

Research on the Evolution of the United States in the 20th and 21st Century

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Abstract: The United States, as a global power, has consistently demonstrated remarkable resilience when confronted with challenges in the 20th and 21st centuries. This research delves into the critical factors such as technological innovation, democratic governance, cultural diversity, and abundant resources that have propelled America's ascent. By acknowledging both strengths and challenges, the study offers a comprehensive view of how these elements have shaped U.S. dominance, from economic prosperity to military strength. It also discusses internal polarization, global competition, and strategic adjustments that present potential threats but underscore the United States' capacity to navigate these complexities deftly. Ultimately, the essay contends that the future trajectory of the United States is promising as it adapts to its evolving role in a rapidly changing world, instilling a sense of confidence in its ability to overcome future challenges.

Keywords: The United States, U.S. History, Hegemonic Decline, Historical Analysis, Foreign Policy.

1. Introduction

The United States' global hegemony has faced challenges in recent years. Judging from the current status of foreign research, research results on the decline of U.S. hegemony are mainly concentrated in relevant treatises and articles by American scholars, such as the theory of the decline of U.S. hegemony proposed by Paul Kennedy[1]. According to relevant domestic research, Chinese scholars generally examine whether U.S. hegemony is declining in two aspects: soft power and hard power. However, most studies on this topic tend to focus on older events and emphasize their greater independence. This article will first introduce how the United States rose and what the author believes are the four critical factors in its rise: a democratic political system, a diverse and inclusive culture, advanced technology, and military prowess. Then, the article will introduce the challenges the United States has faced in recent years. For example, the economic recession caused by the COVID-19 epidemic, the multi-polar trend of the world brought about by the rise of China, and the political division caused by the US election, etc. These challenges have tested the resilience and adaptability of the United States. Finally, the article will use historical research to analyze these events and point out the future path of the United States.

2. Traits That Helped the U.S. to Be a World Power

2.1. The Advantages of Technology

In the contemporary world, the maxim 'Technology is the primary driver of productivity' holds for most nations. As early as 1976, the United States enacted a law aligned with a national policy for science and technology. Similarly, in 1995, China unveiled its Strategy for Invigorating China Through Science and Education[2]. These instances underscore the recognition by dominant countries like China and the United States of the pivotal role of technological progress and development in global power dynamics.

The First Industrial Revolution first happened in Britain; it helped Britain rise rapidly, becoming a world hegemony at the end of the 18th century. However, after becoming a monopoly advantage around the capitalistic world, Britain lost the pressure of competition, falling into a state of stagnation. In the early 20th century, the United States gradually overtook Britain in power. Conversely, the United States capitalized on two technological revolutions, notably the Third Revolution, spearheaded by computer technology, and emerged as the new dominant force following WWII. Until 2003, the U.S. was responsible for 161 of the 321 most significant inventions in Encyclopedia Britannica[3]. The United States has a solid foundation; education spending on each student is 36172 dollars, lower than that in Luxembourg, where less than ten percent are unemployed[4].

2.2. Democratic Political System and Diverse Culture

The traditional political system has consumed considerable social wealth and costs in the United States, but it also allows the United States to benefit from it. The principle of the U.S. Constitution is the separation of powers, which leads to a three-branch government: the legislative, judicial, and executive branches. The legislative, judicial, and executive branches collaborate, providing a system of checks and balances, and running for president results in significant financial waste. However, it also keeps the government free of massive corruption and dictatorship.

Cultural dominance is another aspect of America's global power that deserves attention. The United States' culture is a beautiful mosaic, a blend of various cultures, a unique and powerful aspect of its international influence. This inclusivity implies firm and optimistic individualism, advocating equality and free competition, and believing in the American dream that success is attainable through hard work. With its advanced education system, the United States attracts more than a million international students for higher education a testament to its cultural appeal [5] [6]. However, it's difficult to say if they want to return, a reflection of the United States' allure. This diversity is critical to the United States' global influence and should be appreciated and celebrated, fostering a sense of appreciation in the audience.

2.3. Rich in Resources

The United States' global power is not just a result of its political and cultural influence but also its economic strength and strategic resource reserves. The country is rich in energy resources, such as oil, with 44.4 billion barrels of crude oil as of the end of 2021, excluding the Strategic Petroleum Reserve[7]. The United States' fertile central Great Plains, superior geographical location, and vast land area are unique advantages that contribute to its economic strength. The United States is the world's largest and most technologically advanced economy, with a per capital GDP of 76,329.6 dollars[8]. The US regulatory and tax system gives foreign investors complete operational freedom, further enhancing their economic stability. In evaluating the business and investment environment, the United States has always been the best or ranked among the most significant indicators—the American economy[9]. The economy has maintained a consistent level of competitiveness,

innovation, and openness, far exceeding that of other countries, instilling confidence in the audience about the United States' global competitiveness.

2.4. Wars and Conflicts

In World War II, the United States fought with the Allies and ultimately defeated the German, Italian, and Japanese fascists. After World War II, the United States became a world superpower with its military and economic power. The confrontation between the two major military groups in the East and West led to the "Cold War." Competing with the Soviet Union, gaining world power, and improving and consolidating power in the "free world" became the two main characteristics of the United States' foreign relations in the 1950s[10]. During the early Cold War, successive U.S. governments focused on world leadership. The U.S. launched a global struggle with the Soviet Union, transitioning from a "not directly involving" stance to one of possible interventions in distant conflicts [11]. Whenever a significant conflict arises between the United States and other countries, the U.S. dispatches armies and resorts to force. In the 1970s, the international situation underwent drastic changes that were not conducive to the United States.

The rise of developing countries and the loss of the Vietnam War made the international political forces more multi-polar, and exchanges between countries and regions increased. In this situation, President Nixon pressed, "As far as the problems of international security are concerned, the United States is going to encourage and has a right to expect that this problem will increasingly be handled by, and the responsibility for it will be taken by, the Asian nations themselves," implying that the United States will not directly involve other countries[12]. Try to be engaged in other countries. The United States proposes an interdependence that prioritizes the United States and strives to achieve its hegemonic interests through collaboration. Ration. After the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union profoundly changed internal politics. The United States found that no country or group of countries could match the power of the United States.

3. Discussion

The United States' rise in the 20th and 21st centuries was due to the advantages of technology, a democratic political system, a diverse culture, and rich resources. The United States has absolute advantages in science, technology, and innovation. The speed of innovation in developing new technologies and industries in the United States is unparalleled. The application of these scientific and technological innovations across various fields ensures the prosperity of the US economy and the strength of its military[13]. Furthermore, the setbacks in the American democratic system and the export of democracy do not indicate the failure of the democratic system itself. On the contrary, the number of democratic countries increased significantly in the last quarter of the 20th century. Initially limited to a few wealthy nations, it soon became the most common political system in the world[14]. Most people still have confidence in the U.S. political system and believe that the threat to Western democracies is not destructive but political rigidity, which will only be slowed by daunting challenges such as fiscal crisis, political paralysis, and demographic pressure on economic growth without causing the United States to collapse. As Zakaria said, "The capitalist liberal democratic system is the only flexible and rational system in the world today"[15].

On the contrary, the United States still cannot ignore the risks and challenges of recent years. The United States may continue to lead other countries in science and technology in the next few decades. Still, other major countries, especially China, have made significant economic leaps after reform and opening up and have gradually improved their talent policies to compete with the United States[16]. Global influence was once an advantage for the United States, but at the same time, it also brought more global obligations to the United States. Now, the United States struggles to defend all

its global interests and assume all international responsibilities simultaneously, leading to frequent regional wars like the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the failed war in Afghanistan. These are all evidence that the United States is insufficient to maintain its global hegemony. Maintaining hegemony requires corresponding economic and military advantages, and the two are a pair of contradictions. Democratic politics were once America's pride, but now chaos reigns. The inability to address the global virus, which has resulted in the deaths of millions of people, and political discord, which has sowed the seeds of division in the United States, are all contributing factors[17][18] Whether this system can stand the test of time is still unknown. Furthermore, the shift of power from west to east is accelerating. Asia is rising, and the potential threat of conflict is increasing as growing economic power translates into political and military power. Currently, China is the most significant rising power. Since the 1990s Southeast Asian financial crisis, China has become the engine driving the recovery of other Asian economies. Its economy proliferates yearly, and this trend will likely continue for decades. China plays such a significant role in the global economy that the entire global financial system inextricably depends on its economic health.

Due to their ideological differences and different visions of the future world order, conflicts between China and the United States are inevitable. China prefers a multi-polar world and can challenge the United States economically, technologically, and militarily. The United States is still trying to maintain the liberal international order after the relative power decline. After 2016, the Trump and Biden administrations imposed high-end technology and economic sanctions on China, marking the beginning of a new era of confrontation between China and the United States.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, a complex interplay of strengths and challenges has marked the trajectory of the United States as a global power. From its ascension driven by technological innovation, democratic governance, cultural diversity, and abundant resources to its current phase grappling with internal divisions, global competition, and strategic recalibrations, the U.S. has exemplified both the possibilities and pitfalls of international leadership and democracy.

Technological prowess has underpinned America's economic and military dominance from the Industrial Revolution to the digital age. With a democratic political system based on checks and balances, this technological edge has fostered resilience against authoritarianism, promoting innovation and societal progress. Cultural diversity has been another cornerstone, enriching the nation's social fabric and bolstering its soft power globally.

However, these strengths have also sown the seeds of challenges. The technological advancement that propelled the U.S. to superpower status now presents a dual-edged sword as other nations rapidly close the gap. The democratic political system, while resilient, faces unprecedented strains from internal polarization and global crises that strain its institutional fabric. Moreover, while sometimes enhancing global stability, military engagements have drained resources and divided the country.

Looking forward, the United States stands at a critical juncture where navigating these challenges will determine its future trajectory. Global leadership will require adaptation, not just in technological innovation and military strategy, but also in fostering domestic unity, addressing socio-economic disparities, and redefining its role in an increasingly multipolar world. History lessons remind us that no empire's ascent is linear, nor is its decline inevitable. The path ahead for the United States will be defined by its ability to harness its strengths while confronting its weaknesses, thereby shaping a future that continues to impact the global landscape for generations.

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