In the '60s and '70s, Perlstein said, "it was jeremiad city! The best-seller list was full of doom-and-gloom books." In the long rhythms of American jeremiad, he said, that was a sign of political health, despite the excesses of those times. By contrast, the public mood now is "perilously blithe."

What Is To Be Done?

I started out this process uncertain; I ended up convinced. America the society is in fine shape! America the polity most certainly is not. Over the past half century, both parties have helped cause this predicament—Democrats by unintentionally giving governmental efforts a bad name in the 1960s and '70s, Republicans by deliberately doing so from the Reagan era onward. At the moment, Republicans are objectively the more nihilistic, equating public anger with the sentiment that "their" America has been taken away and defining both political and substantive success as stopping the administration's plans. As a partisan tactic, this could make sense; for the country, it's one more sign of dysfunction, and of the near-impossibility of addressing problems that require truly public efforts to solve. Part of the mind-set of pre-Communist China was the rage and frustration of a great people let down by feckless rulers. Whatever is wrong with today's Communist leadership, it is widely seen as pulling the country nearer to its full potential rather than pushing it away. America is not going to have a Communist revolution nor endure "100 Years of Humiliation," as Imperial China did. But we could use more anger about the fact that the gap between our potential and our reality is opening up, not closing.

What are the choices? Logically they come down to these, starting with the most fanciful:

We could hope for an enlightened military coup, or some other deus ex machina by the right kind of tyrants. (In his 700-page new "meliorist" novel, *Only the Super-Rich Can Save Us*, Ralph Nader proposes a kind of plutocrats' coup, in which Warren Buffett, Bill Gates Sr., Ted Turner, et al. collaborate to create a more egalitarian America.) The periodic longing for a "man on horseback" is a reflection of disappointment with what normal politics can bring. George Washington and Dwight Eisenhower were the right men on horseback. With no disrespect to David Petraeus, their like is not in sight. In 1992, an Air Force lieutenant colonel wrote an essay for the National War College called "The Origins of the American Military Coup of 2012," which began with the perceived failure of civilian politics to address the nation's problems. The author, Charles Dunlap, who is now a two-star general, meant this as a cautionary tale. His paper began with this quote from John Adams: "Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide." Tempting as the thought is when watching the Senate on C-SPAN, we can't really hope for a coup.

We could hope to change the basic nature of our democracy, so it fits the times as our other institutions do. But this is about as likely as an enlightened coup. For a few hours on Election Day 2004, it seemed that America had a chance to correct the anachronism of its Electoral College. When exit polls showed John Kerry ahead in Ohio, there was a chance that for the

second election in a row, a candidate might lose the popular vote but still become president. (A swing of 60,000 votes in Ohio would have put George W. Bush in Al Gore's position from four years earlier, as the popular-vote winner who had to go home.) With each party burned, in sequence, we might have agreed on a reform. That chance has passed, and there is no chance for constitutional amendments to make the Senate more representative, since the same small states that would lose power can block any change.

In principle, the United States could call for a new constitutional convention, to reconsider all the rules. That would be my cue to move back to China for good—pollution, Great Firewall, and all. As a simple thought exercise, imagine the fights over evolution, an "official" language, and countless other "social" questions. "I am perpetually disappointed by our structural resistance to change," Gary Hart told me, "but can you imagine what would be put into a drafting session for a constitution today?" Kevin Starr said, "You would need a coherent political culture for such a session to occur"—and the lack of such coherence is exactly the problem—"otherwise it would turn into a food fight from *Animal House*."

A parliamentary system? This too would improve C-SPAN viewing. But not having started there, we cannot get there.

A viable third party? Attractive in theory. But 150 years of failed attempts by formidable campaigners, ranging from Robert LaFollette to Ross Perot, suggest how unlikely this is too.

We might hope for another *Sputnik* moment—to be precise, an event frightening enough to stimulate national action without posing a real threat. That kind of "hope" hardly constitutes a plan. In 2001, America endured an event that should have been this era's *Sputnik* ; but it wasn't. It doesn't help now to rue the lost opportunity, but there is no hiding the fact that it was an enormous loss. What could have been a moment to set our foreign policy and our domestic economy on a path for another 50 years of growth—as Eisenhower helped set a 50-year path with his response to *Sputnik* —instead created problems that will probably take another 50 years to correct.

That's yesterday. For tomorrow, we really have only two choices. Doing more, or doing less. Trying to work with our flawed governmental system despite its uncorrectable flaws, or trying to contain the damage that system does to the rest of our society. Muddling through, or starving the beast.

Readers may have guessed that I am not going for the second option: giving up on public efforts and cauterizing our gangrenous government so that the rest of society can survive. But the reason might be unexpected. I have seen enough of the world outside America to be sure that *eventually* a collapsing public life brings the private sector down with it. If we want to maintain the virtues of private America, we must at least try on the public front too. Rio, Manila, and Mexico City during their respective crime booms; Shanghai in the 1920s and Moscow in the 1990s; Jakarta through the decades; the imagined Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* —these are all venues in which commerce and opportunity abounded. But the lack of corresponding public virtues—rule of law, expectation of physical safety, infrastructure that people can enjoy or depend on without owning it themselves—made those societies more hellish than they needed to be. When outsiders marvel at today's China, it is for the combination of private and public advances the country has made. It has private factories *and* public roads; private office buildings *and* public schools. Of course this is not some exotic Communist combination. The conjunction of private and public abundance typified America throughout its 20th-century rise. We had the big factories and the broad sidewalks, the stately mansions and the public parks. The private economy was stronger because of the public bulwarks provided by Social Security and Medicare. California is giving the first taste of how the public-private divorce will look—and its historian, Kevin Starr, says the private economy will soon suffer if the government is not repaired. "Through the country's history, government has had to function correctly for the private sector to flourish," he said. "John Quincy Adams built the lighthouses and the highways. That's not 'socialist' but 'Whiggish.' Now we need ports and highways and an

educated populace." In a nearly $1 trillion stimulus package, it should have been possible to build all those things, in a contemporary, environmentally aware counterpart to the interstate-highway plan. But it didn't happen; we've spent the money, incurred the debt, and done very little to repair what most needs fixing.

Our government is old and broken and dysfunctional, and may even be beyond repair. But Starr is right. Our only sane choice is to muddle through. As human beings, we ultimately become old and broken and dysfunctional—but in the meantime it makes a difference if we try. Our American republic may prove to be doomed, but it will make a difference if we improvise and strive to make the best of the path through our time—and our children's, and their grandchildren's—rather than succumb.

"I often think about how we would make decisions if we knew we would wake up the next day and it would be 75 years later," Cullen Murphy, author of *Are We Rome?*, told me. "It would make a huge difference if we could train ourselves to make decisions that way." It would. Of course, our system can't be engineered toward that perspective. Politicians will inevitably look not 75 years into the future but one election cycle ahead, or perhaps only one news cycle. Corporations live by the quarter; cable-news outlets by the minute. But we can at least introduce this concept into public discussion and consider our issues and choices that way.

What difference would it make? We could start by being very clear about our strengths, as revealed not simply by comparison with others but also through the pattern of our own rise. The mutually supportive combination of public and private development; the excellence of the universities; the unmatched ability to attract and absorb the world's talent—these are assets we can work to preserve. We could reflect on how much more attainable our goals are when the world works with us—economically, diplomatically—rather than against us. We could not compel international obedience even if we tried, but everything we care about becomes easier if the American model attracts rather than repels. And a longer-term perspective would mean doing all we can to address the "75-year threats"—the issues for which we'll be thanked or blamed two or three generations from now. Rebuilding the infrastructure, so that it's an asset rather than a drag. Reinvesting in research, for the industries our grandchildren will found. Dealing with environmental challenges that will make all the difference in whether the world looks like hell.

America has been strong because, despite its flawed system, people built toward the future in the 1840s, and the 1930s, and the 1950s. During just the time when Frederick Law Olmsted designed Central Park, when Theodore Roosevelt set aside land for the National Parks, when Dwight Eisenhower created the Pentagon research agency that ultimately gave rise to the Internet, the American system seemed broken too. They worked within its flaws and limits, which made all the difference. That is the bravest and best choice for us now.